

# Developing Expressive Musical Leadership Through The Art of Conducting

**Michael Haithcock, TBA Featured Clinician**

*Michael Haithcock will present  
“Making Musical Decisions”  
at the TBA Convention/Clinic  
sponsored by  
Music Across Texas &  
The Foundation For Music Education.*

Today's band directors are bombarded with information pertaining to the pedagogical and management functions of running a successful band program. The proportion of the information stream makes it understandable that many lose sight of the fact that all directors function as performers (conductors) as well as administrators and teachers. The need to explore a non-verbal language of communication, allowing the body to vividly respond to the detailed expressive expectations inherent in the music, is often lost in the struggle to juggle the many pedagogical concepts necessary to be “successful”.

The frequent result of this model for success is a teacher who may have five ways to explain a single articulation concept but only one way to physically demonstrate five different articulations. Such a verbal imbalance stimulates a cycle of rote teaching and limits rehearsal exploration to rhythmic organization, basic ensemble pedagogy, and defensive error detection. While each of these components of correctness is vital, they too often become the source of musical purpose since they are objective and

provide tangible easy answers. “Is the rhythm correct?” “Is the ensemble together?” “Is it the right note?” All conductors desire the answer to these questions to be a resounding, “YES!” In objective ways, limiting gestural clarity to the basics of the beat may provide a secure level of comfort, such as a superior rating at contest, but it limits the subjective interaction vital for a truly expressive music making process which is the purpose of the ensembles inclusion in the fine arts curriculum.

In his book, *The Composer's Advocate*, Erich Leinsdorf describes this objective manner of conducting as “musical navigation” and argues it is of minimal benefit to the composer's intentions and the performers' real needs. If showing a clear ictus, well defined beat patterns, inviting cues at new entrances, releases with emphatic clarity, and general dynamic changes are not good enough to meet the performer's needs, then what does it take to be a “good” conductor? The answer can be found in striving to understand the creative balance between directing to secure an accurate perfor-

mance and conducting to encourage an inspiring level of musical expressivity. A conductor who enlightens the musicians through a physical presentation of what is to be expressed, beyond what is commonly seen through the limitations of the musical notation, adds a subjective dimension of expressive musical leadership. This enlightenment is often called interpretation and it is as necessary to the musical experience as objective accuracy in performance.

A musical leader with a fully developed interpretation of the score should also be able to communicate the nuances of what is to be heard through a compelling and expressive gestural language. To establish a framework for expanding one's capacity to communicate expressively through gesture, it might be helpful to review the following basic principles:

## **1. Contour yields contrast, which allows the communicated goal to be perceived.**

Common gestural problems are caused by trying to clarify gestures with size utilizing the shoulder more than the wrist. Size created through the resulting tension causes two

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specific communication problems: a) tension limits the availability to move and thereby reduces the clarity of the preparation, and b) this lack of clarity reduces the contour and contrast of the gestural presentation and the observer's ability to respond. The conductor should not be concerned with the amount of movement but with appropriately matching the specific expectation of what is to be heard. If everything is the same size it loses meaning and clarity.

### 2. Quality versus Quantity of motion.

The principle of "Quality of motion" refers utilizing the best possible motion to illustrate the musical expectation with a specific and detailed gesture of intention. This is in contrast to the concept of "Quantity of motion" that describes a more general movement that is less specific and detailed no matter its size. These two extremes of motion can be easily visualized by imagining two different ways of painting. First, imagine a great painter carefully detailing a beautiful landscape with a fine brush. Think about how this artist would move in relation to the canvas in front of them and how their movement would be initiated. After creating this mental image, replicate it with actual motion while thinking about the detail of each gesture. In contrast, imagine painting the same artistic vision on a canvas with a paint-roller. Observe the way the body responds to the contrasting mental images with ease in a manner that requires no instruction beyond the imagery. The body need not wield a paint-roller if the intention is to paint a beautifully detailed landscape. This response to the expectation provided by the imagery is vital to understanding the principle of quality motion and its connection to the details of the interpreted score.

