

# CONDUCTING

A New Series from Tim Reynish

## I – TECHNIQUE OF DIRECTING

*The best conducting technique is that which achieves the maximum musical result with the minimum of effort.*

Fritz Reiner

*Technique is "the immediate and precise response of the hands to the direction sent out by the mind".*

Ivan Galamian

### TECHNIQUE

Technique is not beating time; you can only demonstrate technique by conducting music which needs musicality to be shown. Just as the preparation for the first note will show the pulse, dynamic, attack, quality of sound, weight, immediately that you have conducted the beginning of that note, your baton is already preparing the next beat; will the beats be legato? will there be a crescendo or diminuendo? is there an intensification or diminution of tension due to the melodic line, the harmonic movement, the orchestration? how is the phrase developing, what sound do you need from the players, light, dark, heavy, airy, thin, thick? what emotion?

There is clearly a technique of **direction** to be studied and developed - what cannot be so easily taught is a technique of conducting, the physical transference of the thought processes into musical terms through gesture. The least we can offer our orchestras, bands and ensembles, is a clearly defined beating pattern which does not get in the way of the music, a language of gesture which can be easily understood by everyone. If we can turn direction into conducting by making the beat convey every aspect of the music, then we begin to conduct ..... and if we achieve that, we may end up as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic!

### POSTURE

#### 1. Stand erect, feet 5/6 inches apart

Extend arms fully, bring hands in to create angle of slightly more than 90 degrees

#### 2. Knees straight but not locked

Elbows should be approximately between 4 and 5 o'clock and 7 and 8 o'clock

#### 3. Shoulders back but not rigid

Forearm should be normally a little lower than elbow

#### 4. Head high but neck relaxed

Hands and stick are a continuation of forearm

#### 5. Move naturally

Hand with palm facing downwards

The control of the knees, the trunk, the shoulders and the head is intended to concentrate our players on the stick, or the hand. These other parts of the body might come into play for particular emotional and dramatic purposes, but our basic aim is one of control.

Video as many rehearsals and concerts as possible; watch the video and ask:

1. Am I over-conducting, can I be more economical?
2. Am I confusing my players with unnecessary movement of head, elbows and forearm, trunk, knees or bottom?
3. Do I indicate the speed clearly?
4. Do I indicate the exact point of the beat?
5. Am I giving clear messages of what my feelings are about the piece?
6. Where is this phrase going or coming from?
7. Do I have eye contact with my players, or am I glued to the score?

Then, go through the video frame by frame and check carefully:

### PHYSICAL POSITION

1. Balanced stance
2. Back straight, back of legs firm
3. Arms away from body, hand and baton centred

4. Head out of score, maintain eye contact
5. Tempo, melos, beat pattern, style, dynamics, density, colour, rhythm, should all be clearly in mind and transmitted into the baton

This ideal is probably only reached by anyone in front of the mirror with a CD of the Vienna Philharmonic, so do not be too down-hearted; Kleiber and Giulini come close to this, so metaphorically aim high.

Check that	Stand is high enough for you to refer with your eyes but not your head
	Feet are slightly apart, well balanced
	Knees are supple but not bent
	Elbows are without restriction but not flapping
	We have a good line of arm/wrist/finger/baton
	Bottom and head are still most of the time; don't conduct with them
	Stand tall, even if you are tall
	Face muscles naturally relaxed, registering emotions where necessary – show appreciation of good playing
	Eye contact throughout with the main musical line or a section that needs our attention
	Score in head, not head in score

### TYPES OF BEAT - Preparatory Expressive Passive

**A. PREPARATORY BEAT** should include the quality of the sound which you expect, and the type of attack. The first preparatory beat is the only one which starts from stillness, and normally takes one beat of the pulse you are setting.

The preparatory beat needs to convey

- The tempo
- The dynamic level
- The articulation style of the opening
- The precise beginning of the first note

Successive beats need to convey all of these musical matters plus the architecture of the phrase, the section and the movement.

Try to get your players used to react to a more subtle beat. **Do not count them in;** counting in cannot give a clear idea of these elements. Also your players must learn to concentrate on your baton.

**B. EXPRESSIVE BEAT** continues the quality of the preparatory beat and is itself a preparation for the next beat.

PREPARATION is the space between the ictus of one beat and the ictus of the next

DYNAMIC is indicated by the size of the preparation

QUALITY is indicated by the shape of the preparation

ATTACK is indicated by the speed of the acceleration and the force of the ictus

ICTUS is the point of rebound

REBOUND is a flexible reaction to the ictus

**C. PASSIVE** does nothing more than indicate a bar or beat with no musical result – it is useful in recitative or accompanied cadenzas but do

# THOUGHTS



not use it merely on a long note – say in bars 7/8 of the Holst *First Suite* – keep the tempo and tension, whether releasing or increasing – a musical phrase is never static.

