

The Artist as Leader: Brian Cole



An accomplished bilingual conductor with a resume that spans symphony halls and opera venues all over the US, Europe, South America and the Caribbean, Brian Cole has been Dean of the School of Music at UNCSA since 2016. Prior to his arrival in Winston-Salem, he was a member of the team of musicians and administrators who founded the Berklee School of Music's first international campus in Valencia, Spain, and who also crafted the noted institution's first graduate programs. He was also the campus's first Dean of Academic Affairs.

In this interview with Corey Madden, Brian reveals how an unexpected but providential leap from the saxophone to the bassoon in high school set him on a path that led him to conducting, teaching and administrating, learning all along the way how to listen more fully.

Corey Madden: Lots of artists make transitions in their careers. They find other opportunities, and in some cases leadership is the thing that calls to them. So let's start back at the beginning. How do you think your upbringing and your background might have informed your leadership style?

Brian Cole: I guess I've always been in leadership roles, large and small. If I think back to the way I was raised. My parents are very loving, non-confrontational people, and I'm definitely a very non-confrontational person. The side of leadership that involves confronting or engaging confrontation is one that I've had to learn to do and am still learning to do. My parents today are basically the same people they were back then. It was a very calm environment. They allowed me to be whoever I wanted to be and to try things.

CM: Were you a musician early on?

BC: I was. My first memory of being involved in music specifically was singing in Mrs. Gretchen Grigsby's fourth-grade music class. We had a chorus, and we did a concert for Thanksgiving. She asked me if I would sing a solo in that little concert. I remember doing it and thinking, "This is so cool!" I think she's still alive today. It would be amazing to track her down and tell her that. She probably has no idea. I can even remember the song. I remember very clearly that being the first time I was excited about making music. I don't know, maybe it's because I was out in front, too. There's probably a little bit of that element, to be honest. So then I ended up being in middle school band and high school band. I was, you know, lucky to have great opportunities and lucky to have good teachers.

CM: It sounds like one thing that happened to you in terms of leadership is that your talent helped put you out front early on, and also you had a lot of reinforcement. Do you think that that was one way that you got guided toward leadership?

BC: I think that's accurate. I don't consider myself to be among the most talented people as a performer. I think I'm a very good performer, but I don't think I'm in any kind of class apart. I think I did have enough situations early on that helped me build confidence to do that more, and so the more I did that, the more confidence I felt. I think there's a direct relationship to being willing to go out and perform as a soloist or perform in front of people and then being comfortable in front of people in general.

CM: I've noticed that you have a high degree of comfort and a relaxation about being a leader. Is that a combination of how calm your parents were and your experience performing?

BC: People have told me that a lot. That's true now, but I haven't always felt comfortable. I think I had to grow into that. I can trace that very clearly back to my parents and just the way they treated me. I was lucky. I had a very stable, supportive and inspirational childhood. I got to explore things. I had the permission to be comfortable in my own skin.

CM: Was there ever a time when you realized it was an asset to be calm, comfortable, confident?

BC: Yeah, I started to realize that kind of poise or comfort in the wake of pressure or in front of groups of people was more of an asset as I went into conducting as a career. It's an interesting story about how I ended up becoming a dean, which has a lot to do with conducting, in my opinion.

I started out actually playing saxophone. I remember one day, in ninth grade, the band director came in — this was a very transformative teacher that I had — and she said, "Does anybody want to play the bassoon? We only have one bassoonist. And so if somebody wants to play the bassoon, there's a lot of opportunities and you'll probably get to play in the more advanced ensembles." I was the first-chair saxophone, so I was doing well, but I remember I looked down the row, and there were like 25 saxophones. Not really even thinking about it, I just kind of raised my hand and said, "I'll do it." Everyone looked at me like, "What?" Switching

instruments wasn't something I'd ever thought of. I just kind of said, "Why not?" And I think that has a lot to do with being comfortable enough to take ...

CM: A risk?

