

Title: Handbook of Conducting
Author: Hermann Scherchen
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About the author

Hermann Scherchen (1891-1966) was born in Berlin. In 1933 he moved to Switzerland and worked for many years in the city of Winterthur. He was principal conductor of the Winterthur city orchestra for almost 30 years, and worked with them particularly on contemporary music. He recorded a wide variety of music, from the baroque through to premières, and made an important orchestral arrangement of Bach's 'The Art of Fugue'.

Review

The forward to this book is by Norman Del Mar, and is a warm recommendation of the book. He calls it: "By far the most absorbing and demanding book on conducting ever published ... it is both visionary and rivetingly interesting". He does temper his enthusiasm somewhat at points, but Del Mar's words excited me – I couldn't wait to get reading!

What I found, however, has rather underwhelmed me. I shall comment on three things: firstly the language, secondly the organisation, and finally the key theme of his book.

The language. The book was written in German in 1929. The translation has been made not into an English from an equivalent period but an (at times) awkward English which makes the already quite dense style of writing sometimes difficult to understand.

Secondly let's look at the organisation of the book. It begins with a section of the skills and aptitudes required by a conductor – particularly the requirement for strong musical imagination. He begins to develop here a theme which punctuates the book: "My intention is to show that a technique of conducting does exist, and can be learnt and practised down to its smallest details before a student first attempts to conduct an orchestra". We shall return to this later. After this introduction he gives a list of things that must be trained in a conductor – through sight-singing, melodic improvisation, harmonic and rhythmic understanding. Exercises are given for each category. For example, the rhythmic exercises culminate in beating 4 against 5. Tough stuff, and the exercises are not sufficient in and of themselves, but this serves as a reminder as to how a conductor must be a fine all-rounder. There follows a short section about the orchestra as an entity followed by a long section on orchestral instruments. This is the core of the book, taking up almost 100 pages. He moans that conductors are always string players (although he was himself a violist!) and so devotes more space than one might expect to the wind, brass and percussion. There are many musical examples, and a good number are fascinating as there is a greater preponderance of 20th works than you normally find in such books – a good thing indeed (although some of the composers are quite unknown to me, e.g. Casella and Kaminsky). This is surely what Mr Del Mar was so keen – he himself

had a lifelong fascination with instruments and would therefore have enjoyed Scherchen's detailed instrumental information. The third section is about the technique of conducting. This is done in less than 40 pages. There is not sufficient detailed information here - nor are the diagrams of a good enough quality - for a student to get to grips with conducting technique by reading it. Conversely there is occasionally a lot of detail for some specific examples that follow on, and these could repay careful study. The final section of the book is a series of analyses, from a conductor's point of view, of three works: Beethoven Symphony No.1; R Strauss Till Eulenspiegel, Stravinsky Soldier's Tale. I struggled through the Beethoven section and couldn't face the Strauss and Stravinsky. One big problem is that he refers to a specific edition of each score by page number so unless you have that score it's very hard to follow along. A strongly positive point, however, is the detail he gives regarding balancing the orchestral sound (both here and in the section on instruments).

Finally, a word more about Scherchen's key theme: "When a student confronts and orchestra for the first time, he must have thoroughly mastered the practice of his craft. He must be not merely theoretically able to conduct an orchestra, but actually capable of dealing with the realities of the orchestra." Now I would certainly agree that it is verging on the criminal that some musicians think that all you need to be conductor is to buy a baton. It's a craft that must be learned. But Scherchen seriously overstates the case. It would be like saying "Before you drive a car you must know how to drive a car". It's an impossibility. Yes, you can know much about subdividing, cues, pauses etc etc but you cannot know the reality of conducting an orchestra until you actually do so! Presumably he was reacting to currents in the musical world of the 20s, but it feels very overblown. His solution is to say that the teacher should react (by singing or whistling!) to the student's conducting to show the student "the correlation between productive motion and sounding music". That the reaction of one person (the teacher) can prepare a student to face an orchestra of dozens of people is naive at best. The training can begin like this but must continue with the student working with ensembles and musicians. As a footnote, it should be noted that this is a book for those who will work with professional orchestras. There is no consideration of the many who will work with amateurs and children, and of the significant differences this makes to how a conductor approaches many aspects of his/her craft.

Conclusion

The most useful thing about this book is giving a historical perspective on conducting and on orchestras. As examples: his diatribe against wind players with inferior instruments, his claim that German musicians cannot play a true legato, his requirement that the leader should check every string player's tuning before they go on stage ... and much more. There are more thorough books on conducting technique, and on orchestral instruments in general (by of course Mr Del Mar!). But aside from the historical interest of the book there are some wonderful nuggets of information, especially about contemporary music, which will not be found elsewhere.