Effective conducting

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INTRODUCTION

Conducting is a constant feature in the lives of almost all music teachers, whether leading an assembly song, guiding a band workshop or rehearsing the school orchestra. The aim of this resource is to build confidence for those new to the podium, and to offer a helpful revision of key principles for the more experienced.

Writing about the physical aspects to conducting is a bit like trying to teach front crawl in the kitchen. You can only go so far in describing the perfectly shaped upbeat. The focus of this resource is therefore more on the important principles of preparation and rehearsal:

- **Preparation:** score-learning and ‘releasing the ear’
- **Rehearsal:** common problems and how to get the most out of your time
- **Technique:** clarity in your gesture, beating patterns, expressive hands

Suggestions for recommended further reading:

- Brock McElheran: *Conducting technique for beginners and professionals* (OUP)
- Royal Stanton: *The Dynamic Choral Conductor* (Shawnee Press)

What is conducting?

It’s worth remembering that ‘maestro’ actually can mean ‘teacher’. And like a teacher, a conductor is primarily someone who guides, inspires and facilitates the best from his or her group. They are a channel for ‘conducting’ the ensemble’s energy and musicianship into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The gestural part of conducting – the baton-waving – makes up only about 10% of a conductor’s role and skills base. It’s a crucial 10% to get right, but far more important are the qualities that you have already developed as a teacher: planning a good session, maintaining focus and pace, differentiating between abilities, and motivating learners to perform beyond expectation.

The whole process of conducting starts when an enthusiast gathers together three or more players or singers to work on a piece that they love, creating something together that would not have otherwise happened. In that sense, we are all conductors.

PREPARATION

When Hitchcock was asked what made for a great film, he quipped that it was three things: ‘A good script, a good script, and… a good script.’ Borrowing from that, you could say that being an effective conductor is essentially about three things: knowing the score, knowing the score, and… **knowing the score**.

The head-work involved in really familiarising yourself with a score is often the process that gets the most squeezed out of the preparation phase, particularly when you are faced with the more urgent issues of booking
rooms, organising students, and sorting out parts. And yet without a proper knowledge of the score, you are inhibiting your chance of truly inspiring your group.

It may seem an obvious point, but students of conducting are often too preoccupied with how to coordinate their hands. Effective hand gestures, however, often flow naturally out of a proper knowledge of the score. If I know what is around the corner, I can anticipate it more effectively with my gestures. Herbert von Karajan, the famous conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, used to set aside weeks for the process, first marking up the scores and then coming back to music afresh with a second, clean score, unmarked but already deeply internalised.

**MARKING UP YOUR SCORE**

You may like to use different coloured pencils for this. On your first ‘pass’ it is helpful to:

- mark in the cues, indicating which instrument or voice is entering, even if it seems obvious to you at the time. Once multi-tasking on the podium, every little reminder helps.
- mark any cut-offs that need attention (eg a strong unison consonant for a choir).
- highlight any changes in time signature, tempo or dynamic.
- mark in the phrasing and direction of the music.
- consider breathing and articulation, marking in points where this needs to be coordinated.
- put in images that you could use in rehearsal to create the right mood in the music, eg ‘rusty tin soldiers’, ‘fat ducks’, etc.

**Hearing the score**

Score preparation starts with being able to ‘hear’ the music clearly on the page, without prompting from a recording or playing along on the piano. Then can you correct any problems with confidence and lead your musicians into the aural landscape you have created for the work.

Once you’ve found a quiet moment in your schedule, uninterrupted with a piano and a metronome, here are some exercises you can use to train your inner ear:

- Listen to two or three recordings of the piece, if possible – enough to get a good comparison and an overall template for your interpretation.
- Then ditch the recordings! They won’t be relevant to the very unique collection of players and singers you will have before you, and you need to be proactive in shaping what you have, rather than reacting to a pre-formed impression.
- Play through, then sing through the different lines of the score.
- Check you can demonstrate any tricky rhythms.
- On the second and third passes, start memorising the material, conducting along to it as you sing.
- Practise conducting in silence, rehearsing your physical gestures.

These practical exercises need to be combined with reading and researching the background to the music and the context in which it was written. Often the nuggets you get from this research are the most memorable parts to the rehearsal. Rarely is a piece of music without some narrative potential, whether overtly or not. Find the story, and you can really bring the notes off the page.
At this stage, ask yourself:

- Can I demonstrate (sing or tap) any part of any line in this score if required?
- Do I have a solid overview of the structure of the piece?
- Do I know what’s around the corner, over the page?
- Can I tell the story of the piece succinctly?
- How much can I conduct through from memory, in silence?

**RELEASE THE EAR – HEADS UP!**

If you get your preparation right, then you will spend more time with your head up and out of the score, which ‘releases the ear’ and helps communication tenfold. A classic problem is having the head buried in the stand and looking up too late to cue or shape the music. The more the head is down, the harder it is to activate the ear. It’s all about the preparation – and having the confidence to trust your preparation when on the podium.

**Anticipation**

This will be a recurring theme in all four areas. Effective conducting relies at every level on successful anticipation: of corners in the music, of potential technical issues, of rehearsal logistics and of performance nerves.

In the preparation phase, you need to anticipate any technical problems the players may have and, critically, how you will help them solve them. Will the singers need to stagger their breathing in order to sustain that long note? Do the violins know how to bounce the bow in a proper *spiccato*? Are all the notes within range for your tenors?

**REHEARSAL**

Let’s assume you have sorted the right students for the right parts, that everybody has instruments that work and the kit they need (drumsticks, mutes, rosin, etc), and that the rehearsal space is fit for purpose. The basics are in place. Now for the rehearsal itself.

**The set-up**

A rehearsal needs to be as meticulously planned as a lesson, with clear goals and realistic timings for achieving them. As in a lesson, it is important to share those goals with the musicians right at the outset, so that they can pace themselves accordingly.

We often rely on students to be patient as they wait for other sections to be rehearsed. In the case of the percussion and brass, sometimes they could be faced with long spans of either rests or just cadential material. This needs to be taken into account so that everybody in the room is kept on their toes and involved. Sometimes sectionals may be the answer: other times, it is about asking questions of those less active, encouraging them to support their peers, and even giving them the chance to conduct now and then!
Notice in all of the above common problems, the emphasis is on the role of the conductor. There is so much over which we can have a positive influence, even in the face of all the typical logistical hiccups: the mysteriously broken instruments, the missing stands, the latecomers, the parts in the wrong key, etc.

Here are some thoughts on addressing each of those common rehearsal problems in turn:

**TUNING AND WARMING-UP**
Prevention is better than cure. A lot of time, faulty intonation stems from an over-hasty ‘tutti’ tuning at the start, or from not warming up the voice sufficiently.

The string section needs to be tuned from the bass upwards, so that they can hear themselves properly. Encourage ‘Tai Chi tuning’, where the students take long, slow bows, tilting their ear towards the sound, really fine-tuning the 5th. Granted, with beginner players this may be impractical and work-arounds need to be found, but it does no harm to instil a good practice of caring about tuning, which is the fundamental issue.

With wind instruments, again insist on tuning section by section and ensure the given note (whether concert A or B flat) is played in several octaves. If you have an oboist setting the A, ensure they get into the habit of checking themselves against a tuner. (In the absence of an oboist, a cello A played as a harmonic can often work well.)

If you have timpani, take some time before the rehearsal starts to get them properly in tune. As with harps, these instruments need quiet focus and patience to be wrestled into pitch.

With singers, ensure you warm the voice down into the chest register as well as up. Check that you have covered the full range of the scores you are about to rehearse. And, as ever, think of exercises that will develop the breath support and posture of your singers.

