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# Using Video Self-Assessment To Enhance Nonverbal Conducting Gesture

By Alan C. McClung

**T**he effective use of conducting gesture to communicate musical intention is a primary goal of the successful conductor. Donald Neuen asserted in the preface of his book, *Choral Concepts*, "The development of skilled, refined, and artistic conducting technique should be as high a priority for a conductor as a fine violinist's right hand and bowing technique."<sup>1</sup> Skilled conducting techniques are attainable by connecting a specific gesture with a specific musical intention. In his video, *What They See is What You Get*, Rodney Eichenberger suggests that to be effective, the physical and artistic elements of conducting require an astute awareness of the effect of daily communicative behaviors that are perceived nonverbally.<sup>2</sup> Because many nonverbal behaviors are deeply embedded into our daily lives, the power of that information can go unnoticed.

For one hundred years, researchers have studied and documented the effects of nonverbal communication. Building on the work of Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, Mark L. Knapp (1972), a noted researcher of nonverbal behaviors, refined a classification system that attempts to specify communicative information that is perceived nonverbally.<sup>3</sup> Consider how many commonplace communicative nonverbal behaviors are embedded into the rehearsal and performance aspects of conducting.

Knapp identified six categories of nonverbal behaviors: kinesic behaviors, physical characteristics, touch behavior paralinguage, proxemics, and artifacts. Kinesic behaviors involve five body movement types. Body signs or signals that substitute for words are referred to as emblems. Examples include sign-language, thumbs-up, thumbs-down, "A-OK," the 1960s peace-sign, television crew operation signs, even signs used in the party game, charades. Illustrators are body signs or signals that accompany speech. Their purpose is to accent or emphasize a word or a phrase. Extending the hands apart to demonstrate length and height, head nodding during an affirmative statement, or a thumb and finger to represent a gun are examples. Nonverbal acts in response to another's speech are categorized as regulators. Examples include nonverbal cues that tell the speaker to continue, repeat, elaborate, hurry up, or slow down. Adaptors are silent cues used to satisfy needs, perform actions, manage emotions, develop social contacts, or perform a host of other functions. Throwing one's hands up in the air in a moment of crisis, or body posture that suggests "I'm available" at social gatherings are examples of adaptors. Facial configurations that display affective states are referred to as affect displays. The display can occur with or without awareness. Examples include happiness, sadness, surprise, delight, anger, and horror.

Influential nonverbal cues which are not movement-bound are referred to as physical characteristics. Examples of this category include physical or body shape, general attractiveness, body or breath odors, height-weight, hair and skin color or tone. Touch behavior includes stroking, hitting, greetings, farewells, holding, guiding another's movements, and other more specific instances.

Paralinguage is a nonverbal behavior category that refers to how something is verbalized, not what is said. Within this category, voice quality identifies pitch range, rhythm control, articulation, resonance, lip control. Vocalization includes examples such as laughing, crying, yawning, swallowing, coughing, clearing of the throat, etc. Vocal qualifiers identify intensity (overly soft to overly loud), pitch height (overly high to overly low), accent (drawl to extreme clipping). The final paralinguage subcategory is referred to as vocal segregate. Examples include: "un-hun," "um," "uh," "ah," "you know," and recent additions, "like" and "yo."

Proxemics is a category that identifies the use and perception of social and personal space. Artifacts is the term used to categorize the manipulation of objects in contact with the interacting persons which may act as nonverbal stimuli such as perfume, clothes, lipstick, eyeglasses, wigs, and others. Environmental factors include furniture, interior decorating, lighting conditions, smells, colors, temperatures, additional noises or music, and others.

If the essence of conducting is in the gesture and if the essence of gesture is in the value of the information communicated nonverbally, it is only by freeing the body with an enhanced perception of the power of nonverbal behaviors that musical intentions can be effectively communicated to members of musical ensembles. To enhance perception, the conductor must become cognitively, aurally, and visually aware of the potential power of gesture, and set about to master the psychomotor skills that produce desirable musical results.

