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# "Orchestral Conducting in the Nineteenth Century," edited by Roberto Illiano and Michela Niccolai

Clive Brown  
*University of Leeds*

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**Book review: Illiano, R., M. Niccolai, eds. *Orchestral Conducting in the Nineteenth Century*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. ISBN: 9782503552477.**

**Clive Brown**

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Although the title of this book may suggest a comprehensive study of nineteenth-century conducting, it in fact contains a collection of eighteen essays by different authors, offering a series of highlights rather than a broad and connected picture. The collection arises from an international conference in La Spezia, Italy in 2011, one of a series of enterprising and stimulating annual conferences focusing on aspects of nineteenth-century music that has been supported by the Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini (Lucca), in this case in collaboration with the Società di Concerti della Spezia and the Palazzetto Bru Zane Centre de musique romantique française (Venice). The topics are presented under five headings: Conductors and Conducting in Nineteenth-Century Europe; Historical, Aesthetic and Sociological Aspects; Techniques, Orchestral Dispositions, Treatises; Great Composer-Conductors; and Performance and Musical Instruments. The essays are in five different languages: English, Italian, French, and Spanish, with a substantial number of quotations presented in the original German. I am competent to read only three of these fluently (English, French, and German). While retaining the native languages, both in the lectures and in the published papers, may be equitable, it undoubtedly limits the utility of the book for individual scholars.

The contributors offer different levels of detail and clarity, but many of them throw vivid and informative light upon focused areas, which are often revealing of broader contexts and trends. “Conductors and Conducting in Nineteenth-Century Europe” begins with Fiona Palmer’s “Conductors and Conducting in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain: The Liverpool Philharmonic Society (1840-1895).” This essay provides a clear and useful account of how priorities in the appointment of conductors changed as a provincial orchestra grew from being a mainly amateur organization to a fully professional one. It elucidates the relationship, and sometimes the conflict, between financial and artistic considerations and illuminates the role of the conductor in improving low standards. Further information on these topics, within the metropolitan society of London, is provided by Naomi Matsumoto’s chapter “Michael Costa at the Haymarket: The Establishment of the Modern Role of the ‘Director of Music’.” Costa, later to become a highly effective, if not musically inspiring conductor of the Phil-



harmonic Society, was a major figure in London musical life during the middle years of the century, and his career illustrates the growing prestige of the conductor during that period. Matsumoto details the complex controlling role of a theatrical Director of Music, the essential parameters of which evolved significantly during Costa's tenure. She also indicates that his activities as a conductor were more to do with efficient rehearsal than with interpreting the music. The chapter includes some useful tables, which will aid further research on Costa's activities. Étienne Jardin, in his investigation of "Les chefs d'orchestre dans les concerts parisiens de 1794 à 1815," offers the reader a mass of valuable and illuminating information on the manner in which concerts were organized and directed during the Republican period and the Empire. It is rich in documentation and includes many revealing quotations from contemporary sources, which chart the progression of sometimes chaotic events where, for instance, in 1802 Rodolphe Kreutzer "beat time with his feet and his bow in vain" while the chorus master and composer simultaneously attempted ineffectively to "repair the disorder" (62). The chapter also investigates the difference between a person who "directs a concert" and the instrumentalist who "leads (*conduire*) the orchestra" and shows how the pedagogical principles that lay behind the foundation of the Paris Conservatoire contributed to the development of a more professional approach to conducting an orchestra. The final chapter in this section, Rudolf Rasch's "From *Collegium Musicum* to City Concert: The Professionalization of Ensemble and Orchestral Music Making in Utrecht" deals with a very different context and a much longer time frame, ranging from the foundation of the essentially amateur Utrecht Collegium Musicum in 1631 to the establishment of City Concert in the mid nineteenth century, when, after the appointment of Director of Music Johann Hermann Kufferath in 1830, the Collegium became an integral part of a wider musical establishment in the city, encompassing the theatre and a newly-established music school. The chapter, substantially on the pre-nineteenth-century history of the institution, provides a valuable history of the Collegium. The later part of the chapter facilitates instructive comparison with developments in England and France. A couple of observations in the "Conclusions" raise questions. Referring to the change from violinist-director to conductor, Rasch suggests: "An orchestra with no more than fifteen players can probably do without a conductor, whereas one containing more than fifteen players requires one." Later in the book, however, Gesine Schröder points out that "Performances without a conductor were not uncommon in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century" (313). Schröder's statement is clearly correct: in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, until Mendelssohn's advent, direction of instrumental music was solely from the first violin and even during the 1840s, when Mendelssohn was in Berlin, Ferdinand David directed concerts as leader. The suggestion that "the printing and publishing of scores instead of mere parts became normal practice at the turn of the nineteenth century" (90) is premature. Whereas there was a tradition of issuing full scores in France before that date, it was uncommon in central Europe during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The first printed scores of any of Beethoven's symphonies (Nos.

