

## Clinic: So Who Needs a Conductor Anyway?

presented by Henry Charles Smith  
reported by Faith Farr

Henry Charles Smith began his presentation “Who needs a conductor anyway?” by asking us to sing *My Country 'tis of Thee*. With no gesture or signal there was just an awkward silence, as we looked at him and each other. Finally someone started, weakly, tentatively. Others joined in raggedly. Then Henry helped. He gave us a starting pitch. Then a starting signal; a cut-off; another beginning fast, then slow, then staccato, then legato. Who needs a conductor? Clearly this group of professional musicians did!

Henry cautioned us that clearly a conductor can help a lot. However, a conductor can also hinder. We must be careful not to show forte while we verbally ask for piano. Henry cautioned against big lunging gestures to try to gather the group together in a fast passage. Big indicates slower and louder, the opposite of what will rescue the group. Henry recommended using big melding gestures in a very limited way — maybe once a month. We must be aware that when we go expansive for the melody, we are deserting our oom-pah accompaniment.

Henry demonstrated the “strike zone” box where conducting gestures take place. Like reaching out to shake someone’s hand, the gestures are between your shoulders and your waist, in front of your body. Gestures outside the “strike zone” won’t be seen, or won’t be interpreted correctly. Notice that all beats are down and in the same place “in the box” of the strike zone. To prove this, hold your left hand out palm up in front of you. Conduct  $\frac{4}{4}$  and you will see that you strike your left hand with your right hand exactly on the beat.

Legato is in the wrist — conduct as if under water. Lead with the wrist and let the hand follow. Staccato requires a break in the wrist. Marcato requires no wrist break, but move the whole arm and hand as one.

Henry provided many recommendations for conductor’s study:

- 1) Study the form. For example, *Twinkle Twinkle* is ABA. *My Country* is AB but unequal: 6 +(4+4) or 6+8 bars. First do overall score analysis, and then hang the details on it.
- 2) Practice transposition by being fluent in all clefs. Transposition can easily be accomplished if you mentally change the clef and the key signature. Why

bother? Because the conductor needs to hear pitches from the score. You need to hear that the B natural should be B $\flat$  and tell the horns to play F natural, not F $\sharp$ .

- 3) Transposition is part of solfège — the art of hearing what you see, and seeing what you hear. Should you practice fixed doh or moveable doh? Henry says, both. Fixed doh gives you the note name, which is the name of the sound. Conductors need fixed doh to deal with transpositions. Moveable doh gives you function, the direction of melodic and harmonic motion. Conductors need to understand harmonic motion, appoggiaturas, dissonance and other musical signals of dynamics.
- 4) Know every note in the score. We take for granted that the concerto soloist will know every note of their part by heart. We assume that the good section player will know every note of their part. The expectation for the

conductor can be no less.

- 5) Include listening to recordings as part of your score analysis and preparation. You need to know the traditions.

- 6) How do you set the tempo? Many



Henry Charles Smith

factors will affect the tempo: the speed of the fastest notes; the speed of the harmonic rhythm; the style of the period; the instrumentation; the metronome marking, and whether it was the composer who put it there;

### Transposition Chart

Instrument	Sounds	Clef to read	Key signature to read	When preceded by an accidental...
B $\flat$ trumpet	M2 lower	tenor (up 8va)	+2 flats	lower B, E
Clarinet in A	m3 lower	soprano	+3 sharps	raise F, C, G
E $\flat$ alto sax	M6 lower	bass (up 8va)	+3 flats	lower B, E, A
Horn in D	m7 lower	alto	+2 sharps	raise F, C
Horn in E	m6 lower	bass	+4 sharps	raise F, C, G, D
Horn in F	P5 lower	mezzo soprano	+1 flat	lower B
Horn in G	P4 lower	baritone	+1 sharp	raise F

Suppose your E $\flat$  alto sax is looking at an F Major scale.



This sounds a M6 lower. Read the notes in bass clef (up an octave), and change the key signature 3 keys towards flats. The E $\flat$  alto sax will sound:



Suppose in a different piece, your Clarinet in A is looking at an F Major scale:



This sounds a m3 lower. Read the notes in soprano clef, and change the key signature 3 keys towards sharps. The Clarinet in A will sound:



the length of the phrase — if it is too long to sing, you are going too slow; and the acoustics of the hall. Leave more time for the reverb in a live hall.

- 7) Repertoire choice is crucial. If it is too hard, our students will be frustrated. If it is too easy, they will be bored.
- 8) It is essential to be introduced well at a clinic so that the students you are working with know something about you. The introduction must get their attention, and get their respect.

### Micro Rhythms

Many musicians develop perfect pitch, or at least a good memory for the tuning A. Henry challenged us also to develop the perfect tick — a 120 metronome we can recall at will. Just as we can calculate any pitch if we have a solid A to start with, we can learn to calculate any tempo if we have a solid 120 to start with. This skill is the secret to accurately handling tempo changes and to helping your ensemble with cross rhythms.

For example, start with 120. Conducting 60 is easy; it's just twice as slow. To get to 80, start at 120, and feel the eighth-note subdivision; the beat that lasts as long as three eighth notes is 80. To find 90, feel the triplet at 120, then 4 of the triplet notes = 1 beat at 90. To get to 180, feel the triplet at 120, then 2 of the triplet notes = 1 beat at 180.

120 to 60 (♩ constant)

120 to 80 (♩ constant)

120 to 90 (♩ constant)

120 to 180 (♩ constant)

Henry then led us through some cross-rhythm exercises. When the meter changes, or when music has cross-rhythms, we must be able to feel and express both meters, or we are in danger of hindering our ensembles, not helping them.

Conduct 2 and count 3; the common denominator is the triplet. Conduct 3 and count 2; the common denominator is the eighth note.

Conduct 3 and count 4; the common denominator is the sixteenth note. (You need this if you are going to conduct slow Brahms.) Conducting 4 and counting 6 is hard. Start by conducting 4 and counting 3; then switch the 3 to 6.

Henry reminisced about many conductors he had played under, including Beecham, Ormandy and Szell. He never saw anyone who wasn't totally prepared and he rarely saw an invented beat pattern. Once Stravinsky conducted and got lost in *The Fairy's Kiss*; Henry thought it was reassuring to see that Stravinsky was human too. Copeland and Bernstein were friends and taught each other. Copeland learned conducting from Bernstein; Bernstein learned composition from Copeland.

Henry left us with a cheery "Happy Down Beats!" and his mottos: Be prepared; Don't waste anyone's time; Be respectful. We have a wonderful affirming job; we get to influence young people using the greatest music ever written.

*Faith Farr teaches at MacPhail Center and her home studio. She self-publishes Foundations for Music Reading, an introductory theory curriculum for young readers. She has been editor of this magazine since 1996. ♪*