

From autocratic to democratic managers – what is to learn from contrasting cases?

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the relationship between a musical director and his musicians or choir members as a proxy for the relationship between a manager and his staff. Since the main theme being studied is vulnerability, this approach combined with the use of grounded theory seemed reasonable in order to try identifying a hidden truth, that of managers feeling vulnerable despite wanting to look tough or else invincible.

The results point to the need for managers to opt for an interaction based on a balance between strengths and weaknesses in order to instil a sense of trust and efforts of cooperation.

Key words: Predator, prey, trust, cooperation, MESLY model, perceived predation.

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional perception laymen have of an orchestra or choir conductor is that he¹ is an imposing figure, in full control, untouched by musicians' discontent, and whose authority is seldom challenged. However, this is ignoring one key element of the dynamic between the conductor and his musicians or choir members: his vulnerability. Contrary to common belief, a conductor experiences surges of vulnerability and lessons learned from these experiences may well serve within other contexts, mostly those involving interactions between managers and their team members. This article presents the worst side of music conductors (their "predatory" nature as perceived by musicians) while recognizing that they live intense sentiments of vulnerability, suggesting that managers of all sorts may also experience vulnerability.

The role of a conductor is not limited to giving a musical sense to the score, insuring the musicians or choir members' adherence to the musical vision and quality he targets as well as to performing publicly. The conductor must deal with human beings who have strengths and weaknesses, show enthusiasm or else are disruptive. Conflicts between the musicians or choir members are generated whatever the setting, professional or amateur. Likewise, a manager's function in, say, an industrial plant, is not limited to supervising and giving orders: he must deal with personal issues, resistance behaviors and personality conflicts to list only these.

In an amateur setting, the conductor is most often chosen by the Board of directors, which is in general composed of musicians or choir members that are being directed by the same conductor. Hence, there is an intricate web of relationships that affects the organization when comes time to plan, rehearse and execute a concert publicly.

This article looks at this particular dynamic from the predator-prey perspective. That is, far from being a "predator" that has absolute power over his musicians or choir members, the conductor may sometimes fall prey to them, the 1982 Karajan-Sabrina Mayer's case being an excellent example. At the same time, some musicians or choir members may also feel that they are treated unfairly, being victimized or verbally "assaulted" in front of all their colleagues, much to their chagrin. Similarly, the manager, while attempting to look in full control, often hides a weak side that he cannot let out for fear of losing his grip over his staff. Understanding that a manager can actually hide a weak side may prove important to better capture some of his reactions in front of employees' discontent or other similar strong reactions. It may be that the manager is not able to deal with a situation due to a hidden vulnerability; hence his overwhelming reaction for example when faced with particular employees' issues (he gets impatient, irritated, he avoids suggestions, etc.).

In this paper, the characteristics of the conductor are first discussed not from the angle of leadership (which has been extensively researched) but from a different angle: that of the predator-prey dynamic, an angle that has been acknowledged before (Lebrecht, 2001).

Next, this paper presents a qualitative study done in 2008 and 2009 with two musical groups from the Eastern Townships in Québec, Canada. A model called the MESLY predator-prey model² is then proposed in an attempt to summarize the key findings. The paper concludes by highlighting the limits of the study and proposing research avenues, including matching the findings to the daily reality of managers in quest for power.

¹The use of the masculine is meant to make the text easier to read. It should be considered neutral.

² Formerly named the OPERA model.

CONDUCTOR (OR MANAGER) AS A TYRANT?

A conductor can be considered as a two face entity: he can be seen as a tyrant or else as a hero, or perhaps in some cases, as both. Lebrecht, in 2001, notes that “Conducting, like most forms of heroism, rests on the use and abuse of power for personal benefit” (p 11). This is perhaps the perception that musicians or choir members have as they must deal with his temper tantrums, obsessions, and idiosyncrasies. Talking about Karajan, Lebrecht mentions: “Even lifelong favourites, though, were prey to sudden attacks that sapped their self-confidence and left them quaking at his mercy.” (2001: p.113). Indeed, musicians and choir members alike are sensitive to the demands, gestures, signals and body language of their conductor (Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009: p.36), just like in an industrial setting employees respond to their managers’ non verbal cues.

How, then, does the conductor achieve his goal of producing a memorable event in the eyes and ears of the targeted public? He must have something that others don’t have, beyond musical ingenuity. Soila-Wadman and Köping, in 2009, point to a possible answer: “According to this view, the (musical) leader possesses certain traits, such as charisma, wisdom, courage, drive, motivation and self-confidence.” (p. 31). It is often these exact same qualities that are searched for when a company seeks a new CEO.

