

**PLEASE CONDUCT, DON'T TALK**  
**From the Rear Row and Lowest Voice**  
**A Tuba Player's Reminders for Community Band Conductors**

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**"Give a musician a baton, and it goes to his mouth."**

(Rochester Philharmonic violinist, related by Marvin Rabin, emeritus  
professor, University of Wisconsin)

**"Speaking about music is like dancing about nuclear physics."**

(An anonymous wise person)

**"I am told and I forget, I read and I remember,**

**I do and I understand."**

(Ancient Chinese proverb)

**"Time is every person's most precious resource. If wasted, it can never  
be recouped, and all remaining years of life are diminished."**

(Composer/Conductor Alfred Reed)

- I. You conduct, we'll play enthusiastically. You talk, we'll lost interest. Music is an aural art, not verbal.
- II. Words are inadequate for most things musical. Of the relatively few words that can apply to music, most can be expressed by conducting--louder, softer, faster, slower, *legato*, *staccato*, accent, *marcato*, *cantabile*, etc.
- III. Please speak only in those rare instances when the subject can't be communicated visually. Conducting is visual, not verbal. Singing is better than speaking. Expect speaking to have little or no effect. Record rehearsal and measure the amount of time talking; take note of ineffective words.
- IV. I present nothing new about baton technique, but I give a player's perspective.
- V. Our job as players is to execute the conductor's interpretation.
- VI. Your job as conductor is to do what we players cannot do for ourselves.
- VII. Players learn to watch the conductor most effectively when they discover that performance improves and enjoyment increases, but telling us to watch has no effect. Demand that we play everything that is written. Don't necessarily perform passages the same way every time. Make certain that your instructions

for us to put pencil marks on our parts are not substitutes for clear conducting, don't dull the spontaneity, and don't lead to mechanical performance. Reducing the size of your conducting pattern might get the players' attention and correct stylistic errors.

- VIII. Music is passion. Let us see and feel your emotions; lead us to express emotions in each of our instrumental lines.
- IX. A community band is not a school band and not a professional band, yet includes elements of both. When needed, instruction must be offered in a context of respect and dignity. Basic baton techniques are the same for a major symphony or a community band, but the community band conductor has special challenges. Many school procedures are ineffective (other than as placebo). We will quit the band if not satisfied. Reconcile our joy in playing the instrument with your goal of valid musical interpretation.
- X. Establish routine procedures to ensure, without speaking, most effective use of time and energies. Motivate us to arrive early and tune individually. Have the room arranged: "A neat room encourages neat playing." Stay away from the podium until after group tuning. Have a band member, not you, call the rehearsal to order and lead group tuning to a standard pitch.
- XI. Make your every motion tell us something; ineffective motion will encourage us to be less than attentive. Your manner in stepping on to the podium establishes relationships between you and the players. Use a podium, and place it for optimum sight lines. Have your stand no higher than your waist.
- XII. The way in which a rehearsal begins is a vivid example of the community band conductor's challenge to treat players with the same respect as granted to professionals, while, at the same time, accommodating the nonprofessionals' limited experiences and abilities. Do you begin as with a professional organization, knowing that everyone is absolutely prepared for any challenge? Or do your nonprofessionals need a warm-up? In any case, begin with the joy of actual music, not talk and not fundamentals drill.
- XIII. If you feel the need to begin with a warm-up, play something that is planned for concert performance, but is well within our abilities. After beginning to play, if errors prevent our enjoyment, stop and make corrections, always trying to focus on elements that we will face in other pieces to be rehearsed. If you believe that the ability level requires drill on fundamentals that many school conductors use in warm-up exercises, they are more effectively done while rehearsing real music, in context of a problem the musicians have encountered and, consequently, see the need for solution in order to get full enjoyment. But, in any case, beware that drill on fundamentals in rehearsal with adults is fraught with potential problems of efficacy and motivation.

