

Basic technical advice to the inexperienced conductor

CONDUCTING FOR BEGINNERS

Before I get on to some specific points, we should consider the often-asked question of whether conducting can be taught. As Norman Lebrecht says in his entertaining and highly anecdotal survey of the history of conducting *The Maestro Myth*:

'No-one has ever explained how one man with a physical flourish can elicit an exhilarating response from an orchestra while another, with precisely the same motions and timing, produces a dull, unexceptional sound.'

The answer to that probably comes down to an indefinable recipe of ingredients but charisma or lack of it ('charisn't' as Sir Thomas Beecham put it) is a factor. A dash of musical genius doesn't go amiss either – although some would say that's not necessarily vital! But leaving aside these qualities which people either do or don't have, I believe that it

is possible to train experienced and capable musicians to be effective conductors.

Particularly here in the UK, we seem to have the idea that a highly-trained instrumentalist or singer can be given a baton, thrust in front of an orchestra/band/choir and they will instinctively know what to do. Yes, they may very well be expert in the repertoire in question, they may have a chamber musician's rehearsal technique and the most wonderful ear for balance, texture, intonation, structure and all the other things a conductor needs to listen out for. What they most likely do not have, unless they have undertaken some study, is a refined and developed language of gesture with which to communicate their musical ideas and insight. This, I suppose, is 'technique' and just as with any other musical discipline it can be studied.

Clearly, conducting technique cannot be covered in any depth within the context of an article such as this, but here are 10 'do's and don'ts' which attempt to address some of the problems I most commonly see with inexperienced conductors.

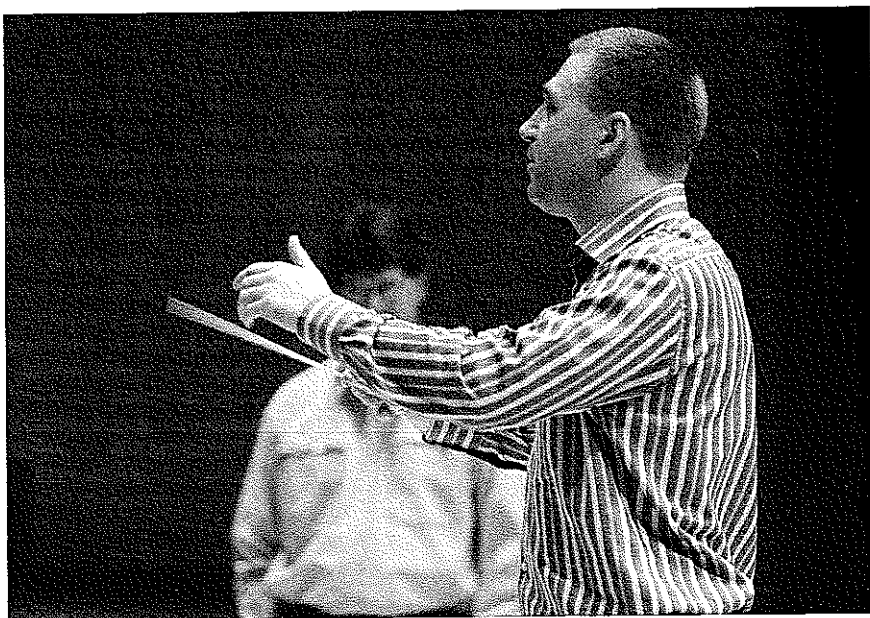
1. DO warm-up

Conducting is a physical exercise (actually, it is very good for you) and one should not launch into it without loosening up. A few gentle exercises to loosen up the fingers, wrists, arms, shoulders and neck will help you to start work in a physically relaxed state. Unnecessary tension is just as much of an enemy in conducting as it is in most instrumental disciplines.

2. DON'T crouch

Standing up straight should stop you developing sore shoulders and back. Perhaps more importantly, it communicates authority and calmness to your players. Leaning in towards specific players may seem like a way to involve them or get a reaction, but by focusing on one individual or section you will be cutting off communication with many more.

I have borrowed a number of principles and concepts from Alexander Technique, Tai Chi, and other martial arts in my own conducting. Alexander students spend a good deal of time lying on a table, concentrating on flattening the spine. I recall my teacher asking me to stand up and trying to keep the feeling of my back being flat on the table as I transferred from a horizontal to an upright position. I find this a very useful thought to have in mind when I conduct.



Conducting Study Score Clinic at the 2005 IWF

3. DO find a good basic conducting position

Your stance should be natural. The basic conducting position should be centred, focused and not too high. A good starting point is to stand with your hands face down on an imaginary table about waist height. Lift the hands an inch or two and you're there. This ties in with Tai Chi philosophy that the solar plexus is the centre of the body's energy. If the conducting position is too high the gestures can appear lightweight.

4. DON'T over-conduct

This could be (and maybe will be at some point) an article in itself. Most conducting teachers will, I am sure, agree that the most common trait in inexperienced conductors is over-conducting. There are two aspects to this although the resulting difficulty for the players is the same. One is the sheer size of the gestures; the other is the amount of them.

