



Gundog handlers and orchestral conductors have a lot in common.

Graham Cox

THIS IS something I've been thinking about for years: the close relationship between orchestral conducting and gundog handling. Why do I say that? Well, let's start with a seeming paradox. Four-time Retriever Championship winner John Halstead's comment that it's now "80 per cent handler and 20 per cent dog" has to be set alongside the *Kennel Club Field Trial Regulations* which, in the section on judging, say that "a good handler will appear to do little but watch his dog while maintaining at all times perfect control over it."

There's no contradiction, of course. Good competitors in any sport appear unhurried: they have time and one reason good gundog handlers have time is because they have absolute confidence in their control over their dog and their co-operation with it. Both will have been based on thoroughly instilling the basics and a readiness to handle decisively during all the training prior to competitive work. Good handlers have a feel for when to "put their whistle in their pocket", as Joan Hayes' father, Edgar Winter, put it. Timing of interventions, and whether to make them at all, is critical. And gifted handlers know that clarity and their whole body language, including facial expression, really matters.

So, can we learn anything from musical maestros? A while ago the BBC gave us *Maestro at the Opera* and we saw Craig Revel-Horwood of *Strictly* judging fame conducting Puccini's *La Boheme* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. "They'll find it hard to trust me," he said, and one of his mentors, Michael Rosewell, reminded him that when the military band comes on stage he would have to keep control of 170 performers. "The capacity for it to go wrong," he commented, with words that might have come from a gundog handler's mouth, "is immense".

The word maestro, of course, proclaims power and control and the images of the greats on record and CD covers sustain the great dictator myth: for myth it is, as a recently published book by Tom Service shows. *Music as Alchemy: Journeys with Great Conductors and Their Orchestras* faithfully represents his research which sought to answer the question of just what do conductors do up there on the podium? He attended rehearsals and

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saw how 'life-changing' concerts are painstakingly built up through weeks of preparation and study and days of rehearsal realised in the few hours of performance.

More than anything, though, his observations scotched the power-hungry maestro idea of conducting. Such figures only came into being in the late 19th century. Before that, composers or pianists took care of the time-keeping. Now, though, professionals can themselves have stellar reputations. Despite that, Service found the last thing the best conductors do is force a group of musicians to do their bidding. Claudio Abbado uses one word more than any other in rehearsals: "listen". Sir Simon Rattle's relationship with the exceptional virtuosos of the Berlin Philharmonic is founded on similar principles of collaboration.

How great orchestras become capable of delivering a 'cosmic' performance varies, it seems. There's a complicated psychology at work, depending on the orchestra's history, its function and constitution, its cultural and political significance within each city and the character of the musicians. They clearly want to feel valued as individual musicians. But equally, they expect inspiration and leadership from the podium. 'Life-changing' performances go beyond egos.

So the similarities between training and handling a dog and conducting a great orchestra could not be more marked. Control demonstrated on the podium is made possible by hard work and mutual trust, and the orchestra's response depends crucially on clarity and timing. Great handlers and great conductors do indeed have much in common. ✎

Graham Cox is an 'A' panel judge and member of the Kennel Club Field Trial sub committee.