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THE ART  
OF  
ORCHESTRAL  
CONDUCTING

BY

RUDOLPH DOLMETSCH



Orchestral Conducting  
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*Illustrated by T. L. Poulton*

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MADE IN ENGLAND

I have pleasure in acknowledging the interest taken and the assistance given to me in writing this book by the following of my friends: Mr. K. J. Spalding, for criticizing the work from a literary aspect; Mr. Marco Pallis, for his suggestions concerning its conciseness; and Mr. T. L. Poulton, for his admirable illustrations.

R. D. \*

## *List of Contents*

SECTION	PAGE
1. THE BATON ... ..	1
2. PRELIMINARY EXERCISES ... ..	4
3. THE TECHNIQUE OF BEATING TIME ... ..	8
4. STARTING AND STOPPING ... ..	17
5. USES OF THE LEFT HAND; CUE GIVING; THE STANDING POSITION ... ..	18
6. SCORE READING AND MEMORISING ... ..	22
7. PRACTICE ... ..	24
8. REHEARSAL ... ..	26
9. CONCERTO ACCOMPANYING ... ..	28
10. KNOWLEDGE OF INSTRUMENTS; THE PLACING OF THE ORCHESTRA ... ..	30
11. CHART OF CLEFS AND TRANSPOSITIONS USED FOR ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENTS ... ..	33
12. PROGRAMME PLANNING; PERFORMANCE ... ..	35
13. INTERPRETATION ... ..	37
14. EXPERIENCE ... ..	43
15. FORMING AN ORCHESTRA ... ..	45

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## Section 1.—The Bâton

**M**OST CONDUCTORS of wide experience will agree that the perfect bâton exists no more than does the perfect violin bow. A lot of time and care has to be taken in choosing a bâton that will meet adequately the demands of modern technique, and the student of conducting who is in the early stages of his training would do well to have a bâton chosen for him by an expert conductor. The subtle difference between one stick and another is not usually noticeable to the beginner.

It may well take years for a conductor to decide what kind of bâton he is going to use permanently, and even when he thinks he has made this decision he may very likely change his mind on this point later on.

Figs. 1, 2 and 3 show the three principal kinds of bâton,—the plain tapered stick, the stick with the shaped wooden handle, and the stick with the cork handle. Of these three kinds, the third is usually considered to be the most practical. Most conductors' hands are liable to get hot during an important rehearsal or performance, and they may find that an entirely wooden stick may either fly out of the hand or, being gripped too firmly, may result in stiffness.

Assuming then that the cork-handled stick is the best for most purposes, the next question is that of length. The shortest bâton of this type usually measures eighteen inches, and being light and manageable is a good length for a beginner to start off with. The next size is twenty inches long, and giving as it does a good sweeping beat is to my mind the best in the long run. The shorter bâton allows of great subtlety and ease of technique; it will be found, however, to require a good deal more physical effort on the part of the conductor, when directing an orchestra of any size, particularly in loud passages. On the other hand, a stick of more than twenty inches in length does not usually allow of much subtlety of technique. It is also very important that the bâton should be painted white, as if the wood is left its natural colour the players will find it more difficult to follow.

Just as an oboe player has to be able to make adjustments to his reed, so must a conductor be able to make adjustments to his bâton if he is to have it as it really suits him. The handle of the twenty inch stick can be much improved if it is cut down on one side and slightly scooped out, as shown in Fig. 3. This gives the longer bâton more of the subtlety of the shorter one, and makes you feel you are in more direct control over the main part of the stick.

The chief advantages of the bâtons shown in Fig. 2 are that the



handles feel as though they had "grown" out of the stick, but there are on the other hand the disadvantages already mentioned.

The completely plain bâton needs a very good technique in order to manipulate it with perfect clarity, and will be found furthermore to be somewhat too thin at the butt end to give a really good grasp.

Conducting without a bâton is not a practice to be much encouraged. It is true that the human hand is more expressive than an object made of wood, and some pleasing results may be obtained in this way with a very small body of players. With an orchestra of any size (where some of the players are a long way off), it is very doubtful whether subtlety of this kind can be appreciated, and the greater clarity of a bâton will be found to be more effective.

In the few isolated cases of large orchestras being controlled by "stick-less" conductors, it is probable that the performance has had very many rehearsals and that the players, knowing their parts practically from memory, are able to watch the conductor more closely than might otherwise be possible: this will make up to some extent for the difficulty of following small or vague movements.

The beginner-conductor who feels he has greater freedom when dispensing with the bâton will probably find that his technique is at fault. The point of the bâton, as I shall explain more fully later on, travels further than the hand, which acts as a kind of gear-box: it will, therefore, be easily understood that any fault of technique made by the hand gets magnified by the point.

In choosing a bâton, it is very important to see that it is as straight as possible, as a crooked stick will give a blurred beat.

Fig. 4 shows the best way of testing its straightness. Hold the bâton as indicated, and turn it round while looking down the length of the stick with the left eye closed.

Lightness of weight and general balance are also very important; and it will be found that the bâton with a small piece of lead inside the handle will have the effect of making the point feel lighter and will in this way improve the balance.

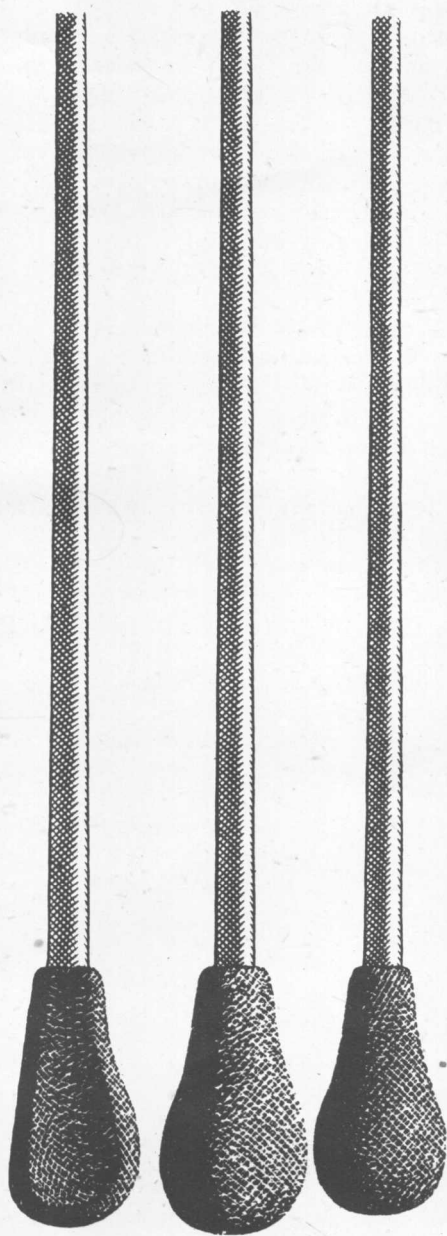


Fig. 3

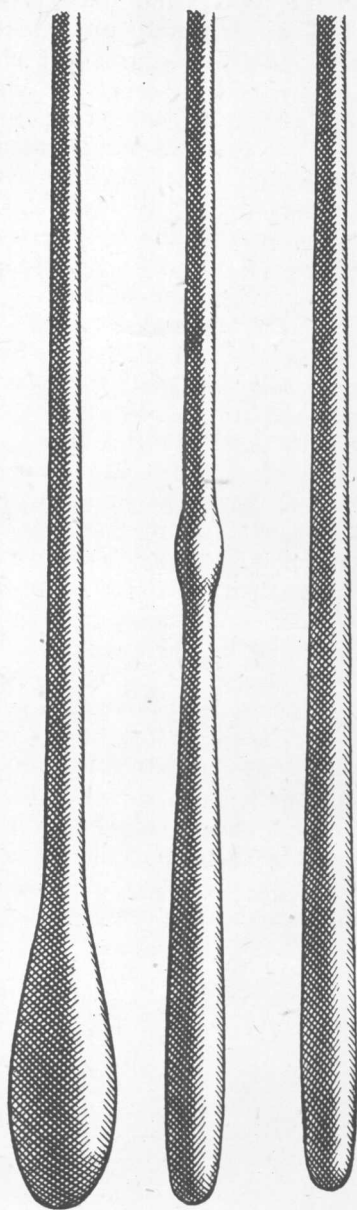


Fig. 2

Fig. 1  
Plain Stick

## Section 2.—Preliminary Exercises

THE object of these exercises is to train the thumb and fingers to play their proper part in the technical side of conducting. You will probably find them very difficult, but being of fundamental importance they are well worth persisting with. When mastered they are an excellent way of getting the muscles into good condition before a rehearsal or performance.

