

## “If I Had Those Players, My Ensemble Would Sound That Good, Too.” What are the Truths and Myths Behind this Statement?

I chose this title since this is a statement that is often heard at the Midwest Clinic, especially after concerts from very fine ensembles.

Please understand too, that these are only my opinions and are based on my lifetime experiences both as a player and as a conductor.

I believe that in this day and age we conductors are doing a very good job of providing opportunities to develop our conducting skills, particularly our non-verbal skills. We have more conducting symposiums than ever before, we have many choices of outstanding texts with which to teach our students from, and we have more outstanding conducting teachers than ever before. However, I am not sure that we talk about viewing ourselves from the players' perspective as often as we should. Why is this important? Well, first of all, you've all heard the cliché that “perception is reality” and this is never more true than in our craft. The way our players perceive us on the podium is largely determined by our ability to understand the psychology of not only conducting but also the psychology of rehearsing the ensemble. If you have fine players sitting in front of you, you better understand psychologically how to enrich their intellect and their musical development, or they will quickly tune you out and feel musically and intellectually stagnant while working with you.

Conductors and Players all share these truths:

- I want to make music with the best possible players.
- I want our ensemble to play in tune.
- I want our ensemble to play expressively.
- I want to enjoy our rehearsals and performances.
- I want the audience to enjoy our music making.
- I want to create musically satisfying rehearsals and performances.
- I want my intellect to be stimulated in rehearsal and performance.
- I want my emotions to be stimulated in rehearsal and performance.
- I want to become a better musician through my ensemble experiences.
- I want to perform quality repertoire.
- I want to rehearse as little as possible.
- I want to perform often.
- I want to make music in a respectful environment.
- I want to have the freedom to make musical decisions within the parameters of the music.

Here are some questions to pose:

- How might the definition of each truth differ from player to conductor?
- How might they be the same?

- As conductors why is it important that we understand the players' definition of these truths?
  - Do the players understand and/or know our definition of each truth? Do they care?
  - How can we, as conductors, maximize the symbiotic relationship between conductor and player?
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- I want to make music with the best possible players.  
As conductors we all want to conduct the best possible players, so our ensembles will play well. Consequently, we audition the players and try our best to make objective decisions on putting the players in the best possible situation to set them up for success, which in turn will set us up for success. Players also want to sit with players who play as well or better than they do. Sometimes our biggest challenge may come with the highly developed player sitting in a section or ensemble with other players who are significantly less developed. This musician can easily become frustrated or unmotivated to continue developing because the music or intellect of the rehearsal may not challenge them. This is why it is crucial that we provide challenging opportunities for this level of player through small ensembles or solo works, especially if that need isn't being met in the large ensemble setting.
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- I want our ensemble to play in tune.  
Both players and conductors alike want this to happen so intonation problems do not get in the way of the music. Depending on the age and development of the players, they may not yet understand what "in tune" sounds like, so the conductor must define this by teaching and modeling the concept. For example, players need to be taught that a unison line that is "in tune" sounds like one person is playing. It also means that there are no "beats" or "waves" in the sound. This is best achieved by players first of all hearing two or more players achieve this goal and you pointing it out. It also requires their inner ear being developed enough to hear "in tune" intervals and requires an understanding of how to manipulate the instrument to do what the ear says.
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- I want our ensemble to play expressively. (or musically as we like to say)  
This is a highly over-used subjective term which conductors need to define. In other words, the conductor must teach the players through a combination of verbal and non-verbal gestures what expressive (or musical) is to them. Ex – playing a slow line expressively may mean to you that a ritard and an emphasis on the movement of scale degree 4 to 3 occurs in a V7 chord in a perfect authentic cadence. It may mean to you that the ensemble is playing perfectly with the metronome or that every cadence point and transition is perfectly "scripted" or over-rehearsed, removing all spontaneity from every potentially emotional moment. In faster music it may mean that you have communicated clearly the arsis and thesis of each beat in the phrase. Or that you have established the "arrival" of the phrase so players know whether they are approaching the arrival or departing it. Whatever the case, you must communicate your definition of expressive to the players in each section of the music. This is done through a combination of verbal and non-verbal gestures.
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- I want to enjoy our rehearsals and performances.

