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Behind the Baton:

Exploring autoethnographic writing in a musical context

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Abstract

In this article I consider how music can expand the creative possibilities of autoethnography. Likewise, I also explore how autoethnography can offer musicians a means to reflect on their creative work in culturally insightful ways. In order to 'play out' these disciplinary considerations, I craft an autoethnographic narrative that centers on my own creative practice as a conductor. Moving between description and action, dialogue and introspection, my narrative reveals some of the complexities of reflecting and writing about music in this way. While this narrative is grounded in my own lived experiences, it reveals significant broader issues about the process of doing autoethnography, the conducting profession, and the culture and practice of music-making at large.

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I am a professional conductor today because of my first conducting class. It sounds cliché, but it really was a magical experience for me. Strangely enough, I never grew up wanting to be a conductor. Since childhood I had seen conductors as school teachers who frightened the hell out of their students by making them perform solos in front of the whole school band. Of course they were nice, fun-loving men when they were cooking hamburgers at school functions, but when they stepped up to the podium they could strike the fear of god in their wide-eyed students. With one comment or glance they could make a child's life a blissful triumph or a living hell. Luckily I was one of those diligent young girls who figured out how to charm these conductor-characters with my apparent musical talent.

I later came to see conductors as men with foreign accents, who wore turtleneck tops with their sleeves rolled up. They were intense people who seemed to drink copious amounts of dark coffee and smoke a lot. By the time I reached university, I still saw conductors as larger than life men who were scaring the living daylights out of their musicians. Looking back, my early impressions are certainly not dissimilar to those of the infamous American music critic, Harold Schonberg (1967): "He is of commanding presence, infinite dignity, fabulous memory, vast experience, high temperament and serene wisdom. He has been tempered in the crucible but he is still molten and he glows with a fierce inner light [. . .]. He has to but stretch out his hand and he is obeyed" (pp. 15-16).

It is no wonder the thought of becoming a conductor had never ever crossed my mind. Although I did feel great affection towards one or two of these conductors – particularly the ones who encouraged me – I still saw the role as somehow "untouchable." So when I was required to take a conducting class during my university degree, I was not the slightest bit impressed or excited. I did not know this class would forever change the direction of my life. When I stepped up to the podium for the first time and began to move my body to the music it felt so natural. All of my childhood impressions of conducting did not seem to gel with the musical experience I was having. Whether it was because of my passion for dancing, or some other deep musical desire within me, conducting became my new fixation. After one class, I was hooked.

In the ten years since that first conducting class it feels as though my career has been moving in a somewhat intense mode. I am only in my late twenties, yet I have directed ensembles from Thailand, Singapore and Australia, conducted a number of university and community groups, and toured to Taiwan and Bangkok. I am not saying this to be self-congratulatory, but rather to point out that the intensity of my career has forced me to face a number of complex challenges without the luxury of much retrospection or hindsight. In 2006, this led me to begin thinking more deeply about my position and asking bigger and broader questions about the musical, performative, relational, and embodied nature of the experiences I was having. I began looking for ways to think and write about my musical experiences which were just as creative, exciting and personal as my work on the podium. Somehow the tired and conventional methods offered by musicology just didn't seem to help. After much searching, the field of autoethnography seemed to find me. It wasn't long before I was captivated.

I launched into an intense year of journaling, reading, score studying, rehearsing, filming, writing, analyzing, thinking and performing. This process built on my previous ethnographic research into the gendered experiences of women conductors and looked at the ways in which the issues I'd explored in other women's lives related to my own (see Bartleet 2006, 2005, 2004, 2003a, 2003b, 2002). At first this involved sifting through the memory archives of my life, so I could come to a deeper understanding of myself as a conductor (see Ellis 2004, p. 176). I used emotional recall and drew on sensory recollections of significant moments throughout my musical development. These recollections not only revealed a great deal about me, but also about my profession at large. Due to the musical nature of my project, my reflections were not always in text-based formats. I filmed my rehearsals and concerts, undertook interviews with colleagues and used sound recordings and photographic images to reflect on significant moments in my processes of interpretation and performance. By being one step removed through such media, I was able to explore the differences between what I thought I was doing in the moment and what I perceived myself to be doing in retrospect. Crafting, reflecting, re-crafting and re-reflecting on this data evoked a very

fluid sense of time; it happened anywhere, anytime and never seemed to end. This fluidity meant there were very few boundaries between my creative work and my personal life.

