

THE CRAFT OF CONDUCTING – A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

In the broader soundscape of music making, the orchestral conductor's craft is a singular one. Unable to produce a sound via the motions of his baton, he leads, inspires, coerces, suggests and requests, but ultimately the responsibility for actual sound production is, somewhat paradoxically, not in his hands.

Contradictorily, it is the conductors' hands which are generally recognized as the primary tool and principal means by which he communicates, evoking, moulding and shaping the sound of the ensemble.

Held in the right hand, the baton is the most physical symbol of the orchestral conductor's role. In its most rudimentary function, it is used to indicate tempo and maintain a rhythmic pulse via time-beating gestures. There are standard patterns corresponding to the number of beats in a bar – the basic technical vocabulary of a conductor.

There is of course, a great deal of information a conductor needs to communicate over and above this primary rhythmic function. Nevertheless, if a conductor is unable to communicate this basic information the ensemble will not work as a cohesive unit. This principle applies as much to a high school ensemble as to a professional orchestra, but its importance is contextualized by setting. As Daniel Kohut and Joe Grant confirm, 'clearly, the role and function of the professional conductor at one extreme is quite different from that of the elementary school teacher/conductor at the other',^[1] a distinction also highlighted by John Lumley and Nigel Springthorpe.^[2] For example, while basic rhythmic information is of paramount importance to young musicians, in a professional context it is reasonable to assume a significant degree of rhythmic responsibility from individual players. Context, therefore, mandates to an extent the distinction between the basic craft of conducting and its broader artistic function.

Conducting as Non-Verbal Communication

Via a repertory of manual gestures, a conductor performs the basic functions of indicating tempo (and any modifications thereof) and dynamics. Through his hands, a conductor also shapes phrases and shows articulation as well as the type of sound he has in mind. Observing a performance from an audience perspective, it appears as though the musicians respond to the manual directives issued and that the conductor's vocabulary of hand gestures elicits particular musical responses.

These hand signals are, however, not the only means used. In addition to these gestures, a conductor's communicative capacity is significantly enhanced by other means of nonverbal communication. Intent is also relayed by body language, general posture and appearance, alongside facial expressions and eye contact. As Kimberley VanWeelden writes, 'conducting is a complex art that involves, among other things, effective nonverbal communication'.^[3] As the role of the conductor has developed into a more interpretative one, these aspects of the conductor's art have assumed a heightened degree of importance. As choral conductor Colin Durrant confirms, 'Gesture goes beyond beating time, but becomes an essential ingredient in the conveyance of the expressive character of music'.^[4]

The fundamental technical elements – the basic craft of conducting – are the same for student conductors, conductors of amateur groups, conductors of school and university ensembles and those who work in the

professional domain. The tools a professional conductor uses to communicate therefore share this common basis. For conductors of professional ensembles, however, these basics are assumed knowledge – prerequisites which are taken for granted.

The professional orchestra conductor has an additional dimension, focused on a more elevated plane – a largely artistic, interpretative and expressive responsibility. As scholars Kohut and Grant recognize ‘at its highest level conducting is an art’.^[5] In this context, the subtleties of gestural communication are inherently important. Nuances of facial expression and eye contact can reflect and depict the character, mood and emotional content of the music. Hand gestures are more refined, and are able to demonstrate detail corresponding to an array of articulation, variety and colour of sound, a multiplicity of dynamic shadings and gradations, and the intricacies of phrasing. Combined with body movement and involvement, these gestures are also able to reflect and communicate an understanding of the overall architecture of a work.

General body posture and stance can communicate an air of authority and confidence – important aspects in conducting. Leadership and the power of personality are also critical factors – as in all facets of life the ability to inspire counts for much. As author Michael Bowles explains ‘much of a conductor’s effectiveness depends on his personal characteristics and on his capacity to persuade others of his will’.^[6] One responsibility of a conductor is to unite the ensemble in a common artistic interpretation and to inspire them towards this collective goal – something that demands an ability to exert influence over some 100 potential differing opinions.

