
Sinead Hayes

Zoom Conducting

Reframing the Baton

Case Study 1:

Working with Athenry Music School Sinfonietta



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Introduction

The move to online ensembles has led to a re-evaluation of the role of the conductor.

All my professional work stopped in March 2020, leaving me with the time to reframe, reimagine and find a way to continue to work as a conductor within the context of COVID-19.

Since September 2020, I have had the opportunity to work via Zoom on a weekly basis with the Athenry Music School Sinfonietta. This is a summary of my experience and approach so far.....

Athenry Sinfonietta

18 PLAYERS

AGED 14 – 18

GRADES 5 - 8

INSTRUMENTS:

VIOLINS (10), VIOLAS (4),

BASS (1)

FLUTES (2), ALTO

SAXOPHONE (1)





The Zoom Issue....

Zoom has positives and negatives for group music making.

POSITIVES:

- Visual equality of individual musicians – when viewed in 'gallery view'.
- Possibility for smaller group discussions in break-out rooms.
- Possibility for group engagement with pre-recorded audio and video material

NEGATIVES:

Although it is an effective platform for group discussions and conferences, the main disadvantage of using Zoom for ensemble rehearsals is its level of variability including:

- Sound quality
- Participant equipment – camera and microphone
- Internet quality, speed and reliability resulting in variable degrees of latency among Zoom meeting participants
- Musician position relative to the camera. For larger instruments, it can be difficult to find the optimum camera position.



Case Study: Athenry Music School Sinfonietta

weekly Zoom rehearsal: Thursdays 19:30 – 20:30

Repertoire:

Raymond Deane: A Baroque Session with Carolan & Friends (2009)

Arcangelo Corelli: Christmas Concerto: Pastorale

PRE-PREPARATION

- Bowing and marking up individual parts
- Parts e-mailed to players (thanks to AMS director Katharine Mac Mághnuis for this!)
- Preparation of practice tracks - I played, recorded and multi-tracked all the individual parts on violin and baritone violin.
- Uploading of recordings to website for download by the players

INITIAL ZOOM MEETING - ATHENRY MUSIC SCHOOL

- Three orchestra groups meet in the main AMS Zoom meeting room at 7:30pm on Thursday evenings.
 - Following a brief group chat, the groups are divided into break-out rooms by Katharine: Youth Orchestra, Youth Orchestra Celli and Sinfonietta
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Sinfonietta Rehearsal Format

INITIAL CHAT & TUNING

All players unmute. Quick response from each player –e.g. tell us about the week. This is followed by a short tuning session led by the conductor from the violin.

WARM UP

This focusses on aspects of the repertoire that can be visually communicated, such as:

- bow distribution
- sounding point
- slow motion passage bowing
- We sometimes use a call and echo approach where I nominate players to unmute and demonstrate aspects with others all echoing (while muted).
- I also sometimes nominate pairs of players, one player demonstrating and the second player observing what they did.