BC: Yeah. I didn't really see it as a risk at that time. I just thought it was something interesting. So then I did it. It went just like my teacher said. Within the second half of my first year I was playing in the top symphonic band. I got these experiences because I was in that situation to do more advanced things, and I got more inspired by it. I ended up going to college studying music, not intending to go into music professionally, just because I got a scholarship. I got a scholarship because I played the bassoon, because people need bassoonists, not because I was the world's greatest bassoonist. I was good enough. I went to college and then I started playing in the orchestra. I never played in orchestras in high school, only in college, but I was a huge orchestral music fan. I remember playing in orchestra and just being so inspired by it. My passion for it went to the next level, and then I thought, "This is what I want to do. I want to be around this. I want to be involved in this to the greatest degree." So that's essentially how I came to be a conductor.

CM: Why was becoming a conductor going to give you more access?

BC: That for me was the way to be the most involved with the experience: to lead it. I wouldn't be just playing my part; I would be playing the whole thing. I would be fully immersed in it because I just really loved it. Of course at that point as a young kid you have no idea what being a conductor really is. You imagine what it is. But playing the bassoon got me there.

I'll jump forward. After studying and getting graduate degrees in conducting and professional jobs, I was a conductor. We were still in Cincinnati where I had completed the coursework for a doctoral degree, finished a two-year stint as an apprentice conductor with the Cincinnati Symphony, and then a year teaching at CCM [College-Conservatory of Music], and then this great opportunity in Puerto Rico came along for my wife. She had the chance to take a position leading her father's engineering firm. We discussed it and I thought, "Why not? Let's just go to Puerto Rico, because I can be based anywhere." I had been trying to build guest-conducting opportunities, and maybe I could start to get opportunities in South America. You know, it's easy to catch flights from anywhere. And it sounds like an adventure, so why not? I remember going there and I did a little part-time teaching at the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music, conducting some of their rehearsals, coaching chamber music, things like that. And I continued to do trips and conduct as I was fortunate enough to have opportunities.

One day the dean of the conservatory and the chancellor contacted me and said, "We heard about you and we're really interested in your background and we want to know if you're interested in talking about this associate dean position that we have. We've been looking for somebody for many years and we haven't found the right person." And I was like, "Wow. Thank you very much. That's an honor for you to think of that, but no, no thank you." I'd never had any interest in administrative things. I'd always seen myself balancing a professional career in conducting with maybe going into academia, which I love being around, and, you know, conducting a university orchestra somewhere.

Then they called me back in and the message I got back from them was, “Give it a try. It’s not what you think it is, especially at a place like this. ... It’s not just this desk job. You’ll be very much in touch with the art and with the students and the experience; and, you’ll have the flexibility to continue to do things artistically. We promise that, and we think you’d be really good at it.” At that point I didn’t have a reason not to, and the idea of having some stable income sounded good. So, I did it, and I actually really loved it.

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It took a couple of years for me to realize why. I felt much like I did when I was a bassoonist and I wanted to be a conductor because I would be more involved in something I loved and have a greater effect on it. And it’s not like that at every place. They have places where those jobs suck. The DNA of certain places is not such as that at Puerto Rico or at Berklee or UNCSA. The places I’ve gone are places where I could have a greater effect in an administrative role. Just like as a conductor, you have to have vision, you have to get people behind it and you have to execute it — but you can’t do it without the other people. It’s the same way being a dean, and so I found that that’s why I really got drawn to it. I really do love being a dean. The skill set of being a dean is in my opinion close to 100 percent the same as being a conductor.

CM: Can you talk about that translation from creative practice to leadership?

You have to be comfortable in front of people. You have to be able to communicate your vision to others. You have to convince people of it and get them behind it. You have to create that sense of a group that can do it together. You have to be a psychologist.

