

Essay

Performing Leadership: Observations from the World of Music

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Abstract: This paper explores leadership as an emergent social process. We begin by discussing and contesting the tradition privileging linear management processes, and offer as a counterpoint accounts of distributed leadership out of which our focus on leadership as a plural process grows. Our concept of leadership as a plural process is enriched by an inquiry into musical ensembles with formal leaders as well as those which are leaderless that find ways of moving collectively towards shared goals. The specific issues that we explore are: personal preparation, expressing readiness to begin, establishing a way of operating, and dealing with unexpected problems as they arise. We conclude by speculating about how these elements could inform our understanding of how leadership arises from teams beyond the musical world.

Keywords: ensemble-consciousness; group leadership; hierarchy; jazz; narrative; orchestra; structure

1. Introduction

In today's social environment, it is increasingly clear that the issues faced by organizations are not easily solved by one person, the leader, acting alone. There is a need for more complex and nuanced ways of responding, which draw from the composite expertise, energy and viewpoints available.

Increasingly shared leadership is offered as a response to this situation. Those in formal leader roles are often challenged to let go in ways that allow more collaborative and distributed leadership to flow throughout the organization. This is particularly the case in music performance, especially that of orchestras where contemporary conductors and managers are challenged to “let go” of their traditionally authoritarian approach and allow the musicians themselves more of an active role in producing their art [1]. Although letting go involves taking great risks and courage, it can also provide opportunity for a more active participatory role by all members of a team. But it is difficult to know how such forms of leadership emerge in practice. Particularly, how is such shared leadership fostered? What are the conditions which most support the emergence of leadership within groups? If those holding formal leader authority want to encourage leadership as plural action, what can they do to foster this?

In this paper, we explore the phenomena of group leadership where no particular person takes responsibility for motivating or guiding group actions by examining how musicians behave in performance. From the outset, we acknowledge this orientation towards plural leadership within groups is a difficult position to defend because of what seems to be an inherent need among human beings to resolve collective actions back to an authoritative individual. This individual has come to be called “the leader”, positioning the discourse of *leadership*, and the idea that specific individuals possess certain characteristics that place them as *leaders* at the forefront of an organization’s work is the focus of much of the literature. Our contestation of this view is derived from our own experiences of music making and our discussions with musicians; experiences that show leadership to be much more fluid and that functions as people engage in communal activities together. Many of the factors which contribute to the emergence of leadership within groups, we suggest, are historical, culturally determined, and invisible. They are known in the experience of leadership happening, and although they may be retrospectively attributed to an individual, they are in fact much more collectively produced and experienced.

First, though, we define the problem of the single responsible leader within a hierarchical system and show that this can lead to situations which constrain and limit human freedom. Once the problem is explored, we then define what we mean by plural process. We then discuss the performance practices of musicians and the leadership challenges that arise in this field. Our in-depth exploration of musicians’ experiences of working in ensembles provides a fine-grained account which addresses these questions from the inside-out. We conclude the paper by arguing for new ways of doing leadership that privilege group-based processes rather than that which is generated through individual agency.

2. Enduring Hierarchy and Its Contestations

Notwithstanding that many large organizations have successfully evolved post-bureaucratic structures which rely on mutual trust and non-standardized practices [2], the idea of hierarchy and the implicit linearity upon which the notion of leader rests remains prevalent in the field. Thus, the field has adopted theoretical positions that explore leadership as being a transaction between the leader and follower, a transformational experience where the leader animates followers who act willingly and enthusiastically, or even servants where the leader’s mandate is to ensure that followers are free to act with the resources at hand.

Each of these concepts relies on an individual who takes charge and seeks to control the environment through behaviors that are facilitated by linear conceptualizations such as “chain-of-command” and “line manager”, common in contemporary organizations. This kind of linearity found its apogee in Shannon and Weaver’s [3] mathematical model of communication which relies on the sequential passing on of information from a sender to receiver. Thus:

[Shannon and Weaver’s model] is a kind of pipeline model of a hardware container for software content. It stresses the idea of “inside” and “outside” and assumes that communication is a kind of literal *matching* rather than resonant *making* ([4], p. 86 emphasizes in the original).

This critique of linearity by McLuhan and McLuhan [4] underscores an important shift in the way we are conceiving of plural leadership. The McLuhans note that mathematical and linear communication occurs within Euclidean-like cones enabling extraneous information to be filtered and eliminated. Thus communication is both centered and bounded leaving little room for alternative constructs and inevitably creates a hermetic environment where leaders become sealed from outside influences. By implication, in privileging linearity and the scientific rationality that this implies, as King [5] argues, the field has become limited and stifled. Instead, King advocates for “the opportunity to correlate art with management and organizations [and this] opens up opportunities to suggest a complementary dimension for developing our understandings” ([5], p. 230). Awakening leaders to their artistic sensibilities that complements other more familiar forms of managing, though, requires a change in focus from pure rationality—“freed from a fixed point of view” ([6], p. 71)—to embrace an environment that is fluid and indeterminate, sensate and polyphonic.

Rather than perpetuating the “unfreedom” Bookchin ([7], p. 3), which plagues hierarchy, our turn to musical performers provides the opportunity to examine processes which distinguish *authority* that shifts in a mobile fashion around the particular members, from *authoritarianism* which is a fixed and stable phenomenon that rests in an individual Purkis [8].

