

## ROLE-PLAYING IN *SIX TO FIVE*

Thomas R. Moore

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**Abstract:** This article traces the creative process of *six to five*, a work for 20 guitarists with a special role for the conductor, premiered by the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp's guitar ensemble. The piece was commissioned by the author from the American composer Jessie Marino as part of research into the role of the instrumentalised conductor. The article explores the ways in which Marino deployed the conductor to meet her artistic goals, testing at each step the extent to which her utilisation rises to the level of instrumentalisation. Applying political theories offered by, among others, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the article also considers the extent to which Marino deployed the conductor as a tactical leader in both the rehearsal process and the performance of *six to five*.

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### Introduction

Towards the end of the Cold War several NATO nations set up the Tactical Leadership Programme (TLP) to train their military pilots to work cooperatively towards common goals. The programme was set up to meet 'the need to generate leaders for challenging multinational air defense and air strike missions'.<sup>1</sup> Those leaders were trained to be rapidly deployed by NATO joint command, should the need arise to defend themselves against an attack from the USSR. The TLP's mission was to train officers from different nations to step into a leadership role for a short, well-defined, multinational operation. While Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri may not have had military stratagems in mind when writing their manifesto *Assembly*, they succinctly describe a similar motivation, calling for leaders who could be used as 'a weapon to wield and dispose of as the situation dictates'.<sup>2</sup>

This creates a colourful allusion: only under the most dire circumstances would the pilots be brought forth from their host nations to create a kind of multifaceted shield to protect the allied nations from the Red Menace. Those leaders would be tactically deployed to operate according to the strategy of the moment and then, having fulfilled their mission, they would be 'discarded' and sent back to their normal duties. The website *dummies.com* defines strategy as the

<sup>1</sup> Tactical Leadership Programme, 'History of TLP', [www.tlp-info.org/history-of-tp-2/](http://www.tlp-info.org/history-of-tp-2/) (accessed 8 June 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *ASSEMBLY* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 22.

‘what’ and tactics as the ‘who and how’.<sup>3</sup> In the context of business models, Ramon Casadesus-Masanell and Joan Enric Ricart define tactics as the ‘residual choices open to a firm by virtue’ of its strategic choices.<sup>4</sup> If we apply this to the TLP-trained pilots, these leaders would represent the ‘residual’ tools left to NATO after it chose to employ a particular model – in this case, a joint allied defence programme.

Though not necessarily a weapon ‘to wield and discard’, conductors are also employed as tactical leaders, deployed à la carte for specific pieces and programmes depending on strategic and (sometimes) specified motivations of a utilising actor (usually an artistic director of an ensemble or venue and/or a composer).<sup>5</sup> For example, Alexander Khubeev required a conductor literally bound to an instrument to tell the story of the rise and fall of a dictator in his *Ghost of Dystopia* (2014, revised 2019); his strategy was the story and his residual weapon of choice an instrumentalised conductor.<sup>6</sup> Another example can be found in Ensemble Musikfabrik’s use of a rehearsal conductor for pieces that are performed without one; the conductor is tactically deployed to generate efficiency in rehearsals, then ‘discarded’ prior to the concerts.<sup>7</sup>

The physicality of a conductor placed between the audience and a group of musicians is inescapable (see Figure 1). The person fulfilling that role is present, moving and carries an load of traditional expectations for those watching, both on stage and in the audience.<sup>8</sup> This is a great source of both inspiration and frustration for many composers and artistic directors.<sup>9</sup> For Stefan Prins and Pieter Matthyssens, the artistic co-directors of Nadar Ensemble, ‘[the conductor] is a visual element. So if you programme concerts in which you think the visual element is really important, then putting it simply, with a conductor, you have a dancer on stage.’<sup>10</sup> With that in mind, when the chance arose in my artistic research to commission a work to further explore, develop and instrumentalise the role and physicality of the conductor, my first thoughts went to American composer Jessie Marino. Her whole practice centres on the physicality of the performing musician, finding ways to ‘scale musicians, making the performers as physically similar to one another as possible’ in order to ‘[erase] certain kinds of visual information from an audience’s standpoint’.<sup>11</sup>

