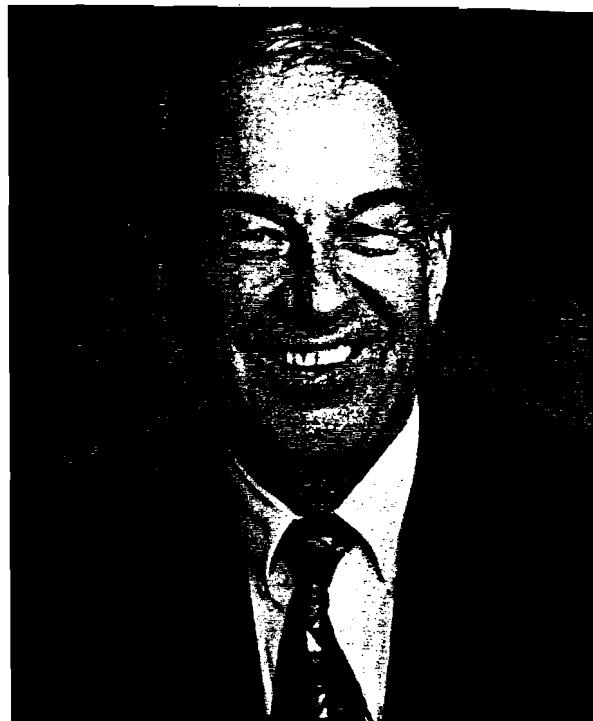


The Relationship between Nonverbal Communication and Conducting: An Interview with Rodney Eichenberger

by Alan C. McClung



Rodney Eichenberger

We do not hear with our ears only; we do not see with our eyes only: both these senses go together and form a whole which makes human communication complete.'

—Max K. Adler

Human communication is **interwoven** with verbal and nonverbal cues and messages. From overt actions to unconscious signals, limitless combinations are formed. The impact of nonverbal behaviors on communication carries profound implications for the art of conducting. This article provides an overview of literature on nonverbal communication, as well as its effects on conducting, and concludes with an interview of Rodney Eichenberger, a leading expert on nonverbal communication and conducting.

Nonverbal Communication Research

Peter Marler, a noted researcher on the role of genetic and environmental factors in the development of animal communication, concludes that types of communication other than language play a much more important role in human biological makeup **than** is **generally** acknowledged.¹ Language is only one part of a large **and** complex communication system. Allen T. Dittman, recognized for his work in movement communication, points out that people communicate through words, tone of voice, facial expressions, **body** movements, proxamic behavior, and by **psychophysiological** responses such as blushing and speed or depth of **breathing**.³ Nonverbal communication comprises such a significant portion of human interaction

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that health professionals have determined that it even plays a role in mental **health**.⁴ For more than **twenty** years, the topic of nonverbal communication has received significant attention at international conferences on anthropology, sociology, linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology, applied psychology, cross-cultural psychology, semiotics, communication, and other **disciplines**.⁵

Definitions of nonverbal communication range from very broad to very narrow. In an effort to integrate various **disciplines** and perspectives, Fernando Poyatos, a specialist in the field of nonverbal communication, offers a broad definition:

the emissions of signs by all the **nonlexical** somatic, **artifactual**, and environmental sensible sign systems contained in a culture, whether **individually** or in mutual **construction**, and **whether** or not those emissions constitute behavior or generate personal interaction."

Adler provides a simpler definition:

The whole of the human body *is* a means by which to express what happens in a **man's** inner being. The way he walks, he stands or slouches, how his **eye** shines or is dull. **every facial** expression. every sound of his throat. **every** movement of his **mouth**—**everything** in and on him is a continuous, ever-changing projection of his inner feelings in respect to **the outside** world.'

Although the **impact** of nonverbal behavior on **communication** has been acknowledged throughout much of human **history**, research into nonverbal behavior **began** with the work of Charles Darwin in 1872.⁸ In *The Expression of the Emotions in*

Man and Animals,⁹ Darwin established serious scientific study of facial and body movement patterns. He concluded that much could be learned through the observation of animals when considering

the causes or origins of movements and expressions in humans. For example, Darwin observed the appearance of a hostile dog approaching another dog. He described the hostile dog as having erect

cars, eyes intently directed forward, bristling hair on the neck and back, a remarkably stiff gait, and an upright and rigid tail. So familiar is this physical communication in its meaning and intent that an angry person is sometimes said to have his or her "back up."

