ESSENTIALS IN CONDUCTING

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BY

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PREFACE

In putting out this little book, the author is well aware of the fact that many musicians feel that conductors, like poets and teachers, are "born and not made"; but his experience in training supervisors of music has led him to feel that, although only the elementary phases of conducting can be taught, such instruction is nevertheless quite worth while, and is often surprisingly effective in its results. He has also come to believe that even the musical genius may profit by the experience of others and may thus be enabled to do effective work as a conductor more quickly than if he relied wholly upon his native ability.

The book is of course planned especially with the amateur in view, and the author, in writing it, has had in mind his own fruitless search for information upon the subject of conducting when he was just beginning his career as a teacher; and he has tried to say to the amateur of today those things that he himself so sorely needed to know at that time, and had to find out by blundering experience.

It should perhaps be stated that although the writer has himself had considerable experience in conducting, the material here presented is rather the result of observing and analyzing the work of others than an account of his own methods. In preparation for his task, the author has observed many of the better-known conductors in this country, both in rehearsal and in public performance, during a period of some twelve years, and the book represents an attempt to put into simple language and practical form the ideas gathered from

this observation. It is hoped that as a result of reading these pages the amateur may not only have become more fully informed concerning those practical phases of conducting about which he has probably been seeking light, but may be inspired to further reading and additional music study in preparation for the larger aspects of the work.

The writer wishes to acknowledge the material assistance rendered him by Professor John Ross Frampton, of the Iowa State Teachers College, and Professor Osbourne McConathy, of Northwestern University, both of whom have read the book in manuscript and have given invaluable suggestions. He wishes also to acknowledge his very large debt to Professor George Dickinson, of Vassar College, who has read the material both in manuscript and in proof, and to whose pointed comments and criticisms many improvements both in material and in arrangement are due.

K. W. G.

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Essentials in Conducting

CHAPTER I

Introduction

DEFINITION The word "conducting" as used in a musical sense now ordinarily refers to the activities of an orchestra or chorus leader who stands before a group of performers and gives his entire time and effort to directing their playing or singing, to the end that a musically effective ensemble performance may result.

This is accomplished by means of certain conventional movements of a slender stick called a *baton* (usually held in the right hand), as well as through such changes of facial expression, bodily posture, *et cetera*, as will convey to the singers or players the conductor's wishes concerning the rendition of the music.

Conducting in this sense involves the responsibility of having the music performed at the correct tempo, with appropriate dynamic effects, with precise attacks and releases, and in a fitting spirit. This in turn implies that many details have been worked out in rehearsal, these including such items as making certain that all performers sing or play the correct tones in the correct rhythm; insisting upon accurate pronunciation and skilful enunciation of the words in vocal music; indicating logical and musical phrasing; correcting mistakes in breathing or bowing; and, in general, stimulating orchestra or chorus to produce a tasteful rendition

of the music as well as an absolutely perfect *ensemble* with all parts in correct proportion and perfect balance.

In order to have his directing at the public performance function properly, it thus becomes the conductor's task to plan and to administer the rehearsals in such a way that the performers may become thoroughly familiar with the music, both in technique and in spirit. In other words, the conductor must play the part of musical manager as well as that of artistic inspirer, and if he does not perform his task in such fashion as to be looked up to by the members of his chorus or orchestra as the real leader, and if he himself does not feel confident of being able to do his work better than any one else upon the ground, he cannot possibly be successful in any very high degree. A conductor must first of all be a strong leader, and failing in this, no amount of musical ability or anything else will enable him to conduct well. We shall have more to say upon this point in a later chapter.

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF CONDUCTING

Conducting of one kind or another has undoubtedly been practised for many centuries, but directing by gestures of the hand has not been traced farther back than the fourteenth century, at which time Heinrich von Meissen, a Minnesinger, is represented in an old manuscript directing a group of musicians with stick in hand. In the fifteenth century the leader of the Sistine Choir at Rome directed the singers with a roll of paper (called a "sol-fa"), held in his hand. By the latter part of the seventeenth century it had become customary for the conductor to sit at the harpsichord or organ, filling in the harmonies from a "figured bass," and giving any needed signals with one hand or the head as best he could. Conducting during this period signified merely keeping the performers together; that is, the chief function of the conductor was that of

"time beater." With the advent of the conductor in the rôle of interpreter, such directing became obsolete, and from the early nineteenth century, and particularly as the result of the impetus given the art by the conducting of Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner, the conductor has become an exceedingly important functionary, in these modern days even ranking with the *prima donna* in operatic performances! It is now the conductor's aim not merely to see that a composition is played correctly and with good ensemble; more than that, the leader of today gives his own version or *reading* of the composition just as the pianist or violinist does. Instead of being a mere "time beater" he has become an interpreter, and (except in the case of the organist-director of a choir) he attempts to do nothing except so to manipulate his musical forces as to secure an effective performance.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF CONDUCTING

