

On Conducting

by Robert E. Foster, University of Kansas

Let's talk about being a better conductor when you are primarily a teacher-or "The Art of Conducting for the High School and/or Junior High School Band Director."

If we want other people to take us, our ensembles, and our music more seriously, we must focus our attention on becoming better conductors and on presenting ourselves and our ensembles in a more professional manner.

You CONDUCT music!

You DIRECT traffic!

CONDUCTING is an exciting form of non-verbal communication. Whether you are a fine conductor, or an inexperienced one, you are sending out signals. You are communicating. The big question is what signals are you sending out, and what are you communicating?

We all have enormous potential for better and more positive non-verbal communication through the art of conducting if we will just develop those skills and become better conductors. The bright young conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic, Semyon Bychkov, stated in an interview that was reported in the July, 1987 issue of *Connoisseur* magazine: "Conducting is a visual art. It is not enough to get an orchestra to play together. It is not enough to be 'a great musician.' A conductor's means of expression must be as rich to look at as the music sounds. "Conducting," he continues, "is the youngest of the performing professions, born only in the late nineteenth century. It is the least understood, the least thought about and there is a great misconception that it cannot be taught or learned."

Through the baton (or at least the artistic and proper use of the baton) we can determine not only tempo (conduct faster or slower) (without using verbal encouragement or hand clapping?), but also style and volume. The "tip" can illustrate style -is it detached or connected? And the size of the beat will determine volume. Also, the size and location of the beat (high or low) can reinforce the concepts of both dynamics and style. All beats are not created equal! They do not need to all be the same size, in the same place, or the same style. In fact, if we are going to be musical conductors, they cannot be the same size, in the same place, and in the same style. Continuing this line of thought, neither should all measures in a selection, phrase, or line be necessarily conducted in the same pattern or frame -even if they are in the same signature and the same tempo. Example: Last line, Suite in Eb, first movement.

The left hand (when used) frequently seems to be primarily used to "mirror image" the right hand, throw an occasional cue, and turn pages.

We, generally, have not begun to exploit the usefulness or effectiveness of the left hand. Try to make it something better than a mirror image. That (the mirror image) in itself is redundant. If you are giving a set of signals with the right hand, why give the same set of signals with the left, when you can be adding an entire new group of signals or musical encouragement.

The left hand can:

1. Help develop a line or phrase by lifting as the line grows, and lowering as it diminishes. Example: first line, First Suite in Eb, first movement.

2. Add to the preciseness or effectiveness of entrances or releases.

3. Call for more sound or less sound.

4. Enhance accents, rhythmic emphasis, mood, and style.

5. Compliment or reinforce the right hand, for especially big moments; but, if it mirrors the right hand constantly, it loses its effectiveness.

Zuohuang Chen (the conductor of the Beijing (China) Symphony, formerly conductor of the University of Kansas Symphony, taught: With the baton (right hand) conduct or focus attention on what is the most difficult and technically or rhythmically, maybe the back of the 2nd violins, or the 3rd clarinets, etc. With the left hand, conduct the melody, or the more obvious line. Example: First Suite in Eb, first movement (second line of example).

We have talked about the right hand, and we've talked about the left hand, and we have omitted the most obvious part of all. That is your entire body! Ideally, today's skilled conductors conduct not with just their arms, but indeed, with their entire being.

How do you stand? Think about how your weight is balanced, forward or backward. Do you stand heavy; or do you stand light; or do you stand big; or do you stand small? You can “be” the music to a certain extent.

Become aware of your sternum (and your chest and shoulders), and your carriage and your head. Become aware of your facial features and facial expressions.

It is possible to conduct without even using your hands. As professional teachers we have become too reliant on our hands and voices, to the exclusion, too frequently, of our other resources.

Try putting your hands in your pockets or behind your back, and conduct an entire work using your other resources. It is a great exercise. (And it will certainly get your band’s attention!)

Example: First movement: Holst Suite in Eb. Start the Chaconne.

To do any of these things well, you must first know the score. You must study the piece and prepare yourself before you begin to waste students’ time foolishly because of your own lack of preparation. Know what you want to accomplish before you start the rehearsal or the piece.

You must also rehearse conducting! Yes, I mean practice, alone and without a group. You did not learn to be a good performer on your instrument without practicing, and you will not become a good conductor without practicing conducting.

Conducting and beating time are not synonymous. You have to know your beat patterns before beginning. Also, you have to know how to start and stop; but conducting is so much more than that!

The more communicative you become through conducting, the more efficient you will become as a teacher, (You simply do not have to stop and talk so much) and the more musical your groups will become. The more musical your groups become, the more satisfying the entire experience will be for you and for your students.

After you have prepared your ensemble (or as you prepare your ensemble) be sure to prepare yourself. Think about how you will present this product called music.

1. Be well dressed in clothing appropriate for the group and the occasion. If the group is in full uniform or in tuxedos for a major performance, the conductor should also appear formal so the total appearance is consistent. In this case there should be no casual shoes and no sports coats with slacks.

2. Be well prepared. Be certain that the group knows what you plan to do. Borrowing a phrase from the Holiday Inn people, “The best surprise is no surprise!” Rehearse every facet of the program, even standing and sitting. Leave nothing to chance.

3. Frederick Fennell’s rule for conductor’s: “Before going on stage or to the podium, empty everything: pockets, change, keys, billfold, kidneys. . .”

Summary: Conducting is an exciting challenge, and like many musical goals, the more you learn about it, the more you realize that you don’t know about it; and the more you learn about it, the more fun it is.

It may be that the only really satisfied conductors are the happily naive ones, or the bad ones (the ones who do not practice and refine their skills).

Becoming a better conductor is one of the exciting opportunities that we all have to continue to grow and to improve. There are things that you can do to continue to improve and to grow as conductors:

1. Find and locate good role models, and study them to see how they move and how they do things.

2. Work and practice in front of a mirror.

3. Videotape yourself in rehearsal, and videotape your concerts and study them to determine how you can improve.

4. Study videotapes of good conductors.

It really is fun to be better!

Certs and Tests: Have you thought about the difference between a CERT and a TEST, or between a conCERT and a conTEST?

A CONCERT is first and foremost a musical presentation, and the conductor is an extremely important part of the presentation.

A CONTEST is also a musical presentation, but it is in a very structured environment and an unnatural musical setting, but the conductor is still an important part of the performance. Note the term: “part of”, not something in addition to the performance.

Accordingly:

1. Conductors do not set up chairs in front of the audience (although some “directors” might). With just a little pre-planning this can be taken care of in advance by using dependable students from this (or preferably another) group. Be sure to have the conductor’s stand level (or height) set in advance.

2. When you enter the stage for a concert or at most festivals (at least the ones which announce your performances) the preferred plan is to go directly to the podium, turn and face the audience, and acknowledge the applause (if any). It is nice to have the group stand as you enter so they can also acknowledge the applause. Then, have them be seated, and get ready to play.

3. Dress properly for the occasion. If the ensemble is dressed formally, the conductor should also dress formally.

If we want serious consumers of music (or consumers of “serious music”) to take our work and our music more seriously, we must do a better job of presenting our product.

In the business world this would be called packaging our product. I believe that we generally do a good job of teaching our students music, and we do a good job of teaching them to perform. We have a good product! However, we all need to continue to work to develop a better awareness, and to do a better job in the area of “packaging our product” for public consumption.

Have fun, and good luck as you continue that mysterious and exciting quest to become a real “CONDUCTOR” as well as a great teacher and a good band director!

Conducting Self-Analysis:

1. Am I conducting beat patterns, or am I conducting music phrases, dynamics, and style?

1a. Am I conducting measures, or musical lines and phrases (which may be groups of measures)?

2. Does my left hand function independently, or does it mirror my right hand?

3. Do I really know the score? Have I studied it so I am really prepared?

4. Have I practiced conducting it (the score); actually rehearsing my “moves”, developing a more effective style and more meaningful communication?

5. Do I always automatically inhale with my preparatory beat? (It will certainly improve the chances of your group beginning together.)

6a. Start Big!

6b Start Soft.

7. How many ways can I conduct a release?

8. Am I a generic conductor? After all, 4/4 is 4/4 isn’t it? (Remember: All beats are not created equal.)

9. Am I (or is my band) a foot tapper? Some performances sound like foot-tap concertos with band accompaniment. This is just a habit, and it is easy to correct, but you (and they) have to be aware of it or you cannot correct it. (Many successful teachers teach their students to tap inside the shoe, keeping the shoe on the floor. Try it, it works.)

10. Am I a singer? Now everyone agrees that singing is a great exercise for conductors and for bands. . .but NOT while you are conducting publicly.

Robert E. Foster was the director of bands at the University of Kansas from 1971 to 2002.

Mr. Foster has served on the board of directors of the National Band Association, Kansas Band Association, John Philip Sousa Foundation, College Band Directors National Association, and the American Bandmasters Association. He is past-president and former chairman of the National Band Association. He was president of the Southwest Division of the College Band Directors National Association and chairman of the 1989 North American Band Directors Coordinating Committee; he served on the selection committee of the ABA/Ostwald Composition Contest and was a member of the international jury of the Sudler International Wind Band Composition Competition. He is on the board of advisors for The Instrumentalist magazine and is the band editor for the MENC Adviser column in the Music Educators Journal. A well-known composer and author, Foster is a member of MENC, KMEA, TBA, Phi Beta Mu, Phi Mu Alpha, and an honorary member and former district governor of Kappa Kappa Psi/Tau Beta Sigma. In 1983 he was selected one of ten outstanding music educators in the nation by The School Musician magazine.

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