1-3) were published in London in 1808-9, but none of the later symphonies were printed in full score until the 1820s.

In “Historical, Aesthetic and Sociological Aspects,” there are just four contributions. Renato Ricco’s “Virtuosissimo violinistico e direzione orchestrale: Rapporti storici e scissione dei ruoli” deals with virtuoso violin playing and orchestral direction, and the separation of these roles. The chapter contains much interesting information about Paganini’s activities as an orchestral director and his activities in Parma during the 1830s. Much of the material in Italian sources, such as Giuseppe Scaramelli’s *Saggio sopra i doveri di un primo violino* (Trieste, 1811) and Nicolò Paganini’s collected letters (*Epistolario*) are unavailable in English, and it is a pity that this informative chapter is also available only in Italian. In the next chapter, “Naissance, épanouissement et subordination du directeur musical,” Gilles Demonet charts the birth, blossoming, and eventual decline of the controlling role of the musical director in orchestral organizations. This broad survey of the changing role of conductors looks at their position from the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century and briefly considers subsequent changes. It focuses particularly on three important figures: Habeneck in Paris, Mahler in Vienna, and Toscanini at La Scala. The contrast between these authoritarian figures and the modern conductor, more dependent on the will of orchestras or administrative bodies for their position, is discussed. The author might, perhaps, have also drawn attention to the situation in contemporary opera houses, where the once all-powerful conductor has been subordinated to the whims of the theatrical director. In “La figura del direttore d’orchestra nella dimensione storico-estetica del’ottocento,” Claudia Colombati provides a broader consideration of the orchestral director in the historical aesthetic context of the nineteenth century. She focuses particularly on the tension between Classical and Romantic tendencies, looking at the ideals and practices of, in the former category, Louis Spohr, Felix Mendelssohn, Ferdinand David, Ignaz Moscheles, and Carl Reinecke, and, in the latter, Carl Maria Weber, Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Gustav Mahler. Ruben Vernazza’s “Il direttore d’orchestra nel sistema produttivo del teatro d’opera italiano di fino ottocento. Un caso eloquente: Emilio Usiglio a Firenze nel 1892” provides an investigation into the direction of Italian opera at end of the nineteenth century, with a case study of the career and activities of Emilio Usiglio. It is interestingly illustrated with correspondence, of which appendices provide helpful detail.

The following section, “Techniques, Orchestral Dispositions, Treatises,” is the shortest, with only three chapters. Walter Kurt Kreyszig’s contribution is entitled “Hector Berlioz’s Technique of Conducting in Theory and Practice,” and subtitled “His Subdivision of the *tactus* in *Le chef d’Orchestre, théorie de son art* and his scores.” Readers may find Kreyszig’s approach somewhat puzzling. His emphasis on the theories of *tactus* in Philip de Vitry’s *Ars nova*, which creates the impression that

they had a direct influence on Berlioz's approach, is confusing. There is no evidence that Berlioz knew anything about Vitry, and he surely derived his understanding of meter and the different time signatures from his communication with contemporary musicians or from such sources as the *Principes élémentaire de musique arrêtté par les membres du Conservatoire*, edited by Gossec, Agus, Catel, and Cherubini (Paris, 1798-1802). His linguistic limitations will have barred him from reading the extensive discussion of such issues in German sources. The constant use of Vitry's Latin terminology in Kreyszig's essay is hardly justified by the context and does nothing to help the reader's understanding; it also misrepresents Berlioz's own thought processes. Reference to musical texts in *Le Chef d'Orchestre* merely by page numbers (given in an appendix), may have been necessitated by considerations of space, but it does not make the article reader-friendly. Emmanuel Hervé's chapter, "The orchestra of the Paris Opera: A forgotten plan of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," in contrast is succinct and clear, with useful seating plans of various arrangements employed at the Paris Opéra between 1820 and the 1870s and an interesting discussion of the information contained in Choron and Lafarge's *Manuel complet de musique vocale* (1836-8). A final chapter in this section, Antonio Carlini's "Metamorfosi della direzione bandistica in Italia dall'ottocento a Toscanini," examines changing practices in the direction of bands in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy.

