

Conductors **Drowning** not **Waving**



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Conductors are the best paid and most respected musicians in the business. That's because they work harder and know more than everyone else, isn't it? Chris Gillett separates glamorous myth from the grubbier musical reality.



In my last column I was quite rude about conductors. Far from unleashing the dogs of musical war, this prompted a lot of support from my fellow singers and musicians, and a few conductors to boot - one of whom, a friend of mine, described his fellow tradesmen as 'awful; conductors are just so greedy.' (Yes, surprisingly, I do actually have conductor friends, not one of whom was the target of my bile).

In the wake of [Claudio Abbado's death \(/uk/features/whats-on/events/remembering-claudio-abbado\)](http://uk/features/whats-on/events/remembering-claudio-abbado), one of the greatest conductors, it might be a good time to examine the role of the conductor and their place in our affections. Abbado was respected, loved and admired, principally I think because he was humble yet inquisitive, rather than arrogant and domineering. He was highly professional too, taking his preparation extremely seriously. Like all the conductors I admire, he left his ego out of his work and strove to let the musicians play with as little of his interference as possible. The older and more experienced he got, the humbler he seemed to become. I saw him conduct some Bach about five years ago. He seemed to regard his very presence on the podium as unnecessary, as something of a joke, and virtually hid behind the players at the curtain calls.

I just wish I could say the same about some of his fellow baton bandits, some of whom seem to spend more time working on their hair than they do on their music-making.

Why are conductors so revered by publicists and managers yet so often disliked by working musicians? (The answer to that could well be buried in the question.) Why are all conductors, as an orchestral flautist said to me, 'guilty until proven innocent'? Is it simply because they earn so much money for making absolutely no sound?

A successful conductor can gross a million dollars a year without even being a household name

A successful conductor, one that's charging from one continent to the next, possibly with a couple of music directorships in his pocket, can gross a million dollars a year without even being a household name. The big stars, the ones who head up the big orchestras, make several times that. God only knows what Valery Gergiev (/uk/learn/artists/valery-gergiev), who regularly gives around 250 performances a year - a figure which almost beggars belief, the equivalent of conducting every single weekday of the year - must earn. Many, many millions. How do we judge if someone like that is giving good value for money? You can hear when a player or singer is overworked, but if a conductor is not functioning well, who except the highly astute will hear the difference?

The difference between a conductor's massive fees and a musician's paltry one might spark resentment, but the rift runs deeper. I can't claim to represent all singers but this true story I'm about to tell you is an example of the sort of thing that gives some conductors a bad name. Every singer will have an equivalent story. Excuse me while I change all the names and places, just to give me some hope of ever working again.

I have worked several times with conductors whose scores bear all the tell-tale signs of never having been opened

A few years ago I was booked by the prestigious 'Morotavian Opera' to sing an obscure role in a big romantic opera that the the company's music director, let's call him Bilbo Waggins, had conducted before in concert. My role was in a scene that is usually omitted from the opera, as it had been when Bilbo had previously done it. On the first day of rehearsals we had a music call with Bilbo and he didn't have the score for my scene. He claimed he had no idea we were doing it, which was odd, given he had been at several meetings during which it was discussed. The fact he didn't know it was in itself no great shock. I have worked several times with conductors whose scores bear all the tell-tale signs of never having been opened – a cracking sound as the spine is flexed for the first time, pages that won't stay open, a complete absence of any pencil markings, to name but a few clues. Bilbo said I should sing the scene for him so he could hear how it went, not a luxury I, a lowly singer, am ever allowed. I was contractually obliged, as ever, to have my part memorised in time for the first day. I'd like to see how it would go down if I asked to be shown how a scene went. I'd be fired on the spot.

I sang it through, guiding the pianist as to how I thought it should go, and that was the end of the rehearsal. I assumed that Bilbo would take the score home, learn it, and all would be fine. We spent the next month staging the opera in a studio but every time we did my scene, Bilbo wasn't there. He was "otherwise engaged" or simply left early. So his assistant conducted instead. Oddly, I wasn't called to any sitzproben, (when we sing through the opera with the orchestra without any acting). I didn't even see Bilbo at any stage and piano rehearsals. The first time I saw him since that first day was at a stage and orchestra rehearsal, a full five weeks later.

I wondered if the conductor could possibly be so lazy as to plan to scrap a scene rather than learn the damn thing

I hurtled on stage for my scene and within a few bars it was chaos. The tempi were wrong, Bilbo was lost, and the orchestra didn't have a clue what was going on. He still didn't know it. We crashed to a halt and Bilbo, desperately trying to cover his shortcomings, yelled "I don't like this scene. It should be cut!" This was, let's be clear, my only scene, though it involved several others and the entire chorus. An argument ensued with the director and we eventually staggered on to the end of the scene in tatters, while I

wondered if Bilbo could possibly be so lazy as to plan to have a scene scrapped rather than learn the damn thing. The dress rehearsals went a bit better but on the first night, nerves kicked in and Maestro Waggins messed it up again, leaving me and my colleagues in the pit to rescue something from the rubble.

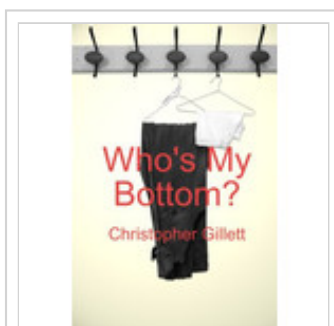
I was taught to apologise for musical mistakes, to hold my hand up and admit the error, thus making it clear I knew that I was wrong. Sometimes a good conductor, especially a great one like Abbado, will apologise for his mistakes. Bilbo, of course, said nothing. And that's why we think conductors are 'guilty until proven innocent'.

A full discussion on conductors would take up the whole internet. If this has aroused your interest, have a read of conductor Lev Parikian's "Waving, Not Drowning" (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Waving-Not-Drowning-Lev-Parikian/dp/1484114507>) for a wonderful satire on the inner workings of a conductor's inflated head.

Read more of **Christopher Gillett's opinions on Sinfini Music (/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett)**.

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