EXERCISE 1.—From position A to position B, describe a rocking motion with the stick, by means of the thumb and fingers only. (See Fig. 5.)

EXERCISE 2.—Holding the stick in position A, swing it across to position B, taking care to use the thumb and fingers only. In this operation, the second finger plays the chief part. In returning from B to A, the first finger plays the chief part. The thumb and both fingers should be kept flexible throughout any movement made with the stick. (See Fig. 6.)

EXERCISE 3.—This exercise is a continuation of Exercise 2, and adds a third position (position C) to the course of the stick. In moving from B to C, the thumb plays the chief part, and in returning from C to A, the first finger. (See Fig. 7.)

EXERCISE 4.—Starting in position B, pass from A to C. The change from B to A, as already explained in Exercise 2, is mostly done by the first finger. The change from A to C is mostly done by the thumb, and from C to B by the second finger.

EXERCISE 5.—Describe as wide a circle as possible by joining up the three positions of Exercise 3. In all these exercises it will be found helpful to hold the right hand with the left when trying to manipulate the stick with the fingers only. This form of assistance, however, should be dispensed with when greater control has been acquired.

EXERCISE 6.—Describe a circle in the opposite direction from Exercise 5 by joining up the three positions of Exercise 4.



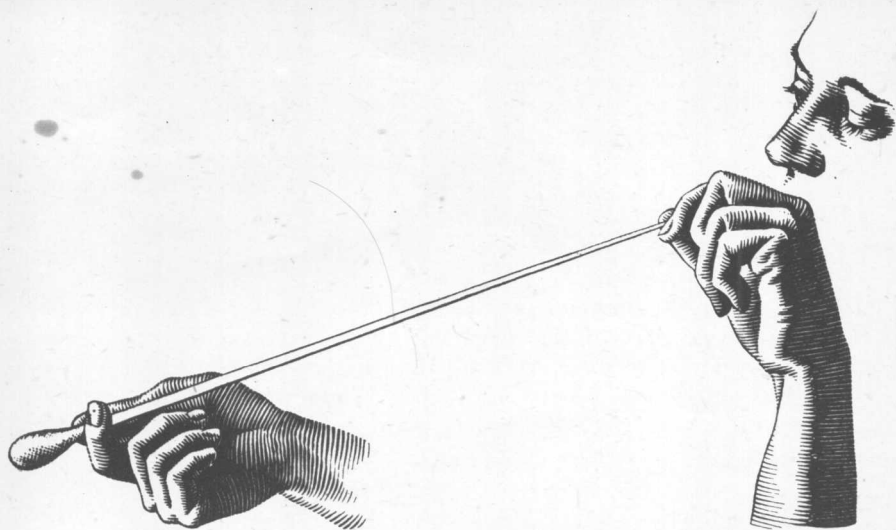


Fig. 4. Testing a stick for straightness

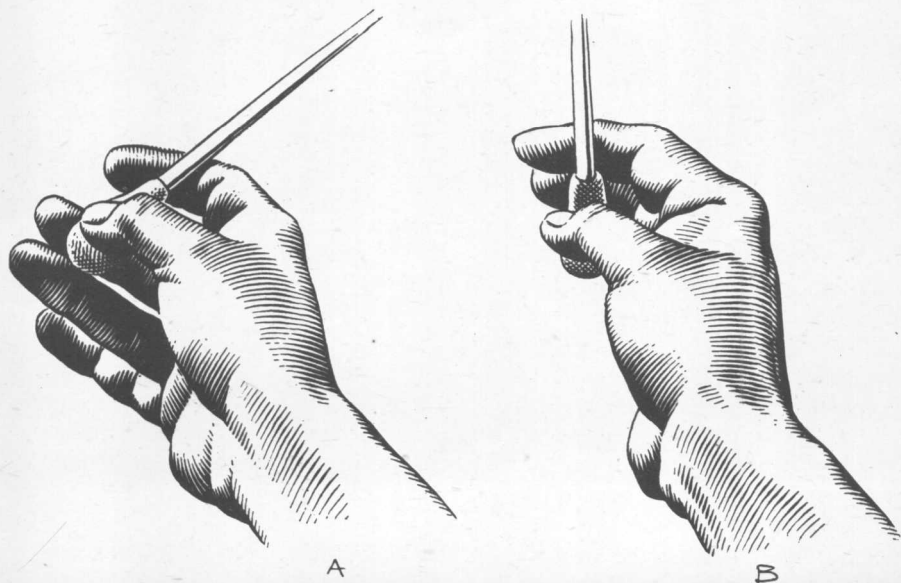


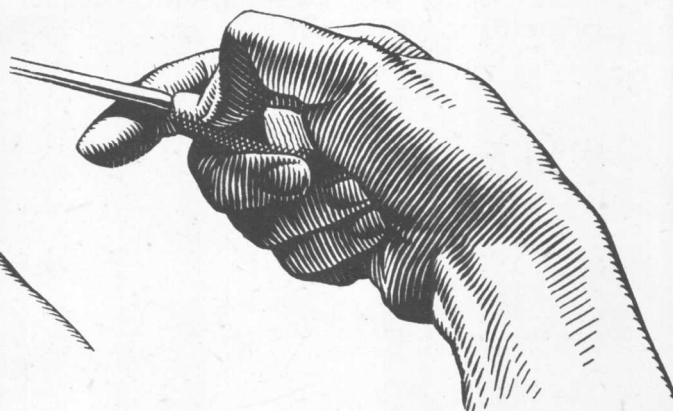
Fig. 5

The proportions of people's fingers and thumbs are all different, and slight variations of hold may be necessary when these exercises are being practised.

It is interesting to note, however, with what similarity violinists With completely different hands will hold their bows. It may be that conducting has a more individual technique than bowing. It may also be that conducting is as yet a comparatively young art and has, therefore, not become sufficiently standardised.

