

Luigi Gaggero

A Natural Gesture
Thoughts on Musical Praxis
and Conducting

Luigi Gaggero, a native of Genoa, has graced the stages of Europe's most prestigious venues. He is currently Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra as well as musical director and co-founder of the Ukho Ensemble Kyiv, with which he has recorded acclaimed CDs of contemporary music repertoire. Before launching his conducting career, Gaggero performed for 25 years as a cimbalom player and percussionist, collaborating with the finest European orchestras and ensembles under the direction of distinguished conductors such as Abbado, Barenboim, Boulez, Hannigan, Harnoncourt, Muti, Petrenko, and Rattle. He is professor at the Académie Supérieure de Musique in Strasbourg.

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First edition 2023

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Typeset in Simoncini Garamond and Avant Garde

Layout and Coverdesign: wolke verlag

ISBN 978-3-95593-266-4

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Preface by Barbara Hannigan

Back in the day, at the turn of the last century, I was touring a lot to contemporary music festivals with various ensembles, performing, meeting composers and other musicians along the way. During this time, somewhere, fortunately, I met Luigi Gaggero.

It was at a hotel breakfast room with white tablecloths, a meagre selection of pastries, and no windows, that we first sat down together. Maybe it was in Vilnius? Or was it in Strasbourg? Huddersfield? No, no. No white tablecloths in Huddersfield. Porto, perhaps? Maybe Italy ...yes. I think it might have been Italy. We easily moved beyond a few introductory phrases, chit-chat, into the real dialogue that would infuse all our conversations in the years to come.

I remember in that first conversation, the care Luigi took before every word, delicately taking

his time to search for exactly the perfect one which could express what he wished to say. His hands moved in a very particular way as he spoke, his lithe fingers sensing the air for consonants and vowels. There were pauses. And we spoke of music, of composers of now and then, who we knew and admired or who we wished we'd known: Gesualdo, Monteverdi, Kurtág. And there was music flowing under the language exchange, in search of the nature of a phrase, pronunciation and language of rhetoric, the flow of a gesture, the search for breath and silence. Silence. I think there was no music playing over the sound system at that hotel breakfast, for once.

Time led us to share the stage together in 2011. It was in fact, my official conducting debut at the Châtelet in Paris, and Luigi was right in front of me, playing the cimbalom part in Stravinsky's *Renard*. For anyone who does not know this already, he is one of the world's great cimbalom players. Having Luigi front and centre that night at the Châtelet gave me that extra grounding which I so deeply needed to walk onstage.

The next time we worked together, was to perform a set of Kurtág songs, *Hét Dal*, for soprano and cimbalom. In a way, he was conducting

from his instrument. The pre-sound breath and gesture with the leather-tipped cimbalom sticks was always authentic and so very true to what was to come. Never exactly the same each time but always true. It was so clear where I needed to begin. That first upbeat at our very first rehearsal for the Kurtág songs, high up in his attic apartment in Paris was one of those Life-Music moments which is forever pasted into my mind's photo album. Breath. Silence. Gesture. Sound.

I wished many young musicians could have been there to absorb, by some alchemical osmosis, the sense of space and time that was so particular to Luigi's musicianship. But in fact, when I did invite one young conductor in 2017, a young woman who was assisting me at the time, into the intimate rehearsal space to watch and listen to the rehearsal, she was on her phone within 5 minutes, oblivious to (or perhaps even trying to shut out) the concentration. I was absolutely shattered. My expectations had been unrealistic. On reflection, I could only assume Luigi's way of inhabiting music was beyond her, at least at that moment in her life.

Luigi's way of thinking and working is indeed not for everyone. His methods of preparation could be perceived as extreme, uncompromis-

ing, utopian. But to him, it is the only way. Some would imagine, some might say, it is not possible, not sustainable, not realistic (!) to consider all these perspectives of music making (which are now so poetically written down in this book) with the pace at which we musicians seem required to produce results, especially within short rehearsal times of a couple of days. There isn't enough Time! But this is completely authentic to Luigi Gaggero and it is necessary, and therefore Time must be found, or created.

A natural gesture is a philosophy of sound, for musicians, for conductors, and can be read in metaphor by anyone who delves deeply into that about which they are passionate. It is a beautiful exploration of a Way. As I read it, sometimes I smiled, sometimes I felt regret or guilt for the moments I compromised for one reason or another, and mostly I felt relief that this book now exists, and that I and other musicians can read and return to it. Working with Luigi has made me a better musician. Reading this book makes me eager to get back to the scores, to the practise studio, and to the podium, to strive to serve the music at a deeper and deeper level. And also, to realize that it is not just burying oneself in music but the authentic and healthy being

one must nourish through philosophy, self-realization and rhetoric, to reach the silence which precedes the sound.

Introduction



Numerous are the *manuals* on orchestra (and choir) conducting already written by great educators or accomplished conductors. Many of these manuals contain meticulous technical schematizations on how to conduct, offering valuable guidance for studying a score and preparing for rehearsals with an orchestra. Not infrequently, they also include technical-musical reflections on certain passages from famous compositions.

The present volume, however, does not intend to add itself to this already abundant bibliography. On the contrary, it emerges primarily from the need to investigate those *invisible processes* that constitute the true premise and cause of a conductor's gestures. Among them are listening, the perception of Time, the comprehension of form, empathy, and others. Without a thorough understanding of these processes, indeed, any purely *technical* study runs the risk of being futile or misleading.

The essence of a Maestro's conducting style can *never* be fully grasped through mere external observation, such as analyzing the pattern used to indicate beats, the

manner of holding a baton, or which hand is employed to indicate a phrasing and its movements. For all these aspects, and many others, are primarily the *result* of a certain way of *inhabiting Time*. Consider, by way of example, the *Cartesian temporality* exemplified by Pierre Boulez, the *metaphysical temporality* evoked by Herbert von Karajan, and the *human temporality* inspired by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Above all, it is these diverse *temporal conceptions*, or to use a somewhat less fashionable term, *spiritual* ones, that inform the technique of these three conductors, their phrasing, the very idea of what constitutes a *musical phrase*, and their non-verbal communication with the orchestra.

The aspect of *temporality* is fundamental, although, as we will see, there are other elements that contribute to establishing our musicianship style. We hope that these *Thoughts on Musical Praxis* can shed some light on these aspects: only by better understanding our poetics (of which we, often, are not conscious enough) can we achieve genuine interpretative and technical progress. It is only by questioning our *whys* that we can discover our *hows* and, beyond technical thinking, (re)discover our own *natural gesture*.