**FIX THE PROBLEM**
In a one-to-one context, we are constantly telling our students not just to play through their pieces unthinkingly, and to apply some focused, problem-fixing techniques when practising. And yet somehow this approach often seems to go out the window when faced with rehearsing a large ensemble. Perhaps it is the fear that too much dissection will drag the pace of the rehearsal down. More often than not, it can be that the conductor doesn’t have the confidence to trust their ear and pinpoint the faulty note or dodgy rhythm.

The encouragement here is: dive in! If you hear that something is wrong and you’re not sure where it is, take a ballpark section and start repeating it until you can narrow it down and find the issue. See it as a fun opportunity to develop your ear.

If you’re worried about losing the attention of the redundant players or singers as you do this, give them a task to do quietly while you sort things out. They could look ahead at fingerings, bowings or a tricky rhythm, for example. The main thing is not to shirk finding the problem and fixing it.

Once you have isolated the problem, dissecting it kindly and tactfully is one of the main challenges for any conductor at any stage of their career. Saying, ‘Good, let’s try it again’ is an unhelpful default. The general advice here is to make it about the music, not the person. That said, with your knowledge of the individual student, you should be able to think of ways of overcoming technical deficiencies. Is it a problem with their breath support? Is it because they need more practice on harmonic minor scales? Do they need a clearer or earlier cue from you? What is actually going to help them not make the same mistake again?
THREE STEPS TO COMMUNICATING EFFICIENTLY

Musicians need to be kept playing or singing as much as possible within the rehearsal to remain engaged (with due consideration for rest periods). Conductors need to find ways, then, of economising their instructions so they go straight to the point. This is something that belongs in part to the score preparation phase. Even at that stage, you need to start considering how you will get across your ideas succinctly, together with any good, imaginative images to reinforce the point.

Imagine you want a passage to be played or sung with a really short, aggressive staccato. The most economic thing to do is to sing or imitate what you want, or rap out the rhythm on the stand. Then comes a well-chosen image – ‘sharp teeth’, ‘angry wasps’, or whatever works best for the age-group in the room. What will they really remember? Thirdly, if necessary, you need to specify how they will achieve the effect. Perhaps by bowing more at the heel, sharper pushes from the diaphragm, or stronger tonguing – again, taking in consideration their ability and what they can achieve technically.

So, it can be a three-part communication:

1. Sing or tap what you want, conveying the mood. Reinforce this with gesture.
2. Give a memorable image.
3. Back up the image with technical specifics.

HAVING A VISION

If players are lacking focus and getting bored, it is generally because they are not excited about the story of the music. The rehearsal has been reduced to the sterilities of observing notation. True, attending to details is an important, unavoidable part of the process, but it can be balanced at every stage – whether in intense sectionals or dress-rehearsal tuttis – with a clear and imaginative vision for what the music is trying to communicate.

Often, painting the mood of the music with conviction first – allowing for missed notes and other inaccuracies – can be the key to unlocking technical issues later. If a flautist knows they’ve got to sound like icy gusts of wind, for example, their imagination will help them be more fluent with their scales.

So much of this will be very familiar territory to us all as practising musicians. But it is surprising how many large-ensemble rehearsals suffer through the conductor simply lacking an imaginative vision for the music and the conviction for communicating it at every stage. Inspire the mind first, then deal with the physical constraints.

THINK BACKWARDS

The ultimate aim of a rehearsal is to have everybody leaving with the feeling that the music is sounding better than before. Allowing enough time and, crucially, energy for a run-through at the end is critical for that comparison. The larger the ensemble, the more the details of the individual parts need to be reassembled and reassimilated into the whole on a regular basis.

It makes sense, then, to plan your rehearsal from the final run-through backwards. What can you realistically fit in before that point? Do you need to focus on smaller passages for run-through? Can what you’ve achieved be best done in sectionals or together, and what do those logistics mean for the timings of the session?

If you are insisting on good time-keeping at the beginning of the rehearsal – ie that everybody arrives punctually – then you need to be consistent in your own time-keeping as well by ending on time.

