A DISCUSSION OF GUNTHER SCHULLER'S APPROACH TO CONDUCTING
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC CLASSROOM

JANICE WALDRON
University of Windsor, Canada

Abstract: What professional musicians say and do affects the attitudes and actions of music educators in the classroom. One example comes from influential conductor/composer, Gunther Schuller, who, in his controversial 1997 book, The Compleat Conductor, defines, espouses, and recommends his own "philosophy of conducting." An examination of his ideas and, more importantly, the assumptions that premise them, demonstrates that Schuller fails to situate his beliefs within the larger historical framework of aesthetic philosophy. It also serves as a useful example of how we, as conductor/educators, are prone to distance ourselves from educational philosophy as a product of the systematic examination of beliefs. This is dangerous because, through conducting, one necessarily reinforces a philosophy of music, which is itself situated within the general realm of aesthetic philosophy. This paper summarizes Shuller's interpretation of conducting, identifies the unarticulated realist and idealist assumptions within,
critiques his "philosophy," and discusses the implications of this prescriptive approach to instrumental music education.

Professional musicians, through their performances and beliefs, can profoundly affect the attitudes and approaches of classroom music educators. A particular case in point can be made from a wind band educator perspective. There are currently only two professional wind bands operating in the United States; instrumental wind band educators who wish to emulate the practices of professional musicians are forced to rely almost exclusively upon the works presented by professional orchestral models and, by extension, professional orchestral conductors. Because this is the case, the actions, words, and thoughts of professional conductors can be a significant factor in shaping the beliefs and practices of public school band directors.

One such influential conductor/composer/musician/educator is Gunther Schuller who, in his 1997 book entitled "The Compleat Conductor," espouses his controversial approach to conducting, which he labels and defines as a "philosophy of conducting." It is not a philosophy in the commonly understood aesthetic use of the term. Instead, based on his unexamined assumptions, he presents his ideas regarding conducting and performance practice as truth and, as examples, uses eight classical masterworks to demonstrate how to apply his philosophy to written scores. Schuller makes no attempts to ground his claims through dialectic or other systematic method of examination. To his credit, this is not his objective because such an examination would undermine the idea that what he presents are universal truths regarding music and written scores. Questioning this would be unthinkable and irrelevant.

In this paper, I will examine the underlying philosophical claims of Schuller's conducting philosophy but, more importantly, I will examine the manner in which he articulates these claims. This will be done in an attempt to demonstrate that his failure to situate his philosophical beliefs within a larger historical framework serves as an example of how we, as conductors, are prone to distance ourselves from educational philosophy as a product of systematic examination or dialectic. Instead, in many cases, it is possible that such philosophical beliefs are constructed in order to reinforce attitudes that are grounded in prevailing practice. It is not my intention in this paper to offer my own or any other alternative philosophy of conducting, but instead to use Schuller's book as a useful case study that exemplifies the problems inherent when unreflective thought guides a practice, which, in this case, is conducting. I will now briefly summarize the main ideas in the philosophical and prescriptive segments of Schuller's work before arguing this case. It is worth noting that his book also contains an excellent history of conducting, which will not be discussed here.
SCHULLER’S INTERPRETATION OF THE ART OF CONDUCTING

According to Schuller, conducting is the most demanding and musically complex of the various disciplines which constitute the field of music performance. He claims that it is often mistakenly perceived as an easily acquired skill by musicians and a magically bestowed gift by audiences, but maintains that it is neither, because it requires “years of hard work, intensive study and talent.” Although he does not define the term “talent,” he asserts that by itself it is insufficient for one to become a conductor, because the art of conducting involves skills which encompass a range of human attributes, including certain physical, aural, analytical, intellectual, psychological, and philosophical strengths. All must be highly honed.

Schuller wisely notes that there is an underlying philosophy in every conductor’s approach, but implies that most of these philosophies are misguided for various reasons. Further, he maintains that, contrary to the beliefs of many conductors, the act of conducting can be specifically defined and prescribed. According to him, the ideal conductor is deeply devoted to understanding the score, humble in her desire to serve the music, an ardent advocate for new music, and possesses the necessary “technical, intellectual and emotional capacities” to translate an appropriate realization via the correct gestures. Most importantly however, she possesses

a sense of unalterable respect for the great literature comprising our Western musical heritage; a sense that the art of conducting must be seen as a sacred trust to translate into a meaningful expressive acoustic reality, with as much insight as humanly possible, those musical documents—the scores, the texts—left us by the great composers.1

Schuller is not suggesting that the conductor should eschew a healthy ego, but rather recommends that she possess a sense of humility born of a desire to know all aspects and dimensions of a work, both notated and spiritual. By fulfilling this obligation, a conductor necessarily discovers the only suitable way to perform a piece, thus abolishing the concept of “interpretation”—which Schuller abhors—and instead instituting Maurice Ravel’s concept of “realization”—of which Schuller is an advocate. As an example, he quotes Ravel who advised, “One should not interpret my music, one should realize it.”

