

What does your conducting say?

What Does Your Conducting Say About You?
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Common concerns observed in choral conductors

- Mirroring
- Minimal use of left hand (stroke conductor)
- Excessive tension
 - o Conducting too high or too stiffly
- Too fluid
 - o Lack of ictus or vaguely moving through pattern (or no pattern!)
 - o Passive or vague gestures (especially cues and releases; especially prominent in choral conductors)
- Lack of expression or stuck in patterns (metronome/robot; common in instrumental conductors)
- Excessive gestures (Leonard Bernstein wannabee)
- Lack of eye contact (buried in score)
- Conducting does not express music accurately (opposite day)
 - o Large during soft passages
 - o Sharp staccato or marcato when should be lyrical and legato
- Too many focal points or subdivisions
 - o Multiple ictus in hand and arm (elbow, wrist, palm, fingers, baton)
 - o Head moving and showing an ictus along with the hand
 - o Movement in knees, legs, or torso creates an additional ictus
- Most musicians consider it to be unthinkable to perform in public without practice, but many conductors rarely practice their conducting outside a course during undergraduate or masters studies!
 - o Many conductors “work it out” in front of the ensemble
- Most musicians would never consider performing without going through an adequate warm-up routine, but how often do you warm-up to conduct?

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Influential people and theories of movement that apply to conducting

Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) - Ukrainian born scientist, engineer, and first European black-belt in Judo who developed knee problems during a soccer match while studying in Paris, moved to London during WWII, then Israel and taught in Europe and US. Developed his Feldenkrais Method to avoid being wheelchair-bound when knee problems resurfaced.

- “Awareness Through Movement” to create mindful sensitivity and reduce effort/tension in order to avoid injury and maximize effectiveness.

Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) - Australian born Shakespearean actor who developed chronic laryngitis and through self-awareness discovered that excess tension in neck and body were to blame.

- Alexander Technique and Body Mapping to discover self-awareness, proper bodily position/function, and how to reduce tension/effort in order to avoid injury and maximize effectiveness.
- Barbara Conable and concept of Body Mapping

Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) - Hungarian born dancer and choreographer who worked in Germany until WWII and then moved to UK and introduced Modern Educational Dance into the schools.

- Movement Analysis Theory
- Three planes of movement
- Effort elements and actions

Rodney Eichenberger (Florida State University) - *What They See is What You Get* (video). Conductor's physical gestures, posture, etc. influence vocal production

Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 Hour Theory (Outliers) – It takes approximately 10,000 hours of mindful practice in order to achieve mastery.

- About 90 minutes of practice every day for 20 years or three hours of practice every day for 10 years.
- However, “practice does not automatically make perfect. Practice makes permanent!”
- 10,000 hours is a convenient landmark for “a lot of practice” but it must be mindful

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How to apply these techniques to conducting

- Create an open ready position that invites singers to sing
 - Begin from ground up to create a balanced skeletal structure that requires minimum amount of muscular “holding” and allows an active flow of movement throughout the whole body
 - o Connectivity between motion of upper and lower body halves
 - Even distribution of weight through pelvis, into legs, through feet, and into floor.
 - Naturally rounded, lengthened, and free spine and neck
 - *Four Concepts of Good Use* in Alexander Technique
 - o Allow your neck to release so head can balance forward and up.
 - o Allow your torso to release into length and width.
 - o Allow your shoulders to release out to the sides.
 - o Allow your legs to release away from your pelvis.
- Create an accurate Conductor's Body Map - Five joints in shoulder/arms
 - Clavicle at sternum
 - Clavicle at shoulder
 - Shoulder's ball and socket joint
 - Elbow
 - Wrist
- Develop awareness of self through movement analysis and reflection
- Preparatory gestures, postures, and breaths should reflect what we want singers to do
- Kinesphere - the area surrounding the body within the reaching possibilities of the limbs without changing your place.
- Central Path - Spatial shaping which is initiated from the center of the body, traveling in radiating pathways like spokes

Create meaningful and expressive gestures through Laban Movement Analysis

- Three planes of movement vertical, horizontal, and sagittal
 - Practice moving within planes with both hands mirroring
 - Practice hands moving at different speeds in the same plane
 - Then move in different planes at the same speed
 - Finally move in different planes at different speeds
 - Shaping - moving through all planes to sculpt three dimensional forms in space

What does your conducting say?