There are analogies with speech here. If someone talks constantly, others are apt to switch off and ignore. On the other hand, someone who talks only when they have something interesting, relevant and necessary to say can acquire a reputation for being profound, knowledgeable and worth listening to (even if they aren't!). When conducting, it may seem like a good idea to give every cue, show every accent and beat every beat. In reality, much of this will take care of itself and by over-conducting you will quickly lose the attention of your players.

A commonly used technique in teaching situations, especially where the band or orchestra is fairly capable, is to ask the conducting student to start the group off and then stop conducting. Generally, the result is better than it was before! The point is that every gesture from the conductor should improve on what is possible without them.

In terms of the size of the gesture, think of a small box about 18 inches square within which the majority of your gestures will be contained. A way to practise this is to put your hands through the gaps in a wire music stand and get used to the feeling of conducting the beat patterns within that space.

5. DO develop the variety of your gestures

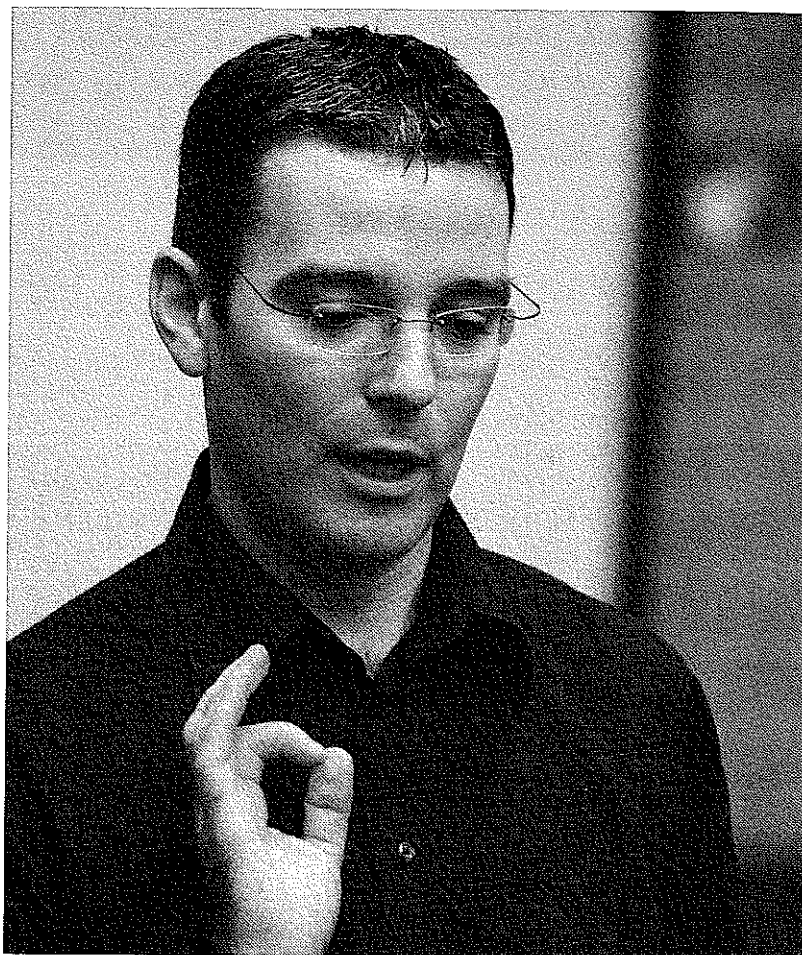
Analogies can be useful here: a *legato* beat might be painting horizontal stokes with a paintbrush; *staccato* perhaps touching a hot stove; a massive accent like lifting a heavy chair with both hands. It is also important to develop independence of the hands. Try conducting beat patterns with one hand and circles with the other and develop your own exercises from there.

6. DO make sure the beat doesn't rebound too much

As a basic rule of thumb, the rebound after the point of the beat (known as the *ictus*) should not be more than one third of the size of the beat itself. Too much rebound results in a flurry of movements which are not easily understood by the players. This is closely linked to.

7. DON'T subdivide too much

This is a common fault with inexperienced conductors, in the mistaken belief that it helps the players. In fact, it falls into the same category as over-conducting – too much information for the players. In contrast to much of the technique taught in the UK and US, where the beating pattern often slices through a central point, the approach favoured in



The author in action

Russia is to transfer the sound from one place to another by putting the *ictus* of each beat in a different place. This is difficult to explain in the context of such a brief article but essentially the idea is that by showing the players the direction of the beat from one place to another, subdivision becomes unnecessary because the players can work it out for themselves. When this technique is mastered it is possible to control *rubato* in a much more subtle way than is possible with subdivision.

8. DO get your head out of the score

This is important for many reasons. Your players will look at you more if you look at them; watching your players can help immeasurably in deciding what the problems are and how to solve them; by freeing yourself from the printed page you are more able to listen and react to what is happening.

9. DON'T worry about whether you should use a baton

If you conduct well, the players will follow you. Whether or not you wield a stick isn't so important. The most important thing is that you communicate your musical ideas clearly to the musicians. If you do that more effectively without a baton, that is fine. A more likely problem is that the baton is too long – there is a theory that the ideal length is equivalent to the distance between your elbow and wrist. Most batons you will find in music shops are longer than that.

10. DO listen

Self-explanatory really, but you would be surprised how many conductors get so wrapped in what they want to hear that they forget to listen and react to what is actually happening.

Photos:
Jonathan Nunn