



Conductor-Free Zone

By Brian Lauritzen

Let's break the ice with a few conductor jokes.

Q: What's the difference between God and a conductor?

A: *God knows He's not a conductor.*

Q: Why are conductor's hearts so coveted for transplants?

A: *They've had so little use.*

Q: Why did they bury the conductor 20 feet into the earth?

A: *Because deep down he was a nice guy.*

Sorry, was that last one a bit too harsh? It's not disdain nor animosity that drove the decision for the Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra ("KCO") to function as a conductor-free ensemble. Rather, the KCO seeks to bring a chamber music approach to larger pieces of orchestral music. (They've even performed big Mahler and Shostakovich symphonies without a conductor!)

But KCO's point is not that conductors are irrelevant. Instead, KCO believes there's pretty intense and important artistic exploration that can, and should, be done as an democratically functioning ensemble. Principal musicians change frequently. Concertmasters change frequently. For each program, the orchestra designates a couple of artistic leaders in various instrumental sections and they chart out the interpretive course. Then, as the rehearsal process begins, anyone is welcome to pipe up with musical suggestions.

Together, they listen to one another, they try things, they debate, they advocate, they compromise, and together they arrive at a musical conclusion. Out of many, one. (Perhaps

we should send the Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra to Washington, D.C. to lead some workshops for our political leaders.)

All of this adds up to a fresh approach to old standards, like Beethoven's 5th Symphony. All of a sudden, the power and drama of that famous first movement becomes even more urgent as that rhythm — short-short-short-long — bounces from the strings to the woodwinds to the brass. Zoom in a bit and it's the cellos intersecting with the bassoons and the second violins connecting with the flutes. Zoom in even further and it becomes about each individual musician fitting into parts of a musical space that s/he is helping to create. Live, in real time.

As the stormy opening movement gives way to the tender slow movement and the smoldering scherzo finally ignites into the glorious blazing finale, we are able to hear how that same short-short-short-long rhythm from the opening appears literally everywhere in this symphony: in the calm accompanimental figures that underscore the delicate cello melodies in the slow movement to the stately French horn themes in the scherzo to a rhythmic countermelody underneath the heroic violin melodies in the finale.

What happens when you add a soloist into the Conductor Free Zone? It gets simpler and also more complex. Yes, it's both of those things at the same time. Simpler because the artistic vision is set by fewer voices. More complex because performing daring feats of pianistic virtuosity while also leading an orchestra is, well, not easy.

Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto is all kinds of virtuosic. He started writing it in 1917 and completed it a few years later. Throughout the composition process, he combined new musical themes and ideas with older fragments of previous works that he had started but never finished. (As it's full of these recycled resources, the Marketing Department might highlight this concerto's sustainability.)

Speaking of bits of other pieces, Caroline Shaw's *Entr'acte* is built on a tiny musical fragment of a string quartet by Haydn. The New York-based composer and youngest-ever recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music (who, this month, celebrated the premiere of her own new Piano Concerto with Jonathan Biss and the Seattle Symphony) tells us about the time she heard the Brentano String Quartet performing Haydn's String Quartet, Op. 77, No. 2. Shaw describes a "spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet" and says, "I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition."

Entr'acte was originally written for string quartet, but Shaw has created an expanded version for full string orchestra as well. Both versions function just fine without the intrusion of a conductor.

Join Brian Lauritzen and other guest moderators for free pre-concert conversations in the Bram Goldsmith Theater with the artists prior to select classical music performances, along with a complimentary glass of wine provided by The Henry Wine Group.