REVITALIZING YOUR CONDUCTING GESTURES

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WHAT IS CONDUCTING?

› Conducting is more than just keeping the beat; it is an expression of music that uses the whole body.
› We affect our singers in many different ways as conductors or music leaders, from giving our singers musical signals (such as dynamics, or how many beats in the bar) to other non-verbal gestures such as breathing and emotional expression.
• All of these affects are achieved through a mirroring of our own movements and body language as a conductor.
  • When we breathe, our singers breathe with us.
  • When we smile, they smile back.
  • When we stand well, so do our singers.

STUDY OF CONDUCTING

› Hard work and preparation to become a skillful conductor—a master interpreter of music;
› Studying conducting and how to communicate results in a more sensitive and responsive ensemble member.

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CONDUCTOR

› Demonstrate musical competency;
› Demonstrate leadership in group dynamics;
› Effective communicator;
• Feelings of insecurity often inhibit initial attempts at expression—natural;
• “Let your butterflies fly in formation.”
• Most have been ensemble members and not leaders—takes time;
• Use “butterfly” feeling as one of excitement and let it motivate you to perform better (Adrenaline can work for you.);
› Demonstrate competence as educators;
• Rehearsing involves teaching;
› Demonstrate organizational skills;
› Must LOVE music!

Great music is born in the heart and from the heart it must flow.

PROPER MUSIC STAND POSITION

› Unlike when one is singing or playing an instrument, the top of the stand should lay flat, rather than angling upward away from the body. (Stand or podium is often referred to as the conductor’s “desk.”)
› The top of the stand should sit at about navel level—no lower than the waist, but not higher than the elbows when the arms hang at your sides.
› Some conductor’s prefer to turn the stand so that the lip is at the back, away from, rather than close to the body.
• This positioning of the stand allows the music to be high enough to see without obstructing movement of the arms, and maximizes visibility to both singers and instrumentalists, who are often seated.

POSTURE & PHYSICAL STANCE

› Feet
• Six inches apart, toes pointing forward;
• Left foot slightly ahead of right;
• Keep you from swaying;
• Balances an extended right arm/hand;
• Weight slightly forward, equally distributed;
• Do not be afraid to move the feet to turn to face a particular section of the choir.
› Knees
• Relax knees slightly;
• Do not pulse the beat with either knee or toe.
› Hips
• Tucked under; buttocks in;
• Place hands over the hipbones with thumbs forward; rotate hips slightly under by tucking buttocks in—straightens spine
› Spine
• Stretched

Role Model for Singers
Appearance of Authority
**Role Model for Singers**

- **Appearance of Authority**

  - **Chest**
    - Elevated; lifted;
    - Raise sternum;
    - Hands over head, lower arms to shoulders, roll thumbs back;
  - **Shoulders**
    - Back, down and relaxed.

  - **Head**
    - Elevated;
    - Chin on a shelf;
    - Do NOT conduct with head;
    - Score in head, NOT head in score.
  - **Face**
    - Vitaly important part of leadership and musical interpretation;
    - Eye contact;
    - DO NOT mouth the words or sing when conducting. Hard habit to break!

**Right Arm & Hand Position**

  - **Shoulder**
    - Major pivotal point for the movement of the arm;
    - Upper arm extends outward and slightly forward;
    - Shake hands position;
  - **Elbow**
    - Lifted to four or five on clock;
    - Elbow joint must be free of tension;
    - Forearm is parallel to the floor on the horizontal plane.
  - **Wrist**
    - Important in establishing the precision of the ictus;
    - Not rigid but firm for marcato-style technique;
    - Flexible but never floppy.
  - **Hand**
    - Natural extension of the arm, one unit with the arm.
    - Palm should usually face downward.
    - Thumb rests at the side of the hand against the first finger.
    - The hand should not rotate so that the thumb moves up or down.

**Vertical & Horizontal Plane**

  - **Vertical Plane**
    - An imaginary line extending from top to bottom directly in front of the right shoulder;
    - Extends in front of the shoulder at a comfortable distance;
    - Extends forward about a foot and from side to side in front of the torso.

  - **Horizontal Plane**
    - Parallel to the floor at the “breath belt”.
      - Where the vertical and horizontal planes intersect is the point of the downbeat ictus.

**Parts of the Beat**

  - **Preparation**
    - Initial gesture before the beat;

  - **Ictus**
    - Exact moment the beat occurs;

  - **Rebound**
    - The point at which the hand rebounds from the horizontal plane;
      - The rebound should never be more than half of the beat.

**Experience the Beat**

  - **“Touching-Springing” action**;
    - Wrist must spring slightly before the upward movement of the hand.
    - Yo-Yo or basketball.

  - Keep hand moving constantly.

