

CONDUCTING OUTSIDE THE BOX: CREATING A FRESH APPROACH
TO CONDUCTING GESTURE THROUGH THE PRINCIPLES
OF LABAN MOVEMENT ANALYSIS

by

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To my loving wife, Angelika, and my beloved children, Tara and Jeremy.

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You have been and continue to be my strength and inspiration.

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The purpose of this study was to introduce and test the effectiveness of a unique, interdisciplinary approach to conducting gesture based on key principles of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA). This method is the product of the researcher's ten year investigation of LMA and its practical application to conducting. The concepts and techniques presented in this study provide conductors with the means to observe and experience their gestures from a new and different perspective that facilitates a better understanding of the relationships between elements of musical expression and the gestures conductors use to represent them.

Four conductors of varying backgrounds and levels of proficiency participated in the study. Following a pretest conducting performance of the opening 154 measures of Beethoven's (1770-1827) *Overture to Coriolanus*, Op. 62 (1808), the participants completed five hours of LMA training administered by the researcher. This mini-course provided movement instruction, some of which was related to conducting, but it was not a conducting class. No specific applications of the course material to the study repertoire were prescribed. Participants were asked to use homework assignments and in-class participatory exercises as the means to incorporate newly acquired skills into their conducting.

Both the pretest and posttest performances were documented with a Samsung model SD23 MiniDV camcorder and single-point stereo microphone placed in front of

the orchestra. The resulting video recordings were edited without any change in content and transferred to DVD. The data were analyzed by two expert panels of two conductors and two LMA specialists respectively. A third channel of data included in the findings was collected through a post-study interview of each participant conducted by the researcher.

The LMA panel was able to confirm significant changes in movement choices and an expanded range of movement possibilities for all four participants that could be attributed to LMA training. The conductor panel was able to concur that the changes they observed constituted a positive development for all four participants, and the participants themselves agreed that the LMA training they received was of great value to them. The results of this study strongly suggest that LMA instruction would be a valuable addition to any conductor's training and practice regimens regardless of experience, proficiency or area of specialization.

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CHAPTER I

THE ART OF SILENT MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

After nearly five decades of conducting symphony and opera performances around the world, I have come to the irrevocable conclusion that there is no function in the entire realm of the performing arts as universally misunderstood as that of the conductor.

—William Steinberg, "The Function of a Conductor"

In little more than 200 years, the orchestral conductor's art has evolved from its simple origins of time-beating and rudimentary directorial duties to become one of the most complex, demanding disciplines in the performing arts.¹ It stands alone in the midst of musical endeavors devoted to performance because it is practiced in silence.² Recognizing this unique circumstance, conductor, teacher, author Hermann Scherchen (1891-1966) identifies gesture as "the conductor's one and only medium during performance."³ Even in rehearsal, when a conductor often employs the voice to instruct or demonstrate desired execution, he still relies most heavily upon nonverbal, physical communication, conducting technique, to transmit his vision of the score to the ensemble.

¹ The earliest documented account of beating time in the context of a prescribed pattern was presented by Bohemian lexicographer and organist Thomas Balthazar Janowka (1660-1741) in *Clavis ad Thesaurum Magna Artis Musicae* (1701). Elliot Galkin, *A History of Orchestral Conducting in Theory and Practice* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1988), 198.

² Silent conducting was not always the norm. Beating time, the practice of tapping a bow, rolled up manuscript or baton on the podium (or sometimes the floor) continued into the nineteenth century in parts of Europe. Galkin, 200.

³ Hermann Scherchen, *Handbook of Conducting*, 10th ed., trans. M. D. Calvocoressi (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 14.

William Berz further confirms the importance of gesture as the conductor's primary mode of communication in his 1982 study where he reports that most of the participating conductors "relied on hand movements for expressing musical ideas nonverbally, rather than on facial expression, posture, or vocalics."⁴ Accepting that there are many such technical elements that may contribute to a conductor's performance (eye contact, aural acuity, bearing, demeanor, rehearsal skills, theoretical and historical knowledge, for example), this study concentrated solely on gesture, the use of hands, arms and body, as the central means by which a conductor conveys musical expression to his collaborators.

