

Gestural Techniques that Communicate Beautiful Singing

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In many conducting courses, instructors typically begin the semester by discussing what conducting is and what the conductor's role is. *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines conducting as "the art or method of controlling an orchestra or operatic performance utilizing gestures, involving the beating of time, ensuring correct entries, and the 'shaping' of individual phrasing."¹ In Anthony Maiello's, *Conducting: A Hands-on Approach*, he defines conducting as "the powerful communication of musical concepts to others through the use of silent gestures."²

When an ensemble is on stage, it is the conductor's role to ensure that "a unified, balanced performance" is produced.³ While numerous rehearsals may lead to performance day, the conductor must remind performers on stage through gestures. The performer may have score markings, but it is the conductor's gestures that communicate what they ask from the ensemble. Maiello adds that a conductor is a communicator. They must have "the ability to communicate in silence," using gestures that may include the arms, hands and fingers, face, eyes, mouth, body, and stance.⁴

In a choral ensemble, the conductor makes sure the group stays on the beat and ensures the group enters at the right time, and shapes the phrases appropriately.⁵ The cho-

ral conductor must also demonstrate and demand beautiful singing through their conducting gestures. Dag Jansson, Beate Elstad, and Erik Dørelate relate a choral conductor to an artist and craftsman. The artist is "the one who creates meaning from the musical material and establishes an idea of the sound in music." The craftsman "molds the sound towards this idea, by correcting errors, blending voices, shaping timbre, and unifying expression."⁶

This article provides a perspective on how a choral conductor communicates beautiful singing. The first section explores the definition of conducting. The second section reviews what beautiful singing is. The third section focuses on what choral conducting techniques can be used to communicate beautiful singing.

What is Conducting?

In encyclopedias and dictionaries like the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, terms like conducting are often defined or explained using language that may be difficult to comprehend or to the point of not expanding past the technical definition. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Historical Performance in Music* defines conducting as "musical direction developed

gradually to deal with larger groups and more complex music.”⁷ *A New Dictionary of Music* takes a similar approach and defines the term as “to direct a performance with the motions of a baton or the hands.”⁸

In textbooks like *Maiello’s Conducting: A Hands-on Approach*, authors tend to take a simplified approach providing definitions that allow exploration while gaining fundamental knowledge and technique. Beyond the definition previously mentioned by Maiello, he continues to explain that “conducting technique requires graceful movements of the body as used in dance, combined facial and physical gestures as used in acting, and physical presentation “without speaking” as used in mime.”⁹ To achieve a conducting technique suitable for communicating the composer’s intent, Maiello encourages the learner to develop their fundamental movements, including the preparatory beat, beat patterns, rebound, and cut-off. He also encourages fine-tuning cueing skills, the left hand for expression, shaping the phrases, mood, and dynamics, which are only a few minor components in communicating with an ensemble.

Harold Farberman’s *The Art of Conducting Technique: A New Perspective* considers conducting as an “elaborate ritual of pantomime contingent on the command of technique.”¹⁰ This conducting technique is created based on the composer’s score, which allows the conductor to respond mentally and physically.¹¹ While Farberman and Maiello’s textbooks share similar areas of technique such as expression, cueing, and beat patterns, Farberman also includes legato and staccato patterns important as “the strokes that form the patterns must take on the character of the musical text.”¹²

In Barry Wilson’s *Basic Conducting*, he includes the right hand, the left hand, the face, and the optional baton as tools for the conductor. He describes each of these tools as:

- The Right Hand - the primary tool that indicates meter, tempo, dynamics, location within the measure, and style.
- The Left Hand - gives cues, reinforces information provided by the right hand, and turns the pages.
- The Face - magnifies the music’s emotional content and registers approval or disapproval of what is going on in the music.
- The Baton - makes the conductor’s patterns easier to see from a distance.¹³

Wilson also discusses the three elements of conducting patterns that indicate beats of music. The elements are the preparatory beat—the first beat of a piece of music, the ictus—the point in time and space where the beat occurs, and the rebound—the bounce from the ictus that prepares the next beat. Once the conductor can understand those elements, they may then work on the basic beat patterns.¹⁴ The four common beat patterns are the three-beat, the four-beat, the two-beat, and the six-beat pattern.