The 1311 case study of *Clever Hans, the Horse of Mr. von Osten*,¹⁰ illustrates the surprising power of nonverbal meaning and intent. In 1900 in Berlin, von Osten began training his horse Hans to count by tapping his front hoof. Hans was a quick learner and was supposedly instructed in figures and the alphabet. News of the horse's abilities spread quickly and, because of the obviously profound scientific implications, an investigating committee was assembled to decide if any deceit was involved in Hans's performances. A committee comprising a psychologist, a physiologist, a veterinarian, the director of the Berlin Zoo, and a circus manager tested Hans and certified that their investigation revealed no presence of signs or cues of wén an unintentional nature. A second committee was summoned. Oskar Pfungst, an experienced researcher, discovered that Hans could answer a question only if someone in his visual field knew the answer. Pfungst deduced that when Hans was given a question, the onlookers assumed an expectant posture and increased their body tension. This was Hans's cue to begin tapping. When Hans reached the correct number of taps, the onlookers would relax and make a slight head movement, which was Hans's cue to stop tapping. Hans's cleverness was not in his ability to understand verbal commands but rather in his response to the almost imperceptible and unconscious movements of those around him. Mark C. Knapp, a noted lecturer on interpersonal communication and nonverbal communication, explains that the case of Clever Hans is not unlike people's awareness of nonverbal cues when attempting to attract the opposite sex, closing a business deal, playing poker, knowing when to leave a party, and a multitude of other common situations." Whether one interprets the case history of Clever Hans as an example of cause-and-effect or a reciprocal exchange of nonverbal information among those assembled, it illustrates how nonverbal communication can produce surprising results.

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The ability to code and decode non-verbal behaviors is subject to a number of factors. The Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS) test, an ongoing research project started in 1971, sought to discover if a given expressive movement would be decoded similarly within and across several populations. Administered to more than two hundred different populations in the United States and other countries, the results revealed that people translate the same nonverbal cues in different ways. The nonverbal decoding ability of an individual or a defined group is not equally distributed."

When nonverbal variables are combined with verbal components, the possibility of sending mixed or conflicting messages is quite understandable. A form of mixed communication is nonverbal leakage. Adler explains that although people exercise a reasonable amount of control over the words they choose, their capacity to remain aware of their nonverbal cues is more limited. Nonverbal information that is unconsciously leaked by a speaker can contribute to and confuse the intended message.¹³ For example, while reflecting a calm facial expression, a speaker may show anxiety by feet shuffling, rocking back and forth, or awkward use of the hands. Any of these unconscious cues will conflict with the calm facial expression, creating a confusing message for the receiver. The results of a study on nonverbal leakage indicate that when actions contradict words, people rely more heavily on the actions to interpret another's communication. Conversely, when both words and expressions are in synchronization, the redundancy of the messages intensifies the meaning.¹⁴

When communication components or channels contradict each other, the receiver must decide which message to believe. Should the receiver respond primarily to the words, the posture, the facial appearance, or the tone quality of the voice? Effective communication uses nonverbal messages that reinforce rather than confuse the verbal message.¹⁵

Nonverbal Communication and Conducting

Although the work of John Keltner, a noted researcher in interpersonal communications, deals with human interaction generally, his conclusions about consciously

controlling nonverbal messages readily apply to the task of conducting. He asserts that freeing the body to perform effectively as an instrument of communication is a difficult task. At the beginning one faces the problem of social conditioning, including muscle memory and learned habits. As awareness increases, tension is more easily detected, allowing one to retrain muscle movement.¹⁶ Results of research by Albert Mehrabian indicate that in Western culture body tension is primarily associated with fear and a lack of control." Unproductive body tension can be obvious or subtle. Only a trained eye with kinesthetic sense, as was demonstrated in the story of Clever Hans, can adequately recognize the subtle degrees of tension and its impact.

Conductors must become aware of the effects various nonverbal cues and messages have on musical performance. John Dickson, in an article on kinesthetics and conducting, points out that a conductor must reprogram earlier learned gestures in order to recognize that the vast majority of

music moves "up or away," rather than "down or toward." Dickson warns, "Time beating implies an imagery that is antithetical to the music-making process."¹⁸ Failure to monitor psychomotor skills can lead to flawed techniques or bad habits that are difficult to change."

