

Mouthing the Text: The Advantages and Disadvantages

by Micah Bland

The admonition of mouthing text is common in conducting master classes and literature. The majority of authors—including Harold Decker and Colleen Kirk,¹ Elizabeth Green and Mark Gibson,² Abraham Kaplan,³ and Donald Neuen⁴—discourage the director mouthing the text. Only Max Rudolf in his popular book, *The Grammar of Conducting*, was found to encourage the mouthing of text claiming improved enunciation as a result of a conductor's textual mouthing; this text, however, is primarily designed for orchestral conductors performing major works.⁵

In order to better understand current opinions on textual mouthing, interviews were conducted with university conductors via email correspondence.⁶ The participating conductors were selected in order to represent a diverse assortment of North American geographical regions, and were asked to give their personal opinion on the mouthing of text with a choral ensemble. The conductors interviewed are: Jeffery Ames, Belmont University; Hilary Apfelstadt, Professor Emerita, University of Toronto; Jerry Blackstone,

Professor Emeritus, University of Michigan; Joey Martin, Texas State University; Amanda Quist, University of Miami; Richard Sparks, Professor Emeritus, University of North Texas; Tram Sparks, University of Southern California; and Carl St. Clair, Pacific Symphony and Principal Conductor of the USC Orchestras, University of Southern California.

As a conductor, what percentage of time in performance do you find yourself mouthing the words?

Jeffery Ames: 25%

Hilary Apfelstadt: As little as possible. Likely the maximum would be 15–20% of the time.

Jerry Blackstone: I'm probably the wrong person to ask about how much I mouth words, since mouthing is often unintentional. I do, however, try to not mouth words unless it is for a specific purpose, such as vowel improvement, unanimity, etc. I find that with younger singers, mouth-

ing tends to improve the sound of the ensemble, especially large festival groups. Young singers are trained to follow the conductor's face, not their hands, so breaking that habit in the space of a few days is not so easy. I'd say, with the University of Michigan Chamber Choir, I tend to mouth very little. They are trained musicians able to ascertain the conductor's intention quite quickly from communicative gestures. Perhaps 15% of the time.

Joey Martin: The percentage of time varies from ensemble to ensemble based on their needs. With advanced university groups, I rarely mouth the words. With less experienced ensembles I mouth about 20% of the time.

Amanda Quist: This is hard to say without watching a video of myself conduct. I believe it changes with the ensemble; if I am trying to inform vowel shape, then it may happen more. Hopefully not more than about 20% of the time.

Richard Sparks: Too much, although I've never counted percentage!

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Tram Sparks: Since I have been on the faculty at USC, I have not conducted an ensemble on a regular basis. However, while a choral faculty member at Temple University (1999–2009) and as conductor of several ensembles over the course of my time there (Women’s Chorus, University Singers, University Chorale, Concert Choir), I found myself mouthing words on occasion, e.g. significant words or words at important entrances. As far as I am aware (I think conductors typically have an inaccurate view of their own practice unless documented by videos), when mouthing, I usually would form the vowel shape, as if to visually “place”

the phrase. Personal video footage generally shows more vowel formation than mouthing of sentences or entire phrases.

Carl St. Clair: I am *not* one to do this as a matter of course and certainly do not employ this as a substitute for nonverbal conducting gestures and communications, but if there are particularly favorite moments or texts, I might sing along with a singer or chorus. I can think of a few places, such as in Mahler’s *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, or some of Hesse’s incredible texts in Strauss’ setting of his *Vier letzte Lieder*, when I just can’t resist singing along. I

am sure there are such moments in Beethoven’s 9th as well. But, at this moment I am *not* “mouthing” words, I am literally *singing along* because I love it so much. I suppose that in every opera, choral work or works with singers there are such beautiful moments which I just can’t escape participating. That said, I would never sing so loudly that almost anyone would hear it. No one would buy a ticket to hear my voice.

Is a moderate amount of time (20–50%) spent mouthing the words acceptable? Is more than 50% acceptable?

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Jeffery Ames: A moderate amount is acceptable, and “moderate” will vary for each conductor. I believe more than 50% is unacceptable.

Hilary Apfelstadt: I think not for even “moderate” and absolutely not for more than 50%.

Jerry Blackstone: I always say mouthing words is never right and never wrong. If it’s for a specific momentary purpose, then it’s acceptable. If it’s a conscious choice, it’s probably acceptable. If it’s just because I do it all the time, then it’s never acceptable. More than 50% of the time seems quite excessive to me.

Joey Martin: For me, mouthing the words is used when ensembles need the visual cueing. Generally, though, I believe that mouthing should be done less than 20% of the time, and anything in excess of 20 minutes (with the exception of young singers) is not acceptable.

Amanda Quist: I usually feel that mouthing the words means that I am not listening enough. If I am trying to inform vowel shape, or potentially helping with the occasional memory slip, then I may do it more, but I generally try to avoid it, so the singers are responsible for singing and I am responsible for listening.

