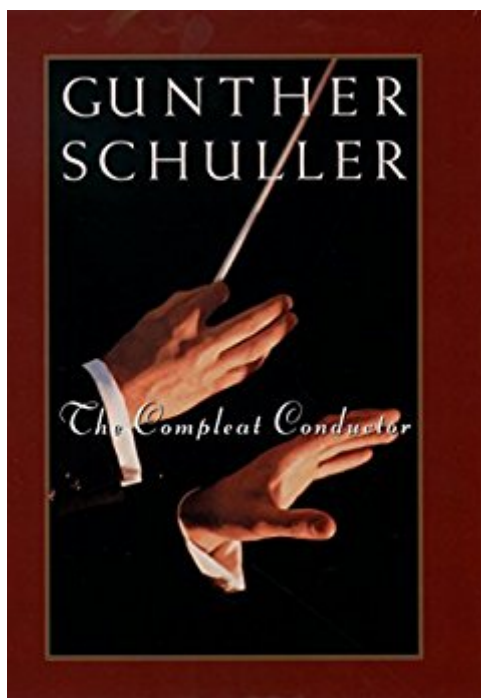


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# The Compleat Conductor



## Synopsis

A world-renowned conductor and composer who has led most of the major orchestras in North America and Europe, a talented musician who has played under the batons of such luminaries as Toscanini and Walter, and an esteemed arranger, scholar, author, and educator, Gunther Schuller is without doubt a major figure in the music world. Now, in *The Compleat Conductor*, Schuller has penned a highly provocative critique of modern conducting, one that is certain to stir controversy. Indeed, in these pages he castigates many of this century's most venerated conductors for using the podium to indulge their own interpretive idiosyncrasies rather than devote themselves to reproducing the composer's stated and often painstakingly detailed intentions. Contrary to the average concert-goer's notion (all too often shared by the musicians as well) that conducting is an easily learned skill, Schuller argues here that conducting is "the most demanding, musically all embracing, and complex" task in the field of music performance. Conducting demands profound musical sense, agonizing hours of study, and unbending integrity. Most important, a conductor's overriding concern must be to present a composer's work faithfully and accurately, scrupulously following the score including especially dynamics and tempo markings with utmost respect and care. Alas, Schuller finds, rare is the conductor who faithfully adheres to a composer's wishes. To document this, Schuller painstakingly compares hundreds of performances and recordings with the original scores of eight major compositions: Beethoven's fifth and seventh symphonies, Schumann's second (last movement only), Brahms's first and fourth, Tchaikovsky's sixth, Strauss's "Till Eulenspiegel" and Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloe, Second Suite." Illustrating his points with numerous musical examples, Schuller reveals exactly where conductors have done well and where they have mangled the composer's work. As he does so, he also illuminates the interpretive styles of many of our most celebrated conductors, offering pithy observations that range from blistering criticism of Leonard Bernstein ("one of the world's most histrionic and exhibitionist conductors") to effusive praise of Carlos Kleiber (who "is so unique, so remarkable, so outstanding that one can only describe him as a phenomenon"). Along the way, he debunks many of the music world's most enduring myths (such as the notion that most of Beethoven's metronome markings were "wrong" or "unplayable," or that Schumann was a poor orchestrator) and takes on the "cultish clan" of period instrument performers, observing that many of their claims are "totally spurious and chimeric." In his epilogue, Schuller sets forth clear guidelines for conductors that he believes will help steer them away from self indulgence towards the correct realization of great art. Courageous, eloquent, and brilliantly insightful, *The Compleat Conductor* throws down the gauntlet to conductors worldwide. It is a controversial book that the music world will be debating for many years to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am totally overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of this man's intellect and grasp of so many diverse facets of music! I want to learn as much as I can about his life and work...

good.

Essential Assignment for any conductor or musician: read the first 100 pages (at least)! Very opinionated, daring, but informed exposé!

This was gratefully received. The young conductor studied with Schuller. He was pleased with the gift and now embarked on his studies.

