On Conducting

The publication of two new books, *The Compleat Conductor* by Gunther Schuller and *The Art of Conducting Technique* by Harold Farberman, invites the opportunity to reflect on the state of conducting, interpretation, the training of conductors, and contemporary orchestral practice. Schuller and Farberman have much in common. They are only four years apart in age, and both came of age as musicians in the late 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. Both have had distinguished careers as orchestral players. They were prodigies as instrumentalists. Schuller was principal French horn first in Cincinnati and then at the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; Farberman was principal percussionist and assistant timpanist in the Boston Symphony. Both were in their twenties. In addition to becoming conductors, they are composers. Schuller is the better known, but Farberman's work has held its own. It was first championed by Stokowski, and Farberman's opera, *The Losers*, opened the American Opera Theatre program at Juilliard in 1971. Schuller and Farberman have also taught. Schuller was, among other things, the president of the New England Conservatory. Farberman, who now teaches at the Hartt College of Music in Hartford, founded the Conductor's Institute, perhaps the finest training program in America for young conductors. The aesthetic and cultural parallels in the careers of the two men are best mirrored in the pivotal roles both played in the Charles Ives revival of the post–World War II era. Schuller edited and performed a great deal of Ives. Farberman was among the first individuals to perform and record much of Ives's orchestral music, particularly in Europe.

Although the commonalities are striking, so too are the contrasts. Schuller's father (with whom I had the honor of working when, in retirement, he played in the Hudson Valley Philharmonic) had been a member of the New York Philharmonic. Farberman's father was a *klezmer* musician on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Schuller has been prolific as a writer, particularly on the history of jazz, and has been, properly, widely acclaimed. Furthermore, Schuller has been tireless in his advocacy of contemporary music and young musicians through publishing and recording. Farberman has devoted much more of his time to teaching and to the
training of young American conductors. He founded the Conductor’s Guild and has become America’s foremost conducting pedagogue.

Schuller’s book is not a textbook but is directed at a wider audience, particularly music lovers and concertgoers, not only academics and performers. Farberman has written a textbook, and it is, appropriately, accompanied by a video. It is a technical treatise, much in the tradition of Max Rudolf’s *The Grammar of Conducting* or, more recently, Arthur Weisberg’s *Performing Twentieth-Century Music: A Handbook for Conductors and Instrumentalists*. Schuller’s book delves into the philosophy and history of conducting and interpretation. Although both writers focus on specific pieces, Schuller provides an exhaustive and detailed analysis of eight works, while Farberman, who concentrates more on particular conducting problems and the physical issues involved in realizing a musical and interpretive intention—the art of communicating and preparing a performance—deals in detail with only three works.

What really differentiates these two books is a fundamental divergence on the matter of what interpretation is all about. It is hard to believe that these two authors are from the same generation, the same cultural milieu, with parallel careers and commitments, each possessed of unimpeachable credentials, achievements, and consummate musical skills and abilities. Schuller, from start to finish, assumes a nearly inflexible attitude, asserts superior knowledge, spews forth contempt and criticism, all in the name of respect for the true way of performing great music. Farberman invites a new generation to gain a technique sufficient to make music anew, to learn how to fashion and execute a serious interpretation on the assumption that great music can, will, and should speak convincingly and differently. What they share is an utter lack of doubt that they are right about what it means to make music.

Schuller is firmly rooted in the image of the score as complete and sacred text. There is, for him, in the notated signs themselves, a full set of instructions. Schuller sounds much like Schoenberg and Stravinsky when he writes about the damage performers and performances wreak on compositions. He reminds one of Milan Kundera’s recent peroration in the *New York Review of Books* about those who seem to override the wishes of the composer, who, in Kundera’s view, owns, so to speak, his work. Schuller’s book is an eloquent and impressive reassertion of a midcentury modernist set of claims that focuses on the obligation to honor the composer’s intentions. This seems plausible only because Schuller assumes that the notated score, if one looks carefully enough, has within it all the implications of that intention. Right can be clearly distinguished from wrong. Doing a piece as it should be done requires the unraveling of secrets embedded in formal compositional procedures,
structures, elaborations, and details contained in the score, often as clues and seemingly innocent fine points.