Once the conductor is prepared to present their technique, this is done in what Farberman considers the “conductors’ space.” This space “allows for every conceivable technical gesture to be delivered with clarity.”¹⁵ In Morten Schuldt-Jensen’s *What is Conducting? Signs, Principles, and Problems*, the author adds that the conductor’s space “comprises the whole length of his arms in front of and at the side of his upper body from his hips and upward to the top of his head.”¹⁶ Thus, the ensemble must clearly view the conductor as their whole body—body posture, muscular tension, and facial expressions are involved in communicating with the ensemble.

What is Beautiful Singing?

In a choral ensemble, the conductor’s role is to produce a unified, balanced, beautiful sound among singers. In a 2015 study by Helen Hoekma van Wyck, the researcher interviewed four choral conductors’ rehearsals. While each of the conductors had beautiful sounding ensembles, each conductor demonstrated various approaches to tonal concepts and ideas in achieving an excellent tonal sound.¹⁷ Howard Swan describes beautiful singing as “a beautiful tone that is not breathy, is sung to the center of a pitch, possesses some degree of intensity, accompanies a sound which is normal in pronunciation and is comfortably sustained.”¹⁸ To achieve a sound described in Swan’s definition, the conductor mentioned in Wyck’s study focuses on resonance, timbre, vowel, and pitch variation/vibrato. One conductor also includes the breath with resonance, diction, space, and relaxation in building a beautiful sound.¹⁹

In Carl Cherland’s article *Toward Beautiful Singing The Vocal Pedagogy of Cornelius Reid, Part 1*, he discusses Reid’s “natural approach to expressive singing” in the choral ensemble.²⁰ With exercises created in achieving *bel canto* singing, focused on “dexterity and freedom, uniformity and consistency of vowels and vibrato, beautiful *legato*, and intonation and carrying power,”²¹ the singer’s quality of the sound is enhanced based on what they have been asked for

in each exercise. These exercises include:

- A series of single sustained pitches, low in the voice, sung in descending order;
- Five-note scales or 1-3-5 *arpeggios* in ascending order, beginning low in the voice, usually using the vowel [a];
- 1-3-5-8 *arpeggios*, sung as above. These can be done slowly but always in rhythm;
- Descending 8-5-3-1 on [u], [a], or [i], for men, to strengthen the *falsetto*; and
- Octave leaps from chest to falsetto and back, mostly for men.²²

Part two of Cherland's article acknowledges that singers often hinder producing a beautiful tone due to their consciousness of being knowledgeable in vocal pedagogy beforehand.²³ By thinking of singing as something that happens, the singer can produce a sound that is "reflexive, natural, and free."²⁴

In Derrick Thompson's 2019 study, *A Collaborative Approach: How Pedagogues of Singing and Their Student's Navigate the Choral and Solo Realms*, the researcher recognized that while terms such as beautiful, healthy, proper, and good can be controversial, in singing, they have similar meanings among vocal instructors.²⁵ Authors of *The Singing Book* consider good physical balance, breathing that is accomplished easily and deeply, and staying present as three healthy singing principles.²⁶ For Emmons and Chase, a beautiful tone consists of:

- true, unjust intonation;
- a "spin" in the tone (a balanced vibrato);
- ease of emission;
- core, focus, clarity, carrying power; and
- a warm, full tone quality.²⁷

Based on the study, the definitions align, showing that healthy, beautiful, proper singing techniques can be taught through analogies, imagery, modeling, and discussions.²⁸

The choral conductor has the advantage of being able to portray many of these characteristics through their conducting gestures.

