

PASSING THE BATON: HOW DO WE NURTURE THE APPRENTICE CONDUCTOR TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES OF TAKING UP THE BATON?

Journals of Arts & Humanities Studies

ISSN: 3069-325X (Online)

Vol. 1: Issue 3

Page 12–21 © The Author(s) 2025

Received: 25 June 2025

Accepted: 27 July 2025

Published: 31 July 2025

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a qualitative, phenomenological investigation into the development of novice conductors, framed within a practice-led research paradigm. Originating from several mentoring opportunities, the study examines how young musicians transition into conducting roles, the pedagogical strategies that support this process, and the challenges they encounter. Drawing on the lived experiences of two apprentice conductors, the research explores the intersection of technical skill acquisition, interpretive decision-making, and communicative efficacy.

The study addresses a gap in the literature, which often privileges either the autobiographical accounts of professional conductors, instructional manuals focused on technique, or conducting programmes taught at tertiary (university) level. Through semi-structured interviews and reflective analysis, key themes emerge: the importance of early experiential opportunities, the role of mentorship, and the development of confidence and clarity in gesture and musical intent. The findings underscore the value of embodied learning and highlight the influence of ensemble dynamics, gender perceptions, and institutional support on access to conducting pathways. This study also heightens the importance of training for those working in schools and with community ensembles, for whom training in being a conductor is not readily available.

The research advocates for a holistic and inclusive approach to nurturing apprentice conductors, integrating formal instruction, reflective practice, and scaffolded opportunities for authentic leadership. By foregrounding the voices of emerging conductors, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of musical leadership and offers practical insights for educators, mentors, and institutions committed to cultivating the next generation of conductors.

KEY WORDS

Conducting Pedagogy, Music Education, Phenomenology, Practice-Led Research, Mentorship, Musical Leadership, Novice Conductors

The genesis of this study came when I was conducting an orchestra of 8-12-year-olds. In the New Zealand education system this is classed as Years 5-8, spanning the upper primary and intermediate levels of the primary school so the eldest of these children were just about to head off to high school. These were remarkable performers where many of the string players had passed the high grades (not so many the brass and woodwind, as might be expected) and the overall performance standard was way above what you would expect for this age group. The oft-quoted aphorism that you only truly learn something when you teach it to someone else, referred to as the “protégé effect” by Catherine Chase, Doris Chin, Marily Oppezzo, and Daniel

Schwartz in their article "Teachable agents and the protégé effect: Increasing the effort towards learning."¹ This is indicative of how this study came about, not through need, design, or intent but by an opportunity that presented itself to teach a conducting novice. My question became how best to mentor those taking their first tentative steps as a conductor. This then led to asking how mentors and music educators can be better prepared for that moment when a young person steps up to the podium and says, "I'd like to try this". An essential part of this was identifying what it truly means to be a conductor, and the possible motivations a person might have to take it up in the first place.

Much of the existing literature falls into two distinct categories, those recounting the exploits of the successful professional conductor, such as Daniel Barenboim² and Leonard Slatkin³, and others that would best be described as teaching manuals focussed more on the mechanics of doing it, such as the excellent contemporary publications by Frank Battisti,⁴ Anthony Maiello,⁵ and Christopher Seaman.⁶ It is perhaps because of the likes of Barenboim and the many other pianist/conductors that one of my questions in this study (and others) was around the importance of being a pianist in the skills et of being a conductor. Surprisingly – to me, anyway – not one conductor said that it was, the nearest I got was a conductor in another study saying it "might come in handy". From an interesting historical perspective – but no less valuable or entertaining for that fact – Sir Adrian Boult provides insight from the podium at the time when the professional conductor in the modern era was beginning to gain prominence in Great Britain,⁷ while Warwick Braithwaite is notable for his being a New Zealander who spent much of his working life in Britain working in the field of opera, which many regard as quite a specialist arm of the profession.⁸ Studies by Silvey and Major⁹ examine the role of mentoring as part of college and tertiary programmes and this enabled me to see what might be possible and how, in the future, I could scaffold the learning of any young conductors I might be working with. While the lessons learned can be challenging and public, they offer tremendous growth opportunities for young conductors, boosting their confidence and enhancing the effectiveness of rehearsals and performances. It's a demanding role, but many educators embrace it out of necessity and passion, stepping up when no one else is willing. In her doctoral dissertation Helen Renaud¹⁰ made the point that in New Zealand a lack of formal conducting instruction, particularly once a student has graduated and is in the teaching workforce. While not part of this study due to the ages of the participants, it is an important thing to consider given how many schoolteachers end up conducting because they have to do so. Renaud's work reminded me of my own lack of formal training in conducting and how my own experiences had evolved and shaped my career. I should say at this point, that I regard myself as strictly amateur in this capacity, given my professional occupations as an academic, teacher, and composer. However, I would argue that when you are standing there in front of an audience (and an ensemble), conducting in whatever capacity, the stresses, responsibilities, modes of communication, and requisite skills are very similar. It is not an activity for the faint-hearted for sure, but many educators do it because they have to, as often there is no-one else willing or capable to do it. In my case, I felt that part of the problem was a lack of proper training, so I decided to look at the literature on the subject, as well as the lived experience of two conductors who had been part of my own journey.