Schuller is primarily a formalist, but he invokes history when convenient. Schuller's version of history is dependent on a few selected well-known sources, many of which are secondary. In the main, he employs a fixed, ahistorical notion of the text and only a bit of context to underscore the idea that, in the end, there is a right way of doing things. According to Schuller, if one looks closely enough one will discover that the wide variety of tempi and phrasing decisions made by famous conductors available on recordings (hundreds of which Schuller painstakingly analyzes) are mostly wrong. They are the result of ego-driven, vain, and undisciplined musicianship. Schuller takes pride in trashing many icons of conducting. His praise is as rare as it is glowing. Erich Kleiber does not fare so well, yet Carlos Kleiber, whose repertoire and career are as limited as they are virtuosic, comes in for high praise. Leonard Bernstein, who deserves much more credit and was a far more original and brilliant interpreter and musician, does not command a great deal of respect. Carlos Kleiber is no doubt today's most startling master of the choreographed theater of the physical and gestural representation of music. He is often more impressive to see than to hear. But his repertoire and interpretive contributions are those of an epigone; they are directly divorced from contemporary music and indirectly from contemporary culture. Kleiber represents a caricature of conducting as a dialogue with recordings and an outrageously limited set of works from a musical museum. He may be a magician and a genius, but his career has been crippled and distorted by the shadow of his father, who was a wide-ranging, inspired, and courageous musician and an advocate of new music and new theater, who, unlike Karajan, Knappertsbusch, or Böhm, did not collaborate with the Nazis. Finally, Carlos Kleiber, for all his eccentricities and outstanding gifts, is not today's Glenn Gould of conducting. The point here is not to diminish Kleiber's work but to point out that the logical consequence of Schuller's approach is an intolerable narrowing of what can and should be done with the masterpieces of the past and how they might be reinvented as part of the musical culture of the present and future. The fundamental difference between the careers and contributions of Gould and Kleiber in this regard reveals the limitation of Schuller's strategy.

The point of Schuller's engaging, impressive, instructive, and brilliant book is, put bluntly, to assert that if you know what you are doing and do your homework carefully you may avoid making a mistake. There is some irony in the fact that much of Schuller's text is devoted to the most commonplace, standard repertoire, from Beethoven to Tchaikovsky. The book has extensive analyses of the Beethoven Fifth and Seventh
Symphonies, Brahms's First and Fourth Symphonies, Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel, Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé Second Suite, the Schumann Second Symphony, and the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony. It is as if a great American musician who has devoted his career to writing and performing new music has been waiting for years to tell the conventional mainstream world how what it thinks it knows so well should be done properly. Schuller is taking revenge, so to speak, through the medium of the standard repertoire of the contemporary symphony orchestra season. Since he is not a star composer-conductor on the regular circuit, in contrast to Boulez, he, in writing this book, translates his relatively peripheral status as a conductor into a rhetorical advantage. With the exception of the Ravel, there is no extensive discussion of any piece of twentieth-century music. There is no American work. (Schuller's explanation why in his preface is not convincing.) Likewise, Farberman's focus is equally tied to the standard repertory. The three longer technical analyses cover the overture to Mozart's Magic Flute, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and sections of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Throughout Farberman's text, however, there are examples from many other works. Hermann Scherchen's great book Handbook of Conducting is one of the few studies that consistently used contemporary repertoire alongside standard works.