Enjoyment to the young player may mean that the conductor is funny and is a good friend, maybe tells good stories. It may mean that they gave them a new fingering today for an altissimo note on the clarinet. To the older player it probably means that the rehearsals are efficient, with as little talking as possible, improving the ensemble's playing on any given day. To conductors, enjoyment of rehearsal probably means that the ensemble sounded good today – there were not distractions like students not having their music or instrument, or behavior was particularly good that day. Ultimately, players and conductors on all levels want the performance to be musical (there's that word again) and convincing, which usually means the confidence and execution of all individual parts is on a high level.

- I want the audience to enjoy our music making.  
Players and conductors alike want to receive enthusiastic applause and feedback from audience members, especially from the musically literate audience members. Programming can play a large part in achieving this goal. It's up to the conductor to meet the needs of the players, hopefully without alienating the audience. If you program the Schoenberg Theme and Variations, then hopefully you will book end it with pieces that are more accessible to the untrained ear. In other words, maybe those accessible pieces are "toe tappers" or have singable melodies. However, you may be in an academic setting where an all Messian concert will bring thundering applause and enthusiastic feedback from the listeners. You simply have to know your audience and your players.
- I want to create musically satisfying rehearsals and performances.  
To most developed musicians this means that there is feeling of an effective interpretation being communicated by the conductor. For example, the conductor really knows what he/she wants to hear and how achieve it. As conductors, we must truly facilitate this truth for our ensembles.
- I want my intellect to be stimulated in rehearsal and performance.  
Players like to be posed questions both verbally and non-verbally, then be led to an answer, not given an answer. For example, "where is the loudest most intense moment of this phrase?" Then the conductor raises her arms and conducts the phrase and shows the answer. This can create a sense of spontaneity that is electrifying in both rehearsal and performance. Or you ask your players how to best represent the text in a given phrase of Lincolnshire Posy through their playing.
- I want my emotions to be stimulated in rehearsal and performance.  
Conductors must facilitate this experience by "looking like the music." In other words, if the marking says *soulfully and majestically* like on the beginning of Tschesnokoff's *Salvation is Created*, then the conductor should communicate that through his face and body language. Conductors are an emotional power strip for the ensemble, everyone plugs in to receive their energy. Consequently, if the conductor provides good energy, he/she will receive it back from the players and a fantastic symbiotic relationship will occur.

- I want to become a better musician through my ensemble experiences. Players and conductors alike want to perform pieces that push their level of performance. Unfortunately, oftentimes, the younger player equates this with high, fast, and loud music or fast food music. Since we live in a society of instant gratification or instant results we have to work very hard to teach our students an appreciation of finer music, which sometimes to them is “boring” because it’s slow or because they may not “get it” real quickly, which leads to the next point.
- I want to perform quality repertoire. We conductors must define what quality repertoire is for our players and teach them this “acquired taste” for good music. Oftentimes, it’s not a question of programming the wrong piece, but the right piece at the wrong time. For example, programming Lincolnshire Posy with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade band would be the right piece at the wrong time and would probably lead those students to not appreciating or even disliking that masterwork.
- I want to rehearse as little as possible. (while still creating quality performances) Again, conductors can facilitate this truth by understanding which music to choose for any given group of players. If music that is too difficult for students to intellectually understand is programmed, then students may never get the meaning of the piece or certainly may never understand it. They may, however, be able to reproduce the notes on a very high level. In other words, if we work on a piece from December until May, then we will probably reach the point of diminishing intellectual returns. The ensemble may “play” the piece really well but they will most likely not like it any more or feel an emotional attachment to it. Also, any hope of musical spontaneity will probably be gone. As a university teacher now, I often find when I ask some players what they played in high school the response might be something like, “Oh, some piece called Symphony,” and that’s all they can remember, **but**, they can pick up their horn and play the 2<sup>nd</sup> clarinet part to the Hindemith Symphony in Bb from memory. In that case we may be producing players who can play their instruments, but who know nothing about music. The younger the player the more that they do not understand inherently what playing on a high level means. And if we do not teach them this concept then they will always appear bored with music that they define as “easy,” but really cannot play.
- I want to perform often. Players and conductors alike want to enjoy the fruits of their labors through performing as often as rehearsal and preparation time allows. All of us can do more performances with our ensembles if we will teach our students how to problem solve instead of giving them the answers. Spend as much time on fundamentals of technique, rhythm and tone quality as on a given piece of music and the music will then become a bi-product of the player’s development. If the students are studying privately, it can happen more in the practice room. If not, then it must come in the full ensemble or sectional rehearsal – or even one on one with the band director. If they know that we will give them the answers then they will wait and take no initiative. “Don’t go home and practice until I tell you ‘how it goes’.” “You might

do it incorrectly.” Teach your players how to fish and you will feed them for a lifetime, give them the fish and you will only feed them today.

