PORTFOLIO OF ORCHESTRAL CONDUCTING EXPERIENCES AT BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This paper, as the supporting document to the creative project in orchestral conducting, accompanies a DVD bearing the same title. Filmed from a close, front-view perspective of the conductor, the DVD serves as the visual and audio portfolio of collected conducting experiences at Ball State University during the 2009-2010 school year. For each of the four pieces of music selected to be included in the portfolio, this paper will provide information on the following topics: (1) information which is integral to place the music in historical context regarding issues affecting its performance; (2) information on the composer; (3) performance issues specifically related to the conducting of the piece; and (4) an evaluation of the performance by the conductor and ensemble. Each of these issues as well as the creation of the DVD itself, serves as authentic career experience, as the research, compilation of video, and evaluation of performances is part of the ongoing career of an orchestral conductor.

The following selections are included in the portfolio:

1. Act II of The Medium, a short opera in two acts, by Gian Carlo Menotti (performed on November 21, 2009, with Ball State Opera Company)
2. Selections of *Music for the Blanton* by Donald Grantham

(performing on February 13, 2010, at Ball State New Music Festival)

3. “Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo” from *Cosi fan tutte*, by W.A. Mozart,

with Brayton Arvin, baritone soloist (performing on March 4, 2010,

with Ball State Symphony Orchestra)

4. *Concerto No. 1 for Marimba* by Ney Rosauro, Jeramiah Bowman,

marimba soloist (performing on March 4, 2010, with Ball State Symphony Orchestra)

**The Medium**

A recent opera tragedy in two acts, Menotti’s *The Medium* (1947) deals with the world of the supernatural. The music certainly works to reflect this mood, and employs many 20th-century techniques. An opera that stays “typical of the Italian operatic tradition,” *The Medium* was Menotti’s first international success.\(^1\) Segments of the opera that are well known include “Monica’s Walltz” and “The Black Swan,” both of which happen to be two of the most tonal and least dissonant passages of the entire work.

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Originally “conceived as a chamber opera for fourteen players” plus singers, the performance utilized piano for four hands and singers.² The main performance challenge became apparent through the rehearsal process: the piano players, though trained as accompanists, are soloistically trained, and had limited experience working with a conductor. Therefore, the coordination and non-verbal (gesturing) communication between singers, conductor, and pianists was somewhat difficult to work out. In addition, multiple meter changes and compound meter provided challenges to singers and pianists. The presence of many sections of recitative was also challenging, and required a thorough understanding of the written music.

Overcoming of these challenges proved to be somewhat difficult, but resulted in a high level of performance. As a trained orchestral conductor, I’ve studied different methods of cuing and beating time; all methods involve giving a pickup beat before the players (or singers) enter. At specific moments in The Medium, however, the pianists required a simple downbeat, without preparation; when the beat reached the bottom, or ictus, the players were able to play together, without a preparatory ictus. Though a more traditional method of giving the pickup beat was attempted, the process did not work well in rehearsal. Therefore, the conventional method was not utilized in performance. Below, see one such example.

Here, notice the series of half notes played simultaneously by two performers.

Giving a pickup resulted each time in rehearsal with the uneven attack. Therefore, the method described above was utilized instead to great success. In this instance, talking with the players themselves about what would be most favorable to them visually benefited the performance greatly. Though not a technique taught in the classroom, it was an important strategy for the performance of *The Medium*.

The videoed performance reflects the best combined efforts of orchestra (pianos), singers, and conductor throughout the rehearsal and performance periods. The performance was mostly without technical error. Had more time existed for conductor and pianos to rehearse independently, more expressive qualities by means of rubato tempo and subito dynamics could have perhaps been achieved.
Music for the Blanton

Written by living composer Donald Grantham in 2006, Music for the Blanton is a series of musical tableaux similar to that of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition. Fortunately, the composer attended the dress rehearsal and performance of the piece, which was interesting and informative in its own right. Grantham himself has been the recipient of several awards in composition including the Prix Lili Boulanger, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and three grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. Published by his self-owned company Piquant Press, Grantham makes his living from his compositions as well as working at the University of Texas at Austin. It was interesting to note that this score had to be ordered through Piquant Press—interesting because when searching for scores and resources for 20th- and 21st-century music, it is often necessary to contact the composer directly for such a purpose.

