

# “What’s with the Russian Soldier?” How Acting and Movement Inform my Conducting

Cynthia Johnston Turner

What you are about to read is risky for me to write because it is so highly personal. It might not be something you relate to. You might even think I’m a little crazy because...well...it kind of sounds that way. I share it because it was an insightful and potent experience that has ultimately made me rethink what I do and how I do it on the podium.

Having taken (and taught) numerous conducting seminars, lessons, and workshops, I have long wanted to pursue the concept of “movement” with a non-conductor. During my sabbatical leave last semester, I researched acting and movement schools in New York City and decided upon the Jason Bennett Actor’s Workshop. As it happened, I was fortunate enough to work with Jason Bennett himself, who also happens to have a strong musical background (a former horn player and music-theatre major in a major US conservatory), and who recently was runner-up for the best acting coach and best scene-study teacher in New York. And, though I was interested in traveling to the city for the classes, he was more interested in leaving the city. So, for one weekend last fall, Jason Bennett came to my home in upstate New York to introduce me to a fresh way of thinking about myself on the podium.

Unlike traditional conducting sessions, Jason began by having me conduct to a recording in my (small) music studio. And while I can hear the deafening sounds of disapproval as I write this (I, too, was unhappy with the exercise, for a variety of reasons), it was an informative way for Jason to watch me move to music. He quickly wanted to move away from this exercise (thank goodness!) to a larger space for one of the most embarrassing, scary, challenging, hilarious, frustrating, and ultimately “mind-blowing” exercises I have ever had to perform.

Here is what I had to do: tell a story using my entire body, my whole voice (every range and timbre I could muster), and as much of the room as possible. “OK, I can do that,” I thought. “I don’t particularly want to (and I’m not sure what this has to do with conducting), but I can do it.” Then he added, “It can’t be linear.” In other words, the story couldn’t be a narrative. He demonstrated and, of course, was spectacular. He told a crazy, fantastical, outlandish story that was captivating and extremely entertaining. And then it was my turn.

I tried my best. I was inspired by his work, his acting, his story-telling, and how sort of post-modern the whole thing was. But, I wasn’t very good at it. I’d start with these big arm movements and find a loud, low voice and talk about an evil, fat princess, and waddled over to the other side of the room to become the smallest little tree frog I could be (hey, it’s my story...stay with me), and jump around and whisper something about hairless dogs.

During my story, I kept saying, “and then...” and he’d stop me and say, “try it again.” This went on for twenty-thirty minutes, and finally I got so frustrated, I wanted to quit. “Jason,” I said, “What’s with this Russian soldier that I keep coming back to?” (Whenever I couldn’t think of anything creative or funny or interesting, I’d act like a tall Russian soldier and high-step around the living room.)

He became very quiet, and asked, “Do you trust me?” At that point, I actually didn’t trust him. But I didn’t say so. I just said, “Sure.” And here is where it gets a little odd (as if trying to tell a non-narrative, fantastical story in front of an award-winning acting coach in my living room wasn’t odd enough).

It turns out that acting and movement lessons aren’t just about acting and movement. Finally, he said, “Can I talk to the Russian soldier?” “Um, what do you mean,” I asked. But actually I knew exactly what he meant. And he asked me to move over one step and “be” the Russian soldier. I can tell you, I did *not* want to do this. I didn’t want to have a therapy session. I didn’t want to pretend to be something I wasn’t, and I didn’t understand what he was doing. But for some reason I still cannot explain (maybe I just wanted to stop the exercise), I was *into* it. So I moved over one step, stood as tall and erect as possible, became very serious, and refused to make eye contact. Jason spoke to me as if I was a Russian soldier, and I responded in kind.

“You are very important to Cindi, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are very disciplined, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You respect order and rules, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You protect Cindi, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

And on it went until I slowly figured out that this Russian soldier character was some sort of personal archetype for me. In Jungian terms, he (yes, *he*) might be some sort of psychic disposition that helps form my personality, and he emerged because of this bizarre, creative, and rather stressful exercise that stimulated my subconscious workings. And it’s true. I do respect discipline and order and rules and, evidently, I call on that part of my personality when I experience challenging circumstances. (Trust me on this...if you underwent this exercise that Jason had me do, you might find some recurring characters as well...)

