Coaching a musical mindset

by Line Fredens

Abstract
This article describes and analyzes the improvisational and innovative process that takes place among professional musicians during the extraordinary concert. The aim is to draw parallels to the professional coaching conversation in order to examine what new angles this analogy can contribute in proportion to coaching as a practice. In other words, how can an analysis of the musician’s communication during a successful concert shed light on what is happening in a successful professional dialogue.

The article contains both empirical data and theory. The empirical data comes to results from a qualitative study undertaken in connection with my thesis within the Master of Learning Processes Specializing in Organizational Coaching at Aalborg University, and is based on interviews with five professional orchestra musicians from the Royal Danish Orchestra, the Copenhagen Phil and the Danish National Symphony Orchestra.

Keywords: Coaching, conducting, co-development, musicality, improvisation, cognition, and attention.

We all know it. The magic moments where we forget ourselves and get so absorbed by a conversation that it is no longer us who shape the words but the common dialogue that forms us. Here the result of the conversation is not known in advance but is being created along the way, and new ideas are emerging.

But it’s not always easy. “People do not listen, they reload” writes Isaacs in his book on dialogue (Isaacs, 1999:19). We often talk with the eyes. When we see our conversation partner gasping for air, we open our mouths and can finally say what we were thinking of while the other spoke. But a dialogue is something we do together in contrast to the monologue, and on this basis the quality of the conversation is depending of the interaction between two or more individuals.

At my work as a violinist in Malmö Symphony Orchestra I experience another for of communication. Here are no words but an expression created jointly. When successful, the experience is unique. A work as a musician concerns events. There is no book or a painting as a product when a musician has finished his job. The focal point is the creative element that takes place here and now, where the unique about the event occurs in the meeting be-
tween the people involved. Therefore, the music is also frequently used as an image of the improvisational interaction. But what is really present when the interaction succeeds? When the fragments play together in such a way that the whole can be termed successfully? And what mindset characterizes classical professional musicians who daily deal with and master the special challenge of the moment, where 97 musicians during a concert create something new together.

From notes to music, expression and meaning making

As a young student at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, my violin teacher told me about a mag- ic door: “It is just a door then, it belongs to some other side of the door, just go there and open it.” It was the next stage of my development as a musician he talked about. Later in life, I found myself in Budapest with my piano trio. We were lucky to spend three months in the hands of a famous but also notorious teacher. Here there were no compromises but everything was possible as long as it made sense in a context. It became an intense study that involved making us understand about the music while we played. How could we make the three of us, merge into a common expression that not only made sense for our sell but also for our listeners? Our Hungarian mentor shook his head a lot during that period. But there was smile on his lip and glint in the eye every time he expressed not to understand what he heard when we played. He had fun when we asked about the exact length and other details of the notes and responded cryptically; “The notes does not mean there are short and what’s short?” With great patience, he continued to tell us what he experienced by listening to our playing. It took with great patience, he continued to tell us what he experienced by listening to our playing. It took

Musical communication and communicative musicality

“Where are conductors who speaks everything to death, I just cannot concentrate on all these informations,” was a mean expression from the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. The conductor leads the orchestra and coordinates the interaction between the musicians. And all the interviewed musicians express that the good conductor does not speak too much. Musical communication, which we find in the interaction between the individuals, groups, and conductor, is of a different kind than what we know it from meetings and academic lectures at the university. The researchers Davidson & Good (2002) have shown that there are two major sources of cohesion in a music ensemble. One is the common connection to the music, the other is the social interaction. The first is about musical communication and the last deals with communicative musicality (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009). Musical communication is about the music that is communicated (content), and communicative musicality highlights the way it is done (form).

A common pattern for the interviewed musicians was that several things were difficult to articulate linguistically. In my interviews, I ask a violinist from Copenhagen Phil how she as a 2nd violin player interacts with the 1st violin, and her respond shows that that is not something she previously has been aware of. “It’s hard to say how to do it, really,” she answers on a question concerning something she masters at a very high level. The expertise she has acquired is implicit, which her subsequent comments are about. “That’s because you know the music and the other musicians so well that you can feel when the 1st violins do like that, then they might want this.” The violinist refer to the non-verbal signals in addition to the understanding when she express how she “feel” the interaction. The communicative musicality is by all the interviewed musicians highlighted as the area in which the extraordinary is created during a performance. It is music that is communicated, but the musical communication is mentioned only with few words – and of course it is a matter of course for the interviewed musicians that the side of the performance is present and stable. Let’s take a closer look at what participation in the communicative musicality requires of its participants before we look at how the experiences of communicative musicality can contribute to a greater insight into what characterizes the good coaching session.