- XIV. After we have played enough of the first piece to gain an enjoyable musical experience, and the room temperature has stabilized, take about 45 seconds for all players to confirm that their basic instrument lengths are correct. Tune from bottom up. Your telling individuals that they are sharp or flat is counter-productive, and wastes time; instead, give players tasks that focus their attention on hearing “beats,” on tuning unisons and octaves across diverse sections, and leading tones, dissonances, and other pitches that create musical meaning.
- XV. Your very first motion on the podium, lifting the baton to the position of attention, is more effective than any amount of talk in establishing the relationship between you and us. The lifting motion gets us to focus on you and to sit or stand erect. At the position of attention, the baton shows the dynamic level and the point in the measure where we will begin. If you remember something that must be said, lower the baton.
- XVI. Your next motion, the preparatory beat, is the single most important communication between you and us: essential for playing together, gives impetus for expressive performance, avoids unnecessary spoken instruction, invites us to breathe together in tempo and enter together in tempo with proper style, and shows the point in the measure at which we are to begin playing. Except in a special style such as jazz, please never begin by counting out loud “one, two, ready, play,” or by giving any other spoken cues. Any need to explain an entrance or its preparation indicates that your conducting motion is not clear.
- XVII. Within passages, preparatory motions save time by eliminating spoken explanations: at a phrase ending; in slow *marcato* style; changes in dynamics, tempo and style; entrance or prominence of an instrument; cues.
- XVIII. Please make certain that we can always see the metrical pattern in your beat, whether in a forthright *allegro* or flowing *largo molto espressivo*. Otherwise, we waste time with confusion, losing our places, and/or asking questions. Your conducting motions need to help not only the leading melodic parts, but also those of us who have accompaniment or other lines that might include sustained tones or silence (“rests”).
- XIX. While conducting meter, tempo, style, and dynamics so that they are understood by every player, we like for you to show us how each phrase grows in intensity and relaxes, the points of stress and release, and how to conclude one phrase and breathe to begin the next.
- XX. Your left hand can be a wonderful time saver and expressive aid if used only to communicate things that are not shown with the baton.
- XXI. Clear conducting motions make it unnecessary to speak about how to perform *fermate* in various situations: tonal intensity, conduct each beat and hold on the last; use your two hands, face and eyes for separate groups; if followed by

continued sound with no break, conclude with a smooth motion that prepares the next tone; if followed by a break of no more than a breath, a single motion for release and preparation; if a *caesura*, one motion for release, then stationary, followed by another motion for preparation.

- XXII. Instead of explaining musical structure, rehearse in ways that lead us to learn about it, even if the knowledge is transmitted surreptitiously.
- XXIII. On occasions when you do have to talk, please speak clearly, with a well-modulated voice that reaches farthest reaches of the room. If players are too noisy, your speaking louder will be counterproductive (ask yourself if you are causing our inattentiveness) but your speaking softer might solve it. In a related issue, you can save time and increase effectiveness by using incisive vocabulary, not slang words of students and amateurs.
- XXIV. While we don't like for you to talk in place of clear conducting, we do like for you to pace rehearsal so that there are times when we can rest: announcements, organization business, compliments, a little humor.
- XXV. If ever you make a mistake, we understand because we, too, are human and can make mistakes. Please simply admit the mistake and go on. But if you try to make us think that you did not err, and you instead try to correct an imaginary error on our part, or if you talk in an attempt to divert attention away from your mistake, you will create animosity, or at least negative amusement, among the players. And, more important, you will waste time.
- XXVI. When questions arise about printed wrong notes in the parts, try to avoid talking about them during rehearsal: encourage solutions "by ear" or conference at intermission. Yes, some players enjoy calling attention to themselves.
- XXVII. Try a mindset that each rehearsal is the last one before the concert (or is even the concert itself). You will prepare more carefully, set priorities, communicate more efficiently, and we will enjoy more playing time.
- XXVIII. Nonverbal communication can inform the players and audience about relationships between conductor and players: eye contact and cue motions establish rapport; audiences like cues; concert dress demonstrates preparation, group unity, and relationships between conductor and players.
- XXIX. Conclusion
  - A. We community band musicians arrive at rehearsal with great enthusiasm to play our instruments and have intimate experience with beautiful music. We do not come to hear even the most eloquent, poetic, erudite or humorous conductor speak. Any time taken away from playing dampens our enthusiasm and makes us impatient, sometimes resentful.

- B. Those of us in your band who are conductors, former conductors, would-be conductors, other self-appointed experts, and/or general curmudgeons offer you an exchange: If you keep us busy playing, making beautiful music, we will try to refrain from offering suggestions during rehearsal. An efficient rehearsal will leave no time for us to speak because our mouths will be too busy working as embouchures.
- C. If you use our time efficiently by conducting and not talking, band members will get more enjoyment, our performance will improve, our egos will be fed, we will become more enthusiastic, and we will return to future rehearsals having practiced our parts, and prepared to seek more. Our investments of time, abilities and energies will pay magnificent dividends in fulfilling our expectations for band membership—the joy of music.

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*After several decades as a conductor, tuba player, teacher and university administrator, David C. McCormick now makes music solely for enjoyment, playing in the Naples (Florida) Concert Band and the Paradise Brass Quintet. He also appears as a guest conductor and clinician. McCormick has served on the Midwest Clinic staff and board of directors since 1956, and on the Association of Concert Bands president's advisory council since 2003. His "Community Band: A Special Kind of Organization," addressing many topics, is at [www.AC Bands.org](http://www.AC Bands.org). He and his wife Connie live in Fort Myers, Florida.*