I devoured the work of other autoethnographers and writers, such as Ellis (2004; 1995), Ruth Behar (1999; 1996), Stacy Holman Jones (1998), Laurel Richardson (2000, 1990), Lisa M. Tillman-Healy (1996), Bud Goodall (2000), Carol Rambo (2005, 1996), and Ellis with Art Bochner (2006; 2000; 1996; 1992) and Leigh Berger (2002), amongst many others. With the exception of Holman-Jones, none of these authors directly address their musical lives; however, their ideas spoke volumes to me as a conductor, and equipped me with a plethora of ideas and ways to think about my musical experiences. Their work provided me with guidance on important scholarly approaches to reflective practice, narrative styles and writing techniques. I was particularly drawn to those engaging in what has commonly (and somewhat problematically) been labeled "evocative" autoethnography. This evocative approach seemed to be more conducive to the creative style I wanted to use in my own writing about music. No doubt, my attraction to more evocative forms of autoethnography was also fuelled by the ways in which these writers engaged me, as a reader, in their personal stories and lives. This was something I admired and wanted to emulate both in my music-making and autoethnographic writing.

After some time my study became cluttered with mounds of this rough, yet compelling data. However, it was not in a state for public consumption; to be honest, I had to have a few glasses of wine before I could face it. Looking at this rough data, I was reminded of Ellis' advice that one's first attempt at rendering a story might be "an autobiographical story written for self as audience," however "the final rendering must also be an ethnographic story that points to the commonalities as well as the particularities of our lives" (2004, p. 200). Following Ellis' guidance, over time I slowly began crafting an autoethnographic narrative out of this material, which encapsulated some of my conducting experiences and the autoethnographic process of reflecting on them.

The resulting narrative, which follows, centers on a month of rehearsals and performances with my ensembles at the Young Conservatorium Griffith University and the University of Queensland. It also explores the *process* of using this autoethnographic method in a musical context. In a manner described by Ellis (2004, p. xix), it uses concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection and portrays these in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and a plot. While this narrative draws on my own personal experiences, it also positions these in relation to significant cultural, institutional and pedagogical issues within my profession, and broader methodological issues within the field of autoethnographic writing. Such a process of foregrounding my personal experiences and then zooming outwards to see how they fit within a broader framework is aptly

¹ For debates between evocative and realist approaches to autoethnography, see the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* in 2006 (cf. Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Denzin 2006; Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006, amongst others).

described by Ellis (2004): "Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 37). As my narrative reveals, this process of zooming outward and inward, backward and forward, highlights some of the complexities of using the autoethnographic method in a musical way.

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I march down the hallway towards my office pounding my boots into the ground. Reaching my door I jam the key in and thrust it open. It swings and hits the wall with a loud thud. I'm furious. I throw my conducting bag to the ground and stare at it for a moment surprised it has landed upright. Pacing the floor, I am not quite sure what to do with myself. I can feel a flood of anxiety coming over me. My chest starts constricting and my eyes begin to well up. I am so frustrated with myself. I have finished yet another rehearsal feeling dissatisfied and disconnected. "You weren't prepared enough," chirps an inner voice. "You made a mess of your phrasing," says another. "I know, I know," I whisper in response, "I've let my musicians down."

I make it to my car, exhausted. Turning on the ignition, I try to hold the tears back, but a few slip out. I turn the music off and drive away in silence. This is a familiar sensation, driving away from something feeling crap. Un-talented. Ill-equipped. A fraud. A failure. I always contemplate career suicide on these drives.

I get home to a dark and silent house. My inner thoughts still cloud my mind as I switch on the lights, close the curtains and kick off my uncomfortable boots. When my husband Gav eventually gets home from a long day in the recording studio, we sit down to talk. I tell Gav, "The stress that I'm feeling over rehearsals is really getting me down." Gav looks knowingly at me. He has seen the angst I put myself through, beating myself over the head about my inadequacies as a conductor. Before he can respond, I say, "Somehow writing about my conducting for this autoethnography is forcing me to exorcise my demons, and it's hard work. I'm realizing the problems I have with the conducting profession, and they're really dark and destructive." Gav looks intensely at me, trying to find something comforting to say. He suggests, "You've got to find the pleasure in all of this. You know you're a great conductor, you've just got to believe in yourself." His comforting words don't seem to help right now. "You need to find a way of making it work for you." I just shrug my shoulders in response, "But I can't seem to find a way of making this work for me. I've tried to change things, but I just end up slipping into negative patterns. I feel so disconnected from any sense of pleasure. I am so cut-off from the supposed joy in music making." Gav shakes his head in dismay finding it hard to comprehend what I have just said. He looks at me with weary eyes as I say; "The music is so far away from where I'm at right now, and having to study scores and their dead composers just distances me further. Somehow the black notes on the page just don't inspire me." We both look at one another, exhausted from this draining exchange.