The following personal anecdote typifies the unsuspected power of nonverbal gesture. Early in my tenure as a graduate student, I sat in a conducting class with Rodney Eichenberger. Although respectful of the professor's philosophy about the connection between nonverbal behaviors and gesture, I was hesitant to commit; I needed demonstrative proof. As with so many "ah-ha" moments, the impact of that day's lesson would have important implications. A classmate was conducting when Professor Eichenberger requested that he freeze his gesture. Surprised by the request, the entire class froze. With wrists locked, fingers to ceiling, and palms to choir, the professor approached the conductor in his typical, kindly manner. Using his thumb and forefinger, he took the conductor's wrist and asked him to relax. As the conductor's wrist relaxed, I experienced a personal response. As a trained singer, I am well aware of the importance of a relaxed larynx, but as the conductor's wrist relaxed, I felt my larynx move from a high forward position into a healthy relaxed position. That was the proof I needed; the subtle power of the conductor's gesture communicated musical implications of which I was completely unaware. There was no magic, no complex set of conditions, only a poised, tension-free response. As my cognitive, aural, and visual awareness began to make the connection between gesture and sound, I started cataloguing a variety of conducting gestures into a new set of psychomotor skills, a life-long endeavor that requires constant assessment.

Although conducting is studied in college, the real training happens on-the-job in academic isolation. As Kenneth Phillips points out in his article *Psychomotor Problems of Beginning Conductors*, "Too often these psychomotor skills are not monitored

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closely enough, and bad habits are permitted to develop.”<sup>4</sup> Bad habits, or put another way, ineffective gestures, inhibit musical intentions. Perplexed with an ensemble’s static musical plateau, conductors commit to work harder (a notion that produces additional physical tension), and to talk more. Monitoring personal conducting techniques and eliminating ineffective gestures can produce desirable musical results.

tape is in itself an act of nonverbal communication. It suggests to the musical ensemble that gesture is important and that learning is a lifelong endeavor.

When assessing gesture from videotape, it is necessary to isolate and pinpoint specific behaviors. The video self-assessment form makes use of questions to isolate specific musical intentions. A commentary, an account of catalogued observations, follows each question. It is



# Bad habits,

or put another way, ineffective gestures, inhibit musical intentions.

To monitor student progress, the video recorder has become common place in collegiate conducting classes. This is no recent phenomenon, as Carroll Gonzo reported in a 1981 *Choral Journal* article; it has been a practice for some time.<sup>5</sup> If visual feedback can provide meaningful assessment to the college student, it can provide meaningful information for the practicing professional. The act of monitoring conducting gesture through video-

designed to enhance perceptual awareness, cognitively, aurally, and visually, and to encourage the connection of nonverbal behaviors with nonverbal gesture and sound. Conducting gestures are a form of nonverbal communication that effect musical sound in predictable ways; however the predictable ways included in the commentary are my perceptions. Without a doubt, other thoughtful interpretations should be considered.

## Video Self-Assessment

List the primary areas that suggest strengths in the rehearsal.

Everyone does something well. Pinpoint positives.

List areas that suggest a need for improvement.

Everyone can improve. Pinpoint the primary areas that need attention.

Unlearning precedes relearning. Because learning is sequential, consider working to fix one thing at a time.


Does postural alignment encourage a healthy singing technique?

Conducting pedagogues seem to agree that posture is the first area to assess. It is recommended that the conductor stand tall, with the appropriate height and balance of a singer. Ensemble members will respond consciously, as well as unconsciously, to the posture of the model presented.

Are the positions of the wrists, hands, arms, and shoulders tension free, yet appropriately poised to convey the intended tone, dynamics, and tempo?

The wrists are unlocked yet poised, similar to the wrist position used to play the piano or classical guitar. A locked wrist can induce a raised larynx, resulting in vocal tension. Floppy wrists can smear the point of the ictus.