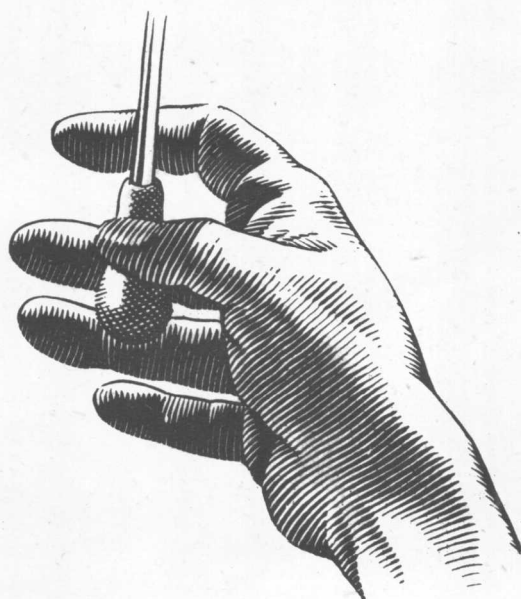


A



B

Fig. 6



C

Fig 7

### *Section 3.—The Technique of Beating Time*

WE now come to the most difficult and the most important part of a conductor's training,—the technique of beating time. A conductor has to be able to indicate with his stick not only the rhythm of a piece of music, but the expression, phrasing and the amount of tone required. The left hand is a useful adjunct, but on no account should it copy the movements of the right hand. The various uses of the left hand will be fully explained further on in the book.

Figs. 8 to 23 show the basic direction of beats, and should be well memorised before proceeding any further. It would be practically impossible to show the exact movements of the stick on any one diagram, as these are very complicated, and an attempt to do this would only result in confusion.

Fig. 24 shows the stick when held in the starting position. The chief points to remember are that the arm is bent at the elbow and held away from the side. The stick is held between the thumb and two fingers, the thumb being uppermost. Whether the thumb is placed on the handle, on the stick itself, or in between the two does not really matter very much. It is quite a good plan, in fact, to vary its position according to the style of beat you are giving.

There are roughly two chief kinds of beat,—staccato and legato. You will find that you want to use every shade of beat between staccato and legato, just as a violinist will use every shade of playing between these two extremes. These subtleties, however, can only be used when the two fundamental kinds of beat have been thoroughly mastered.

Before analysing in detail the two kinds of beat, it must be remembered that the point of the stick travels further than the hand, the hand further than the forearm, and the forearm further than the elbow. The shoulder itself should never move.


