Walking the Artistic Tightrope: Musical Expression and Clarity of Conducting Gestures

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Foreword: On Becoming a Conductor

The late nineteenth-century German conductor Bruno Walter had the opportunity to watch Hans von Bülow conduct the Berlin Philharmonic in 1889. After the performance, he wrote,

“I saw in Bülow’s face, the glow of inspiration and the concentration of energy. I felt the compelling force of his gestures, noticed the attention and devotion of the players, and was conscious of the expressiveness and precision of their playing. It became at once clear to me that it was that one man who was producing the music, that he had transformed those hundred performers into his instrument and that he was playing it as a pianist played the piano. That evening decided my future... I had decided to become a conductor.”

I started conducting with a similar experience at Kelby Sappington’s senior conducting concert of Berlioz’s *Symphony Fantastique*. I felt the orchestra pulsating with energy during the performance, as if it were some sort of dragon that had come to life. And I saw the conductor, who simultaneously tamed the beast and gave it life, nurtured it to breathe white-hot, brilliant fire, and taught it to fly fearlessly through the open air. I left that concert thinking *that’s* what I want to do.

Everything was brighter on the podium, somehow more alive. Making eye contact with a musician during a rehearsal or a performance, feeling that connection, and being able to hear it change the music kept me coming right back. I couldn’t stay away; I was humming everywhere I went, snapping my fingers and conducting imaginary orchestras. I felt the music everywhere, and

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I conducted every chance I got; I spent hours poring over scores, brainstorming gestures, practicing them to perfection, observing conductors in performance and in rehearsal.

All the while, I struggled with my identity as an aspiring conductor and an aspiring doctor. Growing up in a family of physicians, I had always known that I would one day be a doctor myself. My parents were real-life heroes, and I had decided very young that I wanted to be just like them, so that I could make a difference in people’s lives, be a part of their story, heal their wounds and make them whole again. Naturally, my passion for conducting presented a problem: I couldn’t shake off the feeling that becoming a musician meant I wasn’t doing my part for humanity. I constantly fantasized about becoming the next Bernstein or the next Alsop, but wasn’t I supposed to be a doctor? Would being a conductor be a selfish decision? If this is a matter of want vs. should, isn’t the answer already out there? But will I regret not seizing the opportunity of being a conductor when I look back at myself in thirty, forty years? I didn’t know; I was constantly fearful of discovering a true passion for conducting that would lead me to give up my path to becoming a doctor. But most of all, I wanted to see how far I could go with conducting. In my own egocentric logic, I reasoned that if I were meant to be the next Marin Alsop—if I were good enough—then who am I to fight my destiny? It would be an equal disservice to humanity to deprive it of the next Marin Alsop.

In the summer before my senior year, I was finally given a chance to test myself out against the big bad world of conducting. Ailee Rowe and I traveled through Europe to engage in various music-related activities ranging from musicals at the West End to wandering into Mass at the Anglican Church in the middle of London, attending a performance of Mozart’s Requiem by the Brussels Philharmonic, interviewing the conductor Maestro Hervé Niquét, and watching street performances at the Duomo in Milan. Then we began our month-long conducting
workshop with Dr. Hartenberger, the director of wind ensembles at the University of Georgia, during which I struggled to develop meaningful gestures that conveyed artistic expression, rather than the authoritative but often mechanical direction of the orchestra. I was faced with the task of stripping down the music and conceptualizing every independent aspect of it—rhythms, dynamics, articulations, phrasing—then translating those concepts into movement; it was by far the most difficult conducting lesson I had yet to face.

In the Senior fall semester, I presented Modest Mussorgsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain*, Mily Balakirev’s *In Bohemia*, and Alexander Glazunov’s *Autumn* in a joint conducting concert with Ailee. This experience harbored its own challenges, from rehearsing an orchestra for two hours non-stop, to working with professional musicians, writing program notes, and coordinating all the minute details of our concert. But the biggest challenge was incorporating into my conducting what I had learned over the summer, thereby developing my own conducting style that allowed for effective direction of the orchestra while maintaining the highest level of artistry in my gestures. Following the summer intensive, I had completely reworked my gestures to simply embody the music, only to realize that my gestures did not allow for effective communication with the orchestra. In the simplest sense, I had gone too far in the other direction—my gestures were beautiful, but not helpful during the rehearsal process when the performers weren’t familiar with the music yet. As a result, I was faced with the task of reconciling the clear-cut conducting style of Dr. Norcross and the expressionistic style of Dr. Hartenberger. By the end of the rehearsal process, I was able to finalize a set of gestures that effectively directed the orchestra while maintaining a level of artistic expressivity.

