

# Questioning the relationship between conducting and leading in choral practice

By Carla Conti

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*The title of my speech was 'Non è tutto coro quello che luccica. Il direttore di coro nella relazione con il gruppo vocale'. It is a word pun and it plays with an Italian expression 'non è tutto oro quello che luccica' / all that glitters is not gold, and this is because 'coro'/chorus rhymes with 'oro'/gold.*

I thank the Sahaja Yoga association and particularly Gregorie de Kalbermatten and my colleagues from the Department of Music Education and Instrument Didactics for having designed and made possible this conference; as we know, good teachers and motivated students are not enough to make the Education System work: we need legislative interventions and financial investments.

I reflected that in the construction of the identity of the musician, the choir conductor is a liminal figure in the collective imagination: musician / animator, singer / pianist, and on the adoption that the common language makes of some terms of the musical lexicon concerning the choir, a difference with the orchestra like: "orchestrate" as a verb refers to a very well organized, planned, rational type of activity, while "choral" is an adjective that is used in contexts that refer to the collective sense, to the common good, "a choir of voices has raised in defense/in protest, etc. etc. "

As if directing the orchestra was the result of mental activity while the "choral" activity was the result of feeling.

I also considered that there are so many books and films that celebrate music through performers, primarily singers, pianists, violinists, conductors and composers as the protagonists of novels and screenplays.

Just to name a few: Roman Polansky's *The Pianist* (2002), Giuseppe Tornatore's *The Pianist on the Ocean* (1998), Gérard Corbiau's *Queen Voice* (1995), Michael Haneke's (2001) *Pianist* with Isabelle Huppert, and Ricky Tognazzi's *Canon Inverse* (2000) and without counting all the fictional biographies, from Verdi, Puccini, Paganini, Chopin, dramas, television series and then literature, we could only make a report on the titles of novels that deal with musicians but, on the contrary, as regards the choir conductor the clues we find are translated from his/her activity, where more often the choir is at the center of interest.

Among the books: from the best known *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) by Nobel Prize winner William Golding, where the choir is not mentioned in the title but is a fundamental part of the experience of one of the young protagonists that will

lead to the most unthinkable and dangerous, destructive aspects, *Choir boys* (2005) novel by the American Charlie Anders, starring Berry and his need to remain a white voice. Already *Le voci bianche /The White Voices* (1964) a film by Pasquale Festa Campanile and Massimo Franciosa with the contribution to the screenplay by Luigi Magni, which reconstructs with fancy and irony the eighteenth-century context and the use of the voice of the castrati, who discovered their own musical career starting to sing in children's choirs.

The complexity of the chorus phenomenon is also investigated, from other points of view, in the novels *A voice from the choir* by Andrei Sinjavskij (1982), or *The Boys of the Chorus* by Joseph Wambaugh from which the homonymous film *Les choristes* (2004) was based, directed by Christophe Barratier, or as well as *Idilli in chorus* by Luce D'Eramo (1951), up to the *Chorus of the killers and the dead* by Richard Mason (2004), translated into Italian with NOI (WE), where the choir is a metaphor for the ensemble of voices that intersect, an image of indistinct voices singing the story at the same time but not in unison, to remain in the musical lexicon, indeed each providing their own contribution, just as happens in a polyphonic score.

The novel by Hiromi Goto *The Choir of Mushrooms* (2005), follows the same principle: a structure with multiple narrative layers with three voices that intertwine like threads of an embroidery, to pass on orally the Japanese fairy tales of the grandmother and, in the at the same time letting the musicality of the word be perceived. Because the very idea of singing together suggests poetic images: *Tu dov'eri quando le stelle del mattino gioivano in coro?* (Where were you when the morning stars rejoiced in chorus?) by Christian Raimo.

I want to suggest two other films that mark the limits within which the choir environment moves. The first is *Sister Act I and II*, with Woopy Goldberg in the role of a fake nun who improvises choir director and also gets many results. The second is the docu-film *Die grosse Stille/The great silence the German* (2005), written, directed, scripted by Philip Gröning, on the life of Carthusian monks with secular rules, including the silence broken only by collective liturgical songs, a very singular choral community in fact.