Inner and outer attention

One can distinguish between inner and outer attention (Baluch & Itti, 2011). Our thinking is based on our inner attention while outer attention is directed at the outside world. When we make plans, the inner attention focus on details and consider for and against. It is an abstract process at the expense of the external context. It is outer attention that join the outside world often effortlessly. A musician from the Danish National Symphony Orchestra describes the attention shift as follows: “Fixed agreements are like traffic rules. Once you’ve learned to drive, you do not think about the rules, but drive after the conditions.” This comment illustrates the difference between an effortful inner attention (Baluch & Itti, 2011) and an outer effortless attention (Bryua, 2010).

As an analogy to the coaching conversation, a newly trained coach with his or her learned theories and models will have difficulty fully listening to the coachee, because theory driven attention is an inner attention that stands in the way for the outer attention addressing the coachee. With experience, the theories and models will step in the background for the benefit of the dialogue between the coachee and the coach. The coach’s outer attention will take over and in a bottom-up sensation let the creation speak to him. Inner and outer attention, are two different ways of orientation. Attention is a prerequisite for cognitive processes, and here
The dual-process theory distinguishes between two different thinking systems, one fast and one slow (Kahneman, 2011).

Dual-process theory – fast and slow thinking

The basis for the dual-process theory probably comes from psychologist William James, who thought there were two forms of thinking: an associative and implicit, as well as a conclusive and explicit. This dual process theory has since been described in different ways and has been given a modern expression with Kahneman (2011), who talks about two complementary systems: a slow explicit and a fast implicit. The slow system contains our conscious thinking and our verbal language. It is linear and therefore moves one step at a time opposite to the fast system, which has many simultaneous parallel branches. It is the slow system that underpins academic learning with abstract thinking, logical strategies, analyzes and evaluations as well as technical rationality where you can set measurable goals. It is an energy-intensive mental process that requires concentration, perseverance and focused (inner) attention.

Technical strategies are crucial in situations where you need security and control and know the results in advance. Both the musician and the coach must possess technical skills to be able to do their craft, but when it comes the artistic process, a completely different system is needed: the adaptive. An adaptive strategy does not have a measurable goal, but an idea or vision of direction. It is therefore a strategy that develops while you walk the road. A strategy that captures the context, which makes it possible to adapt. It is the fast system's sensitivity to the specific context. In this way, the coach's fast thinking system must be in play in the outer attention.

The fast thinking system, which is the fast system that captures the context, has unlike the slow, a big capacity, and is the system that is on the pitch when we experience a world without thinking in a bottom-up sensation. A violinist from Copenhagen Phil also tells us how, under the good performance, “is not guided by her brain and can play freely”. She describes how she can be disturbed by thoughts (linearly) and “tries to push them out and focus and get into it.” The musician from the Danish National Symphony Orchestra tells how he thinks back and forth in time during a bad concert, while the sense of time disappears during the good concert where he is more present in the present, “here is the mind present in another way”. The trombone group talks about a feeling during the good concert: “You do not think about technical problems (...) it all just flows”. The contradiction is described as academic, "and it cannot be used for anything (...) it becomes square and stupid music, and when we speak feeling, it completely disappears." The quotes above shows how the musicians oppose being in the slow thinking system during a performance. The conscious thought will always be at the expense of the whole from which the good concert emerges. On the other hand, the conscious thought can subsequently focus on selected details from the whole. Both experience, idea and situation are ambiguous and complex whole and cannot therefore be contained in our verbal communication alone. The language will always narrow a whole (Schön, 1991), and therefore our verbal expression must be in dialogue with our body expression of feelings and intuition. Against this background, a perspective change in a coaching conversation could help the coachee to discover new opportunities based on the same context.

We are thinking with the slow system, while the fast system thinks for us, claims Kahneman (2011).

In a coaching session, it is also about creating ideas together. But not only in the dialogue between the coach and the coachee. Initially, it is also about the dialogue that the coachee have with himself, between his implicit and explicit experience. The language will always only account for a part of a whole, since another story can always be told. In our verbal communication, the body becomes meaningful and communicative musicality should be regarded.

The phenomenologists call it a pre-reflexive experience where the body becomes meaningful with the senses as an inseparable part of this process (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Noë, 2009).

The two ways of thinking are two sides of the same coin and can be summed up as follows:

Summary of the results from my qualitative survey

Communicative musicality is essential for the optimal concert experience for the musicians as well as in any coaching sessions. The prerequisites however are, that the technical skills are mastered to such an extent that they have been automated.

The fast thinking system gives the musicians an experience of “not to think” but an intuitively interacting with the context, which makes it possible to create an idea together”, as the violinist from Copenhagen Phil tells during the interview.

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The improvisation:

It’s a fairly common but erroneous view that classical musicians just reproduce the score that stand in front of them. By contrast the interviewed musicians describe the classical symphony as improvisational. There emerges new ideas "totally spontaneous (...) or if there is someone who just played extra delicious, then you respond in a slightly different way than usual.” What happens during the good concert cannot be taught in advance, it is something "one cannot learn by reading", but something that needs to be learned in the situation itself. It’s about "experiencing the music as something that occurs here and now".

The improvisation lies not only in the tones, as much as in the timing, in the actual interaction between those involved on the stage. Even though the notes are written down, each performance becomes a new experience, and the new occurs in the relationships between the musicians and the relationship between the notes. This is where the music becomes creative. Musical communication and communicative musicality should be regarded.
as a complementary relationship in the same way as the relationship between content and form in music. Designing the content is a creative process. In analogy to coaching, the coach contains a "context" for instruction and practice, that the coach can encourage the coachee to develop. How the coachee interacts with this potential however, can be made visible and verbalized through the coaching questions. When implicit patterns of action are verbalized, the coach and coachee will be able to look at these patterns and thereby optimize these in relation to a given desire for direction in the process of learning.

The Danish National Symphony Orchestra expresses it: "Being in the right relationship between safety and freedom". He later elucidates these concepts as each other's prerequisites. "I feel safe and I know what's going to happen. If something else happens, it's also okay (...) but if I don't feel safe, it's like a straitjacket, and I get the feeling that I have to be careful." All the interviewed musicians agree that the good conductor should be able to lead an orchestra so nobody is in doubt about his intentions.

"One must be confident that he (the conductor) shows what is needed," says the violinist from Copenhagen Phil. When the conductor manages to create a collective frame of reference, it will give the musicians a common space within which can be improvised. The common framework gives the musicians the confidence that is a prerequisite for the improvisation, as improvisation is based on the fast thinking process when we relax, whereas the slow system is active and offers more explicit technical strategies when deliberate concentration is needed (Hattie and Yates, 2014).

In a coaching session, the coach as a gamemaster can create the framework for improvisation. When the coach moves from a content level to a process level, the frame of the conversation can be elucidated and thereby constitute the prerequisite for the improvisation.

When a coachee seeks answers to a problem, it often binds to a desire for more order in an unmanageable situation. But if the goal of the conversation is to send the focus person out into the world with the ability to handle the unexpected, then a clear answer will block the interaction with the unforeseen and prevent the emergence that the complexity can offer.

Open questions on the other hand, can set the course for upcoming answers, and thereby create the framework for an improvisation. Questions will direct the coachee towards a given direction, and let the coachee improvise in any situation. A good question will guide the attention of the coachee towards the opportunities that the context offers. The future is created by our daily interactions and if the coachee question is a dead end, he must be capable to create a new one in order to make "good music." If the purpose of coaching is to make the coachee self-regulative, and ultimately independent of the coach, it is not enough for the coach to ask good questions. The coachee must learn how to ask the questions himself.

To master the art of making questions

Bloom's taxonomy from 1956 (Bloom and Krathwohl) was revised in 2001 (Anderson and Krathwohl). The taxonomy shows a progressive development of learning, where creativity is the highest form. From a lower - to a higher form of thinking, you move from qualifications to competences and to creativity. Qualifications are about facts, knowledge and information, or "knowledge about". The competence level concerns the "how", and is about being able to apply and analyze the knowledge. At the level of creativity, evaluate and create is in the center.

A good question directs the attention towards those learning processes that can bridge the gap between what we already know, and toward where we want to go. It opens up the coachee understanding "the nature of success (...), then the greater the probability of learning happening" (Hattie and Yates, 2014:xi). The single most influential factor in learning is what the learner already knows (Hattie and Yates, 2014). Our experiences are proactive, and in this light a good question can activate the coachee’s experiences from previous successfully similar task, and help to analyze these underlying knowledge schemas for future actions.

To master the art of making questions concerns knowledge about learning and knowledge about the effect of the different types of questions inspired by Blooms Taxonomy.

This knowledge should be understood, applied, analyzed, evaluated, and only here the coach will be able to master the art of making questions with the improvisational skills that characterizes creativity. In this light, the coach will have to balance between giving the coachee the relevant knowledge in these areas while also pave the way for the dialogue between the coachee’s explicit and implicit knowledge. You must master the craft before you become an artist, which Bloom’s taxonomy also points out.

This is as well supported by the following comments from the interviewed musicians:

"A high professional level is Alpha Omega", "If you have the technical skills, you can be in line with the situation, feel confident and brave. It is also important to feel that you contribute, and not just sit like "ahh", I hope I survive this."

As mentioned earlier, a performance is a creative process where something unexpected and unique may occur. It’s not a material product, because when
those involved when the situation itself becomes rally good performance. That is this interaction that characterizes the moment, during the performance, if the participant and rules the orchestra in a predetermined direction, transforms the musicians into marionette puppets, in contrast it’s about, helping the coachee to open up for critical thinking and thus in individual statements. The interviewed musicians, provided that the musical communication and communicative musicality leads the meeting with the emerging and unique whole that is the condition of practice. When listening to another person, listening becomes an appreciative way, it’s a meeting without prejudices. An appreciative interaction does not require consensus, but is about assign each other validity. The appreciative approach has roots in the German philosophical tradition, as we meet it with Hegel (Hermansen et al, 2009). This form of listening is an appreciative way, it’s a meeting without prejudice from inner to outer attention. A predetermined plan will build on an idea of a whole that we imagine will soon take place, but when the situation asks to dance, the musicians describe how they let themselves lead in the dance like a woman in a tango. It is one of the key elements that’s highlighted during the good concert, to be able to “experience the music as something that occurs in the situation”, where the musician describe the situation as a co-development. As an analogy with the dialogue, Gadamer has pointed out the three questions we do not have a dialogue “we are led in a proper dialogue” (Lyttbæk, 2008: 216). If that is the case, the dialogue, as the good performance, have potential for synergy, by giving up the control of the good conductor. Let’s play with the idea that the purpose of a transformation ultimately is to help the coachee to be able to navigate in his life in the best possible way. The process of transforming the content of the experience and with awareness of the means he already has (content) and at the same time being able to use these means in interaction with the context, previously illustrated as an appreciative communicative musicality (form). In my empirical material, the musicians refer to a bad colleague as a person “who wants to be right”. One who wants to be right will meet the context with an almost established instrumental perspective, which will shut down for other opportunities that might arise in the situation itself. In contrast it’s about, helping the coachee to open up for the good interaction. An adaptive behavior, that manages to interact and improve with upcoming situations. Answers shut down for possibilities, while questions open up. But good questions will not be shaped based on pass way answers (answers), and in this light, answers and questions are complementary. We find answers in the after-thought, whereas questions will guide our actions when we meet our surroundings that characterize the art of interaction. When we meet each other in the space behind “the magic door”, we should not meet each other with answers on the lip, but with good questions, with an appreciative approach.

Conclusion

I have highlighted the distinction between musical communication and communicative musicality: Where the musical communication stands for the explicit content, the communicative musicality concerns how this content is conveyed (the form). During a performance in a symphony orchestra, the content is the written notes (the musical communication). When the notes become music, it is by means of communicative musicality among the musicians. The latter are expressions of qualities in their nonverbal communication and thus implicitly. The communicative musicality will always be adaptive in that sense it is based on human interaction. Communicative musicality is thus emphasized as the particular element that characterizes a successful performance among musicians, provided that the musical communication is mastered.

My methodological approach is based on interviews with five professional musicians and thus in individual statements. The interviewed musicians have all emphasized how collective consciousness is a crucial prerequisite for the good performance and thus the communicative musicality. The descriptions from the musicians have also shown that the achievement of this collective consciousness requires a special effort from the individual, indicating an implicit cohesion during the good concert where the description of the individual experience of “thinking” is highlighted as inappropriate. It is therefore crucial that technical explicit strategies do not take precedence over the implicit adaptive strategies, which is at heart of all creative activity. New thoughts and opportunities do not emerge through technical strategies but...
through an adaptive, and that is a strategy that is being developed along the way.

Similar to the professional musical conversation, the overall purpose of a coaching conversation in my view will be to foster those of the experiences of coachee, which also can promote an adaptive behavior. Coaching is not just about finding the best answers, it also concerns how coachee can get better at handling their everyday lives, and here coachee’s questions can act as a compass for navigation.

Awareness of the complementarity between the fast and slow thinking system, can contribute to an interaction between analysis and experience in a coaching session. The musicians in my empirical research, does not need to “think” during a performance, they prefer to listen. A coach can’t avoid “thinking” in the same way. Unlike music a coaching session need words, and it is the slow thinking system that is involved in the spoken language. But coaching is much more than listening to the words that are being said. As new recognitions have not yet been pronounced, the coach must also meet the coachee through the fast thinking in order to sense his tacit knowledge.

This article has questioned the assumption that the coach should help the coachee finding the best answers within himself. According to recent research, cognition can be described as an interaction between brain, body and the outside world. Answers and not least questions emerge when the professional conversation is brought into a social context. A creation of a co-development between coachee and his context just like tones become music, and the music colors the tones.

Coaching a musical mindset is something that emerges from the interaction, no manuals can describe in advance. Manuals are important because they inform us, but they should step in the background in the process of coaching leaving room for spontaneity and the invention where the participants are open to a surprise – and questions of how to create something new together with others.

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Literature