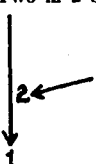
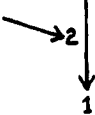
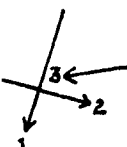
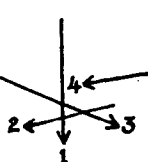
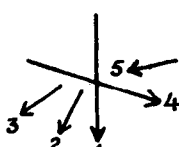
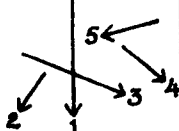
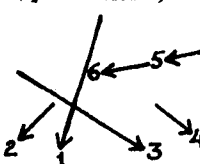
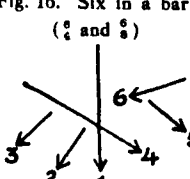
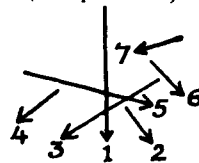
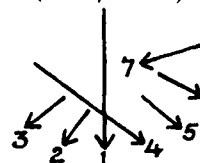
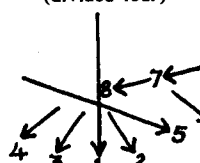
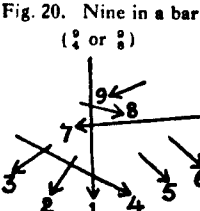
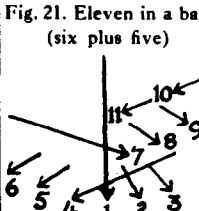
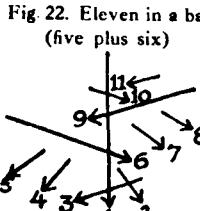
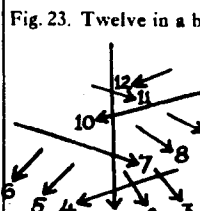
It will now become clear that the point of the stick should always be watched and never the hand. Good players are trained to do this, and would tend to alter their point of observation if the conductor's technique were so poor that his bâton travelled no further than his hand or forearm.

#### STACCATO BEATS

A staccato beat is divided into three sections: (1) the "click" or actual culminating point of the beat; (2) the "filling-up;" and (3) the "prepara-

# BASIC DIRECTION OF BEAT-PATTERNS


The arrow-head indicates the "click" or culminating point of the beat

<p>Fig. 8. One in a bar</p> 	<p>Fig. 9. Two in a bar</p> 	<p>Fig. 10. Two in a bar</p> 	<p>Fig. 11. Three in a bar</p> 
<p>Fig. 12. Four in a bar</p> 	<p>Fig. 13. Five in a bar (three plus two)</p> 	<p>Fig. 14. Five in a bar (two plus three)</p> 	<p>Fig. 15. Six in a bar (<math>\frac{3}{2}</math> or divided 3)</p> 
<p>Fig. 16. Six in a bar (<math>\frac{2}{3}</math> and <math>\frac{2}{3}</math>)</p> 	<p>Fig. 17. Seven in a bar (four plus three)</p> 	<p>Fig. 18. Seven in a bar (three plus four)</p> 	<p>Fig. 19. Eight in a bar (divided four)</p> 
<p>Fig. 20. Nine in a bar (<math>\frac{3}{4}</math> or <math>\frac{3}{4}</math>)</p> 	<p>Fig. 21. Eleven in a bar (six plus five)</p> 	<p>Fig. 22. Eleven in a bar (five plus six)</p> 	<p>Fig. 23. Twelve in a bar</p> 


tion" for the next beat. The bâton should never stop moving except at pauses. A series of isolated "clicks" will give no indication of when the next beat is coming, and will result in dragging or poor ensemble.

**ONE IN A BAR.**—Hold the bâton as indicated in Fig. 24. Raise it fairly slowly upwards to a good height by using the wrist and letting the forearm follow the wrist at a slower speed: the last part of the stick's course should be made with the thumb and fingers only, and should be a short rapid movement. This is the PREPARATION for the next down beat. The downward course of the beat towards the "click" should always be a rapid movement,—however slow the tempo. The "click" comes of the conductor's having held the bâton loosely during its upward and downward course, and then stopping the arm abruptly and tightening his grip. The bâton by means of the fingers and thumb will travel further down than the rest of the hand, and by the tightening-up operation bounce back again until it is level. A really good snappy staccato beat should make a whipping noise in the air. After the click, raise the bâton fairly slowly upwards again (as already explained), and this operation will constitute the filling-up.

These three movements when joined, will have the effect of a general *accelerando* towards the culminating point of the beat.

