

The history of the conducting gesture is as old as recorded history itself. While the modern “professional” conductor did not invade the popular consciousness until the middle of the nineteenth century, depictions of conducting gestures were etched in hieroglyphics and Pharaonic friezes, recorded in Greek and Roman literature, and encoded above Jewish and Gregorian texts as cheironomic neumes. Conductors in the ancient world were so revered, in fact, that the ancient Egyptians dedicated images of the hand and arm in art exclusively to refer to music, musicians, and especially conductors.¹

Yet for some reason, conducting history has been overlooked by instructional programs for choral music educators in America. Studying the development of conducting gestures emphasizes that conducting gestures have an array of meanings and contexts beyond “keeping time.” Analyzing the historical use of gesture to transmit melodic information lends authority to the modern use of kinesthetic educational practices such as the Curwen hand signs.² Understanding the

evolution of the conducting gesture over the years encourages conducting students to develop new solutions to modern conducting problems and inspire them to be innovators rather than imitators. Finally, studying conducting holistically within a historical framework helps students consider different leadership styles to achieve the best possible performance, whether that requires conducting or giving direction in other ways.

The purpose of this article is to review the literature on conducting history, particularly as it pertains to choral conducting and to argue the pedagogical value of history for conducting students. First, I summarize current literature on existing instructional content related to history in conducting course syllabi. Then, I overview the current understandings of the development of kinesthetic musical practices from ancient times to the present day. Finally, I provide implications for teaching conducting history to students in conducting courses and instructors in the choral conducting classroom.

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The background of the cover is an abstract, textured composition. It features a mix of teal, red, and yellow-green colors. The textures are varied, including fine, repetitive patterns that resemble woven fabric or digital noise, alongside smoother, more organic shapes. The overall effect is a complex, layered visual field.

GIVING MUSIC A HAND

Conducting History in
Practice and Pedagogy

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Conducting History in Today's Classroom

For beginning conductors in conducting classes today, textbooks serve as a primary resource for information. Today's conducting textbooks, however, make either only cursory reference to history or omit it altogether. The typical textbook begins with basic posture and beat pattern guidelines, then describes a system of gestures without any historical context. Timothy Benge's survey of college conducting textbooks acknowledged that these texts are generally excellent examples for the mechanics of conducting. Only six of the twenty-four choral pedagogy texts Benge surveyed, however, contained any information on the historical development of the conducting gesture.³

As early as 1968, Julius Herford called attention to the lack of information that is currently provided to students regarding historical gesture and performance practice.⁴ The most extensive description of ancient conducting history in any textbook appeared in Wilhelm Ehmann's 1968 *Choral Directing*, in which the author described the use of hand gestures and feet by Greek choruses, the Gregorian gesture, and the origins of chant conducting or *cheironomy*. However, this information is extremely brief, only filling about two pages of the entire text.⁵

Conducting instructors frequently provide substantial content to students through handouts, articles, and direct instruction. One might argue that conducting history may be studied in the classroom through sources other than textbooks. Scot Hanna-Weir's 2013 doctoral dissertation surveyed twenty-two undergraduate conducting course syllabi and found no indication of any historical context. The researcher determined that, like textbooks, most undergraduate courses "begin with a discussion of posture...then introduce the basic patterns in the right arm."⁶ Hanna-Weir argued that this focus on metric gesture as the underpinning for conducting syllabi likely was encouraged by popular mid-twentieth-century conducting texts like those of Karl Gerkens and Nicolai Malko.⁷

Research by John Hart published in 2018 on the status of choral conducting curricula surveyed conducting pedagogues at American universities regarding instructional content. The questionnaire distributed by Hart defined content knowledge in exclusively technical

terms—tempo, beat patterns, control gestures, expressive gestures, and score study—but did not address any historical knowledge regarding the discipline. Hart concluded that conducting instructors emphasized technical skills over pedagogical skills,⁸ consistent with the theory that many current conducting courses focus exclusively on hand-waving without substantial historical context.

