

**The Seven
Deadly Sins
of
Choral
Conducting**

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Conductors are responsible to the music, composers, performance ensembles, and audiences. Our ensembles are perhaps the most important, since they are the means through which the music on the page and the interpretation of the composer's sonic intent are brought to life. As conductors, we take on the role of maestro or teacher, regardless of the experiential level of the ensemble. Conductors who fail to optimize the role of teacher are in danger of committing one or more of the seven deadly sins. These sins relate metaphorically to the Seven Cardinal Sins; however, although conductors' transgressions do not endanger a person's soul, they do ultimately affect the soul of the music and artistic performance.

Each of the seven deadly sins for conductors is equally serious and therefore not ranked; however, as Illustration I shows, lack of preparation and cessation of learning are central to, interrelated with, and interactive with the other five. The purpose of this article is to discuss how each sin negatively affects music-making in rehearsals and performances, and to provide anecdotal suggestions for avoiding these transgressions. The list of sins or failings, although not exhaustive, includes: (1) lack of preparation; (2) multiple preparatory gestures; (3) lack of eye contact; (4) over conducting; (5) unmusical conducting; (6) inefficient listening; and (7) cessation of learning.

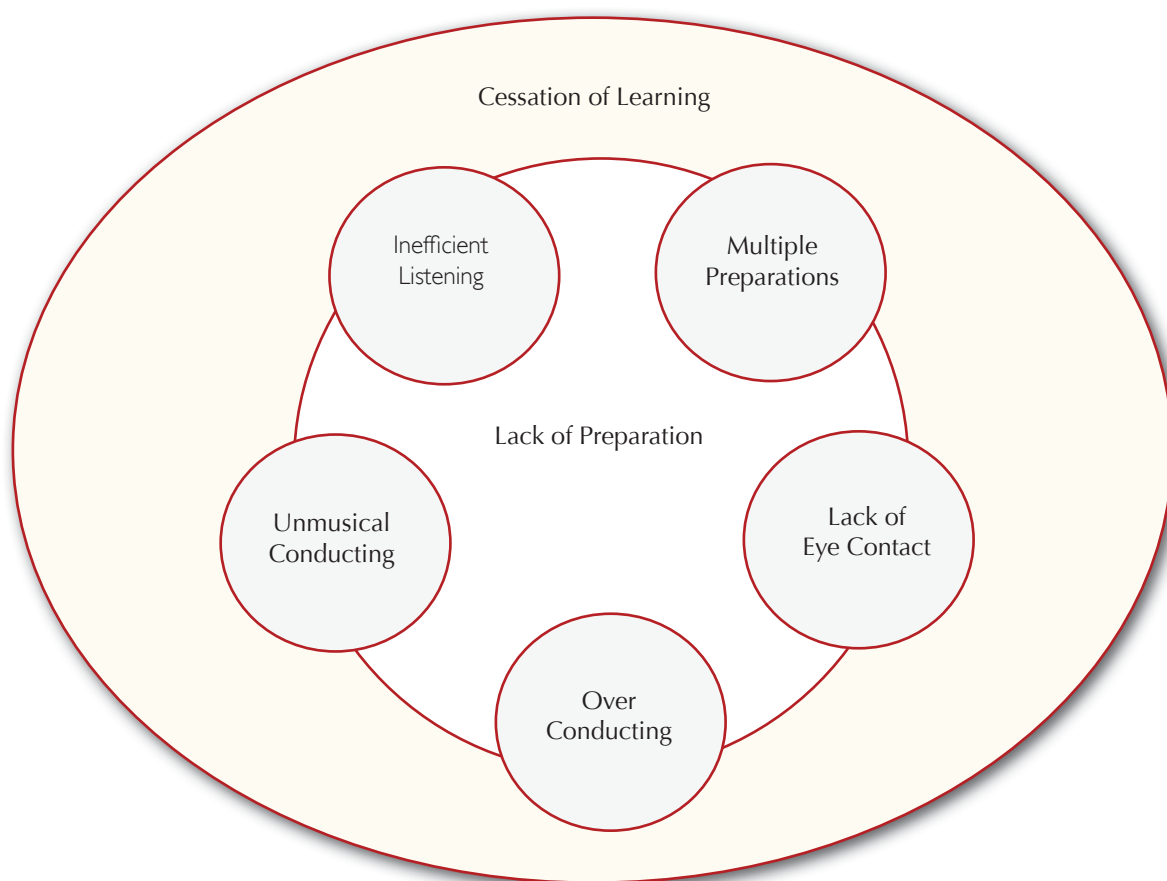


Illustration I: The Seven Deadly Sins of Conductors

The Seven Deadly Sins of Choral Conducting

Lack of Preparedness

Thorough preparation is necessary to avoid wasted rehearsal time, incomplete music-making, frustrated performers, disservice to the composers, and musically unsatisfied audiences. To honor the composer's sonic intent and to convey this to the ensemble and thus to the audience, a comprehensive knowledge of the score is essential. Musical interpretation matures as the conductor studies every aspect of the score to develop an aural concept of the written page. Donald Neuen views score study "microscopically, one detail, note, word, syllable, or phrase at a time [with] our reward the ability to interpret thoroughly, teach, and conduct with honest confidence."¹ The task of score preparation is to be completed before the first rehearsal so the conductor

may communicate the interpretation to the ensemble through gesture and pithy verbal explanations as necessary. An exhaustive discussion about preparation is beyond the scope of this article; however, the primary tenets will be highlighted.

Effective conductors hear the music in their inner ear (audiation). Audiation is paramount to successful understanding of the score, to bring to life the interpretation of the notes on the page. Conductors transfer this aural concept to the performers through gestures beginning in the first rehearsal. Recordings are useful in the learning process, but should not be used in *lieu* of hearing the score in the inner ear. Multiple professional recordings (a minimum of 3) for each work are recommended to provide a diverse field of interpretations. Sole reliance on recordings for developing the inner ear is not encouraged. When asked about practicing, the late concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz stated he did not practice. Before playing a note he researched and studied the composers