Tolerance, openness to new ideas, and flexibility are not words that first come to mind after one puts Schuller's book down. The most startling thing is that Gunther Schuller believes the statement, "The composer and his score have to be respected," to be unproblematic. Schuller believes that the process of notation from the eighteenth century to the twentieth constitutes a fixed variable. Each composer is precise, and the reading of the notes on the page implies an unambiguous and prescriptive, closed set of instructions leading to the right sound. But even sound is not a fixed stable category; how "it sounds" is highly variable. Nonetheless, the performer has "unequivocally" no "right to disregard or override most of the basic information contained in a composer's score." On one level, there can be little argument against this, so long as the definition of "basic" remains rudimentary. But Schuller knows very well that he is not talking about "basic" issues in some vague sense of the right pitches played in the right sequence by the right instruments at more or less the right time. The bulk of his book is devoted to extremely subtle and detailed claims about phrasing, tempo, pacing, balance, dynamics, timbre, and the like. It is nearly incomprehensible that a musician and intellect of Schuller's caliber should be entirely impervious to the intellectual sea change that has come upon musicians and scholars with respect to how a score might be read and how music can be and has been understood, particularly as an aspect of history. At stake here is not adherence to fashion but rather the absence of any attempt at methodological self-criticism.
The making of instrumental music in the sense we associate with the modern symphony orchestra as a dialectical process of persuasion between composer and audience actually began in the eighteenth century. Both Moses Mendelssohn and the Earl of Shaftesbury, along with a host of other eighteenth-century aestheticians, understood music and its public performance as transactional events with an argument. That argument was made by performer and composer in a specific context of live music making. It was not necessarily a narrative or a story line; it was a complex, multilayered mixture of affect, logic, and, if you will, aesthetic apperception. It was at once purely musical and associationist in a so-called extra-musical sense. The score was the foundation but not the entire edifice. And there was no ideology of so-called absolute music. The social context of performance was a crucial component of the creation of meaning in particular musical experiences of performing and listening. This was the case, historically speaking, for Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. The audience's recognition of rhetoric, gesture, and allusion went hand in hand with the aural grasp of formal strategies in composition in terms of harmonic structure and motivic development. Therefore, wit and humor, as well as the sense of longing and of the tragic, were readily communicated through instrumental music even at first hearing. Discontinuity and continuity in a composition had purposes that were not only internal to some ahistorical construct of form and to a dialogue with historical precedents in the writing of music but were related to an ambition directed at making contact with contemporary listeners and performers, both amateur and professional. This remained the case until about 1914.

However, precisely because of the contextual historical contingency of musical communication since the late eighteenth century, there have been dramatic historical changes in the assumed and actual relationship between written notation and the task of the performing musician. No doubt, as Schuller correctly observes, there are important distinctions between \( f \), \( ff \), and \( fff \), and therefore in what is meant by the use of notated dynamic contrasts. But the physical means of realization, the spaces of realization, and the public recognition of such contrasts, let alone their meaning, perceived significance, and effect, cannot remain invariable. Therefore, because this idea was once self-evident, it is not clear that Mozart or Beethoven or even Brahms possessed any notion of a single “right way” to perform a piece of their own music in the way Schuller assumes. Too often biographical citations arguing the contrary are fragments shorn of their historical context. Brahms, for example, religiously avoided all metronome markings. Furthermore, he recommended that in certain instances, particularly in first performances, slower tempi might be justified. Notation in the nineteenth century took into account
assumptions about common practices by performers that either required no explicit references or demanded particular emphasis and commentary. The existence of a crescendo marking in Brahms means a clear indication at a particular moment. But its absence elsewhere does not mean that the performer should not apply variation in dynamics. Brahms's own markings in the score of the Fourth Symphony he used in performance suggest considerable flexibility in the way he heard his own music. All notation must be read in an intrinsically historical and relative manner, particularly if one wishes to claim that one knows the intention of the composer. And perhaps (perish the thought) the intention is itself a limited version of the possibilities for interpretation created by the score and the music. Given the enormous interaction between improvisation and published composition throughout the nineteenth century and the existence of divergent and contrasting regional performance traditions, a mid-twentieth-century notion of a "correct" reading of a score viewed as a sufficient closed assemblage of instructions is simply historically ignorant nonsense when it comes to nineteenth-century music.

Even though it is all too restrictive to consider a score a text in the literary sense, the current popularity of the application of hermeneutics to music comes in handy here. No one would dare write a book today telling the reader that there are correct ways or even one right way to read The Brothers Karamazov or to analyze a painting by Anselm Feuerbach or Arnold Boecklin, two of Brahms's favorite artists. Schoenberg may have believed that there was a right way to perform his music, but Charles Ives certainly did not. We know very well, for example, that Robert Schumann reheard his early piano music later in his life, since there are significant contrasts between earlier and later editions of "the same" music that he himself prepared.

