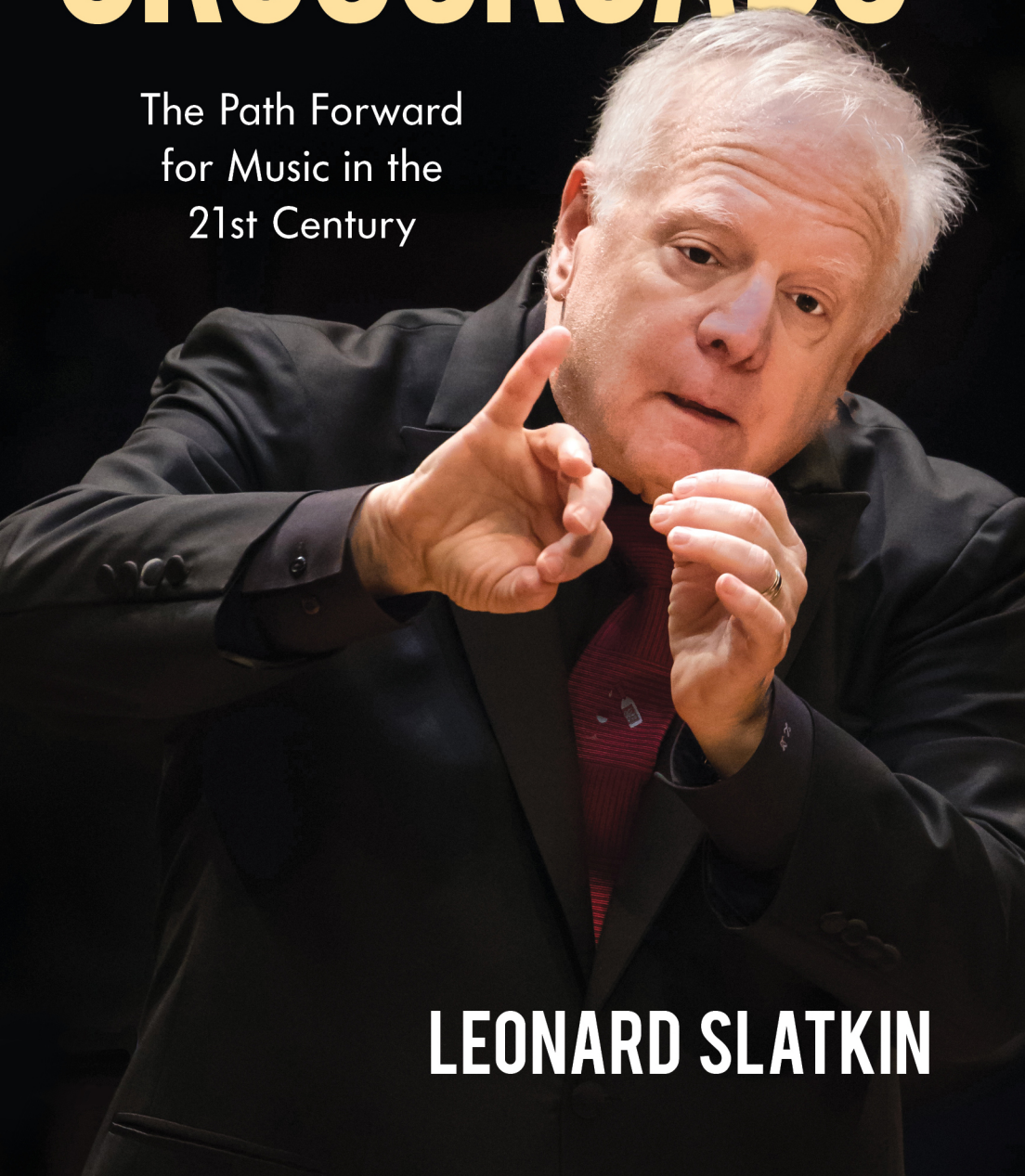


CLASSICAL CROSSROADS

The Path Forward
for Music in the
21st Century



LEONARD SLATKIN

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*For my son, Daniel,
with love, friendship, and music*

Only on paper has humanity yet achieved glory, beauty, truth, knowledge, virtue, and abiding love.

—George Bernard Shaw

The function of music is to release us from the tyranny of conscious thought.

—Sir Thomas Beecham

Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts descend upon me?

—Walt Whitman

All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.

—Albert Einstein

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your magnificent indifference.

—Dizzy Gillespie

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part I: First Movement	
1 On Conducting	7
2 On Orchestral Personality	15
3 On Size	23
4 On the Theater	31
5 On Nationalism	39
Part II: Second Movement	
6 On Agents	49
7 On Diversity	57
8 On Soloists	67
9 On Music Directors	75
10 On Retirement	81
Part III: Third Movement	
11 On Repertoire	89
12 On Media	95

13	On Composers	101
14	On Performance Practice	109
15	On Rehearsing	115

Part IV: Fourth Movement

16	On Audiences	123
17	On Forgotten Masters	129
18	On Sound Health	135
19	On Auditions	143
20	On Education	149
21	The Road to Recovery	157
	Coda	225
	Notes	227
	Index	231

INTRODUCTION

What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

—T. S. Eliot

On September 1, 2019, I turned seventy-five, a day filled with lovely notes and messages, a couple of surprises, and a lot of reflection. Among the first of my mini epiphanies was the realization that I had been conducting for almost sixty years. Questions began to form in my mind, mostly regarding what has changed since I first began my baton-wielding journey.

Changes are inevitable, and those that took place over this time in the classical music workplace were extraordinary. Still, if we were to travel back to the middle of the 19th century, we would find that a lot of concert life was the same then as it is these days. An orchestra would usually perform a program that started with an overture, continued with a concerto, and concluded with a symphony. Concerts would include premieres, revivals of lesser-known pieces, and star soloists. We have seen variations on that theme over the years, but for the most part, we have continued to be content with that presentation format.

The turn of the 21st century saw more music reaching a broader audience. Recordings, video technology, and the internet had a lot to do with it, as one could even see full-length operas, plays, and ballets in the movie theater or at home.

As a result of such developments, the relevance of classical art forms has been called into question. Do we really need symphony orchestras anymore? Why does it seem as if there is an endless cycle of repetition in what the audiences hear? With technology leaping over itself almost by the minute, is there really a place for what used to be called “high culture”? Why are our school systems leaving the arts out of the curriculum?

My first two books, *Conducting Business* and *Leading Tones*, were primarily about my life, with observations regarding musical matters and how to lead an orchestra. For this volume, I have selected certain topics that are relevant to the musical world today. Dedicating a chapter to each subject, I address matters within the theme that puzzle me and offer suggestions about how to solve those particular dilemmas.

How do we cope with the lack of diversity in the classical music workforce? Are our concert venues too large to accommodate the downturn in audience size? Do we have a one-size-fits-all type of orchestral sonority due to a broken system of auditions? Who actually runs our organizations?

When COVID-19 changed the global landscape, the musical scene changed dramatically as well. With no work or travel to occupy my time, I began to think about possibilities for the industry that might exist both during and after the pandemic. As the weeks dragged on, I found my writing taking on a different tone, almost angry at times. Instead of my usual monthly web essays detailing my travel exploits and conducting activities, I started a journal devoted to the ways we are dealing with the virus in the arts world.

The series took on a life of its own. In rereading these posts, I decided to include several of them in this volume. As the pandemic progressed, this section became the largest topic of discussion in the book. Several of the ideas might apply well after we have the virus under control. And perhaps by the time you read this, the arts industry will have dealt with many of the difficulties facing cultural organizations in this changed world.

I have incorporated a few amusing stories along the way, but only to clarify a point. The general tone of this book is one of serious intent. However, there is one feature that is quite new.

As I was writing, it occurred to me that I wanted to involve the reader in a different way, so I set up a system that allowed visitors to my website to participate in the process. Every week, I posted a topic on my homepage and social media channels, inviting readers to pose questions to me based on a brief description in the hope that they might point me in a new direction. Although some subjects elicited more responses than others, I received many thought-provoking comments and several that were a bit contentious. Those I chose to integrate into the book added intriguing ingredients to an already busy stew.

It is not possible to cover everything, but I hope that some of the ideas presented might help as we all try to figure out what to do next to make the world a better place through the arts. We learn from the past to create a better future. Perhaps a few baby steps are contained in the pages you are about to read.

With three-quarters of a century behind me, I can only thank those who have made my life such a wonderful adventure. It has been a great honor to be in the service of music, working alongside others who engage and inspire communities through the arts. In particular, I would like to give thanks to my wife, Cindy McTee, my executive assistant, Leslie Karr, as well as the dedicatee of this book, my son Daniel.

I

FIRST MOVEMENT

1

ON CONDUCTING

No statement should be believed because it is made by an authority.

—Robert A. Heinlein

In 1925, Richard Strauss wrote a short essay offering career advice for conductors:

TEN GOLDEN RULES

Written in the scrapbook of a young conductor

1. Remember that you do not make music for your own amusement, but for the pleasure of your audience.
2. Do not perspire when conducting; only the public ought to get warm.
3. Conduct *Salome* and *Elektra* as if they were by Mendelssohn; fairy-music.
4. Never look at the brass encouragingly; except with a quick glance for an important lead-in.
5. On the contrary, never let the horns and woodwind out of your sight; if you hear them at all they are already too loud.
6. If you think the brass is not strong enough, tone them down two points further.
7. It is not enough yourself to hear every word of the singer—which you know by heart anyway; the public also must be able to follow it without effort. If they don't understand what is happening they fall asleep.

8. Always accompany the singer so as to enable him to sing without exertion.
9. If you think you have reached the utmost Prestissimo, take the tempo as fast again.
10. If you remember all this sympathetically, your rich talents and great knowledge will always be the unimpaired delight of your audience.¹

When we watch available videos of this great composer, we can infer that perhaps he is, of course, being facetious in some of his commandments. What we do not know is how he spent his time in rehearsal, which is where the work gets accomplished. As Strauss suggests, the performance is meant to please the listeners, and not to distract them with exaggerated mannerisms.

But that was a century ago, and times have changed. These days, I believe that we need a few more rules by which to be governed. There is no conductors' legislative bureau, so we have to fend for ourselves. Nevertheless, unlike in Strauss's time, we are held accountable to some stringent regulations imposed upon us by orchestras and unions. These must be obeyed, and as I will say often in this book, "The clock is the enemy of the conductor."

With that in mind, as well as my own set of experiences at the podium, I offer these additional suggestions to add to the German maestro's list:

1. Do not talk too much. Orchestras only need to know six things: faster or slower, louder or softer, and shorter or longer. That's all. Everything else is a variation on those themes. How can this be? Look at the next rule.
2. Try to get an engagement with an orchestra that is in a country where you do not speak one word of the language. These days, there are always musicians who can communicate in English, no matter where in the world you are. Still, as a conductor, you are reduced, automatically, to keeping your remarks short and to the point. Your stick, eyes, and body do the work, not your mouth.
3. When you arrive at the first rehearsal, look around and make sure that you know where everyone is situated in the

orchestra. Few oversights are more embarrassing than giving a cue in one direction, only to have the sound come from another. Each orchestra has its own stage plot, and it is more than helpful to find out who is where.

4. Check when the break occurs in the rehearsal and how long it lasts. This helps in planning what you will do during the rehearsal and gives you some idea about how to control the time you spend on each piece. More than one conductor has not been given this information and has run out of minutes before completing what he or she had planned.
5. Make sure the music stand is at the correct height. Yes, this seems obvious, but you would be surprised by the number of conductors who just plunge right in, only to discover that they have to lean forward more than expected to turn the page. Ask a stagehand to help, or even a member of the orchestra.
6. Learn where your dressing room is. When you come to the stage door, someone needs to take you to your quarters, but that will only occur on the first day. Sometimes the backstage area is like a labyrinth, involving multiple floors and staircases connected by long corridors. It is often equally difficult to get out of the building. That leads us to:
7. Figure out how to get to the stage. Certainly you will be accompanied the first time. But there are things to remember as you make your way to the podium. Is it on the same floor as the dressing room? Are there photos on the wall that you can use as a map? Will you enter the stage from the right or left side? If you are in doubt, ask one of the musicians to point the way. If they like you, it is possible you will be directed to the correct spot.
8. You do not have to know the orchestra musicians' names. It would certainly be impressive if you could call on them individually, but just identifying the instrument or chair will suffice. They will call you Maestro or Maestra. Do not take this as anything more than the title you have for the time you are there. Most of us do not really deserve this appellation anyway.

9. Avoid making faces when something goes wrong. Assume that it was something you did that caused the error in the first place.
10. Always show the love you have for the music, even if you hate it. We have all done pieces that we did not want to perform, but for the time that we are working on it, the composition must be thought of as the finest ever written.
11. When working with singers, in particular, avoid wearing strong perfume or cologne. You might need something if you have a tendency to perspire, but go easy on the scent.
12. When you are conducting, imagine that you are playing somewhere in the back of the second violins. That is the correct volume for speaking to the orchestra. Everyone needs to hear what you are going to say, particularly when you are telling them where to start up again.
13. Wait for the musicians to be ready before giving any beat. Getting the attention of all players is crucial, otherwise you will have to start over. But you also must be aware of who is playing at the place where you will commence. There is no point waiting for the first violins at the start of *Ein Heldenleben*.
14. At the first rehearsal, always try to play through one piece without stopping. The orchestra has to get to know you and vice versa. Do not begin with the most difficult new work but rather something that you know can be read with relative ease. Take mental notes on what works and what does not.
15. Use the first day to plan how you will organize the next rehearsals. Keep in mind that the clock is ready to stop you, so prepare accordingly.
16. On the day or evening of the performance, double check that you have everything you need for the concert. Often, conductors tend to forget things such as suspenders, ties, handkerchiefs, and even shoes.²
17. Do not make the management sweat. Get to the venue at least fifteen minutes before showtime. And always remember that there are at least twenty members of the orchestra

- who can conduct this program, perhaps even better than you.
18. At the conclusion of a piece of music, give the musicians who had prominent solos a bow. It is easy in a piece like *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* but complicated for *Boléro*. I leave it to you to figure out, but don't be concerned if you forgot someone and he or she is knocking at your dressing room door.
 19. Always give the orchestra a *tutti* stand-up bow. They will let you know if you should get one by yourself, usually by tapping their bows on the stands or clapping. The concertmaster might gesture to you to take this one by yourself. Do not be offended if they do not offer this. Each orchestra has its own way of showing appreciation or lack thereof.
 20. If you can, wait in the wings after the performance and thank the individual musicians who come out on that side of the stage. It is a nice gesture, and they appreciate the opportunity to shake hands with the conductor. They also want to get to the snack bar quickly.

There are so many more little bits of information to be gleaned as you go about pursuing your career, but let no detail go unnoticed. Keep track of what works and what does not. These lessons will be cumulative, and eventually you will develop a set of patterns that works in almost any situation. But at the same time, conducting always brings something new. As with the music itself, there are discoveries at every turn.

Deciding if you will stand or sit at rehearsal is a discretionary matter. I vowed that I would always be on my feet, but then matters of the back started to creep in, and I began rehearsing from a stool. It was once my belief that if you were vertical, it would make the orchestra more attentive. Now I am not so sure it makes any difference.

Here is something I have not changed my mind about: The audience always makes its first judgment about the conductor from the moment he or she enters the stage. Working on deportment is helpful, perhaps with the aid of a posture coach, or at least a friend

who wants you to make a good impression. Do not overlook this important aspect of the conductor's craft.

We musicians have an expression: "The conductor should have the score in his head, and not his head in the score." Over the years, I have been doing more and more of the repertoire from memory. This is mostly based on years of experience performing works several times. Eventually, you develop a kind of body memory, just as pianists do not think about fingerings after practicing and playing pieces often.

Some people think of conductors who perform without the music on the stand as showboats. After all, most great orchestras can get through a great deal of the repertoire without really looking at the person on the podium. But I think the real plus of leaving the score at home for the performances is that you have a much better sense of communication with the players. Your eyes, unless they are closed, will always be on either the entire ensemble or a few members. However, do not attempt to do a work from memory if you have any insecurity whatsoever. The orchestra will sense this, and if something goes wrong, they will remember.

Should you use a stick or conduct with only your hands? This is a personal decision, and the answer depends on what you wish to accomplish. Great conductors have favored one technique over the other, and many have utilized both interchangeably. It is probably better to start out with a baton, just to get the feel of what it can do and how well it fits into your hand. If you tend toward angularity in your gestures, put the baguette down for a while and see if you can create a more natural flow of beat when you take it up again.

For those of you who aspire to make the podium your domain, it is important to observe conductors in rehearsal, more so than in performance. Watching both great and not-so-great maestri is an object lesson in what not to do. What do I mean by that? When everything is going along smoothly, it is pretty much impossible to figure out why. But if a passage does not proceed well, one can usually deduce what the conductor did wrong. This will seem obvious, but in your own path as a conductor, do the best you can to avoid falling into traps that you might have witnessed.

You cannot learn how to conduct from a book. Although a number of texts are available, the most they can do is give you written explanations of beat patterns, instructions on the use of the left hand, examples from select pieces of music, etc. It is like trying to teach someone how to pole vault without actually going onto the field. No one has written *Conducting for Dummies* yet, but there is *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Conducting Music*. Good luck to those of you who wish to learn in this manner.

One final piece of advice: The musicians always know the best places to eat, especially on tour. I once had the idea to write a little essay that told performers which restaurants are open after concerts in major cities. Do not confine yourself to the hotel or room service. Once in a while, be adventurous rather than relying on the tried and true. The following was something I heard in Paris, but just from the point of view of the musician on his cell phone, calling back to the States. He said, "You will never guess where I am! It's the Champs-Élysées, and I am standing right in front of a McDonald's. It is exactly like the one at home!"

2

ON ORCHESTRAL PERSONALITY

An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience.

—James Baldwin

Imagine, if you will, a lone violin sitting on a table with a bow placed at its side. One by one, six violinists come out, and each plays the same piece of music on the instrument. When all have completed the task, can you discern a difference in the sound coming from the fiddle? This is not about the interpretation but the actual sonic profile of each individual.

The more experienced and talented the violinist, the more singular the sound will be. The same test holds true with any instrument. Ask six pianists to play the same piece on the same keyboard, and you will hear six distinct tonal qualities. Of course, it can sometimes take a highly trained ear to perceive the differences, but those disparities are always there. This is what separates the great musicians from the ordinary. Having an individual personality is how we identify those whose abilities transcend all others.

This brings me to one of the great orchestral dilemmas of our time, the loss of personality that was once a hallmark of certain combinations of ensembles and their music directors. Just as with our distinguished soloists of the past, orchestras used to be identified with a specific sound. Usually it was associated with an artistic leader who had the vision to work toward that end by hiring musicians who were a good fit in terms of both technical ability and blend.

Strict attention to how a newcomer to the orchestra would match with the others supported the development of “The Stokowski/Ormandy Philadelphia Sound,” “Reiner’s Chicagoans,” “Szell’s Clevelanders,” etc. These musical autocrats created a soundscape that was recognizable from the first bar of any given piece of music, regardless of style. They also had an innate understanding of the overall sound they wanted their orchestras to achieve, and they were willing to showcase the idiomatic character of the ensemble in a wide variety of repertoire.

When a guest conductor would come in, he would inherit the sound associated with that orchestra’s music director unless the visiting maestro was truly a genius or musical wonder. The visitor had to walk a fine line when deciding whether or not to attempt to alter this individuality. But in a few cases, a very strong person on the podium could have a profound effect on the musicians without ever saying a word. The casual glance, flick of the baton, or gesture of the left hand might produce a distinct change in the collective sound, without anyone understanding why this occurred.

The first time I led the Philadelphians in the Academy of Music, my program included the Second Symphony by Rachmaninov, a house specialty of Eugene Ormandy. Until I arrived, the orchestra had always observed what were at that time traditional cuts. The work is long, and for reasons having to do with early recording limitations, these modifications were approved by the composer. The first half of the program contained music by American composers, not often programmed by Ormandy. Leading unfamiliar works is much easier than attempting those from the standard repertoire, at least when you are working with one of the great orchestras.

After an initial run-through of the symphony, it was fairly clear that with the exception of the newly reinstated music, the Rachmaninov was simply going to be performed in the manner that the orchestra was used to. Yes, some of my tempi were different, and there were textural and internal details that I wanted to highlight, but the overall sound of the orchestra was unchanged. I wound up comparing it to a week-long visit to someone’s house. Your presence changes the dynamic of everyday life a little, but you would not move the furniture around.

The reverse can also occur, but this is much rarer. I was invited to watch the very same Ormandy make a guest-conducting appearance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO). The major work on the program was the Third Symphony by Glière, a piece seldom encountered in the concert hall these days. After ten minutes, without saying a word, the maestro had the CSO sounding very much like his own orchestra in Philly. And when Sir Georg Solti came to St. Louis to conduct a benefit concert, it likewise took only ten minutes and no speaking from him to transform my very own orchestra into a much more tension-filled ensemble, closer in sound to his charges up north.

These same metamorphoses do not, of course, apply to our most distinguished solo instrumentalists and vocalists. In fact, we go to hear them precisely for their individuality. The collective listening conscience wants to be able to identify who is playing. Imagine if, for example, Yo-Yo Ma completely changed his own sonic presence for each work on a recital. Needless to say, interpretive matters, such as the use of vibrato or the range of dynamics, come into play. But for the most part, he will always be Yo-Yo. The same goes for Renée Fleming or any other artist with a recognizable tonal profile.

Today, we do not seem so concerned about personality when it comes to orchestral sound. Even though our instrumental and vocal soloists can put their own stamp on various pieces of music, we have arrived at a time when orchestras are beginning to sound very much alike. There are many reasons for this. Some have to do with the audition process, a subject I will tackle in a later chapter. Another factor is the homogeneity of teaching, which in many respects focuses on technique over actual sound production. And the worldwide pool of musicians, coming from many different schools of thought, contributes as well.

That last sentence is an understatement. Up until thirty years ago, seeing an Asian face in an American orchestra was a rarity. Today, our orchestras not only sound different but look different as well. We have moved from a set of European traditions, which led to an American school of performance, to an aesthetic that reflects the varied training backgrounds of today's musicians. As a result, creating a unified sonority for an orchestra has become more and