The palms of the hands, including the fingers, are turned toward the floor, similar to the tension-free hand position used to play the piano. Notice how the gently cupped palm can be used to reinforce the



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position of the lifted soft palate. In this position the palms typically encourage the production of taller vowels and a rounder, freer, floating tone. This position can also be used to energize pitch and aid in dynamic control. Sometimes there is an inclination to turn the palms inward, creating a "karate chop" position. This position can typically produce a weighted articulation, but lessens the degree of dynamic control and vocal lift.

The **tip of the middle finger** is generally identified as the point for each ictus. The other three fingers and thumb should be tension-free, neither splayed nor forged together. Sometimes tension can creep into the thumb, creating the nonverbal emblem of a "hitchhiker."

The **forearms**, from wrist to elbow, are parallel to the floor. This position should frame the diaphragmatic region with tension-free poise. Forearms that frame the diaphragmatic region encourage a deeper breath and produce a warmer, rounder tone. Forearms positioned higher tend to produce shallow breaths and a less supported tone.

The **upper arm**, from elbow to shoulder, is free to spring away from the rib cage, creating the potential for a "billows" effect. Strive to lift in and out from the elbow, not up and down from the shoulder.

The **shoulders** should remain relaxed, down, and tension free.

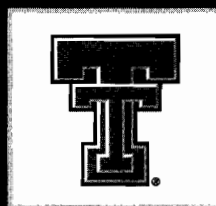
**Do superfluous gestures from the head, waist, knees, or feet conflict with the musical intention?**

Non-verbal gestures that are unrelated to musical intention should be discarded. Movements that include bowing, bending, and leaning can affect pitch by pushing it under. Keeping time with the feet, knees, or hips can provide conflicting ictus points and affect tempo. If such movements are observed, consider eliminating

them. Although habitual movements may be well intended and possibly personally fulfilling, superfluous movement can be counterproductive to the musical intention. Replace body tension with inner peace.

In his book, *Choral Concepts*, conductor and teacher, Donald Neuen, explained: "No gesture should be unnecessary, unmusical, undefined, or unnatural. None should be obtrusive, distracting, or sim-

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The message conveyed through a conductor's approving smile can communicate



# VOLUMES.

ply for show. There should be no meaningless, idiosyncratic, or habitual movements or gestures. Specific musical thoughts or ideas in the score should dictate every movement or gesture.”<sup>6</sup>

To stop sound, consider the difference between a release and a cut-off. Cut-offs are achieved by pinching the sound (thumb to index finger). This gesture seems to produce a stop-sound-action

controlled by throat muscles. Releases are achieved by gently touching an ictus point and rebounding. This gesture seems to produce rapid, diaphragmatically controlled breath decay.

Is the preparatory beat appropriate for the desired breath, dynamics, mood, and tempo?

**Placement location:** Typically, the preparatory beat is placed on the silent beat that occurs prior to the first sounding beat. Examples: In 4/4 time, if beat “1” is the first sounded pitch, beat “4” serves as the preparatory beat. If beat “3” is the first sounded pitch, beat “2” serves as the preparatory beat. If the music begins on the “&” of a beat, the preparatory beat should be 1 \_ silent beats from the first sounded Pitch. Example: In 4/4 time, if the “&” of “4” is the first sounded pitch, the preparatory beat should begin on beat “3.” Beware the pitfall of providing the “double prep.”

**Quality:** The preparatory beat should include the depth of breath, the initial dynamic level, the mood, the tempo, and even the initial vowel shape of the first sounded word.

**breath:** To achieve a deep breath, position the hands and forearms low and connected to the diaphragmatic area. For a light breath, place the hands and forearms in a higher, chest-related position. The desired singers’ breath can be achieved more readily if the conductor offers the singers a personal model to emulate.

**dynamics:** To achieve a soft dynamic level, use a small gesture. Maintain a singer’s posture with an open chest. The hands should be close and connected to the diaphragmatic area with elbows free and unrestricted. For louder dynamics, a larger gesture is required. The space between the elbows and the rib cage should be increased. The size of the billows (the area between the rib cage and the elbows) is increased or decreased relative to the desired dynamic intensity. Dynamic movement will be discussed further in the phrase shape question that follows.