## **BEATING**

preparation  
ictus or point  
rebound, which then becomes the preparation for the next beat  
penultimate beat placing  
final beat placing

**PREPARATION** Make this as natural and simple as possible – think of the back swing to a golf shot or tennis serve, think breathing, for wind strings and percussion. Normally it will take a beat in the upcoming tempo. Keep shoulders relaxed, body and legs supple but focused on the baton

**ICTUS** The normal placing will be central to your body, but that might be to give a *tutti mf* A to the woodwind – the actual placing will depend on the orchestration, the intensity and depth or lightness of sound, the place in the phrase, so the actual ictus and its preparation are part of a constantly slightly shifting series of planes, depending on the music.

**REBOUND - must be controlled; the rebound should never be more than 1/3 of the beat**

Many conductors utilise a big rebound, which takes them back to the plane of conducting in which they started. This, in my view, dissipates energy, and releases control. Those players sitting on the side, cannot differentiate between the beats clearly unless there is a strong lateral element. (See comments by Gunther Schuller)

**PENULTIMATE BEAT PLACING** Because of the limitations in flexibility in the beat to the right for the penultimate beat of the bar, make sure that the previous beat is more to the left, and if necessary, allow the shoulders and trunk of the body to follow through to give the space you need.

**CENTRE YOUR LAST BEAT** It is particularly important to centre the last beat in the bar. Do not think of it as an upbeat, because it is here that so often rubato occurs, it is here that you set a new slow or fast tempo. The speed of the preparation from the ictus of the last beat in the bar to the ictus of the next first beat, gives the new pulse and type of beat.

**BEATING PATTERNS** Control the rebound. It should never be more than one third to one half the amplitude of the original beat except in one in a bar.

Use horizontal planes after the first beat rather than vertical. It is difficult for players on your right and left to differentiate otherwise.

In general, in moderate dynamics, keep the ictus within the plane of your stomach - keep the ictus low. Draw the players to you, so that you can always extend when you need. Do not over-conduct.

**COMPOUND TIME - FRENCH AND ITALIAN SIX** I prefer in a slow six to employ an Italian pattern, of Down - left - left - Right - right - centre (and up)

If I am going to move gently into two beats in a bar, or if I want to keep a slight subdivision of two going, I would employ a French six - Down - right - right - Centre - right - left - the last two beats going up like a Christmas tree.

The advantage of an Italian six is that it follows my basic premise that the penultimate beat will always be out to the right.

The advantage of the French six is that it is very flexible for moving into compound two with the rebound of the first beat flattening out to the right.

In compound time, practise making your beat take up the space of the subsidiary second and third, fifth and sixth beats,

**REMEMBER** that the players on either side of you have a very different view of the beat from those in front.

duple time is particularly confusing  
we should always anticipate the next event in music  
we should guide and lead the players  
we should always indicate phrasing with the beat

**SUBDIVIDING** In slow music, or with small note values, 16th or 32nds, you may need to show a subdivision of the beat. Just put a smaller beat after the rebound. Normally I recommend going in the same direction to avoid confusion with other main beats

**SIMPLE DIRECTION** Make every gesture as natural as possible, clear, easily understood and meaningful.

**COMPLEX RHYTHMS** The more complex the metrical and rhythmical tissue of music, the clearer should be the bar's indication by the conductor.

## **LEFT HAND**

Most conducting teachers insist that the left hand does not mirror the right. How many professional conductors follow this advice? I believe that you should conduct with both, ensuring that the left is as strong as the right and you are able to be balanced. Then you can develop various exercises to free the left up, and the most useful routine might be to take 16 or 32 bars of a video of your conducting, and conduct only with the left hand, not beating time but indicating the phrasing. Take more time, we all tend to rush the left hand in phrasing and cues. Like a good string player, save the beat or bow. With your video, try dozens of different ways of demonstrating sound and phrasing.

The role of the left hand is revealed in assisting, sometimes duplicating, the right hand and emphasising:

dynamics  
sphere of expressiveness in the broad sense of the word  
indication of cues to different instruments  
indication of syncopation  
correction of various mistakes which may arise

In the next issue:

## Choice of Repertoire