Schuller believes that interpretation is a dangerous practice for several reasons. First, because it is a recent development having evolved over the last two hundred years, the relative novelty of the concept of interpretation makes it suspect in and of itself. He argues that the modern interpreter, either through “arrogance or ignorance, alter[s] the work to suit his own needs or thoughts.”
Thus, according to him, interpretation becomes a refusal to let the work stand alone. Worse, repeated exposures to many different interpretations renders critics, musicians, historians, and audiences incapable of distinguishing a “real work” when heard. Further, anyone who has not experienced such a “true realization” cannot even begin to contemplate how sublime this “ultimate artistic achievement” could be.

SITUATING SCHULLER’S PHILOSOPHY

I will now discuss how Schuller’s approach to conducting is rooted in two schools of aesthetic philosophy. Although he does not acknowledge this in his discussions, I believe that an examination of the philosophical roots of his beliefs is necessary, because it serves to demonstrate how we, as educators, often fail to acknowledge the roots of our belief systems, therefore remaining oblivious to the resulting impact that they can have on practice.

Closer examination of Schuller’s ideas reveals an approach to conducting tacitly rooted in the two philosophies of idealism and realism. In the former, the ideal version of a piece is believed to exist only in the composer’s mind. Thus, the best that musicians can hope to achieve in a performance is a close approximation to the original version envisioned by the composer. Realists believe that the score is a literal translation of the composer’s intent. The two philosophies overlap to some extent; their one common thread is the belief that a score is not open to more than one interpretation. Adherence to the score therefore becomes the ultimate standard by which performances are measured.

Because idealists believe that the material (or lesser) world is constantly in a state of flux, they wonder if any grounds for stability are possible. Stability is sought by seeking the truth that lies in the ideal, but because it lies in the ideal, that truth can never be fully realized. These ideas trace their roots to Plato, Hegel, and Kant (who formulated the concept of “transcendental idealism”) and are based on the belief that what we experience is “merely a shadow of reality” because although we cannot truly trust our senses, the world as we know it is experienced sensually. Since “real objects constituting the external world are not independent of cognizing minds,”8 knowledge, reason, and logic then become the only tools available to us to uncover truth.

There is a strong idealistic streak evident in Schuller’s writing that is best represented by the manner in which he perceives music as transcendental. As an example, he states that “such subtilties of interpretation reside in that final highest realm of reproductive performance where inexplicable, indefinable—and unteachable—instant and intuition take over, which go beyond the musical notation, beyond the text, and capture the essence that lies behind the notes.”9 Further, he claims that “those aspects of a performance that transcend the limi-
tations of the score, that explore the regions beyond the scope of musical notation, should respect the final stages of an interpretation which is in all other respects and at all other levels wrung from a faithful, rigorous, intelligent reading of the text."10 Thus, Schuller is speaking of universal ideals and truths because he speaks not of definitive performances, but ideal ones.

Betty Hanley, in her discussion of the implications that various aesthetic philosophies hold for music educators, explains that teachers with an idealistic approach to music education employ "a systematic, thorough, and generally more intellectual study of acknowledged masterpieces" because to an idealist these "are the best manifestations of lasting and universal truth to be found in the material world."11 Music educators with this belief system—and the resulting approach to practice based on it—would certainly seem to be consistent with the views expressed by Schuller.

On the contrary, realists value the world as perceived, because to them the physical is what is real and constant. Aristotle, one of the first proponents of this philosophy, maintained that the path to truth was based on empirical observation because rational conclusions could then be drawn based on practical evidence.