TECHNIQUE

Our aim as conductors, whether beating with a baton or not, is to have clear, expressive gesture – something so clear that it can be read easily even in peripheral vision.

Clarity is essentially about – and here’s that word again – successful anticipation. Or, in conductorial terms, a clear upbeat.
Everything we express as conductors, we do in the beat before the music happens, from communicating tempo and dynamic through to tiny nuances of mood and character.

And here, the advice begins to diverge. For every technical point of ‘grammar’ there seems to be an equal and opposite view. Much of what is learnt on basic conducting courses seems to be negated as soon as you watch any professional conductor. The wizard-like tremors of Valery Gergiev’s hands are a classic example, bearing no relation to textbook technique. And yet they work a treat – thanks in no small part to the professionalism of his players.

With those caveats in mind, what follows is an approach that ensures your gesture is visible and readable to any ensemble.

**First things first: posture and baton-holds**

An orchestra can often tell what a new conductor will be like simply by the way they walk to the podium and take their first upbeat. The overall body language of your demeanour and posture is very important. In general you are aiming for an open, upright stance that is well grounded and allows you to move freely. The usual postural rules apply here. Start with your feet shoulder-width apart, relax your shoulders and stand tall, without over-extending your neck.

When you conduct, you are aiming to ‘fall into the beat’, that is, to avoid tension in your arms and shoulders. Generally, you are trying to model the sort of posture you would like from your players. If you’re hunched, grimacing and with cramped shoulders, it’s hard to encourage a full, soft sound from a choir! And yet sometimes we find ourselves in those places of tension without realising.

**WHETHER TO USE THE BATON OR NOT?**

A well-wielded baton can be helpful for adding extra precision and expression to a beat, but it is by no means essential. Look in the mirror as you conduct, with and without a baton. Which do you find easier to follow and why?

If you do choose to use a baton, you should aim to ‘shake hands’ with the stick, so that the ball-grip of it lies naturally in the fold of your palm, with the fingers closed naturally around it, without having to hold tight. Try to avoid the vicar-with-teacup habit of sticking out the little finger, as this pulls focus from the true point of the beat – the tip of the baton.

The style of grip is down to personal preference, but ball-grips have the advantage of not having to be held too tightly, which is useful for releasing tension generally in the arm.

**Baselines and patterns**

Each of your beats should bounce off and fall to the same horizontal plane, or baseline. This line should be around the height of your belly button, or higher if sightlines require. If it’s too high, you will immediately get tension in your shoulders and neck.

Having established this baseline, practise bouncing and returning to exactly the same point, imitating a yo-yo action with a neat flick of the wrist to create a point to the beat.

- Is there a good focus to the beat?
- Are you flowing uninterrupted from one beat to the next without stalling or subdividing?
Now extend this to the usual patterns for 2, 3, and 4, ensuring you keep each point falling on the same axis:

Notice how the upbeat is always next to the downbeat. This is will remain a constant throughout, however many beats you wish to show.

Space does not allow here for describing the other beating patterns, but the basis for them will be the same: bounce on the same horizontal axis, and keep the upbeat next to the downbeat.

A good exercise is to write out a random multi-bar sequence, 2/4, 1/4, 3/4, etc, and try conducting it through. Then add different levels of difficulty:

- Add an accelerando and ritardando, keeping the beats on the same axis.
- Practise it staccato, legato, marcato, changing between bars.
- Add accents on different beats. Remember to prepare the accents the beat before.
- Introduce a melody with phrasing and articulation, showing this in your beat.

Cues and cut-offs, dynamics and the left hand

Every cue and cut-off needs to be prepared with the beat before. You can’t suddenly switch a sound on or off.

The gesture for both is a simple and up-and-down combination, starting from and returning to the same point on the baseline: an ‘and-in’ or ‘and-off’.

It’s the ‘and-off’s that tend to trip new conductors up. In all instances, try to keep the upbeat in the same tempo as the cut-off so that the ending can be perfectly anticipated and read.