The information that professional musicians glean from conductors is thus neither limited to nor expressed via purely technical conducting hand gestures. Rather, a conductor uses a variety of communicative tools in addition to his hands. The art of conducting is therefore a composite one – an amalgam of various forms of physical movement and posture, facial expressions and hand gestures, all of which are framed by the personality of the individual. The focus of this article is the tangible and arguably teachable gestural elements of this complex art form, namely those pertaining to the actual technical tools or ‘craft’ of conducting.

The Origin of Conducting: The Need for a Time-beater

Attempting to define and explain conducting has challenged musicians, scholars and observers throughout history, so it is little surprise that most of the literature is centred on technical and rudimentary aspects – i.e. the craft of conducting. However, because these manual technical gestures provide the platform for artistic expression, it is difficult to completely dissociate any analysis of the craft from the art of conducting. That said, it is possible to outline and explain in detail the separation of the fundamental aspects of the conductor’s work that comprise the craft and inform the art of conducting.

A straightforward description of conducting in general terms was offered by Hermann Scherchen, who described conducting as 'contact between human beings'.^[7] Put simply, conducting is communication – communicating the music, communicating with the musicians and communicating with the audience. Indeed a conductor's ability to communicate is central to his task and good communication has been labelled the key to success.^[8] Pedagogue Anthony Maiello explains,

the conductor is the communicator, inspiration and overseer of the musical message; the conveyor of the composer's intent, and the courier of the music being sent to the listener via the performance. This sense of communication is what makes the musical experience something that transcends the written word.^[9]

In the first instance, information is communicated most obviously via the conductor's basic time-beating gestures, the clarity of which has a direct correlation with a conductor's fundamental effectiveness.

Kenneth Phillips believes an effective communicative technique stems from a mastery of conducting technique, noting that conductors who lack a clear and commanding technique are unconvincing.^[10] Scherchen also believed that when a conductor makes clear and concise contact with the players, the result will be intelligible and effective.^[11]

In fundamental terms, the primary responsibility of the conductor is a rhythmic one and it is from this origin that the role originally developed. From very early times,^[12] various implements were used to beat a pulse for instrumental ensembles while silent forms of timekeeping predominated in vocal music. Choir directors during medieval times used their hands to direct singers, preferring a rolled piece of paper by the eighteenth century.^[13] Instrumental music has, however, long been associated with a more powerful symbol – the baton.

Today used by orchestral conductors in an artistic and refined manner, this was not always the case. A large mace-like staff was popularly used to audibly beat time for instrumental ensembles up until the nineteenth century, with possibly one of the best-known time-beaters the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687). Lully's instrument was a large wooden stick he beat on the floor, until beating it on his foot which subsequently developed a gangrenous infection that led to his death.

As the role of the basso continuo developed throughout the Baroque, the responsibility of the keyboard player became an increasingly important one. Providing the underlying rhythmic and harmonic structure of a work, it is no surprise this position evolved into one of leadership. Often it was the composer who assumed this role of *Kapellmeister*, directing the performance from the keyboard.

With the keyboard gradually disappearing from instrumental music over the course of the eighteenth century, the principal violinist assumed the function of leader. Standing at the forefront of the ensemble, he was well placed to demonstrate time-beating motions with his bow and by lifting his violin to lead.

It was the nineteenth century, though, which witnessed the most significant innovations in conducting. These hitherto forms of instrumental leadership were abandoned in favour of the conductor proper – one who assumed musical leadership of an ensemble without playing an instrument therein. The role of the conductor as an entity was therefore firmly established, a function which has remained unchanged for almost two hundred years. At this time, the time-beating stick enjoyed resurgent popularity and gradually evolved into the modern baton used today.

The twentieth century also saw major developments. Bernard D. Sherman suggests that the increased precision of modern conducting technique enjoys a direct correlation with the metrical challenges of twentieth century music, noting also that larger productions demanded greater conducting skills.^[14] With the advent of recording technology, flawless performances became the norm, and conducting technique became increasingly precise so as to ensure recording-like perfection in the concert hall.^[15]

The Conductor – A Mere Metronome?

