

Symphony Snippets - A Conductor's Role
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I used to wonder why conductors receive so much attention for just standing on stage and keeping time for the musicians with their baton. I also wondered why the search for a new conductor for the Asheville Symphony was such a big deal. After spending a year with the Symphony, I have a much greater understanding and appreciation for the knowledge and talents that a conductor brings to an orchestra.

First, a conductor has to thoroughly know each piece of music for a concert. This is impressive given that a conductor's full music score includes the scoring for at least twelve instrument sections and may be tens to hundreds of pages long. As a conductor studies the music, he/she must identify the most difficult sections and transitions in each piece and help the orchestra work through these areas during rehearsals until they sound as smooth as they do on the easiest parts.

In addition, the conductor must interpret, or decide, how the piece will sound during a performance while maintaining the integrity of the piece as written by the composer. This includes selecting an appropriate tempo and deciding how loud or soft different sections of the piece should be. The conductor may also ask certain musicians to play their parts in a specific way, perhaps asking the string musicians to "bounce" rather than "draw" their bows across the strings, in order to achieve a certain type of sound. A piece of music can sound completely different when performed by different conductors, even though the music score is exactly the same.

A conductor's job does not stop there. He/she must understand the strengths and weaknesses of the individual musicians and build off the strengths while diminishing the weakest points. Plus, the conductor must act as the main decision maker for a group of 80 to 100 musicians, create unity and cohesion within the group and provide the inspiration and enthusiasm necessary to create an outstanding performance.

Could an orchestra perform without a conductor? Well, sure. Would the performance sound as good? Not likely.