

The Importance of Conduction

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Butch once wryly told me that he had figured out how to write an entire symphony without ever having to pick up a pencil. Without sonata form or many of the other time honored structural conventions of classical music, he has amassed a body of grand work for large ensemble satisfying all the requirements for thematic coherence, development, and intellectual engagement by which the canonical works of Western orchestrated music have been measured. His methodology for accomplishing this fete – Conduction – is a language and a system within which a prescriptive vocabulary is used to generate and interpret music. Conduction is also a way of thinking about the creative activity of humans working collectively. Only in carefully considering all of the ways that Conduction exists can we begin to assess the importance of what Lawrence D. Butch Morris has offered as his “supplement” to music.

Again, what is Conduction? Conduction is a way of inscribing musical information onto a human body and an occasion for releasing that inscribed information in a real time performance situation. The body of the conductor, his or her four limbs, the digits of the hands, even the gaze, has supplanted the notated page. And all of these corporeal elements are moving as rapidly as the music. Like an elaborate reverse dance: Bodily motion existing not to expressively reflect music, but to instigate, direct, and mold music with an uncanny degree of specificity. Conduction *is* a relatively under-determined music and the space that it leaves for unpredictability is a central aspect of its grounding sensibility. It is nonetheless a system of discipline and order. As no professional musician would disregard the notes on a score he or she was handed to play, so too Conduction requires adherence to the music as given. The fact that that music is transcribed onto a human body in flux does not diminish the authority of the score.

Even as we adjust ourselves to accept this change in what we know as the score, we must consider the ramifications of trading paper for flesh. Music is fundamentally an embodied experience. If the phenomenology of sight begins with a visual field that radiates out from the viewer and maps onto a spatial grid what is external to him or her, the phenomenology of sounded experience is internal. Music lodges invisibly in the space reserved for the private voice of thought and reflection. We hold music within us in a way that is untrue of visual forms of communication. Music is always in and about bodies, the result and cause of activated bodies. Conduction maps musical composition onto a body which must be activated in order to release the composer’s intent. In so doing it provides a way of communicating musically that perhaps has more to do with the fluidly embodied truth of music than do static charts and scores.

Sight, to be sure is integral to Conduction. The coherence of the communicative process that provides the form and forward motion of the music depends upon a relentless reciprocal gaze between the conductor and each of the instrumentalists. If the gaze is broken, if the players allow their attention to wander, the line of

communication is broken and the music is disrupted, torn in precisely that place. Similarly, the conductor must keep a watchful eye over the entirety of his ensemble. He can tell when a player is not ready or conversely, he should be the first to see when a particular player's face brims with the anticipation of wanting to get into the musical moment at hand. The conductor has a responsibility to use his vigilant gaze to monitor and modulate the potential musical contributions. Of course, all of these eyes are mounted in real human faces, faces necessarily speaking the convoluted language of real human emotions. There is a social warmth and complexity to the conduction process that does not exist in conventionally notated music. Imagine if Beethoven had had to stare each of his instrumentalists in the eyes as he composed his *Eroica*!

Conduction is under-determined or improvisational not because the conduction vocabulary is ambiguous, but because it allows, like any proper Zen koan, for more than one right answer. Those answers are pulled from experience – musical experience, personal experience. Conduction is a way of making music in community that is immeasurably enriched by the individual histories and capacities of the members of that community. The Conduction system dynamically integrates within a single creative work the dense matrix of talents and sensibilities that have come within reach of the conductor's baton. The identity of the music emerges out of the biographies of its creators.

Butch's first attempt at Conduction involved a real-time arrangement of a Beethoven string quartet (*Opus 130 Presto*). "I only added rehearsal numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. I used three signs/gestures: repeat, sustain, and improvise. I could send any of the players to any of the rehearsal numbers at any time – I could also change the speed of what was being played". As an interpretive supplement, Conduction allows written music to assume the spontaneity, provocation and combustion of improvised performance. The score can be disassembled and reassembled to meet the unique demands of each performance context, to adjust to the unique abilities of each ensemble. Conduction gifts music with a flexibility and power of renewal that multiplies the value of composed work.

Since that initial moment of discovery twenty years ago, the history of Conduction has been the history of a new transcultural music. The system has been applied to ensembles drawn from around the globe. These have included players most comfortable with improvisation and those most comfortable playing from notation. The Conduction vocabulary has expanded to include special gestures accommodating a variety of electronic instruments. With greater regularity than not, what is achieved sounds neither like a synthesis nor a stylistic augmentation of an existing genre. It is sound freshly gathered and organized according to a logic that belongs to a part of our history that we are only beginning to live.

Conduction has based its aesthetic standards on the sensitive exploration of possibilities. Each musician within the Conduction ensemble must respond immediately to the gestures hurled his or her way such that their contribution

remains consistent with both the conductor's intent and the sonic requirements of the music. Each conduction gesture is a frame that can only be fruitfully filled by musically correct decision making. Conduction grooms a virtuosity of listening long before it rewards a virtuosity of technique. If Conduction's fuel is attention, heightened attention is also its by-product. The Conduction ensemble should be appreciated as a pedagogical environment in which musicians at all stages of development can refine their capacity to attend and respond to the shifting essence of music. Conduction is a lesson in which the student is returned to the phenomenal truth of music and asked to actively participate in its evolution. Conduction in its first two decades has already resulted in a generation of musicians functioning in all genres who have benefited from Conduction as a laboratory for advanced listening.

The social logic of Conduction is a contract which reapportions the creative prerogative of the musicians bound by its terms. This reapportionment is consistent with the progressive arc of social development towards greater recognition of the rights and intrinsic value of the individual. Clearly, both the conductor and the instrumentalists have expanded their authorial privilege greatly under the Conduction contract. No longer is the conductor the dutiful servant of the composer, his or her obedient translator. Likewise the imagination of the instrumentalist is unfettered by Conduction which provides every player within the ensemble opportunities for thoughtful and distinctive contribution. In other words, there are no second violins in the Conduction ensemble. No redundancy.

This contract extends to the community of active participants we call audience whose role in completing the act of composition is more evident in the music of Conduction than many others. The listening of the conductor and ensemble, while highly attuned, must also be distorted by its functional constraints. Listening for the participants on stage is a focused exercise that filters and predicates action. The conductor listens as a way of building macrostructure and listens to know how to invite the ensemble to fill that architecture. For each player, the music is carrying information that will be the basis for what he or she plays. Only the audience is free to embrace the music from all sides and through its heart. Each audience member can be seen as an off-stage player/conductor with a contractual obligation to use their attention to creatively reconstitute the Conduction deep within themselves. Whatever meaning, beauty or importance that Conduction may possess, ultimately rests within this very human field of individual emphases and perceived symmetries. Conduction music is a personal revelation that forges authentic connections between the social and the psychological. "Anytime you synchronize the spirit and still give it liberty," writes Morris, "you open many doors to the primus, where the intimate necessity of possibility reigns, where we find and realize our individual and collective freedoms."