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THE COMPLETE CHORAL CONDUCTOR

Gesture and Method



Brian R. Busch

THE COMPLETE CHORAL CONDUCTOR is exactly what the title says it is—a uniquely comprehensive introduction to every aspect of choral conducting, from basic gestures to the organizational skills required of an accomplished conductor.

Unlike other texts based largely on instrumental music, this book focuses entirely on the demands, problems, and talents involved in vocal music. It is divided into three parts. Part One, for the very beginning student, covers physical gestures and the basic study of the musical score. Part Two examines advanced conducting techniques. And Part Three deals with the knowledge required of the conductor—audition procedures and rehearsal techniques, music selection and programming, vocal exercises, intonation, balance, and blend.

Combining the study of physical gestures, fundamental techniques, and essential theoretical and administrative skills into one carefully organized volume, **THE COMPLETE CHORAL CONDUCTOR** features:

- A problem-solving approach that includes more than 150 diagrams and 40 innovative mirror photographs
- Hundreds of practical, basic exercises that are melodically conceived and singable by any conducting class
- Supplementary exercises taken from actual musical scores
- Graded lists of skill-building choral music, from elementary to advanced levels

In addition, the book covers topics often overlooked by other texts—how to practice conducting, developing musical intensity, the fermata, and the final release.

Designed for undergraduate courses in beginning, intermediate, and advanced choral conducting, this is a text of unusual clarity, scope, and teachability. No other book of this kind provides as much information. Or presents it so effectively.

BRIAN R. BUSCH is Associate Professor of Music Education and Assistant Dean of the School of Music at the University of Miami. He received his MM and DMA from the University of Oregon, and has taught at Corpus Christi State University and the University of Southwestern Louisiana; he was also choral director at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon.

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BRIAN R. BUSCH

University of Miami

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Many conducting textbooks on the market do not seem appropriate for the students beginning the study of choral conducting. The musical examples in many instrumentally oriented conducting books are either not appropriate or too difficult for students to learn. Other books demand an accomplished accompanist to play the exercises.

How does this book differ from other conducting books?

1. Over 130 diagrams help explain hand and arm movement.
2. Many photographs, including two sequences of mirror-image photos, show hand and arm position. The student can use the mirror-image photos by placing the book against a mirror, then comparing his or her mirror image with the mirror image in the book.
3. Fermatas are dealt with in some detail.
4. Advanced conducting techniques are included in Part II.
5. Basic knowledge for the choral conductor—intonation, audition procedures, advanced rehearsal techniques, music selection, vocal exercises, programming, balance, and blend—is stressed in Part III.
6. The musical exercises are all melodically conceived and should be singable by any beginning conducting class. The exercises are purposely left wordless so that students can supply their own syllables for singing. The melodies are, for the most part, diatonic and without complexity. Each exercise contains a conducting problem. It is intended that students will spend time learning to conduct, not learning complicated musical examples. It is hoped that the musical exercises will be learned easily, thereby motivating students to practice more often.

The musical exercises can be adequately performed by two or three students in the class. An accomplished accompanist also is not necessary.

Supplementary conducting exercises have been included to give the student additional practice in developing necessary technique.

Techniques for daily practice of the conducting gestures, the development of musical intensity, practical considerations for the teacher-conductor, and the psychology of the final release are other topics considered in this book.

Specific points that are important for students to remember have been placed in sections entitled *Nota Bene* or *To the Student*. Some of the exercises ask students to use their imagination and ability to improvise appropriate melodies for conducting purposes. Students will also have the opportunity to experiment with alternate approaches to solving conducting problems, thereby developing a larger vocabulary of expressive gestures.

There are also lists of music appropriate for beginning and advancing conducting students. These lists are by no means comprehensive, but they do provide a point of departure when the teacher wants to introduce the full score to the students. Works suggested for beginning conductors are appropriate for choirs of elementary school and junior high school age, mostly unison, two-part, and SSA works. Recommended works for advancing conductors are more appropriate for advanced junior high, high school, and university choral groups. For those students who will go on to teach choral music, these works will serve as an introduction to appropriate literature for schools and church.