Conducting pedagogue Hideo Saito argues that ‘the main purpose of conducting is to clearly show the tempo and the beat’.^[16] Saito is not alone in this perspective, with many believing that the primary function of the professional conductor remains a rhythmic one. In his famous treatise, *Über das Dirigieren*, Richard Wagner maintained that a fundamental task of the conductor is to set the correct tempo,^[17] and Wilhelm Furtwängler too, believed that conducting is primarily concerned with the transference of rhythmic information.^[18]

Establishing tempo and maintaining a steady pulse are both essentially borne of the same function. The preparatory beat given to signal the commencement of a piece indicates the tempo of the piece itself. By continuing to beat this tempo, a conductor automatically maintains a steady pulse. Changes of tempo and slight modifications such as *ritardandi* and *accelerandi*, are communicated via changing or modifying the beat, and hence altering the pulse, accordingly.

Additionally, Wagner maintained that when a conductor sets the correct tempo, it induces correct phrasing and expression from the players.^[19] This is an interesting point and one that highlights the inextricable connection between the various facets of the art. In practical terms, for example, a tempo that is ‘too slow’, or slower than rehearsed, could create problems for brass and wind players in terms of breath support and control, meaning they would potentially be unable to execute the desired phrasing.

Composer and conductor Hector Berlioz, on the other hand, placed primary importance on interpretative aspects, and rather than seeing time-beating as an integral part of the musical fabric, he implied that it is merely a rudimentary prerequisite to the conductor’s role, which requires

almost indefinable gifts, without which the invisible contact between him and performers cannot be established. Lacking these, he cannot transmit his feelings to the players and has no dominating power or guiding influence. He is no longer a director and leader, but simply a timebeater.[20]

For Berlioz, then, the time-beating function of conducting was entirely subordinate to the more important qualities of leadership and communication. Furthermore, unlike Wagner, Furtwängler and Saito, Berlioz considered time-beating to be of minimal importance; he did not consider it a component of leadership and guidance or the broader artistic function of the conductor.

In fact, the divergent views represented by Wagner and Berlioz are both valid. As conductor and pedagogue Diane Wittry confirms, 'basic conducting technique is important and critical to communicating your musical ideas, but it is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to being a great conductor'.[21] Similarly Douglas Stotter warns, 'standing on the podium and beating time does not make one a conductor'[22] and Sherman goes so far as to say that 'musical authority does not require modern conducting technique'.[23]

Indeed, it is very difficult to separate the craft of conducting entirely from the art, even at the highest artistic level where musical expression governs all aspects of the conductor's work. Respected pedagogue Gunther Schuller clarifies this duality of the conductor's function,

to express the music with clarity, to shape it into that form which the composer indicates in the score, and to capture the essence of that composer's expression and style ... at the most fundamental level the conductor's job is ... to provide a rhythmic frame of reference (through his beat) and a visual representation of the music's content (through expression *in* his beat).[24]

Leonard Bernstein concurred, stating 'the interpretation must always be *in* the time-beating itself'.[25] Traditionally, textbooks on conducting advocate the use of the right hand in a time-beating function and maintain the left hand is generally used to express nuance. Bernstein challenged this notion exclaiming, 'this is sheer nonsense. No conductor can divide himself into two people, a time-beater and an interpreter.[26]

A number of other pedagogues present balanced views regarding the place of technical function within the broader artistic framework. Renowned teacher Harold Farberman, for example, while recognizing the importance of technique, states that it must be connected to specific musical ideas, explaining that command of conducting technique allows the conductor to shape and mould the music, bringing life to the composer's text.[27] Similarly Phillips highlights the importance of the artistic function over the technical explaining 'there should be an interpretation in the conductor's mind that is guiding the direction of the

ensemble. If little thought is given to musical meaning, even a technically proficient performance will be dull and void of life.’[28]

Nevertheless, much of the literature on the fundamentals of conducting is centred on basic beat patterns and time-beating function. Aside from forming the technical foundation on which a conductor works, these essential manual signals are relatively easy to describe, define and explain. As choral conductor and teacher James Jordan notes, ‘Conducting texts, for the most part, deal with the ‘outside’ aspects of making music. That is, we tend to want to teach what, perhaps, is easiest to get at’.[29] Similarly, Clotilde Otranto observes, ‘The essential ingredient in the art of conducting – the gesture itself – is not investigated’.[30] Furthermore, basic gestures are the most visible component of a conductor’s work at any level, offering another reason for the popularity and ease of analyses. Given the inherent subjectivity involved, analysis of the conductor’s communicative art beyond this rudimentary level is problematic.

