

Breathe Life Into Your Conducting
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Breathing as a Player vs. Breathing as a Conductor

1. Breathing as a player is different than breathing as a conductor. Wind players must be constantly exhaling in order to create vibration and therefore sound. Breathing as a conductor must reflect the rise and fall of the musical line.
2. Determining where the music inhales and exhales can guide the interpretation of a piece and therefore change the way a conductor physically conveys the piece to an ensemble.

Sternum

Our body consists of “hinges” or places where we can bend. The sternum functions as a hinge, but often is in a position of retreat. By opening at the sternum we can begin to explore the possibilities of the torso.

Use of the Torso

Movements beginning in the center of the body and moving out towards the extremities appear to flow more freely than do movements of the extremities alone with the center of the body remaining still (principle of Laban’s *Effort Shape Theory*).

1. *Centralized flow* begins in the torso and extends outward into the limbs. The outward journey of any movement, from the torso to the periphery, is centrally guided.
2. The return journey, from the extremities to the torso, led by the hands and/or feet is peripherally guided. As conductors, we tend to be peripherally guided.
3. The natural reaction of the torso is to retreat quickly backwards in danger and, when danger has passed, explore more cautiously forwards. The body contracts away from danger and the spine assists by curving to protect the torso.
4. There is vulnerability with exposure of the torso. Centralized flow demands exposure of the torso and may therefore be perceived as being more genuine than movements of the extremities alone.

The Breath Motivates the Gesture

Our body will naturally respond based upon the nature of the breath. A contradiction of breath and gesture is not only evident in expressive movement, but also nearly impossible to execute.

Attention to the Macro vs. Micro

1. Musical elements in the *micro* are usually rather obvious and driven by pulse or meter. Constant attention to the micro can inhibit the breath.
2. Many pieces also have *macro* elements that are often overlooked due to our fear of letting go of pulse.
3. Sharing your attention between the micro and macro elements of a piece may help you to bring more of its character to life.
4. Pay close attention to what the music says and not necessarily what the meter says. “Ride” on top of the meter rather than trying to endlessly control it.

Strip the Music Down to its Essence

1. By paying close attention to the essence of a musical passage, the conductor is far more likely to capture the character of a piece than by drilling meter.
2. The breath is then applied to the essence of the score to reflect the musical intentions rather than the meter.
3. Worry less about beat energy and more about what is most important to bring forward from the score. Go after those elements.

Laban's Effort/Shape Theory: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Conducting

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In short – I believe that developing a Laban vocabulary will help conductors clearly define and describe not only conducting gestures, but elements of any form of expressive movement. The better conductors are able to recognize expressive qualities in movement, the more likely they are to recognize and develop similar movements in their own conducting.

Brief background of Rudolf Laban

The work of Hungarian born Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) is largely associated with the discipline of dance. He was both an influential dancer and choreographer, but perhaps his most lasting impression was made through his studies of natural movement and the resulting theories that he devised. His system of analyzing movement was based on the premise that physical movement was the outward expression of an inner impulse. According to Groff (1995), “The (Laban) framework helps artists map the relationship between inner intent and outer expression. By differentiating the world of inner impulses, the artist gains clarity and mastery of expression in performance” (p. 30).

Laban's theories provide a means by which artists can specifically define and thoroughly explore expressive movement. They are based on natural movement principles to which all living things conform. Laban presented these principles in a highly structured and clearly defined manner, which enables teachers and researchers to observe and discuss the basic elements of movement. His movement theories led to the

development of a system of notation, known as Labanotation or kinetography, that is used by choreographers to document movement as composers document music.

Labanotation has also been used for documenting other forms of movement, but is most commonly found in the discipline of dance.

Elements of Effort

1. Weight - our ability to move our body weight against the natural laws of gravity. May be strong or light.
2. Space - the distance reached and direction towards which the body moves; determines *where* in space. May be direct or flexible.
3. Time - the amount of time that passes during the execution of a specific motion; determines *when* in time. May be sudden or sustained.
4. Flow - the order in which the body parts are set into motion. May be free or bound.

Use of the Torso in Flow

Movements beginning in the center of the body and moving out towards the extremities appear to flow more freely than do movements of the extremities alone with the center of the body remaining still.

5. *Centralized flow* begins in the torso and extends outward into the limbs. The outward journey of any movement, from the torso to the periphery, is centrally guided.
6. The return journey, from the extremities to the torso, led by the hands and/or feet is peripherally guided. As conductors, we tend to be peripherally guided.
7. The natural reaction of the torso is to retreat quickly backwards in danger and, when danger has passed, explore more cautiously forwards. The body contracts away from danger and the spine assists by curving to protect the torso.
8. There is vulnerability with exposure of the torso. Centralized flow demands exposure of the torso and may therefore be perceived as being more genuine than movements of the extremities alone.

Shape

1. Sphere of movement (or kinesphere) – area in which all effort occurs; with limbs extended, the imaginary inner wall of this sphere can be touched by hands and feet, and all points of it can be reached.
2. The sphere of movement consists of countless three-dimensional planes, which can be divided into three general pairs of directions:
 - a. up/down
 - b. left/right
 - c. front/back
3. Shape - the execution of individual and combinations of movements within the sphere. Movements may occur on a combination of many planes.
4. Trace forms – shapes we leave behind in space or the creation of spatial patterns.
5. Shadow forms - may exist as a contradiction to the intended gesture.
6. Effort/Shape Theory - a means to explore expressive movement through internal effort that is externalized through the creation of shapes in space (or trace forms).

Similarly: Conducting must first be an internal image of the music – physical conducting is merely an externalization of the internal impression of sound.

Positions

1. Movement instruction is often focused on positions of the body rather than the nature of the change between them (ex. Ballet positions, conducting patterns). However, positions are static and cannot define movement.
2. Positions are important, but the essence of expressive movement lies in what is communicated as we move *through* positions. Expressive content changes as a change occurs in the movement between positions.
3. Positions or “patterns” must be broken to expand trace forms into the sphere of movement. Repetition lacks expression.
4. Transitions between use of effort elements must flow well for the greatest expression.
5. All of the effort elements (especially flow) are apparent in the change from one position to another. The quality of these elements will either create or inhibit the flow of transitions.

References

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