Choral Conducting Gestures that Resemble Beautiful Singing

What makes conducting a choral ensemble different from an orchestral ensemble is that the choral conductor typically focuses on one instrument, the voice. While literature can easily be found on orchestral conducting, conducting technique specifically for the choral conductor is limited. This may be because "choral and orchestral works are based on the same technical rules and principles of communication."²⁹ In some literature, similar to that of Jeffery Wall's *Intentional and Expressive Conducting: It's All in the Rebound*, instrumental conductors are critical of choral conductors due to their lack of clarity. In contrast, choral conductors are critical of instrumental conductors for lack of expression.³⁰

Expressivity has become a significant component for many conductors, as it allows the conductor to "feel more connected to the music and the players, resulting in better ensemble sound."³¹ While the conductor must be able to communicate the time, meter, beat, articulation, and dynamics on the page, the conductor must interact with the musical material "actively responding and constructing musical meaning."³² To achieve this gestural fluency, Courtney Snyder asserts that conductors should begin by studying how to listen, feel, flow, and show expression before beat patterns, as many class textbooks begin.³³ This section focuses on expressive gestures that allow the choral conductor to communicate the beautiful singing described in the previous section.

One must first know the definition of gestural technique to gain knowledge of gestures suitable for demonstrating and demanding beautiful singing. In Jose Maurico Valle Brandao's *Learning and Teaching Conducting through Musical and Non-Musical Skills: An Evaluation of Orchestral Conducting Teaching Methods*, the gestural technique is defined as "the building of a repertoire of gestures that convey musical basics and understanding, and through which they will be communicated to the ensembles."³⁴

Lisa Adalade Billingham's, *The Development of a Gestural Vocabulary for Choral Conductors Based on the Movement Theory of Rudolf Laban* identified six actions successful in creating expressive conducting gestures for choral conductors.³⁵ **Table 1** describes the movement example and proposed gesture

for each action.

With the gestures mentioned in Billingham’s study, the following characteristics of beautiful singing were found in their ensembles:

- Sense of buoyancy in the body, representing proper posture (float);
- Connection to the breath (punch);
- Appropriate phrase shaping (glide and press);
- Correct rhythms, clarity of text (dab); and
- Adapting to meter changes (flick).

Liz Garnett’s *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning Gesture, Voice, Identity* shares four choral conductors’ distinctive gestures.³⁶ Table 2 on page 18 provides gestures that were noted throughout Garnett’s text.

The conducting gestures resembled by Garnett “focus on onset and release of sound and some dynamic shaping and phrasing.”³⁷

In Ramona Wis’s *Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal: A Gesture-Based Approach to Developing Vocal Skill and Musical Understanding*, the author provides an extensive list of conducting gestures used to enhance posture and support,

initiation and release of sound, resonance, intonation and tuning, word sound, and interpretation and musicality. Table 3 on page 18 provides examples of descriptions and applications found in choral conducting gestures.

Incorporating physical metaphors into the rehearsal allows the singer to “stop thinking so hard about the goal,” which builds anxiety when singing and remains “actively engaged” in what is taking place during the rehearsal or performance.³⁸

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this article was to provide background knowledge on what conducting is, how beautiful singing is viewed, and how choral conducting gestures can communicate beautiful singing. While the literature mentioned throughout this article represents a small portion of a conductor’s role in leading an ensemble, it also shows how important a conductor’s role is. In Harold Decker and Colleen Kirk’s *Choral Conducting Focus on Communication*, the authors express the importance of communicating, sharing:

“the choral experience is an avenue unique for communication. Because of the group dynamic, a conductor’s role is that of catalyst and facilitator. Both the singing group and audience are dependent upon the conductor’s skills and artistry.”³⁹

Table 1: Gestural Actions Chart (Billingham)⁴⁰

Action	Movement Example	Proposed Gesture
Float	Pulling away from a hug.	Open space, use of light horizontal plane; buoyancy.
Punch	Boxing	Confined to the pattern, weighted pattern with sharp edges.
Glide	Hand sliding over a glass tabletop.	Wide horizontal sweeping motion; open, rounded arm space.
Dab	Touching a spider web.	Short, quick movements with the hand isolated in free space (no pattern).
Flick	Removing glitter from hair.	Short, quick movements with the wrist in a small pattern area (wrist flat).
Press	Human garlic press.	Palms rounded in a heavy weighted, smooth motion.