In quick tempi of 160 to 108 beats a minute, the action of the bâton is practically a straight up-and-down movement. The rhythm of the stick is roughly this:  The dotted quaver refers to the beat and filling-up, and the semiquaver to the preparation.

Slower tempi from about 104 to 76 beats a minute, will require a "curved filling-up" between the click and the next beat: the amount of curve will increase with the slowness of tempo. This curve in the course of the stick is done by turning the wrist and forearm in an anti-clockwise direction,—this movement being added to the others already described. By the time the stick has reached the top of its course, the wrist and forearm should have resumed their usual position.

In tempi slower than about 66 beats a minute, it is advisable to divide the beat, as this will help to shape the phrases and strengthen the ensemble. Flowing passages are best done by indicating the first beat of the bar with a click, and merely sketching out the second and third beats, like a kind of  $\frac{3}{4}$ . Lively dance rhythms of 80 beats a minute and slower are very effective if the beat is divided as follows. Use a straight up-and-down beat with an indication of where the third crotchet or quaver should come. This is done by catching the bâton in the air for an instant before plunging down to the beat proper. Tightening the grip of the stick is all that is necessary to accomplish this operation which, of course, should be only a small movement and nothing like as conspicuous as the beat itself. The rhythm followed by the bâton would roughly be this : the semiquaver refers to the preparation and the last quaver to the division in the beat.

A one-in-the-bar rhythm is almost invariably a  $\frac{3}{4}$  or  $\frac{3}{8}$  rhythm which is too fast to have each beat indicated. There are also instances of rapid  $\frac{2}{4}$  rhythms where one beat to a bar is beaten. These rhythms when becoming less



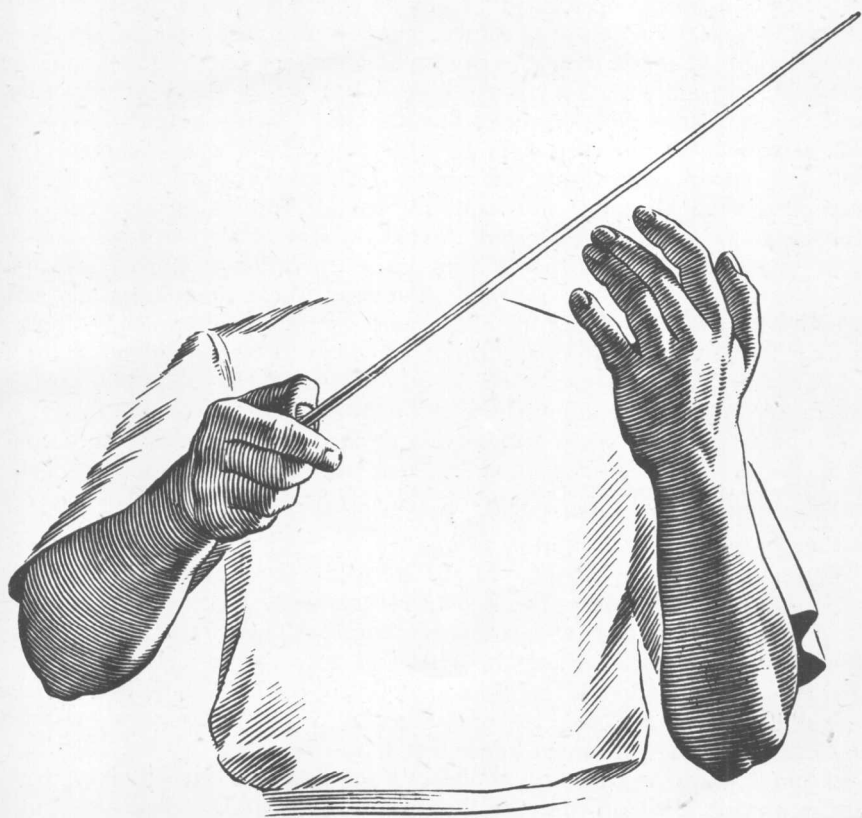


Fig. 24. The Starting Position

rapid, however, resolve themselves into a  $\frac{2}{4}$  pure and simple. Fig. 25 shows the filling-up and preparation which have been discussed in this section.

**TWO IN A BAR.**—The principle of click, filling-up and preparation applies to all staccato beats. When beating two in a bar (Fig. 9), the bâton travels to the right after the first beat, and into the position for giving the second beat. The click of a beat which is done sideways, has the same tightening-up action as a down beat. Fig. 26 shows the pattern of the filling-up and preparation.