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When a conductor verbally instructs ensemble musicians, that conductor can demonstrate insight and knowledge of the score. If nonverbal leakage in performance conflicts with the verbal instructions given in rehearsal, however, the performers, consciously or unconsciously, must decide how much of each message to follow. Some performers may choose to follow one of the verbal messages, while others may choose to follow one of the many nonverbal messages. Probably, the conductor will have to stop the ensemble and again give verbal instructions, selecting words more carefully. When a conductor depends primarily on verbal information, the conductor is implying, "Ignore my gestures—do as I say, not as I do." Sometimes frustration creeps in, and a conductor unknowingly shifts the responsibility onto the ensemble by asking the question, "Why can't you people follow me!" Some conductors have become so effective in using verbal directions that they overcome any lack of coordination with their nonverbal cues. A conductor is more efficient

and maximizes the musical results, however, when successfully coordinating verbal directions with nonverbal behaviors.

Some musicians maintain that success in the conducting profession is totally dependent on innate factors, and they refuse to engage in a scientific approach to conducting education. They argue that conducting talent is inborn and, therefore, cannot be taught; their educational approach is one of coaching rather than teaching.²⁰ Based on scientific research in nonverbal communication, however, an objective approach to teaching elements such as facial expressions, gestures, and movement in conducting is entirely possible. A literature review conducted by William Fredrickson suggests that one learnable behavior and an effective conducting skill is the development of eye contact? A study of collegiate choral directors by Thomas J. Stauch indicates that primary nonverbal qualities such as gaze/facial behaviors, proxemic behaviors, and postural behaviors are consciously developed by most successful conductors.²² A

study by Robert Grechesky examines the verbal and nonverbal behaviors exhibited by a random selection of high school band conductors in central Indiana.²³ Of the eleven variables he identifies as affecting performance, eight are nonverbal. His highest ranked bands experienced rehearsals in which verbal explanations were complemented by nonverbal communication skills. "The point is," Grechesky states, "if the essence of music is nonverbal, the essence of conducting also should be nonverbal."²⁴

The Interview

Rodney Eichenberger is a conductor, lecturer, and clinician who has focused much of his life's work on investigating the effects of a conductor's nonverbal communication on music ensembles. He has lectured, taught conducting masterclasses, and guest conducted extensively in Europe, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. A member of the Florida State University music faculty since 1990, Eichenberger holds degrees from St. Olaf

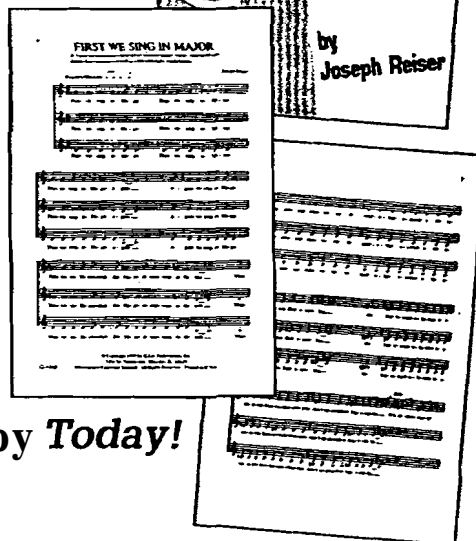
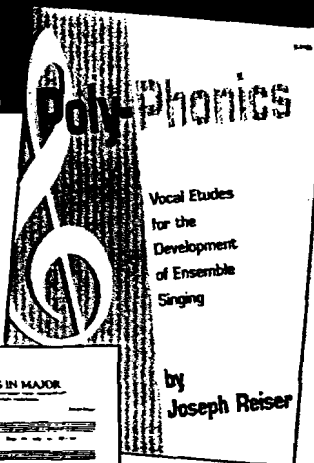
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College in Northfield, Minnesota, and the University of Denver, with advanced students at the University of Washington and the University of Iowa. This interview was conducted on May 11, 1995, in Tallahassee, Florida.

Alan McClung: Looking back on your career, what events influenced your present philosophy of conducting?

Rodney Eichenberger: The University of Washington was my first collegiate position. I started with a newly formed group called the University Chorale. At the same time, I was a student at the university, studying voice and teaching undergraduate choral conducting. The relationship between my voice study and my choral conducting was very close. My voice teacher, Edison Harris, believed in the use of movement to teach certain things about the voice. Similarly, I became convinced that a conductor's movements and nonverbal messages directly affect the response of a choir.

Ted Norman, head of the music education department, came up to me after the first concert of the University Chorale. He said, "I think that the sopranos don't be quite so strident if you didn't have so much tension in your shoulders." That comment hit hard, and so I started paying attention to my shoulder tension. I discovered that I could get a much better sound if I did relax my shoulders. That experience started me on a long study of conducting.