Methodology

My methodological approach for this research was qualitative and largely phenomenological, exploring my practice as a conductor and comparing it with the lived experience of two young apprentice conductors. Given that I am both inside the research and standing apart from it as the researcher, I am very much influenced by phenomenology's contemporary doyen Max van Manen's statement that

¹ Chase, Catherine C., Doris B. Chin, Marily A. Oppezzo, and Daniel L. Schwartz. "Teachable agents and the protégé effect: Increasing the effort towards learning." *Journal of science education and technology* 18 (2009): 334-352.

² Barenboim, Daniel. *Everything is connected: The power of music*. Hachette UK, 2010.

³ Slatkin, Leonard. *Conducting business: Unveiling the mystery behind the maestro*. Amadeus Press, 2012.

⁴ Battisti, Frank L. *On becoming a conductor: Lessons and meditations on the art of conducting*. Hal Leonard Corporation, 2007.

⁵ Maiello, Anthony Joseph. *Conducting: A hands-on approach*. Alfred Music Publishing, 1996.

⁶ Seaman, Christopher. *Inside conducting*. University Rochester Press, 2013.

⁷ Boult, Adrian. "A Handbook on the Technique of Conducting." (1920).

⁸ Braithwaite, Warwick. *The conductor's art*. Williams and Norgate, 1952.

⁹ Silvey, Brian A., and Marci L. Major. "Undergraduate music education majors' perceptions of their development as conductors: Insights from a basic conducting course." *Research Studies in Music Education* 36, no. 1 (2014): 75-89.

¹⁰ Renaud, Helen. "Conductor and youth orchestra: rehearsal professionalism and curriculum development." (2018).

“phenomenology is oriented to practice”¹¹. However, because I am looking to reapply my findings in my own performance practices, this study will also follow the principles of Bradley Haseman’s “practice-led research”¹². Being a conductor gives me the subjectivity that, as van Manen suggests, orients my research in a unique and personal way¹³, allowing me to see the conducting experience not only from my own perspective but also from that of others, as suggested by the work of Karin Dahlberg.¹⁴ Aiming to be what Mark Dahlberg describes as a “phenomenological craftsman,”¹⁵ comparisons of themes and observations follow Linda Finlay’s Articulation of Variants approach for the descriptive empirical phenomenologist.¹⁶ It has also helped position me as a facilitator, as outlined by Ian McGill and Liz Beaty,¹⁷ for my mentoring work with other young conductors which, in turn, informs my own conducting practice ensembles. Baz Kershaw calls this “practice as research through performance.”¹⁸ However, as a conductor *and* researcher, my main interest is in the lived experience of the people who carry out this work and to examine their stories, insights, and experience.

Structure of the Study

Each participant in the study was given a short, written questionnaire to fill in, then undertook a follow up semi-structured interview which was then transcribed by me. The first three questions were designed to allow the participants to talk in general terms about their music-making to date, covering their initial musical interests and when and how they started learning music. The next questions were specifically around conducting – what made them want to do it, their early experiences and the challenges they faced. The third level of questioning probed deeper, getting the participants to discuss their current conducting activities, focusing on technique and skill development, and things they wanted to improve.