Table 2: Gestural Actions Chart (Garnett)⁴¹

Action	Proposed Gesture
Forward 'shovel' downbeat	A 'downbeat' that comes forwards and slightly upwards from hip to waist level. The hand is gently closed, with an extended thumb uppermost as if holding a small trowel. The head and upper body dip forward in the preparation of this downbeat and then straighten up again as it arrives.
'Twisting' downbeat	A downbeat that comes forward characterized by a twisting motion that circles in on the ictus and may be executed with a closed hand or a pointed finger. It gives a vigorous, dynamic accent or can be used for softer agogic accents in quieter dynamic contexts.
'Breath elbow'	An upbeat executed with a subtle lifting of the upper arm from the shoulder and elbow joint, often used as a preparatory beat to signal a breath point. The gesture can serve musical as well as vocal purposes such as off-beat changes of harmony.
'Bullhorn' hand	The middle fingers fold inwards, leaving the thumb and little finger extended. It can be seen as an open-handed gesture as a way to 'stroke' the sound.

Table 3: Gestural Actions Chart (Wis)⁴²

Gesture	Description	Application
Brushstroke	Paint a long, fluid brush stroke horizontally or vertically in front of the body.	To create a <i>legato</i> line.
Directional pointing (tone placement)	Point forward from the forehead; point along the side of the face, arching up and forward.	To give focus or point to the sound.
Flat hands to point	Start with hands, palms down, chest high, and a body width apart. Gradually point forward as you sustain the tone.	Move from a spread to a focused tone; to move from a darker to a brighter tone.
Clap and release	Experiment with different ways of making a clap; a flat clap; a sliding clap (hitting lightly and moving away from the base hand), clapping close to the body vs. farther away from the body.	To become aware of the quality of the release sound, to apply these qualities (resonant vs. clipped) to vocal release.
Small circles	Draw small circles with the index finger in front of the mouth; make two circles using the thumb/index fingers of both hands and extend these circles from the face forward (or start with hands extended and bring circles toward you).	To create a round, hollow "oo" vowel.

While the choral conducting gestures highlighted are vastly different from source to source, it is important to recognize first the collective meaning of conducting and beautiful singing provided by previous researchers. When defining the term conducting, each of the researchers noted that this was a form of communication done using the whole body. Although there may be disagreements on how conducting should be taught, it is also important to mention that expressivity plays a significant role in defining the term and should be the first step in the learning process.

The characteristics of beautiful singing were also similar among the researchers presented. Although other words such as healthy, proper, and good may have been used to substitute beautiful, it was determined that beautiful singing includes:

- Physical balance
- Not breathy
- Center of the pitch
- Resonance
- Diction - uniformity
- Space
- Relaxation or freedom
- *Legato* singing

Each of the characteristics mentioned here was also shown through examples of choral conducting gestures that may be used in the rehearsal or performance space. These gestures represent a small number of the gestures used by choral conductors across the world, and the ensemble must recognize and understand the purpose of their conducting gesture. This understanding may not come naturally for many ensemble members and may need some explanation from the conductor.

Based on the literature presented, choral conductors should share their approach when conducting an ensemble. Examining how choral conductors define beautiful singing, how the choral conductors implement this description into their conducting, and how the choral ensemble members

respond to the gestures introduced to them will contribute significantly to choral conducting. This would add to the literature provided and give choral conductors a chance to see what their colleagues are doing in their rehearsal space, providing fresh ideas. Most importantly, further research will allow choral conductors to share and discuss the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication with their ensembles. **CT**