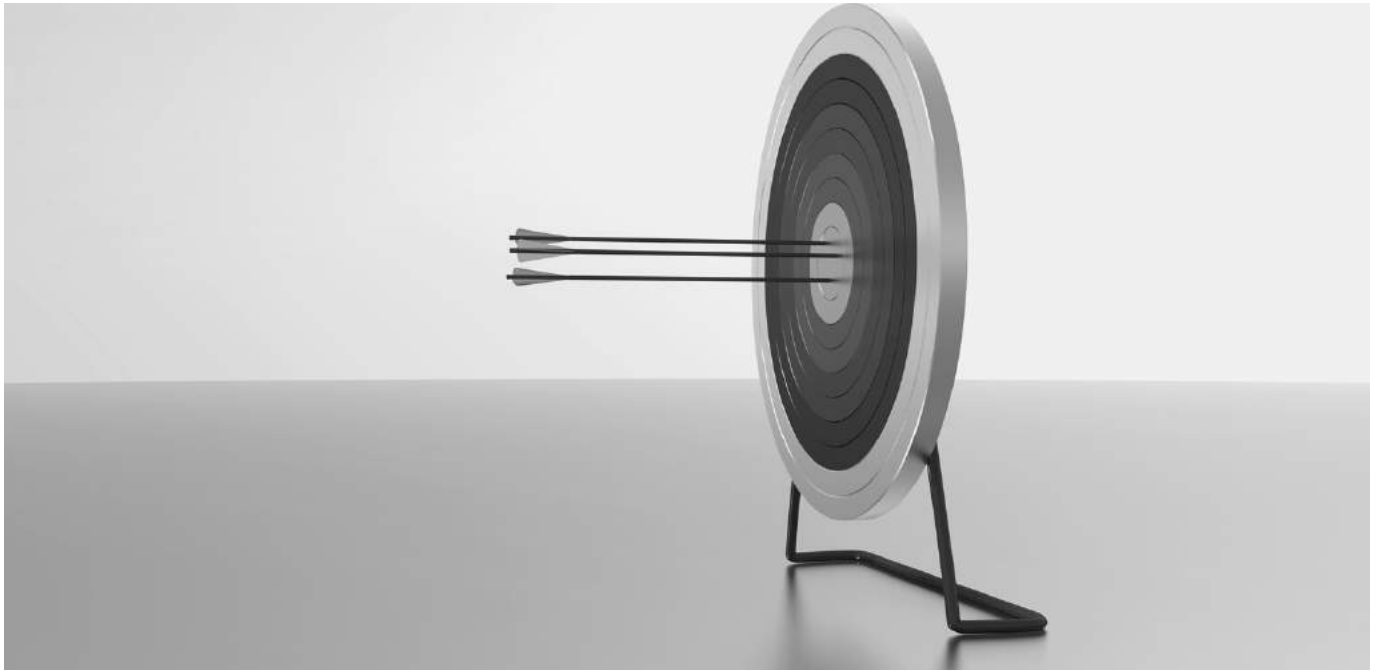
WORK ON THE REPERTOIRE

During the first few weeks of rehearsal, we worked on the repertoire using a combination of:

- Live leading where I played each part focussing on details of bowing, articulation, dynamics etc. The players marked their parts and played along while muted.
- Sharing the pre-recorded track as computer sound via Zoom, and observing the players as they played along. Zoom latency meant that this took some getting used to!

After three weeks, the players were familiar with the music, so each took turns unmuting and leading short sections of the repertoire (8 – 16 bars long). This gave me an opportunity to hear their individual progress, and generally point out any issues of intonation/rhythm etc. by highlighting certain bars to the group (not the individual) e.g. “Watch out for the F natural in bar 20 – make sure that’s not too high”

As the weeks went on, the players became more confident and led longer sections, eventually playing the full piece and counting out the rests for the colleagues.



Musical Goals

These rehearsals aim to build a sense of individual and collective musical responsibility within the group in a supportive and collegial way, in the same way as conventional, in-person ensemble rehearsals.

Just like real life rehearsals, as well as playing as much as possible, I engage the players with the as many musical decisions as possible by prompting:

- Critical listening
- Critical musical thinking
- Critical musical observation

Equipping the musicians with these tools allows them to keep developing, even when they don't have the possibility for real life musical interactions

They effectively learn how to teach themselves.

They also develop a deeper appreciation for musical nuance and artistry, allowing them to engage critically and emotionally with elite musical performance.

A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.

Leonard Bernstein



Critical Listening

This is important in the context of Zoom, where individual players usually only hear their own sound, and the sound of the leader.

Aspects of critical listening that we regularly consider during our Sinfonietta sessions:

- Pulse/Tempo: is it rushing/dragging?
- Rhythm: is it different to the leader's? Where exactly? How do we correct it?
- Intonation: does your intonation match the leader's or the guide track? Is it higher or lower? How can you match the intonation?
- Tone Colour/Dynamics: This is very challenging to examine particularly with Zoom, but using the pre-recorded material, certain passages can be highlighted and experiments in bow speed, pressure and sounding point can be done. The individual players can then make a judgement on the best combination to achieve the particular sound/dynamic/effect/character.
- Ensemble: This is another challenge with Zoom. I continually ask the players to judge whether they are playing together with the leader/guide track. Pizzicati in particular are great for focussing on accuracy of ensemble!
- Character/Feeling: How does the music make us feel - or how would I imagine my parents/siblings would feel after listening to this music?

For our work on Corelli, I asked the players to find YouTube videos of performances of the Christmas concerto. We compared these performances, noting musical differences and finding inspiration for our own performance of the piece.



Critical Musical Thinking

The Zoom rehearsal format gives us a chance to examine why, not just how, by asking questions and forming a collective opinion based on the individual players' ideas. Responses in the initial stages can be like pulling teeth, but this gradually changes as group confidence grows! Decisions are marked in the parts, but can evolve during the rehearsals.

Questions I ask during our sessions include:

- What do we think of the tempo?
- How do we set the tempo? Relationship between the metronome mark and tempo? Is the metronome mark correct??
- What kind of character are we going for in this section? I give two or three options and ask for a show of hands to vote! Another approach is to ask some of the more confident players, and then ask for a show of hands.
- How will we achieve this character – bow stroke articulation, general feeling?
- Details of articulation/dynamics - how can we relate these to the character? Longer, shorter, lighter, heavier? I'll demonstrate two/three options or ask two/three of the players to each demonstrate different options and ask for a vote.
- What about the micro/macro musical picture? What's the overall architecture of the piece? How long do we think that phrase is? Who says 2 bars? Who says 4 bars? How do we show the phrasing? I'll demonstrate a couple of options, or ask individual players to demonstrate, and ask for a vote.

Whatever the answer, I always find a positive, even if the response doesn't fit the exact musical aim. Having a musical opinion is the point at this stage!