Our agenda is to find the “cut” or the “crack” ([9], p. 1) in the traditional discourse of leader-oriented control and to identify ways in which groups might work productively without operating within a hierarchy and without the seeming necessity of a single leader who retains overall accountability for group outcomes. In contesting Jaques [10] that the 3000-year history of hierarchy makes it the most natural form of human leadership, we consider that this endurance is not in itself sufficient reason for its continuance. Furthermore, even Sigmund Freud [11] understood the dysfunctional relationship between groups and their leaders. His strident language warns of the problems that can arise when those in leadership positions fail to identify with the cultural mores of the groups they lead, and instead remove themselves from the group process. He writes that

This danger is most menacing where the social forces of cohesion consist predominantly of identifications of the individuals in the group with one another, whilst leading personalities fail to acquire the significance that should fall to them in the process of group-formation ([11], p. 93).

Criticisms of hierarchy and advocacy for alternatives have more modern precedents. McLuhan [12] in his 1970 commentary on the fixed structure of the Roman Catholic Church advocated for a “de-Romanization” of that institution in order to achieve greater participation among congregants.

In justifying his views, he argued that, “the higher up in the hierarchy the harder it is to get involved. We must get rid of the hierarchy if we want participation” ([12], p. 56). McLuhan’s views were informed by the rise of the telegraph and its concomitant potential for democratization. The subsequent development of information communication technologies has furthered the radical changes in the way that people work. Rowe’s [13] now classic analysis of the impact of information technologies argues that these technologies centered on personal computers have brought about social and organizational changes on the scale of the Industrial Revolution, requiring adaptations in the ways in which work is structured. A more contemporary voice, Mintzberg [14], in his short but provocative essay, proclaims that the new world of work requires leaders who are not situated at the pinnacle of an organization’s hierarchy but rather are actively networked and connected throughout the enterprise. In a similar voice to McLuhan and Nevitt’s use of the term “drop out” [15] to describe leaders, Mintzberg writes that, “a manager who sits on top of a network is *out of it*” ([14], p. 22, emphasis added). Although such leaders might claim that “sitting on top” proffers them wider vistas and broader insights than workers on the shop floor, with which to direct the organization, Mintzberg’s, clever use of the metaphor “out of it” may imply a leader who has either become too distanced from the action to be useful, or deluded by the intoxication of their power to offer anything substantial to the warp and weft of an organization’s daily activities and continuing well-being.

Notwithstanding Rowe’s [13] strident language of “revolution” in our social and organizational structures, alternative means of communication and group behavior have certainly been realized in contemporary digital platforms such as Wikipedia, Facebook and Twitter. Indeed Shirky [16], maintains that, “our electronic networks are enabling novel forms of collective action, enabling the creative collaborative groups that are larger and more distributed than at any other time in history” ([16], p. 48). Furthermore he argues that “our social tools are dramatically improving our ability to share, cooperate, and act together [and this] is leading to an epochal change” ([16], p. 304). The social transformations of Rowe and Shirky’s [13,16] prognostications achieved their global reach by the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century with the “Arab Spring” and “Occupy Wall Street” movements where large gatherings of people in public spaces were initiated through viral messages on the social media sites of which Shirky [16] writes. Most surprisingly for political commentators, these movements were created by ordinary people who had no prior obvious political affiliations. Although these “improvised democratic protest villages without preappointed leaders” ([17], p. 47) were criticized for their naiveté in their lack of such identifiable leaders, these groups remained surprisingly resilient and determined to carry on with their agenda of large-scale, open-ended dialogue [18]. Yet it is this lack of identifiable spokespeople and the commitment to democratic decision-making that is endorsed by Parker [19] in his critique of the sacred implications of hierarchy in the writings of Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysus.

The kinds of changes that Parker [19] and Shirky [16] explore conforms to our analysis of the process of leadership, its reliance on plurality, and the investment of each individual into the group’s well-being and strategic intent within social settings. Such openness to the fluidity of leadership is a precursor to discovering its plurality and necessitates forging lasting relationships within groups.

Leadership as a plural process, then, eschews hierarchy in preference to the more difficult and perhaps more time-consuming work of maintaining “relational integrity” ([20], p. 1438), avoiding both the passive compliance of groupthink [21] and the potential for offence by overly confrontational and

combative argument [22]. As Cunliffe and Eriksen [20] state “relational leaders understand the polyphonic, unfinalizable and creative nature of dialogue and the always emerging nature of leadership” (p. 1438) and that this kind of leadership rests on the ability of group members to resist indulging their ego and embracing an “*ethics of reciprocity*—of living well with others” ([23], p. 1439, emphasis in the original). Therefore, we define plural leadership within groups as a social construction that relies on a reflexive attitude and where individuals continually reassess their relational dynamics in order to act in ways that improve the group’s ongoing welfare and its social contribution. We will offer a more fine-grained analysis of this definition later in the paper, but first we will explore the broader literature concerning distributed, shared, and team leadership.

3. Shared, Distributed and Team Leadership

A few authors conceptualize shared leadership as a group phenomenon in which the object of attention is a “social relation”, rather than an individual. Here, we introduce two groups of authors who offer this construction. Firstly, Fletcher and Kaufer [24] identify three *shifts* in thinking concerning how leadership is shared. The first sees leadership as a “distributed and interdependent” phenomenon, produced through coordinated an individual agency as outlined above. The second views leadership as embedded in social interactions. In this way it is seen as something that “occurs in and through relationships and networks of influence” and importantly “the relational interactions that make up shared leadership are understood to be fluid and multi-dimensional and less individual, one-directional and static than more traditionally individualized models” (p. 23). Their third shift sees leadership as “learning”, noting that the “kinds of social actions that comprise shared leadership are mutual learning, greater shared understanding, and eventually, positive action” (p. 23). It is the second shift that is most aligned with our understanding of leadership as a plural process. However, Fletcher and Kaufer [24] do little to elaborate on how such a conceptualization is realized.