"Great Composer-Conductors" begins with Maria Teresa Arfini's "Felix Mendelssohn direttore d'orchestra." This is a very thorough survey of Mendelssohn's activities as conductor, covering the whole of his musical career. It contains many relevant quotes (in the original language), some of which come from previously unpublished sources (for instance in the Bodleian Library's Denecke collection) and constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Mendelssohn's activities in this area. One aspect of his time in Leipzig that would have been worthy of inclusion is the nature of his close collaboration with his intimate friend Ferdinand David, who was not only leader of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra but also, perhaps, the first Konzertmeister to mark-up orchestral parts in detail before rehearsal. Gesine Schröder's chapter "The historical theory of rhythm as instruction for conducting or how Liszt performed his symphonic poems," provides another highly interesting and thought-provoking perspective not only on nineteenth-century conducting and Liszt's particularly idiosyncratic approach to it but also on the relationship of different attitudes towards 'shading, nuance and "periodic presentation"' (319). These issues are considered from the perspective of Liszt himself, Hans von Bülow, Hugo Riemann, and Mathis Lussy, as well as (by means of interviews) three anonymous modern conductors. Although the chapter can only highlight broad issues within a very complex area, it successfully raises many intriguing questions. Mariateresa Dellaborra's chapter "Alessandro Rolla direttore d'orchestra del Regio Teatro alla Scala" casts valuable light on a leading figure in early nineteenth-century Italian music, whose activities as a practical musician and orchestra director have received less attention than they de-

serve. As “capo d’orchestra” at La Scala from 1802-33, Rolla helped form an ensemble that even impressed Louis Spohr, whose opinion of Italian orchestras was generally very negative. German quotations in the text might have been proof-read with greater care. Elisa Grossato’s chapter, “Dal virtuosismo strumentale alla direzione di Aida: Poliedricità artistica di Giovanni Bottesini (1821-89), un direttore d’orchestra ‘Impreciato di quatettismo’” investigates the activities of another under-researched, later nineteenth-century Italian conductor, the virtuoso double bass player, Giovanni Bottesini. It is of particular value for its primary research into previously unpublished material on Bottesini’s conducting activities.

The final section of the book, “Performance and Musical Interpretation,” begins with Rémy Campos’ “La repetition d’orchestre: d’un objet historique inédit à de nouvelles pratiques musicales.” This is a worthwhile piece of practical research into issues of rehearsal and the gradual professionalization of that process. Among the developments mentioned is the use of rehearsal letters in the score of Meyerbeer’s *Le prophète* in 1849, which implies that this was an innovation. This practice had, however, been utilized as early as 1820 by Spohr who, during the period when violin-direction was still common practice, also published sophisticated violin direction scores (on three staves with the first violin part in full-size notes in the middle and the outer staves in smaller type showing a short score of other important parts). The chapter combines historical research with a report on the results of an interesting practical project involving a collaboration between the Conservatoire Nationale Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris and the Haute École de Musique de Genève in 2010. Such practice-led research is certainly encouraging. In experiments of this kind, the parameters are all important and the establishment of these, is of course dependent on the quality of the preceding research. Fabrizio Ammetto’s chapter “Elementos de concertación en los conciertos para órgano y orquesta de Gaetano Valeri” examines the concertos for organ and orchestra by Gaetano Valeri. My lack of familiarity with Spanish, unfortunately prevented me from evaluating it. Paola Cannas deals with “Sonata forms in performance.” She looks at different approaches to the understanding of musical forms, both in the nineteenth century and more recent time, especially the relationship between sonata form and “developing variation.” The extent to which, in recordings, conductors of Brahms’ Fourth Symphony from Abendroth to Mackerras have responded to these tensions in relation to tempo is illustrated by a series of informative graphs (although the first of these, overlaying all eleven of the recordings considered, is too complicated to be clearly understood).

All in all, this volume contains much stimulating material and certainly provides useful information and perspectives, as well as stimulation for future research. For future publications of this kind, with multiple languages, it may be worth considering the inclusion of abstracts in English, since this is the most widely used scholarly language; this would ensure that scholarly advances published in less commonly under-

stood languages would be less likely to be overlooked by the wider academic community.