A book like this is usually the result of efforts by many people. I offer my thanks to:

Don Oglesby, assistant professor of conducting at the University of Miami, for providing much constructive criticism of technical matters, format, and matters of clarity.

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PART I

The Mechanics of Conducting

1

The Body in Preparation

This book examines conducting from the standpoint of clarity, position, direction, and appropriateness of gesture. The book will also help beginning conductors establish criteria so that they can make valid judgments about their conducting. In many instances several different gestures aimed at achieving the same result are discussed. The musician learning to conduct can try all of these techniques, eventually settling on the one which feels most comfortable and achieves the best results.

Posture

Posture transmits the positiveness, strength, and self-confidence of the conductor to the ensemble. The stance should thus appear solid, but not overly forced or rigidly locked into position.

As you assume the conducting stance, your feet should be approximately 12 to 18 inches apart. One foot may be slightly in front of the other. Your body weight should be distributed evenly in the hips. Your legs should be straight, but not locked at the knees. The chest should be held high, with shoulders slightly back. Your head should remain in vertical alignment with the body, neither tilted to one side nor jutting forward.

Beginning conductors should remember that assuming certain postures involves habit formation. At first this suggested stance may feel strange and awkward. Practice involves doing certain actions over and over again until they feel natural. Conducting is an activity which involves the entire body. Effective practice will teach your body to feel comfortable when conducting.

Your posture must show that you are in command of the situation, that you

know what to do. As a conductor you are a leader. Those you lead must have confidence in you. Your posture alone can do much to communicate this sense of leadership.

The conductor's body must show *nonverbally* all the majesty and grandeur, grace and eloquence, which music is capable of expressing. Throughout this book you will be asked to rely on your imagination and your ability to act expressively. Many of the exercises are designed to give you an opportunity to explore your feelings as you stand on an imaginary stage before an imaginary ensemble. Being able to perceive yourself as a conductor through your imagination and ability to act expressively will help develop necessary attributes common to successful conductors.

Exercise 1-1 Stretch your arms high over your head. Note how your entire body feels in this position. Leaving your chest and shoulders in this raised position, drop your arms. Be sure your weight is distributed in the hips. Review this posture in a mirror: feet apart, weight evenly distributed, chest high, shoulders slightly back, head aligned vertically with the body.

Exercise 1-2 You are a dignitary ready to disembark from your personal jet in London. You are being honored by a full military review and a 21-gun salute. Prepare to walk through the open door of the jet and view the huge crowd awaiting you. Now take five steps through the doorway and stand at the top of the stairs viewing the waiting multitude of dignitaries below. How do you feel? What is distinctive about your posture as you stand at the top of the stairway?

Exercise 1-3 The Robert Shaw Chorale and the Philadelphia Orchestra are onstage for a performance of the Berlioz *Requiem* under your conductorship. The lights dim and you prepare to walk out onto the stage. How do you feel? You walk across the stage and turn to face this superb ensemble of musicians. How do you feel now? What is distinctive about your posture? Your facial expression?

Hand and Arm Position

As you raise your arm into conducting position the elbow should be forward of the body, not cramped against it. The position of hand and arm may best be demonstrated by shaking hands with someone. The position of the elbow, approximately six to eight inches in front of the body, will also pull the upper arm forward, allowing the shoulder, elbow, wrist, and finger joints to move freely. The entire arm should be directly out in front of the shoulder. The angle of forearm to upper arm is also important. For some conductors the forearm may be parallel to the ground, as if completing a handshake (Figure 1-1a). Other conductors will raise the forearm slightly so that the hand is approximately mid-chest high (Figure 1-1b).

The conductor's height may determine which forearm position is most appropriate. Shorter conductors may have to raise the gesture slightly to be sure the entire gesture can be seen by the ensemble. No portion of any gesture should be hidden behind a music stand, piano, or podium.



Figure 1-1a. Forearm parallel to ground.