Writing from the “team leadership” perspective, Day, Gronn and Salas [25] echo Fletcher and Kaufman’s sentiments by suggesting that “leadership can be an outcome, rather than an input, to team processes” ([24], p. 859). Standing in contrast to the first stream of writers who conceptualize shared leadership as coordinated individual agency, Day *et al.* [25] go the furthest of any theorists we have found to suggest that rather than being produced by co-ordinated individual agency, shared leadership could come about by “all team members participating in the leadership process...[in this way] it is a shared, distributed process that creates a capability for versatility and adaptability” ([25], p. 859).

Although this burgeoning literature concerning “shared” “distributed”, and “team” leadership increasingly acknowledges the need for more distributed forms of leadership [26], this notion is not new and can be traced back to the work of Mary Parker Follett [27,28] as well as Cecil Gibb [29]. The main idea behind their work is that leadership cannot be identified as being located with one sole individual in the achievement of tasks. Subsequent leadership scholars have noted the importance of not equating leadership with leaders in their separation of *process* (leadership) from *people* (leaders) [30,31] but their work has until recently been subservient to the more dominant heroic and transformational leadership school of thought.

Broadly speaking, scholars working in the area of shared, distributed and team leadership call for the recognition that mobilization among groups of people is not accomplished solely through the

power of individual leaders. For instance, notable writers in the field, Pearce and Conger [32] define “shared leadership” as “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both” (p. 1). The importance of this kind of leadership is supported by a range of other scholars [26,33–36].

Although a number of scholars distinguish between the terms “shared”, “distributed” and “team” leadership, here we use the terms interchangeably as our primary concern is not definitional, but to examine *how* these types of collective leadership processes are experienced by those involved in them. To this end, we identify two broad streams of thought within the literature. The first equates leadership with the act of leading—passing from one person to another. In these cases, leadership is seen as fluid, but is still equated with individual agency. For instance, writers such as Livi, Kenny, Albright and Pierro [37] use a social relations method to consider who within a group is the leader at any one point in time, Carte, Chidambaram and Becker [38], discuss how individuals emerge as leaders within virtual teams, and Konu and Viitanen [39] explore how individual leaders emerge from a Finnish health care setting.

For these authors, an important concern is how individuals coordinate themselves so that leading is passed effectively from one person to the next. Developing Malone and Crowton’s [40] notion of “managing dependencies between activities”, Gronn [41] identifies “co-ordination” as a foundational component of distributed leadership. Mehra *et al.*’s [26] study conducted with sales teams indicates the extent to which their performance is affected by the degree to which such co-ordination occurs. Nevertheless, how such teams manage this coordination process is left unexplored. Understanding the means by which coordination occurs, however, is critical to realizing any synergistic possibilities offered by shared leadership.

The second stream centers on the importance of shared mental models in achieving more distributed forms of leadership. For instance, Burke, Fiore and Salas [42] emphasize this point, writing, “as the leadership function is dynamically transferred among team members, effectiveness is heavily dependent on the smooth transference of this leadership between team members” (p. 105). Similarly, Collinson [43] advocates thinking beyond the dualities of leaders and followers in order to enable groups to work in complex environments. This requires a shift in emphasis away from a leader-centric ideology to a more dialogic approach where group members participate equally in the production of ideas and strategies. Cunliffe and Eriksen [20] discuss this phenomenon under the rubric of “relational leadership” and explore how day-to-day, “mundane small details, actions and conversations” (p. 1428) impact positively on group processes.

In this paper, we follow this approach and go beyond the understanding of leadership as an individually determined phenomenon and build on the second nascent stream of literature on how leadership emerges from group activities. Our particular contribution is the presentation of a phenomenological account of how those processes are experienced by those engaged in them. To enrich this dynamic, our focus is on musicians and musical groups. In taking this approach, we consider how musicians embody the habit of leadership as an emergent process.

This is particularly important because to date much of the literature on the role of music and musicians in relation to organizational life has focused on the *institution* of the orchestra rather than the artistic experiences of the musicians themselves. The now classic study by Allmendinger, Hackman and Lehman [44] discussed the low job satisfaction of players [45], while Castañer [46]

analyzed the breakdown of industrial relations in the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra. Ropo and Sauer [47] have moved this discourse further by exploring the relationships between various ensembles and their stakeholders. Further, Koivunen and Wennes [48] enquire into the everyday habits of orchestral players involved in producing sound [49], along with the conductor who co-produces the final product [50,51].

Recent theoretical work on the orchestra, however, has moved from these institutional concerns to explore the dynamic interactions between players [52,53]. The orchestra is an apt exemplar because it works in an environment where the “products are experiential, judgments about quality are subjective and shifting” ([54], p. 24). This environment, according to Maitlis [54], is ripe for sensemaking and sensegiving, processes that implicate all the stakeholders of the enterprise—players, conductors, administration staff, and funding agencies, to name but a few interested parties.

The improvisational nature of jazz has also been a rich area of discussion. Here, jazz performances are formalized around a given structure, such as a traditional song, and then extend informally into new, previously undiscovered and spontaneous melodic lines [55]. Improvisation in this context is seen to be an embodied practice that underpins organizational activities [56].

Notwithstanding that much of the leadership literature relates either to orchestras and their conductors [57–59], or to the forms that enable jazz combos to improvise, [60–62], our method is to examine musicians as they work in ensembles and to observe how leadership occurs *in situ*.

4. Method: Locating Leadership and Plurality

In her critique of the sole agent on whose constructions followers enact commands, Kort [63] explores leadership as an emergent process where a number of actors and factors contribute to the outcome of any given strategy or venture. Kort uses as an illustration the ways in which musicians in a chamber ensemble work together in “joint plural action” (p. 422) to produce a successful performance. Plural action, however, is not well understood by those outside the performing arts; and the concept of not having a particular leader who takes ultimate responsibility for group actions is difficult to comprehend.

