

Can you create a great performance in three days? Orchestra conductors do so time and time again. Bernhard Kerres investigates how they do it and what we can learn from them.

When orchestras, conductors and soloists get together, they typically have just three or four days to prepare and deliver a great performance. A conductor who has never worked with the orchestra before is expected to take charge of up to one hundred musicians,

communicate their musical strategy and interpretation, rehearse for a couple of days and then perform flawlessly live in front of a very demanding audience. How do they do that? Why is it so difficult to replicate that for high performance teams in other environments, especially in business?

Orchestras are not unique — other high performance teams have to perform under extreme time pressures. Think of certain types of sports teams, for example. When football or rugby players represent their country, often they come together for just a

few days prior to the game. For the manager, this poses a special kind of challenge: how to get unfamiliar players to gel and how to foster a winning culture in a short space of time.

Or consider a surgical team. The personnel in an operating theatre can change several times during a shift, and medical practitioners, such as anaesthetists, surgeons and nurses, often find themselves working with people they don't know. As the leader of the team, the surgeon has to produce a team performance in literally life and death situations.

CONDUCTING BUSINESS



PERFORMING LEADERSHIP

Or think of emergency services teams — when police, ambulance and fire services come together at the scene of an accident, a terrorist attack or to tackle a natural disaster.

All of these sorts of teams share certain common characteristics with orchestras. These are:

- A clear common goal and deadline: the performance target is clearly defined and there is an immovable timeline to deliver it. Everyone in the team is committed to that end.
- A defined process leading up to the performance itself: there is a structured and clearly delineated process by which the performance target will be achieved. The precise details may vary by individual leader, but the team is in no doubt about what is required.
- A shared understanding and acceptance of each individual's role within the team: everyone involved is clear that the performance is a team performance. Egos may clash but the performance takes precedence over all individual concerns.
- Shared trust in each other: the performance requires that each member of the team brings their own unique skills to bear in order to achieve the collective performance. For the purposes of the performance, members of the team form a symbiotic relationship with each other. They all need each other to succeed and must trust in each other's professionalism and goodwill.

But one characteristic differs orchestras from other teams and makes them much more similar to business teams. Even during the few days leading up to a performance, the musicians are not exclusively focused on the concert they are rehearsing for. They are often preparing for other concerts or performing. They also teach and take care of the business side of music. Even so, musicians understand that rehearsals are crucial meetings which require their full focus and do not allow for interruption.

Musical lessons

So what can we learn from musical ensembles? Over the years I have spoken to some of the world's most famous musicians and conductors, discussing with them how they achieve great performances

whenever on stage — often a hundred times a year and more.

The life of a conductor is peripatetic and full of unknowns. He or she meets an orchestra a few days before the scheduled performance. Sometimes the conductor has never worked with the orchestra before; sometimes they know it very well. Another unknown quantity is the programme of the concert to be performed. It may be well known to everyone or new to either the orchestra or the conductor or even both. Sometimes a soloist is entered into this mix with the same uncertainties.

Dates for concerts are mostly set years before. The planning cycle for classical concerts is often two to four years long. And yet, within a few days — and within two to five rehearsals of around three hours each — the orchestra and the conductor need to be ready for the performance. All start with certain expectations — that they know music in general and sometimes even the pieces to be performed. They also can start with the expectation of everyone working hard to deliver a great performance. But beyond these common assumptions, every situation and every leader is different. How conductors approach rehearsals, for example, varies from individual to individual.

Rehearsals for leadership

Attitudes to rehearsals play an important part in the bonding and blending of skills. Marc Minkowski, the artistic director of Les Musiciens du Louvre, Grenoble, and recently appointed Artistic Director of the prestigious Mozart Week in Salzburg, describes his view on rehearsals:

“The first ten minutes are critical. In the first rehearsal I mostly let the orchestra play through the first ten minutes without interrupting in order for both sides to get to know each other. You then need to build up this delicate balance of trusting the orchestra, practicing and letting an orchestra get away with things, which they should not get away with. It is a balance between trust and irresponsibility. Trusting the orchestra and being irresponsible in giving them too much trust. This balance can break any time, even much later in the rehearsal period or with an orchestra you know very well.”

