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Paper abstract

The body orchestral

The fixed places and the poker faces of orchestral musicians belie a fundamentally embodied process of expression which is mediated by intensely temporally bound interactions. In the flow of performance there is little time for individuals to reflect on possible courses of action, but rather they must rely on their own tacit knowledge as well as that of the entire group in order to maintain ensemble coordination and put across a cohesive musical performance. Whilst it has been well argued from multiple disciplinary angles that the performance and perception of music is intrinsically connected to bodily knowledge and experience (Clarke and Davidson 1998; Sudnow 2001; Overy & Molnar-Szakacs 2006; Bangert et al. 2006; Cox 2011; Moran 2013), and research into small ensemble performance has drawn attention to the importance of the body in co-performer communication for the accomplishment of temporal and expressive cohesion (Williamon and Davidson, 2002; Davidson 2005; King & Ginsborg 2011; McCaleb 2014), there remains an underlying assumption that in orchestral performance these mechanisms are superseded by the hierarchical structure of the group and the coordinating gestures of the conductor.

Previous research has shown, however, that conductor authority is actually negotiated and contingent and that orchestral musicians are involved in a much more complex set of interactions in which communication is far from unidirectional and the conductor may only play a small part (Faulkner 1973, Atik 1994, Dobson & Gaunt 2013). Despite these findings, the continued over-attribution of the conductor's role in the accomplishment of orchestral performance—the 'romance of leadership'—has been effective in masking the subtle, but essential, interactions among orchestral musicians responsible for group cohesion and artistic expression.

Drawing on data collected from orchestral musicians over three years of doctoral research including in-depth interviews, a nation-wide questionnaire, and six case studies of individual orchestras, I argue that the division often made between chamber music performance and orchestral performance is not nearly as distinctive as is frequently assumed. Rather than decreasing the reliance on embodied knowledge in the production of musical expression or the role of the body in co-performer communication, orchestral settings demand that musicians are able to respond quickly and instinctively to an ever-changing musical environment. In contrast to the highly organised appearance of orchestras in performance, in reality orchestral musicians are negotiating a sea of competing influences while engaged in a semi-structured massed dialog of sounds and bodies.

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