  - Pretend arm is heavy or hold a weight in hand and beat will have more of the “heft” and “bounce”.

**Drill**

  - Flatten top of music stand and adjust to your horizontal plane;
  - Place hand at intersection of vertical/horizontal planes;
  - Tap lightly on the top of the music stand for each ictus.
**Mental Preparation**

- Four messages:
  - Dynamic level
  - Tempo
  - Articulation style
  - Preparatory ictus
  - Downbeat ictus

  *Time between the preparatory ictus and the downbeat ictus sets the tempo.*

- Mentally determine the tempo, dynamic level, and articulation before the gesture is given.
  - Don’t be in a hurry.

**Preparatory Gesture**

- Starting the sound: “Set”:
  - Appropriate conductor’s alignment
  - No motion, begin from a stable point
  - For the prep to have meaning, it must have stillness first
  - Raise the arm/hand and head simultaneously
  - Scan the group for readiness; and
  - Maintain eye contact throughout the preparatory gesture and downbeat.

- Preparation Gesture:
  - Rhythmic breathing motion:
    - Breathe with the preparatory gesture for all groups, even those that do not use breath energy to produce the tone
    - Do not breathe through the nose, drop the jaw visibly and silently
  - Begin the preparatory gesture with a downward movement at the speed of the initial tempo
  - The shape of this downward movement should correspond to the desired articulation
  - Indicate the preparatory ictus on the horizontal plane with a rhythmic pulse of the wrist/hand and rebound to the top of the vertical plane (same height as the prep gesture began)
  - Complete prep gesture with a downward stroke on the vertical plane to the horizontal plane, which is the point of the downbeat ictus.

**Preparatory Gesture & Downbeat**

- Start at and return to the plane:
  - Each ictus on the same plane

  ![Diagram](image)

- Drill:
  - Set the tempo and the preparatory gesture should be given in time
  - Vary dynamic level
  - Variation: tap the stand on the ictus

**Common Problems**

- Not breathing; noisy breath
- Looking down
- Going “through” the plane
- Stopping on the plane
- Too many preparatory beats
  - Do not prep the prep
  - Unclear speed in preparatory beat
  - Poor conductor alignment

**Standard Metric Patterns**

- Basic Metric Patterns:
  1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, etc.

- Asymmetrical Patterns:
  5, 7, 9, 10, 11, etc.

- Mixed Meter

- Subdivided Patterns

**Basic Patterns**

![Pattern Chart](image)
Distinguish between “beat” and “ictus”
- **Beat** is the space between the ictus.
- Clarity is important so simplify the pattern
- Crescendos/decrecendos, etc. happen between icti.

Eliminate extraneous “stuff”
- Wrist vs. elbow vs. shoulder
- Stabilize elbows, fulcrum/hinge
- Use corner of music stand
- Stabilize wrist, hand position
- Use large spoon

Maintain a constant speed through the beat
All beats should bounce at the same level
Glide beat for long notes
Be aware of the relationship of duration and space

**Patterns—Guidelines**

**Horizontal Plane & Beat Spacing**
- Adjust the height of an ironing board or music stand to reflect the appropriate horizontal & vertical planes for you.
- Practice beat pattern spacing by placing paper dots at the desired spots and ‘tap’ (marcato) or ‘scuff’ (legato).
**Conducting Plane & Beat Spacing**

- Adjust the height of the piano bench to reflect the appropriate horizontal & vertical planes for you.
- Play a C major triad beginning at middle C on beat 1, the C below middle C for beat 2, the C above middle C for beat 3, and back to middle C for beat 4. Use the thumb for C and fingers three and five for E and G respectively.

**Final Release or 'Cut Off’**

- Raise hand and tap another beat followed by a small rebound. **Always release with breath.**
- Higher than the general beating plane or it may be misinterpreted as another beat.
- Rebound is smaller because nothing follows it.
- **Avoid excessive and flowery motions:**
  - Curlicues and pinching one’s fingers together are the two most noticeable examples.

**Final Release**

Stopping the Sound

**Pattern Articulation**

- **Legato:**
  - Curviness of rebound; rounded rebound motions; pull flat for placid sound;
  - Uninterrupted flow of movement
- **Marcato:**
  - Angularity of rebound; deep angular rebound motions that move in decisive, accented fashion; almost no wrist action, wrist and arm become unified, momentary stop of the rebound action between beats.
  - Uninterrupted flow of movement: suspension
  - Yo-yo, bouncing ball, rubber bands around leg/knee
- **Staccato:**
  - Angular rebound motions; checkmark fashion;
  - Soft music: the motion comes from a wrist action that springs or snaps on the ictus;
  - Loud music: the wrist gesture must be combined with a greater use of the forearm.
The downbeat is followed by a touch—slight bounce on the beat division with the rebound becoming the prep into the next down beat.
**Beat Pattern**

Dynamics = size of beat pattern

Crescendos/decrescendos, etc. happen between the icti.

