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The Mechanics of Conducting: Developing Efficient Nonverbal Communications

By Don Running, Bridgewater State University

The ability to be both expressive and specific about our musical intentions lies at the core of conducting technique. The basic technique of conducting (patterns, cues, fermata) has been well established in multiple texts and methods. But how does one train a conductor's gestures to become imbued with the emotional and musical qualities that truly represent the conductor's intention and interpretation?

Conducting (at its most fundamental) is the act of communicating musical intent through physical gesture. The most important thing to consider about the act of conducting is that it is in-the-moment music-making performance for an audience. I use the term "audience" loosely, as I believe that ensemble performers (and even the conductor) should be encouraged to appreciate the music made by their colleagues as much as people in attendance.

The act of conducting is a performance skill that involves meaningful physical movement through time. However, there are two abilities that the conductor must develop that are only tangentially related to the actual act of conducting: score study and rehearsal. I don't mean to disregard these processes as unimportant—quite the contrary. It is through score study and rehearsal that we develop our concept of "musical intent." Score study enables the conductor to create a thoughtful and meaningful interpretation of a piece of music. Decisions made in this stage allow the conductor to determine what the music will become and

what technique(s) will be required of the conductor and the ensemble. But it is important to remember that score study is not conducting.

Somewhere between score study and conducting lies rehearsal. Rehearsal is where decisions made in score study can be presented and developed with the ensemble. The conductor's role is that of actively listening while correcting or praising. Rehearsal is a start and stop mode of music making. Like practicing an instrument or voice, there is (or should be) a very different approach to practice and performance. Practicing may require looping measures, tuning individual pitches, breaking down complex rhythms, removing ornaments, or any number of other techniques to assist learning a piece. Performance is an act of taking all that was developed through practice and putting it all together.

Conducting and rehearsing are closely related. Oftentimes the transition between one mode and the other can appear seamless. Conducting, however, is a musical act that exists only in the moment. Once one stops and begins to explain the nature of a

staccato, the conductor becomes a rehearsaler. A conductor telling the ensemble to perform from A to B for rhythmic accuracy and the conductor who tells the ensemble, "We are going to start at A and stop at B" to listen to the piece as it is, are in fundamentally two different places. Of course a conductor remains observant and able to edit or nuance a performance—but all is happening in real time without the thought process that the music will stop as soon as the conductor has something to improve.

I believe that the following model demonstrates the basic relationship between the three areas of conductor training: score study, rehearsal, and conducting technique. The core of great conducting is a balance of these three skills in performance.

So where does this leave us as teachers, educators, and conductors who are looking to improve our real time, in-the-moment, creative conducting skills? To begin with, we have to understand that the physical body can be looked at as a machine. Beautiful and elegant, but still a machine. Indeed, the term biomechanics (the study of bodily movements and structures through a lens of mechanics) has grown significantly in influence and spawned several new disciplines including kinesiology, ergonomics, orthotics, and prosthesis. And to develop control and eventually mastery of this machine, there are a few biomechanical processes that we need to understand: 1) the machine needs fuel, 2) the machine follows universal laws of physics, and 3) the machine uses a series of motors to accomplish tasks.

The Machine Needs Fuel: Our Breath

All machines need fuel. For our conducting machine, the fuel that we need to accomplish tasks is air—and more specifically our breath. How we use our breath is what charges our gestures and imbues them with emotional meaning. How we breathe is the simplest, most efficient, and most universal facet of human communication. How we breathe will always tell more about our intentions than what we say or how we gesture. Take a look at those facial “emotion posters” that by themselves hint at the caption beneath them. Add breath to the facial mask and you get real communication of emotion. For example, how does a breath of surprise differ from a breath of rage or contentment? To this end we will explore training in the use of breath in order to infuse conducting gestures with greater and more specific emotional and musical information.

The Machine Follows the Universal Laws of Physics

Physics is the only truly universal language. Physics represents the world that we live in—the world that we see every day. We throw a pebble into the air and it falls with perfect consistency. If we toss it to another person, they will know exactly where and when it will fall into place. The consistency of the pebble is so strong that even if I pretend to throw a pebble to my friend, they know when and where it will land. Why this is so important to conducting is that by following the laws of physics, our ensemble can anticipate our intentions before they are asked to act upon our intentions.

For example, all movement begins with a preparatory movement in the opposite direction. Take the golf swing, in order to drive the ball forward we must start by pulling the club backwards. If I were to place a bowling ball on a high shelf, my first motion is to drop the ball down in order to lift it. Apply this back-to-go-forward concept to conducting and we find that our first gesture to start a piece is actually an upward gesture to signify the speed and “flavor” of the downbeat. The key to a clear transition out of a fermata is a release in the opposite direction of where the next beat will begin.

The Machine Uses a Series of Motors to Accomplish a Task

When the body moves, it activates a motor to do so. When it needs to walk, it uses the legs as a motor for propulsion. When it lifts, it employs the arms. But what motors do we use when we conduct? From my perspective, this is a critical area that many conductors need to explore. Do we conduct with our shoulders? Elbows? Wrists? Fingers? All of them? Of course the reality is that a conductor should be comfortable creating impulses from any of these but too often we get stuck in the habit of one. Musical context should be the overriding factor when deciding an appropriate motor. Conducting “ff” while only using fingers or wrist does not demonstrate enough power and motion to allow the ensemble to embrace fortissimo. Conversely, conducting “pp” with movement generated from the shoulder or elbow will lack the precision and delicacy needed by the ensemble.

**DR. DON RUNNING
PRESENTS
“THE MECHANICS OF CONDUCTING:
DEVELOPING EFFICIENT
NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS”
THURSDAY, 4:20 PM
SKYLINE**

From a view of developing efficiency and clarity, at any given time, only one motor should be used while conducting. An ensemble who sees a conductor using their wrist and their elbow must make a choice regarding which of these motors or impulses is most important.

Join me in March at the MMEA 2012 All-State Conference where we will explore breath, physics, and motors in a safe and enjoyable setting. I very much look forward to your questions (and discussions) regarding my thoughts and methods as much as I look forward to being inspired by the dedication and passion of my fellow teaching colleagues that continue to bring great music to the world. •

Dr. Donald J. Running is an Assistant Professor of Music and conductor of the Wind Ensemble and Jazz Band at Bridgewater State University. In addition to his university duties, Dr. Running is active as an adjudicator/clinician and pursues an active research and writing schedule, recently being published in the Journal of Band Research and presenting a conducting workshop in Beijing, China.