

Conductors' Tips 2 - by Tim Reynish

CONDUCTING - OR BEATING TIME?

We are invariably the most well-equipped musician in the band-room, we can read a score, we own a baton, we have the confidence to deal with the situation, but does our technique match our musicianship, do we have the score in our head and in our body? Are we satisfied

with our technique, are we timebeaters or conductors, should we give as much thought to own technical development as we do to that of our players? Would they play better if we gave a clear, expressive, meaningful beat, or is beating time all we want to do?

In the last edition we explored how to adopt a natural, relaxed conducting position, and took some advice from Erich Leinsdorf. In this article, we look at beating technique.

To help achieve more musical conducting, we need absolute confidence in our technical work, so that we can concentrate on the music, not allowing technique to get in the way.

Do not be afraid to video your rehearsals and concerts - then check whether the gestures you are giving are always appropriate for the music, do they indicate everything you feel and think?

BASIC POSITION

Elbows away from side, without constriction, in a bowing position

Arms angled slightly down to do away with too many angles

Wrist lower still, but centred

BATON

a Use wood, not plastic unless very light and supple

b find a grip which suits your hand

c Baton should not be too long - between 14 and 16 inches unless you are very tall

d Think of the baton as an extension of arm/wrist/fingers

Good batons are available from J P Guivier, 99 Mortimer Street, London W1N 7TA, £4 50 each

GRIP

Hold the hand flat, facing upwards, place top of stick and the bottom of the cork between thumb and forefinger, close hand loosely and turn over parallel to the floor.

FINGERS

Must be flexible, practice with a pencil to get the smooth change between upbow and downbow, as with a violin bow.

Almost invariably we are technically the least competent member of the ensemble

BEATING

The Beat is made up of three elements:

a preparation

b ictus or point

c rebound, which then becomes the preparation for the next beat

There are three types of beat

a Preparatory

b Expressive

c Passive

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. It should indicate

i speed

ii dynamic

iii style/weight/type of attack

Try to get your players used to reacting to this.

Do not count them in - counting in cannot give a clear idea of these three elements. Also your players must learn to concentrate on your baton, not your voice.

Do not give a bar or extra beats for nothing; In a fast 6/8, you might need to give two beats to establish the speed for an upbeat quaver, but generally one beat to breathe together should be sufficient. The point of not giving a whole bar for nothing is that later in the work you may well have to change speed, or start again after a pause. If the group is used to a bar for nothing, the new start will be more difficult.

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 into and the force of the ictus

ICTUS is the point of rebound

REBOUND is a flexible reaction to the ictus

THIS MUST BE

CONTROLLED - THE

REBOUND SHOULD

NEVER BE MORE THAN 1/3 OF THE PREPARATION

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, releases control and leads to a lack of clarity. Those players sitting on the side, cannot differentiate between the beats unless there is a strong lateral element

TIPS FROM THE TOP

IVAN GALAMIAN

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

★ ★ ★ ★

MAX RUDOLF

It is not necessary for a conductor to be trained as rigorously as a dancer. Still he must find the happy medium between tension and relaxation. The two extremes to be avoided are shyness and exhibitionism

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EVERY GESTURE THE CONDUCTOR MAKES SHOULD SAY SOMETHING TO THE PLAYERS.

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Next edition - Passive beats, beating patterns and alternatives and Frank Battisti on the Expressive Conductor