Some sources that have included conducting history contain incorrect information. Karl Gerkens's 1919 volume *Essentials of Conducting* stated that there was no evidence of conducting gesture before the fourteenth century,⁹ an argument refuted by his own contemporaries. Even as late as 1960, William Finn's *The Art of the Choral Conductor* provided misrepresentations of the use of the conducting gestures during the Gregorian period.¹⁰ Robert Demaree and Don V Moses's 1995 textbook, *The Complete Conductor*, provided inaccurate information about the use of gesture during the Renaissance.¹¹ Charles Chapman's 2010 article regarding chant conducting technique, while not technically incorrect, recommended conducting gestures based on the author's "experimentation" rather than either historic or authentic contemporary cheironomic practice.¹²

There are two comprehensive, accurate sources of scholarship on the full history of the choral conducting gesture. The first was published between 1923 and 1924 by William Wallace, notable Scottish composer and dean of music faculty at the University of London.¹³ In a remarkable series of seven articles, Wallace surveyed conducting history as a whole, from ancient Egypt up to Wallace's own time. The scholarship in these texts is still highly accurate and readable and would be an excellent resource in any undergraduate conducting course. The second is Elliott Galkin's (1988) *The History of Orchestral Conducting: Theory and Practice*. Galkin's review of historical sources on conducting practice is painstakingly comprehensive in breadth and detail. The writing is impeccably sourced and annotated, including primary source authors from every possible European background. Galkin's two chapters on conducting history may be a bit dense for undergraduates but will still provide an excellent overview of the topic for instructors and a comprehensive list of primary sources for study.

Conducting in the Ancient World

The earliest use of hand signals for musical instruction was discovered in Egyptian statues and burial art, particularly in the areas surrounding Giza.¹⁴ This form of musical communication was more than simply an indication of the beat or dynamics. Rather, the Egyptian hand signal system likely communicated both pitch and melodic contour. Edith Gerson-Kiwi and David Hiley argued that this theory is supported by observing contemporary Coptic and Egyptian cantors who today practice similar hand gestures to those found in the ancient Egyptian artwork¹⁵ (Photo 1). Although these theories have been disputed, Hans Hickmann described the great effort made to determine the validity of these claims:

The reconstruction of Egyptian music poses many problems for the scientist. To solve them, several paths are offered to him: the methodical study of the instruments discovered in the thousand tombs; the analysis of works of art and pharaonic paintings that represent musical scenes; and finally, the review of the remains of ancient music in the folk customs of modern Egypt and Nubia.¹⁶

The physical gestures of the Egyptians had a lasting effect on many of the cultures surrounding their territory. Louis Barton believed that the Hebrew people were most likely exposed to it during their captivity in Egypt.¹⁷

Today, some Jewish sects use a system of written symbols within their scripture to indicate the proper gestures.¹⁸ In this tradition, the gestures aided in teaching and memorizing the correct intonation and contour of the scriptural chant with which they corresponded. There is no evidence, however, that this tradition migrated to Europe during the Jewish Diaspora or was used by European Christians until almost a thousand years later.¹⁹

The ancient Greeks, great admirers of the Egyptian culture, later incorporated these traditions into their own musical cultures:

The Greek travelers, already, were impressed by the extreme serenity and the beauty of the Egyptian melodies. Several testimonies bear witness to this: haven't the Greek authors repeatedly underlined that their musical art and its theory came down in direct line from the pharaonic musicians, their masters? In fact, it is scarcely conceivable that modern musicians have not taken into account in their works the historical evidence which we possess about the beginnings of musical life in Egypt, the cradle of civilization.²⁰

In Greek musical ensembles, rhythmic ideas were given by movement of the feet, and melodic ideas were expressed with the hands. Texts performed by the chorus were typically sung in a chant style, so the leader of



Photo 1: An Egyptian relief representing hand gestures used to lead an ensemble.²³

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the chorus (ἡγεμων, “hegemon”) was physically raised above the others to give gestural direction.²¹ The instruments, particularly the flutes, were given authority over the beat. In later periods, Greek flute-players wore wooden shoes and stomped on a hard surface so that the beat was heard. Roman musicians also used this system of keeping the beat, and the wooden shoes are seen in statues and referred to in the writings of Marcus Quintilian. The writer Marius Victorinus identified these gestures by name as “arsis is the raising of the foot without sound, thesis is the putting it down with sound.”²²

Conducting in Medieval Europe

Throughout the middle period, Christian chant melodies greatly increased in complexity. Rather than syllabic style, which dominated earlier forms of chant, European chant of the twelfth century became stylized and ornate.

