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Inside Front and Back Covers: A Physics of Conducting

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Conductors are expected to have at their disposal a vast knowledge of appropriate repertoire and musicianship developed through years of performance and study, and a physical ability to communicate musical intent through gesture. And it is this last portion, communicating musical intent through gesture that defines the act of conducting. As it turns out, not all gestures made by conductors do a good job of communicating his or her musical wishes to the musicians. To understand why this is the case, consider some of the elements of the conducting process.

Step one: The conductor takes a piece of paper with innumerable scribbles, notations, rhythms, and so on, and begins to formulate an internal concept of what this piece is going to sound like from basic sounds to intricate interpretational issues. And the conductor must keep in mind the countless musical influences that cannot be notated into the score.

Step two: The conductor takes the knowledge gleaned from his or her score study and begins to perform his or her interpretation of the music physically for a group of trained musicians. The conductor’s gestures create a metaphor for what the composer and/or the conductor believes this musical work to be.

Step three: The ensemble visually takes this gestural stimulus internally while cross referencing with the music on their paper. A synthesis is created between the conductor’s physical performance, the musicians own musical training and the notation on the paper to create a tangible sonic product.

Step four: This sonic product is projected to a listening audience who (Story continues on inside back cover)
combines what is seen (through the lens of the conductor and the movements of the players—breathing, bowing, drumming and so on) with what is heard. The combination of these factors hopefully yields an enjoyable concert-going experience.

We conductors have two types of gestures at our disposal. The first, the socio-cultural gesture, is easier to understand. These are movements whose meanings are learned and passed down through social means. Some examples include “thumbs up,” “point to the ear,” or “slash across the throat.” The value of these gestures is that they communicate very specific ideas. However, in order for the value of these gestures to be realized by a performer, the musician must go through a series of steps: 1) See the gesture, 2) Understand the cultural meaning of the gesture, and 3) interpret this meaning within the context of the music being performed. Should any step be missed, the gesture becomes meaningless. This interpreting of data yields thoughtful rather than feelingful music.

The second category of gesture is based upon the universal language of “embodied physics.” These are gestures that imitate the very world that is witnessed and lived in daily. For instance, a pebble (even an imaginary one) thrown into the air has a specific speed and trajectory that will result in a predictable fall back to its original position. Through examining human movement, it becomes clear that any bodily movement begins with a movement in the opposite direction. The bat goes back before it can be brought forward. By incorporating how the body and the physical universe move, one can imbue gestures with a sense of determinism. This enables those witnessing a movement to be able to “feel” its intention without having to interpret its intellectual meaning.

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