Expressive Gestures

Gestures do not make sound, but then, neither do notes on a page. And in their primitive way, certain gestures do correspond to music: pointed, crisp movement suggesting shortness, smooth, horizontal movement indicating length; the big gesture indicating loudness or intensity or slowing down, the small gesture the opposite.[31]

As discussed, the most recognizable aspects of the conductor’s work are manual gestures, however as the use of the adjective ‘primitive’ in the above description indicates, there is a great deal more to conducting gestures than these fundamental hand signals.

In the first instance, hand gestures are responsible for the transference of essential information regarding tempo, ensemble, entries, dynamics and articulation. Using a standardized set of conducting patterns, the conductor generally beats time with a baton in his right hand while the left gives additional information as to the musical and expressive content. This formulaic model is, however, simply that. Each conductor develops his own set of personal and idiosyncratic gestures via which he communicates.

The majority of orchestral conductors use a baton; the majority of choral conductors do not, preferring to shape the sound with their hands alone. The reasons for the use of the baton in orchestral contexts are largely practical. As David Ewen observes, ‘tempo and rhythm can be articulated more precisely and graphically with a stick than with bare hands’,[32] a factor of greater significance when dealing with a large instrumental ensemble. A baton offers greater clarity due to a tiny tip which focusses and magnifies the beat, and, as an extension of the conductor’s arm,[33] the baton has an added advantage in making it easier for a large group of players to see,[34] particularly helpful to those seated a distance from the podium.

The use of the baton plays a leading role in all orchestral contexts. Arguably, however, the set of basic principles underlying manual conducting technique – that is the craft of conducting – is of significantly more direct relevance to conductors working in domains other than the exclusively professional.

Professional musicians have a great deal of experience in reading and interpreting a conductor's gestures, meaning they are far more likely to be able to come to terms with subtle, non-orthodox and unfamiliar gestures, the primary function of which is a musical one. Such experience, however, is outside the realm of the majority of community and student musicians, most of whom rely on a clear and familiar set of standardized conducting patterns in order to feel comfortable. Furthermore, the level of artistic nuance and expressive subtleties in a professional setting are defined by this environment.

This fact is recognized by Gerry R. Long who points out that a conductor's repertory of manual gestures is context-specific. He suggests an uncomplicated conducting style will get best results when working with an amateur orchestra, recognizing that when working with experienced professional musicians a conductor is afforded greater freedom in baton technique.^[35]

Consequently, in the professional orchestral context that defines the art of conducting, the view of the conductor as a mere time-beater is a very primitive one.^[36] While the dissemination of rhythmic information via manual directives remains a prerequisite, elements other than purely technical considerations influence this aspect of the conductor's function. A great deal of musical information can supplement time-beating gestures when executed by skilled professionals. As Karl Krueger notes, 'Time beating not only echoes the pulse of the music, but it can serve – in expert hands – to delineate melodic and formal contours and to convey accent, stress and relaxation'.^[37]

At this advanced level, expressive information can, and indeed must, also be purposefully communicated via time-beating signals. Karl D. Van Hoesen observes, 'Beats in themselves are meaningless and must be adapted to musical expression',^[38] explaining that 'all beats derive their size and character from the musical feeling of the sound being produced'.^[39]

Aspects of manual indications such as the size and shape of the beat can be analysed in more absolute terms, offering a degree of insight into the broader function of hand gestures. In particular, dynamics and articulation lend themselves to observation and description. Varying the size of gestures is an effective communicative tool and is one which most often corresponds to dynamic indications. In the language of musical gesture, large gestures are commonly associated with *forte* and smaller ones with *piano*, with the relative size of gestures indicating all dynamic gradations in between.

Articulation can also be clearly expressed via manual function, particularly by the motion between the beats. Sharp, angular gestures can, for example, reflect *staccato* while a smooth, uninterrupted, flowing arm motion will result in *legato*. Phillips describes the various types of manual gestures as they apply to articulation.