While vocal and instrumental performers have at their disposal long established traditions and conventions upon which they can more or less concur, conductors and conductor educators have yet to reach substantial, meaningful agreements regarding the proper approach or methods for the acquisition and development of technique. Listing this deficiency among his primary motivations for writing *Lehrbuch des Dirigierens* in 1929, Scherchen wrote: "Indeed, there does not even exist a standard method of teaching the technique of conducting, a method providing teachers and pupils with materials for systematic exercises and dealing, in a gradual order, with the problems of conducting."⁵

Sir Adrian Boult (1889-1983) came to the same conclusion in 1959 when he observed: "There has so far been no time for someone's 'method' to be evolved and opposed to

⁴ William L. Berz, "The Development of an Observation Instrument Designed to Classify Specific Nonverbal Communication Techniques Employed by Conductors for Musical Ensembles" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1983), 144-5.

⁵ Scherchen, 3-4.

someone else's as we have seen with all other forms of interpretation, vocal and instrumental."⁶

Nearly twenty-five years later in 1982, noted choral conductor educator Gail Poch maintained: "There is [still] no source which offers a logical and meaningful learning sequence for the development of the techniques and skills of conducting."⁷ This disparity between instructional methods in other performance disciplines and conducting persists today despite recurrent admonishments from leading pedagogues and artists of the twentieth century as well as dozens of texts and treatises published since Hector Berlioz's (1803-1869) groundbreaking 1855 essay, *L'Art du chef d'orchestre, le theorie du son art*, was appended to the revised edition of *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*. A brief examination of the development of conducting technique over the last three hundred years helps to explain why this circumstance continues even into the twenty-first century.

From Time-Beating to Sculpting Time

Composers and performers gave birth to the practice of musical direction out of necessity. Larger groups of singers and musicians that performed more complicated musical scores required direction of some kind to preserve ensemble and impose temporal consensus. During this early period, no highly specialized technical skills were required. The director beat time audibly or silently, gave simple cues, offered instructions

⁶ Sir Adrian Boult quoted in Michael Bowles, *The Art of Conducting* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 9.

⁷ Gail B. Poch, "Conducting Movement Analogues through Effort Shape," *Choral Journal* 23, no. 3 (November 1982): 21-2.

and corrections when required, and the ensemble followed.⁸ Conducting responsibilities often fell to the *Kapellmeister* who directed opera and choral works from the klavier and instrumental music from the concertmaster's desk. If not composers, such pioneer conductors were performers (usually but not exclusively violinists) with previous leadership roles.⁹ These practices continued until the close of the eighteenth and, in some locations, into the opening decades of the nineteenth century.

Musical direction began its evolution towards true conducting when the rising popularity of concert music and changes in performance practice during the first half of the nineteenth century compelled ensemble directors to become the primary interpreters of music as well as timekeepers.¹⁰ To further complicate this new added challenge, late eighteenth-century composers had already embarked upon a campaign to stretch the boundaries of musical expression that would continue unabated well into the twentieth century. New instruments were added to the orchestra, and existing sections were augmented to maintain balance. In response, choirs grew larger to produce more sound

⁸ Some behaviors associated with the direction of musical ensembles can be traced back to the first millennium b.c.e. and beyond through iconographic evidence and biblical references. However, for the purposes of this discussion, the "early period" is defined by historical records dating from the seventeenth century onward. Galkin, 241-74.

⁹ According to Carse, there were three common methods in the eighteenth century for controlling performances of instrumental music or combined vocal and instrumental music. Leadership duties were divided between the *Kapellmeister* (usually the composer) and the concertmaster for operatic performances. Instrumental performances were sometimes subject to the same dual leadership method but more often conducted solely by the concertmaster who exerted full control. Choral performances, with or without instruments, in large spaces where performers were more widely dispersed required the services of a time-beater, armed with a roll of paper or wooden staff, who marked the time visually or audibly. Adam Carse, *The Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1940), 88-9.

¹⁰ Galkin, 467.

and keep pace with the expanding instrumental forces of the orchestra.¹¹ Musical forms grew longer, more complex and more flexible, while technical demands placed on the musicians tested the limits of their instruments.¹² At the same time, a new and growing appetite for music composed by deceased masters demanded that conductors from the mid-nineteenth century onward acquire an increasingly large and more diverse repertoire.¹³ Because of this unusual set of circumstances, broadly accepted techniques and methods for leading opera, choral or symphonic performances were given neither the time nor the attention required to develop much beyond simple rules for beating time. The art of conducting—or more specifically, conducting technique—had to be invented on the job.

