



THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF MUSIC BY SARAH IOANNIDES

SARAH IOANNIDES

Sarah Ioannides is an Old Cranleighian and is recognised as one of the top 20 female conductors worldwide by Lebrecht's "Woman Conductors: The Power List". An active guest conductor internationally with orchestras such as the Tonkünstler, Royal Philharmonic, Orchestre Nationale de Lyon, Cincinnati Symphony, Gothenburg Symphony, she serves as Music Director of Symphony Tacoma, WA and formerly Music Director of the Spartanburg Philharmonic and El Paso Symphony. A graduate of Oxford University and Juilliard School of Music, she is active on advisory boards, an adjudicator, public speaker, and educator, she has also served as NEA Panelist for the US Government.

"Conducting is truly an art" I told one of my students at a recent conducting masterclass. I remember my first experimental appearance in front of the orchestra at Cranleigh, wafting my arms through the air to Elgar's 'Serenade for Strings', wondering how one was supposed to connect all these notes between impulses of the beat as well as inspire from the podium. Long has my search for those answers continued, throughout my ascent to three Music Director positions in the US, as well as guest conducting across continents in a rather unpredictable "business". My journey in pursuit of the musical dream has certainly had its wealth of valleys and peaks, but when the going was tough I turned always to my heart for direction.

Even before I knew this would be my path I was fully absorbed in every available musical opportunity. My direction only became clear when I began to trust the mentors and teachers around me. One of the most important from school days was Elizabeth Ovenden, both a Computer Science teacher and a professional violinist, who changed my attitude and directed the application of my talent. She guided me from practice room to library study, where I put in the countless hours necessary to join both the National Youth Orchestra and Oxford University as an instrumental scholar. Cranleigh gave me the leeway to follow my passion for music whilst maintaining my academics, training for the person I later became: instrumentalist, conductor and Music Director. It also enabled me to devote countless hours to the French Horn, Violin, Piano, Singing Lessons, Choir and Orchestra practice, even a term in guitar and saxophone lessons. It was a huge awakening to find that I could set what seemed like a far-fetched goal and achieve it with determination and diligence. From this point I began to allow myself to dream and to believe that I could become not just “another conductor” but the ultimate version of myself, the most powerful communicator of music that I could be.

I knew that this quest would require great perseverance and, although I claimed it as mine, I gave myself permission to take another route if this proved no longer fitting for me. Along my way, I was reminded by my brother, Kinyras, to enjoy the journey and not worry about the result! Most recently while working on my knee rehab from two surgeries and determined to start running again for my overall health and fitness on the podium, I was reminded by my physiotherapist and Olympic Trials Marathon Runner Alison Unterreiner, that those who know a long hard journey must enjoy its way bit by bit. ‘To live only for some future goal is shallow. It’s the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here’s where things grow. But of course, without the top you cant have any sides. It’s the top that defines the sides. So on we go... we have a long way... no hurry... just one step after the next.’*

The many phases of my journey led me through the tough training of a young conductor, learning the discipline of lengthy study to absorb the multitude of details in any single score required for preparation: its

structure, harmonic journey, melodic language, stylistic idiosyncrasies, idiomatic language, instrumentation, tempi and transitions, and articulations. Then came the way in which I personally might choose to lead the music through phrasing, in adherence with the depth of my understanding about this or that particular composer, and the traditions that may have developed over centuries regarding its performance.

Next, I embraced a great variety of technical possibilities since there were so many different philosophies and approaches to “beating”, “baton technique”, etc. I read every available book in the necessary various original source languages on the “art of conducting”, as well as biographies of conductors, and manuals about everything a conductor needed to KNOW in order to be a conductor. Other critical skills I needed to master included the language of communication when rehearsing or teaching, such as how much to say, how often, and when. Essentially my rehearsal technique was a critical area in which to become confident, requiring leadership skills and an understanding of psychology. Without this knowledge I could not see how I’d be in a position to advise my colleagues. I wasted little time and got to work!

Overall it took a further 10 years of study after Cranleigh to prepare me for the podium, from Oxford University, to the Guildhall School of Music, the Curtis Institute of Music and, finally, the Juilliard School of Music. Yet I was still not ready for the “business” of becoming a conductor, finding a manager, setting up websites, networking, job-hunting and auditioning. After a few close misses I secured a job as Assistant Conductor to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Music Director of the Cincinnati Symphony Youth Orchestra, and a few years later took on my own orchestras as Music Director (El Paso Symphony, TX and Spartanburg Philharmonic, SC) where I began to understand the subtleties and structure of running a mighty ship. Here, the necessary interpersonal skills became essential, important for interacting with, and relating to, the board, staff, patrons, donors, sponsors, the press, and other community leaders (both arts and other non-profit collaborators), as well as managing the key musical and artistic relationships with orchestra members, soloists, composers, and other collaborators.

Although others have pioneered the terrain before me, my international experience has often been as the “first female conductor” and the glass podium was, and still is, very much in discussion. I have seen the business gradually change and open up to more women on the podium, yet I have also seen multiple examples of women being pulled back down and criticised. Even for instrumentalists there is still discrimination within the orchestral world. Every day articles surface about issues that we know are discriminatory and we wish had disappeared long ago. Yet I have never wished to dwell on the negative but to break through it. I respect greatly the women who get out there and fight for those rights, because there are still many places to fight and perceptions can be changed sometimes only with time. Personally I have felt that time is too short and that the best way forward is to be true to one’s art and passion and to simply persevere.

Nevertheless I have lived with the pressures of juggling a family life with a career as a conductor, which requires a lot of travel, constant planning and continual flexibility for all involved. This, I am sure is equally applicable to women in top leadership positions in all spheres. I have had the joy of mostly being able to bring my children with me and to school them in many different places; for several years they attended schools in three different cities, going back and forth between them multiple times in an academic year. This has been achieved thanks to the support and open-mindedness of many that wished to support our family. Of course some sacrifices have had to be made, but on balance there have been many opportunities for the children to grow, to develop multiple perspectives, to be flexible, and to believe that they could live their dreams; this, accompanied by hard work and healthy living could take them far. Their well-being will always be paramount.

I have had to be flexible. But throughout my career I will always believe in, and hold at my centre, the power of music. I directly witnessed this power as a child exploring the sounds and form of music, as a young impressionable teen, and as an adult watching the countless responses of people of all ages being moved to tears and to joy by a performance. All of this gave me the confidence that I was doing the right thing with my life, as hard as it was. Seeing this emotional response to music, feeling the

moments where time almost stands still, remains a powerful inspiration to my ongoing journey.

I have been thankful to mentors along the way along for their belief and encouragement. Also to the many musicians, friends, supporters, and colleagues that have helped me to recognise that my quest was to make a difference for people through music. Last but not least, to all those, including our families, who helped us manage all the difficult travels and multiple locations in which the children (now eight, eight and ten) have been schooled, lived and made homes and friends within my and my husband's professional lives! For us, it is the inspiration of music, its ability to empower and be an expression of our world that gives us belief and hope. It is essential for our planet to have the inspirational gift of live orchestral performance, inspiring community, bringing compassion and the joy of life, and overall bringing people together through music.

AND THUS,

EX CULTU ROBUR!

*Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance