

The Conductor Gertrud Herliczka

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The conductor Gertrud Herliczka was born 1904 in Vienna and has conducted over 100 concerts with professional orchestras between 1927 and 1939. She has left no scores, and we have no recordings of her conducting. I am currently writing my PhD thesis entitled “The Conductor Gertrud Herliczka – Viennese Traces of an International Career” in historical musicology with Prof Dr Melanie Unseld as my mentor. My main sources are the private estate of the Hrdliczka family as well as Gertrud Herliczka’s estate in the archive of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. They comprise mainly of programme papers and newspaper clippings of concert reviews. In this paper, the word conductor from the title of my presentation will be just as important as presenting a glimpse of Gertrud Herliczka, and the focus will be on Theodore Schatzki’s theory of artistic bundles.

In writing about the conductor Gertrud Herliczka, I am asking myself several questions. What is the nature of a conductor’s work? How can we describe it in its complexity? There is another aspect which raises interest: Why does being a woman on the podium matter? Having read a great number of reviews of Herliczka’s concerts, I found none without mentioning her gender. I decided to focus on these aspects and illustrate my thinking with quotations of the reviews of one concert, conducted by Gertrud Herliczka with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra on 21st November 1938, 11 years after her debut in the Musikverein with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.

Musical reviews inevitably contain a general understanding of the time as well as the individual opinion of the critic (author of the article), directed at a particular group of readers. Reviews are subjective, and we read them differently today than they have been read by contemporaries. I will regard the statements from the reviews not as objective truth, but as opinions which link the world of music with other social worlds, which will be explained later.

In 2018, the British conductor Mark Wigglesworth wrote a book called *The Silent Musician. Why Conducting Matters* with the aim to explain what conductors do.

A good conductor unifies and inspires a large group of people for exactly the same set of reasons that any other leader does. Retaining one's own responsibility for decision-making while creating a rewarding collective sense of collaboration might not be an exact science, but few would disagree that such a combination is the goal of contemporary leadership in pretty much any field. A conductor is one of the few people whose authority is exercised in public. [...] Conductors are more hands on than most leaders. The complication is that the language we use is figurative, and our mode of communication can appear questionable to an audience that is probably not meant to see it at work at all. It's hard for the public in the concert hall to avoid observing the physicality of a conductor, but our gestures are no more a means to an end than is an instrumentalist's fingering. I'm not sure it should matter to the listener what a conductor looks like – yet everything about the visual mechanics of a live orchestral concert seems to suggest that it does.¹

Wigglesworth points out the centrality of the visual for a conductor. Not only does a conductor interpret music by visually transmitted signs, he or she is also a visual object for the audience. That is why a conductor's looks are inevitably going to be noticed. If they are not concurrent with the implicit expectations, they might be mentioned in a review, and that is often the case with women.

Today, noticing the visual is often regarded as less worthy and writing about the music is supposed to be the aim of a review. But hiding certain aspects does not remove them from reality, neither does it change the fact that noticing the gender of the conductor cannot be avoided. The visual aspect cannot be separated from the evaluation of the musical

1 Mark Wigglesworth, *The Silent Musician. Why Conducting Matters* (London: Faber, 2018), 2–3.

interpretation of a conductor. In Herliczka's time, most of the reviews were quite straightforward.

A woman on the conducting podium is at the very least an unusual spectacle – the graceful stillness of the female figure is without doubt disturbed, when it comes to 'conducting in skirt'. A conductor must substitute such 'unmanly' formalities with convincing concentration of orchestra leadership. The Viennese Gertrud *Herliczka* transformed prejudice against such Kapellmeister into growing interest. Herliczka is possibly an exceptional phenomenon, because she conducts from memory and without a stick. Biologically striking regarding femininity as well as musical psychology was the fact that her best rendition was that of the high-spirited tone poem 'Don Juan' by Strauß, overflowing with attractive sensual sound. In that piece, Herliczka's conducting skills were energetic and her gestures technically as well as stylistically clear and sure. Much knowledge and impulsive musicality took place.²

The visual aspect alone is not sufficient to describe a conductor. In reviews of Herliczka's concert many more layers are implied, and her gender appears to be the dominant theme: a woman must compensate for stepping out of the ordinary behaviour pattern by a convincing 'concentration of leadership'. To the author, it is also biologically and psychologically surprising (to be more precise, outside the biological and psychological suppositions of the time and the social world in question) that a woman might conduct Richard Strauss' *Don Juan* better than other music in the concert, conventionally deemed more 'female'. Apart from that composition, the programme consisted of Cherubini's overture *Il portatore d'acqua*, a violin concerto by Glasunov (with the soloist Lajos Szikra) and Skrjabin's *Symphony Nr. 2*.

