

towards the women in his life is justified by his need for artistic solitude; in the eyes of the narrator (whose personal inadequacies are paralleled by his failures as a pianist: he has, instead, to resort to writing articles about music!), his slender relationship with Mewton-Wood becomes a tragic, romantic saga through comparison with the thwarted loves of the great composers.

Of course novelists are perfectly welcome to write about whatever they like, from the kings and queens of England to the history of quantum physics to the life of Noël Mewton-Wood, and historians to write about musicians. There is, however, little likelihood that a novel about quantum physics would be seen as any kind of substitute for actual scientific research, or that physicists will be expected to present their findings to the general public in an equally appealing form. We need to be vigilant that in the rush to embrace creative works as research, we do not lose sight of the similar gulf that exists between popular treatments of musical topics intended for the general public and specialist musicological research that makes a genuine, original contribution to international scholarship.

### ***Liz Garnett, Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning: Gesture, Voice, Identity***

Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009

ISBN: 978-9-7546-6379-9. xiii+227pp. Hbk, bibl., index, ill., DVD

**Reviewed by Peter Campbell**

The dust-jacket of Liz Garnett's exploration of a facet of the socio-musical world provides an excellent summary of her aims. Choirs of different styles and from different traditions—contrast, for example, an English Cathedral choir with an American Gospel choir—not only sound different, but also look different; both the singers and their directors move differently, gesture differently and interact differently. Garnett explores how physical (or non-verbal) communication works in a musical context, asking if some gestural recognition is innate or if, at least in part, it is formed through a process of social convention and learnt behaviour.

This fascinating topic urges one to think about the practical consequences of placing a conductor from one tradition in front of a choir from another. Some purely musical elements (pitch, rhythm and rubato, for instance) may well survive intact, but many matters of style could well be lost, the suggestion being that we rely more heavily than might initially be thought on shared practice. The book is thus an investigation of 'the extent to which the connections between conductor demeanour and choral sound operate at a general level, and in what ways they are constructed within a specific idiom.'

Garnett's introduction sets out these questions such that the reader is drawn immediately into feeling it necessary that answers be provided. How do the body-motions and other physical indications of conductors from different choral genres actually differ? How exactly can their various 'gestural vocabularies' be described, and does the viewer (the chorister), or indeed the listener (the audience), perceive the music differently if he or she does not come from that background or (musico-cultural) tradition? Even if they do, might different levels

training lead to different interpretations of the same gesture? In my experience, at many a joint rehearsal, much time is spent in muttered conversation by choristers and orchestral players about the relatively subtle differences between an 'orchestral conductor' and a 'choral conductor'—whomever is waving the baton that night if she is not from one's own, supposedly shared, Western tradition—so it is even more intriguing to think of the practice from more diverse parts of the choir spectrum. How, indeed, does gesture become meaningful, and under what conditions does a particular gesture retain the same meaning?

Evidence from four broad areas is presented: music and identity, performance studies, choral conducting, and non-verbal communication theory, although the book itself is not ordered in these sections, rather giving us parts concerning how we study conducting, what the nature of choral singing is, the links between conducting gesture and musical thought, and the bond between conductor and choir. For each, Garnett gathers examples of conducting techniques from her direct observations of a variety of choral ensembles from different traditions: an all-male cathedral choir, a female barbershop chorus, a community gospel choir and a symphonic chorus. The particular traits under discussion are shown on the accompanying DVD, an excellent addition for what is largely an investigation of the way in which visual information is 'translated' into an aural product. The structure is a good one, although the theoretical material means that the boundaries are not always clear and I was itching to get through to the 'answer' of how exactly conductors can mould choirs (if, indeed, that is how it works).