Despite the tremendous growth I felt I had achieved throughout the joint conducting project, I felt a need to apply my training in conducting. By gaining experience as a music
director and conductor outside of the classroom setting, I hoped to refine my conducting technique and style. As a result, I decided to take on a final conducting project at F&M to broaden my exposure to different ensembles and repertoire, and further develop my conducting style. Taking into account the limited availability of musicians, each concert presented repertoire for different small ensembles: strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion. Each concert involved approximately twelve to fifteen musicians and consisted of ten minutes of music, which was rehearsed for one hour the day before the concert, with a thirty-minute pre-performance dress rehearsal. Keeping in mind the limited rehearsal time per performance, each concert served as an opportunity to develop gestures that allowed for effective direction of the ensemble, as well as learn the idiosyncrasies of each instrument group. By engaging in a year-long conducting project targeting different gestural aspects of conducting, I believe I was able to develop my own conducting philosophy and style.

Each concert and the full list of repertoire are listed below:

**Conductors**

Saturday, October 1, 2016

*Night on Bare Mountain* by Modest Mussorgsky, arr. Rimsky-Korsakov

*In Bohemia* by Mily Balakirev

*Autumn* from ‘The Seasons Ballet’ by Alexander Glazunov

**Adagio**

Saturday January 28, 5:00 pm

*Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Osborne Barber
Tutti

Saturday February 25, 5:00 pm²; April 27, 2017, 5:00 pm

Swartzwald by Clarissa Grunwald ‘17

Passing of the Night by Dalton Fowler ‘18

The Transient by Christian Mechem ‘19

Tributes

Saturday, March 25, 5:00 pm

Fanfare for the Common Man by Aaron Copland

Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 2 by Joan Tower

Fanfare for the Common Cold by Peter Schickele (P.D.Q. Bach)

Homecoming³ Simple Symphony by Benjamin Britten

Three hundred and sixty four days have gone by since Ailee and I embarked on our conducting journey through Europe; I have thirteen days until I am done with my undergraduate studies. Throughout the last three years that I studied conducting, I’ve finally come to realize that music and medicine are two sides of the same coin; while one heals the body, the other heals the soul. And I’ve decided—not surprisingly—that I want to do both. Karl Paulnack, who served as the director of the Music Division of the Boston Conservatory 2002-2013, said in a famous welcome

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² The original concert on February 25, 2017 was canceled due to the thunderstorm warning. However, we were able to present all three pieces at the Award Ceremony on April 27, 2017.

³ This concert was canceled due to the unavailability of student musicians. However, I was given the chance to work with Allegretto Youth Orchestra Lancaster for their final rehearsal of Simple Symphony on February 21st, 2017.
address to the freshmen at Boston Conservatory,

“Someday at 8 PM someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft... You're here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul.”

The above statement has stayed with me from the first day I read it, and it has been pinned on my wall ever since. The thing is, I want to be a doctor when I grow up—but for me, that means I have to be a conductor as well. I'm not complaining; I hope that my music, and my conducting, allow me to help people through difficult times and to provide a home for others that I've found in music.

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Walking the Artistic Tightrope: Musical Expression and Clarity of Conducting Gestures

As Hector Berlioz argued in his treatise *The Conductor: The Theory of His Art*,

“...A bad singer only damages his own part; the incapable conductor ruins everything... Under such circumstances the most wonderful orchestra is paralyzed; the finest singers are annoyed and benumbed; there is neither spirit not unity. Under such direction the noblest flights of the author seem but folly, enthusiasm has all the heart knocked out of it, inspiration is thrown violently to the ground, the angel no longer has wings, the man of genius becomes a madman or fool, the divine statue is hurled from its pedestal and dragged in the mud.”

The question that stems from the conductor’s seemingly awesome—yet cataclysmic, as described above—potential is how the conductor achieves such results. Since the conductor performs in pantomime by use of gestures, I propose that the conductor’s influence stems from the use of gestures throughout the entire musical process, which contains three parts: the preparation of the work, the physical act of communication with the musicians during the rehearsal process, and the performance. While all three parts of the musical process involve the use of gestures, they fulfill different functions at each stage, which causes them to differ stylistically. Therein lies the problem of assessing a conductor’s artistic ability solely based on the use of expressive gestures during the final performance; such evaluations simply fail to acknowledge the conductor’s use of gestures throughout most of the musical process.

