

The Midwest Clinic

An International Band and Orchestra Conference
Chicago, Illinois

Conducting Workshop Session
Wednesday, December 17, 2003 - 2:30 - 3:30

Great Conducting Ideas
Stolen or Borrowed
from Friends and Colleagues!

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"The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor."

Vincent T. Lombardi

Introduction: What conducting is - and what it is NOT.....

The conductor is NOT the group's metronome/time beater. We often forget how well our groups can play without anyone on the podium at all. For a quick reminder sometime, have the group play without you conducting at all - just step off the podium and listen to them play as an independent ensemble, then think about what can you contribute to helping them play better. It will almost never be "beating time" for them. It will be in adjusting balance and blend, shaping phrases, pacing tempo changes, dealing with the wonderful silences in the music and helping them to get into the music more deeply by what you can share with them about its composer or the composer's reason for writing that particular work. Don't be a metronome, be a musician.

Example: U. S. Navy Band at the Oregon ABA convention performing "Eternal Father Strong To Save" in memory of Claude T. Smith

Conducting is not black magic and witchcraft, it is non-verbal communication. Technically it is a form of specialized sign language - used to communicate information specifically affecting the way in which the performers make music together as an ensemble. Obviously in the extended sense, it involves a great many things beyond the stick and the basic beat patterns, but the basic activity of the baton and the podium is a form of sign language.

Most music education students enter their first conducting class with a well developed ability to "read" this language, based on years of sitting in ensembles and watching conductors. This is a little like being able to understand a foreign language when hearing it spoken, but having no ability to speak it yourself.

How does one go about learning to "speak" this language? Therein lies a fairly large problem. Teaching conducting is a lot like teaching a person to swim. You can watch people do it for years, look at the pictures, and read all the theory, but until you get in the water and flounder around on your own, you have no idea how it feels to actually try to do it. And like learning to swim, I am not sure that you can "teach" anyone to conduct.... you can only try to assist and help them to "learn" for themselves. A master teacher like Elizabeth A. H. Green - almost the patron saint of conducting pedagogy, who raised a whole generation of us - is able to make this process seem a natural and enjoyable challenge!

A second major problem is that personal experience during this learning process requires some sort of ensemble to conduct. As simple as that sounds, many places teach conducting by conducting records or the teacher at the piano. Learning basic beat patterns in front of a mirror and conducting to a recording is very much like a med student trying to learn anatomy without having a cadaver on which to practice!

What is the process.... actually and specifically?

Basically the activity of conducting, in my mind at least, boils down to three basic activities or processes:

1. The first is simply to learn the tune (which may classify as the understatement of the year). "Ma" Green used to say, "There are two kinds of conductors: those with their head in the score, and those with the score in their head".

Before setting foot on a podium it is absolutely imperative that the conductor have fixed in his or her mind a clear mental image of the work, in detail, and in its entirety. Personal performing experience, your score study and preparation, the practice of gestures..... and literally everything that you have ever experienced or learned about music is a part of this preparation to fully comprehend and re-create a score with a live ensemble. This is where the artist conductor separates from the "adequate". There are conductors who show all the correct beat patterns as the notes go by on the page, yet this is not the same as the conductor who is working, not from the page, but from the clear detailed image in sound of the work that exists in his mind.

2. The second basic part of the activity is the ability to hear what the ensemble is actually doing, and compare that with the above mentioned mental image of the "ideal" performance. There are vast differences in various individual's abilities to hear the details that exist within a full band or orchestra sound. This listening and analysis process of hearing what the group is doing, in every sort of detail: tone, pitch, balance, blend, phrasing, and etc. and comparing that constantly with the "ideal" that is the mental image is a constant challenge to us all. This is especially true when dealing with mixed meters, cues, page turns, and all the other activities of the moment. Some people are amazingly skilled at this aspect of conducting, but most of us have to work very hard to develop this ability.

3. Once you have established the "ideal" sound in your mind, and then have heard the actual sound of the ensemble, the third step in the process involves the pedagogy of bringing about correction and improvement to the sound that the ensemble is making. This is the area of knowledge of the instruments or voices involved and the teaching "chops" to effect positive change as is needed. Oddly enough, most band directors are often excellent at this "mechanical" aspect of the process, but perhaps not as strong in the first two!

What are the goals to which we apply this process?

Be the composer's representative. This is a major obligation, since only music requires a "middleman" to present a work of art. We cannot experience the original work directly. The composer leaves instead, a "blueprint" from which we must recreate the work for each audience to experience. We are the "Pizza delivery boy" for the composer.

Lead and Guide. Make appropriate musical decisions. Interpret the score, present the composer's ideas and concepts to the ensemble. Transform notation into the appropriate musical sounds. Maximize the musical experience for the performers and the audience. Everything from "how much ritard..?" to the program notes for the concert.

Facilitate the educational experience. Bring order to the process. Establish a positive environment in which to make music, both physically and mentally. Provide a meaningful learning experience for students involved, by getting beyond the bare notes and into the meaning behind them. You cannot play "Prague" without getting into a little history and why Husa wrote this masterpiece; and you cannot play "American Elegy" without talking about Columbine. Help the music be real to the students who play it.

Basic Level: Fundamentals

"Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choices of many alternatives."

