Conductors and Authorship:
A Postmodern Critique of Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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A modern conductor’s relationship to the concept of authorship is particularly problematic when viewed from a postmodern perspective. Its current incarnation remains narrowly conceived as a didactic relationship between a subservient interpreter and his or her obedient followers, and an all-significant composer. Because such relationships have been modelled on modern and pre-modern concepts of the self, tradition, knowledge and authority, they remain somewhat antithetical to postmodern concerns. Surprisingly, the marked mismatch between such manifestations of these relationships and postmodern perspectives has remained un-critiqued. Following the work of theorists such as Foucault and Barthes, this paper unpacks the lingering dualistic and hierarchical relationship that conductors currently have towards authorship. In light of Foucault’s critique of the connection between the author and the text (score), it examines the way in which the author ‘functions’ as a part of the discourse itself, and how this then relates to conductors. It also critiques the myth of authorial authority and the ‘knowable text’ according to Barthes’ work, and considers the pleasures and opportunities for creative revision and interplay with and beyond the text.

Since the nineteenth century orchestral conductors have predominantly played the role of subservient interpreter of composers’ works. To date, this role has been enacted through pre-modern concepts of divinity and sanctity – whereby a priestly conductor guides his or her flock of musicians towards communion with a composer – and modern ideals of secular humanism – whereby an autonomous conductor leads his or her musicians to an ultimate and conclusive rendition of a composer’s work. Surprisingly, the marked mismatch between such manifestations of this role and postmodern perspectives has remained un-critiqued. While some so-called forward-looking conductors have claimed that their multiple interpretations of works bring them in-line with postmodern perspectives, what they fail to realise is the disjuncture between their autonomous existence and the dialogic and pluralistic presence that a postmodern perspective might call for. Furthermore, such discourses about conducting also fail to acknowledge the de-centred, fractured, culturally inscribed, and contradictory aspects of both the conductor and composer’s subjectivities. Indeed, the postmodern concept of a subject-in-progress does not fit well with the aforementioned notions of the all-knowing composer and conductor.

Following the work of theorists such as Foucault and Barthes, this paper unpacks the various manifestations of the dualistic and hierarchical relationship conductors have had towards authorship. It draws on Foucault’s 1977 critique of the ‘author-function’ to explore the pivotal role that conductors have played in upholding and protecting the composer’s elevated authorial position in the realisation of his or her work. By using the term ‘author-function,’ I am referring to the idea that an author serves as an important part of a written text and how that text is perceived by its reader, but is not necessarily the one and only originator of that text. The paper also critiques the myth of authorial authority and the ‘knowable text’ by using Barthes’ 1977 concept of the ‘death of the author.’ By using the term ‘death of the author’ I am referring to the idea that an author does not exist prior to or
outside of language, and that writing is what makes an author, not *vice versa*. When Barthes’ concepts are applied to conducting, the composer can be ‘removed’ from his or her authorial position over the conductor and endless opportunities for creative revision and interplay with and beyond the written score become possible. As this paper aims to illustrate, these postmodern concepts shed new light on the fractured and culturally inscribed aspects of both the conductor and composer’s subjectivities, and throw into question the hierarchical structure of the concert tradition, which has changed relatively little since the nineteenth century. By applying these postmodern concepts to conducting, we are able to reconceptualise the role and its relationship towards authorship in very different ways to previous eras.

In using the work of Foucault and Barthes, one might question whether the concept of authorship can be used interchangeably with composition. Indeed, given music’s own system of semiotics, the traps of blindly exchanging the two without regard for how musical texts differ from linguistic texts are apparent. However, there are many parallels in how these concepts have functioned within literary and musical discourses, and as such, the ideas of Foucault and Barthes on authorship have been applied to the following critique on conducting and composition. Likewise, one might question whether the concept of a written text has parallels with a written score. There are certainly many similarities with how the written text and written score have been produced, disseminated, read and understood. However, like with authorship and composition, the ways in which scores have functioned are somewhat particular to music, and one has to constantly keep this in mind when applying Foucault and Barthes’ ideas about how texts operate, in a musical context. Nonetheless, Foucault does acknowledge the possibilities of this application:

> I am aware that until now I have kept my subject within unjustifiable limits; I should also have spoken of the “author-function” in painting, music, technical fields, and so forth.⁴