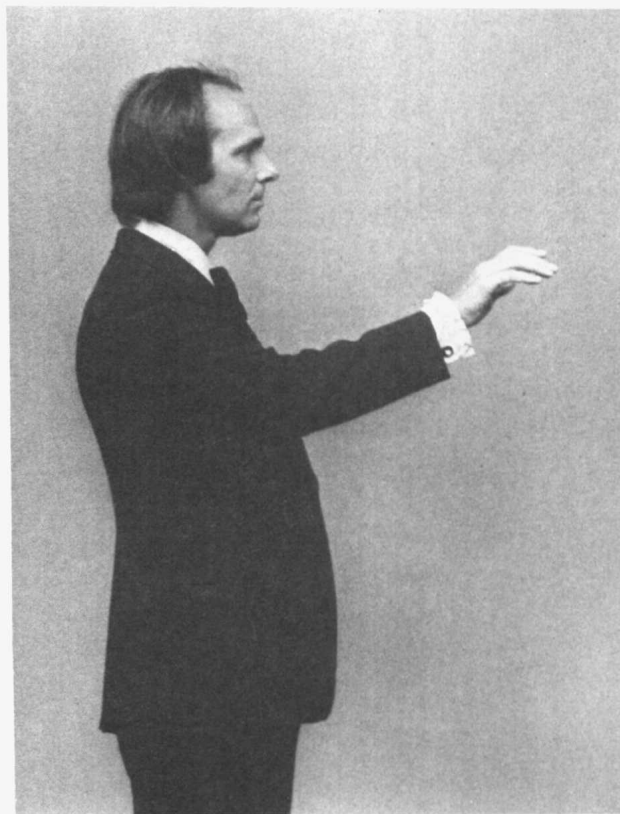


Figure 1-1b. Forearm raised, hand mid-chest high.

As can be seen in Figures 1-1a and 1-1b, the hand should be slightly above the wrist at all times. The exception to this rule will be discussed in Chapter 2.

You may conduct with palm slightly open to the side (Figure 1-2a) or with palm down (Figure 1-2b). The difference between palm open and palm down is very slight. In any case, the palm should not show fully to the side.

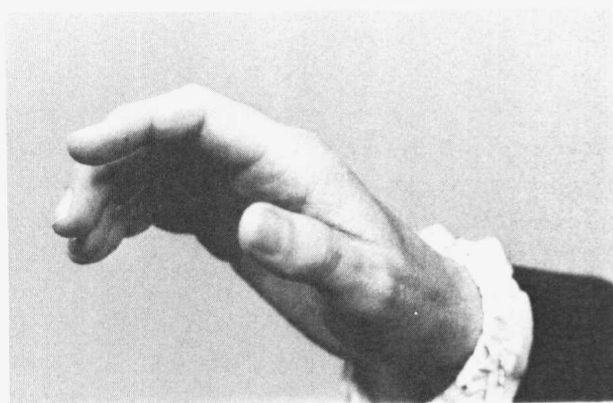


Figure 1-2a. Palm open.



Figure 1-2b. Palm down.

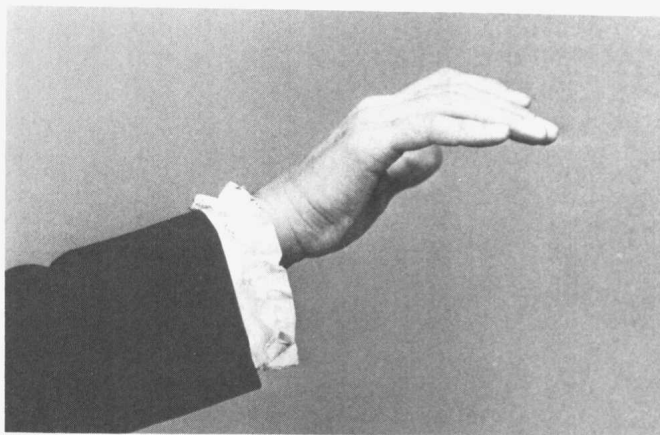


Figure 1-3. Curve of fingers.

The fingers of the hand should be slightly curved, much as if you were shaking hands or holding a chalkboard eraser diagonally across the palm (Figure 1-3). Fingers should not be held tightly together or spread too far apart. The thumb should be in a moderate position, neither sticking straight up or out nor held too tightly against the hand. The little finger should not protrude excessively, but should join the gentle curve of the rest of the fingers.