As I sit in silence, it begins to dawn on me that by bringing all my issues and insecurities to the surface with this autoethnographic journal writing, I'm feeling lonelier than ever. I don't quite know what to do with all that I'm discovering about myself and my profession. Breaking the silence I suggest, "Maybe I can talk to my colleague Ralph about this." "I think that's a good idea," Gav responds, "You know I don't believe you need a mentor-figure, you're quite capable of working this out for yourself; but you seem to want some guidance."

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A few days later, I head up to Ralph's office. His door is open and the lights are on, but I can't see him in there. "Hello" I call out. Ralph pops his head around the corner and smiles, "Come in, come in." He gestures at me to sit down at his table. Looking around me the floor is covered with scores he is studying and sketches for a new composition he is working on. I sit in my usual spot facing the wall that has framed photographs of Ralph's international tours. I smirk to myself looking at some of them; they must be at least ten or fifteen years old because Ralph looks so different in them. "I'm sorry about the mess," he blurts out. "Don't apologize," I say, "I know what it's like. So how are you going?" I ask. "Good, good, good," Ralph says bouncing his knees and jiggling up and down in his chair. "How about you?" he asks. "I'm okay, I guess." Sensing that I want to say something more, Ralph keeps unusually quiet. I nervously run my fingers across the edge of the table. "Well actually," I add, "there's something I want to talk to you about." Ralph looks intently at me, wondering what I'm going to say next. "I'm still having problems connecting with the composer through the score and communicating with the composer through the score in my conducting, and it's really getting me down. I'm doing everything I'm supposed to be doing when analyzing the scores, but I'm afraid this ritual doesn't seem to make me feel any more connected to the music, or inspired about what I'm doing. It just feels so superficial. I'm wondering if you might have some advice for me."

Remembering my confession to Gav a few nights ago, the seriousness of this situation is not lost on me. "It's not working in a way that's going to sustain me for a long time," I add. Ralph pauses for a moment sensing the seriousness in my voice before he suggests, "Maybe you should conduct one of my pieces, and that way you can talk with the composer?" Although I've conducted a few of his pieces before, I have never actually studied any of them with him. "Yes, that would be useful," I say hesitantly, "but I'm worried that I might become too reliant on you." Hoping I haven't offended him, I go on to explain, "The problem is, you're alive and you're a big part of my life, so it's easy for me to make a connection with you. It's not easy for me to make a connection with the other dead male composers I have to conduct." Ralph smirks at the directness of my comment. I add, "You know, I'm working on Ralph Vaughan Williams' English Folk Song Suite with my University of

Queensland ensemble, and I'm thinking, what would I say to him if he were still alive, and we were having a glass of wine together? I wouldn't know what to say. What would he think of me? What would he think of my interpreting his work?" Ralph sits up in his chair, and nods his head, empathizing with my predicament. I go on, "With you it's easy; it's different. When I conduct your pieces I can talk to my musicians about you, because I know you, and I have a connection with you. I feel like I have more freedom to actually interpret your work. But this doesn't help when it comes to all the dead ones."