Maestro Valery Gergiev, the Artistic and General Director of the

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Marriinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia, and the Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, told me about his expectations when rehearsing with an orchestra:

“The orchestra members know when it comes to the performance, that, obviously, I will give my best and I expect them to give their best, too. But it does not generate excitement every time. Sometimes I want them simply to go through the music, sometimes I want them to feel relaxed, but relaxation still comes with a serious attitude. Relaxation which kills concentration is not acceptable and they know that.”

What Marc Minkowski and Valery Gergiev both make clear is that building up trust and having clear expectations right from the start of working together with a new team is crucial for them to lead their teams towards a great performance. Both comments show also that these conductors have a high level of respect for the orchestra musicians. By letting a team develop their thoughts and strengths within the first moments of getting together with a new leader the conductor signals his or her respect.

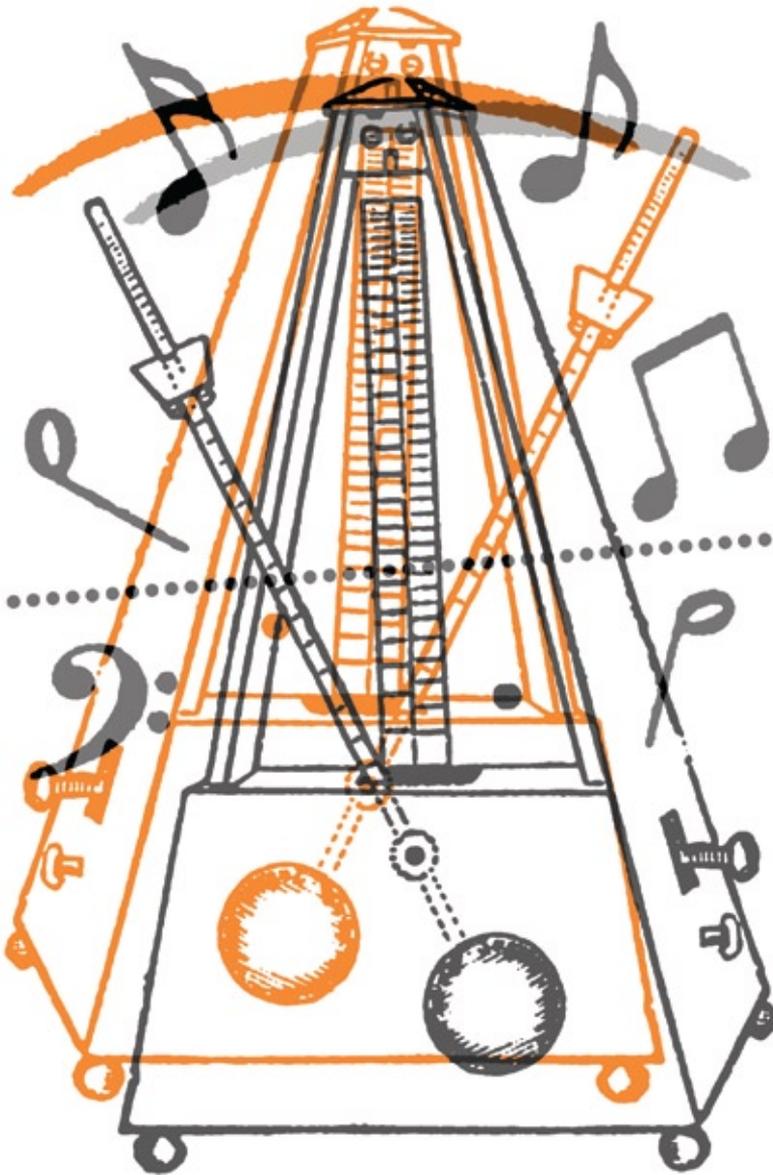
When I lecture or coach teams I like to do an exercise where participants can experience some of the trust musicians develop over time. I ask participants to close their eyes and to start humming. Managers often need to trust themselves more when humming in a group than when leading a team. Second, participants need to trust each other that everyone takes part in the exercise. For many groups, the experience is surprising.