From literature to films, the figure of the choir conductor almost disappears behind the activity of the group, but by investigating the chorus we will see that "not all that glitters is choir!"

How is the activity of this voice leader perceived by the public?

Now the activity that manifests itself, especially during the performance, is that of an apparently spontaneous yet formalized behavior, as well as ritual; we can say a sort of behavior centered on the act of leading/conducting which is inherently non-verbal.

The gesture of the choir conductor includes some elements such as:

- facial expressions (simulation of voice emission)
- visual contact (never cover your eyes with your hands, make sure of the gazes of the singers to begin with)
- posture and body position,
- paralinguistic (lip movements)

- movements of the shoulders, arms, hands and fingers,
- use of interpersonal space.

The sense of one's body, the structuring of one's body image is fundamental for a choir conductor. The ritual use of symbolic gestures sees the sign-gesture as the writing of him/her Self. The sense of one's body: how to see oneself in the mirror even in the absence of this object.

To quote Marcel Marceau: "The word is not necessary to express what one has in the heart".

There are no specific studies regarding how the choir conductor's gestures are significant of the cognitive processes and for the cognitive processes themselves, nevertheless I point out some studies from the beginning of the 90s of the twentieth century, the Japanese studio of Morita Hideyuki, Shuji Hashimoto and Sadamu Oheru, *A Music System Computer That Follows a Human Director* (1991), and David McNeill *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought* and again *Gesture and Thought* (1995) which phrase has become famous: "gestures are a window on thought". In the XXI century. Rhonda J. Vieth Fuelberth, *The effect of various left hand direction gestures on singers' perceptions of anticipated vocal tension* (2004) and Gerhard Widmer, *Misunderstanding and learning of musical expression* (2005).

In terms of publications by musicians / performers, I note the study by Liz Garnet, *Choral conducting and the construction of meaning: gesture, voice, identity* (2009) where she focused on the direct effects of the conductor's physical behavior on the way of singing of the choir, saying it is on a largely unconscious and involuntary level.

How can a largely involuntary behavior determine a leadership role?  
 Can we say that it is a necessary leadership, that of the choir conductor?  
 We can start from the observation that different choral traditions, with different repertoires for genres and historical periods, show not only different vocal styles but also a vocabulary of gestures, shared between the choir conductor and the group but also among different groups facing the same repertoire.

How can this multidimensional communication be explained?  
 Is it the result solely of the convention of a particular choral culture or does it have its roots in an ancestral, per-linguistic communication, which refers to the leadership of groups / communities?

Choral music, more than other ensemble musical practices, is above all an aggregating social cultural practice and we know that societies always manifest leadership dynamics, in various ways and circumstances.

Another study that certainly provides food for thought is due to Elizabeth Blades Zeller (1993) *A Spectrum of Voices: Prominent American Vocal Teachers Discuss the Teaching of Singing*.

Starting from Blades Zeller, I refer to what characterizes the role of the choir conductor with respect to the singing teacher, who works mostly with "one to one" method:

- ability to recognize the vocal qualities of the singer,
- 'diagnosis' of problems and possible (musical) solutions,
- ability to collectively communicate what it needs to the vocal group,
- capacity how to concentrate with self and heterodirect attention,
- developing and strengthening their self-leadership,
- treating (wisdom of) each chorister as an individual and not as a piece of a musical mosaic, both at the level of music and at the interpersonal level; we can reflect on the fact that there are no so-called child prodigies / precocious talents in the choir conducting, or famous choir conductors with Asperger's syndrome (people who have strong musical qualities but relate to others with difficulty).

I wonder: spontaneous gestures and acquired gestures in what way are the intentions of the choir director, in relation to the leadership needs of the vocal group?

Richard E. House's study, *Effects of Expressive and Nonexpressive Conducting on the Performance and Attitudes of Advanced Instrumentalists* (1998) suggests that choral conducting gestures are not universally understood while Timothy Bengé had come to opposite conclusions in his work *Movements Utilized by Conductors in the Stimulation of Expression and Musicianship* (1996).

Spontaneity or formalization, in the expression of leadership, how to overcome these obvious dualisms?

