

All-State: Conducting Basics: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

presented by J. David Arnott — reported by Carlin Stiles

There are two gentlemen I would like to introduce to the orchestra: Maestro Malo and Maestro Bueno. Both these great conductors will be working with the All-State Orchestra today so we may learn more about how to better conduct our middle and high school level orchestras.

Upon stepping onto the podium Maestro Malo began to shuffle through his scores and then announced to the orchestra, "I would like to start... 1-2-3-4-5-6 measures after B." He then immediately raised his arms and dropped a downbeat without any preparation while the orchestra frantically tried to play. Frustrated by the lack of immediate sound, Maestro Malo changed plans and switched to playing the beginning and started the orchestra again. A few measures in, he dropped his arms again, shook his head and made indistinct guttural noises and cried, "Again!" He did this two more times and on the third time he let the orchestra continue on. Within 8 measures, Maestro Malo was waving the stick above his head and was buried deep within the score. He heard something he didn't like in the violin sections and upon turning to the first violins he mumbled, "Firsts that was not right," then turning he continued, "and seconds... try it again." And the orchestra began again with no real feedback. Maestro Malo counted 1234 and then continued on with the piece in a completely different tempo, causing a rough start for the orchestra. His left hand started to mirror the right, then it traveled to the hip, to the pocket, and then it landed, planted on his slightly rotund belly. Maestro Malo apparently heard something he did not recognize and his head went back into the score and he began conducting like a monkey with its hands in the air. His beat pattern became more and more erratic as Malo got more and more lost and finally the orchestra disinte-

grated into chaos. In his 90-minute rehearsal, the bass section has not played a single note.

When Maestro Bueno arrived for rehearsal, he cheerfully greeted the concert master and invited her to tune the orchestra. Once the orchestra was tuned he asked them to take out the Grieg because he would like to work on a few spots before reading the piece. "At this spot," he mused "I would like a really ethereal sound and it all begins with the inside second violins. Seconds, can we try that?" He allowed them to try it two or three times, cueing their entrance only with a slight inhalation of breath and it sent a shiver down the spine of the rest of the orchestra. His next spot occurred in the middle of two letters. "Tutti orchestra, please find A and count 1-2-3-4-5 measures. Here we are going to take two full down bows with a fast bow lift in between." After the orchestra tried it once, he picked up his fiddle and demonstrated what he wanted it to look like and asked the orchestra to imitate his bow distribution. After 2 tries and direct feedback from Maestro Bueno, the orchestra succeeded in making two large, full, down-bow chords. Bueno carried on and inquired, "At C, what expressive marks do you see? And how should we interpret them?" Several students raised their hands and presented possible answers that Bueno elaborated on and it morphed into a discussion on who is important at letter C. "The violas are important here because they are the beginning of the heartbeat. This movement is called *Heart Wounds* and within this heartbeat, we need to convey the emotions we want to express. Does the heart beat go tataTA or taTAta or TAtata?" The students decided it is the third option and Bueno asked the entire orchestra (because as he pointed out, this is a figure that shows up in all the parts) to sing the heart beat rhythm with the correct infection. He then

moved it to being played on the instrument so the whole orchestra created one unified sound. Satisfied with the work completed on specific spots, Bueno asked the orchestra to return to the beginning, keeping in mind all that had been discussed. He set down his baton, because as he claims, it allows for more expressive motions in both the right and left hand, breaths, and the second violins sneaked in with a sustained pitch. As the piece continued, Maestro Bueno stayed present to the orchestra and his eyes travel to the sections that have important melodic material. At the end of the rehearsal, Maestro Bueno thanked the orchestra for their hard work.

In reflection on my own conducting, I see aspects of Maestro Malo and Maestro Bueno in myself. I need continued development in the basic clarity of my conducting pattern: placement of my ictus, precision of my prep beat, accuracy of my cues, etc. The area I feel needs the most work is in the expressive gestures of my left hand. A mentor of David's used to say, "If your left hand has nothing good to say, put it in your pocket where it can do no harm." My left hand is certainly guilty of harm! I have a tendency to mirror, and to make vague, unclear gestures with my left hand when it is not awkwardly getting in my way. My goal is through nightly, exact score study to identify one or two expressive gestures to practice and incorporate in specific spots in the repertoire I conduct. This will be a process. I must be patient and diligent in my quest for improvement, but by keeping Maestro Malo and Maestro Bueno in mind as I lead my orchestras, I will become a better conductor.

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