Each interview concluded with participants being asked what they thought the most important skills an effective conductor should have, and what could be done to help and encourage beginner conductors.

I have given the participants the pseudonyms Anna and Mark. Anna’s interviews were carried out on three separate occasions over a period of six years, while Mark’s interview was carried out several years later. In reporting Anna’s comments, I have only distinguished between comments in the three interviews on a couple of occasions as generally it felt like they formed one seamless stream of ideas, with slightly more detail for the earlier ones as she was closer to those embryonic experiences then. Having amassed more experience, her later comments allowed her to reflect and project forward more.

As the interviews progressed, it became clear what interested each participant most, what drove them, and where their focus lay. Their words have been used to illustrate the themes that emerged from these discussions—they are both powerful and insightful and, because they are born out of experiential learning, authentic. Their lived experiences, expressed through their own words, show how we might better understand what it is to be a conductor and therefore prepare and encourage our young people to further their studies in this area.

Background to the Participants in the Study

The study originated quite by chance in 2009 when Anna, a player in the junior orchestra I was conducting as part of an annual music festival, took my baton to conduct the orchestra while I stepped away to listen to the overall sound. A very good violinist and pianist, Anna showed remarkable aptitude to the extent that she ended up conducting one of the pieces in the festival that year. In 2014 I interviewed her again about

¹¹ Manen, M. van. "Phenomenology of practice." *Phenomenology & Practice* 1, no. 1 (2007): 11-30.

¹² Haseman, Bradley. "Rupture and recognition: Identifying the performative research paradigm." *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry* (2007): 147-157.

¹³ Van Manen, Max. *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁴ Dahlberg, Karin. "The essence of essences—the search for meaning structures in phenomenological analysis of lifeworld phenomena." *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being* 1, no. 1 (2006): 11-19.

¹⁵ Vagle, Mark D. *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge, 2018.

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ McGill, Ian, and Liz Beaty. *Action Learning: a guide for professional, management & educational development*. Psychology Press, 2001.

¹⁸ Kershaw, Baz. "Practice as Research through." *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts* (2009): 104.

her experience at high school and again in 2015 about her first year at university where she conducted an orchestra for her faculty which was, incidentally, not a music faculty.

Though somewhat older than Anna, the circumstances around my getting to know Mark are remarkably similar. An extremely talented double bassist, tuba player, and singer, he started off in the music festival as a performer in the early 2000s and, for as long as I have known him, has been heavily involved in community music-making across a broad range of ensembles, including orchestras (both amateur and semi-

professional), choirs, and, somewhat unusually, brass bands. He, too, was my associate conductor at the music festival following Anna's departure to university.

Starting Out – the Importance of a Strong First Beat

When asked how she felt starting out conducting, Anna used words like “exciting,” “daunting,” and “different.” She described how it began “when I was sitting in the violin seat and just watching the conductor myself it seemed very natural.” She went on to describe the myriads of thoughts going through her head thus: “Where do I start? How do I start? How does this work?” Anna was worried how to start them off and setting the correct tempo, how to bring everyone in, what she calls “just the basics.” She was concerned about how to fix problems and to make it better so that players would have clear direction for working on their errors, saying, “I had to be more confident so that they had faith that I knew what I was doing.” Anna's ability to fix errors also came from her experience playing chamber music, which were largely self-supervised, saying that she was used to “stopping and listening to another person's suggestion and also making a suggestion myself to try and fix things.”

Anna was very precise about her early experiences, and I suspect that her comments are typical of the thinking processes of many young conductors:

When I first came across conducting, I thought it must be so hard before I actually started. Afterwards I thought, ‘hey it's not actually that big a deal, it's all good. I can beat one, two, three, four and they can stay in time, it's all good.’ And then I realised it was *really* hard [emphasis added]. So back then I was focused on beat—this is one, this is two, this is three, this is four and they have to be able to see that and if I go really big that means loud and small is really quiet and then using my facial expressions to say, ‘yeah, come in.’ Eyebrows raised and stuff.

Over the three interviews Anna was able to examine her own development a little more, saying, “when I first started it was like, ‘okay, what time am I in, where's the key change, where's the high signature change?’ Just mark those. Where are the cues?” As she progressed, she came to look at the music more as a whole rather than dividing it into sections first.