In addition to his idealist beliefs, Schuller demonstrates an empirical realist approach in the manner that he decided what musical texts to include in his book for analysis. The eight "acknowledged masterpieces" represent to the author the definitive orchestral works of the last two centuries. Prior to writing the book, Schuller listened to every known recording of each piece and then listed them in descending order of frequency of recordings. The number of times each piece was recorded determined both its inclusion in the book and the order in which it was analyzed. In order, the works are Beethoven's Fifth, Seventh, First, and Fourth Symphonies; Brahms's Fourth; Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel; Ravel's Daphnis et Chloe, Second Suite; Schumann's Second; and Tchaikovsky's Sixth. Each work is presented in a separate chapter in which Schuller prescribes how to obtain an exact performance of the masterwork based on his ideas and these are reflected in his reading of the text. Further, Schuller is dismissive of any conductor who falls outside of his judgment as to what is or is not a correct realization—not interpretation—of the score.

This homage to acknowledged masterpieces is also consistent with a realist's view of music. Hanley explains that, "for realists, masterpieces are important because they have been identified by connoisseurs as worthy of study."12 A music educator with this philosophy therefore believes that it is her purpose as a teacher to help students perceive what is really happening or being heard in the music and this would also appear to be consistent with Schuller. He states that "a consummate knowledge of the music at hand will always bring out the best in
the musicians.”13 In this view, the conductor becomes the teacher and the musicians are the students.

This philosophy holds other implications for music educators as well. It implies that “if students don’t appreciate a great musical work, it is because they do not truly hear (that is, understand) what is going on”14 and it therefore becomes the teacher’s duty to clarify the work so that the students will “appreciate what they are experiencing.”15 Schuller would seem to concur with this statement, because he argues that “as a working method, [the conductor] is in the process of revealing the score to the orchestra and thence the listener, the specifics of how all the elements of music are used—harmony, melody, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, form and structure must be separately added then collectively explored and understood.”16

Further, Schuller uses realism to bridge the gap between the material (score) and ideal worlds by asserting that the score contains measurable elements which are the key to understanding and thus realizing the ideal. He states that we must concern ourselves with “those aspects of performance—and musical notation—which are fundamental, which are measurable, and which in turn permit us to evaluate a performance in relation to at least those fundamentals.”17 Schuller values the quantifiable aspects of music because it enables the conductor to uncover truth.

SOME RESPONSES TO SCHULLER

In order to contrast Schuller’s realist conception of the score, it is first necessary to understand what various scholars have to say about the value of scores and the relation of composers, performers, and music in a performance. Here I am trying to establish that alternate views exist and for reasons of brevity, do not believe it necessary to review all that has been said on the subject. Therefore, I will now outline the beliefs of two philosophers who represent a dissenting view: Francis Sparshott and David Elliott, both of whom were chosen because their ideas are fairly well known within the field of music education.

Sparshott says that a score is a piece of written text with signs on it and that these signs are understood syntactically within the context of a specific performance practice. The signs indicate certain sound types, silences, and relations between them that “correspond to a class of musical performances.”18 The score by itself does not demand how it should be performed, therefore providing performance opportunities for the practitioner. According to Sparshott, scores can be used in several ways. They can be executed “straight” (that is, performed as truthfully as possible) or can be used to form the basis for an improvisation, or as a “source of ideas.”

Sparshott also maintains that the manner in which a score is employed can
be analogous to the way in which a tune is learned aurally. This is because when a performer learns a song based on another's rendition one is imitating the originators' version and thus producing, and not necessarily re-producing, a copy of the original. The song can then be varied or used as the basis for a new tune. In this way, Sparshott perceives music-making as a potentially talk-like activity, thus rendering realist beliefs about score function tiresome and obsolete. He identifies the debate surrounding the issue as political rather than musical in motivation and maintains that, for this reason, “using a score in one way” does not necessarily preclude others from using it in an altogether different manner.

Playing from a score differs in another way from a performance learned from an aural experience. Aurally learned performances are based on “one or more individual performances” while a score answers to a “class of performances.” There is a belief that if one wishes to truly know a composer's work, then there must be a “subclass of performances answering to the ways the composer envisaged the work when it was composed.” Sparshott wonders if such a class is needed because some, like Schuller, believe that there is only one true inner performance intended by the composer, which must, by default, be the definitive one.

Sparshott, however, is convinced that this concept is not only musically unviable but also unnecessary. A real performance has mistakes, but it can also contain moments of sublime participant interaction, which do not necessarily originate from the written page. Music-making is an inherently human activity, he argues, and as such to seek the perfect performance is futile and misses the point. For example, in a real performance, unlike an inner one, decisions are constantly being made in response to a multitude of unplanned interactions and external events. Bearing this in mind, the composer's inner performance would not necessarily be more authoritative than the composer's own actual performance, because she might not be a proficient enough musician to realize her own composition. A superior musician, however, could demonstrate that “different interpretations, both equally defensible musically, [could] comply with the same score.”

