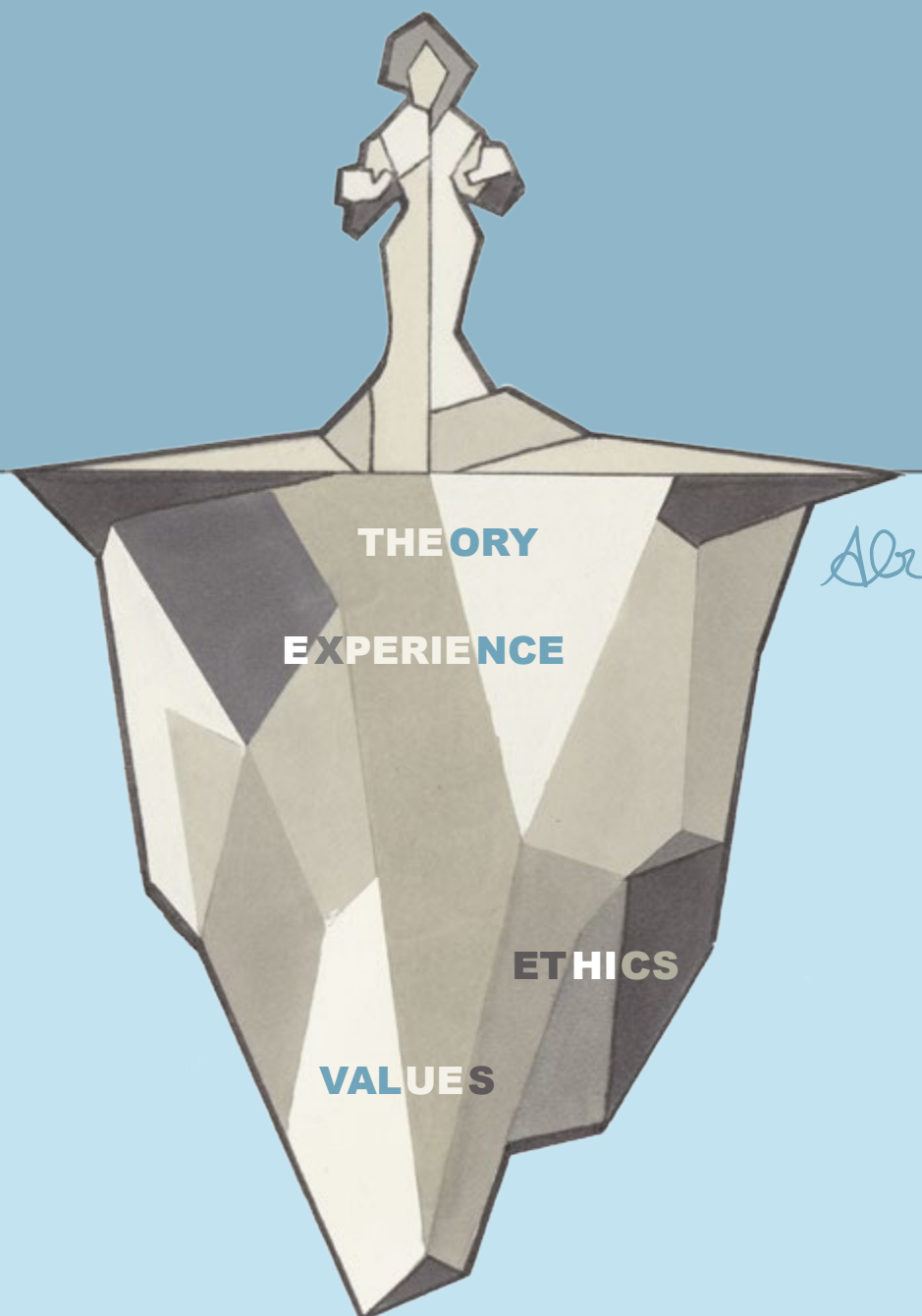


Thomas Caplin

THE LEARNING CONDUCTOR

A book about choral leadership



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Words of wisdom



Pop-up note

Preface

It all starts with you as choir conductor acknowledging that you cannot know everything. And yet, everything is just what you really would love to know – and need to know – in order to become a fully functional leader of a choir or any musical ensemble.

Next, you need to ask yourself how you can acquire as much knowledge as possible, systemizing experiences from all your rehearsals and concerts to create a lasting and sustaining insight that has no “best before...” date.

And I truly believe that you as a choral leader really can accumulate an increasing amount of knowledge week after week working together with your instrument, if you only understand how to access the knowledge and systemize it. This innate knowledge is often called “tacit knowledge” or “implicit knowledge”.

When I meet my own choir – or any other choir – I always begin with the assumption that the collective knowledge, experience and creativity that resides in the singers is greater than my own. And instead of monopolizing knowledge and becoming a search engine, the only source of information flow, I attempt to create a setting where this collective implicit knowledge and experience is liberated and becomes explicit. Instead of thinking “internet”, I try to establish the “intranet” connecting the singers, and make it visible. And then learn from it!

