

The Conductor's Baton as a Magic Wand

by Sue Robinson

Sue is the Assistant Conductor of the Wellington Chamber Orchestra. She also conducts for the Upper Hutt Choral Society and a children's choir. The inspiration to utilise some of the theory and practice of psychodrama in her work is a new area for her. We 'meet' her at the beginning of a new period of her career as she develops both as conductor and group process worker.

In training in psychodrama and sociodrama, the analogy of the orchestra is often used. In expanding our ability to relate to the total complexity of the group and to conquer our fear of leadership, we have sometimes been encouraged to imagine the group as an orchestra, and ourselves to be the conductor. This seems to be an especially relevant image and therefore must capture many similar elements that we aspire to integrate as group leaders in this particular method.

Conducting is easy for me. I see myself as a magician, able to encourage more than the musicians think is possible.

One focus of my work is voices. Many people come to me saying they have been told that they can't sing. I am angry that this is seen as an ability we have or don't have. Singing can be learnt. We can all learn to sing in tune, and to increase the power and enhance the quality of our voices. (How am I doing this...)

The conductor's view of the singer is often woefully limited. In choirs, singers are asked to restrain, restrict, blend in; to subtract rather than add. I challenge the singers to bring in their true individual voice quality. That way something really rich emerges. It is clear when I work that the music takes off, and the magic really takes

effect when *everybody* does this.

As a woman conducting orchestras, I enter a field with a conspicuous lack of role-models, and a fixed, traditional way of doing things. I am just beginning to experiment. People think I'm joking if I try something different. There is etiquette about where people sit, what is done in rehearsal, the order people enter for a performance, who is allowed to make suggestions ... I'm concerned with finding ways of working within this framework, with as much freedom as possible. (later changing framework?)

The audience's view of conductors and the orchestra's view often differ markedly. While the audience sees an alive, playful, enlightening personality, behind the scenes the orchestra can be rehearsing with an incompetent tyrant, and in perform-

ance they may be using their considerable skills to conceal this incompetence. Think of the extra energy that would be freed if this were not so! The baton is being used as a weapon, and many conductors assume their position gives them the authority to abuse. This is rife in the musical profession; a hidden legacy of fear and tyranny. Professional orchestras often hide a vicious maze of envy, bitterness and cynicism. What a paradox, to be working with some of the most brilliant manifestations of the creative spirit, in an atmosphere of fear and hatred.

I am concerned to encourage confidence and freedom. I am very aware I'm not working with instruments; I'm working with people playing instruments. And *they're* doing the playing. My body is my only instrument. As a conductor I have a responsibility to use my power in a creative way.

I have a vision of a full-time orchestra, where there is time set aside for psychodrama. Players will work on their relationship with each other, the audience, the conductor, with the music, and with their instrument. I'm also concerned to use my awareness of the link between physical tensions and emotional blocks to bring more freedom to the musicians I work with.

I'm strongly aware of the dichotomy of being a woman conducting music composed almost exclusively by men. I hope this will soon change.