Richard Sparks: I think it’s not helpful, simply a habit we have. If it’s occasionally helpful (5% of the time), then mouthing the words too much simply means the choir doesn’t pay attention when you do.

Tram Sparks: It all depends on the context. For example, is the mouthing used for a very specific *musical* purpose? Are there limited rehearsals? Is it a guest conductor situation? Is the mouthing predictable? The more predictable (thus, possibly indicating habitual), the more problematic it is for both conductor and ensemble. Habitual mouthing is a detraction from expressive conducting in that the conductor is presumably relying more on mouthing than expressive movement to communicate. In this situation, mouthing is a distraction for the ensemble in that they are focused on an element that is, at

best, minimally expressive and cannot express articulation, dynamics, character, line, or a reliable tempo, to name a few. Is more than 50% acceptable? In light of my responses above, I would say, no.

Carl St. Clair: I am not sure what is acceptable or not as far as “mouthing” in percentages, but I do know that a number shouldn’t be attached. As long as a conductor does what he/she can to inspire a better performance and to bring greater respect for the composer and their work, that seems like it should be permissible or, at least, allowable.



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What are some of the advantages to mouthing the words?

Jeffery Ames: Memorization.

Hilary Apfelstadt: Perhaps if the group is uncertain in a homophonic texture, it could be helpful to mouth as a reminder.

Jerry Blackstone: Mouthing can improve vowel formation, and can facilitate conductor/ensemble connection, especially with younger singers. Mouthing is simply another tool for conductor/ensemble communication. Used too much, it loses its effectiveness.

Joey Martin: Mouthing can be a visual reminder of appropriate vowel shapes for developing ensembles. It can also be crucial for reinforcing memory of text (or lack thereof...). I've found that the younger/older the membership of an ensemble, the more mouthing is needed to achieve ideal results.

Tram Sparks: One advantage of mouthing could be the *perceived* security and increase in empathic connection between conductor and ensemble. I say "perceived" since it is usually merely a perception on the part of the conductor, and not an expressive or musically effectual connection that actually elicits a corresponding sonic or emotional result. That said, very specific, limited, and intentional mouthing could help a conductor to feel a stronger rapport in a given moment of music making.

Carl St. Clair: Not quite sure that there are any. Having an orchestra

or chorus watch your mouthing of words could detract from their focus on your body and hands, which are communicating the essence of the music in one's heart. Mouthing certainly does nothing to add to the quality of the sound or musical output of an ensemble, choral or otherwise.

What are some of the disadvantages to mouthing the words?

Jeffery Ames: In my opinion, mouthing the words, without any apparent need, prohibits proper preparation for the cue. Oftentimes, I see my choral conducting students mouthing the words. When this happens, they cannot properly execute the shape of the vowel needed in the following word. Of course, the "prep" prepares the next beat by indicating inhalation, vowel shape, dynamic, and character. But one or more of these elements will be missed when mouthing the words, which occurs as a 'real-time' event.

Hilary Apfelstadt: The biggest is that the group does not watch the gesture but rather focuses on the conductor's mouth. It becomes a crutch, I think.

Jerry Blackstone: Mouthing words in polyphonic music is counterproductive. Conductors who mouth and mess up the words are headed for potential disasters. Mouthing distracts from expressive and communicative gestures.

Joey Martin: Excessive and/or overuse of mouthing can have unintended outcomes including a lack of

independence and responsibility for the members of the ensemble. Additionally, the conductor will be unable to concentrate on elements that require their attention.

Amanda Quist: The singers are watching your mouth, instead of your hands. Also, I find if I am mouthing the words with them, I am not truly listening to what they are doing.

Richard Sparks: If the music is at all contrapuntal, you can't mouth the words of all parts—likely confusing, not helpful. Often conductors exaggerate, which can lead to tension from singers.

Tram Sparks: One of the greatest disadvantages to mouthing is the "watering down," over time, of the meaning between the conductor's gesture and sound. One caveat to this statement is a situation where a conductor has extremely limited rehearsal time with an ensemble, or where a conductor is a master teacher and has spent months, even years, with an ensemble. In the latter situation, if a discrepancy is observed between gesture and sound, often it is a result of an understanding that is developed between conductor and ensemble that gesture is less musically "important" than the masterful instruction that has occurred over the course of many rehearsals. As a result, the sonic product in a performance is more directly tied to rehearsal preparation and frequently, guidance by mouthing, than "in the moment" music making.

Carl St. Clair: Usually, when one

sings along or mouths words, that is the very thing—sometimes, the *only* thing—the conductor is hearing or listening to at that moment. It is the old adage that when one is speaking, one can't also be listening. This is one of the main reasons I don't try to sing or mouth the words, and certainly don't encourage it in young conductors. It is also a bad habit that is very difficult to break when it sets in.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The general consensus is that mouthing the text is not preferred and should be minimized. However, a *minimal* amount of textual mouthing may be appropriate in specific situations. While the term minimal lacks specificity, based on these interview responses, mouthing the text up to approximately 20% of the time may be considered acceptable. All the conductors interviewed considered more than 50% to be unacceptable. It is also interesting that while many of the conductors consider a minimal amount of textual mouthing to be acceptable, their goal continues to be the minimization of this mouthing. In addition, for many of the conductors this percentage varied among types of ensemble.

