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Chapter One

The Right Hand

Introduction

Conducting is communication through gesture. The language of gesture, like all languages, takes time to learn and perfect. Subtlety of speech communication takes years to develop, and so will expressive communication as a conductor. Many elements factor into this unique form of “talking” to a musical ensemble, among them eye contact, body language, and clear mental and intellectual intentions. But the foundation of communicative gesture lies in the bodily movements that we call conducting patterns.

In this chapter, we will discuss basic conducting patterns and their execution. To begin, there are two terms you should know. The first is the *ictus*, or the point of the beat; and the second is the *rebound*, that portion of the beat that lies between two ictus points. An ictus is defined by the rebound, by the change of direction in the pattern at the exact moment of the beat.

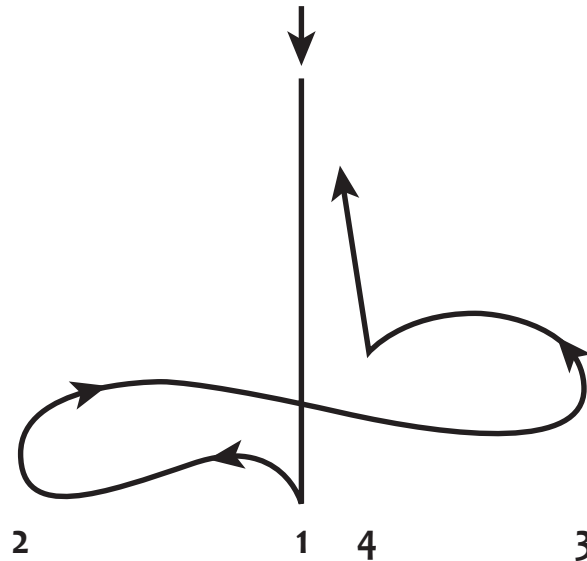
Singers live from ictus to ictus—this is where their activity takes place. Their response to your gesture begins on one ictus point and ends on the next. Once the conductor has given the third ictus of a $\frac{4}{4}$ pattern, the singer begins the activity (the notes or rests) that occupies that beat.

The conductor, on the other hand, lives in the rebound of each beat. It is in the rebound of the beat preceding each ictus where the conductor has the sole opportunity to convey performance information: not only tempo (indicated by the speed of the rebound), but also dynamic, style, articulation, and other crucial performance indications.

Traditional conducting styles, at least those outlined in many textbooks, rely on patterns that do not have an ictus point, that moment of rebound that defines the end of one beat and the start of another. The ictus is extremely important in defining a clear pattern and hence in creating concise ensemble singing. The sweeping patterns often illustrated in textbooks, however, do not allow for an ictus point on each beat, rendering them ineffective. If one closely observes experienced, professional conductors in concert, it is rare to see any of them use these sweeping gestures when information needs to be clearly communicated. While experienced ensembles can sing cleanly without continuously provided beats, younger groups usually cannot.

Singers live from ictus to ictus, while conductors live from rebound to rebound.

There is another problem with these sweeping gestures, and that is that they are inherently unbalanced in execution. In a sweeping four pattern, for example, beat one takes X amount of time to execute as one moves, say, ten inches to the conductor's left, to the second beat of the pattern:



Beat two to beat three covers nearly twice that distance, yet the conductor is expected to cover this greater distance in the same allotted time as he or she covered the distance traveled to the first beat. This means that the conductor must now change the speed of the rebound in order to get to the next beat in the same, exact amount of time.

Changing the speed of the rebound is an inherently dangerous thing to do, since the primary job of the conductor is to convey an accurate tempo in order to allow the ensemble to perform together. To continually change the speed of the rebound invites a distorted tempo. While a good conductor may instinctually rely on his or her innate musicianship to keep a steady pulse, it seems easier to learn from the beginning a technique that allows the young conductor to regulate and maintain this steady pulse.

A modified version of these common sweeping patterns is presented here for two principal reasons. First, the patterns outlined here are more balanced in their design, doing away with the need to constantly make shifts in the speed of the rebound. Secondly, they provide clear ictus points, and consequently relay a strong, steady internalized pulse. Since the primary function of a conductor is to keep an ensemble precisely together, the ability to internalize and communicate a steady pulse is critical to conducting success.

Study and eventual mastery of these exercises and patterns will develop a technical basis for conducting. One learns three-octave scales in every key as a pianist, but that does not imply that the player's upcoming recital will consist of showing off how well she can play scales. Conducting, likewise, does not consist of performing textbook techniques in front of your choir. It consists of drawing on the technical skills you have acquired, combined with experience and musicianship, to develop conducting gestures which are not only individual, but clear, concise, and meaningful. Good communication as a conductor is further reliant upon other factors as well. Among these is meaningful eye contact with your choir, an active and involved posture, good body language, breathing with your singers, and clear musical intentions.

Conducting requires more than reproducing beat patterns in front of your ensemble.

Do you use a baton?

