
From Pianissimo to Crescendo! Passion, Integrity & Servant Leadership with a Conductor's Baton

Interview with Dr. Tiffany Chang ¹

Award-winning Orchestra and Opera Conductor
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Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi
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Introduction to the interviewee

Dr Tiffany Chang is an orchestra and opera conductor who inspires artists to feel seen, valued, and fulfilled knowing their work matters. Having recently made thrilling debuts at Portland Opera and Opera Columbus, she has received awards from the Solti Foundation U.S., The American Prize, OPERA America, and the international LIT Talent Awards. Tiffany also authors a leadership blog called "Conductor as CEO" where her goal is to increase job satisfaction rates of professional musicians through a focus on creating purpose-driven cultures, promoting psychological safety, and building employee-centric workplaces.

Her "refreshing and thoughtful" leadership on and off the podium has led her to be an

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active panelist, speaker, and contributor for arts organizations such as the Canton Symphony, Girls Who Conduct, Sound Mind, and Notes from the Podium. Having received a doctorate in orchestral conducting and degrees in cello performance, music education, music theory, and music composition, she also served as professor at Oberlin Conservatory, Boston University, Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, and Berklee College of Music. <http://tiffanychang.net>

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LinkedIn: <http://linkedin.com/in/outatime123>
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Interview

Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. Could you tell us how you've become a conductor?

Dr Tiffany Chang (Chang): Thank you, Yasmina, for your invitation. It's an absolute pleasure to share my story!

I began my musician life as an instrumentalist playing the cello and the piano. During my college years, I quickly found that every aspect of music fascinated me. I wasn't just interested in performing on the cello. I was equally curious about music composition (what the creative process was like in writing music) and music theory (analysing and reverse-engineering how composers put their work together). I also loved the idea of leading a group of people from point A to point B. I love seeing someone's mind being open through my leadership and becoming inspired to make music in ways they never thought possible.

Being a conductor allowed me to combine all of my curiosities into one job - I can perform and create art in real time on the stage, I can think about how music works from a composer's mindset, I can solve mysteries in figuring out how composers put their works together, and finally, I can lead and inspire others musicians.

Q2: A project manager is often compared to a conductor. Let us explore some of the comparisons and gaps in the following questions. As a conductor to a new team, how do you build your credibility?

Chang: One of my top core values is integrity. I believe that is the backbone of everything I do. Generally in the field, I've built my credibility through being highly consistent in upholding that value for my own work and the way I interact with others.

When I encounter a new team, I not only take my integrity with me, but I also assume the responsibility of a leader who is there to serve the people in my care.

I take the effort to emphasise that I don't have all the answers and that every team member has value to give. We are really stronger together. As a conductor, I was actually not trained to think this way. I was trained to think that I must learn and know everything and that I am responsible for being right. And most musicians in orchestras are trained to expect the conductor to be right and hold all the solutions. If they don't, they must not be good. One consequence of that is the musicians stop exercising creativity and risk-taking that may lead to long-term growth.

It has taken me a long time to unlearn those expectations. I've come to understand that the leader is responsible for eliciting not only the best from my people, but to also create a space where they want to go beyond their best toward personal goals that (ideally) align with the collective group goals. And the only way to access that "beyond" zone is to demonstrate vulnerability as a leader, empathy for my people and what they want, and clarity in why we are all here.

I know that I've earned my credibility when people I lead believe that I have their best interest in mind as well as the interest of the collective project.

Q3: In a project, some team members can backup others. if a musician doesn't play as intended, how can you handle the situation?

Chang: I ask questions to try to understand what's getting in their way and how I may help them. We don't always know the reasons for sub-par performance. It may not always be skill-related. There may be circumstances outside of work (something personal or current events). It may be working conditions that get in the way (a chair that is uncomfortable to perform their instrument optimally). It could be a lack of feedback or coaching (they had no idea there was something wrong). Understanding the context behind the problems will reveal the appropriate solutions and who would be responsible for addressing them. At that point, I work with the person in question to create an action plan to improve their work, with clearly defined goals, timelines, definitions of success, and ways I as a leader could be supportive.

