

# Book Review: The Learning Conductor

*Reviewed by Tobin Sparfeld, DMA, teacher and conductor*

Author Thomas Caplin is a professor and choral director in Norway. He currently conducts the Defrost Youth Choir, Lund Academic Male Choir, and is a professor in Choral Conducting and Management at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. In his book, *The Learning Conductor*, Caplin addresses many of the main aspects regarding the leadership of a choral ensemble. While he admits it is far from a complete examination of the subject, it is a broad introduction to many concepts of choral conducting.

*The Learning Conductor* was first published in 1995 and has been revised several times. This e-book is the first edition in English and was published in 2015. The book has three main sections; the first deals with the mechanics of conducting techniques, the second covers the psychology and leadership skills necessary and the third examines aspects of choral methods.

Thomas Caplin

# THE LEARNING CONDUCTOR

*A book about choral leadership*



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The section on conducting mechanics is the strongest section.

Caplin begins by describing the ideal hand position with open space between the fingers. From there, he introduces the four main beat patterns. While some conducting textbooks begin with duple metre, Caplin starts with the one-beat pattern, describing the sensation as if bouncing a ball on the ground. Several musical examples are included along with written descriptions about specific feelings and characteristics. The text discusses four different dimensions experienced while conducting—gravity, time/timing, ‘flow’ (horizontal motion of the beat pattern), and space. A mantra repeated throughout the text is: “What you do is what you get!”, a phrase similar to Rod Eichenberger’s “What they see is what you get.”




**Exercise**


Conduct a 1-beat figure while singing notes of different lengths on a single syllable (e.g. “la”) – a semibreve for the first beat, minima for the second beat, crotchets for the third, and so on.

An *exercise*, beat 4 is a 1-beat figure with your conducting hand alternating between a “light” and “heavy” beat. “Heavy” is the feeling you would have if conducting underneath, or the feeling that the air is moving resistance on your hands. Maintain the same pulse all the time (alternate between one light and one heavy beat).

**Simultaneous exercises:** Set up a chain. Make circles in air with one hand (yellow hand). At the same time make a figure of eight with the same leg (e.g. right hand – spring; left hand – forward).

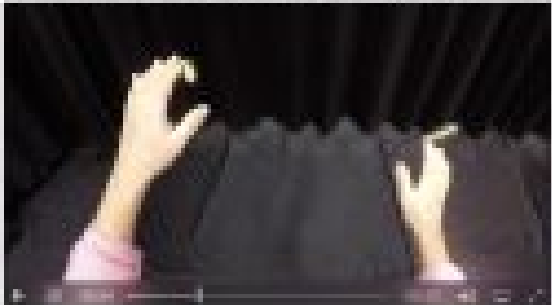
Maintain the circular figure in one hand and make figures of eight with the opposite leg – is this easier or harder? Why is that, do you think?

This exercise offers tempo, but difficult parts! If you can additionally move your other leg up and down without making circles or figures of eight, then you have three active parts. Remember to be aware of the feeling of simultaneously shifting your mental focus from one part to another and all three together. Perfect this exercise! You can also begin singing a song on a fourth part, so long as you do not forget what is how you are singing.




**Simultaneous exercises:**

Beat 4 with your conducting hand. Make two parts together with your other hand – first and third beats. “Forward” your hand when it leads, and follow the pattern of a single stroke/beat – straight up and down.



Now you should be to conduct the “Minute-Quintet” by Beethoven the same way – forward in your right hand and back in your left.

**Polyphonic:** Beat 4 with both hands. Sing square and crotchet notes on a single syllable (“la”). (See square figures and one crotchet triplet per beat).



Beats are added to each gesture to create duple, triple, and quadruple meter patterns. Five and six-beat patterns are introduced, while larger compound metres and subdivisions are briefly mentioned. Illustrations and videos are provided in the e-book.

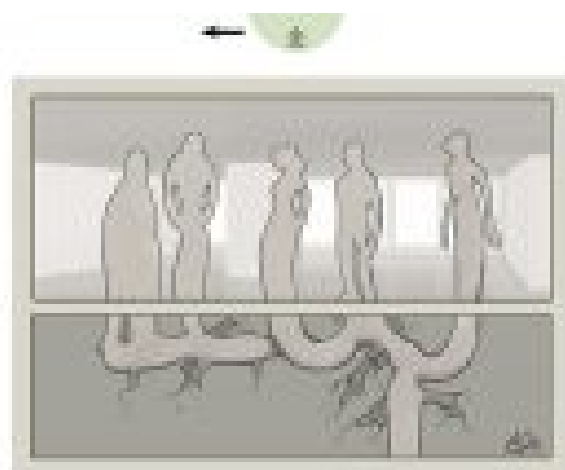
Caplin then reviews preparatory beats, cut-offs/releases, and the various ways to conduct fermatas (with/without cut-offs, pauses, etc.). While these are touched on, novice conductors may have difficulty learning how to conduct these more advanced gestures from the book alone. The section concludes analysing the causes of a common malady he refers to as "jigging," where the conductor jerks away from the beat instead of down into the ictus (as if touching a hot stove for each beat).