My aim with this book is to expose and discuss – together with specially invited colleagues and guest authors – a series of aspects regarding the concept of being a leader of a choral ensemble. It centres around the idea that music is all about humanity – where the conductor learns to lead the whole person behind the voice. If you can’t see the person behind the voice and understand what she understands, you will be limited in your efforts to move her in the direction you want her to move.

The content of this e-book – published for the first time in English – is based on 30 years of working in the field with professional ensembles and, to a greater degree, amateur choirs. The book has previously been published in both Norway and Sweden and has become a standard textbook in many higher music education institutions.

It is with great pride – and joy! – I can now share my ideas and experience in this revised book, in the sincere hope that it will stimulate both individuals and choral conducting classes, whether the student is a beginner or has reached an advanced level.

Considering how this material is structured, I would suggest that the experienced conductor reads the book from back to front and the unexperienced from front to back.

It’s far from everything – but it is hopefully a pathway in that direction, towards never ending learning experiences!

Hamar, Norway, 2016

Thomas Caplin

“An eclectic (selective) ensemble leader is continually developing his practical theory based on various theories dealing with pedagogy, psychology, sociology, aesthetics, systems, music theory and experience of relations/leadership, and sees what is most functional in any given situation, dependent on his or her goals and plans. At the same time this leader is able to explain in their pedagogical philosophy why they do what they do.”
(Stig Eriksen, 2011)

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THE LEARNING CONDUCTOR

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Introduction

In order to play an instrument you have to acquire a certain technique. The ability to be musical, the realization of your inner perceptions, and your knowledge of the music are all dependent on how well you master the technique. There is, however, a danger of stagnation during a process of development, reaching a point where everything you do is centred on technique – you hear the technical reproduction of the sound, but not the music. This is also true of conductors – who are performers too – their technique may be excellent, yet they still do not manage to connect with the ensemble. In another instance we might encounter a conductor who is not highly proficient from a technical point of view, but whose manner of leadership is indisputable – he connects with his musicians and everybody loves him for what he is – a musician! Musician or technician – the one does not exclude the other. Quite the opposite, music is very much dependent on technique. But if technique does not lead to music then it loses its function and its value.

What role does the individual play, the person in whom the musician and the technician reside? Is he part of the leadership process or is it simply about music or technique? To me, the individual behind the musician/technician is perhaps the most important parameter in musical leadership. It is at a human level that we come together in an ensemble, and interact with the leader, whether amateurs or professionals. Through developing technique and musicianship we can be in touch with the human side of ourselves so that we can learn to lead/conduct the person behind the instrument, behind the voice.

In the same way that we use various techniques to communicate music, we can use various techniques to communicate the person within us. A well-developed understanding of this interaction between the cognitive and emotional side within ourselves, can help us to become better leaders.

Beat, conduct or lead?

I would be inclined to suggest that technical conducting, simply beating time, does not have any musical value in itself. It is only one component of a complex process of communication. One of the aims of this book is therefore to convey an understanding of the interaction between technique, music and humanity, in order that the reader might develop the ability to perceive the nuances between leadership

from both a musical and human perspective and conducting/beating time. Conducting should be considered a tool – an instrument – mastering its technique should help the conductor to communicate the music. If one cannot, or will not, consider technical conducting from such a perspective, then one must always expect to be limited in one's ability to express and shape the music.

There are many ways in which to lead a choir: with sound conducting technique, with emotions, with facial expression, with body language, and with knowledge of psychology, communication, pedagogy and leadership. We are limited not by the possibilities, but by our ability to implement them. The definition of a good leader might therefore be one who is aware of abilities and possibilities – in himself, in his singers, in his ensemble, the acoustics, the performing space – and who understands how every element of his surroundings there and then affects the result. It is one who sees each member of his ensemble as an individual, and who can provide the best possible environment for the growth and development of each individual member and the ensemble as a whole. It is one in whom the sum of the wholeness is bigger than the sum of the individual competencies.

A goal for any leader/conductor should be to make him- or herself superfluous on behalf of the music. One should never stand in the way of the music – one must create a channel through which it can flow unhindered to the choir and the audience.

Let me share with you some very wise words from the Danish philosopher Søren Kirkegaard (1813 – 1855) about the art of helping (my translation):

«If one truly is to succeed in bringing one person to a specific place, you must first and foremost see to finding him where he is, and start from there. This is the secret in all art of helping. Anyone who cannot do this, is delusional in meaning he can help someone else. In order to truly help someone else I must understand more than he understands, however primarily by understanding what he understands.

When not understanding this, my greater understanding will for sure not help him. If I then still wish to make my greater understanding predominant, it is because I'm vain and proud, thereby wanting him to admire me more than I want to benefit him.

But all true helping begins with humbling. The helper must first humble himself to those he seeks to help, thus understanding that helping is not dominating but serving, that to help is the willingness - for the time being - to accept to be wrong and not understanding what the other understands.» (Volume 22)