

The Left Hand: Hard to Train
by Richard Strange, Arizona State University

Conducting textbooks all have rules, catch-phrases, and axioms that sound logical and make perfect sense. When one compares many different texts (as my graduate conducting class does each year), it becomes apparent that practically all of the books on the market agree on most of the basic “rules of conducting” except beat patterns (not the subject of this column). If this is so, why do we, the practicing professional conductors, ignore so many of these rules?

To cite one of the most egregious examples, I know of no text that doesn’t condemn continual “doubling” of the right-hand beat pattern by the left hand. And yet, most conductors are guilty of mirroring the beat (to a fault). This one conducting rule probably is honored more often in the breach than in the doing. Why is it that we “preach one thing and do another?”

Coordination of our two hands and arms is such a powerful physical force that it is almost impossible for some people to disconnect one side of the body from the other. After all, left/right coordination is built into our bodies from before birth and is the goal of much that is learned throughout childhood. Actually, we “lefties” of the world have a decided advantage over right-handed conductors when using the left hand (I think). Once we have “beaten our right hands into submission” while learning beat patterns, we are free to concentrate on making left-hand movements that are truly independent, since we are working with the strong side of our torso. However, this statement doesn’t apply to many conductors since most people are right-handed from birth.

Since doubling is so natural, why is it not a useful conducting tool? First of all, let me state for the record that some doubling is both permissible and, indeed, necessary. The following conducting gestures are made easier to see and appear more emphatic when both hands (and arms) give identical gestures simultaneously:

1. Preparatory beats and the first downbeat
2. Cutoffs
3. Fermatas
4. Changes of tempo
5. Changes of style
6. Musical emphasis
7. Any doubling used for a well-thought-out musical reason not covered above.

When, then, is doubling not permissible for conscientious students of conducting? (This includes all conductors, all of their professional lives, I hope.) To my way of thinking, doubling is never permissible when it is an uncontrollable habit. Our gestures must have musical meaning to be worthwhile. Just to stand on the podium and “make like a two-bladed windmill” is the height of musical futility. Not only that, it is musically wasteful.

The realization of a worthwhile piece of music (another subject for a different column) through body movement demands fine conducting technique. The myriad nuances and musical events inherent in fine music (style changes, cues, dynamics, tenutos, etc.) need all of the agility and dexterity that we can command. To waste the power of combining several different gestures at once to convey the subtlety of a complicated phrase, is to waste many of our best conducting resources. What more can a player want at the moment of performance than to receive from the conductor a tremendous amount of musical information in the form of thought-out conducting gestures, rather than just two separate-but-mirror-image beat patterns.

If the conductor has the pernicious habit of doubling practically every beat, what can be done to change left-hand gestures to show musical thought, not non-musical routine? There are several steps that one must take to change non-productive habits to productive ones. The principles utilized to change conducting habits are no different than the ones we use when we try to quit smoking or chewing our nails. Following are the steps necessary to effect a lasting change:

1. Identify the habit you wish to change.
2. Convince yourself of the need to change it.
3. Identify the habit (doubling) whenever it occurs in your gestures.
4. Stop doubling immediately each time you “catch yourself at it.”
5. Identify, learn and substitute alternate musical gestures that will convey your musical meaning more clearly.

One practical tip for identifying and learning appropriate left-hand gestures is to practice (privately, of course) conducting using the left hand, only, while singing the score or following a recording. In other words, get rid of the temptation to double by not using your right hand at all. Practice cues, dynamics, nuances, etc., with left-hand movements that carry no hint of a beat pattern. When you feel confident that you have these movements under control, then add the right-hand pattern for just a few measures and see if you can put these diverse movements together without falling back into the habit of doubling.

This type of conducting practice takes time and mental discipline, but it is worth it. Once you gain true “independence of hands,” you will never want to go back to your old, inefficient habits.

It is not really necessary to use your left hand and arm every instant that you are conducting. Many conductors seem to feel awkward with the left hand and arm still. They dangle their hands down at their sides, put them behind their backs or place them on their tummies (which becomes hilarious to the group being conducted). I have even seen a very few conductors put their left hand in their pockets while conducting a concert (that’s slightly too casual for me to appreciate when I am in the audience).

What can be done to get rid of this awkward look? I teach my students to “park” the left hand (when not in use) by leaving it directly in front of the body, about a foot out from, and slightly above the waist line. This position keeps it out of the sight of the audience and ready to be used again without excess wasted motion. The conductor looks neither excessively casual nor awkward from the audience’s viewpoint.

I believe this position to be both practical and comfortable. Try it; you’ll like it.

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Dr. Strange was president and was Executive Director of the American Bandmasters Association. In the past few years he has conducted, judged or given clinics in Austria, Belgium, Canada, England, France, Germany, Guam, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States. At present, Dr. Strange is Music Director and Conductor of the 90-member Tempe (Arizona) Symphony Orchestra.

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