The conductor works largely through the instrumentality of *instinctive imitation;* that is, his methods are founded upon the fact that human beings have an innate tendency to copy the actions of others, often without being conscious that they are doing so. Thus, if one person yawns or coughs, a second person observing him has an instinctive tendency to do likewise. One member of a group is radiant with happiness, and very soon the others catch the infection and are smiling also; a singer at a public performance strains to get a high tone, and instinctively our faces pucker up and our throat muscles become tense, in sympathetic but entirely unconscious imitation. In very much the same way in conducting, the leader sets the tempo,—and is imitated by the musicians under him; he feels a certain emotional thrill in response to the composer's message,—and arouses a similar thrill in the performers; lifts his shoulders as though taking breath,—and causes

the singers to phrase properly, often without either the conductor or the singers being aware of how the direction was conveyed. It is at least partly because we instinctively imitate the mental state or the emotional attitude of the pianist or the vocalist that we are capable of being thrilled or calmed by musical performances, and it is largely for this reason that an audience always insists upon *seeing* the artist as well as hearing him. In the same way the musicians in a chorus or orchestra must see the conductor and catch from him by instinctive imitation his attitude toward the music being performed. This point will be more fully discussed in a later chapter, when we take up interpretation in conducting.

CONDUCTING A COMBINATION OF SCIENCE AND ART

In setting out to become a conductor it will be well for the young musician to recognize at the outset that by far the larger part of the conductor's work rests upon an art basis, and that only a comparatively small portion of it is science; hence he must not expect to find complete information concerning his future work in any treatise upon the subject. It is one thing to state that there are three primary colors, or that orange is the result of mixing red and yellow, but it is a very different matter to give directions for painting an effective landscape, or a true-to-life portrait. One thing involves *science* only, but the other is concerned primarily with *art*, and it is always dangerous to dogmatize concerning matters artistic. To carry the illustration one step farther, we may say that it is comparatively easy to teach a pupil to strike certain piano keys in such a way as to produce the correct melody, harmony, and rhythm of a certain composition; but who would venture, even in these days of frenzied advertising, to promise that in so many lessons he could teach a pupil to play it as a Hofmann or a Paderewski would? Here again we see clearly the contrast between science and art, matters of

science being always susceptible of organization into a body of principles and laws *which will work in every case*, while art is intangible, subtle, and ever-varying.

The application of our illustration to conducting should now be clear. We may teach a beginner how to wield a baton according to conventional practice, how to secure firm attacks and prompt releases, and possibly a few other definitely established facts about conducting; but unless our would-be leader has musical feeling within him and musicianship back of him, it will be utterly futile for him to peruse these pages further, or to make any other kind of an attempt to learn to conduct; for, as stated above, only a very small part of conducting can be codified into rules, directions, and formulæ, by far the larger part of our task being based upon each individual's own innate musical feeling, and upon the general musical training that he has undergone. All this may be discouraging, but on the other hand, granting a fair degree of native musical ability, coupled with a large amount of solid music study, any one possessing a sense of leadership can, after a reasonable amount of intelligent practice, learn to handle a chorus or even an orchestra in a fairly satisfactory manner. It is our purpose in general to treat the scientific rather than the artistic side of conducting, and we are taking for granted, therefore, that the reader is endowed with musical feeling at least in a fair degree, and has acquired the rudiments of musical scholarship as the result of an extensive study of piano, organ, singing, ear-training, music history, harmony, *et cetera*, and especially by attentive listening to a very large amount of good music with score in hand. As a result of combining such musical ability with a careful reading of these pages and with a large amount of practice in actually wielding the baton, it is hoped that the beginner will arrive at his goal somewhat earlier than he would if he depended entirely upon what the psychologist calls the "trial-and-error" method of learning.

IMPORTANCE OF MUSICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The musical amateur who is ambitious to conduct should therefore study music in all its phases, and if in doubt as to his talent, he should submit to a vocational test in order to determine whether his native musical endowment is sufficient to make it worth his while to study the art seriously. If the result of the test is encouraging, showing a good ear, a strong rhythmic reaction, and a considerable amount of what might be termed native musical taste, let him practise his piano energetically and intelligently, and especially let him learn to read three and four voices on separate staffs (as in a vocal score) in order to prepare himself for future reading of full scores. Let him study harmony, counterpoint, form, and, if possible, composition and orchestration. Let him work indefatigably at ear-training, and particularly at harmonic ear training, so that notes and tones may become closely associated in his mind, the printed page then giving him auditory rather than merely visual imagery; in other words, let him school himself to make the printed page convey to his mind the actual sounds of the music. Let him study the history of music, not only as a record of the work of individual composers, but as an account of what has transpired in the various periods or epochs of musical art, so that he may become intelligent concerning the ideals, the styles, and the forms of these various periods. And finally, let him hear all the good music he possibly can, listening to it from the threefold standpoint of sense, emotion, and intellect, and noting particularly those matters connected with expression and interpretation in these renditions. In as many cases as possible let him study the scores of the compositions beforehand, comparing then his own ideas of interpretation with those of the performer or conductor, and formulating reasons for any differences of opinion that may become manifest.