Ralph looks out the window for a second before he says in a quiet tone, "They're people, you know." I recoil at the comment, almost feeling apologetic. Mind you, I think to myself, the problem is that conservatories do not train us to look at composers as 'normal' approachable people; they train us to revere them as demi-gods. Ralph breaks my thoughts, "Do you know that lovely old story about Ralph Vaughan Williams?" I shake my head, "No, what story?" "Well," Ralph begins, "At some club in London Vaughan Williams was sitting with one of the music critics from The Times discussing his concerns about his hearing loss. The music critic said, 'It doesn't matter, you can sit in your big leather chair in your study and reach back and pull out one of those wonderful manuscripts and just sit there and read it and hear it all.' At that moment the waiter came along and said, 'Gentlemen, what would you like to order?' Vaughan Williams responded, 'I'll have filet mignon, but my friend will just read the menu." I laugh out aloud, realizing the poignancy of the story. Ralph then adds, "All of it means nothing until it's realized." Still thinking about the Vaughan Williams story, I admit, "Maybe that's why I've always been more interested in connecting with my musicians and the dynamics of actually putting the work together, than I am in studying the score. My most cherished conducting memories have stemmed from a chemistry I've shared with musicians at a particular moment in time. I experienced this through a score, not in a score." At that moment the phone rings. Ralph jumps up to answer it, "I'm expecting a call from Julie." Not waiting for him to finish talking to her, I stand up and mouth, "I've got to go anyway. I'll see you on Saturday at the rehearsal."

As I begin to descend the stairs I keep thinking about the profound connection between personal relationships and musical meaning. In my experience, relationships are what give music meaning (see Small 1998). Why is this never talked about in conducting books and classes? Why is the most fundamental part of what we do as conductors – building musical meaning through relationships – never discussed? Is it too personal? Is it too subjective? Is it too intangible?

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A week after my chat with Ralph I am sitting in my office with my legs curled up in my chair, staring blankly at the grubby marks left on my desk from my sandwich. I have been eating and reading at the same time. The words of Ruth Behar, Laurel Richardson and Carolyn Ellis swirl around in my

head. Each time I swivel in my chair to face my computer and begin typing I only manage to spit out one sentence. Gav and Ralph aren't the only ones who have been helping me through this process; these other authors have also been challenging the way that I think about autoethnography and music. But, I'm having trouble. Sure, they've encouraged me to turn the lens on my music experiences and write about them in creative ways, but something seems missing. Taking a deep breath, I start to type into my computer:

In the current literature there is constant reference to artistry and creativity in ethnography/autoethnography. Ruth Behar (1999, pp. 472-84) alludes to it when she says that if ethnography is to have a life beyond the academy it will need to move closer to the arts. Laurel Richardson (2000) goes to great lengths to describe her CAP (Creative Analytic Practices) concept. Carolyn Ellis (2004, p. 215) also talks about the manner in which autoethnographers and arts-based researchers explore their own subjectivities in similarly creative and embodied ways. However, in all of these descriptions, drama is mentioned, plays are mentioned, choreography is mentioned.

Looking up from my screen, I then speak out aloud, "Where does this leave music? It's the most abstract of art forms, so how are musicians to make head-or-tale of what these writers are saying?"

Feeling slightly guilty about my frustration with these writers, particularly as they have played such an important role in nourishing me intellectually and emotionally, I swing back to my keyboard and continue writing:

I am at once inspired by the possibilities they speak about when connecting creativity and autoethnography, and frustrated that most of the forms they discuss can be reduced to text in some way, with the exception of visual arts and dancing of course; although there is something much more tangible and descriptive about a painting or dance, isn't there? I am yet to see how music figures in all of this. What would a music autoethnography look like? I suppose someone could write a music autoethnography by composing a work that represents their experience in the field or with a person or with themselves (cf. Mio 2005), much like performance ethnographers do. But isn't that just composition in its most basic form? What makes it ethnographic? Where is the 'ethno' part of this musical process?

I stop for a second, feeling entangled in my thoughts, unsure of where these disciplinary borders should be. As my mind plays with the word "border" I remember Ellis (2004, p. 39) saying that she likes keeping the boundaries of autoethnography blurry and inclusive. Ruth Behar (1999, pp. 472-84) also says that by blurring genres we end up with a fluid field of hybrid texts that can't be easily categorized and nurture the telling of stories based on lived experience.

As I think through these ideas and their ramifications for music further, it begins to dawn on me that I've been viewing music in a very narrow way. I've been so keen to find a model for using autoethnography in music research that I've failed to think about it in terms of my own actual lived experiences as a conductor. I've been focusing far too much on scores and the "texted" parts of

music. As I have come to appreciate, music is much more this; it is about the relationships that are evoked through the process of music-making. My mind starts racing as I think about the possibilities of how this relates to my autoethnographic work and conducting practice. I suppose this kind of music autoethnography would focus on the musical relationships of those involved in the project rather than the creation of something like a composition that represents them? All of a sudden my conversation with Ralph comes creeping back into my mind. "All of it means nothing until it's realized," I whisper. I start to realize that the key to understanding my approach to autoethnography and conducting lies in the relationships I share with my musicians.

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A week later I am dashing off to a mid-week rehearsal at the University if Queensland. Soon after I arrive, I follow my little ritual of carefully arranging my scores on the stand. "Okay people, let's setup," I shout. A few people move, but others ignore my request. They slowly gravitate to their seats and get themselves ready. As the clock hits 6pm, I clap my hands loudly and then leave one arm in the air. The noise and rumble slowly starts to die away. "Good evening everyone, B-flat concert scale, long tones, thank you." I step up to the podium and pick up my baton and gesture them to begin. I'm thinking and listening. "Their entries are slack, they're not breathing together, their tuning is atrocious, the balance is all wrong," my internal dialogue begins saying. When we get to the end of the scale and my mind is thinking about what to say. They put their instruments down and look up, waiting for me to comment. "How would you rate your tuning?" I ask. They all grumble in reply. "Use your air, sit up straight, switch on, let's try it again," I encourage. And off we go again. I spend the rest of the warm-up listening and thinking, then feeding back. I try to encourage them to think for themselves by constantly asking them questions, but they don't seem interested. They are so accustomed to the person up the front telling them what to do. So I oblige. I play the role. "Okay, I tell myself." Things are not going as you had planned. Do something!" It's only later on that evening that I start to realize the dissatisfying pedagogical implications of how I allow my students to be so passive, so absent, from the process.

We pull out Vaughan Williams' English Folksong Suite, and I let them play the first movement in its entirety, vowing not to stop and talk. I listen and whisper problem points to myself that we need to go back to. Once we reach the end of the movement, my mind is racing with the feedback I need to give them. And so we go on. I keep the talk to a minimum, but make sure that my directions have a purpose and are clear to them. I try to show them how I want to interpret this work as much as I can with my body, but my mind never stops thinking about how things could be improved. Much like the process of score study, this feels like a deeply intellectual process rather than an embodied one. As the rehearsal nears the close we talk through the details for our concert on Sunday. With my parting words, "See you at the sound-check. Don't be late!" there is chaos as everyone heads for their instrument cases and out the door.

Walking away from the rehearsal I hope that my car is still where I left it earlier in the day. It is dark and my car is the last one left in the ferry terminal parking lot. As I turn on the ignition and start the drive home I start to think back through the rehearsal. My feelings are mixed. I know that I am feeling better than last week, and that I was a better conductor tonight, but my musicians seemed to be off in their own world. Instead of working on all of the interpretive aspects I wanted to, I found myself drilling uninspiring technical issues of rhythm and balance. From a pedagogical perspective, how am I supposed to encourage them to take more responsibility and connect with me and the composer on a deeper musical level if they are not interested in taking that step and making that connection? I all of a sudden feel very alone again.

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After arriving home and putting away my conducting bag, I walk through to Gav's studio. When he sees me standing at the doorway he hits the space bar on his laptop and the music comes to an immediate stop. He reaches over to put his guitar on the stand and then looks up and smiles at me, "So how did you go?" I shrug my shoulders, and say, "Okay, I guess." Gav laughs at my indifference, "So that means you had a good rehearsal then?" Not wanting to concede much, I say, "Yeah, there were some things I was happy with and some things I wasn't happy with. They hadn't prepared well enough considering we have a concert on the weekend. I'm just glad it's over. Have you eaten?" He looks at me apologetically. "Yes I have. I couldn't wait, I was too hungry. I've put some leftovers in the fridge for you." With that, he turns to his laptop and taps the space bar and the music starts again. I close the studio door, having heard enough music for one night, and head towards the kitchen. I pull the plate of pasta out the fridge and pop it in the microwave. Listening to the hum and watching the dish go around and around, I start thinking about how I'll spend the rest of the evening. It always takes me a long time to come down after a rehearsal. "It's time to do some more writing," I tell myself.

I make myself comfortable in my favorite spot on our old lounge suite. I have a few spoonfuls of pasta and look out through the French doors to our neighbor's trees. It is dark outside, but I can still make out the shapes of the leaves and branches from the moonlight. At that moment the muffled sounds of Gav's music filter through the walls from the studio. I take a sip of my juice and then pull my laptop from the floor up onto my legs. I decide to write about some of the issues I have been facing with my conducting. I have recently been reading Laurel Richardson's (2000) chapter on "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," where she says "By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (p. 923), so I decide that this is maybe the way to go. Staring again at the tree silhouettes, I let my mind follow my stream-of-consciousness. It flows from one thing to the next. I start thinking about my lack of connection with the composer through the

score, and in no time I'm also thinking about my connection with my musicians and my experiences in rehearsal tonight.