The challenge facing the conductor and performer today is not to perform a piece in the "right" way as Schuller would have it, or to render a work in a manner determined by a historically contingent analytical and interpretive standpoint located in the antiromantic conceits of twentieth-century modernism. Schuller puts forth an ideology about text and performance that is a twentieth-century construct at odds with cultural history. Interestingly, in order to make his case he has to take shortcuts on the historical front. One logical consequence of his highly detailed prescriptions might be a wholesale embrace of the highly limiting period-instrument performance practice claims that he himself does not share. He succeeds because his use of history is selective, and he relies on the static, normative principle that the composer always knew what he was doing and that a work reveals its true meanings as a result of internal formal analysis. For Schuller, there are few loose ends. Total knowledge on the part of the
composer always carried with it authorial ownership. Everything is reflected in the notated text, which only periodically can be illuminated by reference to history.

In contrast to Schuller’s and Milan Kundera’s argument, it may be that even Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Copland did not fully realize the possibilities of their own compositions. They certainly were not the best exponents of their music. Their notations do not represent an exclusive set of possible criteria for future performance. As authors they did not fully anticipate the wide range of expressive adaptation that their music permits. It is precisely the capacity of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schoenberg to speak in contrasting ways in radically different readings at different times to different audiences that justifies their claim to a special kind of greatness. For example, I once heard a performance by Celibidache of Strauss’s Don Juan. It was startlingly different from the convention and from Strauss’s own reading. Yet it was revealing, suggestive, convincing, and well thought through. It was a reinvention in slow motion that only underscored in a new way the compositional brilliance and mastery of the composer. The Brothers Karamazov and the great paintings of the past have survived a fantastically divergent set of readings and responses that all sustain legitimate claims to a careful grounding in the text and the object itself. No doubt there always has been a category of arbitrary, thoughtless, indefensible, and implausible readings. The writings of Friedrich Nietzsche have been consistently exploited in this way. But at the same time, the nearly inexhaustible richness of defensible interpretive possibility is what recommends Nietzsche. Schuller treats his musical texts the way a religious fundamentalist reads the Bible. Unfortunately, the results of such a rigid claim to authenticity and truth are as damaging to music as they are to religion.

The blurb of Schuller’s book suggests that the book is “highly provocative.” Indeed it is. The critique outlined above is in no way designed to diminish the real strength of Schuller’s book. His book deserves high praise and admiration. It offers immensely useful, closely argued, brilliant analyses of works, and it puts forward in an appealing and alluring way a particular point of view about performance that has been at the center of twentieth-century music making. No one is as qualified as Schuller to argue a theory and practice of the interpretation of the historical repertoire grounded in commitments reactive to perceived excesses of the late romantic era regarding the relationship of the composer to the public. His views mirror the significance of modernism to twentieth-century performance and composition. Oddly enough, Schuller’s exemplary and unusual concern for the relationship between concert music and other musics, particularly jazz, seems to have left little residue here. In any event, Gustav Mahler’s readings of Beethoven,
Schumann, and Tchaikovsky would have been dismissed by Schuller had they been preserved on recordings. That in itself should give the reader some pause in accepting Schuller's approach. No doubt Schuller is still reacting to the thick overlay of unexamined interpretive conventions that dominated music teaching decades ago and that gave birth to thoughtless habits. But the battle against unreflective performance habits in reading music cannot be won by replacing them with an equally limited set of pseudo-authoritative claims.