This difficulty is demonstrated in the following exchange between Jennifer Lawn and the NZTrio [64] during an Arts and Leadership Festival celebrating Joseph Haydn’s bicentenary, where an audience member inquires about that chamber ensemble’s leadership practice.

Audience Question: What about the way that you get on within your own group? Which of you takes the lead in terms of making decisions, or do different members of the group take the lead in different contexts?

Ashley [cellist]: We do not have a leader as such. We discuss all decisions as a group and work on a consensus of what feels right for that particular issue.

Audience Question: I don’t quite believe that answer. I’d certainly say that groups don’t get much done unless somebody is taking the initiative. There’s a whole literature on the management of groups that supports this view ([64], p. 34).

This direct contestation by an observer challenging the description of the NZTrio’s decision-making processes reveals how deeply embedded within contemporary leadership practice is the concept of an individual taking ultimate responsibility for a group or organization’s outcomes. We argue that there is a

different, but under-developed way of conceptualizing shared leadership processes which avoids the difficulties inherent in tracking how leading moves from person to person. From this perspective shared leadership is a collectively produced outcome, and results from the ways people work together in teams rather than being equated to individuals passing leadership one to the other in a serial manner.

Our study draws from interviews with ensemble musicians who, as Kort [63] suggests, interact in ways which result in leadership. We believe that their stories provide insights into the predispositions, preparatory work and attentional capacities which can result in a type of leadership which could be described as “joint plural action”. However, our problem with Kort’s analysis is not her choice of illustration, for we find the musical analogy useful. What Kort misses are the nuances of team action that create a successful musical performance. The study we offer delves into our own experiences of playing within musical ensembles more deeply, as well as those of other musicians who play in groups, in order to begin to speculate about how such leadership is created in practice. In doing so we move beyond Kort’s theoretical analysis and flesh out the plurality of leadership as a lived, embodied experience.

Rehearsal processes and performances of two kinds of groups: one a chamber orchestra comprising some 45 musicians, and the other a jazz trio that recently began performing together, are the focus of our analysis. One of the authors of this paper is a member of both groups and the other is an experienced musician and orchestral manager. Thus, both authors bring inside knowledge and experiences to explore the plurality of leadership. Additionally, we draw on interviews with five other musicians who perform in orchestras and small ensembles. These people include Lucy, a flautist in a concert band and a wind consort; Jennifer, a soprano in an unaccompanied choir and rehearsal conductor who has also sung in numerous choirs throughout her career; Timothy, a trombone player in a brass band; Brian, a violist in a professional orchestra which has no conductor, and Dimitri, an experienced string player who is now launching his career as a conductor. In each case, these names are pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity. Our interviews probed participants’ perceptions of group performance focusing particularly on their experiences of individual and collective leadership. We then compared the interview narratives with our own experiences, seeking rich descriptions of group processes which contributed to the “felt sense” of leadership as it occurred. Our interviews focused on two primary questions:

- What are the micro-processes that groups and individuals within groups employ which result in leadership?
- What do individual members pay attention to in order to coordinate individual agency in such a way that leadership results?

In conducting our study this way, we respond to the suggestion by writers such as Mehra *et al.* [26] who suggest that in order to really understand shared leadership processes, more in-depth, qualitatively-based studies need to be done ([26], p. 243). In particular, our work aims to address the question of “what it feels like” to work in teams for whom leadership can be experienced as an outcome, rather than an antecedent to group processes.

The methods used to conduct this research are based in the ethnographic tradition. We relied on convenience sampling of musicians to interview about their musical practice and enriched this with autoethnographic accounts of musical performance. To that end, we follow Anderson’s [65]

notion of analytic autoethnography. In his advocacy of this method, Anderson lists five important characteristics:

- (1) Complete member researcher status,
- (2) Analytic reflexivity,
- (3) Narrative visibility of the researcher's self,
- (4) Dialogue with informants beyond the self, and
- (5) Commitment to theoretical analysis ([65], p. 378).

In adopting this approach, we obviate the problems of impaired memory, oversimplification and a lack of analytical rigor [66]; concerns that scholars express about the sometimes-confused objectives of autoethnographers [67]. Our insider status as practicing musicians enabled us, through dialogue with our interview participants, to interrogate the taken-for-granted behaviors and tacitly-held beliefs and expectations that underpin group performances. While we acknowledge that insiders sometimes fail to recognize and take into account habitual everyday practices, Czarniawska [68] notes that “desensitization or bias must be weighed against the clumsy ignorance of the outsider, which can be removed only by complete acculturation—if such is possible” (p. 24). Researchers with outsider status have a degree of aloofness and an ability to reach broader conclusions than insiders. This is set beside the advantage that an insider brings in his or her greater degree of involvement with the research site.

By definition, the outsider is more detached from the research setting than is the insider. The outsider is also more concerned than the insider with uncovering generalizable knowledge; the insider is more concerned with the particular situation and with developing knowledge for direct practical use ([69], p. 15).

As insiders, then, we offer in this paper a number of core elements that make for successful musical performance. Our experiences in working in musical groups of various genres, and more particularly classical and jazz ensembles, is analogous to other work groups that we have participated in through our daily interactions in organizations as employees and leaders with designated responsibilities and roles.