BC: I’m still in both worlds. I still am a relatively active conductor, you know. Four or five concerts a year. And then of course I have this position at UNCSA. Both have intensely creative practice and leadership involved, and the skills required for both, I think, are the same. As a conductor you have to be a person of vision, and you have to have something to say about the music that’s going to happen. You have to be comfortable in front of people. You have to be able to communicate your vision to others. You have to convince people of it and get them behind it. You have to create that sense of a group that can do it together. You have to be a psychologist. You have to be a business person. You have to work with donors. You have to get people to support what you’re doing, externally. You have to be good with individuals. You have to then be good with larger groups. I mean, it’s identical.

CM: Right.

BC: And in both cases you have to be an artist. You can have all those skills to conduct an orchestra, and if you’re not an artist, they’re not going to go anywhere with you. They’re going to see through you immediately. The same thing, I think, is true as dean. I’m not the greatest artist in the world. I think I’m a competent artist. But if I get up in front of the faculty and try to talk about what’s important — and I don’t understand what’s important from the university standpoint — then they’re also not going to get behind the vision.

CM: The artistic part of your leadership, what does that mean to you? Is it aesthetic, is it values, is it a combination of the two?

Inherently, to be an artist is to 1) be willing and 2) be able to look at the world differently, to look for a different side to something, to look past the surface of it and see whether that's a piece of art or whether it's a landscape or whether it's a person.

BC: I think it's a combination of the two. Inherently, to be an artist is to 1) be willing and 2) be able to look at the world differently, to look for a different side to something, to look past the surface of it and see whether that's a piece of art or whether it's a landscape or whether it's a person. What is the other meaning of it? What does it say to me or to the world beyond what's obvious? And then of course an artist creates things that say those things, that comment on the world and bring out a new side of the world that people wouldn't have seen. I think it's a powerful entity to expose things about the world. Some things aren't so great — cruelty and bias. That's another side of it. An artist shines light on things and focuses people's attention on them.

CM: So I also hear that there's risk involved in it, which is something you mentioned before, namely that you have to be comfortable with taking a certain risk. But it's for a purpose.

If you don't have anything to say, then you're not really a leader; you're just a coordinator.

BC: Well, I think inherently a leader has to have something to say, has to have an opinion. Artists have opinions. Artists are inherently leaders because they are generating something new. They are generating a new idea, a new perspective, a new viewpoint. If you don't have anything to say, then you're not really a leader; you're just a coordinator.

I shouldn't say "just" because that's a huge skill in itself. I don't mean to diminish any of those roles. But if you're really going to lead, then you have to have an opinion and something to say. It is not just that the dean has to be an artist to lead or a conductor has to be an artist to lead. Some of the greatest leaders that I've met, who are not working in the arts per se, have either some experience in playing music or creating art or are incredibly knowledgeable of the arts and passionate about it. Some of the people I'm thinking of know more about music than I do. I'm just impressed to hear them talk about music, and they've never played an instrument in their life.

CM: You talked a little bit about being a conductor, and you're a dean of a large faculty of experts. Outside of conducting, how do you lead other artists?

BC: I think the first two core important skills or values for that would be transparency and highly developed skills in listening. All of the leaders that I would want to emulate are people who never are the first to speak. They are the people who listen to everybody in the room, listen to every perspective and listen to understand, not to respond. It's so infrequent in life to listen to people in order to understand what they're trying to say and not listen just to figure out what you're going to say back.

CM: Why is that important?

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BC: Because in the end, if you want people to get behind you, you have to understand them and you have to make sure that their opinion is valued. The only way to do that is to listen to them. The people who have been really good examples of leadership for me — whether it's at a staff meeting or a meeting about a really big situation — I watch them, and they are the last to speak usually. And the only times they do speak when people express opinions is to question and follow up, like, "Well, you said this, and it made me think this. Is that accurate?" Or, "Tell me more about this. You know, when you were talking about this, you seemed really concerned. Can you explain more?" So, everything that they are doing is trying to understand the core of what is important to people.