The courage to lead

Besides hard (and very efficient) work it takes a lot of courage to lead through the rehearsal process towards a performance. There is always a question of whether you rehearsed enough or too much. This is similar to working with any team on a project. Team members often ask for more time but if they have too much time they simply lose focus or even interest. Valery Gergiev says about rehearsing:

“It is a great and very sensitive issue. Not to rehearse enough, not to use all your time is dangerous because if something goes wrong the musicians will say that he did not even rehearse properly. But if you rehearse all the time and it does not go well they will say he was torturing us, we did so many repeats and we lost interest, yet it was not helpful — so rehearsing too much or not rehearsing enough can both be wrong.”

The day and the time of the orchestra performance has been set years before. There is no way that you can change that. Even if someone falls ill the solution is to replace him or her rather than changing the date and time of the concert. Concert dates are similar to the toughest deadlines in business — from the publishing deadline of the media, critical client meetings, board meetings and AGMs. It takes a leap of faith to feel ready





and to go on stage — faith in your own abilities, faith in the abilities of your team, and faith in the work you put in for that specific performance.

Live and dangerous

Concerts are some of the toughest performances. You have to perform in front of an audience of often a couple of thousand people. Sometimes concerts are even broadcast live to a much larger audience — sometimes millions. Feedback is instantaneous. You can feel the concentration in the room if a concert goes well. All is quiet and focused. If a performance goes wrong the audience becomes restless and might even leave the hall. And then there is the applause.

There are not many business meetings that are as tough and as direct as concerts. If something does not go well in a first meeting we often get a second chance or it is simply accepted that things did not go perfectly. But think of meetings where you or others strived for excellence. These events suddenly go exceptionally well and take everything to a higher, much more professional but also exciting level.

So, what does a great conductor think about before going on stage? When I spoke to Michael Tilson Thomas, Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony and the founder and Artistic Director of the New World Symphony, he told me this about performances:

“It is clear to me — it became clear to me a long time ago — that the people who are actually giving the performance are the musicians who are playing different parts. My job is to create a situation in which they can give and will want to give the greatest performance.

“So, in this way it’s the rehearsals which are the most important part of it and where my concentration and focus will be at a maximum. If that’s done correctly, effectively, then the performance can be very free, an interesting exchange of spiritual ideas.”

Valery Gergiev adds: “Almost all your leadership is in your ability to inspire. Of course you help with your gestures, with your eyes. But most importantly, everyone feels that the performance is of high quality.”

Again, both these conductors implicitly speak about the trust they have in the musicians, in their own abilities, and in their preparation

and rehearsals. Nevertheless the energy a conductor gives during a performance but also takes from the orchestra at the same time should not be underestimated. The trust is lived at every moment of the performance.

Turning up the volume on leadership

And yet, besides the critical inspiration, a conductor needs to be able to provide stronger leadership if necessary during a performance — helping a soloist to find the right entrance, for example, or making sure that the balance is correct between the various instruments.

Marc Minkowski describes how when he is conducting he has three films running in his mind’s eye in parallel. The most important one is right in the moment of where he is in the music, or shortly before, making sure that he leads the orchestra through every passage in the right way. But with another inner eye he looks forward in order to know what is coming up and where he needs to focus more or less. In the third film running in his head, he is listening to what music was just played and comparing it to the other films to see if his expectations were met or if he needs to correct anything. This is an amazing, complicated and interrelated thought process going on in one person’s head to ensure the highest possible quality of a performance.

Watching Marc Minkowski conducting, another observation struck me. Most of the time he is smiling when conducting a performance. As he explains: “Smiling creates a certain stability for the orchestra and especially singers. It does not change the character of the music. When I look unhappy the music might quickly sound like that.”

This reminds me of a point made by the great management thinker Peter Drucker: “Performing organisations enjoy what they are doing.”

Great performances in music, sport, medicine or other areas can be inspiring for management. Great performance always depends on a group of people working together towards a common goal. Trust within this group is essential. It is difficult to build that up, but one of the vital ingredients of trust is respect for each other. Inspiration and the joy of working together are the building blocks for a great performance.

And great performance is the hallmark of excellent teams — and exceptional leadership. **□**

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Kerres has performed as an opera singer together with José Carreras and others. He has also worked in various C-level positions for high technology companies and currently runs the Wiener Konzerthaus in Vienna, one of the most active concert houses in the world. He regularly teaches and lectures on performance leadership.

