



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Conducting Pedagogy for Practical Purposes

by J. David Arnott

Do your students look up at you occasionally on the podium while you are conducting? Do they look at you only in the specific places you have suggested that they look up at you? Do you give them a good reason to look up more than just for an occasional glance? If they do look up, what do they see? Do your “performance issues” possibly stem from ensemble problems due to lack of visual contact between your players and your stick? This article will address some of these issues and offer tips for improving your musical and technical relationship with your orchestra.

So often I see student and community orchestras that begin the music with the conductor’s downbeat and quickly thereafter shift into “autopilot mode.” The conductor thus becomes a sheep rather than remaining the shepherd, following right along, trying to look good, and hoping for the best. This is one of the most frustrating issues for me personally, as it is a self-perpetuating problem that may only be resolved by forcing the issue. It does not, however, have to be a painful resolution — it may be as exciting and fun as your creativity allows.

My orchestra suffers from this malady; (it is a fairly young but generally enthusiastic orchestra and, in their defense, a rapidly improving orchestra). As a long-term project of ensemble-improvement (ensemble: from the Old French meaning “together”), I am planning on performing a Strauss waltz this year (either *The Emperor* or *The Blue Danube* — I have not yet decided) and I plan to use it as a teaching tool for ensemble playing with regard to stick following and responsiveness. The pieces are not terribly difficult and great liberties may be taken with tempi as well as at the start of each section or waltz. One only need observe a New Year’s Eve concert by the Vienna Philharmonic to get an idea of the possibilities for rubato included in one of these babies. And best of all, I will promise to the orchestra never to conduct the piece the same way twice — so that my musicians

must watch always; (ah, you might say, such power is mine!)

How will I be assured that when I slow down, they will slow down with me? And when I speed up, that they do follow right along? There are many ways of achieving this result, beginning with conducting tutti quarter note scales while varying tempi and moving on to really easy pieces that are easily memorized (or portions thereof) such as the first couple of phrases of *Brandenburg Concerto Number 3* or even the Pachelbel *Canon*. It is preferable to employ a fun piece that everyone likes well enough to work with you on issues of following.

Here are some ideas that might help:

Videotape yourself conducting

As I write this, it is finally summertime and, for me, it is a time for self-reflection. It is the time of year to review all the videotapes I made of myself from the previous year. There is never enough time during the academic year to do this properly, so I get a big bowl of popcorn and a yellow legal pad and start making notes. What is that you say? You didn’t have tapes of yourself to peruse? One of the very best methods for improving our conducting skills is by the study of our own conducting. This is not a time to be shy — get tape of the front view *and* the back view! Tape rehearsals *and* concerts! Every conducting program I have ever seen employs the use of videotape for self-incrimination! Pictures do not lie. Are your gestures appropriate to the scope of the music? Are you always facing the melody, wherever it may be? Do you ever notice yourself making eye contact with a back stand, or do you just commune with your principals? Are your cues early enough to be helpful — or late enough to be distracting? (Oops, there it was?) Are your piano gestures distinguishable from your forte gestures? When you need to go faster, do you beat smaller or larger? Most importantly — if you were in this orchestra, would you be satisfied with the direction being given?

(I always hate that question!)

Watch videotape of other conductors to see what they can get away with

I watch a lot of concerts and have seen hundreds of conductors over the years and I am always amazed at how the oddest stick technique and grossest gestures (in the “large” sense of the word) produce some of the most amazing performances. Having tried rather unsuccessfully to emulate some of the techniques I have witnessed over the years, I have come to the realization that conducting styles must be appropriate for the group you are leading. Is your group capable of playing from phrasal gestures or must they constantly have time beaten? Are you able to shape phrases with your left hand or are you consumed with controlling traffic or mirroring the beat with both hands? The question is — are you able to physically show phrases without tyrannically beating time throughout?

Consistency

When you are on the podium in performance, do your musicians see the same conductor they saw in rehearsal? Do you use different gestures in performance? Is the concert the first time you have conducted without the score? Generally, concerts are not the time to try out new techniques. Does the fact that the orchestra knows you finally cannot stop make a difference in their playing?

String quartets for your groups without conductor

An excellent method of developing musicianship skills in your orchestra is to have them play string quartets without a conductor. This technique can be just as fun as it is instructive. Maybe have them arranged in non-traditional seating as an added challenge—facing away from each other or in a straight line across the room. Or from traditional seating—have the back stands of each section try to play together

with each other then have the front stands do the same to show them how much more difficult ensemble playing is the further you are away from the podium and how important it is to have constant visual contact with the stick.

I believe that the way an orchestra plays is a direct reflection upon the musicianship

skills of the director (short guest-conducting appearances excepted). Make some tapes this year and spend some time on your next break reflecting on how your group might make you look better!

J. David Arnott is an Assistant Professor of Music at The College of St. Benedict/St. John's University where he teaches violin and

viola and directs the symphony orchestra. He holds degrees in viola from The Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, The Curtis Institute of Music, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Arnott is currently a member of the viola section of The Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra and is the second violinist of the Tresca Quartet. ♪