In this paper, I show that gestures must be subject to change throughout the musical process in order for the conductor to effectively lead the orchestra. I will begin by elucidating the process of gestural development through the first two steps of conducting: the score preparation

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and the rehearsal. Although the use of gestures in performance poses interesting questions regarding its use in communication with both the musicians and the audience, I will be focusing on the tricks of the trade that are often overlooked by the broader community. Since the conductor’s choice of gesture throughout the entire musical process—directive or expressive—must be able to raise the artistic standard of the performance, the employed gestures undergo a constant metamorphosis. While there is a need for clarity in the initial stages of rehearsal in which fewer expressive gestures are used depending on the level of musical ability and reasoning of the ensemble, there is always a need to increase the musical expressivity of the ensemble, which can only be achieved with increasing use of artistic gestures. As such, I argue that the use of exclusively directive or exclusively expressive gestures at the beginning of the rehearsal process, as well as the use of a fixed set of gestures during the rehearsal process—regardless of how clear or how beautiful the employed gestures are—is not indicative of good conducting if the conductor fails to continually raise the artistic standard.

To be a “good” conductor, then, requires a balance between the use of directive and expressive gestures; this balancing point is different for each orchestra, performance, rehearsal, repertoire, and the unforeseen circumstances of each time and day. As a result, conductors must be able to judge the state of the ensemble at any given time, and adjust their use of gestures to meet the needs of the musicians. While it seems that conductors are simply forced to “make it work,” using whatever means they find effective, each gestural decision—however spontaneous—requires intent for it to be effective. Moreover, effective gestures that contain intent do not arise spontaneously. As a result, the conductor must go through the process of gesture development, which requires meticulous conceptualization of the music during the process of score studying.
In the first stage of preparation, gestures are conceived purely as an ideal that upholds the spirit of the work. These gestures represent a form of communication between an abstract concept—the work—and the conductor, whose purpose is to embody the music in the purest form. At this stage, the conductor’s artistic activity remains in a theoretical sphere, in which the conductor works in isolation to understand the music using various historical sources, harmonic analysis, and different interpretations, all in an effort to create these ideal, artistic gestures. First, conductors must understand the historical context of the music—the composer’s life, the significance of the work for the composer, how the composer and his work fit into music history and the broader historical period, and the performance practices of the time. Although the historical research done by most conductors often doesn’t reach the level of scholarly examination, it should be noted that this process is not trivial, and provides crucial insights into how each conductor’s interpretation is formed.

Second, conductors must familiarize themselves with the work itself. Again, it should be noted that the required harmonic or motivic analysis does not reach the level of scholarly examination of a music theorist, but nonetheless plays a significant role in gesture development. The conductor must be able to identify each chord, the use of specific instrumentation and tone qualities within the chord, melody and counter-melody, the rhythm section, specific articulations, use of dynamics, phrasing, as well as the overall architecture of the piece.

And third, the conductor must also fully internalize the music during the process of score studying, which demands the ability to hear each of the specific components of the piece with rhythmic, harmonic, and stylistic precision. In short, the conductor must be aware of every single detail within the work and understand how each detail fits together. This allows the conductor to be able to create an appropriate interpretation for the work.
Lastly, the conductor should refer to other interpretations by looking at marked scores or recorded performances, which provides a standard for comparison, helpful in discerning particular colors and styles that the conductor may have initially missed. Furthermore, listening to various interpretations and performances serve as a way for conductors to internalize the music.

Only after fully internalizing the music via score studying can the conductor begin to create artistic gestures that best express the music. The gestures that arise out of this process primarily focus on the musical ideas, and are comprehensible only to the conductor and the conductor’s infinitely skillful yet imaginary orchestra. Though they may be lacking in practicality, these initial gestures must not be watered down by limitations of reality, because it is these ideal gestures, which foremost serve the music, that create the artistic impetus that propels the orchestra forward. This “artistic impetus” is discussed by the twentieth-century German conductor Hermann Scherchen, who argues that the conductor’s conception of the work must “[live] within him as an ideal, undimmed by obstacles of mechanism.”

Scherchen emphasizes that the maintenance of the artistic ideal is important because it allows the conductor to both internalize the music and communicate it to the musicians. Similarly, Dr. Proskurnya Oleg, an assistant professor of music at Texas A&M University and the music director of the Kingsville Symphony Orchestra, argues that:

“the principles of group leadership (either social or musical) suggest that an ‘inner’ action always precedes its visual (outer) manifestation. Every conductor’s gesture should be ignited and motivated by an uncompromised strength of the inner creative impulse. This impulse prompts the actions, once the conductor has

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formed an appropriate model of how a work should both sound and proceed through this concept in an actual performance.”