Marino’s compositional methods help an audience to focus on ‘the little things that are not erasable in a human’.<sup>12</sup> In her series of table pieces,<sup>13</sup> for example, she demonstrated that an audience ‘can actually

<sup>3</sup> ‘Strategic Planning: Strategy vs Tactics’, [www.dummies.com/business/business-strategy/strategic-planning-strategy-vs-tactics/](http://www.dummies.com/business/business-strategy/strategic-planning-strategy-vs-tactics/) (accessed 8 June 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Ramon Casadesus-Masanell and Joan Enric Ricart, ‘From Strategy to Business Models and onto Tactics’, *Long Range Planning*, 43, nos 2–3 (2010), pp. 195–215.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Moore, ‘Conductor à la Carte: Artistic and Practical Motivations for Utilizing a Conductor in New Music Ensembles Performing Integrated Concerts’, accepted for publication in *Perspectives of New Music*, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. Moore, ‘The Instrumentalised Conductor’, *TEMPO*, 75, no. 297 (June 2021), pp. 48–60.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, ‘Conductor à la Carte’.

<sup>8</sup> Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Moore, ‘The Instrumentalised Conductor’.

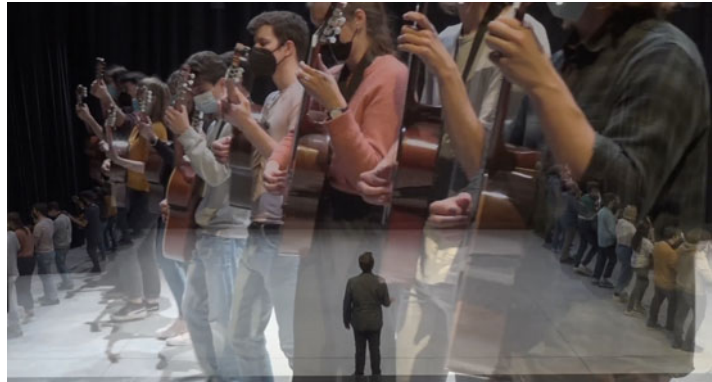
<sup>10</sup> Pieter Matthyssens, interview by Thomas R. Moore, 21 January 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Jessie Marino, interview by Thomas R. Moore, 10 November 2019.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Marino has made quite a few pieces for one or more musicians performing while sitting a table, works that are easily transferable from location to location. Examples include *Rot Blau* (2009), *Endless Shrimp* (2015) and *throw me to you and back again* (2018), [www.jessie-marino.com/pieces](http://www.jessie-marino.com/pieces) (accessed 24 November 2022).

Figure 1:  
The Royal Conservatoire of  
Antwerp's guitar ensemble  
performing *six to five* by Jessie  
Marino. Photo © Thomas R. Moore.



start to see, as if under a microscope, the tiny little differences' in the performers on stage. Marino is preoccupied with the scaling of the musicians, making 'very small things much bigger than they normally would be'.<sup>14</sup> When we began to discuss the commission, Marino and I looked for ways in which, by instrumentalising the conductor, we might 'aggressively re-contextualise[s] the act of listening to explore new places where sounds and bodies meet'.<sup>15</sup> She admitted that she had never written for a conducted ensemble but was eager to tackle the form, deploying 'the body of the conductor, employing choreographed gestures, emotive body language, and vocalisation to show both the performers and the audience new ways of listening and responding to one another'.<sup>16</sup>