The preceding historical synopsis explains how and why the disparity between conducting and other performance disciplines commenced. To discover why it persists requires a comparison of the actual processes of study and practice for the development of instrumental and vocal technique with those same processes for conducting technique. The former are rooted in the production of sound. Indeed the goal of such practices is complete mastery over every nuance of sound. The performer begins by constructing an abstract aural image of the desired sound-time continuum for the music to be performed

¹¹ Carse, *The Orchestra from Beethoven to Berlioz* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1948; New York: Broude Brothers, 1949), 12-23, 295.

¹² Improvements in both the construction of instruments and the training and technical accomplishments of those who played them spurred composers to fully exploit the new textures, colors and breadth of musical expression now open to them. Galkin, 37-42.

¹³ Weber, William, "The Rise of the Classical Repertoire in Nineteenth-Century Orchestral Concerts," in *The Orchestra: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Joan Peyser (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), 367-76.

and completes the process by materializing that abstraction through the medium of an instrument. A direct physical connection with the sound and, in turn, the music is made through the context of bodily movements required to create the sound. It is, by definition, impossible to separate the physical activity from the sound. Exercises may be pursued to develop dexterity or improve control apart from a given instrument, but ultimately the requisite movements and the resultant sounds are inexorably linked together.

Like instrumental/vocal performers, the conductor begins by creating an abstract aural image of a musical blueprint (the score) provided by the composer. However, he materializes that abstraction, apart from the instruments or the sounds they make, through the media of expressive movement (conducting gesture), facial expression and interpersonal contact with the musicians in the ensemble. Although a keyboard, other instrument or perhaps the conductor's own voice may be used to help him learn the music, the direct physical connection to his imagined version of the score is ultimately maintained with the gestures, postures and expressions intended to convey the musical, emotional and spiritual contents of a composition and *not* with any sound the conductor produces. More to the point, the conductor's gestures should connect his own abstract representation of the sounds and temporal flow called forth by a composer's notation with the actual sounds the musicians need to produce at the precise moments these events need to occur. Scherchen makes much the same assertion when he insists that conducting gestures "must indicate perfectly clearly the metrical course of the work; and, at the same time, [they] must convey in unequivocal fashion the varying expression and general

shaping of the work."¹⁴ The conductor's performance personifies and transmits this information *without* making a sound, and an ensemble's audible interpretation of its conductor's silent rendition of a musical opus is, in fact, the collective, collaborative product of his performance.

Clearly the art of conducting should be as firmly rooted in the art and science of human movement as it is in the art of music. Mastery of either discipline without a complementary mastery of the other has been insufficient for nearly two hundred years. Metronomic precision combined with strict adherence to traditional beat patterns (the hallmarks of time-beating) are simply not enough.¹⁵ The conductor's technique should convey tempo, rhythm, articulation, dynamics, character, style, breath and shape—every nuance the orchestra needs to complete a mutually satisfying musical performance. Consummation of this marriage of music to movement comes only when the conductor has established a deep and unbreakable physical connection between his gestures and his fully formed abstract representation of the sounds of music. Put another way, the conductor must maintain a continuous connection between his gestures and the flow of musical expression if he is to effectively communicate his vision of the music to the

¹⁴ Scherchen, 14.

¹⁵ The prescriptive use of beat patterns is often employed by conductors who believe that this type of beating is clear. References to "clarity," when used to describe conducting technique, have long been a source of confusion. A clear beat is not necessarily the result of uniformity of size, speed and placement of gestures. These characteristics are often neither desirable nor appropriate. True clarity requires careful consideration to determine the qualities of gesture that will most effectively evoke the desired sounds from the ensemble. An "unclear" beat—one that includes modifications of speed, force, direction, size and shape—often transmits the most powerful and successful message to performers. Farberman comes to the same conclusion. "Brilliant musical minds, accumulated musical knowledge, and probing musical insights—all are negated when forced to use two-hundred-year-old beating formulas." Harold Farberman, "Beating Time: How Not to Make Music," *Music Educators Journal* 88, No. 3 (Nov 2001): 39-40.

musicians he is conducting. It is this accomplishment alone that elevates conducting from craft to performance art.