In this unique book, a world renowned conductor and composer tells the whole musical world how to

critically examine the great masterpieces of symphonic music. He has put under scrutiny over a hundred recordings of the following works: Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh symphonies, Brahms' First and Fourth, the last movement of Schumann's second symphony, Tchaikovsky's Sixth symphony, Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel and Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe...Examining first the works, then some of their most outstanding recordings, Gunther Schuller gives us an unprecedented study on how these works should be played to come up with what the composers had in mind. Because Schuller believes, quite rightly, that the composer knows better than any conductor what his work is all about: every note, every indication must be scrupulously followed! No conductor, not even Toscanini or Furtwängler, should take liberties with the indications of tempo, phrasing dynamics etc... that the composer has painstakingly put in his score. Now to all those music "critics" who give us their opinions about recordings of great masterpieces I say this: if you don't go through every work the way Schuller has done here, just give up! It's none of your business to tell us which recording we have to choose, because your opinions would be as good as ours...Despite all my admiration to Schuller's work, I have one small reservation: at page 308, he argues against playing the repeat of the exposition of the first movement in Brahms's First Symphony, because of "a certain awkwardness in the way Brahms returns to m.38, an abruptness in the harmonic progression that (he) can't quite analyze." Well, Mr Schuller, you keep saying the composer knows best, so what happened here that made you know better than Brahms?

Schuller has got an ax to grind here, citing laundry lists of "incorrect" tempi from the pantheon of conductors. Abbado is too fast, Bernstein too slow, Boulez too fast. On and on and on, like he is piling corpses, referring that everyone is wrong, yet he is right. Schuller is arrogant as well, claiming "Brahms never meant that tempo", claiming how stupid conductors have been by not following what the composer had indicated. If we did that, there would be little to listen to of interest within the classical canon. The grand masters knew nothing of performance of their new works, they guessed at tempi many times, it has only been through continuous performance up through today that such a thing as tempi has come to be affix in a somewhat loose way. Schuller knows his orchestration however with a focus upon blending of winds and strings and the problematics, like in the opening of the First Symphony of Brahms. I had wished he would have included a new work, even one of his own would have been fantastic to discuss, i.e. the conducting problems of a new work. Ravel's Daphnis & Chloe is a great example which he utilizes here. That work with string harmonics and virtuoso wind writing in multi-layered textures is again a great example. I suspect the editor perhaps cut out a chapter on Ligeti or Boulez or Babbitt. He should follow-up this book with another strictly

devoted to music after 1945.

This book was recommended to me during a conducting workshop. The teacher, an extremely knowledgeable musician and gifted and hardworking conductor, hated this book upon FIRST reading, and as he explored the concepts and analyses further found more enlightenment and wisdom. You can tell the folks who didn't like this book are writing off the cuff. In *The Compleat Conductor*, Gunther Schuller gives us his philosophy and a short history of conducting, and then goes into some real detail analyzing eight great classical works and how even the greatest maestros can fail the composer's wishes and ideals. Schuller is VERY straightforward and covers all of his bases well, and defends his points and decisions and pickiness. A quote: "The secret of great artistry and true integrity of interpretation lies in the ability to bring to life the score for the listener (and the orchestra) through the fullest knowledge of the score, so that the conductor's personality expresses itself WITHIN the parameters of the score." Schuller maintains that composers like Beethoven and Brahms were very explicit in their desires, and that their music doesn't need all of the extra bells and whistles conductors use to manipulate an audience, and in fact a good number of conductors in the process ignore the finer points of the music. Quote again: "...all those deviations from the score do not necessarily make the performance 'more natural,' 'more human.' They may create that illusion--or delusion; they may fool the unknowing, unwary listener into thinking that it was 'exciting,' 'moving,' 'authentic,' when in reality the excitement was superficial and the work was grossly misrepresented." There are points in the book where Schuller then recommends changing this and that in various scores. But in these sections he more than backs up his reasons--perhaps there is conflict between the manuscript and printed scores, or maybe there is truly a problem in balance due to the power of different instruments, etc. I am now listening to recordings with a new critical ear, and approaching my orchestral work with a refreshed perspective.

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