The decision by a conductor to mouth the text presents a number of advantages and disadvantages. One of the leading arguments against the mouthing of text is that it distracts from a conductor's gesture. In the case of conductors who exaggerate the enunciation of text, this argument seems plausible, yet its rationale is questionable. If the mouth-

ing of text truly distracted from a conductor's gesture, would not a conductor's facial expression be equally distracting? The argument also infers that a performer cannot interpret multiple sources of visual stimuli at the same time.

Conductors may also develop a number of habits that result in the conscious and unconscious mouthing of text. The habit of singing with the ensemble during rehearsal can easily manifest itself as mouthing during performance. In addition, although beneficial during score study, the speaking or singing of vocal lines during a conductor's individual practice can potentially become habitually reinforced, appearing in performance.

In contrast to the disadvantages, a number of potential advantages can be observed in the mouthing of text. The most frequent reason for the mouthing of text is to support the singers in memorization. This is an understandable necessity when the ensembles preparation time is limited, or the ensembles age elicits additional support. While this support at times may be necessary, a conductor should seriously evaluate the ensembles needs. Frequently memorization support from a conductor is unnecessary and results from a more concerning lack of trust in the ensemble.

Although varying among conductors, and experienced only as a sympathetic response, a conductor may perceive a heightened emotional connection with the music through the mouthing of text, resulting in improved facial expressions. In other words, as the conductor mouths the text, their internal connection with the emotion of the music is im-

proved. In April 2019, the University of Southern California's Choral Artists performed Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna* at Walt Disney Concert Hall. During rehearsal and performance, Maestro St. Clair made the expressive decision to mouth the text of every word in the third movement ("O Nata Lux"). In response to questions about his textual mouthing in this work, St. Clair said, "*O nata lux* is a text which has a deeply personal and intimate meaning to me. As a devout Catholic, this text reaches and touches my spirit... When I would sing along with the chorus it allowed

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me to become even more close to the performers and them to me.” Because the emotional connection is solely experienced by the conductor, the effectiveness of this argument for the benefit of the choir is questionable; however, there is clearly an emotional benefit for the conductor, which can be valuable.

As previously discussed, according to Max Rudolf, the mouthing of text promotes improved enunciation from the ensemble.⁷ This may or may not be true. It is possible that singers are reminded to enunciate as they observe the director mouthing the text. However, this over enunciation and constant mouthing of the text can lead to undesired vocal tension in the singers. It should also be cautioned that, similar to a conductor frequently mirroring the beat in both hands, mouthing the text for an extended period of time diminishes its effectiveness. Instead, the inclu-

sion of textual mouthing is likely to be more effective at planned limited moments in the performance.

Finally, the mouthing of text may provide additional information to the singer, such as vowel shape. Throughout a performance, the ensemble’s sound can quickly be adjusted through the shape of the vowel, as demonstrated by the conductor. While this method may not be necessary for more advanced singers, it may significantly support developing ensembles.

incorporation of mouthing may be most appropriate for memorization support, shaping the vowel, critical climatic moments, as an enunciation reminder, and emotionally expressive moments in performance. All of these examples, however, should be utilized in moderation as to incorporate the mouthing of text as a purposeful expressive gesture and not diminish or distract from the conductor’s physical gesture. 

Conclusions

A minimal amount of textual mouthing may be acceptable but is accompanied by a number of advantages and disadvantages. Just like any other conducting choice, such as gesture, dynamic, or tempo, the mouthing of text is a tool that can be utilized by the conductor. The

NOTES

- ¹ Decker, Harold A., and Colleen J. Kirk. *Choral Conducting: Focus on Communication*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1996, 29.
- ² Green, Elizabeth A. H., Mark Gibson, and Nicolai Malko. *The Modern Conductor: a College Text on Conducting Based on the Technical Principles of Nicolai Malko as Set Forth in His The Conductor and His Baton* 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004, 186.
- ³ Kaplan, Abraham. *Choral Conducting*. New York: Norton, 1985, 91–2.
- ⁴ Neuen, Donald. “Conducting.” In *Up Front!: Becoming the Complete Choral Conductor*, edited by Guy B. Webb, 121–45. Boston, Massachusetts: ECS Publishing, 1993, 143.
- ⁵ Rudolf, Max. *The Grammar of Conducting: a Comprehensive Guide to Baton Technique and Interpretation* 3rd ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1994, 351.
- ⁶ Interviews were conducted between May 2019 and August 2019.
- ⁷ Rudolf, *ibid*.



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