Garnett has brought together the work of many theorists, and along the way makes interesting observations that performers might find valuable, although I felt that these useful comments were often rather buried. Among the ideas is the fact that gesture is, in many cases, linked more to expressing thought than to indicating action (the example given is the way in which we use our hands when on a mobile telephone, even when we know the other person cannot see us). Here, the action is so linked to helping us express the idea that we make the action almost involuntarily. So, then, the conductor may use a signal, not so much to direct her performers, but rather to express her thought; the outcome is the same—the conveying of the conductor's idea to the performers—but the reason for the action may not quite be what it seems (p. 155). On page 175, in a quote from James Jordan, the observation that the 'shape of the [conductor's] hands directly influences the color of the vowel being produced by the choir' is wonderfully insightful and helpful, and ties in to so much other material in the book trying to unravel the connection between action by the conductor (and whether this action is him interpreting the musical information from the score for transmission, or is, in fact, part of his thought processes about the music itself) and then the consequent reaction by the singer (who reinterprets musically these visual cues or, perhaps, mimics the physical action in a musical way). That this happens instantaneously throughout a large group is the extraordinary thing about live performance. David McNeill's work—*Gesture and Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2005)—is the basis of the discussion here, providing the idea that 'Gesture is not merely a representation of thought, but participates in the act of thinking itself' (p. 159). This links to earlier discussions positing that traditions of gesture—learnt or enculturated physical experience—play a part in the maintenance of specific styles of performance, that is, performers require (or indeed actively contribute to) a shared gestural tradition that would make it difficult for a conductor from another tradition to achieve his intended results when first put in front of the ensemble.

For my money, the crucial argument of the book comes half-way through, beginning on page 140 with the comment that 'conducting gestures circulate as embodied traditions of musical meaning shared among instrumentalists and singers as well as the conductors themselves.' When performers watch a conductor's beat, they are sharing in the 'spacial/orientational meaning encoded in the standard patterns as a direct part of their musical experience and understanding, not merely as a visually transmitted code' (p. 141). This is certainly true of most orchestral conductors and bands, although the generally lower level of musical education of choristers and of their conductors (particularly outside the USA), is indicated by a parallel reduction in the clarity and consistency of the beat in many amateur choirs. In other words, the more varied training (if any) received by choral conductors and choir members is reflected in the varying extent to which they understand or react to complex gesture when compared with elite orchestral ensembles.

As is common, Ashgate's proofreading lets it down. The italic font is missing from a title in a footnote on page 18) and a reference style that omits the publisher from footnotes has, presumably, been chosen. The footnotes on pages 19 and 47 have a mixture of capitalisation, even though everything is provided correctly and consistently in the bibliography. There are small (yet important) words missing on pages 37 ('undertook [to] discuss'), 107 ('as well [as] the'), 132 ('is [the] smoothness'), 138 ('as [a] way to') and 181 ('possible [to] make'), an extra word inserted on page 133 ('and the basses [it] sing it back to him'), and many instances of misplaced commas, especially in the footnotes. While, usually, it is good to maintain the author's voice, there are times when the editor must step in to save authors from themselves. Particularly impressive was a passage on page 199, where a surely unintentional oxymoron was followed immediately by a tautology: '... and some will prove *positively counter-productive*. Moreover, it is not always easy to *predict in advance* which aspects ...' [emphasis added]. Though these are minor irritations, such turns of phrase can, nonetheless, interrupt the reader's flow, and obscure the otherwise excellent point being made by the author.

Garnett's *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning* sets an ambitious agenda, exploring our understanding of how the mechanics of a complex facet of musical performance actually work. As a study chiefly concerned with theory rather than practice, it is, nonetheless, about praxis, or how a better understanding of the way in which a conductor's actions influence the musical outcome of the performers under her 'control' can be applied to increase the effectiveness of that conductor's gestures. In that regard, there are some useful notes in the concluding chapter that might be helpful to many musicians. The hardback edition is well presented, clearly printed and provided with adequate illustrative material, the main drawback being that I felt that while a lot had been explained, I was not very much closer to a deep understanding. I suppose that is what theory must feel like to a practitioner.