

# Coaching

## A Musical Illustration

John Lubans Jr.

This and the winter column look at coaching—the interactive process through which a leader offers sound advice, speaks the truth, challenges, and encourages a colleague or group to become better at what they do.

First, a case study: the Chamber Sinfonia Orchestra of the Manhattan School of Music (MSM) undertakes an intimidating task—developing a musical program, rehearsing, and performing it, *all without a conductor*.

Before any reader suffers a fit of acute pragmatism be assured that *how* a musical team is coached relates to coaching in the library or any other organization. The Sinfonia case illustrates what good coaching is about *and* what it takes for genuine self-management to occur or—risking an overworked term—for *empowerment* to take root.

These music students are among the most accomplished in the country; each is a potential soloist. MSM is comparable to Lincoln Center’s Julliard School, so we know that the technical side, the proficiency side of the music is not in question. Can these student musicians become a self-managing team and make beautiful music? That’s the challenge. They, not a conductor, are to decide the sound and shape of the music.

The Sinfonia’s task is more Herculean than any money-making project Donald Trump would assign his TV flock of apprentices: “I’ll give you three weeks. When you return to the board room, someone will be fired!”

The Sinfonia’s “board room” won’t be the dimly lit clubby lair high in Trump Tower. The Sinfonia’s brightly lit board room is Greenfield Hall at MSM, the venue for their April 8 public concert of Mozart’s *Serenata Notturmo* and Debussy’s *Danses Sacre et Profane*.

Like Hercules who was helped in his dozen labors by sympathetic deities, the students will be aided by coaches—sympathetic musical deities—from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, most notably, Julia Lichten, cellist, and Maureen Gallagher, violist. Eight other Orpheus musicians involved in the MSM collaboration will help the Sinfonia students gain an appreciation for the Orpheus process over the next three weeks.

Orpheus is renowned as much for its musical beauty as for how it makes the music happen—rehearsing and playing without a conductor. These coaches are well versed in working as a team, thinking independently, and looking inward, not outward, for musical decisions. Julia’s and Maureen’s challenge is how to evoke self-reliance from

the Sinfonia students, all trained in the solo tradition or in symphonies under conductors. A plus is that these students want to play without a conductor—they *want* to experience the “how” of what Orpheus does.

And the Orpheus organization wants to share that experience. After much soul searching—indeed, of being on the brink of dissolution in its thirtieth year—the Orchestra concluded it wants to be a viable and *continuing* institution. While its beautiful music may linger after each concert, Orpheus believes its way of working—the *how*—is a large part of their legacy. Connie Steensma, the board chair who helped Orpheus through the refiner’s fire of that thirtieth year, told me Orpheus now has “a view of the future . . . a common view.” It is a shared vision that seeks to perpetuate Orpheus’s unique music making.

### First Rehearsal

It is a little after 7 P.M. on a windy night in mid-March; the one functioning elevator bumps upward, stopping at every floor. I am late, wedged in among students and instruments, making my way to the sixth floor rehearsal space of MSM in the Upper West Side’s Morningside Heights neighborhood. Off the elevator, at last, I hurry down the hall. A double door opens into the rehearsal room, a functional, capacious space, with a high ceiling and a wooden floor. The room is a quarter full with students, seated on folding chairs. On the back wall, near the storage cabinets and assorted musical apparatus, hangs a huge pensive portrait of the *maestro*, conductor Arturo Toscanini.

I introduce myself to Julia and Maureen and, just in time, take my seat. Six student musicians sit in an irregular arc in front—this is the Sinfonia “core” group for the Mozart piece. The rest of us—including two dozen members of the Sinfonia orchestra—sit a few feet across from them.

Modeled on the Orpheus core, these six players are responsible for the initial major decisions about the shape and character of the music. They are to find an orchestral voice, agreeing on the interpretation of the composer’s score.



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A core group takes less time than the entire orchestra in sorting out and shaping the music. Prior to inventing the core, the full Orpheus orchestra used to do it, resulting in marathon rehearsals far into the night that overburdened even the most energetically democratic of the Orpheus troupe. It is in the core where the first glimmers of *integration* begin—where the best thinking of individuals combines into something more than one person could envision.

## Coaching Observed

“It’s your rehearsal.”

I was most impressed with how adroit both coaches were at keeping responsibility with the students. When the players tried to hand off a problem to the coaches, they’d turn it back—with options.

Whenever, the core group asked the coaches to “fix it”—often in subtle ways from a seeming haplessness to attempts to draw the coaches into technical discussion (and answer giving)—both coaches were consistent in their response:

“What do *you* want to do?”

When the students were caught between two ways of doing something, Julia would not make the choice for them, advising instead, “Why not try both?” or “You could try it the other way.”

When players professed uncertainty, not knowing what to do next, the Orpheus coach referred them to the musical purpose: “Ask yourself, what is the *character* of the piece? If you are still unclear whether more tympani or strings are needed, try it both ways.”

Understandably, some of the players were frustrated by the coaches not taking over; for others it was liberating. The coaches were keeping responsibility in the core and giving them permission to try different ways, to act on their intuition, to experiment—not to just talk about it or depend on an expert to solve it.

Julia was clear: “It’s your rehearsal.”

Groups that are usually led by an authority figure find it difficult to surrender learned ways and can struggle when given the opportunity to accept responsibility for the product. The Debussy core rehearsal featured a guest soloist, a student harpist, seated in the midst of the core arc. Not a member of the core, she was highly accomplished—hardly glancing at the score she produced glittering cascades of sunlit notes. The core players, struggling through their Debussy parts, turned to the harpist for advice. She was incredulous: “Are you talking to me?” That response suggests some of the difficulty of changing a culture in which conductors tell musicians what sound to produce. The MSM/Orpheus collaboration is one step toward changing that dynamic, demonstrating that musicians are an untapped rich resource for finding the best musical sound.

