



A Conductor's Greatest Untapped Resource

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It was not too long ago that the “big day” in a conducting class was watching the film of Toscanini conduct his NBC Orchestra. The instructor pointed out how the conductor’s every gesture held meaning, his clear point-to-point beat, the great eye contact, and the fact that he conducted from memory. Videos like this were few, and in the days before digital media, professionals and students alike had little opportunity to observe a great conductor at work. Most often, one had to be seated in the audience.

Today all that has changed. We have an enormous wealth of online videos capturing fantastic (and instructive) performances. We can view a choral conductor from two months ago or an orchestra conductor from forty years ago. We can observe conductors from many nations, places to which we may never travel.

Why is watching other conductors important? That is how we learn, and conducting is nothing if not a perpetual state of learning and striving for a perfect performance. Indeed, it is said that we become a composite of all the conductors with whom we have ever studied and performed. That statement is largely true, for better or sometimes worse. After all, not all of our observational experiences were voluntary, and perhaps we saw some things better left unseen, such as the “straight-jacket” (arms crossing while cueing), the “Batman” (head in the score with both elbows above the ears), or the “windmill” (both arms moving fast in circles).

While many practitioners have not had the opportunity to study with virtuoso conductors or even excellent teachers,

we can now study the traits and styles of conductors of our choosing. We can be inspired by observing the best of the best. Whether we are beginners or professionals, conducting large or small ensembles, choral or instrumental focus, young singers or a town and gown community chorus performing major oratorios, we can learn by watching both the good and the bad.

With that in mind, consider three overarching areas where the plethora of videos available provide valuable instruction: knowledge of the score, baton technique, and stage deportment. Let’s explore each in turn and then consider several performances available on video and the lessons therein.

Knowledge of the Score

Knowing the score is primary in everything we do as conductors. It is not hard to see whether a conductor knows the score. (Most often, we observers can hear it too.) Compare, for instance, a consummate professional to an apprentice. While the novice might have his head in the score with little eye contact, the professional may not even be using music. She may be conducting from memory, which means her eyes are on the choir. We can see immediately that the score is engraved in the conductor’s mind; the sound is in her ear.

Also, because our professional has memorized or has a deep knowledge of the score, cues for entrances, dynamics, transitions, and myriad other items are secure. This builds confidence and allows for cueing with the eyes or a nod of the head. She and the ensemble are working as one, and the video shows it.

Our novice, however, isn’t as familiar with the score. Cues are missed; transitions aren’t smooth, and the music doesn’t flow. Video reveals those characteristics as well. Knowing the score cold brings another advantage. It is much easier to listen when one’s eyes are not reading the score. Perhaps that is why the great German conductor Herbert von Karajan often conducted from memory with his eyes closed. Professionals listen, but our novice is so busy reading the score that

he is not hearing everything he should.

Baton Technique

In the realm of baton technique, mirroring is one of the most pervasive and negative behaviors. We all do it, though some individuals more than others. Why does it happen?

One of the reasons, possibly, is lack of ambidextrousness. This, however, is a skill that can be developed to a professional level. Carlos Kleiber, Toscanini, and Pierre Monteux were outstanding at left hand independence. They were experts at using the left hand for cueing, dynamics, and phrasing. Sometimes they simply kept that hand motionless. In other words, assuming all participants have a good line of sight, they usually don't need to see the beat from both of the conductor's hands. Many times, one hand is sufficient. This was proven years ago in a most unfortunate way.

Raymond Dvorak, formerly the band director at the University of Wisconsin, was terribly injured in a train accident in 1948. He was almost killed in the wreck and lost his right arm. After a difficult recovery and questions about whether he could continue his career, he did just that!¹ There is a photograph of his directing the Wisconsin Band, keeping the beat with his artificial arm while gesturing with his left.² True, he was left handed and did much with that hand even before the accident, but those who knew him often pointed out that mirroring was not one of his gestures. Skilled conductors avoid it, just as they avoid mouthing words.

Mouthing words is something too many choral conductors at all levels do too often. Sometimes the conductor is trying to help the choir when they are singing from memory. At other times, perhaps, the conductor is hoping to enhance expression in the ensemble. It is often nothing but a bad and unnecessary habit, one to be avoided. The author was told by someone close to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra that George Solti, the conductor at the time, said he only mouthed the words when the choir was dragging behind the beat. Doing so helped the choir pick up the tempo, he believed.

Clarity of beat is crucial. Too often we hear musicians say, "I can't find his beat." This can be due to many factors, but a clear beat is a trademark of the masters, no matter what type of ensemble they might be conducting. (Watching a conductor on video with the sound turned off can be interesting and instructive.)