These qualities have for initial purpose to entice musicians or choir members to cooperate since without cooperation little can be achieved. Thus, the conductor’s expertise and reputation may just be the basis upon which musicians and choir members decide to adhere to his way of making and interpreting music. The conductor must “sell” his viewpoint and his musical group must “buy” it. This is very much a transaction where the reward is ultimately gained jointly on the condition that the public performance is successful. Besides a one night performance, common criteria used to assess success are attendance, subscription level, number of performances and revenues (Boener and Renz, 2008: p. 21). For the top manager of a company, the rewards are the shares investors buy into the company and convincing annual investors meetings.

Cooperation is enhanced by proper communication. A 2006 empirical study by McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani concludes that, in the context of a seller-buyer exchange, there are six messages that produce some outcome: (1) information exchange; (2) recommendations; (3) threats; (4) promises; (5) ingratiation; and (6) inspirational appeals. These techniques appear equally valid in the context of a conductor trying to sell his music to his first clients: the musicians or the choir members (the public being his second clients).

The relationship between the conductor and his musicians or choir members can be summarized as a tug of war where “[...] often there is frustration, unease and suspicion because of the complexity of the situation, which is one of total dependency, lack of control and uncertainty.” (Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009: p. 39) Thus, this battle between the lone conductor (with his strengths and weaknesses) and a group of artists (with their own strengths and weaknesses) can be characterized according to the terms of predator and prey. Both parties can be predators *and* preys, both parties can inflict psychological damage to the other, cause grief or shame, under perform, overact or target the other’s weaknesses. In an industrial context, this means a manager and his employees have both the capacity, real or else imagined, to interfere with the others’ functions and duties.

The success of a concert entails that the public has seen the “good” side of the conductor and the “good” side of the musical group. This suggests that too strong of a “bad” side, that is, too much of a predatory-prey dynamic within the organization will leak publicly at some point

(the Auckland Philharmonic being a case in point- see Bathurst, Williams and Rodda, 2007). There is an additional source of pressure: media coverage with its load of critical reviews (Radbourne, Johanson, Glow, and White, 2009). It can be said that the value of the performance is created by three sets of people: the conductor jointly with his performing artists, the public and its response, and finally by the critics and their reviews. The stakes are high, putting more pressure on the conductor who can feel isolated if not ostracized at times.

Because it is nearly impossible to play catch back, each concert being unique, this state of affairs represents a considerable challenge for the musical organization. Once the performance is completed, the “damage” has been done: there are no second-chances (Mencarelli, 2008: p.42). The conductor walks on a thin line.

In much the same vein, a manager has generally few chances: too many mistakes and he is out; lack of leadership and he is put aside; failure to demonstrate solid results force top management to replace him, sooner rather than later.

In summary, the conductor is under intense pressure to perform, with no second chances available, while the musicians or choir members have a duty to give their best. Egos confront each other, misunderstandings occur, one feels vulnerable (prey), the other one is seen as exerting excessive dominance (predator). In highly competitive industrial markets, the same conditions apply: managers must show results, and good if not exceptional results.

THE STUDY

The musical sector offers a number of peculiar characteristics. First, it much resembles that of traditional non-artistic organizations (Mintzberg, in 1998, compares the CEO to a conductor) and thus it can be somewhat assumed it has a “bottom-line for profitability” requirement. As such, all parties are under pressure to achieve certain financial objectives, directly or indirectly.

Second, there is a clear goal which is of pleasing the public – and the conductor is ultimately the stand-alone figure that must bear the weight of the public performance (Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009). This risk is another reason for experiencing stress within the relationship between the conductor and the musicians or choir members.

Third, there is regular interaction between the conductor and the musicians or the choir members. These regular interactions are likely to act as catalysts to the tensions that may exist between all the artists, hence adding more salt to the wound of the predator-prey atmosphere when it prevails.

Fourth, there is a possibility of abuse on both parts: conductor and musicians or choir members. Better expressed yet, there is a possibility for a *perception* of abuse. In the Karajan-Sabine Mayer historical case, it is likely the perception that the musicians held against Maestro Karajan that made the difference: in their opinion, he abused his power by hiring a female clarinetist in an all-men orchestra.