The categorizations we offer arose from following Anderson's [65] method noted above. We analyzed the musician's life-world by first recounting our experiences of the things that necessarily occur in order for a group to begin rehearsing. We isolated the personal and corporate preparatory elements and then explored the act of making music, noting the foundational elements that provide the raw materials for group performance. We then set these expectations against our experiences of unanticipated events occurring and the aspects of a plural process that these events reveal. Our own accounts were then enriched with additional data from the interviews, as well as references to literature concerning group dynamics within musical ensembles [70–72].

5. Findings: Distilling Plurality

The next sections introduce the specific themes that arose from our investigation: addressing the instrument, expressing readiness among the players to begin, establishing tempo and style, and dealing with unexpected problems as they arise. We conclude with a discussion of how space can be created and filled as group members attend to these elements in ways that exemplify leadership as a plural process.

5.1. Addressing the Instrument

By firstly turning our gaze on the musician's instrument, we introduce a paradox that underpins plural leadership. Like leadership, music-making begins *before* any sounds are made or any actions taken. For musicians there is an abiding respect for the tool of his or her trade, the instrument. This respect has developed over many years of personal practice and preparation. Successful performance is not possible without these many hours spent alone grappling with the technical difficulties that the musician confronts when mastering the instrument. Being at home and feeling comfortable with the instrument and music enables the player to lose self-consciousness and gain *ensemble-consciousness*, that is, the capacity to think beyond one's individual contribution to see how it contributes to the collective endeavor.

This musical analogy serves the purposes of uncovering the kind of individual capabilities that can develop into ensemble consciousness. These include an awareness of one's own talents, but importantly, a recognition and respect for the skills and competencies of others in the group as well. For, as Lucy playing in her wind consort described, sometimes it requires acknowledging the strengths of another member of the ensemble by "listening to one who I perceive as being a better player than me" in order to achieve a greater sense of cohesion in the group. Similarly, Timothy, who plays in an Army band in which "rank" is still the arbiter of formal authority, noted, "When a player is good, that trumps rank in terms of his or her ability to influence others".

Leadership, defined as "joint plural action", then, is enabled through individuals recognizing others' expertise and allowing them to influence the group. However, this is a two-way process; the *letting go* of authority in order for someone else to influence proceedings is just as crucial to the creation of leadership as the person taking space to influence others. In this way, although we may choose to attend to the person who influences, stepping back to enable them to do so is just as critical to leadership occurring. We will return to this aspect later, now however, we introduce another factor that is critical to the emergence of joint plural action, preparing to begin.

5.2. Expressing Readiness among the Players to Begin

Most of the work of making music is carried out in rehearsal, with performance being the end product of a process where style and intent are negotiated. Rehearsals begin with a *readiness* to begin. Before making any corporate sound, musicians go through their warm-up routines and become ready by acknowledging their colleagues. Players do this by establishing the space in which they will play. For a string player this involves establishing a physical space in relation to the stand partner (string players sit in pairs). There needs to be enough space to move the body and extend the bow fully without encroaching on the space that the stand partner occupies. However, the partners need to be close enough in order to read from the same score, to make notations (which may be instructions from the section principal and conductor or personal notes as reminders on fingering or bowing), and to turn pages.

Beyond establishing personal space, expressing readiness also brings each individual musician into connection with the whole group. The respect for the instrument and music that each player brings with them to rehearsal now transposes into respect for the entire ensemble. Each player becomes

acutely aware of the physical presence of the people in close proximity and ensures that there is a line-of-sight to the conductor, section principal and concert master.

Line-of-sight is crucial for jazz musicians as well. It is important that members of the rhythm section, in particular, are able to see each other. Although being able to hear each other is vital, sight is equally, if not more, important. In this instance, one of the authors is the pianist in the jazz trio. The other members comprise a bass player and vocalist. Proximity and a clear line-of-sight between the bass and piano are vital in order to achieve cohesion. The pianist can cue beginnings, endings and changes with the eyes, all the while following the bassist's fingers as they move up or down the instrument's fret board.

The idea of readiness to begin indicates that the musicians bring *with* them not only their hours of preparation but also respect for the tradition within which they perform. For instance, in an orchestra, each pairing of string players involves an intense relationship where players notice each other's fingering, bowing style and posture. While adherence to the score is vitally important, each partner also assists the other moment-by-moment to feel their way into the music and to find ways of conquering difficult passages.

For a jazz musician, readiness to begin also includes preparation of space. However, there is also an acknowledgement that there will be a degree of flexibility around how the music will be realized. Readiness in this context implies a tacit assent that accidents are a welcome intrusion that may ultimately become part of the final performance.

Therefore, before any group sound is made, plural action has occurred in the personal preparation that each player has undertaken, as well as in the way that players situate themselves physically in relation to the other group members.

Jennifer, the soprano and rehearsal conductor of a choral group, spoke of her readiness to begin as both a sense of her place within the ensemble and as well as a keen understanding of the musical score. For Jennifer, an important part of readiness is to understand the composer's intentions and to find ways of articulating the nuances of phrase endings and pauses to the rest of the group so that they all remain faithful to the score and support each other in responding to the vocal demands of the music. Hence, readiness also implies respect for the music itself and faithfulness in rendering it as accurately as possible.

It could be claimed, though, that nothing in these descriptions indicates the presence or even lack of leadership. However, our intention here is to show that plural action grows out of preparation and a willingness to engage in a process that has no clear pathway to an end goal. We believe that recognition of the importance of "preparing to play" has important implications for the possibility of leadership as a plural process being able to emerge from other work teams. For instance, we notice in organizations within which we have worked that when staff members prepare properly for planning meetings, the ensuing discussions are more fluid and purposeful. The kind of preparation that is contiguous with our musical analogy involves how we present ourselves to the other members of the group. The attitude which group members bring becomes critical, as well as their willingness to become an active part of the ensemble rather than merely perfunctory or possibly resentful members.