It isn’t necessary to beat through long notes if there isn’t any musical movement in other voice or instrumental parts.

Use a sustained gesture or melded gesture to guide the choir through the rhythmic motion of the musical line.
ANACRUSIS
Complete Beat

BEAT PATTERN—DOWNBEAT ANACRUSIS

BEAT PATTERN—DOWNBEAT ANACRUSIS

BEAT PATTERN—DOWNBEAT ANACRUSIS

ANACRUSIS
Incomplete Beat
Adjust patterns to reflect unaccented syllables and/or beats; Negate beat.
**Patterns—Divided Beat**

- **Θ** = letus (downbeat)
- **Δ** = beat division

The downbeat rebounds into a touch (slight bounce) on the beat division; the division rebound becomes the prep into the next downbeat.

**One Pattern—Divided Beat**

**Two Pattern—Divided Beat**

**Three Pattern—Divided Beat**

**Four Pattern—Divided Beat**

**Divided Beat: Faure Requiem, Introit**
**LEFT HAND**  
Position and Function

- Resting down at side when only the right hand is needed;
- Resting a little above the waist (close to the body) when it is not being used but will be used shortly;
- Extending into the conducting area to indicate “attention,” to mirror, or to show dynamic levels;
- Extending beyond the normal conducting area for releases and cues.

**LEFT HAND FUNCTION**

- Indicate Internal Releases;
- Indicate Dynamic Levels;
- Show Crescendo and Decrescendo;
- Indicate Articulation (Accents, etc.)
- Sustaining Gestures for Musical Phrasing:
  - Forward Sweep,
  - Horizontal Sweep.
- Cues
- Mirror Patterns: Hands Must Never Cross
  - Reserve for musical or geographical (large ensemble) reasons;
  - May pass pattern between hands if something musically is happening exclusively on the left side of ensemble and needs special attention.

**INTERNAL RELEASES—LEFT HAND**

- “Set”
- Preparation
- Moving out of the plane
  - Example: Internal release on 3: LH at attention, hold beat 1 & 2 prep, touch on 3 (breathe on release). Your release is your prep for beat 4.
  - Final cutoff/release: prep is the “hand” of the three; lifts from the horizontal plane but immediately begins a counterclockwise movement and finishes parallel to the horizontal plane: should end straight out; brief pause before hand is lowered.
  - Setting up expectation in the ensemble
  - After stopping the sound;
  - “Cut off” vs. “Release”

**INTERNAL RELEASES—BOTH HANDS**

- LH and RH releases:
  - Bring RH into background to bring attention to LH.
- Some common problems:
  - LH isn’t “set”;
  - No eye contact;
  - Looking down;
  - Unclear preparation;
  - Stopping at the point of release.

Only do what is absolutely necessary:  
Keep it simple and clear!

**LEFT HAND—DYNAMIC LEVELS**

- Palm down for soft:
  - parallel to the floor for PP;
  - 45 degree angle for P; almost vertical and palm more open for MP.
- Palm up for loud:
  - parallel to the floor for MF;
  - 45 degree angle for F;
  - almost vertical and palm more open for FF.

(Remember size of RH beat must also change.)
Show Crescendo and Decrescendo
- Palm upward/downward and rising to indicate a crescendo;
- Remember to keep arm slightly bent at peak of gesture & elbow tucked in;
- Raise to app. eye level;
- Long crescendo: raise left arm/hand for the first part, stop the gesture midpoint while RH continues to enlarge the pattern, then raise LH again to complete the crescendo gesture;
- Palm downward and lowering to indicate a decrescendo;
- Begin at eye level and arm extended forward;
- Gradually lower and pull back the LH to the horizontal plane.

Drill #1:
- Hold left palm upward and outward on horizontal plane for four counts; raise arm/hand on four counts (cresc.); hold peak for four counts; turn hand over on the “and” of beat four and lower it four counts (decresc.); hold in piano position two counts and turn hand over on the “and” of beat two, hold for beats three and four, and begin the cresc./decresc. pattern again. Practice first with only the LH and then add the RH.

Drill #2:
- Practice a longer crescendo with both hands. Raise LH four count and stop at midpoint while RH enlarges the four pattern. Continue to raise the LH four counts to the peak.
**All My Trials, arr. McNeil, Gentry**

**Faure Requiem, “Agnus Dei”, Tenor**

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**Sustaining Gestures for Phrasing**

**Forward Sweep**

**Horizontal Sweep**

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**Sustaining Gestures**

**Musical Phrasing**

- Horizontal Sweep used for legato phrasing (Middle Position/Sweep to Left)
  - Left arm is extended in front of the body with the hand open and thumb up (handshake style). Arm/hand sweeps right to left as if pulling through a heavy liquid. The greater the feeling of resistance in the flow of the gesture, the greater the communication of a sustained legato.
- Forward Sweep used to indicate continuous phrasing unbroken by a breath.
  - Left arm in handshake style sweep slowly forward and gives a little push at the point where the phrase is not to be broken with a breath.