The artworks about which the piece was written date from the 15th to late 20th century. This is reflected in the composer’s approach to the music. Certain very traditional elements are used, such as the basis for the final performed movement, “Virgin and Child with Angels.” This movement is based on a piece of Medieval chant by 15th-century composer Guillaume DuFay. Contrary, the movement “Light Pink Octagon” is rooted in the 20th-century technique of quintal composition.

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4 Donald Grantham, Music for the Blanton (Austin, TX: Piquant Press, 2006), ii.
Music for the Blanton was created by Grantham as a commission to celebrate the opening of the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin. The piece features 18 short movements written for a total of ten instruments. Eight movements depict specific works of art and are connected by brief solos. For the performance given at Ball State University’s New Music Festival, four movements were selected based on criteria that centered on the ensemble and the overall musical aesthetic experience, including instrumentation, duration, and feasibility of performance.

Specific issues relating to the performance of this piece are numerous, and are related to each movement. The opening section, “Prelude,” is a brass fanfare in four parts plus timpani, and requires extreme versatility of the performer based on range, varying articulation, and ability to realize exact rhythms across mixed meters. Movement 9, “Cerrado por brujeria,” features a tuba solo that must be approached with sensitivity from the conductor, free of control. This idea is reflected later in this movement in a “free bar,” which allows each member of the ensemble to have his or her own solo. Score directions indicate to “begin in tempo and accelerate to as fast as possible. Trombone, Tuba, and Double Bass release where indicated.” Due to the unusual construction of this passage, players were allowed to simply follow the composer’s written instructions while the conductor gave a downbeat and waited for the ensemble to finish playing, indicating a crescendo during that time.
The overall performance was musically pleasing, and was described as being aurally pleasing by the composer.\textsuperscript{5} The conducting was appropriate to the members of the ensemble, and helped augment the performance. Through careful and thorough preparation of the score, the conductor was able to assist the ensemble in their music-making efforts, though was somewhat constrained by having only three rehearsals, including the dress rehearsal, prior to the performance. For this reason, several areas of improvement can be noted such as improving and unifying articulation, improving tuning of the ensemble at specific places, and some enhanced attention to balance of the group during quiet sections. Overall, the performance reflected a high level for the players included in the ensemble of ten. Several errors in pitch were noted in the last movement, and could have been corrected through further rehearsal time and individual practice. However, they were not extreme enough to negatively influence the overall musical affect of the piece.

\textit{“Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo” from \textit{Cosi fan tutte}}

W.A. Mozart (1756-1791), master of the classical era, created his masterpiece \textit{Cosi fan tutte} in 1789. Created two years before the end of his life, it represents Mozart's operatic writing at his most mature stage. As was the practice of operatic composers in the 1700s, Mozart wrote this aria for a specific singer, in this case

\textsuperscript{5} Letter from Jody Nagel to Matthew Hooper (personal communication), February 17, 2010
Francesco Benucci. Author Daniel Heartz points out that “Mozart spared no resource at his command in attempting to make a show-stopper of Benucci’s big aria in Act I. It is... in the heroic key of D major, with oboes, bassoons, trumpets.” Oddly enough, this aria was eventually deleted from the score. Heartz further explains Mozart’s shortcomings in attempting to write too much for the singer: “Trying too hard to capitalize on Benucci’s strengths... [the composer] indulged in verbal excess, leading to musical excess as well as ending up with a piece twice too long for its purpose.” Hence, Mozart’s decision to delete what would have been a show-stopping aria had an irrevocable affect on the future of the aria.

Interestingly, this story of Mozart’s writing for his actors continues to affect modern performance to this day. The aria, though included in the conductors’ score and referred to and labeled as number 15a, is not printed into orchestral parts. Hence, it must be purchased or rented separately. This omission from the published set of parts was found when preparing parts for distribution to the orchestra, and was an important lesson learned. The piece had to be ordered separately, a process that took time. Therefore, it was learned not to assume the presence of any opera aria, specifically one with such an interesting history as this.