The shortcoming in Schuller therefore lies not in the execution of his argument but in the book's relentless appeal to authority in cases where authority cannot exist. Even Schuller's description of conducting technique is crippled by an exaggerated idea of what is clearly right and wrong. The authority that seems most plausible is an expanded version of a simplistic but common-sense notion of the score and the composer's intentions. When someone gets on the podium in front of an orchestra today, he or she should recall, rather, the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century commitment to communication between audience and musical performance. The conductor must be convinced about that which he or she wants to persuade the audience through the performance of a particular piece of music. Schuller seems not to account for the possibility that decisions regarding tempo, pacing, even orchestration, articulation, and phrasing (preferably within reasonable limits, but perhaps not) that stand in stark contrast with his own minute prescriptions might actually come closer to realizing the intention of the composer in the act of communicating meaning through the performance of instrumental music today. If Haydn, for example, was arguing moral-philosophical claims in his later symphonies, perhaps an imaginative interpretive strategy in the performance of his symphonies that liberally renders the notation and ignores historical precedents might achieve with the audience in 1997 a closer equivalent to what Haydn wished to see happen in the 1790s than either a performance that adheres to some historical approximation of late-eighteenth-century practice or a performance defined through a narrow strategy of formal analysis based on Schuller's theoretical and analytic methodology. This is, after all, what has sustained Shakespeare's place in the theatrical canon and in our culture. No one would think to place Shakespeare's dramas in the kind of ideological and technical straitjacket Schuller suggests for the masterpieces of the symphonic repertory. Music, like theater, is a performing art based on a notated text. Yet consider what miraculous interpretations have been applied to Shakespeare in ways that alter the text, its sound and meaning, defined in terms akin to Schuller's prescriptions. Schuller does not share the confidence that the entire nineteenth century possessed; musicians could even go so far as
to rewrite and reorchestrate the music of the past to sustain its power with a modern audience.

Ironically, it is Schuller's impressive and extensive close reading of today's library of recordings that has fueled his conviction that there is a right way of doing things. Every recording is fixed and cannot be adjusted. A single recorded account has the negative potential of seeming normative through repeated hearings. Most audiences today respond to a performance by comparing it to their favorite recordings. If there is one historical contrast with today that is germane, it is that none of the composers whose works Schuller has chosen to analyze ever dreamed of a circumstance akin to modern recording, with the possible exception of Ravel. The world in which we function musically is so different from that of the composers whose works Schuller analyzes that I suspect in that often-used thought experiment "if Beethoven were alive today . . ." the last thing he would understand is the role of recording and the resultant fanatical and intolerant assertion that there is a correct way of performing his music, even the opening of the Fifth Symphony about which Schuller is certain that there is only one adequate solution.

Given the declining prestige and the flux surrounding the traditions of orchestral performance today, it is precisely the framing of a distinct point of view that can convince a modern audience to listen and respond. This fact defines the challenge to the contemporary conductor. As Derek Bok's new book, The State of the Nation, makes clear, there is still a huge audience for the performing arts in America today. If the symphony orchestra wants to continue to command the attention of a part of that audience, particularly through the performance of the standard repertory Schuller writes about, the range of interpretation must be wide and more imaginative than he suggests is appropriate. The work of writers on music from the generation of Leonard Meyer and Edward T. Cone down to today's younger theorists and historians should inspire conductors to think more bravely about how to connect today's audience to the standard repertory beyond the appeal to the notion that they must restore or recreate a work in some sort of original and authentic manner. Conducting, as Richard Strauss pointed out, is an act that forces the artist into finding some equilibrium between a sense of faithfulness to the composer's text and inspired improvisation. It is toward this end that Schuller's sense of authority is properly offset by Farberman's first-rate technical advice.

Farberman's text provides a painstaking, practical, and imaginative analysis of the physical technique of conducting. Given the economics and realities of modern professional orchestral life, the conductor who gets up on the podium must communicate through physical gestures the shape and sound of the music as efficiently and quickly as possible. It is
the physical activity of the conductor that elicits sound. Because of the impressive professionalism of orchestral players and their entirely contemporary sense of authority and significance as artists, the art of conducting demands the capacity to direct, inspire, and respond to the orchestral musician. One does not have the kind of extensive rehearsal time available a century ago, and one can no longer obtain results through the nasty, dictatorial, and humiliating strategies of the great maestros of the past. The loss of such tyrannical and abusive authority has been replaced by the ease with which it is possible to convince colleagues in the orchestra to follow an interpretation and a detailed set of instructions regarding how a performance should occur.