If you understand what's important to people, then it's easier to make decisions. It's easier to find common ground between people. Not that the decision is always going to make everybody happy. It's one thing to just autocratically make a decision; it's another to say, "I heard you all, and I know this is important to you. Based on that, this is what I think we should do." Then people will go with you. A lot of that is the transparency of it. You know, it's just saying, "Everybody is a part of this team. Everybody is important."

The third facet I think is important, which has everything to do with those first two, is that leadership has to be 100 percent service. So, the more powerful you are or the more responsibility you have in a position, then the greater degree of servitude you're responsible for. I feel responsible for the professional well-being of all of our faculty. I feel very responsible for the development of our students. Everything we do has to point to that. So, if we hire a faculty member, it's because we think they are a great artist and they have so much to offer our students and this whole community. We put them in that position of responsibility because we are sure about that. We have to give them the resources that they need to do it. When we evaluate them, there needs to be a supportive approach. It's like, "This is great." Or, "It seems like you're having a problem here. What else can we do that could help that situation? What other resources are needed?" Understanding the situation, a supportive approach as opposed to a checklist. Not that everything always works out, but I think it's the leader's job to put everybody in the position to do their best work.

CM: That's how to get to excellence.

BC: I think so. Excellence will be measured by what the team produces. I think if a leader — from the president of the United States all the way down to a dean of the school of music — approaches everything from the standpoint of, "What can you do for me, or what can you do for us?" then you're going to get one result. You can argue about whether it's good or bad. But if you approach it from, "What do you need to do your best work?" then people will think about doing their best work and develop themselves within their position.

I think some of the leaders who fail or don't achieve full potential, not just for them but for the institution, are just too focused on making themselves look good with achievements that they can check off and say, "We did this." But in the end, if the school does really well, and if the students

you are producing are incredibly developed and talented and creating beautiful things, that will reflect well on you.

I think a lot of people have it backward. It's easy to get turned around sometimes because life's complicated. I make a million mistakes every day, and it's easy to get off-balance sometimes, and you need to remind yourself of that. But ideally, it's really the success of the team that is the true measurement of success.

CM: For you, what's the hardest part of being a leader?

BC: I think the hardest part is giving feedback and giving it consistently. You know, giving real feedback. Like I said in the beginning, I'm inherently not a confrontational person. Feedback is confrontation. And whether it's really constructive or whether it has to be very direct — telling somebody that they are doing something wrong or in lesser cases just how they could do it better — sometimes that's just as hard.

CM: How does that translate back to the experience of being a musician? It seems like musicians get a lot of feedback.

BC: They do, but a lot of times it's very one-directional. Musicians get a lot of feedback, but they don't give a lot of feedback. That's a very general assessment, but if you think about an orchestra, they get a lot of feedback. "Play softer. Play louder. Do this. Do that. That's not good. This is good." You know, a majority of musicians end up becoming teachers, but with very few exceptions, we don't train them to do it. They become good teachers though trial and error. That's a weakness of all the academic models not just here but anywhere.

CM: It's interesting that one of the attributes you think of as being important as a leader is the idea of creating the ability to listen, respond appropriately and maybe guide. How does that feel? What's the greatest reward of leading for you?

To be honest, the greatest reward is just when everybody's really satisfied. When we've set a goal and everybody's really satisfied with the results, the satisfaction of the group is very rewarding.

BC: To be honest, the greatest reward is just when everybody's really satisfied. When we've set a goal and everybody's really satisfied with the results, the satisfaction of the group is very rewarding.

CM: Can you give me an example of something like that recently or a peak experience?

BC: Well, I haven't been here that long. I know we're going to have some big projects that I'm real optimistic about. But in my recent history, I mean the last five or six years, so many of those achievements have to do with being part of the Berklee Valencia team, with the Valencia campus that we created from scratch.

CM: You created it completely from scratch?