The presentation of the aria seems fairly straightforward; it is written in two sections clearly marked “Allegro” and “Allegro molto.” Further, the notes are not

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7 Ibid., 357
8 Ibid., 358
overly difficult for a college-level orchestra to perform. However, stylistic considerations must be taken into account. For example, the score preparation of every note with regards to its articulation and length is essential to unify the orchestra. The first page of score is shown below:

Mozart, page 1, “Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo,” from *Cosi fan tutte*

Note the lack of articulation markings at measure 6 at the oboe entrance; it is essential stylistically for the players to articulate extremely short notes, and for this
articulation to be echoed by the cello and bass sections. Furthermore, for clarity, there must be a break between the first and second notes of the piece at measure 1. The same pattern for clarity is followed after the second unison D dotted half note in measure 1. Without a thorough analysis of the piece as well as stylistic awareness, it is impossible for the conductor to lead an informed performance.

Another important consideration for the performance of this piece was the acoustics of the hall and the balance between singer and orchestra. Due to the timbre of baritone voice matching almost exactly to that of the cello and low viola sounds, the orchestra needed to be kept at a low volume frequently throughout the piece. Furthermore, the consideration of the orchestra being on the stage for this concert performance, rather than below the stage in an orchestra pit, required further sensitivity from the conductor and orchestra with regards to dynamic range.

The performance of this aria by the conductor and orchestra was quite good; their attention to detail was extremely important given the acoustic issue discussed above. Further, articulations and stylistic considerations were observed quite well by the orchestra. Unfortunately, the soloist missed a key entrance just beyond the Allegro molto tempo marking near the end of the piece, and a few measures became somewhat shaky for the singer. However, the piece did not fall apart, and orchestra and soloist ended together, eschewing the error by coordinating their efforts at the next vocal entrance. Furthermore, the vocalist exhibited a flair for singing with orchestra, and added some gesturing to make the performance more complete.
Concerto No. 1 for Marimba and Orchestra

Ney Rosauro, composer of the marimba concerto, was born in Brazil in 1952. Perhaps one of the most important features of the concerto comes from his Brazilian birth and upbringing, education, and immersion in culture. Educated initially in Rio de Janeiro, Rosauro also attended the University of Brazil for his undergraduate degree, and eventually taught at the Federal University of Santa Maria in Brazil. He has also done work in Miami, Florida, and at the Hochschule fur Musik Wurzburg in Germany.9

Rosauro’s Brazilian heritage affects the immensely popular marimba concerto by infusing it with Brazilian musical motifs and jazz elements. Rhythmically challenging yet repetitive, the concerto has invigorating melodies that are easy to sing. Interestingly, the orchestral accompaniment to the piece uses no other percussion instruments and calls for only a string orchestra. The timbre of the orchestra changes throughout, calling for a difference in pizzicato versus arco playing techniques.

Conducting and performance challenges were mainly centered on the soloist’s request to bring out specific lines to aide him in properly performing the piece. For this reason, some dynamic levels needed to be adjusted to the acoustics of the hall. Furthermore, the conductor had to be sensitive to the soloist’s request for cues at certain structurally key moments. The synergy between the conductor and soloist was paramount to the performance, as there were moments each had to

take cues from the other. A thorough preparatory process of meetings between the two took place prior to first rehearsing with the orchestra.

In order to make the fast movement of the piece have a musical direction and flow, it became necessary for the conductor to make subtle changes to the articulation of the string instruments based on the marimba soloist’s interpretation. The importance of certain notes – especially the accented downbeats following meter changes – was stressed to the orchestra in rehearsal through both verbal comments and gesturing. Furthermore, these changes helped the piece sound less like groupings of notes being swallowed by the acoustics of the hall; the orchestral melodies of the piece were formed into a musical line containing melodic and harmonic direction.

The overall performance of the concerto was quite good and musically convincing. In this piece more than others, the orchestra exhibited a sense of control and musical sensitivity to the soloist on stage. In this vain, the soloist was able to musically interact with the orchestra and conductor, providing the audience with a quality performance.

**Conclusion**

The portfolio of collected experience of orchestral conducting includes a wide array of orchestral pieces. Further study is always possible on pieces, for with future performance usually comes a deeper understanding of the music. Perhaps the most valuable part of the creative project experience was the creation of the
portfolio as a visual and audio tool collected on a DVD – an experience that will be essential to the future career development of any conductor.
Works Cited