For Mark, it was very natural for him to try his hand at conducting as he was very involved in lots of different musical activities. He describes how one day a band he was playing with at the time “only had about half a dozen show up at rehearsal so they let me have a go at the wheel.” Similarly, he sang with a local choir and an opportunity soon presented itself there, Mark saying, “I suppose I got a little bit lucky in that their guy retired.” Mark went on to describe how, once his interest had been sparked, he began working towards doing it formally, saying, “when I started I think most of my cues on how I did stuff was from watching, say, you and Brian Law and people like that conducting, and sort of busking from there,” something Seaman also regards as fundamental.¹⁹

One aspect—preparing to conduct for the first time—was something I discussed in depth with Anna, mainly because it was something happening at the time. When she was first asked to conduct, Anna did the following:

I went home with the score and baton. At first, I was watching myself in the mirror and just conducting and seeing what my gesture looked like. I just kept singing through the music. . . and then marking off that person needs a cue there. . . and practising that with an imaginary orchestra in front of me.

¹⁹ Seaman, Christopher. *Inside conducting*. University Rochester Press, 2013.

There is a lot of sound conducting preparation inherent in her comments borne out of the advice I gave her and the things she had observed as a player. She did not conduct along to a recording, stating that “it feels like I’m not actually interpreting it myself but just doing what the other person’s doing.” That comment alone was a clear indication that she was thinking like a conductor, recognising that she controlled the tempo changes. “I controlled when the people came in” and that “having a clear idea what I wanted was quite good as a base sort of thing so that I could work from that and not chase after what was just appearing in front of me.” This is precisely one of the criticisms Brock McElheran has too, in his book *Conducting technique: For beginners and professionals* (2004), suggesting it promotes following rather than leading and “record worship.”²⁰

Communication is the Key

The importance of good communication was something that repeatedly came up, whether it be the conductor’s skills in communicating their ideas to the orchestra or the orchestra’s ability then to communicate with the audience. After all, Richard Strauss advised conductors, “you are making music not to amuse yourself but to please your audience,”²¹ but there is much more to it than that. For Mark, the key to good communication was “figuring out what I want and getting that across, you know, actually coming up with interpretation.” Carrying on in a similar vein, he suggests that successful communication is as much about building and maintaining rapport with the players as it is about the music, saying, “I think a good conductor should be able to communicate clearly and be able to impose what they want in a way that isn’t forceful or antagonises the ensemble.” Early on in his conducting career he took on some fairly ambitious projects where he had to learn fast, which prompted him to highlight one key communication skill, “the soft people skills.” This probably stemmed in part from Mark having been a player in those ensembles and then becoming their conductor, which was also the case with Anna. However, she was regarded more as “one of us up there” conducting and the players (school children) were all behind her and willing her to succeed. Conversely, Mark may have been regarded differently because he was a little bit older, was operating in an adult (and predominantly male) environment of a brass band, was the ambitious greenhorn facing the long-standing members, and may have suffered from the tall poppy syndrome, a phrase commonly used in New Zealand—though its origins date back to Herodotus and Aristotle—describing the disparaging others’ success by “cutting them down to size” as one might a tall poppy. His tempi were simply ignored but saying, “you’re being picky about dynamics, why don’t you play my tempos?” did not have the desired effect.

When discussing some of the things she had learnt early on in her conducting, Anna highlighted “getting across my interpretation and explaining the reason for the way that I wanted the orchestra to sound or a certain section to play.” Communicating your ideas can be difficult, and Anna talked about reflecting on a session and how certain aspects could be improved upon, saying, “what is another way? I tried this way, say clapping a rhythm, singing it to them. Do I need to explain it in words next time or ask someone else who knows more [about it]?” Anna also picked up on the importance and impact of one’s choice of physical movement, describing conducting as “the art of gestures, since it is all done through gestures, no words, you are trying to communicate everything that you want only through gestures.” She described making the ideal gesture “so it is clear but expressive, not only clear where you are in the music but also musically how you want the sound to come out.” Having attended a number of conducting masterclasses, Anna commented on how some of the more experienced conductors exuded authority, describing them as having “a more assertive sort of manner in the way they went about their sessions.” She went on to describe her own development in this area at some length:

Some of the things I have achieved are getting across my interpretation and explaining the reason for the way that I wanted the orchestra to sound or a certain section to play and really keeping at it so that they would really understand and respond. Some of the things that might not have been successful [included] a lack of authority. Sometimes I might have been too easy and so they wouldn’t play the way I asked them to even though I asked the same thing many times. I had to try to think what I was doing wrong, what didn’t they understand. So, I had to say to them ‘if you don’t understand what I am asking you to change then you have to tell me so that I can explain a different way or show you.’