5.3. *Establishing the Tempo and Style*

Whatever the makeup of the ensembles, each member of the group has an idea in their mind of the tempo and style of the work they are about to perform. These notional senses are provisional and are

only confirmed or re-established once the group begins to play. For the orchestral performer, the conductor is the arbiter of the tempo and style and both these elements are conveyed in the preparatory beat (or more colloquially known as the “up beat”). This is the gesticulation the conductor makes prior to any sound being produced. Again, a paradox of the plural process is evident: that music comes out of silence and that intentions are communicated physically through the use of space and gesture. Thus, plural action becomes embodied in these gestural moments that are suggestive and invitational. By responding to the gesture, each player acknowledges that there is more to come and his or her role is essential in enacting that future.

Although the conductor’s preparatory beat may be perceived to be a leadership moment where a single person acts in order for followers to take subsequent action, as soon as the group begins to play, the conductor yields control to the entire ensemble. For instance, the preparatory beat may have indicated a tempo that is beyond the competence of the group to realize. Here, the conductor is forced to decide whether to insist on his or her preconceived notions of how the music should be performed or to adapt and adjust to the group’s ability. A number of compromises are made by both the players and conductor *in situ* in order to achieve group cohesion. In this way, plural action is taken by both the recognized leaders (conductor and section principals) *and* the players, in order to protect the integrity of the performance. Lucy expressed this as a “sort of intra-sectional leadership which is formal and informal and then you’ve got the conductor who you sometimes pay attention to and sometimes you do not”. For Lucy it was the section as a whole, along with the players in closest proximity to her, that mostly guided her performance.

Brian, a violist, was acutely aware of his place within the ensemble of the orchestra. He noted that being a viola player meant that he had to think “vertically and horizontally” by attending to the other instrumental lines and the harmonic directions implied within the viola section. He said, “We are the *glue*, we have to be able to hear and respond to both the top and bottom of what is happening harmonically”. For Brian, performing on an instrument that plays mostly inside the harmonic texture requires him to maintain a constant awareness of everything else that is happening while responding flexibly to the emerging needs of each musical moment.

In rehearsal, the conductor will stop the orchestra on numerous occasions to point out areas where sections may be playing out of time or where the intonation inhibits the harmonic flow of the music. Sometimes troublesome passages are played a number of times until the conductor is satisfied that competence is reached. However, this, in and of itself, does not imply that the conductor is leading the ensemble. Another interpretation is that the conductor provides the opportunity for players to listen to each other and to discern their importance in relation to the overall melodic, harmonic and rhythmic elements of the work. The conductor’s goal is to provide enough insight into the work’s structure so that the players can take coordinated action.

The conductor, we maintain, is an essential part of the musical performance whose ensemble consciousness plays a vital role in helping the group perform to a high level. Importantly, however, we note the often-ambivalent relationship that orchestral musicians have with conductors. Lucy, Jennifer and Timothy all spoke of how they react to an incompetent conductor. Each mentioned ways in which they ignore gestures and instructions from conductors that violate their own understanding of the flow of the music or the composer’s intentions. Timothy recalled a story of overt rebellion against a conductor who seemed incapable of offering a clear beat, while Jennifer noted that she would speak

directly to a conductor who was missing important nuances within the music. If a conductor proved unwilling to adapt or became insistent, intransigent or even abusive, she simply resigned her position from the group.

Timothy recounted occasions when he disagreed with a conductor.

There are times when I disagree with the interpretation the conductor is making. So I'll tell the section to play it a certain way, and the other brass players follow me. There was a piece of music where the conductor was insisting we should play something long, but I knew it would sound rubbish if we did that. So I said to the lead trumpet player, "we're playing it short", and he agreed with me. So in the concert we played it short. The conductor didn't seem to notice. We just played it that way in the performance. In the performance he was excited and didn't pick up what we had done.

By lingering on the conductor, we demonstrate that the most visible person in the ensemble is not necessarily a useful illustration of leadership. Dimitri, the interviewee who is beginning his conducting career, noted that an in-depth knowledge of the score and a sense of familiarity with the musicians are both essential skills. He also was adamant that in performance the conductor has the least power to influence the outcome. "The conductor is the only person in the orchestra who does not make a sound", Dimitri declared. Thus, it is the ensemble itself that finally must keep faith with the score and bring all the learning and development from rehearsals into the final performance.

Establishing tempo and style is similar within jazz groups. In the trio of which we write, it is usually the piano that begins and takes responsibility, establishing the speed and rhythmic sense of the piece. Again, this should not be conceived of as an individual leading the group, for, the act of beginning does not necessarily equate to leadership. Rather, it is simply an act of beginning. When the bassist and vocalist enter, they too have their own sense of the tempo and style of the work. For instance, the pianist may commence too slowly or too quickly, too straight or with too much swing. In each case, the bassist assists in grounding the piece in a way that suits the vocalist, who then further adjusts the tempo and style when she enters. This may seem uncoordinated and somewhat chaotic but without the flexibility of each player to continually adjust to the needs and demands of the moment, successful performance will not occur. This idea is akin to other work groups that rely on the ability of each member to respond and act on their own sense of how work should be done.

Because of music's temporal nature, negotiations are carried out and decisions are made in an instant. These occur by making eye contact, raising an eyebrow, nodding the head, and by listening intently to the overall effect as it unfolds. However, unexpected twists and turns often occur and players are then placed in a position of having to decide how to negotiate through these accidents.