- Effort Elements – changes in speed, changes in direction, changes in focus, changes in energy (Flow, Weight, Time, and Space)
 - Flow – variation in the quality of bodily tension (Free and Bound)
 - Weight – sensation of force or burden exerted (Light and Strong/Heavy)
 - Time – expenditure or duration of time (Sustained and Quick)
 - Space – manner in which energy is focused (Direct and Indirect)
- Action verb assigned to each combination of three Effort Elements with Weight, Space, and Time predominating changes in Flow.
 - Float (Indirect, Light, Sustained) – treading water, bubble wand
 - Wring (Indirect, Heavy, Sustained) – wringing beach towel, screwdriver
 - Glide (Direct, Light, Sustained) – ice skating, spreading PB or jelly
 - Press (Direct, Heavy, Sustained) – pushing car, ironing clothes
 - Flick (Indirect, Light, Quick) – brushing lint off clothes, light switch
 - Slash (Indirect, Heavy, Quick) – fencing, tennis serve, fishing
 - Dab (Direct, Light, Quick) – typing, tapping a window, tip-toe
 - Punch (Direct, Heavy, Quick) – boxing, karate, hammer
- Action verbs are effective as left hand gestures or basis for right hand pattern
- Practice right hand transitions by changing one of the three Effort Elements
 - Float to Wring - change weight from light to heavy
 - Wring to Press - change space from indirect to direct
 - Press to Punch - change time from sustained to quick
 - Punch to Slash - change space from direct to indirect
 - Slash to Flick - change weight from heavy to light
 - Flick to Dab - change space from indirect to direct
 - Dab to Glide - changing time from quick to sustained
 - Glide to Float - change space from direct to indirect
 - Float to Flick - change time from sustained to quick
 - Flick to Slash - change weight from light to heavy
 - Slash to Punch - change space from indirect to direct
 - Punch to Dab - change weight from heavy to light
 - Dab to Punch - change weight from light to heavy
 - Punch to Press - change time from quick to sustained
 - Press to Glide - change weight from heavy to light

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- Glide to Dab - change time from sustained to quick
- Dab to Flick - change space from direct to indirect
- Flick to Float - change time from quick to sustained
- Float to Glide - change space from indirect to direct
- Glide to Press - change weight from light to heavy
- Press to Wring - change space from direct to indirect
- Wring to Slash - change time from quick to sustained
- Slash to Wring - change time from quick to sustained
- Wring to Float - change weight from heavy to light
- Alphabet exercise with baton or hand - write alphabet (or words) in air transitioning between action verbs
- Practice left hand gestures by randomly adding one as expressive element on various beats

Laban Quotes

- "...Throughout life there is a continual stretching of the body upwards. This is the line of growth which is most apparent. It is also the muscular response to the action of gravity...Man is able to fill the space around him with his movements and positions, or he can restrict himself to straight lines through space neglecting the many extensions of space and using only one at any given time."
- "We must remember that the form of a movement is not one line only; it is not an arabesque or a curve, and also not a single broken or curved surface as we may see on a crystalized mineral, but a cataract of forms, as if a heap of jewels or precious stones had been poured out vehemently, glistening, jumping, breaking. And more than this: it is as if the single forms would grow and shrink, swallow each other or give birth to new ones, changing their shapes in a continuous transformation."
- "Solo dance is a duet between dancer and his environment, or a dancer and his inner world. The former is subjectively real and the latter subjectively ideal. More concrete is the play and inter-action between people in which rhythms of fleeing

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and following, of sympathy and antipathy, appear simultaneously and therefore more powerfully.”

Resources for further reading

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