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**Phrasing: Forward Sweep**

- Place a slight emphasis on the unaccented beat by using a forward sweep conducting gesture or “Hand the Gift”, “Hurl the Hog” motion with the singers. Add appropriate dynamics.

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**Phrasing: How Can I Keep From Singing**

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CUES

Purpose:
- Help performer feel the moment of entrance a shade more precisely;
- Increases performers confidence;
- Shows that the part is important.

Performer must be ready to come in with or without a cue.

CUES—PROCESS

- “Set”
  - Cues must be prepared and put in motion on the pulse preceding the entrance of sound.

- Preparation
  - Usually you take a breath as you give the “prep” for a cue (not always).

- Move slightly out of the plane;
- After the initiation of the sound;
  - Forward motion; slight rebound.

CUES—GUIDELINES

- Cues must be in tempo, character, and dynamic of the entrance sound.
- Eye contact is essential! Look at the person or section being cued.
- Cue difficult entrances or parts that have been counting bars for extended periods of time.
- Don’t cue across your body. Use the appropriate hand.
- Don’t cue when entrances come thick and fast—simply give a clear beat pattern;
  - Cue musically important entrances—not everything in the score.
- Cue directly in front of you for scrambled seating.

CUES—DRILLS

- Drill:
  - Conduct a 4 pattern and give a cue on beat one of every measure. Repeat and give cue on beat two. Repeat and give cue on three, etc. Repeat and give cue on every other beat (1 & 3, 2 & 4).
  - Use dynamic changes only after cue motions feel secure.

- Drill Variation:
  - Use a 3 pattern and give a cue on beat one; beat two, beat three, beats 1 & 3, beats 2 & 3, beats 1 & 3.
  - Use dynamic changes only after cue motions feel secure.

CUES—EXERCISES

Cues—Bop Game
The phrase rather than the time signature dictates the conducting pattern.
Fermata

Three Types
Long Break
Short Break
No Break

Fermata: Long Break

- Musical indicator:
  - caesura or rest after fermata;
  - Stop on fermata;
  - Use final release gesture and stop;
  - Give new prep for music to continue.

**NOTE**
Prep for music to continue must be in tempo.

Fermata: Short Break

- Musical indicator:
  - () breath mark;
  - Release is prep;
  - Stop on fermata;
  - Give internal release and move up and away (prep) from next beat of music;
  - Breathe on ictus of release;
  - Give ictus on next beat.

**NOTE**
Prep for music to continue must be in tempo.
Fermata: No Break

- Musical indicator:
  - slur, or no rest or other break indicated;
  - Stop on fermata;
  - Give no release;
  - Prep next beat by moving up and away from next beat;
  - Give ictus on next beat.

**NOTE**
Prep for music to continue must be in tempo.

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Fermata: Combined Elements

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More Metric Patterns

Asymmetrical Patterns:
- 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, etc.
- Mixed Meter
  [Asymmetrical, Simple & Compound]
Britten indicates that the organ (2+2+2) should be conducted rather than the choir (3+3).

**Marking Your Score**

Sample Scores
Resources


Neuen, Don. *Choral Techniques and Methods,* Choral Excellence (5 DVDs).


Oxford University Press

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Companion Website

http://www.oup.com/us/krueger

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Music Literacy & Choral Workshops

June 4-8, Emporia State University, Emporia, KS
http://www.emporia.edu/music/music_ed_workshop.htm

June 11-13, Morningside College, Sioux City, IA
Jill Wilson: wilsonj@morningside.edu

June 18-22 and June 25-29,
Montreat Presbyterian Worship and Music Conference
Website: http://www.presbymusic.org/montreat.html

July 9-10, Southwest Plains Regional Service Center, Sublette, KS
Belinda Miller: belinda.miller@swplains.org
Website: http://www.swplains.org/

July 17-18, Bay Port High School, Green Bay, WI
Robbie Doelger: robedoel@hssd.k12.wi.us

July 23-25, Shenandoah University, Winchester, VA
Joanna Claycomb: claycomj@frederick.k12.va.us
Jeffrey Marlatt: jmarlatt@su.edu

July 30-August 2, Meredith College, Raleigh, NC
Jane Bruer: jane.bruer@gmail.com
Website: http://www.ncmusicworkshop.com