In her manifesto *The New Discipline*, Jennifer Walshe included Marino, along with artists such as Object Collection, James Saunders, Matthew Shlomowitz, Neele Hülcker, François Sarhan, Steven Takasugi and Natacha Diels, in a grouping she sees as having 'a wide range of disparate interests but all [sharing] the common concern of being rooted in the physical, theatrical, and visual, as well as musical'. Their compositions 'often invoke the extra-musical, which activate the non-cochlear'. This group of composers demands the active engagement in performance of 'the ear, the eye, and the brain'. Walshe concludes that Marino's pieces (among others) are all 'works in which we understand that there are people on the stage, and that these people are/have bodies'.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in the early fall of 2019, I commissioned Jessie Marino to compose a piece for an (as yet) unspecified ensemble and with a special role for the conductor. Returning to the definitions set out earlier, the details of the commission can represent our strategy. If that is the case, what are the 'residual choices' for the special conductor's role that I, as the author of the strategy, left to Marino? Aware of the double role I played as both commissioner and instrumentalised subject, I did my utmost to leave the residual choices as open as possible, so that I would not overtly define any specific role I wanted the conductor to play. I did, however, share my own research, in the form of selected literature and articles that I had written, in the hope that this might

<sup>14</sup> Marino, interview.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Walshe, 'The New Discipline', MILKER CORPORATION, <http://milker.org/the-new-discipline> (accessed 20 July 2021).

nudge Marino to explore the subject further and develop the instrumentalisation of the conductor. Throughout this article I will chronologically describe the process through which the composition *six to five* was created. I will attempt to test how far, if at all, Marino deployed the conductor to meet her artistic goals and whether this rose to the level of instrumentalisation. Finally, I will determine whether, in each phase, my role as the conductor represented that of a tactical leader.

### The researcher as interviewer

Before I offered Jessie Marino the commission, I interviewed her as part of my search for new sources and first-hand accounts of the manner in which conductors have been utilised in new music. We met each other for the first time in November 2019 at her Berlin apartment. Prior to the interview, we had traded several emails, but I was not quite prepared for what an energetic and engaging woman Marino turned out to be. I went to her place with the goal of interviewing her on her perspective on conductors, but as well as discussing that we bounced around between many other topics, including programmable noise-cancelling headphones and Jérôme Bel's seven-minute rule.<sup>18</sup> What became clear to me during that interview, confirming my decision to commission her as part of my research, was that she was highly focused and had developed many pieces and theories on how physical movement influences musical performance and, perhaps more importantly, audience apperception of that performance.

My intention at that point was to discover how to describe the specific motivations of composers and artistic directors for employing conductors in their works. Marino admitted to never having written a piece that required one. She had never been artistically nor economically inclined to utilise one, stating that most of the time she 'leads the rehearsals, but that's also because [she is] performing in it'. She added:

most of my pieces are for two people. It would be ridiculous if there were somebody conducting them. They are for people who are seated behind a table. Again, the dramaturgy actually doesn't make sense for somebody to be conducting. The pieces that are bigger are 'chamber music-y' enough that they don't need a conductor. Also, I've never had a lot of complexity in the rhythmic structure, so for performers it was also always fine without a conductor. They didn't really even want a conductor because they wanted to just rely on listening to one another, and with the kind of timbral-complexities, they didn't feel like they needed one.<sup>19</sup>

Marino does see an overarching, though specified, need for a conductor in new music 'when there's a lot of rhythmic information, there's more than four people on the stage', as a way 'for rehearsals to be run efficiently, and for people to feel like there's a sense of communally felt time'. Conductors, for Marino, are effective 'in regard to organisation', and the role is more 'about politics than it is about gestures. It is an organisation of community.'<sup>20</sup> Clearly Marino is willing to tactically deploy the person who takes up that leadership mantle. She does not require a conductor to interpret music or perform any

<sup>18</sup> The choreographer Jérôme Bel once said: 'The first seven minutes of a performance are for free. The audience can accept anything – after this is another problem, then they want what they have paid for – but during those first seven minutes, as choreographer, you have total freedom.' Quoted in Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Marino, interview.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

artistic responsibility; instead she sees the conductor as imbued with economic responsibilities such as the planning, structuring and execution of rehearsals.