In short, Scherchen and Oleg’s arguments show that the gestures created in the first stage of their development as a culmination of historical research and score studying must exclusively serve the music. These gestures must meet the expressive needs of the music only, and act as the artistic ideal that the conductor must reach for. The “inner action,” as mentioned by Oleg, prompts an appropriate “outer manifestation,” which means that, by definition, the closer the conductor’s initial conceptualization is to the musical ideal, the closer the manifestation of sounds evoked by the ensemble will be to the work. Conversely, if the conductor’s vision for the music is riddled with caveats, then the music will demonstrate these shortcomings, as they are translated by the conductor’s use of gestures.

So far, the importance of creating gestures that uphold the spirit of the musical work based on unblemished musical ideals has been discussed. However, it should be noted that the music is yet to be communicated to others. As such, the second stage of preparation describes the transmission of these musical ideas from the conductor to each musician within orchestra by the use of gestures. The main obstacle of this stage is the translatability of the music into gestures on the part of the conductor, as well as the conversion of these visual cues as understood by the musicians back to sound—preferably of a musical nature. A potential problem lies in the fact that the gestures prepared by the conductor in the first step of gesture development may not be compatible with the orchestra. Because the conductor acquires a depth of knowledge via score

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studying that the musicians may not necessarily possess, gestures that may be meaningful to the conductor may not be may not be considered meaningful for the ensemble. The question that naturally stems from the above, then, is how exactly conductors communicate effectively using gestures, if everyone perceives different things from the conductor’s gestures. The answer I am proposing is that the gestures created in the first stage of gestural development must continually undergo significant revision, adapting to the needs of the orchestra—all the while attempting to reach the artistic ideal that was established during score studying—if the conductor finds it desirable to effectively communicate the music.

The next question, then, is whether such revision is absolutely necessary. After all, the conductor seems to have a superior understanding of the piece, and isn’t it the musician’s job to be able to play whatever is on the page? The answer to this question lies not in the different obligations of the musician versus the conductor, but in the necessity of establishing common ground between two independent parties—the musician and the conductor. We begin to explore this concept with a simple thought experiment in which I propose that the use of expressive gestures—in fact, any gesture—is to empower the musicians to perform artistically. Whether I am conducting the fifth-grade band or the Boston Philharmonic, my goal as the conductor is relatively simple: get the music to speak. Based on this logical process, it can be argued that artistic gestures, once full of intent during the first stage of gesture development, immediately lose their purpose if they fail to create musical artistry. The reason for the continued use of such “empty” gestures is that as conductors—and as humans—we often forget that communication requires two parties: one that presents the message and the other that receives it. Although it seems like a simple concept that hints at the active participation of both the sender and receiver of the musical “message,” this truism fails to acknowledge the need for the message to be
comprehensible for the receiver. In turn, I highlight the duty of the sender of the “message” to ensure the accessibility of the message. With respect to conducting, this demands the use of fewer expressive gestures in exchange for clearer directions, demonstrated by employment of clear downbeats, cues for entrances, changes in dynamics, and cut-offs. As a result, I argue that the rehearsal process should, and often leaves the conductor with a completely new set of gestures from ones that were created in the first stage of conducting.

I have found that the reality of the rehearsal process presents a conflict of interest for conductors who endeavor, as I have, to present the music in its purest form. The problem, as stated above, lies in the fact that if a gesture as a musical “message,” is incomprehensible for the receiver, then the communication of the musical ideas, however beautiful the gesture may be, is rendered incomplete. Thus, the repeated use of the gestures that no one understand only hinders the musical process. In order to counteract the potentially devastating consequences, I argue that conductors must not forget that they are working with musicians, not magicians and mind-readers. Faced with a living, breathing orchestra of a hundred musicians, conductors must learn to adjust their prepared gestures so that they can be understood not only by themselves, but the entire orchestra. This idea is also articulated by Max Rudolf, a twentieth-century German-American conductor and pedagogue, who argues that

“Advance planning of gestures can create a serious danger: preconceived ideas might become so firmly fixed in your mind that when facing the orchestra you forget that you are leading human beings and no longer an imaginary group of musicians. Most essential for a conductor is to stick to a clear concept of how to bring the score to life, but at the same time you must never lose contact with reality and you must adapt your gestures to the responses and
needs of the players.”

The question, then, seems to be whether a conductor of a less experienced ensemble can be considered any good, if talent is judged based on the conductor’s use of expressive gestures. In such a case, the conductor of less proficient ensembles is automatically set up to fail; his gestures will inevitably be centered around the basic needs of the ensemble. In such a case, how do you judge the conductor’s abilities as an artistic director? Furthermore, how can you become a great conductor if 1) you cannot be a great conductor without a good orchestra that allows you to use interpretive gestures, and 2) a good orchestra will not be lent to you if you are not already a great conductor? Can you be a good conductor without a good orchestra?

