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Fundamentals of Conducting

Mimetics

Dr. James Jordan

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When I originally received a copy of the Musician's Soul, I was told I would need a therapy session after every chapter. This statement is very true. It's true because the book identifies my deepest fears and brings up a lot of negativity that is pushed pretty far down. If I may be broad, people are complicated creatures – musicians even more so. We are complicated because we are blessed with the gifts that artistry brings. The abundant gift of artistry also brings a lot that can overwhelm. The place of vulnerability that we must live in in order to be authentic can be terrifying. I don't want to be there-- I am scared to-- yet I know I must. And thus, starts the process of a conductor and a musician, a path to vulnerability and openness. Mimetics: to imitate. .adj. Addicted to or having an aptitude for mimicry or imitation. Also, pertaining to imitation. 2. Characterized by, or of the nature of imitation. – Oxford Dictionary. Wow - the applications of this concept.

What is a perfect sound? Well, to me, it is quite complicated. I want bright but dark, dark but light, light but agile, agile but full, and the list goes on and on. Do I stand in front of my choirs and demand this? Well, maybe... if I want to be the next Richardo Mutti and be asked to formally step down for being over-controlling and a micro-manager. But why would one do this? Why constrict the sound like that? That much control is not good for the ensemble and not good for their music. The music will suffer, for abusing the

music and the musicians like that. No one's ego is that important. No one's opinion supersedes someone's being. This is not what being a musician is about. For me, it's about connecting and sharing who I am, and, if you'll allow me to be a little obscure, who my soul is. The study of dualism in psychology explores this concept of the mind (soul) and the brain being their own entity. I equate the mind and the soul as one. They are, to me, one in the same, and intricately special.

Enough with the negative reinforcement of what not to do, on to the positive and what you should do. This whole semester in Conducting, one quote resonated with me more than any other, and I did not catch who said it but it went along the lines of this: "All you have to do is put up your arms and welcome people to sing." How profound. How soul altering. How, in a way, simple. What we inherently do is simple. We stand in front of people, open and free, inviting them to be the artists that they are. Now besides the touchy-feely and spiritual jibber-jabber there is more to it than raising our hands and being inviting, although I do believe that this is where we must start. Everything else – yes, I said everything else – will follow.

"You would not be here if you didn't *envy* a perfect sound." – Dr. James Jordan, Fundamentals of Conducting lecture entitled *Miracles and Spells*. The peculiar wording of this statement may have been unintentional, but I believe it was said this way for a reason. This quote was said in passing, but the wording is really important to me. In the chapter of The Musician's Soul on mimetics the word "envy" is used quite often. To quote the Musician's Soul, "When confronted with the sound from a choir, remember always that on a deep, profound, and subconscious level you will *envy* the beautiful. The *envy* of the beautiful sounds in life through music are what makes us musicians." (Jordan, 115) When

we are confronted with something so influential, so soul-restoring, we become so invested in it that we attempt to manipulate it. Our intentions are positive, but this obsession with perfection actually hinders the soulfulness of musicing. Since we care so much, it is hard to relinquish that control. We must surrender our personal desires for the integrity of the music. This is far easier said than done.

How though? How can someone put their cares on the back burner? How can someone sacrifice themselves like that? Well, in a way, I don't think you have to. I think beautiful music will occur naturally if your heart is in the right place. Now I have the luxury of being at one of the best institutions for choral music in the world. Factually speaking, everyone here is talented. Now this luxury is not omnipresent but what I think we must remember is what the driving force of music must be – to feel. One of the most profound things I have heard was read to me at Vocal Institute in 2013 by Jordan Saul. Now I am one of the few remaining students at Westminster who had the blessing of meeting her and working with her when she was here at Westminster. She is a huge influence as to why I am here. She read a segment from the welcome address to the parents of those attending the Boston Conservatory written by Karl Paulnack, former Director of Music Division at Boston Conservatory. It reads:

The responsibility I will charge your sons and daughters with is this: "If we were a medical school, and you were here as a med student practicing appendectomies, you'd take your work very seriously because you would imagine that some night at two AM someone is going to waltz into your emergency room and you're going to have to save their life. Well, my friends, someday at 8 PM someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft. You're not here to become an entertainer, and you don't have to sell yourself. The truth is you don't have anything to sell; being a musician isn't about dispensing a product,

like selling used Chevies. I'm not an entertainer; I'm a lot closer to a paramedic, a firefighter, a rescue worker. You're here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of a chiropractor, physical therapist, someone who works with our insides to see if they get things to line up, to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well. Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, I expect you not only to master music; I expect you to save the planet. If there is a future wave of wellness on this planet, of harmony, of peace, of an end to war, of mutual understanding, of equality, of fairness, I don't expect it will come from a government, a military force or a corporation. I no longer even expect it to come from the religions of the world, which together seem to have brought us as much war as they have peace. If there is a future of peace for humankind, if there is to be an understanding of how these invisible, internal things should fit together, I expect it will come from the artists, because that's what we do. As in the concentration camp and the evening of 9/11, the artists are the ones who might be able to help us with our internal, invisible lives."

This is why we do what we do. This is why we are who we are. Someone touched us through music and we have the opportunity, the responsibility, to do the same. Our egos are far less important than this. And this is where we must start, with this constant reminder.

The diagram in *The Musician's Soul* outlines perfectly our defaults and the adjustments we must make in relation to mimetics. As previously stated, we care deeply because music means so much to us. So naturally, our default response is negative when we hear something less than satisfactory. Mimetics is, in relation to music, a conscious and learned change of this default from a need for perfection to one of love; from a response of anger to a response of caring more; self-mutilation to selflessness. "You will yourself to care more and love more." (Jordan 116) Mimetics is actively choosing to catch negative thoughts before they enter your mind, and before they fester into a sickly state of hurting your singers. Diminishing or extinguishing artistry is musical neglect.

“Solitude. What’s that?” A common thought for most music students. All of us struggle. All of us are taking like 39 credits. All of us have jobs too. All of us have other things to worry about. Life is only going to get busier, so we must find time to just sit, plain and simple. Every accomplished artist I know makes time to just walk outside and see the world for what it is. It’s a beautiful place. I spent some time outside today due to circumstance. After reminding myself that I’m allowed to slow down, I chose to just focus on sitting there and enjoying what was in front of me. “The forty pages I need to write tonight will be waiting for me when I get back to school. Why focus on that now?” (The talkative voice in my head –10/4/2018) There is no room left for artistry if you never take a moment to yourself. You will be frustrated and confused as to why your choir is not achieving the sound you’ve envisioned. We expect to be subtle and elegant and welcoming in our music. That’s completely and utterly impossible if we neglect to take time to experience life. We bring these experiences into rehearsal, and they greatly impact the authenticity of what we do. Life is precious. I’m halfway to forty ... like, what? How did that happen? A good quarter of my life is gone. I don’t want to live my life constantly stressed anymore. I owe it to myself and my future singers to take the necessary time for calm and serenity that honest artistry requires. Allowing ourselves to breathe is a crucial aspect of the work that we do.

People are so valuable. I am often criticized for being too touchy-feely, too spiritual, and too emotional, but that’s just who I am. As humans, we are individually made for excellence. I don’t often quote the bible but I feel like it is applicable here. Psalm 139 says that we are all “wonderfully made.” I was raised very religious but as life has gone on I choose what I believe. I believe that we are wonderfully made. I believe it

wholeheartedly. People are valuable. Life is valuable. In this profession, a very special and unique gift has been bestowed to us. That gift is to make people feel valued and loved, and to nurture them into the wonderful artists and people they inherently are. Our profession is one of the few that allows us to directly impact how people perceive themselves, perceive the world, and perceive life. How blessed we are.