

Conducting

Conducting is the art of directing, moulding and shaping a performance by means of gesture. This involves communicating time, phrasing, dynamics, mood, instrumental entries and the features of the music.

The highly amusing history of conducting.

Ancient Greek musicians were said to beat time by stamping their feet in footwear made of iron. Could this have been the first 'sole music'?

Musicians of the medieval and early baroque period did not use conductors as groups were small enough to communicate with each other by body movements, gestures and listening to breathing. This is actually quite simple to do even in the dark (which you should try with your group), as it relies on listening and being physically and musically 'in tune' with your fellow musicians. Group leaders were often harpsichord players and 'led' from the harpsichord.

As instrumental groups grew in size and volume, the need for a visible leader became clear. By the mid 17th century, conductors were using a long stick with a metal point to strike the floor. Jean-Baptiste Lully was the first conducting fatality as while conducting in a very bad mood (always very dangerous), he accidentally drove the baton (big stick) through his foot and later died of blood poisoning.

The modern baton first appeared in 1812 when Mosel first used one at the Vienna Music Festival. Soon Beethoven and Mendelssohn adopted the practice. Batons were originally fairly heavy but today most conductors use fairly short, light, well balanced batons. Some composers pay very large amounts of money to have batons custom made involving measuring the forearm etc. You can also buy ones that work fairly well at a music shop for around \$12. Conductors soon realized the new power they had and began 'interpreting' works, sometimes making 'improvements'. Towards the end of the 19th century Verdi complained that the conductor had now replaced the singer as the composer's worst enemy!

How do you do it?

At first, conductors start by 'beating time' and indicating the meter and tempo of the music. Once conductors progress they soon discover that while this is important, it is by no means the real job at hand. Much of the art of conducting is difficult to teach as it is all about communicating ideas and musicianship visually to your group. As many unskilled conductors do this with eyebrows, knees and shoulders, the potential to look like an idiot is fairly large.

Task: (guaranteed to make you look silly).

- 1) Choose a partner
- 2) Tie your arms behind your back and close your mouth.
- 3) Try and indicate a tempo to your partner, have them clap the tempo along with you.
- 4) Try and change the tempo.
- 5) Try to make their clapping louder and softer without speeding up or slowing down. (This last one is very hard!)

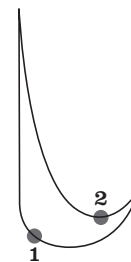
List some different ways you discovered to communicate without talking or flapping your arms.

The Preparatory Beat.

This is the most important thing a conductor does. Presuming the music is starting on the first beat of the bar, the conductor needs to give an 'up beat' before the musicians will start. This is for several reasons; to give the woodwind and brass a chance to breathe, to set the tempo, to prepare the style of what is to come and let the musicians know when you require them to play. Before starting this beat it is important that the conductor makes eye contact with the musicians. Arms need to be poised so the group knows something is about to happen. Here are some of the basic beats - try them!

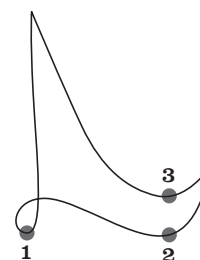
Beating two.

Start with a nice big swoopy motion from the right hand side and start the first 'down beat'. These always are on the first beat of the bar. The horizontal plane is a place just above your belly button where the group knows you are going to expect the music to start.



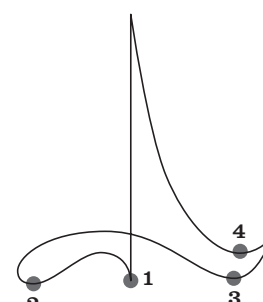
Beating three.

Always remember that the 2nd beat goes to the right hand side of the body. This is the opposite of 4/4 time, so the group has warning about which time signature they are in.



Beating four.

This pattern is beginning to look complex but it is not really. This is the most common of all the time signatures.



Conducting Dynamics

Most of the basic conducting manuals will tell you that the conductor controls the volume of their group with the left hand. This is mostly garbage after about lesson 2 in conducting. Volume is generally controlled by the size of the conductor's gesture or how much space they are taking up. If they have both of their arms spread wide then chances are you are going to play something loudly. If they are crouched in or have their hands very closely together then it will be soft. While using knees and shoulders is extremely bad form for beating time, the entire body is always involved in conducting. If it is just your arms then you will not get the results you are after. Having said that - there is such a thing as being over the top as well!

Imagine you are conducting an orchestra.

You have three pieces in your concert.

The first piece is very dramatic and starts at *ff* - the full orchestra. It is stately, fairly slow and very grand. Describe your pose as you conduct this piece. You should start with the position of your feet and move up to describe your entire body, including the look on your face. Try to describe the effect you are trying to create.

The second piece is soft and smooth. It has a lovely flowing melody played by the flutes. Describe how your approach to this would be different from the first piece, how would your body be different?

The third piece is fairly loud but also very fast and very staccato and spiky. How would this piece differ from the pieces above. How are you going to show 'spiky' with your baton and body?

Conductors often have the reputation of being control freaks. Do you think this is a justifiable statement? What leads to this kind of stereotype?