Pausing to take a mouthful of pasta, I marvel at the stark contrast between my current work at both the Queensland Conservatorium and the University of Queensland and my previous work with community ensembles at the beginning of my conducting career. The difficulties I am facing now with my students were never an issue with my community musicians. I wonder why? I suppose my community musicians were not there for course credit; they were there for the love of it. My mind gets caught up in the memories, and I find myself thinking about Brian, one of my most special musicians. He joined my community ensemble for a tour to Taiwan in 2002, after I realized that I needed a strong lead trumpet. He must have been in his early 60s, so was a highly experienced player. He also happened to be a conductor, so was my ally. Brian knew what it was like to stand up in front of a group of sixty players. Although he was often full of cheek, frequently flirting with female musicians forty years his junior, he also had his quiet moments. We had such fun touring together. I still remember how the crowds of thousands went wild over Brian's Dixieland solo during one of our outdoor performances in Chia-I. Still smiling and thinking about those memories, my heart starts to break as I remember the moment when I answered the phone and heard an old band member of mine, Pat say "I'm afraid Brian has passed away." My eyes start to cloud over as I remember sitting alongside some of my musicians in the Mt Gravatt church one chilly winter morning and staring at the alter. On his shiny wooden coffin were two stands, one with a trumpet on it and the other with a flugel horn. Thinking about him makes me realize that my work has nothing to do with the black notes on the page; it has to do with people and the amazing relationships that music allows us make.

In this gentle moment when I think about some of my other musicians and the connections I've shared with them – how I've adored them, made music with them, laughed with them, sometimes hated them, needed them and grieved for them – I am truly humbled. Somehow my earlier thoughts about connecting with musicians take on a new meaning. The conductor Frank Battisti's words suddenly come to mind: "when you're creating a piece of music as a conductor, you're trying to create a family, in a sense. You're trying to diminish them and me and it, and you're trying to bring it all together so it is us" (as cited in Harris 2001, p. 20). This then leads me to think, how do I bring these relational and pedagogical ideas into the elite institutions I work in? Will they be welcomed anyway? I think back to my musicians' responses tonight and ponder on that thought. I'm not really sure. At that moment I realize my nose has become runny. I put down my laptop and walk to the bathroom to get a tissue. Wiping my eyes and blowing my nose, I walk towards the studio. As I open the door Gav hits the space button and the room is silent again. "Do you want to come and watch some TV with me?" I ask. "I'm tired of thinking!"

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The next evening I am lying in bed reading Ellis' book *Final Negotiations* (1995). It has been another long day of teaching and rehearsals and my back is aching. Gav is still watching television in the lounge room. Not only am I doing my own autoethnography I am spending every spare second I have reading the work of other autoethnographers too. They somehow make the process feel less lonely. I feel at once comforted and inspired by their stories. I read them as novels, bedtime books; but at the same time study them for their craftsmanship. Reading these autoethnographies helps me to imagine how my own will eventually look on the page. This vision gives me comfort and reminds me that there is a point and purpose to what I am doing. As I look up from the page to give myself a break from reading, I am struck by the dark tradeoff this kind of work seems to require. Just as Ellis' pain seems to nourish her writing, the murkier and more difficult my own conducting issues become the better my autoethnographic writing gets.

The words of Ellis spring to mind, almost as a commentary on what I am thinking: "Often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts - and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore - that's when the real work begins" (2004, p. xviii). It makes me think about the oftentimes painful and uncomfortable position this research has placed me in. I start to wonder whether this research is dragging me down and whether I'll be able to emerge from it unscathed. I start to question whether my autoethnographic writing is having a positive or negative impact on my conducting and the ways in which I am relating to my students. I know Janet Ritterman (2004) has spoken about the challenges of thinking about music too much, "Most performers know only too well that thinking about what one is doing - or consciously monitoring what one is doing - at the wrong time - can easily be counter-productive." "How is my timing? Is my autoethnographic work counterproductive?" I whisper to myself. "What do I do? Should I abandon the project?" No, I don't want to do that, I decide. When I've been researching and reading all these texts on autoethnography there is an inner voice that keeps saying this is useful for musicians who don't mind making themselves vulnerable and who want to grow. Tired of thinking, I click the light switch and all of a sudden the room is dark. My mind keeps swirling with images of Carolyn, Gene and my musicians.