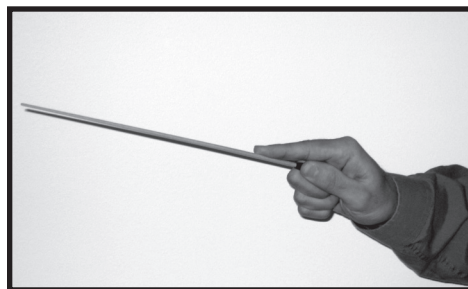
A conducting baton is a magnifying glass. It allows the conductor to make larger gestures more easily. This allows for clear communication to a larger ensemble, which is the reason that instrumental conductors typically use a baton and choral conductors (who often deal with smaller ensembles) more typically do not. Those lines are blurring more frequently in recent times, as more well-known orchestral conductors are opting not to use a baton (freeing their hands to be more expressive), while more choral conductors use one. The choice is really the individual's to make. I usually have my students begin without a baton, but I introduce its use relatively early in the course of study so they can be comfortable using one.

I advocate choosing a light-weight baton anywhere from 12 to 18 inches in length. Use a grip that firmly but lightly grasps the cork or wooden end of the baton. Allow the fingers to curl under; avoid the index finger on top of the baton and don't let the pinkie finger stick out to the side. Hold the baton so the tip is pointed away from you, forming an extension of the arm. Don't allow the baton to turn sideways so that you conduct parallel to the body. Finally, make sure the ictus points are indicated at the tip of the baton, not in the fingers or wrists. Imagine that the tip of the baton is a piece of chalk and that you are writing your pattern on a chalkboard, and you should get the proper idea.