The second section begins on page 135 and focuses on the psychology of choral conductors and singers. Caplin believes that conductors should empower singers and give them greater responsibility by delegating some of the conductor's roles to the singers, the choir's board (if one exists), and by having conversations with the singers about group goals and objectives. Caplin writes that "[m]usic is all about humanity—where the conductor learns to lead the whole person behind the voice." The following chapters on the Learning Choir, written by Stig Eriksen, consider the mental aspects of conducting, including the importance of kinaesthetic learning, gesture, and overall mindfulness in teaching. While containing well-researched information, it concludes without providing much applicable benefit to the choral conductor.

The third section contains elements traditionally grouped together as choral methods. The rehearsal methodology chapter gives basic tips on how to structure a rehearsal and how to rehearse individual parts while engaging the other singers. Piano playing of vocal parts is given significant attention, as well as warm-ups (though there are no specific warm-ups provided) and the use of amplified sound. Caplin makes a good distinction that when singing with a microphone, singers must learn to focus their auditory perception towards the sound coming out of the loudspeaker, not their own immediate sound.

The textbook also briefly comments on the appreciation of music, fidelity to the score, a brief look at some of the

modern techniques of contemporary choral music, and a sizeable section on the arrangement of sections within the choral ensemble. The closing chapters address the perception of choral sound, the importance of partnership in choral music (written by Peder Karlsson), choral intonation, and Latin pronunciation.



## The power of the singers' invisible intranet

In a smaller choir – or vocal group – the “intranet” is of significant importance, as the individual singer can’t “hide” behind the choral effect, both with regards to listening, intonation, sound and musical expression. Discovering and exploring the “intranet” and how the individual singer is constantly established and equally inseparably influences his surroundings, is a task highly interesting and important! It’s a matter of conscious or subconscious co-listening – where the singer’s personal values, competences and experiences – put together creates the co-singers around him. The co-listening’s importance is a choice to neglect rather than what has previously been documented.

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## Exercise – projected listening, use of lead

The word of “neutral” and relatively non-projected listening you often find in a more classical choral setting, would not work within smaller ensembles, and particularly not when using microphones. Leadership must be clearly defined, even though a smaller ensemble normally has a more flat governing situation than in a bigger choir setting.

In this exercise the ensemble should appear one of the singers taking the “lead” and he or she should lead with the aid of his modelled breathing, body language, mimic and mouth positioning, thus creating homogeneity in breathing, intonation, sound, phrasing and expression. The others in the group now give their full personal attention and takes after him/her in anything/s/he does. The effect of this is surprisingly big and can quite immediately solve those normal challenges in a small ensemble. How big this effect is can be explored by simply changing the “lead” person.

In a more classical choir the form of “lead” thinking is an existing way of thinking. Naturally you would of course at the point of departure have a pre-defined lead in the conductor constituting the conditioning authority. It is also here the singer naturally relates to what the conductor explicitly communicates, musically and on a human level, and where the individual singer becomes a limited and explicit part of the choir’s total expression – a part of the total choral effect! Thus, there is a risk that the singer’s own personal baggage of competences, experience and values can easily be forgotten in the big picture – it never becomes explicit.

In a group using microphones all these competences/blocks of competences, experiences and attitudes of values for amplified and made very explicit – what you are and what you do – what you want! Even as a singer!

In order to find out how big this influence from one singer really is on his fellow singers, you may make one of the singers a lead. Place him or her in front of the co-singers and ask him to lead a passage on the music. All perception must now be focused on this lead singer – trying to capture everything his does, his movement, breathing and facial expression. The lead singer may change whatever he feels like changing – e.g. dynamics, phrasing, type of breath intakes – deep, shallow – non dynamic sound, vibrato – pop – nasal – many etc. – You will quickly register how immediately the co-singers pick up and

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At nearly 320 pages, *The Learning Conductor* is not a short book. However, because it tackles so many topics in a brief fashion, it feels much shorter. The writing is concise and clear, which is especially important when describing the motions and sensations of conducting. However, there could be more illustrations of correct posture and movement for conductors and the beat pattern illustrations are more angular than most choral conductors would typically employ. Several subjects are lacking, including score study, repertoire selection, rehearsal pedagogy, diction and the more advanced conducting gesture areas that include prep beats and

subdivisions. Also, there is nothing regarding vocal pedagogy or any details regarding the voice.

*The Learning Conductor* is ideally suited to beginning choral conductors or those with limited experience, especially those who are already singers (and who have previous knowledge of vocal training). With its discussion of piano playing and microphone use and less attention given to score study/repertoire, the book is also more geared towards community choirs rather than academic or church choir settings. Caplin encourages more experienced conductors to begin at the end of the book and work their way to the start, thus getting to the most original sections first. While it can function as a choral conducting textbook for an overview academic course, institutions that divide the conducting and choral methods components will most likely prefer books which are more thorough, regarding either area. *The Learning Conductor* lacks a “textbook feel” due to it not containing exercises, review questions, and fewer illustrations.



Thomas Caplin

Caplin draws on his experience to share his best insights with readers, and uses his words efficiently. While there are many books on conducting gesture out there, this is currently one

of the few e-books on choral conducting, making it an attractive digital resource for modern conductors. While not complete, this broad overview of conducting is one that is worthy to be considered.



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