There are many other conducting behaviors to observe on video. Two of the most important include the rhythmic life of an ensemble and the conductor's stage deportment. The former is as crucial to a superb performance as is knowledge of the score. Have you ever watched a conductor drag an ensemble through the music? You can tell when it is happening because the conductor is working so very hard. He is trying to impart a rhythmic life that is missing. This is particularly noticeable in soft, slow passages and has probably been occurring since the first rehearsal! Amateur conductors are not the only ones to find themselves in this situation; it can happen at all levels.

The author remembers seeing a well-known professional conductor drag a large symphony orchestra through Beethoven's Sixth Symphony in a rather embarrassing performance. Most likely, the problem started in rehearsal. Instead of teaching the ensemble that it is the rhythmic engine and that the conductor is the control, things got turned around, with the conductor trying to be the engine and the control.

How can we teach the choir the importance of rhythm? One way is by example. Wonderful internal rhythm, with the singers as the engine, can be demonstrated to the choir with videos or recordings of groups such as the King's Singers, an outstanding small ensemble with no conductor. The rhythm has to come from the singers. In this case, one demonstration is worth a thousand words.

Stage Deportment

Another aspect of conducting, often ignored, is stage deportment. Here can be seen the good and the bad.

The good is seen in the conductor who takes the podium confidently and with authority. In a sense, there is a rhythm to his entrance. He is a leader. Sometimes he smiles. He knows how to take a bow. He gets right to the music at hand. He is dressed appropriately. His appearance is neat. He knows the score. If he uses music, the score is open. If he uses a music stand, it is set to the right height. If he uses the piano on which to place his music, the score is already there open. In other words, he is professionally prepared, and his demeanor signals the fact that all participants are ready and fully attentive to the task at hand.

Bad conductor deportment can also be observed on video. Perhaps there is an inordinate amount of time be-

tween taking the stage and the downbeat. She adjusts her music stand. She shuffles scores and then realizes that the first score is missing. She leaves the stage to retrieve it. In a choral concert, she has the pitch given from the piano twice. Worst of all, she takes her entrance bow and begins talking to the audience!

The Case of Carlos Kleiber

In searching for conductors with perfect technique, one quickly realizes that some conductors are more skilled in certain areas than others. Some conductors demonstrate consistency in all performances. Others do not. While there are conductors who meet some high standards, there may be only one maestro who consistently meets them all. In the author's estimation, Carlos Kleiber is that person.

Karl Ludwig Bonifacious Kleiber was born in Berlin in 1930. The son of the esteemed conductor Erich Kleiber, the family lived in South America during World War II where Karl became Carlos. With no encouragement from his father, Carlos studied music and made his conducting debut in 1954. As his career advanced, he was extremely selective in where and when he conducted, acted as his own manager, demanded large salaries, extra rehearsals and, if rehearsals weren't going as he wanted, walked out, with no performance! After hearing Kleiber at the Met, Leonard Bernstein praised him as "the greatest living conductor in the world."³

Many of us in the United States have little knowledge of Kleiber for several reasons. He lived in Munich, Germany, and rarely appeared in the United States. He only appeared here with the Chicago Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera, two engagements with each. What is more, compared with his peers, Kleiber did not perform that often. And while he had a huge repertoire, over time he concentrated only on a few works.⁴

Kleiber was particular about recordings and only released twelve. Fortunately, there are videos of him available, and after watching, the reader may agree that he is one of the finest conductors ever, with a conducting style and musicality rarely seen. As Charles Barber wrote: generations to come will marvel that there ever was such an artist on the podium. He had the most eloquent baton of the modern era. Powerful and mesmerizing, supple and exacting, controlling and liberating, his was a style of conducting that had no apparent limitations.^{5,6}

If one wishes to hear only one example of Kleiber's

work, Barber suggests watching *Die Libelle* (*The Dragonfly*) from the 1989 New Year's Day concert with the Vienna Philharmonic.^{7,8} (Warning: once you begin to watch this concert, you may not be able to stop.)

One may also wish to watch a video of the 1992 Vienna New Year's Day Concert, the first nine minutes of which are the absolute epitome of superb conducting.⁹ His performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1983, towers over other conductors.¹⁰

One of his most impressive and consistent characteristics is his shaping of a phrase. It is clear he is not beating time; rather, he shapes phrases and conducts sections. The orchestra "sings." He is conducting from memory; therefore, his posture is erect; his eye contact is superb, and tempo changes are perfect. His independence of hands is exceptional, even more than normally would be expected from a professional conductor. The beat is not only clear but changes size and style with the music. Sometimes he cues with the right hand, sometimes with the left, and sometimes with his eyes. *Pianissimos* find beats small and close to the body while fortes are large and dramatic. Occasionally he does almost no conducting at all since the ensemble is together and moving ahead on its own. If conducting is a controlled dance to music, Kleiber was its finest practitioner. He died in 2004.