NOTES

- ¹ “Conducting” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, ed. Kennedy, Joyce, Michael Kennedy, and Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- ² Anthony Maiello, Jack Bullock, and Larry Clark, *Conducting: A Hands-on Approach* (Van Nuys, CA: Belwin-Mills, 1996), 7.
- ³ Denis Arnold and Stephen Muir, “Conducting” in *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford University Press).
- ⁴ Maiello, 9.
- ⁵ “Conducting” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*.
- ⁶ Dag Jansson, Beate Elstad, and Erik Døving, “Choral Conducting Competences: Perceptions and Priorities” in *Research Studies in Music Education* (June 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X19843191>.
- ⁷ Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell, eds. “Conducting,” in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Historical Performance in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 143. doi:10.1017/9781316257678.004.
- ⁸ Arthur Jacobs, “Conduct” in *A New Dictionary of Music*, 81. New York: Taylor and Francis, 07/2017. doi:10.4324/9781315083360.
- ⁹ Maiello, 7.
- ¹⁰ Harold Farberman, *The Art of Conducting Technique: A New Perspective* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Company, Incorporated, 1999), ix.
- ¹¹ Farberman, xi.
- ¹² Farberman, 49.
- ¹³ Barry Wilson, *Basic Conducting* (2017): 3-4. <https://www.scbaptist.org/am-site/media/basic-conducting-2017-edition.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Wilson, 7-8.
- ¹⁵ Farberman, 1.
- ¹⁶ Morten Schuldt-Jensen, “What Is Conducting? Signs, Principles, and Problems,” *Signata* [Online], 6 | 2015, 395. Online since 31 December 2016, connection on 19 April

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- ¹⁷ Helen Hoekma van Wyck, "Inspiring Excellence: Observations of Four Collegiate Choral Conductors." *Choral Journal*, 56, no. 4 (November 2015), 40.
- ¹⁸ Howard Swan, "The Development of a Choral Instrument." in H. Decker. (Ed.). *Choral Conducting Symposium*. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 8.
- ¹⁹ Wyck, 40-41.
- ²⁰ Carl Cherland, "Toward Beautiful Singing The Vocal Pedagogy of Cornelius Reid (Part 1)." *Choral Journal*, 44, no. 3 (October 2003), 47.
- ²¹ Cherland, 49.
- ²² Ibid., 50-51.
- ²³ Carl Cherland, Toward Beautiful Singing The Vocal Pedagogy of Cornelius Reid (Part 2). *Choral Journal*, 44, no. 5 (December 2003), 59.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Derrick Thompson, "A Collaborative Approach: How Pedagogues of Singing and their Students Navigate the Solo and Choral Realms" (EdD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2019), 186.
- ²⁶ Meribeth Dayme and Cynthia Vaughn, *The Singing Book* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Incorporated, 2014).
- ²⁷ Shirlee Emmons and Constance Chase, *Prescriptions for Choral Excellence: Tone, Text, Dynamic Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 97.
- ²⁸ Derrick Thompson, "A Collaborative Approach."
- ²⁹ Gustav Meier, *The Score, the Orchestra, and the Conductor*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 329.
- ³⁰ Jeffery Wall, "Intentional and Expressive Conducting: It's All in the Rebound," *Choral Journal*, 55, no. 8 (March 2015), 41.
- ³¹ Courtney Snyder, "Conducting Expressively: Navigating Seven Misconceptions that Inhibit Meaningful Connection to Ensemble and Sound," *Music Educators Journal*, 103, no. 2 (December 2016), 47.
- ³² Ibid., 48.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Jose Mauricio Valle Brando, "Learning and teaching conducting through musical and non-musical skills: an evaluation of orchestral conducting teaching methods" DMA diss., (Louisiana State University, 2011).
- ³⁵ Lisa Adalade Billingham, "The Development of a Gestural Vocabulary for Choral Conductors Based on the Movement Theory of Rudolf Laban" (DMA diss., University of Arizona, 2001).
- ³⁶ Liz Garnett, *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2009), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.columbia.edu/10.4324/9781315095714>
- ³⁷ Ibid., 109.
- ³⁸ Ramona Wis, "Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal: A Gesture-Based Approach to Developing Vocal Skill and Musical Understanding." *Choral Journal* 40, no. 3 (1999): 25-33. Accessed June 4, 2020.
- ³⁹ Harold Decker and Colleen Kirk, *Choral Conducting Focus on Communication* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1988), 1.
- ⁴⁰ Brandao, 48.
- ⁴¹ Liz Garnett, *Choral Conducting*, 109-110..
- ⁴² Ramona Wis, "Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal."