

Conductors Who Cannot Conduct: The role of emotions and their excess in conducting

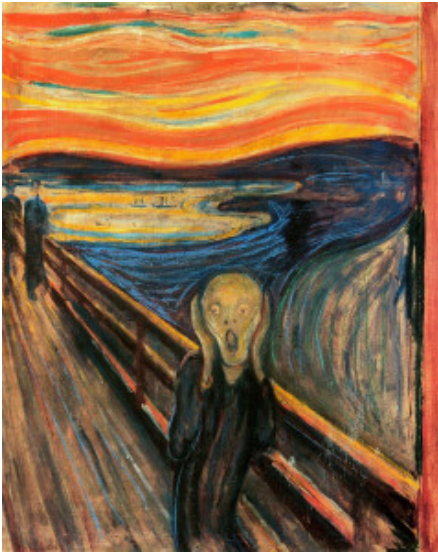
By Aurelio Porfiri, choral conductor and teacher

Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy/UK

When we are busy considering what a conductor does, we may observe the way he or she moves the hands, gestures, and the outcome of his or her conducting skills. Certainly we are fully aware that music is about emotions and we try to observe in which way the conductor is able to channel to the audience the 'emotions' represented by the notes sung by the singers. We do not often pause to reflect on this task of 'channeling' emotions which conductors have to be able to do if they are to achieve the desired result; we take it for granted and do not think about any possible 'side effects'. But being an 'emotional lightning conductor' may be a challenging business and sometimes the emotionality of the conductor prevails over the rational part, putting at risk not only the outcome of a concert, but the conductor's own health and putting also the performance in jeopardy.

Perhaps some people find it strange to talk about this, but nevertheless the 'pathologies' of conductors (and actors, dancers and so on) exist and we cannot pretend otherwise. When a conductor is in front of a choir or an orchestra many feelings and emotions, unusual in his or her daily life, start to come alive in the brain and soul. Our unconscious, this mysterious part of ourselves, starts to be filled with sensations that we can barely control. This was expressed well

by an Italian psychiatrist in a recent book: *'The Unconscious is not only the one which Freud described, the one that includes in itself a second reality nourished from the needs of the species (sexuality and aggressiveness); it is also that abyss, that is our inner being, whose foundation we will never reach, as was said by Heraclitus, and on which not only Schelling, but also Augustine and Pascal have shed intermittent rays of light.'* (Borgna 2015, 57, author's translation). This was already contained in a popular book by Ernst Junger, when he described the human being as a tree: flourishing and luxurious at the top and in the hands of brutal forces at the base (Junger 2014). I have always wondered about the 'brutal forces' at work when a conductor is immersed in the music s/he is performing. For some conductors (probably the majority) it is possible to control these strong emotions but for others it is not. Usually this phenomenon of dizziness in consequence of emotional stress also involves several other effects: the most common is stomach ache (a problem that in the majority of cases is related to IBS, irritable bowel syndrome, one of the most common problems for sensitive people). It is most unpleasant to be overtaken by this sensation during a performance but we need to recognize that IBS is very common and of course is not only related to the struggles of artists but also to a stressful life, common to many other people. A good doctor can give suggestions on treatment that will help to relieve the symptoms.



The Scream by Edvard Munch, 1893

Another problem related to emotionality usually takes the form of a panic attack. This is a bit tricky and also difficult to deal with. A friend, a quite well known conductor (who will of course remain anonymous here in the interests of privacy) has told me what happens when you have a panic attack during conducting: *'suddenly you start to feel a sensation of uneasiness, your heart starts to beat faster and your body and legs are not so strong and firm. Your body communicates to you the feeling that you are going to faint soon and if there is nothing you can grab to fight the fear that you are falling, you need to continue moving your hands and conducting, but at the same time your mind is busy thinking how to stop all the chaos going on in your brain. Sometimes the symptoms may last only a few minutes and then you can once more start to concentrate on the performance and not on yourself'*. Yes, it sounds terrible but it is not at all rare: panic attacks are indeed quite common and today there are many ways to deal with them and face the trouble they are causing in your life, including your professional life. There are also books which describe the experiences of people who have to cope with these issues (not all the books are useful but the fact that there are so many books on this issue helps us to realize how common the problem is).

And there is also good news here, besides the fact that there is treatment available to deal with this problem: many famous people have to cope with panic attacks and they are still famous and very successful in their professional life. If you do some research about this you will see names of hugely popular entertainers, actors and actresses, public figures who have to struggle with this issue and yet still keep their popularity. Of course musicians (and conductors) are a sure target for these problems (IBS, panic attacks etc.) because we feel a great sense of responsibility and also because music is emotional in nature; it is an emotional language. There is no easy 'recipe' for avoiding these problems, just accepting that they exist and asking more experienced people for help in dealing with them. The first impact is of course discouraging and one may feel unable to continue a professional career, but this is not the case. Also, being aware of this phenomenon can help us also to advise soloists in our choir or instrumental group, because quite often they have similar problems too, even if sometimes these problems are only episodic.

We should not be surprised about all these problems: as we have said in the passage from the book by Eugenio Borgna quoted above, our interior being is an abyss which we can understand only up to a point. The moment we feel that we are not in control is the moment to take action and to deal with the problem without becoming too discouraged. Many people with these problems have tried various solutions and many have won the battle. And these issues may also help us to understand ourselves better, with our limitations and our weaknesses, helping us to see ourselves in a different light, perhaps destroying the image of the fully confident person, but shedding light on an image of ourselves certainly more reliable and true.

REFERENCES

- Borgna E. (2015). *Il Tempo e la Vita*. Milano: Giangiacom Feltrinelli Editore.
- Junger J. (2014). *La Battaglia come Esperienza Interiore*. Prato: Piano B Edizioni.