In those early years I taught undergraduate conducting the old tried-and-tested way, in which you start with a pattern and then fit the music into it. At times, my students became frustrated with my instruction. It worried me, so I readjusted my method. I started with making music. The students' assignment was to teach a simple song and perform it within a five-minute rehearsal. We came to the conclusion that the conducting pattern was a useful and important tool, but that it was effective only if it worked within the context of each piece of music. This discovery completely changed my outlook on conducting. Instead of superimposing music on a conducting pattern, I started first on the music and found ways to make it come alive.

When the doctoral program was introduced at the University of Washington,

some very experienced conductors came to study there. Each had developed a conducting style that was locked into

If the essence of music is nonverbal, the essence of conducting also should be nonverbal.

Robert Grechesky

his or her muscle memory. I discovered that the sound of the choir changed with each conductor. Once again my approach to teaching changed. Cueing and prescribing procedures were not my primary focuses. Instead I investigated the personal qualities a conductor uses to make music and how those qualities affect the performance. I began to mentally catalogue things that conductors do that get in the way of their intent. As I started to isolate those things, I would watch a conductor and ask myself, "What is the most alterable trait that will make this conductor more effective?"

A.M.: In conducting classes I have heard you make the following comment: "There is nothing wrong with telling singers what you want; I just want you also to show them what you say you want." How do these ideas connect?

R.E.: Virtually all conductors I know have developed conducting habits that are sometimes antithetic to the desired effect. Those habits are usually reactions to some kind of frustration. As a result they start pawing for the music; their motions get bigger, and their control is decreased. They start telling the choir what they want over and over again; however, they are unconsciously showing the choir something contradictory. Conductors should coordinate intent with verbalizations and gestures in order to give consistent messages to the choir. A great number of conductors give good verbal messages, but then the choir has to ignore the visual messages conveyed by the conductor's body.

A.M.: To what degree do you believe nonverbal behaviors actually affect conducting skills?

R.E.: Jerry Blunt, in his book *The Composite Art of Acting*²⁵ writes, "First the human organism felt. Then he moved. When he moved, he moved for a purpose, and his movement revealed what the purpose was." There are numerous studies on nonverbal communication; unfortunately, few deal specifically with conducting. A conductor can step in a room and in two seconds win or alienate the whole ensemble; the way he or she looks, where the eyes go, and how the nose tips are messages being sent to the

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performers. I think that we don't teach conducting adequately if we don't carefully investigate all the possibilities that nonverbal language brings to the communication between conductor and performer. Conducting is about getting a message across through movement without words. The more effective the nonverbal communication, the more you can get done. The more you talk, the less time the choir sings. You can use all sorts of words to set the

stage, to talk your way into a performance, but in the performance the conductor's movements bring about the final results. There is little question in my mind that conducting is basically a nonverbal art.

A.M.: Perhaps you could focus on three or four of the primary areas that relate to the development of nonverbal conducting skills.

R.E.: The first thing is the posture of the conductor. If the conductor stands

like a singer, tall and without tension in the body, an ideal model is being projected to the performer. Not every piece of music is tall, so the posture might need to change to fit the quality and character of the music, but the posture of the conductor is number one. Posture includes the placement of the feet, the movement of the knees, the movement of the head, and body balance.

When teaching conducting I begin by looking for an alterable habit that can be isolated. Do the knees bend habitually during the phrase? Moving the knees on a regular basis shifts the posture, creating its own rhythmic character. If that rhythmic character is not in keeping with the rhythm of the hand, interference takes place. When the conductor's knees are moving, one of the first things I do is stop the conductor. I demonstrate what happens with just a single note while bending the knees: the pitch sags. That nonverbal message implies sitting down, which in turn results in a downward direction in pitch.

Similarly, if the foot, elbows, head, or wrists are keeping time, the primary rhythm is disturbed. It creates an extra focus point for the singers' eyes. The performer must decide which to follow, the foot, the elbow, the head, the wrist, or the hand.

Musicians watch the conductor and mimic what the conductor is doing. When the conductor's head is raised, singers change their posture dramatically. I check to see how much the conductor's head is moving. Is the head moving out of frustration? Does the conductor's head move up and down with a raised chin while he or she breathes with the choir? If so, tension is being created in the occipital joint region, and the result is vocal tension. Every summer I do a choral conducting workshop in Oregon; twenty participants conduct pieces with the choir. As some conductors display tense conducting habits, I can see sopranos doing things like holding their throats and rubbing their necks.