The upbeat needs to match the downbeat in both tempo and character. If you want a strong consonant on the downbeat, prepare it with a sharp flick that matches it. If you want a soft ‘n’ (eg on the end of ‘Amen’) show the gentle character of that ‘n’ in your upbeat.

DYNAMICS

Imagine a square box that encompasses your whole beating pattern. If you want to increase the square, both the horizontal and the vertical axes need to grow in proportion.

In very simple terms, softer dynamics require a smaller box, and louder ones a larger box. There are, of course, moments in the music that may require the opposite – an expansive soft beat or a focused, small strong beat – but generally the ‘dynamic box’ is a good place to start.
Where this visualisation is helpful is when trying to pace a long crescendo, for example. By focusing on the height and breadth of the beat, you can ensure you show an organic growth in the sound, so that you don’t peak to soon. Gauge the height of the beat at the loudest point and work up to it gradually.

One habit to be aware of is suddenly hunching up when you want people to be quiet. While this can work sometimes, it can become an annoying default and not help your musicians find that quiet sound, which often relies on a more controlled breath or a longer preparation of the bow. Instead, experiment with distancing the beat from the body, as if imagining the sound on a far horizon. This brings space into your body language and models a better posture for creating the sound you want.

When you have extended loud passages, check you are not holding tension in your body. It’s a sure way to a sore neck the morning afterwards.

It’s also in forte or fortissimo passages that the beating patterns tend to become diffuse and unclear. This is the ‘windmill effect’, with every beat a large circular flail. Without cramping your style, it should be possible to keep the overall beating pattern of the bar clear at all times.

Using the left hand

By saying ‘left hand’, the assumption is that you are holding the baton with your right. The first thing to say is that there should be no dogma around this, as musicians can quickly adapt to following a left-handed beat. So by ‘left hand’, what we actually mean is your free, non-baton-wielding hand.

The purpose of the left hand is to add expression to the right. Not to mimic or mirror it, or to get in the way of a clear beat. Less is often more. The left hand should be used to reinforce accents, colour, cues and character. It therefore needs to be independent of the right, and capable of going against it at times.

When judging what to do with your left hand, the main question you have to ask is: ‘What do my musicians need?’ What gesture will add to their understanding of the music and encourage them to sing or play with more musicianship? Sometimes the answer to this is to get out of the way, to let them shine. Most of the time, though, a well-chosen gesture can make a big difference to the quality of the sound and the level of ensemble.

When not using your left hand for any distinct purpose, try to avoid just balancing out your right hand by doubling up on the beat. Sometimes this can give extra emphasis and flow, but mainly it just gets in the way. Relaxing the hand but keeping it ready ‘mid-air’, close to the chest, is a useful resting place.

To develop left-hand coordination and independence, set up a moderato 4/4 beat in your right hand and then, with your left:

- show a crescendo and decrescendo, smoothly growing and fading over four bars each. Explore different axes for doing this: up and down, left to right, forwards and backwards.
- practise giving cues on each of the four beats in turn.
- group an imagined phrase into twos, then threes, then fives, keeping the 4/4 beat going throughout.

Tip: for a subito piano, suddenly lift the baseline so you don’t have to drop so far to create the next beat.
CLOSING THOUGHTS

Good preparation, efficient rehearsal and clear technique are just the starting points to being an effective conductor. Of course, there are so many areas left to explore, from leadership models through to performance practice, as well as issues specific to the type of ensemble, whether big band, symphony orchestra or choir.

The next steps could be to go on one of the many excellent conducting residential courses that run mainly in the holidays. There is no substitute for getting up on the podium. That said, you don’t need a symphony orchestra to start the process. A pianist or a couple of singers will do. The simple practice of matching your intention to your gesture and then crafting the sound as you hear it is where it all begins.

For a list of holiday conducting courses in the UK and beyond see [here](#).