**mood:** Attached pitches are achieved more readily through the horizontal gesture. Detached pitches

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are achieved more readily through vertical gesture.

**tempo:** The preparatory beat should reflect the tempo of the first sounded pitch.

**vowel shape:** Although mouthing words is not encouraged, the mouth and eyebrows can be used effectively to suggest and model vowel shape and height.

**Stand Height:** When the music stand is adjusted to a belt-line height, performers can respond to gestures that induce deep diaphragmatic breathing.

Does the conducting gesture provide a clear placement of each ictus, including a clearly measured rebound to and from the “ands?”

Extraneous movements in the hands (fingers/knuckles), wrists, and elbows can produce conflicting information as related to the point of the ictus. Petting fingers, waving wrists, and/or flopping elbows have been identified as counterproductive to musical intentions.

The physical manifestation of time-keeping in the feet, knees, and hips can divert attention away from the desired point of the ictus.

The time needed to travel from the point of the ictus to the “&” and from the “&” to the next ictus should be measured and placed knowingly. When arrival points are reached too soon, tempo flow is distorted.

Does the conducting gesture convey tempo effectively?

A work's tempo should reflect the character and style of the music.

The preparatory beat reflects the impending tempo.

Similar to the third response of the preceding question, the time needed to travel from the point of the ictus to the “&” and from the “&” to the next ictus should be carefully monitored. Conveying effective tempi requires a discriminating awareness of the speed required to reach each arrival point. Gesture that appears to rush-and-halt through space and time will disconnect the conductor from the

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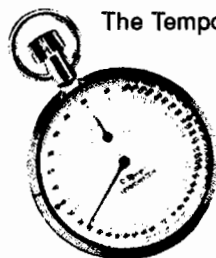
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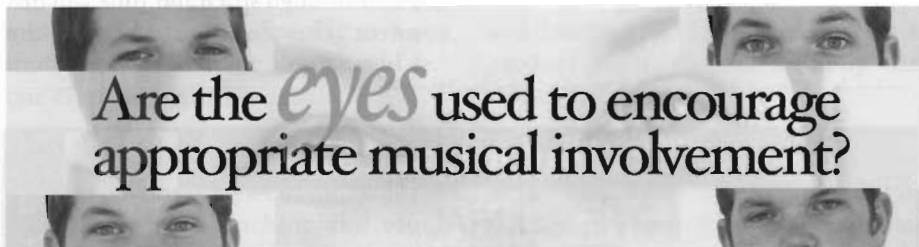
performer. Gesture that is even and measured will connect the conductor with the performer, producing a perceived physical sensation of rhythmic synchronicity. Faster tempos typically require smaller beat patterns.

each beat is unique.

For a phrase to have dynamic movement, the conductor must be prepared to show different dynamic levels. Some phrases marked "piano" can have as many as ten graduated levels of softness. As a respected

three conducting cubes.

Within any musical phrase, it is the musical style that dictates the appropriate dynamic range for each phrase. Renaissance musical phrases are thought to use a subtle and restrained range of dynamics. To bring a romantic phrase to life, the dynamic range should be broadened within a shorter period of musical time.



Are the *eyes* used to encourage appropriate musical involvement?

Does the conducting gesture convey the appropriate phrase shape?

Music's essence exists during the time between the beats. Although the point of each ictus is important, it is the time between each ictus that must be nurtured and shaped with appropriate weight, dynamics, tone, and pitch. In each measure,

colleague observed, "We conduct within a dynamic level not a dynamic level."

Imagine three conducting cubes: one for soft, one for moderate, and one for loud dynamics. Consider the width, height, and depth of each cube. As a phrase unfolds, carefully consider the appropriate free movement between and among the

Does the conducting gesture convey the appropriate weight (articulations), or the lack thereof?