5.4. Dealing with Unexpected Problems as they Arise

In all ensembles, mistakes signal several possibilities. For instance, players intuitively question, "does the mistake signal an opportunity to take a new direction, or is it a clue to a flaw in the way the ensemble is forming, or is it just a one-off error?" Furthermore, when an unexpected problem arises, who decides on the appropriate response?

In an orchestral rehearsal, mistakes often prompt the conductor to realize that some remedial action needs to be taken. In response, the error may be highlighted and a preferred interpretation of the score offered in the hope that the players can more accurately fulfill the intentions of the composer and conductor. However, in performance, the conductor has little power to intervene. For instance, if a player or section begins to rush a passage, only the group in its entirety can bring the tempo back into alignment.

How, though, does this tempo correction occur? While it seems likely that the section principal and concert master may indicate the correct speed through a nodding of the head and upper body, it may also come aurally via the instrument or section, which for that particular moment comprise the designated time-keepers. (Timekeeping is a device placed by the composer within a work that provides for either a strong beat or repeated figures within the texture that the entire ensemble attend to in order to regain their tempo bearings.) To illustrate, once one of the authors attended a performance of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*. Towards the end of the second movement, the first violin section has a passage on its own and in this concert, the section began to play out of time: the back half of the section was out of sync with the front half. Neither the conductor nor the concert master could bring the section into rhythmic alignment. Rather, a player in the third desk realizing there was a problem, turned his body slightly to the back half of the section, and began to nod his head and sway in the tempo the front desks were following. In this way, a fault which could have destroyed the entire movement and thus the symphony's aesthetic impact was quickly corrected. Such initiative demonstrates ensemble-consciousness and the courage to take individual action for the sake of the entire group.

In a jazz context, a mistake can be conceived of as a mutation that signals a possible new direction. Alternatively, after finishing the piece, the mistake-maker might willingly confess to the error and have others in the group make the judgment as to whether it flags something new and interesting or should be ignored. For instance, once during a rehearsal of the jazz trio the pianist added a chord within a sequence that was not in the original chart. On completion of the run-through, the bassist questioned the reasons for the added chord and justification was offered. The bass player replied, "It's fine with me but just don't drop me in it!" This exhortation was a salient reminder that new directions need to be adequately communicated to the entire group and that unilateral action is rarely a useful tactic.

In discussing these issues of addressing the instrument, expressing readiness among the players to begin, establishing tempo and style, and dealing with unexpected problems as they arise, a further important element alluded to earlier may assist in illustrating how plural action occurs: that of creating and taking space.

5.5. *Creating and Taking Space*

Although in classical music, much of what is required of musicians is written in the notated score, to achieve a sense of ensemble, players must attend to the sound that others in close proximity are creating and *blend into* that sound without either dominating or withholding. "Am I too loud; am I too soft?" are questions that players continually ask of themselves. This control over the instrument's dynamic varies moment-to-moment, depending on whether the musical line contains an obvious melody, an inside countermelody or is an accompanying figure. Dynamic control thus forms a necessary role in

either making space for other lines to emerge or taking space so that the given line achieves prominence. This is especially the case in each musician understanding his or her role within the ensemble. For instance, a jazz combo relies on the bassist and drummer working collaboratively together. These two players form the ground from which solos can be improvised. The skill of the bass player is to play just enough notes to indicate the harmonic direction of the piece without over-dominating the texture. By playing too many notes, the ambient sound of the group becomes more crowded, thereby forcing soloists to play even louder, and in the process lose elegance and eloquence. The drummer too can overcrowd the texture by playing too much. Hence, the bassist and drummer do as much by suggestion as by explicit statement and these suggestive motifs open space for the other members of the group to perform freely. Therefore, *implication* allows for space to be created so that the vocalist can explore new directions in melody without being dominated by the piano and bass.

Within the orchestra, the conductor also plays a crucial role in creating space so that different sections are able to hear each other. Dmitri, the aspiring conductor, spoke of the importance in rehearsal of providing opportunities for different sections to hear combinations within musical textures. He cited, as an example, a video clip of Herbert von Karajan rehearsing the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Von Karajan asked the orchestra to stop and then for just the first violins and first flute to play together. In this way, he helped the entire group hear the subtle overtones of that particular combination and then, on inviting the rest of the orchestra to play, asked them to listen intently to those subtleties [73]. Dimitri uses this as an inspiration for his own practice of having different sections play together without the rest of the orchestra, simply to provide space for the whole group to hear, and then with raised consciousness, continue to attend to the finer tonal qualities of the music.

Another question that both jazz and orchestral musicians ask is, “Who is the timekeeper, who has the melody and who is grounding the ideas?” Within the trio that we have explored above, there is no drummer. This leaves the responsibility of establishing the rhythm and determining the harmonic direction with the pianist and bassist. Together they negotiate how to maintain forward momentum. This is usually achieved by creating space, each for the other. The aesthetic integrity of a work may be compromised by over-playing, so as a rule of thumb, a more elegant result is achieved by implying harmonies and rhythmic structures than by overstating them.

6. Group Performance in Organizations

Our foray into the world of musical performance brings us back to the wider world of organizations. How might the insights gleaned through considering the ways musicians achieve joint plural action be applied in less specialized organizational settings? Firstly, the opening two aspects, “addressing the instrument”, and “preparing to begin” signal the critical nature of preparing for the possibility of a plural process emerging. We suggest that just as musicians must spend time mastering their instruments and developing the respect and regard for the craft, other musicians bring to any performance; organizational members have work to do to hone their own sense of mastery of the particular talent they bring to collective action. In this way, the capacity for leadership must be developed *before* leadership takes place. This is important, not just for those with designated “leader” roles, but also for everyone involved in a particular collective activity.

