

Introduction

In his book *le geste musical* (The Musical Gesture), Jean-François S nart asks the question : “Do we really need a conductor?” He then answers : “to this question, often found on ignorant or even malicious lips, it is appropriate to respond in the affirmative”¹. Even if some people would affirm sometimes that “the conductor is a necessary evil” or “a habit which is difficult to break”, such “brutal and disconcerting affirmations” can only betray the musicians' frustration or ignorance related to this essential question. Indeed, conductors being omnipresent in the classical music sphere, one is reluctant to reevaluate their role. One can say that this kind of statement (S nart being far from the only one to share these ideas), does not encourage the reflection about this question. Nevertheless, we see more and more orchestras choosing to play without the help of a conductor. For almost a century now, historically-informed performance practice has gained more and more popularity in the musical scene, and musicians have been increasingly interested in historically accurate articulation, phrasing, instrumentation, ornamentation, tempi, etc. This musical revolution has brought some newly founded ensembles to exclude the conductor completely. Often the keyboard or the violin player is the founding father of the group and therefore leads. In contrast, many early music ensembles are using the modern way of conducting, which is to have an interpretative conductor that stands in front of the group. This begs the question : does the choice of the leadership have an influence on the music or is it only superficial? Wouldn't it be relevant to know how composers like Mozart, Handel or Bach would have « conducted » their works? Did Mozart conduct his wind serenade "Gran partita" or his operas by making gesture like we can see in Forman's movie *Amadeus*? Couldn't we learn from their practical experience? This research aims to bridge

¹ S nart, Jean-Fran ois. *Le geste musicien*. Louise Courteau. Montreal, 1988. p.21



Fig.1. W. A. Mozart (Tom Hulce) conducting his music in Forman's movie *Amadeus* (1984)

the gap and demystify the conducting practices in the eighteenth century, by thinking through their practical repercussions.

Since the nineteenth century, the conductor has evolved to become one of the most attractive element of an orchestral concert. Today, the gestural aspect of conducting is part of the 'show'. Was it the case in the eighteenth century? According to the Oxford music online, conducting is « the art (or method) of controlling an orchestra or operatic

performance by means of gestures, this control involving the beating of time, ensuring of correct entries, and the 'shaping' of individual phrasing. »² So, we could summarize modern conducting this way : a conductor exerts control over tempo (that includes rubato) and phrasing. He should develop a personal interpretation (often even in concertos) and help the musicians by giving entries. Do we find such a figure in eighteenth century musical life?

This question cannot be answered by a definitive yes or no. Conducting practices differed greatly back then and therefore we cannot really speak about "historical" conducting practices since the word conducting derives from a nineteenth and twentieth

² 'Conducting', Oxford music online. Accessed on Saturday, January 14th, 2017.

century concept. Of course, one can find similarities between the historical ways of leading ensembles in the eighteenth century and the modern way of conducting, but one rapidly realizes the great difference between the two realities. This research will investigate the different leadership practices in the eighteenth century by focusing firstly on the presence of time-beating in theory and in practice, and secondly on different ways of exerting leadership without the aid of a visual method.

Sources and translations

To achieve this research, a variety of historical sources were used, including : Iconography, descriptions of performances, eighteenth century performers' point of view, treatises, scores, and so on. Each of them offers a unique point of view regarding certain aspects of leadership. For example, iconographic evidence is limited purely to the visual aspect of leadership, often superficial, while treatises, provide first-hand descriptions of performances. Writings from performers' point of view describe often in detail the dynamics within the orchestra itself. Thus, it is this diversity between the sources that provide the keys to unlocking the mystery of the eighteenth century leadership practices. If not mentioned, the translations are done by the author.