²⁰ McElheran, Brock. *Conducting technique: For beginners and professionals*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

²¹ Strauss, Richard. “Reflections and recollections.” *Tempo* 12 (1949): 13-19.

She then summed up the whole purpose of the conductor very succinctly saying that “if it doesn’t get across, then there’s no point.”

Influencing the Sound

I believe one of the key steps in drawing young people to conducting is educating them as to what it looks like, feels like, and sounds like being up on the podium and there is only one way you can do that and that is by doing it. Anna summed it up well, saying, “you need to do it,” an echo of educationalist John Holt, who may as well have been specifically referring to conducting when he said, “We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way.”²² While one can familiarise oneself with a work by conducting along with a recording (Anna described this as feeling “like I’m not actually interpreting it myself but just doing what the other person’s doing”) nothing prepares you for being the one that instigates the process, exercising control, rather like the first time you depress the accelerator of a car and feel the power of the engine move you forward.

In her second interview, Anna said she became “very conscious about what I did for the expressive part of conducting, really with my left hand,” indicating that she had moved beyond merely establishing and maintaining the beat and was becoming more focused on the impact of her overall gestures. In an article by Hilary Apfelstadt in *The Canadian Music Educator* (2016), Dale Warland addresses this especially for choral conducting, saying the left hand “could enhance the line.”²³ While the clarity of the beat in the right hand was something Anna continued to work on, the expressive quality was becoming increasingly important saying, “if it’s a really smooth, nice, lyrical passage, then making sure that while I’m making it clear, it’s not really disrupting the flow or anything.” When discussing a rehearsal she had observed with a professional orchestra, Anna talked to some of the players and reported that the conductor had “worked with them a lot on sound and sound production and what sort of sound he was specifically going for.” In that same rehearsal, she noted the clarity and lack of “show,” saying, “I really liked that they were all at one with the music. I can see it in the way their gesture really corresponds to the sound that is produced. They are drawing it out of the players.” In each of the three interviews, Anna always coherently drew the technical aspects together with the musical ones, no more so than when she commented:

You have to show expression in the way that you want the players to also play the same way as what you are imagining or envisaging. . . so it is clear but expressive. . . [and] musically how you want the sound to come out.

She was particularly taken with the way the orchestra sounded under a visiting German conductor, saying, “he worked with them a lot on sound and sound production and what sort of sound he was specifically going for.”

Mark’s comments spanned three quite different musical spheres—symphony orchestra, brass band and church music. His early experience working with all three as a conductor are best expressed by, “I thought, ‘right, a few tweaks there’ would make a difference in the sound.” Having worked with many younger players, Mark hints at the opportunity to work more on the overall sound rather than on simply getting the notes right, saying, “it would be great to work with a semi-professional group [as] I think the next thing for me would be to step up and actually think about the next layer of polish.” It can also be problematic taking over an ensemble and trying to change aspects of their sound, which Mark realised when he later took over a choir, but his previous run-in with the brass band members over tempi had taught him a valuable lesson. He described his new approach as “starting from where they were used to and gradually changing, rather than coming and saying, ‘Right, we’re doing this, you’re doing this, and we don’t do it that way.’” Philosophically, Mark acknowledges that “one of the valuable things was to learn some of those things the hard way.”

What Specific Skill Set is Needed to Become a Conductor?

For an inexperienced conductor taking those first tentative steps, knowing how to beat time and being familiar with what is in front of you—both the score and the instruments—are both excellent starting points. Moving beyond that, Regier, Scherer and Silvey investigated the frequency of conducting behaviours such as

²² Holt, John. "How children fail." *Literacy Research and Instruction* 6, no. 1 (1966): 4-7.