Fifth, conductor and musicians or choir members are bound by an intangible promise, that of making quality music. As Inghelbrecht, a conductor from the past century puts it: (1949: p.10) “the musical score is a promise.” This mutual dependence between the actors makes them more sensitive, perhaps even more irritable as pressure to perform mounts. Inghelbrecht refers to requirements and even ruthless behaviors by the conductor whilst there is a need to take into account each musician’s susceptibility: (p. 89): clarinetists are somewhat sentimentalists and must be spoken to with candor.

Based on the above five characteristics (bottom-line, goal to please, regular interaction, possibility of abuse, interdependence creating a sense of vulnerability – Svensson 2004) a series semi-directed interviews with orchestra and choir conductors was conducted. Is it true that a conductor can be seen as a predator? Is the conductor not a prey in some way or the other? These were questions that seemed to be emerging from the literature review.

One orchestra conductor (50 musicians), one classical choir (120 choir members) and one pop choir (40 choir members) conductors were approached for a one hour and a half interview during the fall of 2008, which was followed by second interviews along the lines recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1994) to go deeper into the initial findings. The orchestra conductor could not attend the interviews but was part of a subsequent quantitative study. A question grid had been prepared ahead of the interviews to guide the conversation, without however forcing the discussion, letting instead the interviewees talk *ad lib*. All three organizations were amateur ventures. The idea was to get the conductors to come to talk about their vulnerabilities with the hope of tying this with other business contexts, such as a manufacturing line.

The question grid

The following were the questions prepared for the semi-directed interviews: (1) what teaching did you receive in terms of human resources management in your formal musical education? (2) What frequent problems do you face in your group: you and choir members, choir members in between themselves, and all the choir members at once? (3) What are the key requirements for an effective conductorship? (4) What typical problematic behaviors do you face in your functions? (5) How would you define your role? (6) What are your vulnerabilities, what risks do you face? And (7) to the following terms (ex.: danger, give-and-take, etc.), please spontaneously associate the first word that comes to mind. The responses were as follows.

The classical choir and John³, the conductor

This group is composed of 120 choir members, of which 53% are female and 47 % are male, leaving the male section somewhat slightly deficient (a common problem in choirs it seems) in terms of sheer number. Thirteen percent of the *regular* members are between 17 and 36 years old, 15 % belong to the 36-50 years age group and 55 % are over 51 years old, showing this group is formed mostly of retired individuals who are music lovers. None of them are considered by the conductor as friends and none have family ties to him. The relationship between the conductor and the choir members is judged as somewhat transactional (in roughly 68% of the cases; business is business), and somewhat relational in 30% of the cases (some good words but no deep feeling or thoughts exchanged, usually taking place before or after rehearsals), with a mere 2 % being on an interpersonal level (some personal feelings exchanged, but only outside of rehearsal times). Fifty-five percent of the members have been there from one to five years, 14% from 6 to 10 years, 13% from 11 to 15 years, and 17% have been members for over 15 years. The others are occasional participants.

John's main concern is his vulnerability towards the Board of directors, composed exclusively of members of the choir. The Board is composed of 5 choir members elected by the other choir members. John feels he is judged twice, with no opportunity to fight back as his election to the function of conductor can be easily challenged: he must please his colleagues as

³ Fictitious name to protect the conductor's identity.

members of the Board, but also as choir members. Other choir members are fully aware of this particular setting, which gives a fairly large sphere of influence to the Board members within the choir rehearsals and outside of them. As such, John feels he is always working on the edge, unable to please everybody yet obliged to accept criticism with little support and no ultimate options but to leave if unhappy.

John is paid by the Board but the organization is a not-for-profit one. As John puts it, he is an employee, a boss and a colleague all at once. John has been with the group for five years and was planning retirement at the time of the interview, wanting to leave a good impression should other conducting opportunities develop elsewhere.

John confirms he has received no education with regards to conflict management, personal management, or marketing (which could help him better understand the choir's profile). Because John is not keen on maintaining an interpersonal relationship with any member (as a safe distance is deemed necessary), he faces few interpersonal difficulties. However, he recognizes that the lack of quality work on the part of some of the choir members makes him impatient at times. Nevertheless, John insures that the atmosphere remains cordial at all times.

