

Conducting for Inspired Musicianship

By J. STEVEN MOORE

Conductors have one of the most creative jobs in the world – sculpting sound with hands! Conductors evoke, shape, and inspire sound, and they have the chance to do it with the wonderful people in their ensembles. Picking up a baton, does it feel like a foreign object? Have you ever noticed how easy it is to get stuck in the “beating the pattern” rut? If you were given the task of inventing conducting, would you pound the air on every beat regardless of the musical impetus? Or rather, would you craft a set of gestures that indicates all aspects of the music, not just the meter? Over the years, I’ve picked up a few tips that may facilitate using conducting as an artistic catalyst to inspired music making.



Conduct the music, not the pattern. Conduct only that which is in the music – no more and no less. There is much more to music than the delineation of the meter. Time-beating usually results in over-conducting. Even lovely gestures, if not called for in the music, should not be present in the conducting. Look for techniques, clinics, or instructional materials to help you get out of the pattern box. Applying the language of Rudolf Laban may be helpful.

Conduct the music, not the musicians. Allow each musician to assume responsibility for maintaining pulse, subdividing, entrances, and releases. The conductor initiates and defines the time, and cues entrances and releases, but should not function as a traffic cop directing a chaotic intersection.

Display the information in the tip of the baton or fingers. Imagine paint flowing from the tip of your baton or your fingers on to your imaginary canvas. It flows smoothly in legato passages, creates dabs in normal articulations, and dots in staccato passages. The pulse should not be in the elbow. Preparatory beats should not be given with your head or your mouth. By focusing on the tip of the baton, your body will automatically adjust to the most efficient movement.

On that note, use the smallest tool for the job. Don't use a hammer to insert a small screw. Similarly, don't use your entire arm to depict light or normal articulations. Use the smallest hinge appropriate for the task: finger, wrist, elbow, shoulder, body. With a normal-sized 15-inch baton, you can trace a 15-inch arc from horizontal to vertical using only your wrist hinge. Bend your elbow and you can trace 24-30 inches of space, which is more than enough for most musical situations. By using the smallest hinge appropriate for the music, you avoid over-conducting, beating the air, and large patterns.

Address your ensemble. Conductors often allow the baton to point to the left side of the ensemble. Hold the baton comfortably in your hand. Relax your fingers and wrist with just enough tension to maintain control of the baton. The baton is an extension of your forearm. It should not angle

significantly to the left.

Stay grounded. Avoid going up on your toes by keeping your feet flat on the podium. This often occurs on preparatory beats. (To see if you do this, shoot a video of yourself from the side.) Another posture tip is to avoid deep knee bends. Allow your knees to be relaxed, yet stable. Let's leave the knee bends to our beloved drum majors.

Move your hands up and down at the same rate of speed. All beats have some type of upward and downward impetus which emulates the laws of physics. If you toss a small bean bag in the air, its landing is completely predictable. This predictable motion is helpful to the musicians. Do not rush to the downbeat or jerk up quickly after the ictus is given. You may not realize you are doing this, so please record your conducting. If you flick up too quickly, you will become an "upbeat conductor." The pulse will appear to be on your upbeat instead of your downbeat.

Begin with the end in mind. Show

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the musicians the location of the ictus by starting in that position. In other words, begin the beat where the beat concludes.

Release with your left hand. An elliptical motion with the left hand clarifies your intention for a release. Right hand motions may be interpreted as an indication to play the next note. When releases occur at the end of sections, movements, or compositions where there is not another note, right hand releases are perfectly acceptable.

Begin with your forearm parallel with the floor. Often conductors allow the ictus to drift too high, sometimes to the chest and above. Save this position for indicating registration, for example, soprano cues are conducted higher than bass cues. Keep your elbows away from your torso and forward of your ribs. Many old (and some contemporary) conducting texts

illustrate a fundamental position that is too high. The fundamental position for conducting includes:

- Baton and forearm parallel with the floor (or just slightly higher).
- Forearms angled toward each other (45 degrees from elbow to wrist).
- Elbows in front of the torso (45 degrees from shoulder to elbow).

All beats should move up and down, not in a straight line. All gestures that describe a beat should have an upward and downward impetus. The more pronounced the musical articulation required, the more vertical the beat. The less pronounced the musical articulation required, the more horizontal the beat. Choose a pattern that aligns each ictus along a horizontal plane. Since a straight line does not indicate a beat, the "floor-wall-wall-ceiling" pattern is not the best tool.

Don't mirror. Develop independence in your gestures. There is rarely a reason to mirror. If your left hand is not adding to the musical interpre-

tation, it is adding to the confusion. Imagine your left hand:

- Resting comfortably at your side
- Cueing entrances
- Releasing sound
- Increasing or decreasing volume
- Signaling attention or that something is going to change
- Shaping a phrase
- Sustaining sound
- Encouraging a musician

If the air keeps moving, your hands keep moving. When you stop your hands, the musicians tend to stop the air. If you intend for the sound to sustain, keep your gestures in motion. If the air, (also string bow or percussion roll) is moving, your hands should continue moving. Your upbeat and ictus depicts how you want the sound to begin.

Trust your performers. Allow them to come to you. Train them to watch



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and respond. Teach them to internalize time. Expect that they will assume responsibility for the music. You will get exactly what you expect from your ensemble. This is true of young musicians, as well as more experienced players.

And finally, record yourself on video. One video study session can lead to tremendous improvements. You may notice a hitch at the top of the beat, an extra curlyin between beats, an oversized pattern, the “thinking-man” expression, traffic-cop cueing, excessive mirroring, head in the score, or any number of issues that are easily resolved.

Remember to go easy on yourself, as conducting music is supposed to be a joyous activity. Whatever undesirable habits you have developed can be replaced with more artistic gestures. Visualize yourself conducting the music with tremendous artistry. Compare the video to the image in your mind. Allow yourself to gradually transition into the conductor you see in your imagination. Once you begin to move in the right direction, you will notice a rapid change. Never forget: “Your conducting makes a difference in the sound of the ensemble!”

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