and the scores and then played the music.² Historical background, knowledge of form, articulations, phrase structure, and large tonal centers are important starting points for score study. If text is involved, an understanding of the correct pronunciation, translation (poetic and literal), source, text underlay, vowel production and unification, and consonant placement is crucial for an expressive musical performance. In preparing a score, Joseph A. Labuta suggests looking for hidden meanings to prevent misconceptions and faulty interpretations.³ A number of conducting text books provide sequential or phase-study formats to prepare scores and rehearsals.⁴

Once the score is aurally formed in the conductor's mind, rehearsal plans are prepared. Singers and instrumentalist are encouraged to sing their parts. Choral singers may be asked to sight-read the other voice parts in the early stages of rehearsals. Carefully consider the range limitations of unchanged male voices when rotating parts for sight-reading purposes. Concise instruction about the form and phrase structure facilitate the rehearsal process. A greater understanding of the structure of the whole score by the students will result in improved and more immediate music-making. A complete score preparation process anticipates conducting problems and performance issues such as *fermatas*, *subito* tempo and dynamic changes, asymmetrical meters, errors in the score and text, and expressive markings. Score study also brings our attention to other technical characteristics related to specific instruments or voices, e.g., intonation issues with the throat B³ of the B³ Clarinet, or the high tessitura vowel modification required for sopranos. All aspects discussed above contribute to smooth and musically effective and rewarding rehearsals. The specific structure of the rehearsal stems from a comprehensive understanding of the music, leading to exciting music-making and



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Too Many Preparations

Multiple preparatory gestures are unnecessary and confusing for ensembles of all ability levels. As adjudicators of bands and choirs, my colleagues and this author have observed conductors presenting 3 or 4 preparatory beats. Although one preparation is all that is necessary for the majority of circumstances, 2 preparations are helpful for rhythmically difficult entrances and some tempo changes.⁵ All ensembles respond

to a given gesture if expected to and trained well. If rehearsed with correctly executed single or double preparations, (dependent on tempo and type of *anacrusis* beats) ensembles will respond in kind. Elizabeth Green and Mark Gibson describe the "impulse of will" or hearing the desired sound in the inner ear; believing, and executing, thus initiating a confident response from the ensemble.⁶ A mentor of this author said know what you desire to hear; trust, and expect the ensemble to comply. A comprehensive knowledge of the score provides confidence for concise preparatory gestures. Opera and musical theatre scores are good works to practice single prepara-

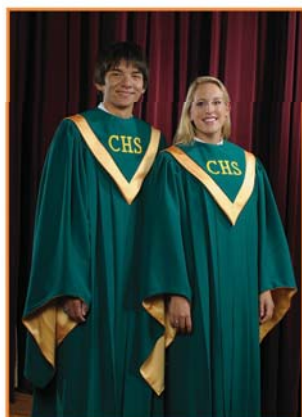
tions because little or no time is available for more without risking interrupting the action.

Additional gestural features assist in the clarity of the preparatory beats. A combination of eye contact before, during, and immediately after the entrance; breathing in during the arm, wrist, and hand gesture; and, a clear preparatory *ictus* will create the optimum initiation of sound. Slow to moderate *tempi* require only a single preparation whereas faster *tempi* may warrant a maximum of two preparations for clarity and security.⁷ Experienced teachers of conducting remind their students that all designation gestures (those upon which the

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sound occurs) require a specific and clear preparation to function accurately. Moreover, the breath is the life of the preparatory gesture since all musicians breathe whether functionally to produce the sound or to articulate a phrase in the case of strings and percussion. To develop acute attention from players, conductors may experiment bringing in ensembles with arms behind their backs and providing the preparation with only the eyes and breath. Breathing simultaneously with eye contact and executing gestures with clear *ictuses* guarantee crisp entrances.

Mastery of the mechanics of preparations enables the conductor to communicate succinctly the technical and artistic parameters of the score. The upbeat of each preparatory gesture via the contour, direction, and speed initially provides the tempo, dynamic (via size with left hand support), style, expression, and articulation followed by the down stroke and wrist flick or ictus at the focal point of the beat in the same "style."⁸ Initial preparations may involve both hands. For louder dynamics and energetic entrances both hands may provide the complete preparatory gesture.

Softer dynamics and sensitive entrances may require the addition of the left hand palm-down gesture. Most importantly, the gestures must match how the music is to sound based upon the conductor's aural concept and interpretation of the composer's sonic intent.

The conductor's facial expression needs to match what the arm and hand are communicating. All mechanics of the preparatory gestures indicate the style, e.g., *legato*, *staccato*, *tenuto*, light, heavy, sustained, *pesante*, and thus the mood or character of the music; effective preparations require thought and focus."⁹ Audiation of the first phrase when considering the most technically or rhythmically difficult phrases or subdivisions help set an optimum tempo. During score preparation, it is helpful to write adjectives or adverbs describing the desired mood and tempo at the beginning of each section of the composition. Research the actual definitions of the expression/tempo markings, e.g., *Allegro* defined as cheerful or bright and *largo* meaning broad or wide. These definitions provide us with a more accurate concept of the composers' sonic intent versus defining *allegro* and *largo* as fast and slow respectively. A mature aural concept combined with a positive expectation of the ensemble as responsible artists, regardless of age, will enable an artistic confident execution of sound.

Our eyes are the most expressive part of the body; they lead the communication between director and ensemble. Minimal eye contact from the conductor reveals insecurity and lack of knowledge of the score. Memorization of the entire score or at minimum, sections enables consistent eye contact.

In addition to preparations and releases, eye contact precedes, accompanies, and remains with sections during cues. Initially eyes function as a "friendly heads up" to the ensemble member preparing for entrances, especially if the person or section has *taceted* for a number of measures e.g., percussionists and harpists. An inviting glance well in advance is welcomed. Once a section or soloist enters the conductor remains with them to ensure security and to help shape the phrase. Green reminds conductors to look to the back of sections to create an inclusive feeling that all players are important.¹¹ Conductors may want to look first into those eyes of the singers and instrumentalist who consistently look up and out at the director. Our consistent effort to work against our natural tendency toward attention to our dominant side by scanning the entire ensemble as evenly and as often as possible will encourage the attention of all individuals. Difficult tempo changes including *accelerandi*, *rallentandi*, *fermati*, and major dynamic changes and technically difficult passages warrant specific attention with the eyes. When a number of sections enter simultaneously or when the *tutti* ensemble is playing, the conductor chooses an individual or section on which to focus based upon the desired musical affect or technical need. Green recommends when teaching younger groups to "show [them] when and how players or singers ought to look at you," and teach them to observe and listen to each other to develop an "organic intelligence [and a] collective ability to play and perceive music as one entity."¹² The most effective means

Lack of Eye Contact

A conductor whose head is buried in the score creates insecurity for the ensemble, lack of interest, sloppy entrances and mechanical performances; it also may enable rehearsal management problems. At minimum, the conductor's eyes must precede and accompany all preparations and releases as discussed above. Ensembles will more likely look at the conductor if the conductor is looking at them—"eye ball to eyeball."¹⁰

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of acquiring eye contact from ensemble members is for the conductor to model this virtue by starting with “eyes up” from the first rehearsal through the performance.

Over Conducting

We avoid the sin of over conducting by honoring the simple phrase “less is more.” Continuous mirror conducting diminishes the effectiveness of our gestures. A symphony orchestra member told Donald Neuen “When both hands do the same thing, it becomes more confusing; we [the players] have to look at two things instead of one.”¹³ Simultaneous beating of meter patterns with both hands minimizes the effectiveness of their independence, especially the left hand. Initial *forte* entrances, energetic sections, or dramatic releases may require mirror conducting for a few measures. The score helps to determine the gesture type. Labuta suggests ambidextrous conducting; each hand and arm alternates conducting the beat pattern and expressive gestures to develop dexterity and auto-independence.¹⁴

Many times our gestures get in the way of the sound and expression. As detailed above, our gestures are visual representations of aural concepts formed during score preparation. Distracting habits such as knee bending, toe tapping, head bobbing, and conducting with the elbows interfere with music-making. We can mitigate these extraneous movements, many of which are subconscious, by video recording our rehearsals and performances to evaluate the effectiveness of our gestures in communicating the music to the ensemble. Consider the following sample questions when viewing video recordings and analyzing rehearsals: (1) does my gesture size match the dynamics; (2) are my accents precise; (3) does the tone quality of the ensemble match

the conductor’s aural concept; and, (4) what can I change in my gesture to improve rhythmic accuracy and phrasing? Rehearsal issues not related to incorrect pitches may first be corrected by adjusting the conductor’s gesture before verbally describing the change; this saves rehearsal time and demands increased ensemble eye contact and attention to gestures. Rodney Eichenberger and André Thomas produced a DVD titled *What They See is What You Get*.¹⁵ This valuable resource for instrumental and choral conductors demonstrates the power of gesture in affecting the overall sound, style, and tone quality of the ensemble. For example, singers and wind instrumentalists generally respond with a healthy and supported tone to a lower conducting pattern in the area of the waist and abdomen from where a low breath originates. Conversely, a high pattern near the shoulder area tends to create a throaty, thin, and unsupported sound. Experiment with minimal gestures and “leaving” the pattern to shape the phrases or larger musical structures if the ensemble is secure with the pulse. Conductors’ gestures re-create the music by communicating the interpretation of the music and the composer’s sonic intent to the performers.

Unmusical Conducting

Unmusical conducting, originating from continuous mirroring or metronomic patterns, may lose the attention of the ensemble in rehearsals and result in uninspiring performances. Our expectation for artistry begins in the first rehearsal. The clarity of the beat may be presented in the context of the shape of musical phrases. Plan to teach, or discover as a group, a minimum of 1 or 2 musical or expressive phrases in all rehearsals from the start; this will garner immediate interest in the music and will yield a higher level of artistry in perfor-



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mance. Introducing the artistic elements of the score early on will encourage ensemble members to be more engaged, optimizing precious rehearsal time. Early modeling of expression with our eyes, face, hands, and arms will improve the transmission of our interpretation to the ensemble. The text, harmonic progressions, melodic contour, texture, and rhythmic patterns guide our expressive gestures, helping us to draw the music with our gestures depicting the direction of each phrase and how to enter and leave each musical thought.

Successful conductors expect their ensembles to simultaneously internalize the pulse and to know the direction of the phrases. Although the conducting pattern is clear, rhythmic precision may not be obtained unless each individual is responsible for the pulse. On occasion, directors may rehearse without conducting to encourage this internalization. In addition to giving personal responsibility to the members, the conductor will be able to focus full attention to listening and observing performance behavior. To practice internalization and personal responsibility, have singers or instrumentalists form a circle and close their eyes, and to begin a selection by listening to the breath. After one or two false starts, students gain confidence and open their ears for successful commencing of sound. Instruct the students to conduct while singing their parts to solidify difficult rhythmic figures.

Tempo is a subject for another article but it is important conductors give "intelligent attention, not slavish obeisance" to metronome markings.¹⁶ Green and Gibson remind us to "conduct the score, not the ensemble—*clarity of intent, not just clarity of beat.*"¹⁷ A few years ago this writer observed the St. Olaf Choir

under the direction of Anton Armstrong, performing a Johann Sebastian Bach Motet while holding hands; a choir of individuals "working" as a unit to feel the pulse and phrasing. The motet danced, creating a stunning performance. Each member was responsible for the pulse and attentive to the collective expression of the ensemble. Non-reliance on the conductor for the pulse increases ensemble listening skills and enhances the collaborative music-making process.

Inefficient Listening

Inefficient listening might be considered the greatest sin for all musicians. According to Green and Gibson, listening is "one of the most crucial aspects of the conductor's art, [balancing the] "generation of sound with one's gestures and hearing actual sound of what is played!"¹⁸ The attention to gesture does not supersede the importance of the conductor's awareness of the acoustic phenomenon being created in the moment. Encourage individual ensemble members to listen within and across sections. A well-prepared score enables the ears of the conductor to listen acutely from the first rehearsal. Avoiding singing parts with the ensemble ensures optimum hearing and prevents distracting the other performers. Listening combined with purposeful gestures decreases the amount of verbal direction required in a rehearsal and optimizes music-making! Unifying the sound of ensembles is achieved by bringing attention to members how their part fits into the whole; for example, whether they are singing or playing the root, 3rd, 5th, 7th, or 9th of a chord. Each tuning is adjusted differently relative to the harmonic texture affecting intonation. Ensemble members' knowledge of the location of the melody and counter melody in the texture will solve many balance issues. To mitigate rehearsal management issues, students in sections not performing may

be asked to actively listen to assess for correct pitches, rhythms, and expressive parameters. Ask ensemble members to trace the phrase shape with their hands and arms as other sections perform. Listening is a team sport that, if modeled by the conductor and encouraged in every rehearsal, will yield productive rehearsals and artistic performances.

Cessation of Learning

Cessation of learning influences all of the aforementioned transgressions. Active and passive learning continues throughout the career of a conductor. Once the processes of discovery, intrigue, trial and error, experimentation, evaluation, and revision cease so does the effectiveness and passion of the conductor. Learning occurs through listening, reading articles, speaking with colleagues, attending and presenting at conferences, researching, rehearsing and performing. Remaining open to what each score preparation, rehearsal plan, and performance teaches us about our art form sustains us. Robert Shaw said each time he repeated a work he produced a new score preparation. We find new gems in revisiting familiar works. Our ensemble members from the elementary choir student to the principle trombone player in a major symphony are our teachers. Music-making is a reciprocal art form through which each performer gains from one another's artistry and musicianship. The artist/conductor may broaden study to encompass poetry, prose literature, and the other fine and performing arts. Conductors are lifelong visual and aural observers responsible for passing these skills on to the ensemble. To enliven the soul of music the conductor-teacher strives to trade the above vices for the virtues of preparedness, judicial and musical gestures, and consistent eye contact. Artist/conductors are good listeners and lifelong learners. Perseverance and

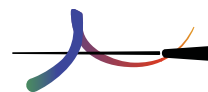
dedication to a lifetime discovery of and expression of the art of great music-making is necessary for success as an artist/conductor.

NOTES

- ¹ Donald Neuen, *Choral Concepts* (New York: G. Schirmer, 2002), 141.
- ² Source interview unknown.
- ³ Joseph A. Labuta, *Basic Conducting Techniques*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000), 67.
- ⁴ Donald Hunsberger; Joseph A. Labuta; Green and Gibson.
- ⁵ Supporting authors: Donald Hunsberger; Joseph

- A. Labuta, and Elizabeth A. Green.
- ⁶ Elizabeth A. Green and Mark Gibson, *The Modern Conductor*, 7th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2004), 12.
 - ⁷ Slower sections may require a double or subdivided preparation for greater tempo clarity.
 - ⁸ Donald Hunsberger and Roy E. Ernst, *The Art of Conducting*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992), 6-7.
 - ⁹ Donald Neuen, *Choral Concepts* (New York: G. Schirmer, 2002), 223.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.
 - ¹¹ Elizabeth A. Green and Mark Gibson, *The Modern Conductor*, 7th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2004), 185.
 - ¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

- ¹³ Donald Neuen, *Choral Concepts* (New York: G. Schirmer, 2002), 206.
- ¹⁴ Joseph A. Labuta, *Basic Conducting Techniques*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000), 47.
- ¹⁵ Rodney Eichenberger and André Thomas, *What They See is What You Get*, DVD, (Chappell Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1994).
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Green and Mark Gibson, *The Modern Conductor*, 7th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2004), 206.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.



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