Legato articulation is communicated by rounded rebound motions that flow in a curvelike fashion from beat to beat ... *Staccato* articulation is communicated by angular rebound motions that move in a quick 'checkmark' fashion from beat to beat. *Marcato* articulation is communicated by deep angular rebound motions that move in decisive, accented fashion.[40]

In terms of describing, measuring and evaluating manual gestures other than basic time-beating signals and those relating to dynamics and articulation, researchers are presented with difficulties typifying the analysis of the art of conducting. The literature offers largely anecdotal and somewhat vague assessments of conductors' manual gestures, and, as Wolfgang Wöllner and Clemens Auhagen confirm, there is a lack of empirical studies of conducting gesture, which is due to the inherent analytical difficulties.[41]

Indeed, associated aspects of nonverbal gestural communication in conducting, because they lack any directly tangible actions, present challenges in any study attempted. Facial expressions, eye contact, body language and posture are difficult to describe in absolute terms, and are thus problematic to quantify and analyse. As Richard Leppert acknowledges, 'the connection between music and the body throughout Western history is highly problematic and contradictory'.[42] Intrinsically, there is a degree of subjectivity in any observation and resulting interpretation of gestures, a fact underlined by Ian Cross, who notes that 'a degree of ambiguity seems to be inherent in all acts of human communication'.[43] Nonetheless it is hoped that by separating as much as possible the manual elements of conducting from both the associated elements of non-verbal communication and the artistic aspects, this article goes some way towards offering the reader a more comprehensive assessment of both the art and the craft of conducting.

A Personal Perspective

Over the course of my career I have led orchestras in a variety of musical contexts throughout the US, Europe and Australia. In professional settings one is most often focused on aspects of the art of conducting, whereas with younger players and student musicians, it is often the tangible elements of the craft that predominate. With non-professional players I often find myself drawing their attention to matters of rhythm, time, tempo and ensemble – maintaining a steady pulse, maintaining notes for their full duration, ensuring an even, underlying metric subdivision to their playing, entering correctly following rests, not holding ties too long and so forth. For the most part, these sorts of elementary details do not need to be highlighted with professional orchestras.

Working with a student orchestra it may also be necessary to remind the players to observe the composer's printed dynamic markings. Working with a professional ensemble, I am able to concentrate on much finer details. Rather than simply loud or soft, I am able to show the type of *forte* I have in mind – a rich, warm and full chorale-like *forte* or a direct, clearly articulated and fanfare-like *forte*. I am able to indicate whether a *pianissimo* should be full of energy and tension in anticipation of a climax which is

about to build, or whether the *pianissimo* provides a beautiful underlying soundscape to a lyrical solo melody in another instrument.

Having worked with young musicians, who more often than not are unsure of themselves, I find they will often not play unless given a cue. Conversely a member of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra said to me in a masterclass, 'we don't need you to show us *when* to play, we need you to show us *how* to play'. Clearly then, context dictates the degree of refinement of the particular gesture employed and the intent behind it. A simple point of the hand will clarify the matter for the average student musician whereas the professional orchestral musician seeks an indication as to the expressive character desired. This, in essence, mirrors the distinction between the craft and the art of conducting, and highlights the differences in working with pre-professional and professional orchestras.

Endnotes

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- [11] Scherchen, *Handbook of Conducting*, p. 188.
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- [14] Bernard D. Sherman, 'Conducting Early Music', in *Cambridge Companion to Conducting*, ed. Bowen, p. 241.
- [15] Sherman, 'Conducting Early Music', p. 242.
- [16] Hideo Saito, *The Saito Conducting Method*, ed. Wayne J. Toews, trans. Fumihiko Torigai (Tokyo: Min-on Concert Association and Ongaku No Tomo Sha, 1988), p. 3.

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- [18] Furtwängler, in *The Conductor's Art*, ed. Carl Bamberger (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), p. 208.
- [19] Wagner, *On Conducting*, p. 20.
- [20] Quoted in Bamberger, *The Conductor's Art*, p. 25.
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