²³ Apfelstadt, Hilary. *The Canadian Music Educator* 57, no.3 (2016): 29-32.

hand independence, conducting patterns, and facial expression, to further pinpoint how novice conductors deployed practice conducting skills.²⁴

Mark's focus was on skill acquisition in order to make the transition from being a multi-instrumentalist and/or singer with the ensemble to standing at the podium. As well as improving technique and communication, he identified that this transition involved moving into an organisational role, Mark acknowledging that he had to do a lot more of the organising himself as opposed to previously where he would "just roll on up and do one piece." A further bonus was already knowing how the church choir

functioned and what repertoire they were used to in what can be a fairly regimented calendar. Mark found this gave him the confidence and underlying knowledge to take over the choir and select the right repertoire, blending the known with the challenging. He also acknowledges that a key skill is knowing when to call it quits on a piece that isn't working, stating that, "there's that whole thing of not making them feel like they're totally inept," and looking at other options. Returning to the need for good organisational skills, Mark noted that "a little bit more thought in the preparation stage does help."

It was very clear that Anna's experience playing in orchestras and chamber groups had equipped her with a solid skill set on both violin and piano and performing generally. Interestingly (but not surprisingly), conducting also had an effect on her playing, saying, "conducting has really impacted a lot on how I hear music, even just the piano when I'm studying a work or a piece. I look at pieces more orchestrally and I can hear certain sections being played by certain instruments." Anna also described how she had to tailor one piece of music for a group of young players explaining how she orchestrated, conducted, and rehearsed it. She again described how one activity affected the other: "I was more focused on colour when I was orchestrating but I did visualise how I would be using the motions of my hands." She found herself thinking, "what different colours do I want to bring in?"

What are the Challenges of Being a Conductor?

Silvey and Major detail the difficulties inherent in the transformation from performer to musical leadership in their study of undergraduate conductors, of which transitioning to musical leadership was one.²⁵ There are inherent problems conducting the ensemble you have hitherto been playing in, something Anna and Mark both experienced, Anna describing it as "even more difficult than conducting the members of the NZSO." Describing working with friends, Anna states, "it's that awkward thing that they are going to think you're 'up yourself' [a New Zealand colloquialism meaning arrogant or overly self-assured] because suddenly you've become the conductor." Anna also found it difficult trying new things with younger players because, "they just expect you to stick with one interpretation or one way of doing it from the start," whereas working with professionals enabled her the freedom to experiment, change, and adapt, something that can unnerve younger players.

Mark cited two additional, and very practical, challenges, the first returning to the issue of conveying one's interpretation, saying, "I still struggle with studying scores effectively and building a unique interpretation." He also chose to focus on a very specific technical issue, citing music in compound time, specifically 6/8 "because I find I actually have to beat it out in six. Eugh! But I'll put up with it because usually, I'm not the one picking the music, so you either do it or you go sit down." Mark raises an important point that, as a beginner conductor, one is often at the behest of one's senior colleague who, while responsible for running the group and providing a safety net should things go wrong, might also be giving a false sense of what the job *actually* entails. In choosing more challenging repertoire for his choir, Mark often asks himself "can they actually do that?" and when it doesn't go according to plan moves to "Plan B."

In terms of perceived barriers to becoming a conductor, Anna started off by saying, "I don't know whether I could actually conduct if I tried," and qualified that later when discussing being a female conductor (another historical barrier), saying, "I do believe that if I worked really hard and have enough knowledge and experience that I can convince people to follow me when I conduct, or respond to what I say, and be

²⁴ Regier, Bradley J., Alec D. Scherer, and Brian A. Silvey. "An examination of undergraduate conductor practice behavior." *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 29, no. 3 (2020): 37-49.

²⁵ Silvey, Brian A., and Marci L. Major. "Undergraduate music education majors' perceptions of their development as conductors: Insights from a basic conducting course." *Research Studies in Music Education* 36, no. 1 (2014): 75-89.

respected, I think the whole gender thing wouldn't be a problem." It certainly has not proved to be the case of late for conductor Gemma New who was appointed the first woman conductor of the NZSO in 75 years. In a recent Stuff media article by Virginia Fallon, New was quoted as saying, prophetically, that it was always the plan "leaving the country to study and I'll come back one day and conduct the NZSO."²⁶ Anna was similarly very practical about her prospects on the podium, saying a barrier would be, "financial things, trying to go to the right places, pay the fees and the travelling, my living expenses that sort of thing." Finally, Anna voiced what many aspiring conductors find once they start out on their own, that the main challenges are, "opportunities and finding them. And once you're out of New Zealand, where do you go? How do you ask people and get into things?"