Melismas at the ends of phrases would be continuously extended, usually on the final syllable of the word. In fact, one Greek chant has a melisma in which the final syllable of “alleluia” is extended for an entire page.²⁴ So as to further complicate ensemble singing, the individual notes of the chant were not sung with equal rhythm but had traditional patterns of *accelerando* and *ritardando* as the pitch ascended or descended.

At first, the monks and nuns who led their ensembles used gestures in the air to indicate relative pitch. Like earlier Jewish manuscripts, these gestures were later inscribed above the words of prayers books and psalters as symbols called neumes. Yet, without an adequate system to notate specific pitches and durations, variations in the chants from place to place inevitably occurred.

The oldest surviving copies of chant texts with graphical neumes are dated to the late ninth century, although chant books without neumes continued to be used as late



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as the early tenth century. These early chant books were too small to be useful during performance, however, so they were likely used more as an occasional reference. As a result, the conductor acted as an interpreter of the neumes to establish consistency in the melody.²⁵ William Wallace cited John Cotton, a writer from the eleventh or twelfth century, who described the tremendous challenges in performing music without standardization:

So, it comes to this, that someone sings the neume up or down at his own sweet will, and when you are at your minor third or your fourth, the next man is singing a major third or a fifth, and if a third man comes in he puts the others out... So, the long and the short of it is that you won't get three people to sing together, far less a thousand.²⁶

As the demands on church musicians grew, these musicians “re-discovered” techniques of musical communication used by neighboring Greek Christian communities. Wallace cited a Codex from the eleventh century, which referenced a form of musical direction known as “cheironomy,”²⁷ derived from Greek word *χείρ* (“cheir,” hand). Similarly, Gerson-Kiwi described a twelfth-century monk from Monte Cassino as the “conductor” in a Greek monastery in southern Italy.²⁸ In this community, the leader, or *cheironomica*, held a bishop’s or abbot’s staff in the left hand to indicate authority while at the same time indicating the neumes with the right.²⁹ Today, Roman Catholic monks in Monte Cassino protect the oldest-known Gregorian-style neumatic manuscripts and still lead songs using cheironomic gestures.³⁰

European musicians were inspired by Greek and Roman influences, but their conducting practices were not identical. Cheironomy, as practiced by Egyptian, Hebrew, and Byzantine communities, was the explicit transmission of specific musical intervals, not a system of communicating musical expressivity. European cheironomic gestures by contrast indicated rhythm and melodic contour, not specific intervals. Therefore, the prevailing cheironomic practice of the Gregorian style must be perceived as a significant departure from its Middle Eastern roots.

In a manuscript dated 1274 by writer Elias Salomon,

Wallace found examples of the gradual evolution of European cheironomic gestures. The first referenced Guido of Arezzo’s “Harmonic Hand”: “having a mental image of the diagram on the palm of the left hand, we mark the pauses with the right, we indicate the ‘points’ with the finger and little stick.”³¹ The reference to the “little stick” is significant here as a potential precursor to the modern baton. This new system provided the monks a means for specifying exact pitch, a practice that several hundred years later was adapted into solfeggio hand signs. Wallace’s second quote from Salomon showed the importance of leadership in the performance of Gregorian chant:

Likewise, be it noted that in the case of four singers equally good, they should be led by one... and he should mark all pauses... and start again after them... Similarly, if the rector does not sing in the quartet, he is to arrange the others in order, and indicate the pauses with his own hand above the book, while he frankly prompts them.³²

European monastic cheironomists borrowed and adapted the classical ideas of *arsis* and *thesis* from the Greek time-keeping practice. Rather than an upward foot motion used by the ancient Greeks, *arsis* became associated with a rhythmic motion forward. Conversely, *thesis* became a movement toward rest rather than a downward motion of the foot.³³ Modern chant performance represents a synthesis of these melodic and rhythmic tendencies with both *arsis* and *thesis*—upward melodic motion quickens while downward melodic motion slows.³⁴

Conducting in the Baroque and Classical Periods

The evolution of the archetypal orchestral conductor, and the subsequent universalization of the baton, happened out of necessity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the number of performers in the ensemble increased, so did the challenge of maintaining uniform tempo. By the end of the seventeenth century, composers were indicating dynamic and phrase mark-

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ings, utilizing paired voicings across the ensemble, and even implementing extended playing techniques. As a result, more complex and subtle compositional techniques increased the need for some form of leadership.