Q4: I have the image that the ego is important in music. How do you handle conflicts between the musicians?

Chang: I'm intrigued by your question! Yes, musicians may portray an *image* of ego, but it is many times a protective armour. It's been built up to protect a fragile sense of self-worth after decades in a competitive environment, to compensate for feeling like they have no identity without their instruments, or to withstand what often feels like personal attacks when someone criticises their music-making.

In my experience, conflicts stem from these fears and insecurities built up over time. Like in many industries, we've been conditioned from when we are young through education and society to seek status and specific definitions of success. There are only a few ways for musicians to be traditionally considered "successful." And we are driven by our ego to put emphasis on status symbols (like performing at Carnegie Hall or getting a degree from Julliard, one of the world's top music schools) and a scarcity mindset (where another's win equals one's loss). We are constantly in states of "we are not enough" or "we have to prove our own worth." Conflict occurs when circumstances get closer to or trigger those feelings.

When I attempt to handle conflict, my goal is to discover and understand the true reasons behind it. Where is it really coming from? Why does someone feel threatened? Are we really having the same conversation? Sometimes a solution is to simply acknowledge these concerns by asking the appropriate questions. This reminds me of Stephen Covey's wise habit "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Alas, I am no master at having difficult conversations of this sort, and I'm working hard at getting better at it.

Q5: You told me you were sometimes a guest conductor for a few weeks. How can we work with the musicians in such a short period of time?

Chang: I try to not impose "my way" of doing things at first. I take note of what their culture is like. Surgeon Atul Gawande describes culture as "the sum total of habits and expectations." I start by actively listening to how they make music and observing their behaviours. I take note of what seems to be their habits and expectations of not only working together but also working with a leader. Then I ask myself how can I help them be better? Is there something I can bring by way of challenging the way they do things or a new idea that will enhance their existing culture? In a short time, I can't make drastic changes, but I can plant seeds that may have big influences later on for those people and those organisations.

Q6: I suppose you have diverse teams in the orchestras. Have you had communication training or intercultural training? Or the language of music helps you to overcome the intercultural challenges? And a naïve question from me: is the way to write music sheets the same in all countries?

Chang: I feel like I can *always* be better at communication, inclusion, empathy, conflict management, empowerment - all those soft skills we don't learn in school. I have not had official training but I have been proactive in finding professional development opportunities to gain those skills. For example, I took advantage of Berklee Faculty Development Office's seminars, such as "Managing Difficult Conversations" and "Hiring at its Best." I've participated in the Akimbo Workshops, including the altMBA, that allowed me to learn from different industries and perspectives. I've also simply learned from reading books and listening to podcasts on leadership and organisational psychology.

Having said that, the non-verbal communication of conducting gestures can easily help transcend any language barriers or cultural differences. I think that's pretty amazing about being a conductor. You don't have to speak the verbal language, and you can communicate everything with your hands and a specific way a finger is lifted. The craft of conducting, to me, has always been a cause-and-effect relationship with sound: you do this and you cause this sound to happen. If you want a different sound, you work to find a different gesture to elicit that sound. There is a visceral connection between what is happening physically in my body and the sound that is coming from an orchestra. And that doesn't require any words!

And, finally, the partitions (or sheet music) are written the same everywhere for traditional Western classical music. That universality does help musicians naturally feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging immediately.

Q7: As a conductor, can you advocate to the orchestra's direction to have training etc for the musicians?

Chang: I think such training would be amazing for all musicians, mainly because it is largely missing from our traditional music education. Though to my knowledge, such training is not commonly offered in large organisations. As a conductor, I often consider myself as "middle management" where there are several levels higher up in the hierarchy. Most people naturally think that the conductor is at the top and can have full reign, but that is not always the case. So I find myself in a position where I must advocate for my musicians and "manage up." Sometimes I'm successful in implementing change, and other times I'm not.