Conflicts develop between choir members for a myriad of reasons with the main one being divergent interests. Usually, choir members who do not get along resolve their difficulties outside of the rehearsal settings. But John faces a number of behavioral problems on the part of the choir members, listed by their intensity as follows: (1) general lack of discipline; (2) arriving late for rehearsals; (3) poor work ethics or efforts (remembering the choir members chose to participate on their own will, without any pay); (4) delays; (5) chatting; and finally (6) goal differences (some choir members are there to socialize rather than to perform). As a result, the better choir members, those who make an effort and make a difference, feel short-changed by the less-enthusiastic ones and in the end, "the choir is as strong as its weakest singer." John remarks that some choir members don't give enough while others, wanting to impose themselves, give too much, almost wanting to assume the role of conductor.

John must therefore show some key leadership attributes: openness, capacity to mobilize the group tolerance, knowledge of his own limits and mutual respect. This of course is in sharp contrast to the tyrants that some famous conductors have been known to be.

John acknowledges his vulnerabilities but cannot afford to show them: he is concerned with his relations with all the members of the group. He feels a certain lack of self-confidence. To combat these, he relies on his mandate to produce a quality concert, limits his emotional involvement and tries to know his own limits. His entire work is thus bounded by the limits of the contractual agreement, the limits of involvement, and his own limits.

His vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that he must let others (the Board) decide on his faith, with his personality, energy level, character and charisma being intangible assets on which he relies to secure his function.

Despite these difficulties and the fact that trust is always on the edge, as he puts it, John finds the experience rewarding, noting that he cannot work without the choir members, but that they in turn cannot achieve much without him. Music is seen as an opportunity for self-development, group spirit, sharing, and awkwardly (given what has just been said) gaining some form of freedom, as music allows for emotions to be generated or even highlighted. John sees his overall experience as pleasurable to the level that he witnesses the choir members improve as artists and as human beings.

The Pop group

This group is composed, depending on the year, of 40 to 45 artists. Artists must not only sing, but also dance and create their own outfits for the show they put together. Twenty percent have been with the group for a year, 50 % from 2 to 10 years, and 15 % over 10 years; another 15 % or so is occasional. The conductor has been conducting for two years. Anna (fictitious name) is doing this voluntarily. She has studied music but changed interest and entered in medicine. As this is a highly informal organization where participants are all joining to put on a show out of their free time and musical interest (without pretending on being formal musicians or choir members), there is no formal Board of director and no funding sought.

The group rehearses once a week for three hours and performs publicly twice a year. It is estimated that each member dedicates somewhere around twenty hours a week in learning the songs by heart (many choir members do not know how to read music), learning the dancing steps, and so forth.

Despite the setting, which differs from the classical one, Anna experiences the same difficulties John does, with discipline being a key concern. Additionally, Anna often feels overwhelmed, near tears, but does all in her power to show she is in control of her emotions, of her state of fatigue, and of her stress level. She has a passion for the group and for music that makes it “normal” to give herself to the level required to perform publicly with a group of non-professionals.

In the word association exercise, Anna mentions to the word “danger” the fact that it is something that can be given, that risk is necessary for advancement, and that the group depends on mutual trust. Music is a communication tool, as opposed to a mechanical object. Manipulation (using the other’s emotions) can be at times useful in order to reach the objectives that have been preset.

John and Anna

It can be said that John and Anna share many things with respect to being a conductor that has to navigate in troubled water at times and to maintain the group cohesiveness despite internal fears and dilemmas as to their real authority. Both John and Anna must trust themselves (despite spouts of self-doubts), trust their crew to drive the vessel to port, and the crew must in turn trust them enough to be guided. In brief, authority is given to John and Anna by the choir members, and it is up to them to live up to the expectations at every single moment. Both John and Anna expose their strengths and (unwillingly) weaknesses, to the Board, the group, the public and eventually the media.

This is a far cry from the image of the invincible conductor. It is much closer to the image of the “vulnerable bulldozer” (Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009: p.35). These authors mention in the same article: “In contrast to this popular image, our research suggests that a conductor is vulnerable, humble, considerate and dependent, as well as charismatic and inspiring. In the creative exchange between orchestra and conductor, the most conspicuous characteristics to emerge were mutual dependence and adaptation.” (2009: p.36)

To believe that trust (in oneself and in others) can be gained and retained at its peak would be an illusion. As Moorman, Deshpandé and Zaltman explain in 1992, even long-term relations tend to become feeble as trust erodes over time. Furthermore, too much trust can be just as damaging as not enough, according to Jeffries and Reed (2000), because everyone becomes

consequently too vulnerable (Granovetter, 1985). In other words, in the musical context, a conductor's job is never completed.