The Synthesis of Two Disciplines

Human beings are born movers. In fact, we are already moving months before birth. Cultures around the world have evolved traditions of expressing thoughts, feelings, opinions and states of being through the medium of movement. A shrug of the shoulders, a wave of the hand or a grimace each convey meanings that are instantly understood given the proper context and circumstance.¹⁶ Yet these seemingly innate capacities to move and interpret movements as forms of personal expression and interpersonal communication do not necessarily predispose conductors, teachers of the art or their students towards an understanding of the relationships between expressive movement and musical events.

Conducting technique is a highly specialized, extremely rich form of nonverbal communication through gesture. Accepting this description, it logically follows that any "school" or method of conducting should include thorough training in the means by which elements of musical expression are translated into movements that are immediately recognized and understood by musicians regardless of differences between forms of culturally embedded nonverbal communication.¹⁷ The fact that conductors use gesture to

¹⁶ Moore and Yamamoto recognize body movement as "a highly structured, culturally-coded form of symbolic communication, equivalent in its sophistication to the better-known extensions systems of language, music, mathematics, and so on." Carol-Lynne Moore and Kaoru Yamamoto, *Beyond Words* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 84-5, 108-14.

communicate with ensembles of all kinds around the globe, provided the musicians are schooled in the traditions of “Western” music, suggests the existence of a distinct physical vocabulary of conducting.¹⁸ The first attempts to codify such a vocabulary appear in early seventeenth century documents and are limited to simple instructions for communicating meter and pulse.¹⁹ Multiple diagrams of patterns for beating time in different meters followed roughly one hundred years later.²⁰

Berlioz included still more complex diagrams with detailed technical instructions and applications of these patterns to musical examples in *L'Art du chef d'orchestre*. Richard Wagner (1813-1883) avoided direct references to technique and beat patterns in *Über das Dirigieren* (1869), concentrating instead on execution, feeling, character, interpretation and aesthetics. From these treatises, two competing schools of thought emerged: one convinced that technique could be learned and the other equally convinced that the ability to conduct was an inborn trait that could be neither learned nor taught. Among adherents to the latter thesis, perhaps none expressed the view that conducting could not be learned more eloquently than New York Philharmonic conductor Anton Seidl (1850-1898).

¹⁷ Cultural differences can confound efforts to send and receive information through gesture. For example, most Western cultures understand a motion of the head from side to side to mean “no,” while many Eastern cultures interpret a similar, although slightly different movement, to indicate “yes.” Examples of this kind of culturally specific context are cited in Moore and Yamamoto, 111-14.

¹⁸ Max Rudolf (1902-1995) extends the linguistic reference in the title of his venerated text, *The Grammar of Conducting: A Comprehensive Guide to Conducting Technique & Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994). Koch goes farther in his 2003 study by describing a “tripartite framework of interrelating syntactic factors” among the organizing forces behind conducting motions. Christopher Jason Koch, “Towards a Theory of Conducting Motion,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003), 127-31.

¹⁹ Carse, *Orchestral Conducting: A Textbook for Students and Amateurs* (London: Augener, 1935), 90-1.

²⁰ Galkin, 261-7.

The ability to conduct is a gift of God with which few have been endowed in full measure. Those who possess it in abundance do not wish to write about it; for them the talent seems so natural a thing that they cannot see the need of discussing it. This is the kernel of the whole matter. If you have the divine gift within you, you can conduct; if you have not, you will never be able to acquire it. Those who have been endowed with the gift are conductors; the others are time-beaters.²¹

Seidl's comments raise two salient points that address this study. First, whether his belief in "the divine gift" refers to some mystical quality of musical leadership or to technical virtuosity, there can be no doubt that a fortunate few conductors are beneficiaries of a natural seemingly inborn kinesthetic sense that facilitates the creation and application of effective conducting gestures. Yet such gifted individuals are not necessarily the best equipped to teach less physically adept conductors how to develop or improve as movers. Second, the fact that few truly great conductors are exceptional educators as well stems less from a lack of interest in writing or talking about their art and more from the apparent absence of proper tools and methods for dissecting and describing, with words and other means, precisely how a conductor is able to communicate musical expression through expressive movement.

Setting Music to Movement

For conductors and teachers who remain convinced that conducting can be learned, the search for new, more effective methods that will better promote an unshakable, dynamic connection between conducting gestures and musical expression

²¹ Anton Seidl, "On Conducting," in *Anton Seidl: A Memorial by his Friends* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1899), 215.