### The researcher as commission-giver

Shortly after my interview with Marino in 2019, I offered her a commission to write a piece, within the context of my doctoral studies, for Ensemble XXI, the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp's (RCA) in-house, student contemporary-music ensemble. She graciously and enthusiastically accepted and we started to brainstorm the piece. Unfortunately, the commissioning process ran into some financial roadblocks and the ensemble's overseers, WHAM (werkgroep voor hedendaagse en actuele muziek), were reluctant to accept my proposed project in its entirety, and they decided in the spring of 2020 to exclude the portion of the programme that included Marino's new piece. However, as luck would have it, Nico Couck's RCA Guitar Ensemble, MATRIX [Centre for New Music] and Transit Festival Leuven were interested in supporting the project. We were also fortunate because it was sufficiently early in Marino's response to the commission that the shift in instrumentation presented no problems for her, either. We very quickly accepted the support of our new partners and the commission was settled on a piece for 20 moving guitarists and conductor, with a premiere date in the spring of 2021 at the RCA and a second performance at Transit Festival Leuven in October the same year.

As the commission-giver, my role was mostly strategic. I came up with the plan which left me with the following residual tools:

- A composer: Jessie Marino
- An ensemble: RCA Guitar Ensemble
- A co-producer: MATRIX [Centre for New Music]
- Two venues: RCA and Transit Festival Leuven

The role of commission-giver is, as Goffman points out, a 'multiple role', or one that contains many sub-roles:<sup>21</sup>

- Matchmaker: I first tried to pair Marino with Ensemble XXI, only to have the choice land on the RCA Guitar Ensemble
- Fundraiser: though my attempts for her work were not always successful, I did manage to raise sufficient funds to pay Marino and cover her expenses
- Programmer: I managed to programme the piece at the RCA<sup>22</sup> and at Transit Festival Leuven

I also played the role of collaborator. In accepting the commission Marino made it a requirement that we would work collaboratively on the piece; this is her normal practice. Initially, I offered some instructions from my side, namely that I wanted her to play with the physicality of the conductor and, if possible, to bring the apparent onstage hierarchy into question. We spent many video calls brainstorming these concepts and randomly discussing others, such as marathon running and flocking birds. Quite quickly we settled on a sort of team-

<sup>21</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> As part of Winnie Huang's and my ARIA seminar, *Framing the Normal*: [www.framingthenormal.wordpress.com](http://www.framingthenormal.wordpress.com) (accessed 24 November 2022).

sport tactic for the musicians in which leadership, and the flowing from one person to another of the 'leads', would be visually apparent to the audience.

This last step, the collaboration, appears to be the only sort of tactical deployment present in the commission-giving phase of this project. I developed a strategy, namely the creation and performance of a new work for ensemble and conductor, but when the time came to conceptualise the piece, Marino quickly put me to work as a fellow brainstormer and a sounding board for her own ideas.

### The researcher as teacher and workshop facilitator

As part of the collaborative creation of *six to five*, Marino advised Couck and me that she wanted to workshop her composition, to work on specific sonic and visual concepts with the players to build, create and write the piece further after each session. We settled on two rehearsal periods: the first in February 2021 and the second in March 2021. To prevent further spread of COVID-19 we divided the 20 guitarists into four groups of five players.

In an earlier conversation, Marino had indicated that once a group reached a certain size, or the music a specific level of complexity, a conductor would be required. She also let it be known that, should the need arise, she would not be that conductor. Couck also holds no ambitions towards conducting the ensemble, although he does have extensive experience coaching chamber-music ensembles. Given these considerations, it seemed logical that I conduct these workshops (see Figure 2); after all, I had commissioned the piece to have a specific role for the conductor. The role of the workshop-conductor was, however, both new and somewhat uncomfortable for Marino. Given that, though the conductor's role has been instrumentalised to create efficacy in rehearsals, it was not an intentional aspect of Marino's compositional method.

The workshops themselves contained very specific ideas, both guitar techniques and movement-based, that Marino wanted to try out with the ensemble. She relied on Couck to assist with guitar



Figure 2:  
Workshopping *six to five*. Photo ©  
Thomas R. Moore.

techniques and encouraged the more advanced students to share their own areas of expertise; she and I coached the movement and marching sections of the workshops. I felt it was important to maintain the feeling of a workshop, with a general sense of experimentation and an acceptance of failure greater than one would normally find in a rehearsal or concert.