Fig. 10 shows a different and less usual way of beating two. Sir Adrian Boult<sup>1</sup> points out that the acceptance of this method will simplify a number of technical problems. In slowing down a  $\frac{2}{4}$  rhythm you can gradually turn it into a  $\frac{4}{4}$  beat. A quick five-in-the-bar (to be discussed further on) of either sort can gradually be made to indicate all the five clicks without altering the basic direction of the beat-pattern. A quick six-in-the-bar can be slowed down in the same fashion.

Against all these advantages there is perhaps the disadvantage resulting from the fact that a two-in-the-bar directed in this manner would be the only beat-pattern in the conductor's technique of which the final beat came in from the left instead of from the right. Some students may find that they can get more swing into the final beat when approaching it from the right; but it is more than probable that this slight drawback would be overcome if the method shown in Fig. 10 were adopted from the very beginning.

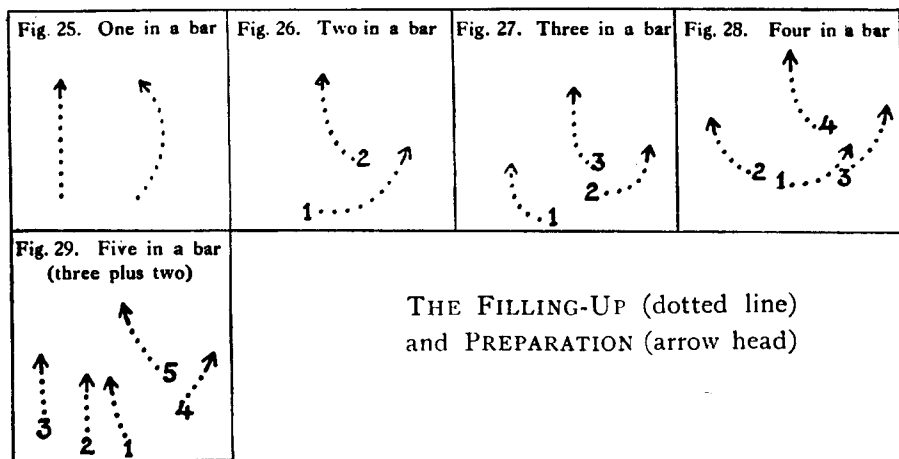
It is, therefore, for the student to decide for himself which style of two-in-the-bar he is going to use. He should, however, remember that it is difficult to change from one way to the other after several years of experience. Time beating becomes instinctive, and any uncertainty on the part of the conductor is likely to cause panic in the orchestra.

**THREE IN A BAR.**—Figs. 11 and 27 indicate the course taken by the bâton, and with the information already given (in connection with the preceding beat-patterns), there remains little more to say concerning the beating of three-in-a-bar.

**FOUR IN A BAR.**—Figs. 12 and 28 will show that the two main beats in the pattern are 1 and 3. This method of showing a slight division in the bar applies to any pattern containing four beats and upwards. Compound-time rhythms, in particular, become very difficult to follow if the beats look too much alike. The mere fact that your stick sweeps across from left to right (at the divisions of the bar) will show the players exactly where they are and give them confidence.

**FIVE IN A BAR.**—There are five methods of beating five-in-the-bar. When each beat is indicated you will divide your pattern according to where

<sup>1</sup> A handbook on "The Technique of Conducting," by Adrian C. Boult.



the chief accents come (Figs. 13 and 14). Rhythms of more than four-in-a-bar will result in a slightly more cramped feeling, as there is less space in which to get a good swinging action between one beat and another. Fig. 29 shows the actions of filling-up and preparation, which work on the same principle from five-in-a-bar to twelve.

A quick five-in-the-bar is done by indicating the first and third or first and fourth beats only. This pattern becomes like a sort of lop-sided two-in-the-bar, containing as it does three beats in the first part of the bar and two in the next, or *vice versa*.

A quick five would be done by giving only one beat to a bar.

**SIX IN A BAR.**—The beat-pattern shown in Fig. 15 will be seen to be a binary division of Fig. 11. The filling up and preparation between the fifth and sixth beats can be got in without interrupting the course of the stick. If, however, it is desired to put a great deal of vigour into these two beats, this can be done by returning partly on your tracks before attacking the final beat.