Let the young musician also form the habit of reading

widely, not only along all musical lines (history, biography, theory, esthetics, *et cetera*), but upon a wide variety of topics, such as painting and the other arts, history, literature, sociology, pedagogy, *et cetera*. As the result of such study and such reading, a type of musical scholarship will be attained which will give the conductor an authority in his interpretations and criticisms that cannot possibly be achieved in any other way. Let us hasten to admit at once that the acquiring of this sort of scholarship will take a long time, and that it cannot all be done before beginning to conduct. But in the course of several years of broad and intelligent study a beginning at least can be made, and later on, as the result of continuous growth while at work, a fine, solid, comprehensive scholarship may finally eventuate.

CHAPTER II

Personal Traits Necessary in Conducting

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALITY

In the introductory chapter it was noted that the conductor must build upon a foundation of musical scholarship if he is to be really successful; that he must possess musical feeling; and that he must go through extensive musical training, if he is to conduct with taste and authority. But in addition to these purely *musical* requirements, experience and observation have demonstrated that the would-be conductor must be possessed of certain definitely established personal characteristics, and that many a musician who has been amply able to pass muster from a musical standpoint, has failed as a conductor because he lacked these other traits.

It is not my purpose to give at this point an exhaustive list of qualities that must form the personal equipment of the conductor. In general it will be sufficient to state that he must possess in a fair degree those personal traits that are advantageous in any profession. But of these desirable qualities three or four seem to be so indispensable that it has been thought best to devote a brief chapter to a discussion of them. These qualities are:

1. A sense of humor.
2. A creative imagination.
3. A sense of leadership combined with organizing ability.

A SENSE OF HUMOR

The first of these traits, a sense of humor, may perhaps upon first thought seem a peculiar quality to include in a category of virtues for the professional man of any type, and especially for the musician. But upon reflection it will be admitted

that the ability to see things in a humorous light (which very frequently means merely seeing them in true perspective) has helped many a man to avoid wasting nervous energy upon insignificant occurrences, while the lack of this ability has caused more trouble among all sorts of people (and particularly, it seems to me, among musicians) than any other single thing.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF HUMOR IN THE REHEARSAL

Some player or singer is either overarduous or a bit sleepy during the first stages of rehearsing a new composition, and makes a wrong entrance, perhaps during a pause just before the climacteric point. The occurrence is really funny and the other performers are inclined to smile or snicker, but our serious conductor quells the outbreak with a scowl. The humorous leader, on the other hand, sees the occurrence as the performers do, joins in the laugh that is raised at the expense of the offender, and the rehearsal goes on with renewed spirit.

An instrumental performer makes a bad tone, and the conductor laughs at him, saying it sounds like a wolf howling or an ass braying. If the remark is accompanied by a smile, the performer straightens up and tries to overcome the fault; but if the comment is made with a snarl there is a tightening up of muscles, an increased tension of the nerves, and the performer is more than likely to do worse the next time.

There is a difference of opinion between the conductor and some performer about fingering or bowing, phrasing or interpretation, and a quarrel seems imminent; but the conductor refuses to take the matter too seriously, and, having ample authority for his own viewpoint, proceeds as he has begun, later on talking it over with the performer, and perhaps giving him a reason for his opinion.

Humor is thus seen to have the same effect upon a body of musicians as oil applied to machinery, and

musical machinery seems to need more of this kind of lubrication than almost any other variety.

But the conductor must distinguish carefully between sarcastic wit, which laughs *at*, and humor, which laughs *with*. In a book bearing the copyright date of 1849, the writer distinguishes between the two, in the following words:*

> Humor originally meant moisture, a signification it metaphorically retains, for it is the very juice of the mind, enriching and fertilizing where it falls. Wit laughs at; humor laughs with. Wit lashes external appearances, or cunningly exchanges single foibles into character; humor glides into the heart of its object, looks lovingly upon the infirmities it attacks, and represents the whole man. Wit is abrupt, scornful . . . ; humor is slow and shy, insinuating its fun into your heart.

THE VALUE OF A CHEERFUL ATTITUDE

The conductor with a sense of humor will ordinarily have the advantage also of being cheerful in his attitude toward the performers, and this is an asset of no mean significance. It is a well-known psychophysical fact that the human body does much better work when the mind is free from care, and that in any profession or vocation, other things being equal, the worker who is cheerful and optimistic will perform his labor much more efficiently at the expense of considerably less mental and bodily energy than he who is ill-humored, worried, fretful, and unable to take a joke. But the *foreman* who possesses this quality of cheerfulness and humor is doubly fortunate, for he not only secures the beneficial results in his own case, but by suggestion frequently arouses the same desirable state of mind and body in those who are working under him. It is particularly because of this latter fact that the conductor needs to cultivate a cheerful, even a humorous outlook, especially in the rehearsal. As the result of forming this habit, he will be enabled to give directions

* Whipple, *Literature and Life*, p. 91