## “Virtuous Struggle and Suffering.”

While the first rehearsal experience probably was not exactly what the Greeks meant by *pathos*—virtuous struggle and suffering leading to heroic accomplishment—there was no shortage of challenge for these students. The coaches, by not solving the numerous musical puzzles, left no option but for the students to take a stand—albeit a vulnerable and uncertain one—and to take justifiable pride in their accomplishments.

For anyone not used to speaking up or preferring to defer to experts, self management can be burdensome, possibly even maddening: surely one person could make better decisions than a group of six! It’s at this point where some groups fall apart, deferring to a self-appointed leader—the easy way out, leading to a “good enough” product. Yet, taking the road less traveled, Orpheus’s bumpy and upward path of shared responsibility may get you to the next level of musical accomplishment, to a lyricism that is noticeably different in its unanimity of sound and often surpasses a conductor led musical rendering.

Upholding agreed-to standards is part of the Orpheus way. Not far into the Mozart piece, Julia asked if the original second violinist core member was missing. Yes, she was stranded for the night in New Hartford—one of the orchestra was subbing for her. “This is your chance,” Julia tells the stand-in. Later that evening, she clarifies the Orpheus philosophy: “No substitutions in core. Be there, no matter what.” After the sub had done a stellar job, Julia suggests to the group they consider replacing the missing core player with the stand-in. The Sinfonia decided to do just that. The absent core member will play with the second violins in the full orchestra.

## The Basics: “Do You Have the Score?”

Coaches cannot assume everyone knows what it means to be responsible, what it means to work without a boss. This applies even if there has been discussion in advance and a presumed understanding about what is going to happen. As we know, people learn and comprehend in different ways. So, a major purpose of the first meeting of a group, musical or other, is to clarify and eliminate any vagaries.

Eliminating uncertainty can be as basic as Julia’s asking one of the core players: “Do you have the score? That’s rule one.”

Bill Morris, the student bassist in both cores (and Sinfonia’s rehearsal coordinator) told me: “There were lots of unknowns [in the first rehearsal]. After all, there was no conductor. The conductor’s job is to know the end product. We did not know what to expect.” They were used to having a conductor tell them what to do.

Indeed, a few of the core did not seem to know what to do, asking elemental questions of each other: “Should we talk?”

Another indicator of uncertainty: there was hardly any eye contact among the core players, all eyes were on the musical score.

Of course, each player's having the *full* score was a new experience for them. Nor was their past practice of sight reading their own part adequate to becoming familiar with multiple parts.

## Clarity and Encouragement

The Orpheus coach summed up next steps at the end of the first rehearsal. She advised the core players to ask themselves: "What kind of preparation did you make for this? If I were you, I'd spend a lot of time with scores, recordings, even playing individually. Seems like a lot of time was spent fumbling through. Remember there's no conductor. This is *your* presentation; it is your personal responsibility."

For the cores (and orchestra) to be self-directed, each musician was going to have to prepare for the *whole* piece of music, not just enough to play his or her musical instrument.

While making expectations clear, the coaches balanced their criticism with recognition of progress made. Their language was encouraging and constructive.

For example, to the bassist: "You are underestimating your importance to *lifting* the swing and sway of the [Debussy] piece."

And, to the core: "I think your instincts are good."

## Trusting the Process

It may be the coach's most difficult role: letting go. There's a point when the least said is best. Doing so takes inordinate trust for the coach to *not* intervene, to *not* offer solutions, but rather to permit the players to struggle. It's uncomfortable, but the ensuing silence will start, faltering at first, to fill with the players' voices.

Less than halfway through the first rehearsal, there were already visible a few glimmers of the group's growing self reliance:

A cellist cheerleads the group: "That's it! Keep that sparkle."

Another player's voice adds to the growing confidence: "I think we can really come alive with that. . . ."

These are the early intimations of where players begin to play off of each other leading to the energy, spontaneity, and exuberance observable in Orpheus's concerts.

Bill saw good progress made in the first session: "The next rehearsal session was like night and day. . . ." I have little doubt that the coaches' emphasis on clarity and fundamentals in the first rehearsal had a profound influence in subsequent rehearsals.

And it is worth noting, once the concept of self management was established after the first rehearsal, the coaches began to advise on the nuances of interpretation

that might not occur even to these student players, however accomplished.

## "It's us."

Thirteen rehearsals later and a week ahead of Greenfield Hall Bill assured me: "We'll be proud . . . it'll be one of the best presentations."

He also knew if the piece did not go well, the usual excuse—the conductor wanted it played that way—would not be available. "It's us."

And so it was.

According to all reports on the April 8 public performance at Greenfield Hall, the "raves" have it. Mr. Trump would have been hard put to find someone to fire.

I asked Bill if a student conductor could have done as well or better? No. He was convinced the group's musical ideas and insights—"shared musical power"—would trump a solo conductor.

I come to several conclusions when I contemplate my word picture of the Sinfonia/Orpheus collaboration:

- Telling someone they are *empowered* is not the same as guiding them to genuine empowerment.
- A self-led team of smart and dedicated people can be more effective than the same group led by a boss.
- Achieving a self-directed staff takes more than desire—guidance is essential to move from concept to achievement.

What did you derive from this essay, this word picture? Are there other parallels between the Sinfonia's experiences and the workplace? I'd enjoy hearing from you.

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