Early attempts at conducting large ensembles were not well received, and conducting became a source of controversy in musical circles in Europe. During the late Renaissance, some conductors had become quite histrionic in their gestures, as noted by the fifteenth-century text *Philomates de Nova Domo Musicorum*:

There are those for whom it is a custom to direct songs with base gestures, thinking that they know outstanding customs and the exquisite condition of singers. Certain directors moderate the measure with both hands spread apart, at fighting distance, just as when in a lawsuit one of the two people is not able to jump upon the hair of the other with his fingernails, he threatens a lethal contest with his twofold palms unarmed and extended. Also I have seen many signifying the measure by stamping their foot, like a horse that has eaten enough strikes the turf of green grass and salaciously leaps about. Many imitate a vegetable while directing neumes, like the one who sings like a swan with his neck tilted back, or that one accustomed to squat down while singing.³⁵

As a response to these excesses in conducting style, Zaccagni commanded at the turn of the seventeenth century that the conducting beat be “steady and straightforward,” with only an up and down motion,³⁶ suggesting a philosophical return to *arsis* and *thesis*.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many *Kapellmeisters* (“chapel masters”) in Germany had taken to literally “beating time” by banging a stick against a wooden surface or by foot stomping, not unlike Greek and Roman traditions. This form of conducting could obviously be noisy and distracting and was therefore never universally accepted. Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his *Dictionnaire de musique*, stated that French opera directors audibly beat time constantly, “compared to a woodcutter felling a tree.”³⁷ Stephanus Vanneus, as early as 1533, insisted that the beat could be indicated

silently, without any “sounded instrument.”³⁸ Audible conducting could even be dangerous. One well-known story involved Jean-Baptiste Lully, the famous French composer, who often conducted using a very heavy stick that he beat against the ground. After a misplaced beat badly injured the conductor’s foot, he subsequently developed a case of gangrene from which he eventually succumbed.³⁹

Although not well documented, women participated in performance and leadership of musical ensembles throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The separation of religious communities by gender had required nuns through the middle ages to have substantial roles in the development and leadership of music ensembles, such as the now well-known composer Hildegard von Bingen. During the Baroque and Classical periods, women of the court such as the Duchess of Alfonso were known widely for their superb musical tastes. The Duchess conducted the *Concerto delle donne*, a chamber music ensemble composed entirely of women founded in Ferraro in the late sixteenth century. Wallace asserted that their performance practice foreshadowed modern practices, such that the performers entered and exited the performance in strict silence and the Duchess conducted using a long, polished baton.⁴⁰

During the eighteenth century, church music in Germany continued to be conducted in the traditional way by a *Kapellmeister*. Opera, however, moved toward a “two director system,” in which the first violin gave the mood and musicality to the ensemble while the keyboardist kept time and indicated entrances and cut-offs to the choir. In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century, the “conductor”—the person keeping the beat—was almost always at the keyboard,⁴¹ a practice that continues in many churches to the present time.⁴²

Wallace argued that the rise of the baton correlated with the decline in prominence of the harpsichord as the central feature of performance.⁴³ Mauceri inferred another relationship between the development of music notation and conducting gesture according to the needs of the ensemble. At first, the conductor was only provided with a reduction rather than the full score. In time, however, it became important for the conductor to know what each part was doing independently.

Early players used subtle gestures like head nods,

eye contact, and other physical gestures during performance. As the ensembles swelled in size, these methods of communication became increasingly frustrated.⁴⁴ Initially, the responsibility for “conducting” went to the first violinists who led the ensemble through bowing gesture or stopping playing altogether and waving the bow like a baton. Indeed, in 1778, Mozart became so frustrated by a bad rehearsal in Paris that he threatened to take the bow and conduct the ensemble himself.⁴⁵

In French opera of the eighteenth century, there was a different approach to the leadership of the ensemble. After an orchestra reached a certain size, neither the violinist nor the keyboardist was enough to keep the ensemble together, and a separate conductor became necessary. Rather than abandoning the principle of “beating time,” the *conducteur d’Opera* used a combination of audible tempo and waving either a stick or a rolled piece of paper.⁴⁶ Wallace suggests this transition toward more rigorous leadership also stemmed from a general lack of musical literacy, noting that between 1715 and 1724, not a single violinist in the French royal band could play music from sight.⁴⁷

