

Creating space

How a musical response to Nancy Kline's *Time to Think* can help executive coaches and their clients

Alastair Levy, November 2023

A moving musical performance, whether an orchestral concert or an opera performance, can touch our thoughts, feelings, senses and soul. It can also have many of the ten attributes which Nancy Kline describes in her much-cited, thought-provoking 2002 book *Time to Think* as the basis for a 'Thinking Environment', in which conversations catalyse the evolution of our self-awareness and thoughts and move us to meaningful action.

The paper shares some reflections on lessons from musical performance for how executive coaches can help achieve the attributes of Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment in their coaching sessions. The lessons are also relevant to the way that managers can put coaching as the heart of the way they lead and enable their teams.

The reflections have four primary sources:

- Nancy Kline's articulation of how we can create environments in which people's thinking is fully and openly developed and shared
- My experience from my initial career as an orchestral and operatic conductor of the enablers of deep-seated collaboration between musicians and meaningful experiences for performers and audiences
- My awareness during subsequent careers in government and professional services of barriers that can inhibit reflective discussion
- My more recent journey, as an advisor and executive coach, to rediscover aspects of what it means to listen which I may have forgotten over time.

Enablers of meaningful musical rehearsals and performances. By reference to Nancy Kline's ten attributes (which are listed below, in her order, in italics), musical performances, and the rehearsals which lead to them, at their best will ...

- Draw you in — thoughts, feelings, body, senses, spirit (*attention*)
- Provide an impetus that transports your thoughts and feelings to new places, beyond the bounds of your prior experience of a work or composer or your day-to-day thoughts and feelings (*Incisive Questions*)
- Involve deep, respectful communion between audience and performers, built around a shared experience of the works performed and a collective sense of humility in respect of the score (*equality*)
- Be punctuated by, and end with, heart-felt response, whether involving applause or silence (*appreciation*)
- Embrace space and silence, and 'the gaps between the notes', allowing time to stop (*ease*)
- Stimulate performers to play to their best and audience members to open their hearts to what they hear (*encouragement*)
- Create a safe, expansive, enriching space for personal and collective emotional exploration, inquiry and response (*feelings*)
- Allow the music to speak for itself, with only selective benefit from programme notes (or from conductors speaking during rehearsals) (*information, sometimes*)
- Occur in a place with acoustic, aesthetic and functional characteristics which foster positive individual and collective experiences for musicians and audience members (*place*)
- Be enriched by the diversity of the backgrounds and experiences of composers, musicians and audience members, enabled by the universal accessibility of great compositions and performances (*diversity*)

Barriers that get in the way. As for business meetings, these outcomes do always not occur in musical performances and rehearsals. Our attention can be fragmented. Performances do not always explore or bring to life as many of the aspects of a piece as they can. Performers (and their teachers, conductors and coaches) and audiences can be overly judgmental or critical. Performers or audiences may not find or be given space to reflect and breathe. Groups of performers may not (yet) sing as one. Concert venues can be unwelcoming. Classical music perennially lacks social and racial inclusivity. Musicians, like us all, are affected by the stresses and strains of the personal and professional daily lives.

Implications for coaches and managers. What are some of the ways in which, building the ten attributes of Nancy Kline’s Thinking Environment and lessons from musical performance, executive coaches, managers and others can address these issues and enhance their coaching sessions and wider conversations and meetings?

- Create a protected space for focused discussion and listening that starts from before you walk into the room, carefully refocusing — and welcoming back — your or a client’s attention as a session evolves (*attention*)
- Address your questions to a client and where they are today, with the aim of helping take their thoughts and feelings to new places (*Incisive Questions*)
- Engage with openness, humility, respect and grace with the emotions and experiences of your clients (*equality*)
- Communicate relevant and authentic appreciation of things a client says and actions they take (*appreciation*)
- Create the time and space for a client to explore, learn and experiment, think, feel and breathe (*ease*)
- Treat your role as using your technique, experience and understanding, and positive, nurturing energy, to help clients travel to places they have not been before — through their own thoughts, in their own voice and at their own speed (*encouragement*)
- Deploy your skills, understanding and personality to help clients unlock, experience, explore and evolve their feelings, recognising the unexpected emotions this can lead to, and in a way which is always safe and supportive (*feelings*)
- Focus the questions and reflections you share solely on what matters for the client’s journey at that moment — with their, not your, experience in mind (*information, sometimes*)
- Do what you can to ensure that the physical spaces in which you meet, whether in-person or remote, are attuned with and contribute to the aims of sessions, compensating and contributing as helpful with your words, actions and the feelings you express (*place*)
- Welcome, seek to understand, respect, build on and care for a wide range of ideas, feelings and experiences (*diversity*)

As a conductor, these actions have a special resonance. You are entrusted in many ways with the experiences and fulfilment of musicians and audience alike. By analogy, as a coach or manager you are privileged by a client or colleague’s trust and have the good fortune to come to understand, appreciate, inform and contribute to their personal and professional growth and fulfilment.

About the author. Alastair Levy is an advisor and executive coach. He helps current and future leaders globally to address the personal and professional aspects of leadership, teams to come together around complex issues and organisations and their boards to take an integrated approach to impact, innovation and risk. He had previous careers at leading management consultants McKinsey & Company, where he was the firm's Global Director of Risk, in the UK government and as an orchestral and operatic conductor. He is based in London.

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