Finally, I look for tension in the arms, shoulders, wrists, and hands. I am particularly concerned with the degrees to which the arms reach and the hands relax. Conducting in a reaching position sends an entirely different message than conducting with the upper arms hanging freely to one's side, and I can hear a

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marked difference in the choral sound
ing from each. The same point can
made about the cocked wrist locked in
an upright position.

A.M.: If posture and its subsets are first
on the list of concerns, what is second?

RE.: It is all linked together. If I ask a
student to notice that a leg is moving ha-
bitually, the student starts concentrating
on the moving leg, and suddenly the face
goes blank. Although facial effects contrib-
ute a great deal to what a conductor com-
municates, I'm not concerned if a student's
face goes dead as he or she deals with other
things that are getting in the way.

I am convinced that the more one is
drawn into the visual aspects of another
person's movement, the more one will
imitate that action. When an actor is in a
very intense scene, the audience is caught
in the action, mirroring what the actor is
doing. I remember my first experience
with a Cinerama movie that had a scene
involving a roller coaster ride. As the roller
coaster went around a corner, the entire
audience, sitting in absolutely stationary
chairs, went around the corner in their
chairs. They moved backwards and for-
wards, then up and down. I was intrigued
with the degree of empathy that the audi-
ence had simply because of the visual
stimuli around them.

That experience demonstrated how
people can be so completely absorbed that
they are unaware of the visual message.
When an ensemble is absorbed in perfor-
mance, it is entirely caught up with the
conductor. This degree of concentration
is one of the basic qualities of the choral
experience.

A.M.: If singers unknowingly empa-
thize with a conductor's nonverbal mes-
sages, would you agree that a conductor
can unknowingly affect all aspects of the
music-making process?

RE.: Yes! You can listen to a group
under one conductor, then put another
conductor in front of it, and it will have a
different quality because of the way the
conductor stands and gestures. When I
work with a choir that has a bad intona-
tion problem, I watch carefully what the
conductor is doing. I can usually relate
me out-of-tune singing directly to the
conductor's gestures. Often a conductor's
heavy downward movements encourage
the choir to sing under pitch. By simply

lifting the conductor's torso to a taller
and relaxed position, the intonation
usually improves. Because of the amount
of muscle memory associated with out-
of-tune singing, the tuning won't be per-
fect, but it will be improved.

The conductor's nonverbal messages
affect every musical facet of a perfor-
mance. My premise is that nothing is
right and nothing is wrong, but every-
thing you do has an effect. Whether con-
ducting a choral or an instrumental
ensemble, I'm convinced that a conduc-
tor can use certain nonverbal messages to
achieve a particular sound.

A.M.: "Nothing is right and nothing
is wrong" doesn't fit the traditional view
of the standard conducting pattern. I have
heard you say that every musical beat has
a specific point, but those beat points can
have different qualities.

RE.: The incredible importance of be-
ing able to conduct steady beats shouldn't
be questioned. The beat must arrive at and
depart from a single defining point.
Rounded beats with circles or smudges
give performers options to decide where
the beat is.

Of course there are various levels and
planes of conducting. The quality of each
beat determines the placement of each
beat. Conductors should listen to the
differences in timbre, pitch, and rhyth-
mic accuracy as those elements are af-
fected by arm position, ictus placement,
and the character of a beat's approach
and departure. The conducting pattern
should be used to allow the music to
come alive. Every downbeat does not
have the same amount of "down" qual-
ity. The quality of each beat should be
determined by the music, and it is up to

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the conductor to discover and to demonstrate visually that quality.

A.M.: Besides the quality of each beat point, what other aspects of conducting gestures influence the musical results?

R.E.: Music-making is determined not just at the point of the beat but throughout the pulse of the note prior to that beat. What happens between the beats determines whether I want to listen or not. There is no slighting the importance of the point of the beat, but if the duration of the note is slighted and you get too concerned with beats, you lose track of the music. You lose track of the quality of the pulse. Is the pulse going someplace? The tension-free motion of arriving at and departing from the beat gives music that specific quality.

To sum up, I believe that virtually all gestures can help a conductor, so I encourage students to isolate each movement and then to discover its effect on the musical performance. These movements can then become effective elements

in the development of a conductor's non-verbal vocabulary.

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