

Teacher and leader as conductor

Roy Blatchford

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The Dutch conductor Bernard Haitink (1929 - 2021) died recently after a career spanning 65 years at the highest levels of music making.

He was a musician ill at ease with the cult of the charismatic maestro. Yet in his time he led the London Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and was music director of Glyndebourne and Covent Garden. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he never thought of himself as interpreting music, or of wanting to do anything with it other than bring it to life.

Fellow conductor Simon Rattle observed that with Haitink 'the normal problems of ensemble or balance simply vanish. If we can't play well under Bernard, it's time to take up another profession.'

Another commentator on Haitink's inspiring style noted that he knew exactly what he wanted, when to hold back, when to let go, and when simply to leave it to the players 'whose devotion to him reflected his faith in them'.

I was struck by both these observations when reflecting on the many excellent teachers and leaders I am currently working with.

When one watches the best teachers (special, primary, secondary) and leaders (headteachers, LA Directors, MAT CEOs and Chairs) in action, it is that quiet command which shines forth. And every time a decision comes up, the qualitatively 'correct' choice is made. The action, in itself, is nothing special; the care and consistency with which it is made *is*.

The most effective teaching I see is rooted in strong subject knowledge, intellectual curiosity, fascinating digression, the teacher's personal stories of learning, great questioning, and humour - elements which bring subjects and skills alive for students in classrooms, and help them remember new facts, figures, ideas and concepts.

And watch a skilled art, music or design technology teacher, or an early years practitioner - and you see that intuitive knowing when to intervene, when to let go which characterised Haitinks's approach to the talented musicians with whom he worked across the world.

I'm no expert on what poor conductors do though this may resonate: less effective teaching in classrooms falls back on didactic delivery, low expectations of how students should listen carefully to one another, and a sense of drift without a solid consensus in the room of the purpose of the session.

As to leadership. That similar knowing when to speak, when to listen, when to summarise, when to allow digression characterises the style and practice of highly respected leaders I learn from.

The care and consistency with which they lead their executive teams or conduct themselves in front of political members or trustees is notable. It comes from years of practice observing others do things right and do things badly. In the same way that Haitink immersed himself as a young conductor in orchestral scores, top educational leaders have paid their dues as juniors, soaking up effective ways of doing from their seniors. Above all, they model and nurture strong professional relationships.

The accomplished teachers and leaders *practise being excellent* - and of course those they teach and lead remember them for that and are inspired in turn. Aristotle reminds us that excellence is never an accident - that it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort and intelligent execution.

High intention in practice means that leaders and teams at all levels set out high, specific ambitions in their respective domains.

Sincere effort means that all staff approach their daily and weekly tasks with a sincerity and commitment that is personally and professionally satisfying.

Intelligent execution means that all staff think intelligently and practically about the best ways to achieve their goals.

It remains a personal and professional privilege to work in schools and colleges around the country, and be in the presence of inspiring conductors.

'*Must do better: how to improve the image of teaching and why it matters*' by Harry Hudson and Roy Blatchford is forthcoming, published by John Catt Education.