Q8: In the project management world, servant leadership, self-organizing teams are communally used and practised. How do these concepts apply to your job as a conductor?

Chang: I wholeheartedly believe in servant leadership for my work as a conductor. I want to help people grow so they can feel individual progress towards their personal goals—with the mindset to push them to be better each day. I want to help them see the relevance of their work to the group's work—even if their part is a "boring" bass part. And I want to recognize them for their contributions as much as I can—having mechanisms in place where I can show my appreciation for them regularly. Ultimately, I want to help musicians I lead to feel fulfilled knowing that their work had an impact on an audience and to feel valued knowing that their work mattered to the success of the concert.

Self-organising teams certainly occur in orchestral culture. Sections of musicians often take matters into their own hands to have conversations among themselves to ensure everything matches artistically. They might take time outside of rehearsals to work in a small group (these are called sectionals). The conductor doesn't always need to be part of those conversations, but we can offer support in answering questions or sometimes being a tie-breaker of sorts when there are differing opinions.

Q9: What can a conductor learn from a business leader?

Chang: What often excites me about learning about business leadership is that I find the conversations that are taking place are miles ahead of those in the music leadership industry. Business leaders are taking strides to improve better organisational cultures by folding in discussion about purpose and core values. They are emphasising the importance of putting people first (being employee-centric) and caring about the people who serve the customers (perhaps as a way of being customer-centric). They are talking about reforms in hiring strategies, motivation and advancement, as well as leadership training. Most importantly, their discussions about psychological safety can be crucial in helping the music industry create workplaces where musicians feel safe to speak up so things can be better and to take risks to innovate and grow as artists.

Q10: You published many things about leadership in the social media: why?

Chang: First, I share leadership ideas that I've learned and thought about because I find them interesting, and I think my industry could benefit a lot from being challenged by those ideas. I also want to use social media as a strategy to find like-minded people, from whom I could find mutual support and additional knowledge. I want to start conversations with people who want to have them, so first I need to find them. My work has attracted all kinds of people from various industries, and I'm still surprised that this continues to happen! Finally, to be honest, another reason is self-serving: I want to use my interest in leadership as a way to position myself uniquely in the conductor market. My social media strategy involves painting a picture of "Tiffany is a conductor who challenges me with interesting ideas about leadership." I hope my industry will begin to see me as a valuable resource for innovation in leadership and organisational reform, as well as a leading agent of change they'd want to engage on the podium.

Q11: What can a business leader learn from a conductor?

Chang: I think business leaders can learn from how conductors unite a team via artistic vision from day one. The conductor usually has to have a super clear vision of how the music should sound before ever stepping foot into a workspace with the musicians they lead. This takes a lot of work. I always like to think that my preparation goal is to be able to conduct the concert 100% by the first rehearsal. Of course, it's not going to be an actual concert in that first reading, but my preparation in my own performance and level of artistic clarity is already there. (I guess this is my integrity that I wrote about earlier.) It's that clarity of vision that makes a conductor's leadership effective and gets musicians on board very quickly. The earlier they are on board, the more time-efficient the team work may be. Along the way, that vision may transform and morph based on the input and insights of the musicians in the orchestra, but it starts from a viable, compelling vision to work with.

In business, my guess is that sometimes the clarity of vision may come later, as it may be generated through the process and informed by the iterative work done. Perhaps

that's fundamentally what's different about the field from music. I wonder what benefits might be enjoyed if the vision is pretty complete at the starting point.

Q11: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Chang: I have never heard of the analogy of comparing project managers to a conductor! I'm so curious about what that is like from the perspective of a project manager. As an outsider, I don't know anything about project management. I wonder what assumptions I'm making about your field. At the same time, I wonder what assumptions project managers may have on conductors. I feel like I can learn a lot from talking to project managers to find more insights about this comparison - and perhaps with that knowledge, I could answer the previous question better (because I'm probably making so many assumptions!). If you're interested, I'd love to have a chat and connect with you!

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France



Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange S.A.](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in [projectmanagement.com](https://www.projectmanagement.com) as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of

the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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