- 2 Author's translation. Original quote: "Eine Frau am Dirigentenpult ist zum mindesten ein ungewohnter Anblick; die anmutige Ruhe der weiblichen Linie wird bei einem 'Dirigieren im Rock' zweifelsohne gestört. Solche 'unmännliche' Aeufßerlichkeit muß also eine Dirigentin ersetzen durch überzeugende Konzentration der Orchesterführung. Die Wienerin Gertrud Herliczka hat das Vorurteil gegen ebensolche Kapellmeister in steigendes Interesse umgewandelt. Mag sein, daß Herliczka eine Ausnahmeerscheinung ist, zumal sie ohne Taktstock und auswendig dirigierte. Biologisch auffallend, sowohl hinsichtlich Weiblichkeit als auch musikpsychologisch war es, daß ihr die inhaltlich heiße und von sinnlichen Klangreizen überströmende 'Don-Juan'-Tondichtung von Strauß am besten lag und auch geriet. Hier war Herliczkas Dirigierkunst energiegeladen, ihre Zeichengebung technisch und stilistisch klar und sicher. Viel Können und impulsives Musizieren trat in Erscheinung." Ferdinand Keyfel, *Teigernseer Zeitung*, November 25, 1938, page unknown [p. u.].

It remains to be discussed if the fact of Herliczka being a woman is a purely visual feature. In a review of her debut concert from 1927, we read: “If one closes one’s eyes while she is conducting, one hears a man, not a woman,”³ so I will maintain that the knowledge that the conductor is female is gained visually.⁴ Since the visual aspect of conducting is very central, we cannot remove this knowledge, but it evidently influences the way a conductor is judged.

Now I would like to list a conductor’s actions or practices from a more sociological perspective. So far, I can establish that what a conductor does includes stepping on the podium, being noticed as a person, influencing the orchestra and the audience by her or his presence, using a baton or not, moving hands in a significant way to influence the music and so on. I suppose that her activities are also the ones automatically associated with the profession and not seen in the concert: obtaining and learning the score, planning and leading rehearsals, giving instructions to musicians to optimise the performance, giving interviews, organising tickets for friends and many more.

Theodore Schatzki introduces the idea of bundles of practices that link art and social life in his paper “Art bundles”:⁵

[H]uman coexistence transpires as part of bundles of practices and material arrangements. As a result, any social phenomenon consists in features and slices of such bundles. This holds true of art, too: art is a feature of, indeed, it is a constellation of linked bundles.⁶

What I mentioned just before (preparing a score, conducting a rehearsal, planning the time, gesticulating in a concert and many more) is a conductor’s bundle of practices. Each conductor has an individual bundle of practices, but some practices are the same with all conductors. The bundle of practices is inevitably linked to the individual’s social world and to the social world as a whole.

3 Author’s translation, in original: “Schließt man während ihres Dirigierens die Augen, dann hört man einen Mann, nicht eine Frau.” R. K., “Eine neue Dirigentin,” *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 16, 1927, p. u.

4 Though thorough research of the meaning of similar remarks often applied to female musicians is requisite, it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Theodore Schatzki, “Art Bundles,” in *Artistic Practices. Social interactions and cultural dynamics*, ed. Tasos Zembylas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 17–31.

6 *Ibid.*, 18. Italics in the original.

An interesting feature of an art world, according to Schatzki, are conventions. “*What holds together an art world, its pattern of joint actions, are conventions.*”⁷

People uphold conventions not because they are supposed to or because doing so in prescribed but because acting in that way is the easiest way of proceeding, where ‘easiest’ means giving rise to the least difficulty, misunderstanding, or disagreement.⁸

One of the conventions in the classical music world is there being a conductor for a larger orchestra piece. It is the easiest way of playing together in a large group, though not the only one. There are conventional conducting patterns that help make gestures universally understandable and clear. As Schatzki puts it:

What makes sense to people to do is often what is conventional. Circumstances, however, might be such (1) that what makes sense to someone to do is something unconventional, and (2) that it is just as easy for her to do this as to follow custom because what she does is intelligible and acceptable to other participants in the practice as a way of proceeding in the circumstances for her project.⁹

This is clearly true for most conducting and musical interpretation in general. The most cherished and sought after interpretation is the one that transcends the conventional. The convention must be inherent, yet true mastery resides in convincing other people that what makes sense in the moment is something unique to this very musical interpretation, acting outside convention while at the same time being intelligible and acceptable.

Another convention that raises interest in relation to conducting, is that, as the visible leader, the conductor is a man. This is not a convention a woman could fulfil. Is it a necessary convention? Could the world enable her to conduct an orchestra if she fulfils other conventions, arguably more important to the success of the project?