Elliot agrees and expands on this idea by arguing that what “musical performers do is analogous to what a speaker does when he utters a quotation.” A speaker using a quote to make a point demands understanding and an interpretative ability on the part of the listener. There is, however, more to a musical performance than this factor alone. When one says that a musician is performing a work, a subtle implication is made that the musician is “producing the precise sounds indicated in the score and deliberately intending the sounds” which are stipulated by the composer. A requirement of any performance is a musical assertion that can be thought of in the same way in which a speaker
expects his listeners to understand and interpret a quotation. It is therefore insufficient merely to quote what a composer indicates on a score because this by itself does not qualify as a performance.

Instead, a performer must "express his/her personal understanding of the composition."25 This is an absolutely necessary ingredient in any performance. It is not enough to copy or reproduce an "audible reproduction of a score."26 What makes a musical experience enjoyable is the special understanding—or interpretation—that exists between a particular artist and the performed work. Sparshott articulates a similar idea, maintaining that the musician must demonstrate a performance understanding relative to the understanding needed to compose a piece. The resulting alternative, a performance that has just copied the composer's understanding, is therefore not a musical one.

Further, Elliott specifies the ways in which performers can demonstrate understanding of a composition within the performing context. He says that one can perform "what the composer should/could have intended, what past performers could/should have intended, what performers believe their audience expects, or any combination of the latter."27 The result is that there can be a myriad of possible contrasting interpretations and further that these constitute the vast array of different performance characteristics which provide the impetus for attending concerts comprised of music which the listener may have already heard numerous times.

A CRITIQUE OF SCHULLER'S APPROACH

There are many tacit assumptions that underlie Schuller's writing. Although I do not personally share this view of music, it has not been my purpose to offer an extensive refutation of idealist or realist philosophies of music here. I have summarized several alternative positions in order to demonstrate that they exist and thus I have overlooked several cogent arguments supporting idealist views in the process. The goal of my previous discussion was to demonstrate that the potentially dangerous aspect of this work is not the philosophy contained therein, but the author's approach. Specifically, readers are not given the opportunity to understand Schuller's claims about music within the framework of philosophical discourse because the author does not take us there.

Schuller's book is not a philosophical work in the commonly understood sense, as he makes no attempt to convince the reader, through the construction of rational arguments or dialectic, of the foundational underpinnings of his philosophy. The many ideas discussed are simply stated as facts with the remainder of the book resembling an instruction manual on how to go about conducting, based on the assumed truth of the philosophy. This brings us to the underlying problem: Schuller, by not attempting to convince the reader that his realist/ide-
alist view is superior to any other, such as pragmatism or social constructivism, for example, serves as a useful case study. Through one’s approach to conducting, one necessarily conveys a particular philosophy of music, which is itself based on some school of thought within general aesthetic philosophy. When this broader philosophical framework remains unidentified, however, the potential for indoctrination remains high. Schuller has gone further than many conductors in that he has articulated his belief system; however, he has not situated it within the framework of aesthetic philosophy or even a philosophy of music. Thus any discussion about the acceptability of his philosophy among conductors becomes closed.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC EDUCATION

It behooves the music educator who ascribes to a philosophy of conducting that leaves its own assumptions unexamined to examine all possible repercussions for music education. Ironically, Schuller indicates correctly that conductors have historically avoided examining the underlying philosophies that guide their actions. According to Hanley, it is a fundamental human characteristic to behave in a certain way which is consistent with one’s own world view. Such a belief system operates on so basic a level that most people make all of their choices based on it until someone or something happens to challenge them. In a recent response to Elvira Panaiotidi, I argued that through the obsessive search for self-justification, music programs in specific regions often develop curricula that reflect local values and/or respond to localized pressures and then backtrack by constructing tacit philosophies that are indirectly based on the social norms that gave rise to those curricula.

This process of constructing a priori philosophies (for lack of a better term) in order to rationalize firmly held beliefs is particularly apt to occur in the realm of band performance, according to Craig Kirchoff. He believes that many traditional band directors ascribe to a realist philosophy while apparently unaware of the historical roots of their belief or that any alternatives exist. This realist philosophy of band directing may be a result of the band’s historic relation to the military or it may exist because of the residual effects of conductors such as Fritz Reiner and Arturo Toscanini. Both were dictatorial in their approach to conducting, assuming that there are absolute measurable standards. The ideas shared by Toscanini, Reiner, and Schuller are influential because they reinforce this traditional style of band directing—or might these ideas themselves be derived from military practice? It is difficult to say.