The twentieth-century virtuoso cellist and conductor Pablo Casals explains how he broke this catch-22 in an interview, during which he argued that

“If a musician feels he has a vocation for conducting he can begin with a group of amateurs, or a modest orchestra in the provinces... Supposing the orchestra is a bad one and the new conductor succeeds in making it improve a little, it gives an indication that he is capable.”

Based on the statements above by Rudolf and Casals, it can be understood that the capabilities of a conductor are not determined by his use of artistic gestures in themselves, but his ability—by any means he find necessary—to increase the artistic standard of the ensemble. Applying this statement to the above discussions of the coherence of the musical “message,” I

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argue that the stubborn use of expressive gestures, if they do not help the musical process of the performers, is not indicative of good conducting. Simultaneously, I argue that the use of fundamental rather than artistic gestures, if they allow the orchestra to achieve higher musical standards, is indicative of good conducting. I acknowledge that the use of exclusively elementary gestures, albeit indispensable in starting and stopping the orchestra and determining tempo, are mere traffic signals to keep the orchestra together, and are insufficient as the sole criterion for exemplary conducting. However, different gestures are effective for different orchestras at different stages of the rehearsal process. With that in mind, as the musical standard of the orchestra increases, there is an increased need for expressive gestures to allow the music to speak; I argue that it is this nuanced use of expressive and directive gestures is what allows for effective conducting.

Interestingly, the current literature lacks consensus on how exactly expressivity is achieved in conducting, despite the unanimous agreement that expressivity in conducting beyond the simple beating of time is necessary. Instead, Carl Bamberger in *The Conductor’s Art* focuses on the holistic perspectives of each famous conductor as a means to explain their use of expressivity.¹⁰ In the book *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting*, José Antonio Bowen completely disregards the topic of expressivity, but rather focuses on the history of conducting and the technical aspects of rehearsals, recording studios, choral, and opera conducting.¹¹

The conductor’s expressivity—so crucial in vitalizing the orchestra and letting music speak—is often at best described as not what conductors should *do*, but rather how they should

be. In his treatise on conducting, nineteenth-century composer/conductor Hector Berlioz argued that “the conductor... should possess, in additional [sic] to the special talent and the constituent qualities we care about to explain, others which are almost indefinable, and without which an impalpable barrier arises between him and those whom he directs,”¹² which demonstrates the indescribable nature of this seemingly crucial quality that is only mentioned as a condition innate to great conductors.

One of the reasons behind the lack of instruction on the communication of these nuances has to do with the diverse ways in which these ideas can be communicated. After all, each conductor has a different way of communicating with the orchestra, and a set of directions from one conductor in communicating these nuances may not be possible or effective for another conductor. According to the twentieth-century composer/conductor Pierre Boulez,

“Gestures are entirely personal. You can’t try to impose them on someone else. They’re as personal as a voice: you can’t make a baritone sing like a tenor, nor a tenor like a bass. The relationship between music and gesture has a physiological aspect that depends on each individual. Karajan always conducted with very round gestures, whereas Solti’s are extremely angular. Both obtained the results they wanted, with orchestral sounds particular to them. Each technique has its merits—the resulting interpretation doesn’t sound any better or worse because the conductor’s gesture [sic] are angular or rounded... it’s an entirely individual matter. You make your own gestures, and find out as you go along which ones serve you best... There are kinds of gestures which nobody can imitate—those that indicate phrasing, for example. There you have as many types of gestures as you have conductors.”¹³

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As articulated by Boulez, perhaps the reason we aren’t privy to the inner workings of how each nuance is created is because every conductor uses different gestures; perhaps each gesture contains such subtle nuances that describing one’s entire body language, from the position of one’s fingertips to their eyebrows to overall posture, would require volumes and volumes of text that such endeavors simply become impossible to complete. Or perhaps it is just that people aren’t interested in what exactly makes a conductor good—we are happy to accept their musical prowess as a stroke of genius.

Taking all three possibilities into consideration, I have not attempted to discern what defines a good gesture; at best, all I can say is that I have attempted, by working with both a professional teaching orchestra as well as small student ensembles, to develop my own style of conducting that incorporates both artistry and effective communication under different situations. Although I begin each process of gestural development with an artistic ideal that I believe most effectively embodies the music, I have discovered that the use of fundamental gestures can be more effective in creating music depending on the musical proficiency of the orchestra. Even for a seemingly all-powerful conductor, there seems to be a time and place for everything.
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23