In 1739, Johann Mattheson published the first text specific to leading an ensemble—*Der Volkommene Capelmeister* (“The Complete Conductor”). Mattheson’s work focused on the conductor as a composer, arranger, and singing teacher, and especially emphasized the importance of good rehearsal methods over gesture.⁴⁸ Mattheson described the ideal conductor as “a broadly educated artist...knowledgeable in literature, poetry, painting, philosophy, and languages as in the various realms of music...”⁴⁹

Yet, the practice of conducting as a discipline separate from instrument performance developed inconsistently. In 1784, Dr. Charles Burney recounted a story describing a performance of the Handel society that was the “first instance of a band of such magnitude being assembled together...without the assistance of a ‘manuductor.’”⁵⁰ French observers of the time, accustomed to the time-beating of conductors like Lully, must have been amazed that such a large ensemble could be kept together without a visible or audible leader.

Early critics of conductors, especially those who used baton, considered the practice too mechanical and distracting from the performance. In 1807, Weber de-

cried its use: “I know of no more bootless strife...than that of the baton.”⁵¹ Later that same century, Pohlenz attempted to conduct the first movement of the Choral Symphony using his trademark blue baton but was promptly ordered to sit by a double bass player. He did not rise again to conduct until the choral movement.⁵² Even into the nineteenth century, musicians such as Richard Hauptmann complained about the poor use of baton in leadership: “The cursed little white stick of wood always did annoy me, and when I see it domineering over the whole orchestra, music departs from me...when everything goes of its own accord, I am in quite another world.”⁵³

The Modern Conductor

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of the “superstar” performer, including, for the first time, famous conductors. Choral music apart from the orchestra had declined through the Baroque period, and while Classical composers utilized choruses, these voices functioned as instruments within larger instrumental ensembles. As a result, through the nineteenth century, the orchestra director became the eponymous conductor model. Furthermore, social trends such as the increasing acceptance of democracy and rapid swelling of the middle class during the nineteenth century stimulated these changes. As musicians moved away from the patronage systems that had controlled European formal music in the Baroque and Classical periods, nineteenth-century musicians relied more heavily on name recognition and public popularity to make a living, and conductors of large ensembles like orchestras were more easily recognizable.

The move toward professional orchestral conductors evoked strong disagreement regarding the function of the position. David Charlton described this philosophical disagreement pointedly:

On one hand there seems to have been strong appreciation of fine results achievable under dual control of violin and keyboard, as in Italian opera. Old-fashioned church practices, with foot-stamping and arm-waving, were reviled. On the other hand, there were ‘Roman-

tic' straws in the wind: strong personalities who directed without instrument...⁵⁴

Conductors have had a long history of "strong personalities" indeed. Lully was known to smash a violin in anger during bad rehearsals, after which he paid for its damage. Handel permitted no interruptions during his rehearsals. Gluck's reputation described him as a tyrant who became enraged at any mistakes. Orchestral conductors in the Romantic era appear to have continued this tradition. Berlioz, for example, was known for leaping in the air, hiding under the conducting podium, and thrusting at and threatening the players during performances.⁵⁵

Technical innovations in gesture, particularly among orchestral conductors, became more widely adopted and standardized in Europe through the nineteenth century. The baton had been universally accepted in continental Europe for conducting orchestras by the late eighteenth century and was introduced into England no later than 1820, possibly by Louis Spohr.⁵⁶ The increasing size of the orchestra and the increasing expressive demands of the composers required ever-increasing podium leadership. Among the greatest examples of this shift in conducting expressivity were Felix Mendelssohn, Hector Berlioz, and Richard Wagner.⁵⁷ The pinnacle of this spectacle was the performance of Mahler's Symphony no. 8 in 1910, conducted by Stokowski, familiarly nicknamed the "Symphony of a Thousand."⁵⁸

The "Renaissance" of Choral Conducting

Alongside the orchestral conductor, the professional choral conductor also rose to prominence around the end of the nineteenth century. Before this time, in both America and Europe, the public preferred the large oratorios of Handel or Haydn performed by large, well-respected choral societies. Other choral compositions were rarely held in high regard, and glee clubs and high school choirs were viewed as educational tools rather than outlets for serious music.⁵⁹

During World War I, however, Americans became exposed to new music through military choruses and

bands, as well as popular touring choirs. In the 1920s, the demand for music education in the United States spurred the establishment of several now world-renowned institutions such as the Eastman School of Music, Julliard School of Music, Curtis Institute of Music, and Westminster Choir College. American high schools and liberal arts colleges formed more formal unaccom-

“As choral music became a greater source of entertainment, choral conductors rose to prominence.”

panied choirs to raise the level and stature of choral music, transforming it from a leisure hobby to a professional pursuit. Palmer Christian observed that in 1924, "the old-fashioned 'glee club' is increasingly discarding the sweater-corduroy-pants-brogue type of progress in favor of the long-tails-white-tie-patent-leather-shoes of dignified and compelling choral music."⁶⁰ By the 1920s, the demand for skilled choral conductors had grown so great that New York University and Northwestern University offered courses focused specifically on choral conducting.

During the 1930s, the Great Depression brought about a greater public demand for acapella choral music facilitated by the invention of the radio and fueled by a demand for cheap entertainment. As choral music became a greater source of entertainment, choral conductors rose to prominence. Ensembles conducted by Norman Luboff and Neil Kjos became known for excellence, and their compositions and arrangements are still widely performed today. Robert Shaw, a monumentally influential choral conductor who passed away in 1999, remains a household name to this day.⁶¹ Indeed, the conductors of the mid-twentieth century continue to have considerable influence on the conducting styles of American choral conductors, decades after their careers have ended.

No comprehensive list of impactful choral conductors in the twentieth century has so far been published, but Christopher Smith's 2016 DMA dissertation outlined the conducting philosophies of several influential choral conductors who had substantial impacts on the

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art.⁶² Frieder Bernius stated that conducting gestures should be unique to each conductor to engage higher-order thinking with conducting students. Bernius specifically recommended resisting beating time as a teaching method and instead focus on compelling gestures. Stephen Cleobury recommended a more organized instructional system for the teaching of conducting and also argued for individualized gestures. Weston Noble asserted that the ensemble members themselves must be trained to recognize and correctly interpret the gestures of the conductor. Robert Shaw believed that orchestra conducting made his gesture more universally recognizable in terms of pattern and therefore more communicative.⁶³

Modern ensembles have approached the issue of musical leadership in different ways. In 1836, Robert Schumann commented that “a good orchestra... needs to be conducted only at the start and at changes in tempo. For the rest, the conductor can quietly stand at the podium...waiting until his direction is again required.”⁶⁴ Most large ensembles like orchestras and oratorio societies typically opt to give the conductor absolute artistic control. Even so, some ensembles have demonstrated that complicated music can be successfully and artistically performed without a conductor.

In the middle of the last century, the Symphony of the Air (formerly the NBC Orchestra) performed without a conductor after the retirement of the renowned Arturo Toscanini.⁶⁵ Contemporary reviewers were impressed at the orchestra’s ability to retain a high level of musicianship,⁶⁶ although the orchestra returned to a traditional conductor-leader less than a year later. Today, some orchestral ensembles choose to perform without a conductor as a way to enhance the collaborative nature of group music making. The Orpheus Ensemble, for example, has operated and performed without a dedicated conductor since 1972.⁶⁷ Likewise, professional choral ensembles like Chanticleer and Cantus perform almost exclusively without conductors, relying instead on rigorous rehearsals and considerable musicianship on the part of the singers to maintain a cohesive ensemble.

The Value of Historical Context on Pedagogy

Every aspect of music may have evolved from its origins—harmony, melody, instrumentation, and even the complete exclusion of humans from music making through technology. Certain characteristics of musicianship, however, have never changed, like the drive for artistic excellence and the intrinsic value of music.⁶⁸ A comprehensive study of conducting history champions the belief that the only true judge of a conductor is the quality of the ensemble’s performance. Whatever techniques are the most effective for accomplishing this goal are the most appropriate for that circumstance.

Philosophically, choral conducting students should understand the similarities and differences between “directors” (*dirigieren* or *conducteur*) and “conductors” (*tacitieren* or *maitre d’orchestre*).⁶⁹ Charlton specifically argued that using the phrase “conducting” without consideration for time period produces inaccurate assumptions about the specific performance practices involved.⁷⁰ Without question, every ensemble benefits from direction, whether dictated by an individual or established through collaboration; but not every performance of an ensemble requires someone waving their hands. Each group music-making circumstance is unique, and students should learn a variety of gestural and non-gestural skills to suitably lead ensembles in a variety of contexts.