I certainly do not want to reduce this extremely complex activity to a series of "sound bites", but often the best way to tackle a complex challenge is by examining its component parts. These smaller details can often be more easily mastered or understood - gradually leading to increased comprehension of the whole.

Many of us in this room teach beginning conducting classes, and this first area of discussion is aimed primarily at this audience, although all of us occasionally need to remind ourselves of the most basic tools of our trade. The following are some terrific teaching tools borrowed from friends and colleagues.

1. Eugene Corporon - Proper conducting stance and posture.
Hug a tree - and ballet class "turn the body out".
2. Virginia Allen - How to bow gracefully.
Look at your feet
3. Elizabeth A. H. Green - Developing greater left hand independence.
Juggle keys and backwards alphabet.
4. Allan McMurray - Stick control basics.
Hinges and picture frames.
5. Observation - The "Beware" words
Senza; immer; al fine; l'istesso, etc...
6. Observation - Excessive verbiage
"You mean you want it louder?"
7. "Watch the stick"! May not be a good goal after all. Work for the "pulse".
How does an ensemble play together? (less "watch" and more "listen"...)
8. Frederick Fennell - Teaching the Tenuto gesture. Water and a good trout.

Intermediate Level: Non-Verbal Communication

1. Laurey Richmond - Sign Language
The subject is Music, but the technique is Sign Language
2. U. S. Marine Band - Non verbal communication
Overture to "Candide" conversation
3. Craig Kirchhoff - Eye contact
Masks
4. H. Robert Reynolds - Mixed meters
subdivision, and goal of the smallest common denominator.
5. Grant Cooper - Sub-divide that Prep gesture in your mind.
It looks and feels different: Aegean, waltz, Carnival, etc
6. James Croft - Vocabulary of gestures; more than one way to show anything!
Pet a cat or hammer a nail; Fly casting; release gesture variations.
7. Fred Fennell and Jerry Junkin. Supply the energy that the group requires.
Exaggerate to whatever level is necessary to get the desired result.

Advanced Level: The Score and building that "Mental Image"

1. Frederick Fennell - How to study a score. Lists, etc....
The score is no more the "music" than a blueprint is a house.
2. Elizabeth A. H. Green - Score Study
Building that mental image; the "Art Gallery" approach
3. John Locke - Error detection
How to find the phantom error in the group, and "self correcting" mistakes!
4. Elizabeth Green vs Sir Georg Solti - Memorization of the score.
What, exactly, does it mean to memorize a score?
4. Aaron Copland - Score Preparation Standards and Interpretation
"Emblems" rehearsal
5. Russel Mikkelson - Compound Melody
"Our Director" - to "Lincolnshire Posy"

Learn the score like a great percussionist learns a part - by compound melody. Example: "Chester" excerpt

6. Harry Begian - Do you conduct the "page" - or what you hear in your mind?
The score must be assimilated to the point where you conduct the music itself, not the "blueprint" that is the score.

EXCELLENCE CAN BE ATTAINED ... IF YOU.....

- Care more than others think is wise...
- Risk more than others think is safe...
- Dream more than others think is practical...
- Expect more than others think is possible...

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Clinic Topics

Recurring "themes" from many, many clinic sessions.
Don Wilcox, Director of Bands, West Virginia University

1. The conductor and the ensemble need to function as the "pizza delivery boy" for the composer.
2. You do not speak in a monotone - don't play your music that way!
3. Music must have "direction" and needs to flow either toward or away from some focal point.
4. When the line moves upward, crescendo. When the line moves downward, diminuendo. It's a start.
5. Silence is often the most powerful component in a musical phrase.
6. Delayed gratification: in accents, suspensions, resolutions, chord progressions, and final cadences.
7. "Stage Makeup" - "extra" inflection, accent and articulation clarity to be "right" out in the audience.
8. Fill the available space. Sonority and intensity are not the same as loudness.
9. Do not confuse p (piano) with "puny"!
10. "Layers" in the music.... Melody, countermelody, bass line, harmony lines, etc...
11. Expressivo - often means "do more with the last beat of the measure"!
12. Conducting is nonverbal communication. Music is the subject, not the technique.
13. Music can say what words cannot.... Elogy, Trauersinfonie, Cajun Folk Songs, etc.....
14. The answer to pitch, tone and control problems almost always is: "More air"!
15. Occasionally, stop conducting and make the group focus on LISTENING to each other.
16. DNSTNWYT - "Do not stop the note with your tongue".
17. Have instrumental ensembles Sing! Best ear training there is, period.
18. Rhythmic problems - go more vertical. To get more flow to the music, go more horizontal.
19. "All eighth notes are created equal" - like in the Declaration of Independence!
20. Separate tempo from dynamic.
21. Play what the adjudicator expects to hear. Missing parts must be covered.

22. Hopping a train - rhythmically!
23. Beware of setting the initial tempo for a work by thinking about only the first couple of measures.
24. Concert Dress. Conductor one notch UP! Minimize visual distractions to the audience.
25. Two ratings, one for the band and one for the conductor.
26. Warming up on stage. The professional approach - a "prelude" to the concert.
27. Separate Blend from Balance. Two separate, but often related problems.
28. Be aware of pacing on ritards, especially on endings.
29. How to make a mistake! Both for you and for your students.