THE MESLY PREDATOR-PREY MODEL IN A MUSICAL CONTEXT

Based on the above review of the literature and its key findings, this paper proposes an exploratory model of the predator-prey dynamic within the relationship between a conductor and his choir members, as follows:

On the left side of the model, the conductor comes with strengths and weaknesses, as *perceived* by the musicians or choir members (the researcher knows, based on the interviews that he tries to hide his weaknesses, hence the use of the term "perceived"). Too much strengths and no display of weaknesses could lead to the perception that he is a predator, trying for example to pinpoint one weak player or singer in the group and using him as a scapegoat to show his power over other musicians or choir members. Too many weaknesses, say on the side of the musicians or choir members, may mean that they feel "prey" to the conductor. In essence, it is the ratio of strengths to weaknesses that separates the predator from the prey. This measure of *perceived* predatory behavior is also a measure of vulnerability. All in all, equilibrium between the conductor's and the artists' strengths and weaknesses make the difference: too many weaknesses, for example, will lead to poor performance. See Figure 1 – The MESLY predator-prey model in a musical setting (Appendix).

As indicated during the interviews, the conductor's weaknesses cannot be displayed, but they still impact his self-confidence. Low self-confidence with a high perception of weaknesses will likely diminish the initial trust the musicians or choir members would allocate to the conductor; and vice-versa. Thus, there is an arrow going from the perceived predatory behavior construct to the trust construct. In fact, Bell, Oppenheimer and Bastien state in 2002 that trust is a psychological state whereby one accepts to be vulnerable towards another with the expectations that he will act properly. Lewicki, McAllister and Bies define trust as follows: "In our analysis, we define trust in terms of confident positive expectations regarding another's *conduct*⁴[...]" (1998: p.439)

Hence, because trust can be partly defined by way of the notion of vulnerability (or, put differently, the notion of perceived predatory behavior), it seems logical to link these two with an arrow. Also mentioned during the interviews are the efforts by both the conductor and his group to cooperate, once a certain level of trust has been established (for example, given the conductor's reputation that has preceded him before he joins the group). These efforts to cooperate based on initial blind trust which has then built up over time eventually lead to the public performance.

Perhaps more fundamentally, a conductor who understands that is he perceived as a predator and who comprehends how this perception on the part of the musicians or choir members negatively alters their willingness to cooperate with him, is poised to take concrete actions to rectify the situation. *A contrario*, a conductor who does not even realize that he is perceived as a predator or else that does not measure the impact of perceived predation on trust and consequently on cooperation, is unlikely to improve the working atmosphere: he thus makes his task that much more difficult and is likely counter-productive. Thus, it seems fair to say that a conductor equipped with a means of penetrating the musicians or choir members' minds is one

⁴ Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) put the term in italic.

that is, indeed, more powerful than the one who remains oblivious to the phenomenon of predation.

Of particular relevance to lessons that can be learned from this study are the number of behavioral problems on the part of the choir members that managers encounter themselves in their daily work life (and which they must contend with despite their hidden vulnerabilities), in particular: (1) general lack of discipline; (2) poor work ethics or efforts; (3) delays; and (4) goal differences.

This short study has thus identified common challenges found by managers in dealing with employees, while at the same time recognizing that a sense of perceived predation prevail, with the manager feeling vulnerable but unable or unwilling to admit this weakness.

CONCLUSION

Courpasson (2000) notes that the “[...] notion of domination is still very useful for understanding how business leaders “govern” organizations today.” This paper has examined the relationship between a music director and his musicians as a proxy for an autocratic manager and unhappy employees.

It has been observed that whilst the conductor appears as a mighty powerhouse capable of generating an outstanding music experience at the tip of his baton, the reality is that he may suffer from low self-confidence and be inhabited with fears and anguish. Musicians and choir members are not without means to impose their own viewpoints, as exemplified by the Karajan-Mayer case, or to become disruptive. Thus, both the conductor and his group feel vulnerable, and while they have reasons to trust each other and cooperate, they must still be on their guard. There is a potential for predatory behavior or else to become prey to an overly-demanding Maestro, as an example. A dynamic relationship whereby perceived predatory behaviors exceed what is acceptable within the working standards will likely lead to discontent and ultimately poor public performance, if it gets to that point. The same can be assumed to be true in a manufacturing context, for example between a plant manager and his employees.