BC: There was a facility that was empty that we rented and developed, so we didn't build a building. But we created the curriculum, we hired the people, we built the team, recruited the students, everything. I was a part of that. There was an executive team — me and two other people, who were tremendous — and, outside of us, there were different circles of all these people. It was an incredibly high-functioning team. You build something from the ground up, you have more freedom in doing it.

There were plenty of problems we had to get past. But I remember opening the campus. I remember graduating that first group of students. Those were obvious milestones. But then seeing the students go out and the employment they were finding ... ! We highly evolved and expanded our capacity in terms of presenting concerts. And the last two years I was there we created this massive outdoor concert to end the year, which is now one of the most important events in the city. That was incredibly satisfying to see because everybody came together and was a part of this event.

I think one of the biggest things I learned in that experience was how to collaborate better with a team. I had some skills in that, but I think I had a lot more to learn, especially from my two colleagues in the executive team. I learned so much from them and from the experience of how to be a part of a team and still lead it and, yeah, through trial and error. And there's nothing that was more satisfying than that experience because we achieved some really big things, and it was everybody playing a role and everybody's role being very important to the whole.

CM: What do you think we need to do to encourage more artists to be interested in stepping up and leading?

BC: We've talked about artists being leaders, that's one thing; but the skills of actually going out and doing that are super important. I would say it's one of the most fundamental things that we need to be training students to do, and we're not doing it. I mean *we* as in *academia*.

As a musician, leadership skills are not really built into the experience. We receive a lot of feedback, but we're not trained to give it back. The QEP [Quality Enhancement Plan] at UNCSA and the School of Music, about speaking to audiences and things like that, that's all very good. That's a start in being comfortable and being in front of people and speaking. But that's not really leadership skills. I think the key to it is giving feedback. Giving feedback inherently means developing your own opinions. Giving feedback is having an opinion.

I think if we enhance the training of students to really have an opinion and express it, that, I think, is the core of it. Because then people will feel comfortable in having an opinion and feel comfortable in sharing it, and if they get to that space, then they might be willing to take it a step further, you know? There are all the other tangible skills — public speaking and building networks and things like that — which are all great and super important, but I think the fundamental core of it is that.

How often will I be teaching a class, and we're looking at a piece of music, and I will ask, "What do you think about it?" No one will raise their hand.

CM: Well, let's hope for lots of raised hands and passionate opinions in the future. Thank you for speaking with us.

BC: You're very welcome. I enjoyed it.

Epilogue

The even keel demeanor and appeal of Brian Cole provides an insight in how to be a successful artist leader by working in support of others. Lessons we can take from this interview include:

- **Use opportunities as positive risk.** Whether changing instruments, moving to new countries, or taking on leadership roles, keep an eye out to try new things, as they can often surprise you with the growth they provide.
- **Find opportunities to get more involved.** Artists grow into leaders by finding ways to have a deeper effect on the art being created.
- **Communicate your vision.** This may sound self-evident, but many projects and teams falter because the leader forget to communicate the reasoning and impact. Also remember to share the "why."
- **Use perspective taking skills.** Have a vantage point as a leader and artist, and be intensely curious to understand others' perspectives. It correlates directly to good decision-making, buy-in, and an overall healthy culture.
- **Know where success lies.** The leader is only as good as she helps others to become. The project, production, or organization is lifted up by serving other to be successful.



Brian Cole
Dean, UNCSA School of Music

Brian Cole is an innovative, experienced and bi-lingual arts leader and conductor of orchestras and opera. His strengths include curriculum and program development, collaborative arts initiative development and implementation, and local and international projection. An accomplished conductor, Cole has led orchestras and operas throughout the United States, Europe, South America and the Caribbean. He has served the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as Conducting Assistant and also as Assistant Conductor for the May Festival. He has held the positions of Assistant Conductor and Director of Education and Outreach Programs for the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, and as Music Director of the Concert Orchestra of the University

of Cincinnati College – Conservatory of Music. He was Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music for over seven years before spending four years in Valencia, Spain, as the founding Dean of Academic Affairs for the Valencia Campus of Berklee College of Music.