How Do We Nurture Aspiring Conductors?

My own experience during my university studies in the UK in the 1980s was that many would-be conductors learned their craft in addition to, not through, their prescribed classes, with tutelage occurring outside the parameters of the standard taught courses, if at all. It seems that little has changed, remaining "hit-and-miss as to whether [talent] is discovered early enough and nurtured," according to Euan Murdoch in a Stuff media article by Andre Chumko on declining standards in music education in New Zealand.²⁷ Mark's early experiences at conducting appear similarly *ad hoc*, Mark explaining, "I was just kind of put up there and left to my own devices." He felt it would have helped had the regular conductor been "standing over my shoulder there and just saying the odd thing like, 'You don't need to say so much here or perhaps for this bit try.'" In her article focusing on mentorship and learning experiences, Melissa Baughman explains the importance of role of the mentor at all stages but especially in planning, reflecting, and during the actual rehearsal.²⁸ For Mark, the important thing in encouraging people to conduct is "just having a go because no-one's perfect out of the box and I certainly wasn't." He also cites "having the chance to figure out what works and what doesn't first-hand" as a key part of how he developed as a conductor. His experience at university in New Zealand was, at best, patchy, with a lab in conducting at the end of the second year followed by a third-year paper.

I got lucky because [tutor A] used to take those and I managed to get the one in second year with him. Now [tutor B] is taking it and it's different because he's a bit more "well, you know, people conduct in different ways and that's that," whereas [tutor A] was very much "break that all down, do the [centric] circles, get the ictus right," so I was pleased I got some technique.

This more formal structure helped Mark navigate what Mary Johnsson and Paul Hager term "the wilderness years."²⁹

In his article on the pedagogy of conducting, Australian Darren Postema presents an interesting case-study of a masterclass workshop with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.³⁰ Having gone through a similar process with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Anna observes that, "workshopping is definitely one of the things in which you learn a lot" and that in professionally run workshops the criticism and pointers were not about changing but rather that "it works for you, but I wonder if this would also work the same." Anna cited the way she grips her baton as being a good example of this. As Anna progressed beyond the basics and worked with more advanced players, achieving balance was something of a focus. It also introduced her to the familiar preparatory workshop step of conducting the larger-scale work with two pianos, making the interesting observation that "it was quite hard. I thought it would be 'give a gesture' or 'give a cue' and they would come in, but they were almost always late." In these professionally run workshops, Anna was initially a

²⁶ Virginia Fallon, "Breaking the brass ceiling: NZSO appoints first woman principal conductor in 75 years," *Stuff*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/127866120/breaking-the-brass-ceiling-nzso-appoints-first-woman-principal-conductor-in-75-years>

²⁷ Andre Chumko, "Music education in New Zealand needs a reset, experts say", *Stuff*, February 13, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/music/124210191/music-education-in-new-zealand-needs-a-reset-experts-say>

²⁸ Baughman, Melissa. "Mentorship and learning experiences of preservice teachers as community children's chorus conductors." *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 29, no. 2 (2020): 38-52.

²⁹ Johnsson, Mary C., and Paul Hager. "Navigating the wilderness of becoming professional." *Journal of Workplace Learning* 20, no. 7/8 (2008): 526-536.

³⁰ Postema, Darren. "The pedagogy of conducting." *Australian Journal of Music Education* 2 (2015): 18-35.

bit daunted, feeling the older conductors “had more authority, a more assertive sort of manner in the way they went about their sessions” but, overall, did not feel that she had done too badly. Observing the other conductors, she noted that they appeared confident, very sure about their own ideas and communicated those effectively to the players. Anna also noted that if the players didn’t understand, then they’d keep at it, re-explain, and do it again. The conductors that were not so successful were those “wavering between their ideas and not really sure what to do; that brought a lot more confusion into the performance.” Silvey and Major also reported this, stating that “novice conductors struggled between the ideal of what they wanted to accomplish and the reality of what they achieved”.³¹ Anna also found that, “instead of just running through a piece start to finish, pinpoint one section, or one entry, one rhythmic thing and just try to get it right,” focusing on the detail and thus helping build player confidence through success.