Of course: to conduct an orchestra, even if they are the artistically experienced *Philharmonic*, a woman needs for that more than grace; knowledge, prudence, vigour, exceptional talent are required. *Gertrud Herliczka* is a born orchestra leader. One noticed that after the first bars of the beautiful, now seldom played Overture to the “Porter of Water”;

7 Ibid., 21.

8 Ibid., 22.

9 Ibid., 23.

how there everything sat and fitted together perfectly, the transitions were flowing, the entries came with absolute precision, and each end of the dynamics or time was understood. Only someone who knows how to transmit one's artistic will suggestively can find such true followers, through looks and the technical training of movements (we cannot speak about 'baton technique'; Gertrud Herliczka scorns the baton). The conductor has her scores in her head and doesn't even lay them on the stand (except when accompanying); that gives her complete freedom and omnipresence. But the main thing: she brings the best, innermost understanding to everything, and music is dear to her. [...] I have heard Strauß' 'Don Juan' interpreted by many important men; never has it been more youthful, fresh, brisk, powerful in Sturm und Drang, never more feminine and sweeter in the lyrical passages than by this woman.¹⁰

These words were written in 1938. Herliczka's critics were impressed by her conducting, so we can suppose she fulfilled the demands of a conductor's bundle of practices but had to struggle with prejudices against her gender. In 2024 we still feel the convention of the man on the podium. It is not because of the absence of women conductors or their lesser competence.¹¹ To put it sociologically, it is a sign that the convention of the man as leader is still strong in the social world. Schatzki resumes Becker's thoughts thus:

10 Author's translation, original: "Freilich: ein Orchester zu dirigieren, seien es auch die kunsterprobten Philharmoniker, dazu braucht eine Frau mehr als Anmut; dazu gehört Kenntnis, Umsicht, Tatkraft, besondere Begabung. Gertrud Herliczka ist die geborene Orchesterleiterin. Man merkte es nach den ersten Takten der schönen, jetzt selten gespielten Ouvertüre zum 'Wasserträger'; wie da alles saß und haarscharfklappte, die Uebergänge flossen, aufs genaueste die Einsätze kamen, und jeder dynamische und temporale Schluß verstanden ward. Solch pünktliche Gefolgschaft findet nur, wer seinen Künstlerwillen suggestiv zu übertragen weiß, durch Blick und technische Geschultheit der Bewegung (von 'Stabtechnik' kann man hier nicht sprechen; denn Gertrud Herliczka verschmäht den Stab). Die Dirigentin hat ihre Partituren im Kopf, legt sie gar nicht erst auf (außer beim Begleiten); das gibt ihr volle Freiheit und Allgegenwart. Die Hauptsache aber: sie bringt zu jedem das Beste, innigste Verständnis mit, und die Musik ist ihr hold. [...] Ich habe Straußens 'Don Juan' von manch bedeutendem Manne verdolmetschen hören; nie jugendfrischer, zügiger, kraftgeladener in Sturm und Drang, nie fraulicher und süßer im Lyrischen, als von dieser Frau." Dr. Hans Scholz, "Gertrud Herliczka dirigiert," *Münchener Zeitung*, November 26–27, 1939, p. u.

11 Talia Ilan has assembled a growing base with currently around 3000 female conductors from the past and present and posts daily on Facebook with the hashtag "#oneconductoraday." The reasons for the lack of their visibility and absence from history books, which results in the popular belief women conductors hardly exist(ed), still require thorough research.

Becker writes that changes in art require changes in worlds, in my language, changes in bundles. What he means is that changes in art take hold only if appropriate changes befall the world involved. His thesis can also be read as stating that changes in art are changes, not just in works of art (including performances), but also in the worlds, or bundles, of which such works are elements.¹²

Changes in art can take hold only if the appropriate changes befall the world involved. And by making changes in art, we change the world. Conventions are the easiest way of proceeding, and that is not our goal in musical interpretation, yet they are the glue that holds an art world together. Bundles of practices after Schatzki are one way of describing what a conductor does. But they do not convey the problematic of the conductor's gender, because no conducting practices are limited to one gender. Apparently, the visual component of conducting is very important, and through that gender is more evident. Noticing that the conductor is a woman suggests a whole scale of prejudices and suppositions that have been applied to this gender,¹³ and the authors of reviews presented above nearly a hundred years ago are reacting to these prejudices subconsciously. Nevertheless, this discussion remains pertinent in the present time. We still hear the term 'woman conductor' being used as if it had a clear meaning, as if a 'woman' was limited to a certain set of behaviours and abilities, and as if 'women conductors' were a separate group, distinct from conductors of other genders. But women are just as individual among themselves as any gender is. Hopefully in the 21st century we might see and judge conductors individually in terms of their actions and cease to apply prejudice to gender.

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12 Schatzki, "Art Bundles," 30.

13 See in particular the classical text by Karin Hausen, "Die Polarisierung der 'Geschlechtercharaktere'. Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben," in *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas. Neue Forschungen*, ed. Werner Conze (Klett: Stuttgart, 1976), 363–93.

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