

# Conducting the Score – Part One: The Drama of Conducting

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When we think of a staged drama, whether a play, opera, or musical, certain elements come to mind. Actors, stage, curtains, script, director – all are familiar in a list of dramatic terminology.

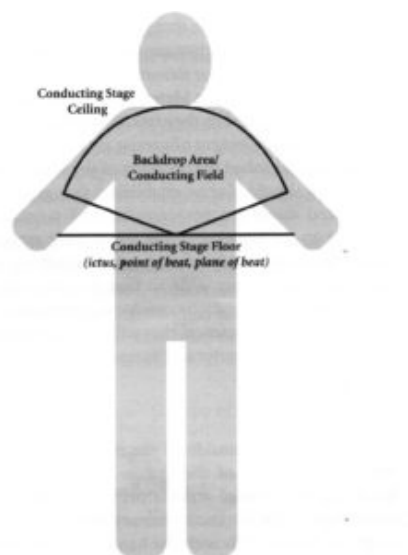
More specifically, if we think of a stage, we think of stage directions such as up stage, down stage, stage left, and stage right. We think of off-stage areas such as the wings and the orchestra pit. Furthermore, we think of actors working against a backdrop, using and interpreting a script, and presenting the results to an audience.

Many of these elements also apply to the conductor, who works on a virtual stage and can use the dramatic stage as an excellent frame of understanding for studying the gestural language of the conducting art.

Consider the dramatic gestural arenas of the conductor. The conductor's arms, hands, fingers, head, face and, indeed, the conductor's own body "act" with beat patterns and gestures of musicality. All are placed against a backdrop of the trunk of the body. Further, these elements are presented on an imaginary stage, variously described as the *plane of beat*, *point of beat*, and *ictus*. Each refers to the imaginary stage floor that serves as a platform for the gestures of the conductor as he or she silently works out the musical script of the score on this dramatic stage.

The conductor's body backdrop as well as the actors on the stage – the arms, hands, fingers, head, face, and entire body – each have subtle features and rules of operation and

perception that add precision to the drama of gestural language in very specific ways. Understanding these rules and practicing toward a precise conducting technique will improve the nonverbal communication that is an absolute must for the effective conductor.



Illustrated definition  
of 'Body Actors'

## Body Actors Used in Precision Conducting

The arm, as used in precision conducting, divides into upper arm, lower arm, elbow, hand, palm, and fingers. Each division has a place in the lexicon of dramatic gestural language.

The conductor's head, when used as a gestural tool, as well as the specific features of the face, all signal dramatic interpretive gestures. The forehead, eyebrows, and most effectively, one's eyes and mouth are strong tools to be used by the effective conductor.

The trunk of the body serves as the backdrop to conducting drama, but it also turns and adjusts in other ways to enhance the conductor's communication. The shoulders, overall posture, and general stance of the conductor, as individual elements and in combination, reflect a leadership attitude and send important signals to your musicians.

## The Arms

The arms are the most visually prominent actors on the conducting stage. As such, they perform a significant primary function in the skill of conducting—indicating tempo and meter. In one way or another, many of the great composers, conductors, and performers have commented that if tempo is wrong in a musical work, everything will be wrong. If the conductor does not signal the correct tempo, there is no standard for the musicians to follow.

Conductors fear having their principal function reduced to merely marking time; a glorified metronome, if you will. This is not necessarily a pejorative role for the arms to play.

All of the prompting that must occur for effective conducting must occur within the framework of meter and tempo. Only the conductor signals precisely the changes that are to come from measure to measure. Although it is fair to assume that performers are counting and listening for cues, they cannot know precisely the length of an *allargando* or *fermata*. That is the job of the conductor. Therefore, the meter/tempo function of the conductor, as signaled by the arms, should be established as a fundamental element of precise gestural language.

Having established the necessity of the meter/tempo function, it should also be established that gestures for tempo and meter are not necessarily of primary importance to the learning of the conducting repertoire. Therefore, as the study of arm gestures begins, meter and tempo will be set aside so that an understanding of the drama of the various conducting gestures can be considered. Like all musical characteristics central to effective conducting, meter and tempo will be introduced in time.

## The Hands

If the arms are considered the most significant “actors” in

the action of the drama of conducting, the hands are the detailed articulators for the drama. The hands bring a finely tuned accuracy to the visual focus of the performer. It is with the hands that the detail of the cutoff is executed, that interpretive musical characteristics in the initial preparation are signaled, and that various nuances and shadings are gestured throughout the performance.

Although a metronome can provide the basics of meter and tempo, there is no substitute for the role of musical leadership that one can achieve through the area of interpretation. The hands are the key to the subtleties needed to signal these interpretive gestures.

Because the hands are an extension of the arms, they will naturally perform in the meter/tempo function. Conversely, the arms are not disconnected from the interpretive function. The same may be said for the face, shoulders, and entire body backdrop. All of these actors work in coordination with each other toward the final drama of performance.