A subsequent exercise had me conducting to music in my head, no recording, and after a few moments he asked me about my incessant use of a downbeat.

“Why do you always have to show ‘1’? It’s looks repetitive and boring.”

“It may look boring, but the players need to see it,” I retorted.

“Why? Can’t they count to four by themselves?”

## WHAT'S WITH THE RUSSIAN SOLDIER?

Well, you can imagine the difficulty I had with this. I gave all sorts of reasons why I needed to show the downbeat (especially with the complicated, modern, angular music that I was conducting in my head), and he gave all sorts of other reasons why it was probably unnecessary and, more to his point, boring. We agreed to disagree on that point, but I was intrigued. In many ways, he's absolutely right, and it has made me rethink orientation in my conducting.

Orientation, by the way, was drilled into me during graduate school, as well as every other technical aspect of conducting, so it's no wonder that I have this other *alter ego* that Jason flushed out...the "terminal degree in conducting" part of my personality. He had a long chat with that *alter ego*.

That part of my personality also believes in rules and order, just like the Russian soldier, and believes in baton technique above all else. But, during another exercise, he flushed out another archetype: what I've called "the clown." He seemed to love this part of my personality. Pure entertainment and absolutely fun to watch (fun to do as well). Some other archetypes emerged during my work with Jason; parts of my personality that I consciously didn't know existed...the "artist," the "entertainer," the "wounded child," maybe there are even more.

You get the idea: essentially, Jason (as well as many eminent psychologists and brain researchers, I've since discovered) believes that our personalities are composed of many different archetypes (or experiences that form archetypes), probably shaped during childhood, all important, and all unique to each of us.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with conducting? Quite a bit, as it turns out. At the end of the first day, Jason and I had a long and animated (most things with Jason are animated) discussion about the role of a conductor: entertainer, technician, facilitator, time-beater, artist, conduit, dictator, collaborator, interpreter, visionary, leader, "channeler," composer's advocate, someone who inspires, all of the above and then some.

I have long believed that personality means more than technique on the podium. That, I realize, is a controversial belief. I am not saying that technique is unimportant; on the contrary, just ask my DMA archetype. I am saying that who we are on the podium – musician, leader, collaborator, *person* – makes more of an impact on musicians and music-making than technique does. And, if you accept that, then knowing who we are, who we really are inside, makes a difference in how we approach our musicians and our music-making. "Know thyself" has since taken on an entirely different and complex meaning for me and my approach to my work as a conductor. Now I practice moving to music in a different way each day. Mostly, on the advice of Jason, I dance.

And, having said all of that, I also believe the opposite: conducting is, and should be, entirely the antithesis of "thyself." Conducting and music-making are about keeping my ego in check, making it not about me but entirely about the music, and committing to something higher than myself.

What we do as conductors (and rehearsal technicians and teachers and leaders) is tricky business. We constantly need to balance a series of complex, sometimes even opposite forces at

work within us and around us. Control of our environment *versus* "losing" ourselves in the music, is a good example. Perhaps we just need to embrace the paradox. What Jason has taught me is that knowing what (or who?) is at work within me, can inform and enhance what I do as a musician, a leader, a teacher, and a conductor. I'm not sure how much I believe it all, but that weekend was a powerful and truly memorable experience.

Another wise teacher once told me, "It's normal to have butterflies in your stomach before a performance. The trick is to get them to fly in formation." Maybe it's the same with our personality archetypes – trust me, you have them, too. It's normal to have them; the trick is to get them working for you.



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## Did you know...?

In summer 2011, the federal government instituted a 15% non-refundable Children's Art Tax Credit of up to \$500 per child (under 16) to support the development of creative skills or expertise in artistic or cultural activities. The following explains eligible activities:

Creative skills or expertise involve a child's ability to improve dexterity or co-ordination, or acquire and apply knowledge in the pursuit of artistic or cultural activity. Artistic and cultural activities include literary arts, visual arts, performing arts, music, media, languages, customs, and heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Music instruction and tuition are listed as qualifying expenses for this Art Tax Credit. To qualify, activities must last longer than once a week for eight weeks or for five consecutive days. It is noteworthy that parents can now receive a benefit similar to the Fitness Tax Credit (begun in 2007) for participation in private music lessons, summer band programs, and other activities.

1. <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/gncy/bdgt/2011/qa01-eng.html> (June 16, 2011)

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