Now some consider choir conducting to be like that of the orchestra, but more often choir conducting is thought of as a *diminutio* of orchestral conducting, and not just in the ambit of amateur choir conductors.

Leadership research is needed that takes into account the specificities of this discipline in relation to the relationship between the choir conductor and the choristers, intended as musicians, who make music exclusively with their bodies, rather than with instruments.

Although not focused on this theme, some investigation, for the most part empirical, is aimed at the vocal / choral product of the gesture of the choir conductor.

Some ideas are offered by Cornelia Yarbrough's research entitled *Effect of Magnitude of Conductor Behavior on Students in Selected Mixed Choruses*. (in *Journal of Research in Music Education* - Summer 1975 23, pp. 134-146)

The experiments were conducted on 4 vocal groups subjected to videos with three levels of gestures: neutral, low or high. The following parameters were taken into consideration:

- visual contact
- proximity of the body
- volume and inflection of the voice
- gestures

- facial expressions
- explanations (rehearsal).

The results were measured as follows:

- evaluating the quality of the recordings performances
- evaluating the attention shown by the choristers
- from the responses of the choristers themselves in a questionnaire administered.

In conclusion, it has been seen that the choristers prefer a high gestural and communicative participation by the choir conductor.

In my experience, leadership always expresses itself with high levels of communication (in the broad sense of this term) between the leader and the group, especially in choral contexts.

Both as an unconscious / involuntary behavior and as a conscious / intentional conduct/ongoings, the choir conducting puts in place highly defined leadership processes in the musical experience.

The choir conductor implements both top down and bottom up information processing strategies, I would say.

Both the identification process (automatic, primary) and the intellectual process (voluntary, secondary) are conceived between the choir conductor and the choir/ vocal group.

Since this concerns, first of all, the identification that develops in the leadership processes between the individual (leader) and the group.

Choir conducting practice is one of the few experiences, in which a joint manifestation of the hierarchical and democratic dynamics takes place at the same time. There is 'despotism' and 'absolutism' on the one hand and the practice of the collectivity on the other: this is an interesting space for understanding leadership in musical contexts.

Choir is a living instrument, a whole set of "musical bodies"; as a result, in the case of the relationship between the choir conductor and the choir, the theory of the semiology of the body, declined in its various facets (Pierce, de Saussure, Barthes, Eco) cannot ignore the notion of individual and identity, according to the ethnopsychiatry. The body understood as the crucial point from which the knowledge of the musical practice begins, through the sensory experience: that audio-phonatory concerning the choral practice.

For this reason, the choir conductor relates to this kind of "musical body" through his/her own body, without elements of mediation, without instruments, with his/her bare hands, drawing on deep roots of self-representation. This is because our body is the first and most natural musical instrument, it is a 'technical object' and at the same time a 'technical medium', it is an instrument and a tool all together.

The experience of conducting as well as that of singing in a choir are unique, because the interpreter and the instrument coincide. This already happens in solo singing, but as enlarging the number of subjects involved this enriches and complicates the resulting dynamics that are linked to leadership.

The body involved in the choral practice (that of the conductor as well as of the chorister) can be understood as a biological body (Körper) and at the same time as an extended space inside and outside of us (Lieb). *Lieb* as a lived body, which has memory of itself, subject / object of music, from the perceptive experience to the aesthetic experience.

The awareness of one's bodily action, of the artistic realization of one's gestures, of a profound communicative attitude even before dialogical, prelinguistic ones linked to leadership behaviors, are the foundations on which the work of the choir director is based.

Self-representation is partly linked to the use of the symbolism of the body and of the different parts of the body (the upper part of the body, the face, the arms and hands essentially), as a manifestation of the multiple states of mind, as re-creation of the musical contents of the score as well as as a mnemonic aid.

From my experience I would like to hypothesize that the gesture of a choir conductor is at the same time: stimulus to music and response to music:

- stimulus for the choristers, as a communicative need (indication of time and mnemonic aid of some musical parameters above all)
- answer because music representation suggests to the choir conductor the type of motor synchronization that derives from it.

I hope that this reflection of mine raises questions about the relationship between the choir director and the vocal group in the light of the dynamics of leadership and the gestures associated with them.

Thank you for your attention.