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Sunday has finally arrived and I am standing backstage at Customs House with my musicians. There is chemistry in the air. I am feeling somewhat lighter in spirit today. Despite the difficulties I have been facing in my work, I think revealing them has given me a sense of relief. As I look at the faces of my musicians I now feel a sense of affection towards them. How strange. I loathed them a few days ago. For some reason, the frustrations I felt during our rehearsals have moved to the back of my mind right now. I have had to abandon them; there is no room for such thoughts during a

performance. As we wait for the stage to be set, I straighten my jacket and check that my trousers aren't hooked in my high heel shoes. I turn to my French horn player Cathy and ask, "Can you check I haven't got any fluff on my jacket?" She laughs and then walks behind me. "No you're fine," she replies. "Do I have any lipstick on my teeth," I ask exaggerating a big smile at her. She smirks and replies again, "No, you're fine." The stage manager walks up to me and asks, "Are you ready to go?" I nod my head and turn to my musicians, "Let's go!" As I watch the ensemble tuning I scan the audience from backstage. The auditorium is full. Once the tuning stops there is a split second of silence. I wait until the moment feels right, and a force pushes me to take the first few steps. The audience begins clapping. By this point my musicians are standing; some are smiling at me, others are looking indifferent. I reach the centre and stand to the side of my podium, look the audience straight in the eye, and bow. I am feeling calm and "in the zone." All of the issues I have been facing over the last few weeks are no longer in my mind. The emotions of the experience have now taken over.

I give a reassuring smile to my musicians, but don't linger on the moment. I reach down to the stand and take my baton in my hand. I lift my arms and my musicians swing their instruments to their mouths. I have forgotten the audience by now. They are nowhere in my consciousness at this point. My breathing is slow, but I can feel blood pumping through my body at a rapid pace. In this split-second moment my internal dialogue stops. I am no longer in my mind, but deep within my body. As my arms move in an upbeat I breathe with my musicians. Our eyes connect in that moment and we are living and breathing together. The music has started. Phrases are washing over me; my body is moving and responding. I am watching ahead in the score, anticipating everything, but my mind is not consciously thinking. I cue entries and connect with players during split-second interactions. My energy is moving in swirling patterns as the music calls my attention to different parts of the ensemble. I feel my arms moving, tiring, but I keep going and ignore the lactic acid building up. I sense the sound on my chest and hum in unison with it. I close my eyes and swallow the sounds, internalizing the intensity of what they are playing. I am listening to them, but am so immersed I can't even hear them at times. I give everything of myself. My body is tingling.

As we near the end of the piece, I draw them in with my eyes. They watch me like hawks, knowing that we need to be at one again. I hold the last chord in my hands and it settles on my palms. Someone other than me seems to end it. A presence envelopes my arms and gently guides my fingers to a closed position. I leave my arms in the air for a second. There is silence. As I drop my arms to my side, the audience erupts in applause. I had completely forgotten they were there. I turn and begin my well-practiced bow. Unlike after a rehearsal, I can barely remember what just happened. I know that it went well, but my recollection is vague and hazy. For those ten minutes of time, I was standing in front of hundreds of people, and connecting with my musicians in what feels like another dimension. How bizarre that we share this most profoundly intimate act in such a public way. The rest of the concert goes by in a flash. Reflecting on this experience soon after the concert

has finished, I remember the words of the infamous conductor, Leonard Bernstein (1959): "When one hundred men share [a conductor's] feelings, exactly, simultaneously, responding as one to each rise and fall of the music, to each point of arrival and departure, to each little inner pulse – then there is a human identity of feeling that has no equal elsewhere. It is the closest thing I know to love itself" (pp. 150-51). I grin to myself thinking about what I have just experienced. Bernstein was right, this feeling has no equal. I am reminded of the magic that can be found on the podium. "If only we could master this in rehearsal," an inner voice then chirps.