Kirchoff states that the idea of measurable standards of performance with regard to the score is no more apparent than in the North American band con-
test. Most band directors and communities judge a band program based on its contest evaluations. There is little doubt, says Kirchoff, that the “band contest has helped to raise and maintain performance standards in this country.” He points out, however, that these numerous contests are so connected by their realist view that there is little or no room for interpretation. Often, a Division One (Superior) performance is the one that has most perfectly replicated the repertoire in terms of the score. The categories on a standard North American adjudication sheet include intonation, tone quality, balance and blend, rhythm, articulation, and dynamics. Because the category of musicianship is normally listed at the bottom of the form, he argues, it inevitably receives little attention. Thus the goal of a contest performance often becomes error elimination, thus achieving as much musical correctness as possible or, in Schuller’s words, “recreating and reproducing the masterpieces.” This is not to imply that the realist position itself is necessarily negative. The problem is that, when taken to extremes and in the absence of any other allowable philosophy, it can preclude musicality and innovation in a band performance. Band directors wanting to achieve a First Division in competition usually err on the conservative side both in programming and interpretation of the music so that, consequently, there is no allowance for risk or creativity in music performance. Aiming for a First Division contest rating also affects how one rehearses. If achieving correctness through duplication is a performance objective, then rehearsals often become fix-it sessions, with the elimination of error as the goal. If we substitute the term “rehearsal” for “music class,” the only goal of music education then becomes the elimination of performance error. This is a goal which, at the very least, should be more closely scrutinized. To quote Kirchoff, “correct musicmaking does not necessarily equate with great musicmaking.”

One final issue for consideration is that the selection of music which an ensemble performs for the band contest is often not dictated by taste or aesthetic value, but by what choices will enable the ensemble to achieve a Superior rating. Schuller’s belief that a piece of music should not be attempted unless it can be properly realized is embraced by many directors whose entire school year is devoted to contest preparations and thus they may avoid introducing repertoire of potentially pedagogical value to students who have yet to master the technique necessary to execute it. Since band music is rarely tailored to the individual needs of particular schools, an imbalance of skill within the sections of a band or missing instrumentation may result in some students never being exposed to repertoire which would be artistically or pedagogically valuable to them.

Further, the typical band repertoire at most North American universities and high schools still emphasizes classical music (that is, the great masterworks) because this is often seen as the only legitimate music that one should perform.
This idealist view discourages band directors from programming experimental music or music which falls outside the hegemony of Western European Art.

In my own experience, those involved in the staging of contests are unaware of the realist and (in the case of adherence to the classics) idealist philosophies which guide them. Thus it would be highly unlikely for teachers or conductors to consider an alternative. A dogmatic approach is one which creates an atmosphere in which it is unlikely that any other guiding philosophy will be considered, yet an approach to music performance based on realism might not be in the best interests of all students. I myself did not even begin to question that there might be more than one philosophical approach to music performance until I began teaching outside of my native Texas environment fifteen years ago. Looking back now, I realize that I am as guilty as any of reinforcing a philosophy through my actions as a band director without considering what rationale, if any, it was based upon. I taught successfully for a decade in an environment in which music education was guided by an unarticulated, performance-based philosophy, which was centered on highly competitive and utilitarian values. During this time, I interacted with several hundred other educators through festivals, competitions, and conferences, not one of whom seemed aware of the reasons for their actions or choices or betrayed an understanding of any alternative belief system. This, to me, confirms the fact that these band directors were, like me, reinforcing a prevailing local philosophy not because of any systematic examination of alternatives, but rather to strengthen the pre-existing values associated with common practices.

As conductors, we espouse philosophies of music the instant we raise our batons or utter a single word in rehearsal. We reinforce our philosophies silently, even as we elicit sounds from our students. Hopefully, as conductors and educators, we will continue to examine our actions and attitudes in front of our ensembles, looking for signs that we may be silently indoctrinating students into belief systems which may be based on constructed rationalizations that we have not yet begun to articulate—even to ourselves.

NOTES

2Ibid., 6.
3Ibid., 4.
4Ibid., 7.
5Ibid., 8.
6Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 105.


Ibid., 83.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 84.


Ibid., 164.

Ibid., 165.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid., 274.