- **To the Student**

The suggestions for conducting stance and hand and arm position should be practiced in front of a mirror. You are seeing what your ensemble will see. Do you like what you see? Do your initial stance and conducting position convey confidence and assurance? Does the gesture look comfortable? Would you be encouraged to perform for the conductor you see in the mirror?

Compare your position with those shown in Figures 1-1a through 1-3. Experiment with hand and finger positions to find the one that fits you best. Continually check your posture.

Excessive tension in the arm and wrist should be avoided. The position of body, hand, arm, and wrist must appear natural. Elimination of excessive tension or rigidity is essential.

- **Nota Bene***

Remember that the audience will be viewing you from the back. Consider the fact that the appearance of some conductors—their physical stance, arm position, excessive motion, and dress—sometimes becomes more interesting to the audience than the music being produced.

TO DETRACT FROM THE MUSIC IS A PROFESSIONAL SIN.

*“Nota bene” is Latin, meaning “note well.” Throughout this book nota bene will be used to point out important aspects of conducting to which the students should pay careful attention.

Use of the Baton

The baton, commonly used by instrumental conductors and many choral conductors, is an extension of the arm. Conducting gestures may be executed cleanly and precisely with a baton. When using a baton, the palm of the hand should be down, with the baton held between thumb and forefinger. The baton, gripped firmly, should lie across the first joint of the forefinger with the ball of the baton resting comfortably in the palm of the hand. Holding the baton too tightly usually locks the wrist and restricts flow of movement. Holding the baton too loosely results in loss of control and ill-defined gestures.

CONTROL OF THE BATON IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.

All beginning conductors should experience the baton. They should become familiar with its feel in the hand. They should experiment with the baton, noting that a small wrist gesture will move its tip a considerable distance.

Because the baton is an extension of the arm, the baton's tip should be out in front of the body (Figure 1-4). The tip should not be angled too sharply toward the center of the body, nor should it be pointed too high.

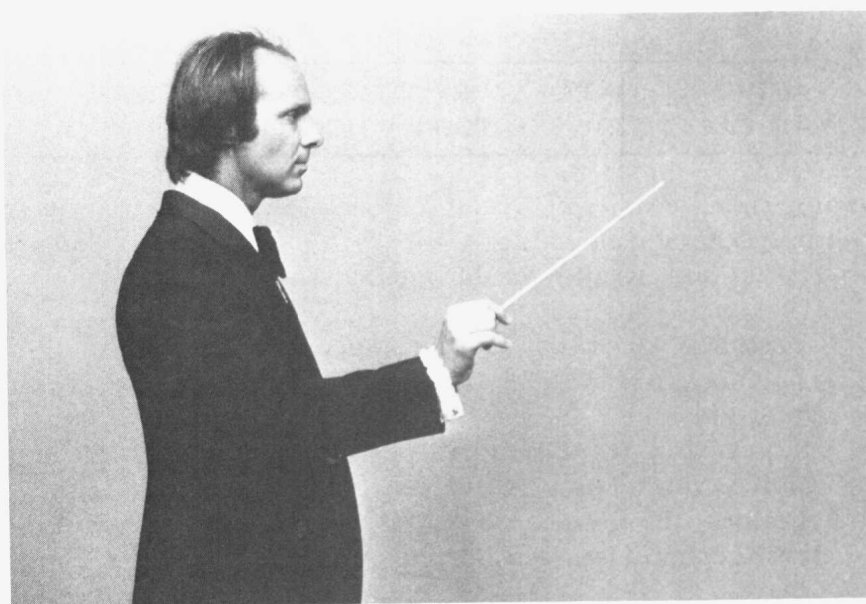


Figure 1-4. Proper position of baton.

On Practicing Conducting

When a musician practices conducting, he does not have his instrument, the ensemble, before him. When he practices singing or playing an instrument, however, the sound and resulting feeling give him immediate feedback, telling him what is correct and what needs additional practice. When practicing the physical gestures of conducting, the aural feedback is obviously missing, since there is no