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Soon after arriving home and taking a shower, I decide to pour myself a glass of red wine and venture into the study housing all my autoethnographic data. I'm still on a high from the performance earlier today. I want to ride on this inspiration and start thinking about what to do with all of this material. Taking a deep breath I turn on the light and close the curtains. The bed is covered with a patchwork-like display of journal entries, photographs, press clippings, CDs and DVDs, letters, transcripts of interviews, scores, and books on conducting and autoethnography. I pull the chair from under my desk and drag it to the side of the bed. I sit down, hooking my legs underneath me, and take a sip of wine. My eyes scan over the numerous journal entries. I lean back in my chair shocked and sickened by the number of conflicts and struggles I have captured on these pages. In some respects, I am appalled that this work has come from within me. Shaking my head I turn my attention to all the photographs and press clippings scattered in-between the journal entries. My body begins to relax as I pick them up, one at a time, and look at the precious people they have captured. Seeing my musicians in the photos brings a big lump to my throat, as I recall all the deeply moving experiences we have shared together. My eyes then fall on a journal entry, "My first magical conducting class." Taking a deep breath I start to smile remembering the moment and the sensations I had that day. Feeling inspired I get up from my chair, drag it back to the desk, open the lid of my laptop, and begin re-working this data into a narrative.

In the months that follow that night, I bang away at my keyboard and begin shaping my entries into dialogue and scenes, characterization and a plot. I turn them into the present tense and add sensory colors, sounds, and movements. The reflective process all of a sudden starts to take on a new meaning. I come to realize how impossible it is to fully capture the creative experiences I had, so I try and convey the meanings I ascribed them instead (see Ellis, 2004, p. 116). I keep in mind the idea that good autoethnographic practice goes beyond a mere introspective gaze, so try to balance the need for communicating the broader significance of my experiences with the need for letting my story stand on its own.

I visit and re-visit all my autoethnographic texts and watch for the ways in which their writers craft their stories. I keep returning to Stacy Holman-Jones, one of the few people who have directly written about music and autoethnography in her book *Kaleidoscope Notes* (1998) and study the ways in which she pulls the reader into an active dialogue with her. Keeping this in mind, I choose particular crisis moments in my narrative – which real broader issues about the culture and practice of music-making at large – and think through creative ways of drawing my readers in before I resolve them. I decide to condense the year's work into a month and collapse stories into one another, still trying to keep the essence of their meanings carefully in tact. As I edit each scene I am forced to reflect on each of my stories again and again, each time digging deeper into their meanings and significance.

This autoethnographic writing process makes me release that a lot of my deepest thinking about conducting does *not* revolve around scores and supposed musical issues. It's much more about the relationships that I have built with people through music making over the years. I think this also gets to the heart of what autoethnographers try to do. When I think about the work of Ellis, Bochner, Behar, and all the others, it moves people and engages them in a relationship, whether real or imagined. Relationships are at the heart of what autoethnographers and musicians do. They unlock and reveal the complexities of our work. By openly talking about them, we present our experiences in a way that others can relate to, learn from, and maybe challenge. I think that's the biggest realization I've come to through this project. No traditional musicological methods would have led me to this realization, they're far too distanced and 'objective.'

Instead of statically representing my musical experiences, I have been able to integrate this type of writing into my creative processes. I know some of my music colleagues will ask why this is even necessary, implying that words will somehow distort and take away from music's meaning (see Cobussen, 2007, pp. 21-29). I suppose such arguments come from an aversion to dry, boring, unimaginative, disconnected, disembodied meetings of music and words. As a musician, I can understand these concerns, although I'm not sure they are as warranted with this method. After exploring the possibilities of autoethnographic writing and rethinking the role that writing and words can play in my creative processes, I've certainly found useful and unexpected ways of coming to understand my work from a completely different perspective. In this process writing hasn't been a "mopping up" activity after my rehearsals and performances but rather an integral part of them (see Richardson, 2000, p. 925). As Gergen & Gergen (2002) suggest,

There is little reason that ethnographic representation should not become as rich in its forms of expression as the arts, with painting, music, dance, poetry, multimedia, and performance all serving as potential sources of communication. And with each alternative we are opened to different avenues of relationship (p. 18).

Looking at the last quote of this paper, I see the word, 'relationship,' yet again. It seems to resonate so profoundly with all that I have discovered throughout this process. Not only has this method helped me to grow as a musician and profoundly deepen my awareness of what I do, it has

allowed me to see that my experiences and musical relationships are part of a picture much bigger than my own.

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