There are outstanding conductors working today, many of whom come from strong choral backgrounds. One example, Harry Christophers, of "Sixteen" fame, also serves as the artistic director of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society. A video of Handel's *Zadok the Priest*¹¹ at the Proms is remarkable for its energy, rhythmic clarity, phrasing, and clean transitions. He uses a score but probably doesn't need it. The intangible in this performance is the drama the conductor imparts, which couldn't happen if he weren't so well prepared and technically proficient. John Elliott Gardiner is another English conductor who is well known to the choral community. Some consider him to be one of the great conductors of our time. A video of the Monteverdi Choir performing Handel's *Dixit Dominus*¹² shows Gardiner at his energetic best.

There are hundreds of other videos of great value available online. Many colleges and universities have splendid examples of excellent choirs led by accomplished conductors. ACDA has numerous videos of performances from regional and national conferences at ACDA.org.

In many cases, there is good footage of the conductor, some of whom are exceptional. Usually, the very best in

conducting technique finds less mirroring, little mouthing of words, and excellent eye contact in addition to the many other elements mentioned above.

Observing the Observer

We have discussed excellent conducting techniques and offered a few examples of elite conductors. Understanding the many benefits in watching others perform, let's consider now the most important professional to be studied carefully on video: you.

Now comes the fun part of video instruction. Arrange for your rehearsal or performance to be video recorded. Take note of the positives and negatives in your conducting, including mirroring, mouthing of words, and memorization. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you conducting beats/measures or phrases?
- How clear is your beat?
- How about eye contact?
- Is the choir rhythmically engaged, or are you “pulling it out of them?”
- Is the performance professional?
- In rehearsal, how many minutes do you talk and they sing? This may be the biggest surprise (and lesson) of all.

All of us are at different stages of growth as conductors. Carlos Kleiber was largely self-taught and grew up watching his father and others conduct. In this age of digital media, we too can watch the greats while constantly striving toward conducting excellence.

NOTES

- 1 www.oocities.org/wisconsinband/Old SiteStuff/history.html
- 2 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/uwdigicolec/4439276486>
- 3 James Kreger, <https://www.metorchestramusicians.org/blog/2014/4/7/making-music-with-carlos-kleiber-elusive-titan-of-the-podium?rq=kleiber>
- 4 Charles Barber, *Corresponding with Carlos: A Biography of Carlos*

Kleiber (Lanham, Maryland, The Roman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011), 6-7

5 Ibid., 7

6 Dr. Charles Barber corresponded with the reclusive Kleiber from 1989 until near the end of his life. He sent 51 video tapes over that period of time of various conductors to Kleiber, who was eager to see them. Carlos's responses are published in “Conversations with Carlos.” This book is highly recommended reading for the serious student of conducting.

7 Carlos Kleiber, *New Year's Concert*, Vienna Philharmonic, 1989, [@21:33](https://youtu.be/9QX4ff0Hmc)

8 Barber, *Corresponding with Carlos*, 122

9 Carlos Kleiber, *New Year's Concert*, Vienna Philharmonic, 1992, <https://youtu.be/R7Hn0do-xKE>

10 Carlos Kleiber, *Beethoven's Seventh Symphony*, Concertgebouw Orchestra, <https://youtu.be/2Sw97NzvvvE>

11 Harry Christophers, *Handel's Zadok the Priest*, <https://youtu.be/J6CNQqzN3mU>

12 John Eliot Gardiner, *Handel's Dixit Dominus*, <https://youtu.be/dS65-ZvUSSM>, <https://www.metorchestramusicians.org/blog/2014/4/7/making-music-with-carlos-kleiber-elusive-titan-of-the-podium?rq=kleiber>

A Community Divided: Gendered Discourse in the Ensemble Classroom

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“In order to promote an openness of access to musical possibilities and a richly balanced and communicative musical experience for everybody, we have to be willing to open up the complex webs of cultural behavior which hold music in its current state.”¹

In a world where “boys will be boys” and “you _____ like a girl,” we often do not realize the negative impact our words and actions have on adolescent males and females. Many of our teaching practices tend to reflect our implicit and perceived sex and gender biases. Based on my experiences in both secondary and higher education, I find that