Critical Musical Observation

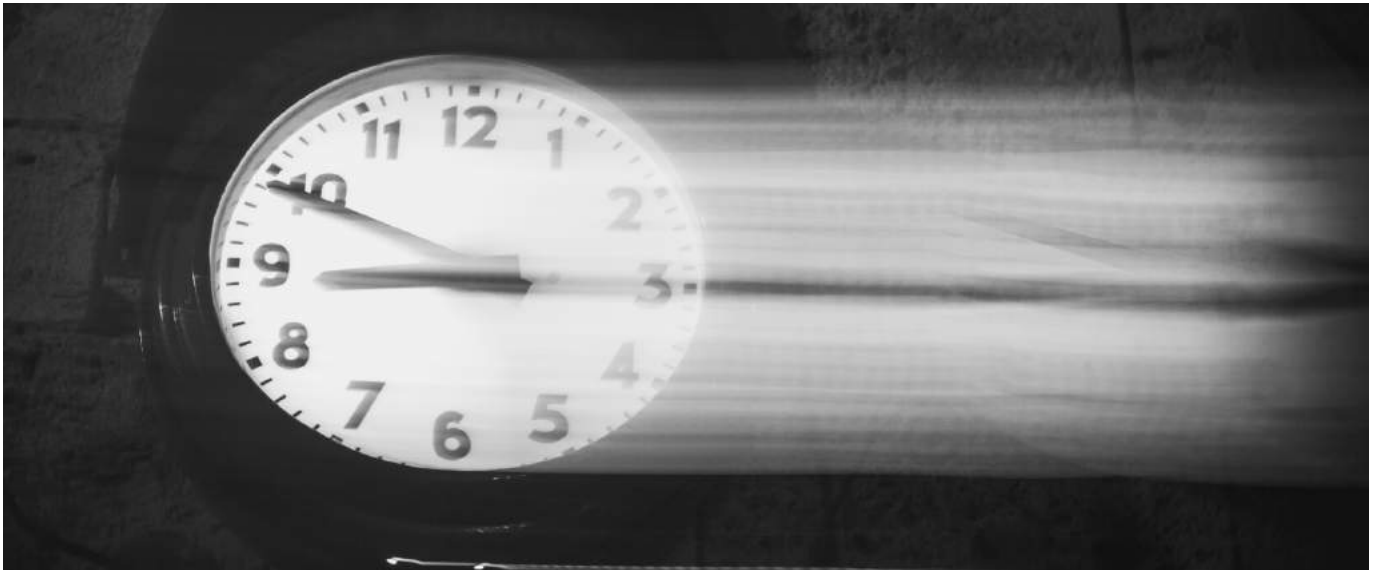
This is where visibility of everyone on Zoom becomes a real advantage. I encourage players to be aware of what I or their colleagues are doing, and constantly remind them to notice.

I demonstrate while asking them to observe, and prompt them to ask themselves questions like:

- Are we in the same part of the bow as the leader/colleagues?
- Does the sounding point match? What is the sounding point ? Be specific!
- How much bow am I using compared to the leader?
- How about bow speed? Is it constant, or does it vary through the note?
- General bowing – are we all doing the marked bowing?
- Left hand position?
- General instrument position?
- Bow arm position – where is my upper arm in relation to my forearm/wrist?

I encourage the players to look and observe their own playing– e.g. watch your bow arm like a hawk while you play bar 15. What do you notice about X or Y?

This critical observation skill means that players can watch and learn from the many elite musicians whose videos are freely available on YouTube.



December 2020.. and Beyond..

Following our weekly Zoom rehearsals (and a guest appearance by composer Raymond Deane), we planned a filming session for 12th December 2020.

On the 6th December, in preparation for the filming session, I had the opportunity to give each player a socially distanced, in-person individual lesson, during which we recapped all the work done in the Zoom sessions.

It really was a joy to see and hear them all in real life!

On the 12th December, following confirmation by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media that we could go ahead, we met in two groups of approximately 9 musicians and actually played together for the first time in many months.

After 20minutes of rehearsal, we filmed our performance. The results are to be seen on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/RjxtnS7NdVU>

Building on our work in 2020, we begin 2021 with the hope that we will all soon meet again to play together in person. In the meantime, there is new music to be learned, new musical decisions to be made, and a whole lot of Zooming ahead!



A word of thanks.....

Huge thanks to Katharine Mac Mághnuis and the team at Athenry Music School for the chance to work with the young musicians of the Sinfonietta. Without your work, year on year, none of this would be possible. www.athenrymusicsschool.com

Thanks also to the young musicians themselves, for bringing their talent, commitment, enthusiasm and sense of exploration to our weekly rehearsal sessions. You make all the extra work completely worth it!

Thanks to composer Raymond Deane, for sending us his piece, and being so supportive of this and future performances. www.raymonddeane.com

And finally thanks to my teachers at RNCM who shared their expertise in working with youth orchestras and players of all abilities. I have worked constantly with those skills over the past decade, and hope to continue to do so for decades to come.