### 3. Be available to move.

At first glance, this may seem like a ridiculous statement but upon further review it is a vital

component of quality motion as well as expressive contour and contrast. To illustrate this principle, engage in the following simple exercise. With your right hand by your side, imagine that you will shake someone's hand. Clench your fist as tightly as possible and move to shake hands. Does your arm feel heavy, strained, and forced, or light, relaxed, and fluid? How does added tension place limitations on the motion? Shift the tension to your elbow and shoulder while repeating the exercise. Notice the restriction caused by tension! These limitations are not caused by the intended goal but are created by the presence of tension in the process. Although avoiding tension is a simple idea it is one of the biggest challenges any conductor faces. Tension is often mistakenly associated with energy and emotion, both proven characteristics of leadership. Removing tension from the most basic of movements increases the availability of the body to move to its full expressive capacity.

### 4. Action Point.

The action point identifies the place in space where the intention of the gesture sparks action (attack) as a result of preparation. Some examples that are easy to imagine are: the stroke of a match being lit, the impact of a golf club striking the ball on a tee, or the point at which a thrown ball is released. The point in space where preparation results in action defines each of these distinctive gestures and is guided by active changing and support in the torso. Review these actions in your imagination and act each one of them out several times. Notice how your body moves as a unit through space with shape to support the desired goal and how your eyes focus on the chosen action point. The cycle of preparation that leads to action is a significant part of how any conductor communicates. The degree to which the entire body supports this cycle as illustrated by these exercises will greatly determine the success of gestural communication. Players at all

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levels of accomplishment make decisions on how and when to play between successive beat points. Action is not isolated but inclusive when it is generated with expressive preparation.

### 5. Efficient movement is initiated at the point closest to the action.

For the conductor, this is the fingertips or by extension, the tip of the baton. With baton in hand, move from stillness. What moves first? It should be the fingers. What follows? The hand, the wrist, the forearm, the upper arm, and the shoulder in sequence, depending on how much space must be covered. Does your arm feel heavy or light when this sequence is utilized? Light, from relaxed fluidity. Now repeat the motion but start the movement in reverse order by moving the shoulder first and engaging the arm towards the fingers in reverse of the natural order. Does your arm feel heavy or light? Fixed, heavy, strained, and perhaps forced, as a result of the tension caused by the unnatural order. Strike a match, swing a golf club, or throw a ball

with similar reverse order and notice how this feels. Pay attention to the manner in which the torso becomes rigid and fixed in response to the tension created by the unnatural motion

How we live, react, and move in everyday situations provides great insight into how to become an effective and expressive conductor as well as fulfilling our many administrative and pedagogical obligations. Drawing upon our daily experience and the intuitive knowledge it provides can be a gateway to communicating complex ideas through common motions that are instinctively and instantaneously understood. The gestural language necessary is not a foreign language but one spoken daily by every one. Attaching these motions to the responsibility of musical leadership is both a craft that can be learned and an art that can be developed if one accepts as their mission to provide enlightened and expressive musical leadership (interpretation, insight, and inspiration), including clear navigational information, to stimulate an artistic experience through a commonly understood but unspoken language.

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**Mr. Haithcock's sessions:**  
**Mon., July 27, 8:15 a.m.**  
**Programming - The Gateway to  
Creative Activity**

**Tues., July 28, 8:15 a.m.**  
**Score Study - The Gateway to  
Interpretation**

**Tues., July 28, 2:45 p.m.**  
**Conducting - The Gateway to  
Expression**



*Michael Haithcock assumed his duties as Director of Bands and Professor of Music (Conducting) at the University of Michigan in the fall of 2001 following twenty-three years on the faculty of Baylor University. He conducts the internationally renowned University of Michigan Symphony Band, guides the acclaimed graduate band and wind ensemble conducting program, and provides administrative leadership for all aspects of the University of Michigan's diverse and historic band program. Professor Haithcock is a leader in commissioning and premiering new works for band and has earned the praise of both composers and conductors for his innovative approaches to developing the wind ensemble repertoire. He is in constant demand as a guest conductor and as a resource person for symposiums and workshops in a variety of instructional settings. A graduate of East Carolina University, where he received the 1996 Outstanding Alumni Award from the School of Music, and Baylor University, Haithcock has completed additional study at a variety of conducting workshops including the Herbert Blomstedt Orchestral Conducting Institute.*