Practical Advice from the Participants

From our discussion, Mark acknowledged that his early conducting had a distinct element of trial-and-error (what he terms “busking”) and often heavily reliant on sight-reading, but experience has taught him that “having a little bit more thought in the preparation stage does help.” Mark has also found it useful to “start from what they were used to and, sort of, gradually change, rather than coming and saying, ‘Right, we’re doing this, you’re doing this, and we don’t do it that way.’” A part of making this good impression was also “generally being polite.” In terms of tuition, Mark identifies that “getting some technique helped because it is very easy to do some wild thing and wreck yourself,” although it is worth remembering pianist Russell Sherman’s remark that “technique is but handmaiden to the music and imagination.”³²

From her own experiences watching others conduct in masterclasses, Anna advises avoiding, “adding all these flicks or twirls or spirals—it was just so confusing for me as a conductor and as a player. If I was sitting in the orchestra, it would just look so busy and hard to follow.” Noting the characteristics of the more effective conductors in those situations, Anna says the stand-out was them “having their own ideas and being really sure and confident about it.” While Anna did not offer this so much as advice but rather a comment on her own development as a conductor, I feel that the following is a good blueprint for how a young conductor might chart their own initial development:

When I first come across the piece I’m going to conduct or work on, I look at it quite a lot more differently than I used to when I first started conducting. When I first started it was like, ‘Okay what time am I in? Where’s the key signature change – just mark those. Where are the cues?’ Whereas now I will look at it as a whole and think, ‘What is the music doing? Where is it going throughout the piece?’ and I think how I would adjust my gestures accordingly. I look at it as a whole rather than dividing it into sections first.

Anna then looks at details, such as instrumentation, particular entries to be aware of, and the gestures she will use to communicate her ideas to the players, always focusing on clarity. It is also clear in her comments that forefront in her mind is what the *music* is trying to communicate, not her.

Conclusion

This study confirms that there is a certain amount of serendipity, circumstance, and opportunity involved in the early stages of becoming a conductor. If luck truly is what happens when preparation meets opportunity (a saying originally attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca), then having a good all-round musical grounding is what enabled these young conductors to progress to the podium but chance and necessity i.e. because it had to be done, also played their part. Being in a performing ensemble also gave the young conductors confidence, although it, too can present distinct challenges and, for both of them, there was the epiphany of suddenly realising that they could do it. Following that initial success comes the realisation of what it really entails, what skills one needs to focus on and develop. Preparation and good communication were identified as key skills, with good communication taking several different forms—with players, your audience but also wanting to be authentic in communicating the music and the composer’s intentions.

³¹ Silvey, Brian A., and Marci L. Major. "Undergraduate music education majors' perceptions of their development as conductors: Insights from a basic conducting course." *Research Studies in Music Education* 36, no. 1 (2014): 75-89.

³² Battisti, Frank L. *On becoming a conductor: Lessons and meditations on the art of conducting*. Hal Leonard Corporation, 2007.

As the apprentice conductors developed, influencing (as opposed to merely presenting) the sound became more important, transferring what's in their heads or on the page into effective musical intentions that work. Being a pianist was not regarded as a prerequisite (although both conductors play piano) but playing at least one orchestral instrument and playing a stringed instrument even to an elemental level, were considered vital. The same would be applicable to voice in that one should have a knowledge of sound production, preferably from considerable personal experience.

In preparation for taking the podium, gaining advice on conducting technique is as important as an understanding of harmonic structure. As one progresses, developing ideas around expression and getting the sound you want come to the fore.

Of the challenges, not getting the necessary technique was mentioned highlighting the importance of taught programmes, something that could be addressed by masterclasses at university level and/or mentorship.

Transitioning from within the performance group came with positives and negatives but both provided valuable learning opportunities for my participants.

As this study has informed my current practice it is hoped the findings will also be useful in instructing those nurturing the next generation of conductors, from whichever direction and musical background they may come.