My role as workshop-conductor became a kind of go-between, a manager of priorities and, most importantly, a facilitator. I came to the conclusion that my position was to facilitate the workshop atmosphere, making sure that Marino was able to experiment with her ideas, that the students and Couck were able to offer their feedback and, also, that the students were able to garner new ensemble playing skills, since the work was occurring within a learning situation, namely the conservatoire. I also found that I began to create a performance practice for the piece by trying to discern elements that would be important for the guitar ensemble when they came to bring it to the stage. This included, but was not limited to, memorisation techniques, learning to walk/march together, how to 'feel' the timing collectively and, for me, how to cue specific types of gestures, passages and movements.

This may have been an unintentional instrumentalisation of the conductor, but it certainly occurred. Marino required a conductor to workshop her piece, generating a sense of community among its participants and facilitating an efficiently run rehearsal. There was also clear tactical leadership: Marino deployed an array of tactics throughout the workshops, including applying Couck's and students' expertise on the guitar, her own knowledge of music-making gestures and my personal experience in marching bands. Marino's strategy for writing her piece also included conductor-led workshops.

### **The researcher as rehearsal leader**

In a way similar to the facilitating and tactical role I had adopted during the workshop phase of *six to five*, Marino instrumentalised me as a conductor to lead the rehearsals of her piece. Unlike the slightly uncomfortable situation in the previous phase, however, this was a preconceived strategy for the piece and its creation. Marino had never written a piece for such a large group and had no experience rehearsing one; I, on the other hand, had had such experiences and indeed had put together a large production with the guitar ensemble the previous academic year.

During rehearsals Marino clearly retained agency over her piece. She often interjected comments and made corrections during the process, but the actual management of the rehearsals was, just as clearly, in my hands. I oversaw the timing of the rehearsal, coached the players and ran the rehearsal: all tasks that Marino and I had discussed and decided upon beforehand. She shaped and developed not only the piece but also its players and the conductor to meet her artistic needs. For example, the piece begins with the guitarists standing shoulder to shoulder at the front of the stage, facing the audience. The first notes are a vamping unison, a whole note D combined with a head-snap on the first beat of the first measure. Starting in the second played measure (or the first repeat of the vamp), the outermost guitarists turn and begin slowing 'sashaying' their way upstage. As conductor I always counted in, marked and cued these first measures and, either verbally or through conducting movements, held the players together. Marino often stopped the rehearsal to offer suggestions, both verbally and

through physical demonstration, on how to move properly during the opening salvo. Only after she finished her comments did I restart the piece. A similar *modus operandi* was deployed for the overall dynamics, blending and balance in the piece, although for blending and balance we often relied on Couck's expertise. When necessary he stepped in and demonstrated the required guitar-playing techniques to create the desired timbre, articulation, dynamic, etc.

*six to five* is a movement piece written for musicians who would not normally walk about while playing, much less march, so much of the rehearsal time was spent exclusively on this aspect of the piece. Marino's choreography included several styles of walking, including precise marching, shuffling, tiptoeing, foot-stamping, waltzing and Olympic walking. The players also had to create recognisable patterns together, march in lines and circles, merge and criss-cross. Each style of movement and pattern required a specific character. As in the sounding portion of the piece, Marino had an overarching strategic approach for the movement rehearsals: she taught the musicians the character of each movement both verbally and through demonstration, while also tactically deploying me to count off, conduct and cue the marching, and maintain the flow of the rehearsal.