Certainly, physical coordination is an essential element of conducting, such as the skills outlined by Nicolai Malko and demonstrated brilliantly by Elizabeth Green’s 1981 conducting exercise demonstration.⁷¹ Yet, conducting pedagogues could allow the history of conducting to inform a developmentally sequenced lesson design rather than focusing exclusively on discrete gestural exercises. The development of gesture occurred organically motivated only by the increasing demands of larger, more complex ensembles. Instructors could experiment with a historically informed, wholistic pedagogy beginning with expressivity through pre-metric gesture and non-conducted performance. Then, as the course progresses, instructors could incorporate more complex conducting gestures, such as metric patterns, as they are needed due to increasingly demanding repertoire being studied.

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The specific repertoire of each historical period could be used as a framework for studying the repertoire of gesture concurrent with performance practice. The cheironomic techniques of the Middle Ages practiced through Gregorian chant repertoire teach expressivity, fluidity, and the importance of text stress. Baroque performance practice demands a variety of conducted and non-conducted directorial methods, including directing from the piano—an essential skill for all conductors, but especially future K-12 educators. Literature of the Classical period requires strictly disciplined tempi and understanding of form, but by focusing on expressivity early in the process, new conductors will hopefully incorporate fluidity and nuance into these more rigid structures. Finally, the modern period offers a wide range of potential repertoire requiring the widest range of gestures, often fluctuating rapidly between two or more or even abandoning traditional performance altogether such as when conducting aleatory.

The overall scholarship of choral conducting history is, by any reasonable measure, woefully lacking both in breadth and authority, and no single article can possibly provide the complete story. More research into this area must be done. Furthermore, conducting textbooks should include historical examples that demonstrate the technical principles being taught. Not only can young conductors learn a great deal from the historical basis for gestural techniques, but conducting scholars have a professional obligation to situate current practice within a historical context.

Studying primary sources about conducting may encourage a more scholarly approach to our discipline overall, and conductors-in-training should read primary sources written by great conductors whenever relevant. Nearly every notable orchestral conductor of the nineteenth century, such as Wagner, wrote a treatise on conducting. The depth of musical understanding that these masters convey is useful to any conductor, regardless of discipline, and their words of wisdom remain profoundly relevant today.

Throughout history, scholars have stressed the need for conductors to be a “jack-of-all-trades.” As Mattheson recognized three centuries ago, the interpretation of music requires knowledge of political and social history, performance practice, visual art, architecture, and

philosophy.⁷² Today, the National Association of Music Schools (NASM) accreditation guidelines require conducting students to have detailed knowledge not just of beat patterns but of the basic literature of each historical performance period and ensemble type.⁷³ Both history and modern practice reminds us that undergraduate conductors require comprehensive instruction beyond just the technical aspects of hand-waving.

Conclusion

Modern music continues to become increasingly complex both technically and expressively, requiring ever more sophisticated conducting techniques. Simultaneously, choral ensembles are performing increasingly diverse material demanding a wide range of conducting techniques leadership styles. Teaching our students merely the technical basics of gesture and focusing on meter patterns leaves them without the necessary adaptive skills to address future challenges. The study of conducting’s history provides insight into the historical development of gestures and may therefore guide students in development of new gestures to address new challenges in the years to come. By utilizing a scholarly approach to learning in our conducting classrooms, we can produce scholarly conductors capable not just of imitation but innovation for the future of our proud and ancient art. ■

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Joan Titus and Stacey Garrepy for their expertise and guidance while writing this article.

NOTES

¹ Edith Gerson-Kiwi and David Hiley, “Cheironomy,” Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05510>.

² John Curwen developed a system of tonic sol-fa hand gestures in the mid-nineteenth century that correspond to the Italian *solfeggio* syllables originally created by

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- ³ Timothy John Benge, "Movements Utilized by Conductors in the Stimulation of Expression and Musicianship" (DMA diss., University of Southern California, 1996), 3.
- ⁴ Harold Decker and Julius Herford, *Choral Conducting Symposium*. 2nd Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), 123.
- ⁵ Wilhelm Ehmann, *Choral Directing*, trans. George Webb (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 110-111.
- ⁶ Scot Hanna-Weir, "Developing a Personal Pedagogy of Conducting" (DMA dissertation., University of Maryland, College Park, 2013), 92.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- ⁸ John Hart, "The Status of Music Education Conducting Curricula, Practices, and Values," *Journal of Music Teacher Education* (2018): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057083718783464>.
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