When individuals within a team have achieved their own mastery, it is then important that respect in the team operates in such a way that individuals give space to allow individual mastery to be expressed when it is necessary. The goal of the collective action needs to become uppermost in order that individuals are more able to put others first in pursuit of the greater whole. Of course, this can be very difficult to achieve, especially when organizational cultures recognize and reward individual achievements above collective ones. This leads to consideration of the question, “What kinds of *readiness* are required in order for groups to create leadership as a plural process?”

In our musical example, individual players readied themselves for playing by rehearsing key passages, negotiating space with stand partners and making certain that their physical alignment was such that they could read cues from the conductor and section leader. Similarly, we suggest that individuals in organizations can ready themselves for collective action by understanding their positioning *vis-à-vis* others in relation to organizational goals. Who do they need to be able to observe and follow in order to understand how they might best contribute? In this way, rather than seeing any leadership initiative taken as an individually-based move, creating leadership as plural action requires the sensitivity to ascertain how one’s actions relate to those of others. The larger climate and culture of the organization also has a role to play in fostering the kind of “ensemble-consciousness” introduced here. As mentioned above, reward systems which attend to individual achievement can mitigate against ensemble consciousness, as can cultures which promote individualistic, heroic styles of leading.

Our discussion also implies that there are ethical considerations that underpin plural leadership processes. Just as musicians may ask “am I playing too loud?” or alternatively “am I playing loud enough?” group members need to become reflexively aware of their place within the group’s texture. Here the ethical question is, “how much of this conversation and I dominating?” Over-domination by a single member or even a power bloc within a group has the effect of shutting down other potentially important voices. Similarly, a subsequent ethical question arises, “how might I provide space for silent members of this team to engage actively in our processes?” By attending to those who appear to be disengaged and providing support for them to take the courage to express their ideas alleviates the problem of a single member wresting control of the group process. All group members, then, become responsible for attending to dominant voices and providing space for the less dominant.

In our explorations of musical practice we note that an ethic of respect underpins all activities—respect for the individual’s instrument, their profession and their co-performers. We maintain that for effective plural leadership to occur, this environment of mutual respect is foundational. Hence, the close-up account of how orchestral players relate to conductors portrayed here suggests that heroic forms of leading can have severe limitations. Even though a conductor may try to impose a certain tempo and style, he or she cannot force players to take it up if they are not capable of doing so, or if they have other ideas about how the piece should be performed. This example has clear implications for formally authorized organizational leaders, who may think they have set a clear direction and plan for goal achievement, but who may see their vision derailed as organizational members attempt (or don’t attempt) to transform it to reality. We were struck by Dimitri’s view that during the actual performance, the conductor is virtually impotent, as he or she is the only one who is not playing an instrument. We believe this realization has relevance for those with formal leader authority within organizations—the way things actually get done is almost always through “joint plural action”, rather than through individual exhortations.

To this end, two further implications from our study can be applied to organizational settings: firstly, as exemplified by the negotiation between members of the jazz ensemble when the pianist introduced a new chord—those taking initiative at any one time must signal where they are in order that others can follow them. Secondly, throughout the accounts told here, the need for “give and take” was a recurring theme. “Beginning” must be seen as just that, “beginning”, rather than “leading” once and for all. In order for a plural process to occur, each member of the team must be attentive to the whole to which the collective is aiming, and be discerning about when and how they might best contribute to achieve that goal—sometimes by taking space, and sometimes by giving it to another.

7. Conclusion

Joint plural action, therefore, relies on group cooperation *and* an awareness of the unique skills each individual brings to the group. We acknowledge that the propensity for groups to default to an individual leader is engrained deeply in our collective psyche. Yet we demur when it comes to Jaques’ claim that “managerial hierarchy is the most efficient, the hardest, and in fact the most *natural* structure ever devised for large organizations” ([10], p. 128, emphasis added). The increasing complexity of the business and social environments in which we operate, the speed at which technological changes are occurring and altering whole ways of interacting, as well as the increased appreciation of the interconnectedness of humanity and the eco-system on which it depends, require new responses which draw on our collective intelligence and energies.

This interconnectedness is operationalized within organizations by moving from *either-or* polarities to embrace *both-and* complexities [43]: a shift in focus that is more than a language game of playing with conjunctions. Rather, it represents how artful engagement can impact profoundly on organizational life, especially team processes [74], by moving groups beyond a leader–follower duality to embrace and explore the complex array of interactions [75]. These interactions, however, are often simple, small gestures that affirm other members of the team, which Cunliffe and Eriksen [20] referred to as “mundane”, and provide a supportive basis from which to work together. A smile, a nod, and even an affirmative “yes, I understand you” are all invitational prompts that trigger further interactions that engage the whole group. Faulkner and Becker [76] acknowledge that decisions in a jazz group may be made in an instant without the audience being aware of the subtleties of the negotiations that take place on stage. They claimed that “even microscopic negotiations take place via looks, small gestures, and fragments of what is played that communicate an opinion or an attitude toward what is being discussed or has been decided” (p. 154). These small actions communicate the kind of sensitivity and openness that group members may bring to their collaborative tasks. Thus, in agreement with Koivunen and Wennes that “leadership is a process, not a possession held by someone” ([48], p. 66) we maintain that successful group interaction involves seeing leadership as a plural process where all group members are actively involved in the realization of aims and objectives.

Through offering a construction of leadership as a plural process, we are advancing a project of reclaiming group action that is neither passive nor anarchic. It is a vision of leadership in which each of us has the possibility and responsibility of offering our own mastery in the pursuit of achieving goals worthy of such attention and energy. In this way, we forward a possibility of leadership, which is inherently ethical in its relational orientation, as well as participative and transformative in its realization.

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