### The researcher as performer

The role of the conductor during a performance of *six to five* is mostly that of a cue-giver, analogous to a traffic controller, giving signals to mobile bodies (see Figure 3). During the performance the guitarists are nearly always moving through the space, facing in the direction in which they are walking, marching, shuffling, crab-walking, etc., and thus not always able to see the conductor. Consequently, they must depend on their ears and their feet for ensemble playing and timing and, because the piece involves so much movement, it must also be performed from memory by both the guitarists and the conductor (see Figure 4).<sup>23</sup>

This cue-giving, facilitating role includes (in the order in which they appear in the piece):

- Exiting a 'vamp' (sections 2a to 2b)
- Unifying a gesture (2c)
- Giving a tempo change, based on a fixed subdivision (3a)
- Unifying a change in dynamics (4a)
- Visibly counting an agreed upon number of repeats (4c)
- Cueing a new section, based on an agreed upon number of repeats (4d)

There are a few sections in the performance of *six to five* in which the conductor's role is not purely facilitatory:

- The beginning: The piece begins in unison and the guitarists look to the conductor for the timing, articulation and general dynamics of these first several measures. This is also a rare chance in the piece for the conductor to inspire the musicians. In the words of Michael Maierhof, the conductor can 'feel the temperature of the

<sup>23</sup> A video of the performance at Matrix – New Music Centre, *six to five & No(w) Guitar*, 2022, is available at <https://youtu.be/IREL0i9W18U?t=1330> (accessed 24 November 2022).





Figure 3:  
Rehearsing *six to five*. Photo ©  
Thomas R. Moore.



Figure 4:  
RCA Guitar Ensemble performing  
*six to five* at Transit Festival Leuven  
2021. Photo © Johann van Gerwen.

room on the [their] back<sup>24</sup> and channel that energy for the musicians.

- Section 5: At the end of the previous section (section 4), the guitarists enter in a slow, shuffling decrescendo. They simultaneously and noisily move backwards into two straight lines at either side of the stage. To begin the next section (6a), the conductor must cue and bring in the first two players in a new tempo and style, switching from a high-energy march to a Renaissance-inspired waltz.
- Section 6b: During this section the conductor abandons their post and goes to the stage floor, running among the musicians who have flocked into four teams of five guitarists flying about the space in v-formations. The conductor must confront each group and perform a ritualistic dance.<sup>21</sup> Once completed, the

<sup>24</sup> Thomas R. Moore, 'Twisting the Arm of Michael Maierhof: Composer, Performer, Concert Organiser', *TEMPO*, 75, no. 295 (January 2021), pp. 85–93.

confronted group is freed from section 6b move to the starting position of the next section (section 7).

- Section 12: The guitarists move in two concentric circles, one inside the other. The middle group plays a simple four-quarter-note pattern and makes a slow crescendo. The crescendo is so slow that the conductor can direct its progression. At the peak of the crescendo the conductor is also tasked with choosing when to cue the next section.

Beyond these four moments the piece consists of prepared, agreed upon and timed facilitatory cues. In the performance itself Marino has devised a strategy in which her conductor takes on a tactical leadership role, holding the conductor 'in reserve' to be deployed at these four key points in the piece. The conductor's roles and objectives are clearly defined and, like the NATO pilots in the introduction, temporary. As conductor I stepped in, made an artistic decision to advance the piece (the mission) and then stepped back into my 'daily duty', assisting the guitarists in their roles.

### Conclusion

Throughout the phases detailed above, we can detect a shift in my role from that of a strategy deviser to an instrumentalised conductor and tactical leader. In the first two phases, I interviewed Marino within the context of my general Ph.D. research and then offered her a commission with a detailed objective. My strategies in these two phases were clear: to gain new first-hand information I deployed in-depth interview tactics; second, I needed to create a new piece for ensemble and conductor that would further develop the instrumentalisation of the conductor, and, having made that artistic decision, my residual choices included a composer, ensemble and venue. These became Marino, the RCA Guitar Ensemble and the RCA and Transit Festival Leuven. As the creation process of *six to five* moved into the writing, workshoping, rehearsal and performance phases, Marino began to tactically deploy me as a conductor to meet her artistic and pragmatic needs. As conductor I eased the rehearsal process during the workshops and rehearsals and managed the ensemble. During the performances of the piece there was a clearly defined employment of the conductor as a tactical leader. At one point Marino even ordered me to fly in from the sidelines, confronting groups on the floor in order to achieve specific artistic goals. For most of the piece the conductor performs a facilitating function but, when the need arose, I was wielded by Marino to make distinctly framed artistic choices before being returned to my primary function.