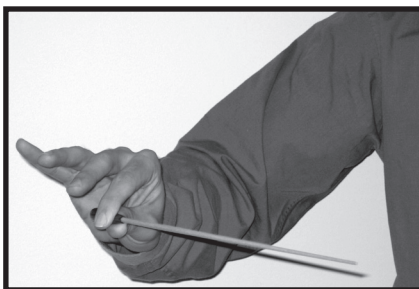


Correct Posture with Baton

Common Pitfalls



Finger on the baton shaft



Extended pinkie

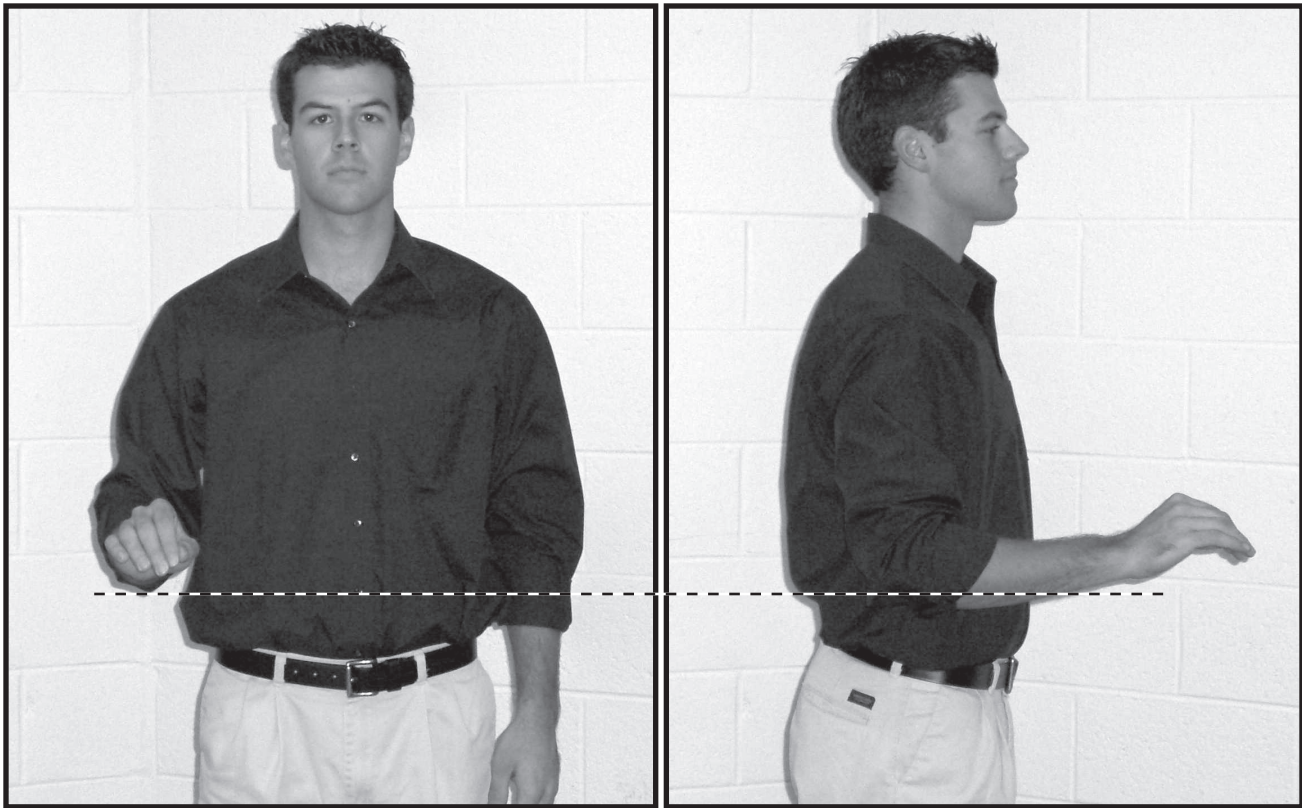


Baton turned sideways

Ideally, conductors should be able to conduct clearly with or without this magnifier. If used, remember that the baton should function as an organic extension of the arm and hand that hold it. The key to its effective use is to move the ictus point to the very end of the stick. With practice, the baton can become a familiar and comfortable tool.

Conducting a Pulse

The first step in building these patterns for conducting is to find and hold a steady, recurring pulse. Begin by taking a relaxed body stance, with the shoulders squared and both arms hanging loosely at your sides. Then, slowly lift the right arm from the elbow until the forearm is parallel to the floor. Let your hand be relaxed, with the fingers held lightly together. Try not to move your elbow out from your body, but let it be relaxed at your side (at the same time, do not keep it hugged tightly to your torso).



Repeat this several times until your arm begins to feel comfortable in this position. This relaxed position, parallel to the floor, will define the bottom of the *conducting box* and is sometimes called the *conducting plane*. It is at this plane (shown as a dashed line in the figures above) that you will communicate the majority of the information you need to give to your ensemble. By establishing this plane, you are telling your singers or players where the important information will come: here lie the ictus points that provide the consistent pulse that conveys a steady tempo. Note that the conducting box also has a third dimension: depth. Your conducting should also normally lie within a regulated distance away from your torso.

Once you feel comfortable with your plane, raise your hand to chin level, trying not to move your shoulder too much. This level, for now, will constitute the top of the conducting box. When you have established this level, let your arm fall relaxed back to your side. Do this several times, feeling each time the weight of your arm as it falls. This weight is important: begin to internalize the feeling of falling by thinking of it happening simultaneously in the center of the body. Practice letting your arm fall with no muscle tension and no feeling of resistance.

The conducting box occupies an area roughly from the bottom of your chin to your waist and from shoulder to shoulder. The bottom of this box is the conducting plane. The depth of the conducting box should also be consistent.

Next, let your arm fall from the top of the box and stop it at the conducting plane (rather than letting it fall all the way to your side). Don't lose the feeling of the weight of gravity that you had when your arm fell to your side. This feeling of internalized weight is essential to maintaining a steady, even pulse or beat. The bottom of the conducting plane should be slightly elastic so that when your hand falls down, there is a bit of rebound. Don't break your wrist. For now, think of your arm, wrist, and hand as one unit, with the elbow as the primary hinge for movement.

Now pick a fairly relaxed tempo, say quarter note = 80. Simply bounce up and down on the vertical axis you just established, without losing the feeling of weight and rebound at the bottom of the conducting box. Practice this exercise in front of a mirror until the feeling of weight is internalized and the motion looks and feels natural and comfortable. Watch yourself to be sure that your shoulder isn't moving unnecessarily, and that your arm returns to the conducting plane for each ictus point. (The downbeat of the three and four pattern will be performed in the same way as this bounce beat.)

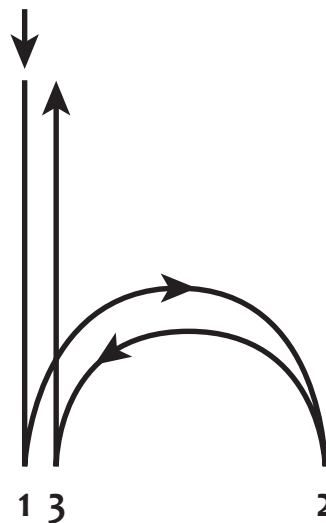
Basic Patterns

There are really only three basic patterns, which suffice for nearly any meter in music: the two, three, and four patterns. The tempo, the meter, and the equality (or inequality) of every beat in a measure are the factors in deciding how to conduct that measure of music.

The Three Pattern

We begin with a three pattern, the easiest one to balance and practice. The downbeat of the three pattern is performed like the bounce beat introduced above. For the second beat of the pattern, simply add a smaller bounce to the right of the downbeat. It is smaller for two reasons: it is not as important an ictus to your ensemble as the downbeat, and because the time vs. space ratio needs to stay the same.

The upbeat, or *anacrusis*, is the upward motion of the bounce preceding the rebound just introduced. This can be shown schematically like this:



When you practice, make sure that each ictus or beat has rebound to it, and that each maintains the internalized feeling of weight you first practiced. Ensure, as well, that each of the three ictuses lands on a level, consistent conducting plane. The three pattern is also used for measures of $\frac{3}{8}$ meter in a fast tempo.

The downbeat should always drop on an axis from the right shoulder. It should not be placed in the center of the body.