## **The Body Backdrop**

In a conventional drama, action takes place before a backdrop that helps focus the attention of those watching the drama. In conducting, this function is served by the area of the body from the shoulders to the waistline. This area, more commonly called the trunk of the body, provides the neutral environment and focus necessary for the arms and hands to act out their conducting drama.

The purpose of the neutral environment on which the gestures are acted out is to bring clarity and focus to that which is being communicated by the hands and arms. The face is included in this backdrop, and can be utilized very effectively in the drama of gestural language.

Returning to the analogy of the stage, the acting does not take place off stage in areas such as the wings or the

orchestral pit. For focus and therefore effectiveness, the acting takes place on stage. In fact, terms such as center stage, stage left, and stage right all refer to specific locations on stage where the central acting takes place. These specific geographical areas are used for maximum effectiveness in the course of a drama.

The stage analogy is quite appropriate for precision conducting. To achieve maximum visual effectiveness, the drama of gestural conducting is played out on stage. Gestures that are made without the benefit of the body backdrop lose focus for the performers.

In the broadest terms, strong and effective conducting takes place against the backdrop of a neutral body trunk. Weak and ineffective conducting takes place off this visual plane. Conductors that recognize the effectiveness of centered conducting and practice such conducting are more precise conductors.

## **The Lower Body**

The drama of gestural conducting is acted out on a stage, not below the stage. For the very practical reason that the dramatic action cannot be observed when the gestures occur below the waist, conducting is gestured at and above the waistline. This imaginary line forms the stage = floor level. Conventionally, this stage level has been termed the *point of beat*, *plane of beat*, or *ictus point*.

The lower body provides obvious support for the arms, hands, shoulders, and body backdrop. Along with the position of the back, shoulders and head, the lower body provides foundation for the conductor's overall posture. The ideal position for the lower body is for one foot to be placed slightly in front of the other as if walking, with the weight of the body distributed on both legs. This posture is the most comfortable conducting position, and it is also a more aggressive posture,

conveying leadership and control to the performing ensemble. Such posture enhances the visual leadership role of the conductor. Above all, find balance, buoyancy and comfort in your role as conductor/leader.

## **The Head and Face**

Although the head has no backdrop, it is a feature of general focus for performers because of the prominent facial “actors”. Also, because we generally focus eye to eye when we communicate verbally, the face is naturally a strong dramatic center. Within this area, the conductor’s eyes are the most effective tool in the gestural language. They can be used to support entrances, preparations, and to interpret aspects of the music. Perhaps their most effective use is to signal cues to specific sections or soloists. The combination of eye contact to a cued section of a performing group along with a gesture from the arms and hands is extremely effective for entrances. The eyes can also affirm that a specific signal will be delivered to the appropriate soloist or section.

Facial gestures can enhance the conducting gestures of the arms and hands, or they can remain neutral. It is even possible for them to detract from the gestural drama being acted out on the conductor’s stage against the body backdrop. Be careful not to react in a negative way with your face. This distraction can preoccupy your ensemble’s attention.

## **Three Functions of Conducting**

The body actors used to execute precision conducting convey, in a nonverbal manner, the three functions found in the discipline of gestural conducting:

1. meter/tempo
2. interpretive
3. start/entrance – stop/cutoff

Each function is critically important for communicating

precise conducting gestures to players and singers, and defines the role of the arms, the principal actors on the conductor's stage, as well as the hands and other body actors.

While the stereotype – even the cartoon image – of the conductor has his or her arms flapping in conducting patterns (the meter/tempo function), the true artist-conductor emerges as a result of exceptional gifts in the interpretive function of conducting.

## **The Meter/Tempo Function – An Overview**

By definition, music is sound organized in time. Although the organization of music has changed over the centuries, it has always relied on the meter and tempo inherent in all music.

Early music was metered by note values as they related to rhythmic modes. Common practice and oral tradition, as well as verbal indications in the score, determined tempo as did theoretical treatises, which chronicled performance practices through the ages.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, meter and tempo indications were clearly written in the musical score. This practice of organizing the musical score with measures and bar lines continued through the Classical and Romantic periods and much of the twentieth century.

Traditionally, meters are straightforward and can be categorized as either duple (twos) or triple (threes) and simple or compound (which are derived from simple meters by multiplying them by 3). The tempo and meter designations also commonly apply to large sections, even movements, of a work. It is, however, the nature of composition to use meter and tempo to add variety, so changes are always possible at any moment and should always be anticipated. Furthermore, twentieth-century music has brought us irregular meters as well as the frequent mixing of meters (called *multimeter*).

Specific meter classifications are outlined below:

- Duple meters – groups of two and multiples of two.
  - simple – 2/2, 2/4, 2/8
  - compound – 6/2, 6/4, 6/8
- Triple meters – groups of three and multiples of three.
  - simple – 3/2, 3/4, 3/8
  - compound-9/4, 9/8
- Quadruple meters – groups of four and multiples of four (which are sometimes included with duple meters).
  - simple – 4/2, 4/4, 4/8
  - compound-12/2, 12/4, 12/8, 12/16
- Irregular meters – Those not evenly divisible into groups of 2s or 3s. Examples include 5/4, 5/8 and 7/8. These meters are normally treated as some combination of 2s and 3s. For example 5/4 = 2/4+3/4 or 3/4+2/4; 7/8 = 2/8+3/8+2/8 or 3/8+2/8+2/8, etc.

Other elements that impact the meter/tempo function are those that suspend time in a composition, including the *fermata* (or hold), *tenuto* and *allargando*. Although the handling of these elements is an interpretive matter, accomplishing them technically is considered part of the meter/tempo function.

### *Right and Left Arms*

Tradition asserts that the right arm is used to signal the meter/tempo function, leaving the left arm for the interpretive functions, including phrasing, dynamics, dynamic shadings, and sustaining gestures.

This is not to suggest that the arms function separately from one another. Rather, the conductor must develop the ability to coordinate all of the functions of conducting between arms, hands, fingers, head, face, and body. Furthermore, every aspect of the interpretive function must exist within the gestures used in the meter/tempo function. For example, a four-beat pattern is conducted within the framework of



*staccato*, *legato*, etc; dynamic shadings are indicated in the size of the meter/tempo gesture, as well as through the gestures of the non-meter/tempo arm.

## **The Interpretive Function—An Overview**

Music is an audible expression of a composer's emotions and thoughts organized into musical sounds. While these organized sounds are incapable of conveying concrete meaning, they are nevertheless expressive. It is the task of the conductor to accurately interpret and convey to an audience the musical intentions of the composer to the best of his or her ability. This calls on the conductor to attempt to enter the mind of the composer, the spirit of the text, or the message of the music.

Accomplishing this task encompasses every aspect of the musical score: meter, tempo, dynamics, phrasing, character, and so on. It includes everything from solo lines to full-ensemble passages. Every dimension of the score is under the scrutiny and interpretation of the conductor. And while the challenge of meter and tempo is no small task, it is not nearly the challenge that the emotional elements of dynamics, phrasing and other interpretive characteristics present.

The indications given in the musical score provide some assistance to the conductor, but not only are they absent at times, there is a great deal in the music that is not indicated. Therefore, it is the task of the conductor to interpret the information that is available and put it towards an accurate performance. This is an enormous task and leadership responsibility.

The interpretive function includes a long list of musical considerations, as illustrated by this list of just some of the interpretive challenges placed upon the conductor: *forte*, *piano*, *mezzo piano*, *accelerando*, *sforzando*, *ritardando*, *legato*, *marcato*, *staccato*, and *tenuto*. Notice that meter/tempo

terms such as *accelerando* and *ritardando* are included, as they are subject to the interpretive function of conducting as well. Also, terms such as *con fuoco*, *passione* and *giocosso* call upon a conductor's interpretive skills.

The left arm is responsible for the interpretive function of conducting. However, the right arm, face, hands and all of the gestural tools of conducting help reflect the interpretive character of music. Even the meter/tempo function operates with sensitivity toward the interpretation of the musical score.

In general, the interpretive function is conveyed through degrees of *legato* and *non-legato* gestures—*molto legato*, *legato*, *marcato*, *accented*, *staccato* (to name a few). These are designated by horizontal and vertical lines or organized by circles, arcs, angles, and stops, and set apart by the unique characteristics of a conductor's individual style.

## **The Start/Entrance – Stop/Cutoff Function – An Overview**

Starting and stopping a piece of music can be taken for granted by some, but no conductor can afford to take this function lightly. It is a short moment, to be sure, but it is a critical moment. While music notation seems to clearly designate issues such as entrances and exits, there is still room for disagreement. The performing forces depend upon the conductor for precise entrances and cutoffs, and it is the role of the conductor to provide such clarity for the ensemble.

The cue for starting a musical work may seem as simple as lifting the hand or baton. However, the preparation gesture must firmly establish interpretive elements such as meter and tempo, and the character of the very first note. These issues must be firmly settled in the mind of the conductor before the first beat's preparation is signaled.

A similar responsibility is that of starting individual soloists and sections of musicians through cueing. Even virtuoso musicians depend on the conductor to confirm entrances because it helps to guarantee a precise and inspired performance.

Stopping a musical work may seem as easy as ceasing all conducting gestures, but unless the desired concluding moment is clearly gestured to all performers, a precise cutoff will not be accomplished. The same is true for any internal stops.

The hands are the most precise tool for the start/entrance and stop/cutoff function, but it can be signaled by any of the gestural tools at the command of the conductor. In particular, facial features can be great reinforcement and should be used intentionally to strengthen these gestures.

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