- I want to make music in a respectful environment.  
Players want to be treated with respect by the conductor. Oftentimes, lack of respect can be caused by the conductor singling out players in rehearsal or being unreasonable with expectations. Much of this goes back to choosing the right music, but also goes back to being a good teacher. Remember that the best conductors are great teachers! George Solti said in his Memoirs, “You cannot be a first-class conductor unless you know the score in the greatest detail. After all, a conductor must be a teacher, first and foremost. How can you teach something you do not yourself know well?” Also, as conductors we should always remember that respect is earned. The players do not respect us just because we are standing in front of them. They will respect the conductor if the conductor is true to the interpretation of the music, and true to the composer. Conduct every rehearsal and performance as if the composer is present. Teach your players that being unprepared on their part is disrespectful to the composer, not to you, the conductor. Create a personal attachment to the music by teaching them about the composer, always searching for what the composer is trying to “say.” Also, allow them to collaborate with living composers. Instill in them a tremendous sense of responsibility in recreating the composer’s art! Ultimately, if we conductors can create a loyalty to music, not a loyalty to us, then we are providing the ultimate experience for our players.
- I want to have the freedom to make musical decisions within the parameters of the music.  
Prepared players do not want to be controlled, especially the more advanced player. They want to have a certain amount of freedom or “space” to place the notes within the phrase. Conductors must understand when we are needed and when we are in the way. This depends on the music and also on the level of the player. The better the player, the less guidance that is needed by the conductor. As conductors we over- conduct our ensembles generally because we don’t trust them. We may not trust them because of their inconsistency in rehearsals or performances or both. We can develop this trust, however, by being good teachers and ultimately allowing them to make and learn from their mistakes. We must understand the difference between teaching or guiding our players and controlling our players. Then we can lead them to good performances, not drag them kicking and screaming!

Now that I have elaborated on all the truths, here are some thoughts that will hopefully help tie all this information together.

- Effective teaching includes the conductor facilitating all truths for the players, which in turn will help to facilitate these truths for the conductor.
- In order to facilitate these truths for the players we must not only diagnose our players’ level of development, but also realize the recipe for fulfilling their truths.

This recipe is realized through a balance of knowledge, understanding, and implementation.

- The younger the player, the more we can mold their truths. The younger players don't have enough experiences to have already formulated many of their ideas – this is why oftentimes younger players don't question us.
- Younger players do not inherently understand conducting gestures as well as older players; however, they can be taught to understand a basic vocabulary of non-verbal gestures. (give some examples)
- Younger players often define the good conductor more by personality. The word conductor may not even be in their vocabulary. In other words, “good conductor” to them means that they like you based on your personality.
- Younger players often define the good conductor more by pedagogical knowledge of the instruments. Why, because this is what they see you do – A beginner sees you teaching them fingerings every day, rhythm every day. They don't see you actually conducting a piece of music as often.
- The more advanced the player, the more each truth is already defined. In other words, the older players are more set in their ways and may completely disagree with what your definition of musicality is within a given piece. Or completely disagree with your taste in repertoire.
- Because of their lifetime musical experiences, the advanced player tends to understand gesture more inherently, making it more possible for you to talk less in your rehearsal.
- The advanced player often defines the good conductor more by the knowledge of the music being performed and by his/her ability to communicate an effective musical interpretation.

In closing I would like to leave you with a few final thoughts; then, I'll be happy to field any questions or comments that you may have.

- As teachers we must assess our players' placement in the age and ability spectrum.
- We must have the knowledge and musicianship to facilitate the truths of the players with whom we are working.

- Ultimately, if the truths of the players are being realized, then the ensemble is probably reaching its potential. In many ways, this can be our biggest accomplishment as conductors.
- If we are not able to facilitate the truths of the players, then the opening statement – “If I had those players, my ensemble would sound that good, too” is a myth. However, through understanding and meeting the needs of our players, the opening statement can indeed become a truth in your teaching.

Thank you again for your attendance – I sincerely hope something that I discussed this morning will help you to become a better teacher. I wish you continued growth, success, and understanding of your players!