

## Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning

Liz Garnett

Ashgate, h/b £55

★★★★☆



Perhaps before establishing what this book *is*, it is important to establish what it is not: it is not a 'how to' conducting book with lengthy discussions of beat patterns, score reading or baton technique. Instead it looks at the role the conductor

plays in creating the ethos, dynamic and identity of the choir and through moulding these issues ultimately shapes the sound of the choir. This book would sit every bit as comfortably among

sociology or psychology books in an academic library as it would in the music section.

Its effectiveness lies in bringing together the often disparate worlds of the practitioner and the scholar. It successfully argues against the views of practitioners who often see scholars as irrelevant and parasitic, or scholars who dismiss the findings of practitioners as anecdotal and unsubstantiated. Garnett combines both these groups' opinions with data collected from her own observations and gives all information the same status.

Perhaps the most interesting sections of the book do not really relate directly to music at all but instead the psychology of the people who make up the choir. The discussions about social identity which examine how the use of metaphors by a conductor to emphasise a point – 'Full bodied sound, like the best cabernet sauvignon' – draw on the collective experiences of the choir to

not only convey a musical point but strengthen the collective identity of the choir.

The book comes with a DVD showing four conductors at work and the book then discusses their contrasting styles and how their style is typical of that genre. The visual aid here really strengthens the author's arguments and I suspect she points out stylistic gestures that each conductor regularly makes yet is totally unaware of. What this does do is clearly illustrate how different conducting styles can be between the genres and how some gestures can be very common in one genre and never appear in another.

Realistically this is not going to be book with mass appeal, but would certainly be valuable for those interested in delving deeper into the study of conducting and the social and cultural issues that lead people to join the musical ensembles they do.

**Ben Crick**