Farberman’s approach is designed therefore to provide the conductor with a highly varied and subtle repertoire of physical gestures that can be adapted to the fresh ideas, talent, and intentions each individual conductor should bring to the score and podium. He has analyzed the space the conductor occupies and the dynamics of gesture and created a textbook that can help an individual develop a command of the elaborate rituals of pantomime that conducting must be, whose underlying grammar is recognized by musicians the world over. He offers a way out of the trap of mere time beating so that the conductor can create sound, line, and musical meaning through physical motion. Heinrich Schenker predicted nearly a century ago the need for a painterly form of conducting in order to assist audiences as well as players. Schenker may not have viewed that evolution as a positive symptom of the future state of musical culture. Given the transfer in musical literacy within the public from text to recording, the painterly aspect has become even more crucial. The positive aspect is that the effective gestural expression that helps an audience listen—the kind Carlos Kleiber commands in an exemplary manner—is precisely the same kind of physicality that can deliver crucial information rapidly to players in the context of the modern rehearsal and performance routine. Farberman’s system can allow each conductor to realize individual intent through clear, comprehensible technique. He, unlike Schuller, allows for legitimate variations in what constitutes good technique.

Farberman and Schuller share a deep distaste for the ill-prepared act of music making. Both understand the common-sensical distinction between willfulness and originality, and between incompetence and insight. They both realize the possibility of fraud and sloppiness, which are easier to hide among conductors than among instrumentalists. The conductor has to have a prepared argument, and that argument has to command respect. And the source of that respect has ultimately to be connected to the score. If that requires deviating from the score, adding to it, making assumptions about what has been left out or ought to be added, or, alter-
natively, interpreting just what is on the page in a new way, then from Farberman's point of view the conductor must not only justify such decisions but show them visually. But that means that the conductor is doing what the conductor ought to do. From Farberman's point of view, notation is never a complete set of musical instructions. Notation is necessary but not sufficient for great performance. It must be brought alive in order to realize the musical experience in live performance in a manner that engages audience and performers.

Farberman's text is the best textbook to appear in decades. It encourages the aspiring conductor. In contrast, Schuller's text is a deterrent to courage and innovation. It places the historical repertoire in an embalmed form behind a proverbial glass wall guarded by a Praetorian guard of self-styled experts. There are a catechism, a canon, popes, and cardinals. Infallibility is the key assumption. When one listens with some amusement to Harold Farberman's recent recorded reorchestrations of Mozart and Berlioz for percussion ensemble, one is reminded that inventiveness and humor, as well as transformative reinterpretation, can compel today's listeners just the way Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Wagner, and Mahler once did with the music of their past. Fresh ideas are encouraged by Farberman's approach. They can fit the standard repertoire Schuller analyzes, which is why those works continue to remain vital.

Schuller's book is a fine tribute to an ideology of reinterpretation that spans the decades between 1930 and 1990. This was an intensively creative period to which Schuller himself contributed substantially. It was the era in which the recording library we now possess (and unfortunately refer to all too often) was created. But the time has come to move on. The abandonment of the kind of argument so well expressed by Schuller as an exclusive interpretive standpoint is a necessity if one is concerned for the future of live performance. This realization is perhaps one of the few virtues of an era of postmodernism.

Every conductor, both young and experienced, will benefit from these books. Schuller's book will remind every conductor of how much more there is to learn in works that seem familiar and how rewarding close scrutiny of the score is as part of the preparation for performance. Farberman's book offers the advice and technical insight sufficient to permit each individual to fashion and realize an interpretation. Since both authors are composers, it is interesting that one has chosen to align himself with the inflexible and nearly hostile attitudes to performers characteristic of Schoenberg and Stravinsky and the other with a tradition of respect for performers and for improvisation and invention. Ironic as that is given Schuller's engagement with jazz, it is the klezmer musician that speaks, in the end, in Farberman's text. Performances seem like weddings
and holidays. There is something always the same about them and yet they are different each time. And although such rituals by definition share essential patterns and characteristics, there is no right way or wrong way of creating each separate experience of joy, understanding, and humility. If I were to prepare any of the works carefully analyzed by Schuller, I would make it my business to reread carefully what he has written in order to establish, reexamine, and test what I wanted to do. When I arrived at the first rehearsal, it is the lessons learned from Farberman that would make it possible for me to realize accurately and precisely the interpretation and performance I wanted to give, which, all good intentions aside, in the end both of them might decide to reject.

—Leon Botstein

Notes