Three music conductors were met, with the orchestra conductor unfortunately not available at the last minute. This poses a limit to the findings: it is possible, although unlikely, that the key findings apply solely to conductor-choir members' relationships, and not to conductor-musicians. Choir members are of course musicians in their own right, with their vocal chords being their instrument. Also, the research was done with two amateur groups; perhaps the findings would be slightly different with professional groups. Evidently, a similar research would be most advisable in different manufacturing contexts.

The researcher has used Glaser and Strauss (1967)'s grounded theory approach to propose a model after some field work had been done, rather than proceeding by presenting a model first and foremost. The proposed MESLY model remains embryonic but seems promising in terms of its managerial implications. It represents a slight modification of the original MESLY model developed in the context of seller-buyer dyad (Mesly 2010a), as it has been adapted to the context of musical performance following qualitative field studies. It remains in line with previous models of business interactions (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1990 and Ring and Van de Ven, 1994).

It has been observed that a conductor can better control his public image by understanding the mechanism of perceived predation. We propose that future research continues to develop the MESLY predator-prey model as it seems to offer a valid and rich way of explaining human behaviors, including in the musical sector. Mesly and Roberge (2010), for example, discuss its

application in the mediation context between negotiating parties. We believe the different applications of the MESLY model could in the end help an organization such as a musical group from the managerial point of view, as the understanding of hidden fears can help human resources and training schools developing instruments to deal with their presence and impact among the organizations.

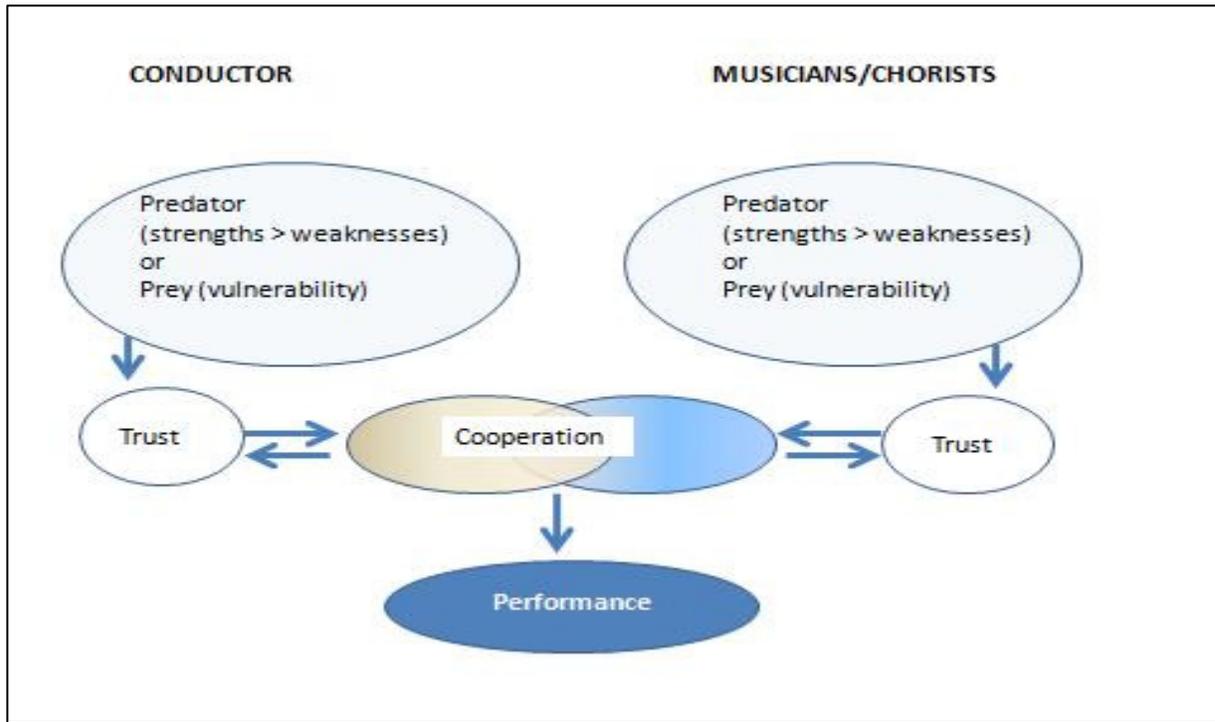
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Figure 1 – The MESLY predator-prey model in a musical setting⁵



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⁵ This figure is the third deployment of the full MESLY model presented in earlier works (2010,2010a, 2011).