As nineteenth-century conductors began to shift away from their seventeenth and eighteenth-century equivalents, the *kapellmeister* and *Maître de musique⁵* – who were hired to give music lessons, compose, rehearse and lead music performances, among other responsibilities – their relationship towards authorship started to change. This occurred as nineteenth-century composers became increasingly less-often employed as servants of private musical establishments, and henceforth, less connected to the execution of their own music for large ensembles.⁶ During this time, the orchestral world witnessed the emergence of the ‘work concept,’ whereby specialist conductors were needed to creatively interpret the ‘masterworks’ of venerated composers. Composers began to annotate their scores more heavily with performance directions and expressive markings, and due to both aesthetic reasons and new acoustic circumstances they also frequently called for larger instrumental forces. These scores increasingly required an understanding and authoritative person to direct and interpret them.⁷ Conductors’ responsibilities thus became progressively more centred on serving the composer and faithfully realising their scores. Such a change was echoed in Hector Berlioz’s manual devoted to the conductor as a specialist (as distinct from a time-beating composer or a violin-bow leader), entitled *L’Art du chef d’orchestre* (1855). Berlioz’s concept of conducting as an act of communication – both of personal feeling and transmission of ‘authentic’ musical style from the score⁸ – anticipated contemporary understandings of the conductor’s responsibilities towards authorship. As Goehr has argued this ‘work concept’ has been problematic for conductors as they have found themselves ‘in an uneasy position because they are simultaneously regarded as masters and servants’.⁹ One the one hand, they have superior status as masters, leaders of orchestras and the art of interpretation; on the other hand, they are regarded as servants to the composer’s work.¹⁰

Since this shift in the nineteenth century, conductors have been expected to submit to a composer’s prominent position, and adhere to the idea that a score provides them with the necessary information to re-create the work faithfully and accurately. In other words, conductors have played a crucial role in upholding what Foucault calls the ‘author-function.’ According to Foucault the ‘author-function’ results ‘from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author’.¹¹ Foucault suggests that this
construction is ‘assigned a “realistic” dimension as we speak of an individual’s “profundity” or “creative” power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing’. 12

Conductors have taken part in promoting this ‘realistic’ dimension to a composer’s work, by highlighting and emphasising the so-called profound and creative elements that are found in the score, to his or her musicians and the audience. However, as Foucault goes on to say:

> [t]hese aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. 13

Conductors have thus played a significant role in ‘handling’ composers’ texts, and drawing out his or her authors’ apparent meanings and intentions. As Schuller claims:

> The art of conducting must be seen as a sacred trust to translate into a meaningful expressive acoustical reality, with as much insight and fidelity as is humanly possible, those musical documents – the scores, the texts – left to us by the great composers. 14

Following Schuller’s comment and Foucault’s critique, conductors have thus performed a vital part in the re-production, circulation, classification and consumption of these works, and their resultant ‘author-function’ within Western musical culture. As I have argued elsewhere, this process has often been conceptualised in ways that overlook the social, cultural, and gendered subjectivities of the conductor, and how these impact upon his or her connection with the composer. 15

This subservient relationship between conductors and composers becomes highly problematic when viewed from the postmodern perspective, which questions the notion of authorial authority. As Barthes suggests, an author is not simply a person to be revered and followed without question, but a socially and historically constituted subject. 16 As Foucault also argues, ‘the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society’. 17 Moreover, the author is not the source of something original, but rather the product or function of the writing of the text. When applied to a musical context, compositions are thus collective cultural products that do not arise from singular, individual beings; hence, composers do not exist prior to or outside musical signs and symbols. Following this critique, the composer cannot claim any absolute authority over his or her score because, in some ways, they did not solely write it. By shifting the emphasis away from an all-knowing, unified, intending composer as the producer of musical language, the problematic concept of a composer’s ‘work’ also comes under question. Both Foucault 18 and Barthes 19 highlight the disjointed nature of texts and their gaps of meaning, incongruities, interruptions, and breaks. Foucault argues that the author is not a source of infinite meaning, but rather part of a larger system of beliefs that serve to limit and restrict meaning. 20 This then begs the question, how can a conductor precisely detect all that the composer intended when interpreting and re-creating his or her work? Foucault and Barthes would reason that one simply could not.

If, as Barthes suggests, an author does not really create a unique and individual text, one runs into problematic territory for conductors. 21 Since the nineteenth century, conductors have worked on the premise that if they follow a process of re-composition – that is, retracing the steps a composer followed to construct a musical work – they will come closer to the composer’s musical identity and a more faithful interpretation of his or her intentions. As Schuller suggests:

> [t]he art of conducting ought to consist of faithfully retracing the manifold steps by which the composer originally created the work, of re-tracing and re-living the creative, visionary journey on which the composer embarked in the first instance. 22

Similarly, Bowles says, a conductor:

> [b]egins with the score and, as it were, works backwards. His final success will be measured by the degree to which, by realizing the technical details and their
implications, he succeeds in re-creating the musical force that originally moved the composer.  

In contrast to the processes described by Schuller and Bowles, Barthes suggests that writing ‘is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing’.  
The problem for conductors is that if they attempt to enter into the sphere of abstract musical language that the composer drew on, they have no real way of tracing the composer’s path, for musical language does not stay static, but is constantly changing. Hence the notion that a conductor should examine the score as the key to unlocking an individual composer’s life history, particular concerns, interests, themes, and so on, in order to come to more ‘authentic’ realisation of the composer’s work is not only misleading, but ultimately impossible.

This issue of interpretation becomes more problematic in the case of composer-conductors. The role of the composer-conductor pre-empted the development of the independent conductor in the nineteenth century and has continued to exist ever since. In this situation the author becomes the interpreter and the person responsible for upholding his or her own ‘author-function’. This has been described as a desirable situation because the composer-conductor is thought to have authorial authority over the music. As Brabbins explains, ‘many musicians will attest to the very particular kind of ‘magic’ even the most technically ill-equipped composer can bring to the performance of his or her own music’.  
The problem with such an idea, according to Barthes, is that ‘to give a text an Author and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it ‘is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’. Hence the difficulty with a person conducting their own score is that they have to somewhat abandon their original conception of the work and be open to multiple interpretations in order for it to have a life of its own. Composer-conductors almost have to distance themselves from the process of authorship for the text to be open to creative revisions and extensions. As Brabbins concedes:

[...] Composers who are less experienced conductors often find themselves getting too emotionally involved while conducting their own music. Without the necessary professional detachment, their passion can get the upper hand, often with embarrassing consequences.

As Barthes suggests, readers – and in this case, one could say composer-conductors – need to separate the work from its creator in order to liberate it from interpretive tyranny.

While the general relationship between conductors and authorship has changed little since the nineteenth century, certain approaches to upholding this ‘author-function’ have been somewhat fluid and flexible. As Foucault observes, the ‘author-function’ is not universal or constant in all discourse. Indeed, if a historical analysis of discourse or music is undertaken, the ‘author-function’ has operated differently in different places and at different times. As Foucault claims, there was a time when literary texts were accepted, attributed, valued and circulated without any question about the identity of their author: ‘Their anonymity was ignored because their real or supposed age was a sufficient guarantee of their authenticity’. However, as Foucault goes on to explain, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries literary discourses were only acceptable if they carried an author’s name: ‘every text was obliged to state its author and the date, place, and circumstance of its writing’. One can observe parallels with musical history as composers’ names have become more and more important in the attribution of meaning and value to their musical scores. Western orchestral music – much like literature – has been dominated by the sovereignty of its composers, and conductors have merely served to uphold this situation. Having said this, while composers’ names have functioned as crucial measures of works’ significance over the last few centuries, during the twentieth century in particular, conductors seemed to come the closest to rivalling this prominence.

As twentieth-century conductors – such as Furtwängler, Toscanini and Bernstein – rose in eminence, they became revered for their showmanship and idiosyncratic interpretations of the symphonic canon. The twentieth century bore witness, as never before, to the glorification of the conductor. These conductors emerged as the figureheads of
musical culture in the eyes of the public and continued to rise in popularity, not only with bourgeois concertgoers, but also with powerful figures in society, including politicians and industrialists. This rise to eminence was accompanied by a number of technical treatises dealing with the complexities of the role. The nature of the relationship between conductors and authorship began to shift slightly, as these conductors began to take more liberties in their interpretations of scores. Although this meant taking on degrees of authorship, this was always done with great veneration towards the composer. As Schuller reiterates:

[w]ithin the confines of fidelity there is considerable interpretive freedom and room for multiple interpretations, but of course, not for interpretations that subvert the real meaning and intention of the composer.

When describing the requirements of conducting Bernstein also said:

[p]erhaps the chief requirement of all is that he be humble before the composer; that he never impose himself between the music and the audience; that all his efforts, however strenuous or glamorous, be made in the service of the composer’s meaning – the music itself, which, after all, is the whole reason for the conductor’s existence.

While the nature of the text might have been somewhat altered to incorporate the conductors’ readings, the composer was always present and still revered. The interpretive liberties taken by these twentieth-century conductors resonate somewhat with Barthes’ idea that the essential meaning of a work depends on the impressions of the reader, rather than the ‘passions’ or ‘tastes’ of the writer. In this musical context, these twentieth-century conductors could be thought of as ‘readers’ in their interpretations of scores. As Barthes suggests, ‘a text’s unity lies not in its origins,’ or its creator, ‘but in its destination,’ or its audience. Instead of discovering:

[a] single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), readers of texts discover that writing, in reality, constitutes “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.

As Barthes suggests:

[i]n the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, “run” (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.

While twentieth-century conductors might not have taken their ‘reading’ of scores as far as Barthes’ critique suggests, they certainly took on elements of authorship and in so doing challenged the notion that a score holds some ultimate and truthful guide for performing a work.

The kind of interpretive showmanship typified by the conductors of the twentieth century does not seem to be as prevalent among many of today’s conductors. While contemporary conductors are still heralded for their virtuosity and prominence, in line with a changed age and a different aesthetic climate, many of today’s conductors seem to be returning to the idea that a musical work ‘belongs’ to the composer – not to themselves as the interpreters. As I have discussed elsewhere, a number of contemporary conductors, particularly women, seem to be preoccupied with the idea of being ‘porous’. As Rachael Worby explains:

[j]it’s a huge responsibility to be porous enough to make sure that the music can flow through you, past you to the audience so that you’re not, as I feel some conductors are, a barrier because your presence is, restricting.
Kenneth Kiesler also describes conducting as ‘similar to the way light is refracted through a prism. The music comes through you’.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly Gustav Meier comments:

[i]t must come from the composition at every point. It can never be my feelings. It has to be the composer’s feelings through me. The composer has to be first – it’s essential.\textsuperscript{45}

Such comments illustrate the strong desire of these contemporary conductors to act as channels for composers. The difficulty with such reasoning, as I have argued elsewhere, is that a conductor’s body is not a neutral medium through which composers’ intentions can simply flow unabated.\textsuperscript{46} Such intentions need to also acknowledge how the body – with its societal, cultural, political and gendered subjectivities – impacts on this process.

The sense of duty and responsibility that this generation of conductors feel towards upholding the ‘author-function’ could possibly be related to a sense of temporality. As these conductors move further and further away in time from the composition of the so-called ‘great’ symphonic works of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it seems they are feeling a greater obligation towards preserving musical heritage. As Simone Young comments:

[y]ou are the composer’s guardian as the conductor. You are the one who carries the responsibility for having the composer’s music performed as faithfully as possible. That doesn’t necessarily mean performing a museum correct version or replica of the original performance, but it means in your best and most honest way performing a work that you feel is true to the composer’s intentions.\textsuperscript{47}

On the other hand, there are many who also advocate the need for a diversity of interpretations, much like there was in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{48} As conductor Roger Norrington reveals:

I think that only true believers in a faith are not worried about orthodoxy. If you really believe in something, you don’t need a hierarchy. … If you love music and it gets to you and you go with it, you won’t be worried about adhering to a specific orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{49}

As Botstein also concurs, ‘One cannot rely any longer on an outdated and reductive notion of truth-telling, or its dubious descendants visible among today’s conductors’.\textsuperscript{50} Although these diverse interpretations, championed by the likes of Norrington amongst others, destabilise the idea of a fixed orthodox way of interpreting a score they still appear to uphold the privileged ‘author-function’ of the composer.

Foucault\textsuperscript{51} and Barthes\textsuperscript{52} suggest that the author needs to be removed from their privileged position and full responsibility and interpretive authority needs to be placed on the shoulders of the reader. Whether the reader is thought of as the conductor, the musician or the listener, the importance would no longer lie in the traditionally privileged place of the score, but rather in the immediacy and newness of each performance. The idea of removing the composer’s prominence certainly destabilises many of the fundamental structures of the conducting profession. It also alludes to the pleasures and opportunities for creative revision and interplay with and beyond the text, when the composer is removed. According to Barthes, the removal of the author ‘is not merely a historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text’.\textsuperscript{53}

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: ‘book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it’.\textsuperscript{54} However, when this author is removed and replaced with what Barthes calls the modern sciptor this role is:

born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.\textsuperscript{55}
Barthes suggests that writing ‘can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, “depiction”’:

[56] Rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered.

The scriptor exists to produce but not to explain the work and ‘is born simultaneously with the text.’ In this view, every work is ‘eternally written here and now’, with each re-reading, because the ‘origin’ of meaning is exclusively in the language itself and its impressions on the reader. Following Barthes’ critique, if the conductor were thought of as the scriptor, such a shift would obviously place emphasis on the immediacy of a conductor’s interpretation and a listener’s reading of that moment, rather than the representation or depiction of something written by the composer at another time and place. As Farberman concurs:

[58] The very thought that any measure of music must be performed in a preordained ‘correct’ manner robs music of one of its greatest attributes – allowing the same succession of sounds to speak differently to different people. … Music may start in the composer’s imagination, but it is delivered by the conductor via physical means.

Foucault also suggests that ‘we should re-examine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance’. Foucault proposes that:

[60] Perhaps the time has come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations within any culture, of modes of circulation, valorisation, attribution, and appropriation.

In a musical context, such a study would have to critique how conductors have functioned to circulate, valorise, attribute, and appropriate composers’ scores, and re-conceptualise the role without the composer at the centre. In light of these possibilities, the recording industry would provide an illuminating context for such a study. As Badal notes:

In the concert hall and the opera house, the conductor controls every aspect of the performance; the dynamics, the balances, and the tempi proceed from his understanding of the score, coupled with his assessment of the venue’s acoustical properties. Recording takes away a proportion of that autocratic control in several ways, not least by allotting power to the producer and the producer’s technical team.

Such a situation has certainly shifted some of the power-dynamics of the author-function, and changed the modes of transmission and requisition of musical works. Another interesting case in point might also be a virtual context, such as the ‘Virtual Conductor’ – a permanent exhibit at the House of Music Vienna that was created by a research group from the University of Darmstadt, the University of Linz, and the University of Ulm. With this program, anyone can conduct the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra by standing in front of a video projection of the orchestra in Golden Hall. It allows a participant to pick up an electronic baton, choose a piece, start conducting, and the orchestra will follow their gestures precisely. With this technological development the author is still to a certain extent present, in that the participant chooses his or her work; however, the participant does not seem to seek a deep communion with composer in the realisation of the work. This might come closer to what Barthes speaks about when he describes the birth of the reader, or what Foucault alludes to when he addresses the significant ‘empty space left by the author’s disappearance.’ Here the reader can take on the role of conductor and interact and engage with the sound of a musical work, and indirectly with its score; the difference being that the
music only comes to life through its reading. While in some ways this situation may seem to represent the epitome of the modernist concept of the autonomous conductor, the ‘Virtual Conductor’ does also embody the postmodern notion that the text is no longer the property of the author, but the reader.

While such a postmodern critique leaves the profession somewhat in ruins, and the likelihood of its chief exponents practicing such ideas are somewhat minimal, such a shift in at least conceptualising the profession, could allow conductors to move beyond what Foucault calls the:

‘tiresome repetitions: “Who is the real author?” “Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?” “What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?”’ So that new questions could be heard: ‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse?’ ‘Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?’ ‘What placements are determined for possible subjects?’ ‘Who can fulfil these diverse functions of the subject?’

Such new concerns would undoubtedly throw into question the reverence with which composers have been treated by conductors, and overturn the power relations inherent in the master composer and their servant conductor. While contemporary conductors might not accept the somewhat radical notion of the ‘death of the composer,’ acknowledgment of some of these postmodern ideas might lead them to position themselves less as bearers of truth and justice, and more as facilitators of spaces where musicians and audiences can play a stronger part in the creative revision and interplay of musical works.
Notes

1See for example, J. Wagar, Conductors in Conversation: Fifteen Contemporary Conductors Discuss their Lives and Profession, G.K. Hall and Co., Boston, 1991.
4Foucault, p.131.
5Kapell meaning chapel and Meister meaning master. Maître de musique was the French equivalent of the Kapellmeister. Note the gender-imbu ed etymology of these terms.
10Foucault, p.12.
11ibid., p.127.
12ibid.
15Barthes, pp.142-148.
16Foucault, p.124.
17ibid., p.119.
18Barthes, p.147.
19ibid., p.118.
20Barthes, p.142.
23Barthes, p.142.
25Barthes, p.147
27Barthes, p.146
28Foucault, pp.126-127.
29ibid.
31ibid., p.23.
36Barthes, p.146.
37ibid., p.147.
39ibid.
41Rachael Worby, interviewed by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 14 May, 2002, Brisbane, Australia.
42Keisler, as cited in Wagar, Conductors in Conversation, p.131.
45Simone Young, interviewed by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 13 August, 1999, Sydney, Australia.
47Norrington, as cited in Wagar, Conductors in Conversation, p.198.
49Foucault, p.123.
50Barthes, p.148.
51ibid., pp.145-146.
52ibid.
53ibid.
54ibid., p.146.
56Foucault, p.121.
57ibid., p.137.
62 Barthes, p.148.
63 Foucault, p.138.