In his book, *Evoking Sound*, James Jordan examines the writings of the noted movement authority, Rudolf von Laban. Laban suggests that our lives are filled with various movement qualities. We experience these qualities through various combinations of weight, time, and space. The action verbs float, wring, glide, press, flick, slash, dab, and punch are examples of various movement qualities.<sup>7</sup> Because the weight and direction of each beat can differ dramatically, the appropriate gesture should be considered carefully.



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Notice the musical implications of a conducting pattern that is weighted with heavy, vertical "down" gesture. By simply turning the "weighted down" gesture into a "lifted, floating up" gesture, the altered musical implications are immediate and dramatic.

**Does the conducting gesture, including facial affect, capture the desired mood/character of the music?**

Conducting gesture, including facial affect, should express the predominant mood of the music being conducted. Consider the differences between the emotional states of joyfulness, sadness, tenderness, and wrathfulness. Each emotion suggests unique gestures. Moods that suggest attached, floating, or legato movement are achieved more readily through horizontal movement. Musical passages or individual notes that are perceived to be unattached, heavy, marcato, or staccato are expressed more readily through vertical movement.

The attention required to attain a tension-free body can, in the beginning, seem all consuming. Frequently, the added dimension of facial affect must be placed on hold. After physical tension is released and the physical gestures become reliable, effective facial affect should be added. In his book, *Choral Concepts*, Donald Neuen, provides the following insight:

"The conductor must not only be comfortable showing the full spectrum of feelings, but actually enjoy and receive fulfillment through it. This expression is very similar to the great actors' visible, dramatic display of inner emotions. You can actually see in their physical expressions those feelings that they are experiencing deep within their minds, hearts, and souls. We must hasten to say that this does not suggest that the conductor should *exaggerate* the honest expression of the music to the extent of sentimentality or superficial theatrics. It means that whether the music is *piano/dolce*, or *forte/marcato*, the conductor needs to be able to reflect the music and text accurately, effectively, and consistently, whether they express

simple beauty or heavy dramatic impact (p. 205)."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the importance of the messages conveyed through facial affect, the information conveyed through a conductor's approving smile can communicate volumes.

**Are the eyes used to encourage appropriate musical involvement?**

The eyes, a primary component of facial affect, should be used to create a direct link between the conductor and each ensemble member. With total eye contact the ultimate goal, the conductor should begin by connecting eyes with each ensemble member at all preparatory breaths, phrase beginnings, important musical cues, and musical releases.

**Does verbal communication complement nonverbal conducting gestures?**

Conducting gestures are a form of non-verbal communication that effect musical



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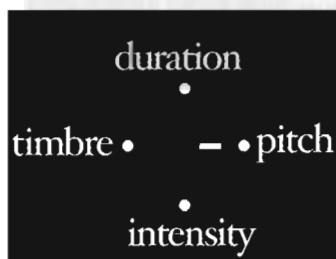


sound in predictable ways. A confluent relationship should exist between verbal communications and nonverbal communications to reinforce specific conducting gestures. The conductor who offers conflicting information sets in motion a con-

Knowing the score, anticipating musical challenges, and creating a time usage plan, are fundamental to successful rehearsals. Are note accuracy issues accurately pinpointed and appropriate remedies administered?

procedure that encourages the development of a sensitive ear in each ensemble member, including the conductor.

In the article, "Mastery of Choral Ensemble," Jameson Marvin of Harvard University provides the following framework to guide the development of analytical listening skills.



“...slowly turn  
the dial and focus  
your concentration  
on one element  
of music at a time.”

scious or unconscious musical dilemma for the ensemble member, “Should I respond to what I’m told, or should I respond to what I see?”

Is the rehearsal well planned and paced?

To analyze and pinpoint musical issues accurately, critical listening is required. Singing with the ensemble or accompanying the ensemble on piano while conducting can delude the listening process. Successful conductors develop a rehearsal

“Picture a dial. While the choir is singing, slowly turn the dial and focus your concentration on one element of music at a time. Spend considerable time listening to one element—*pitch*, for example. Quality, amplitude, accuracy intonation, balance, dynamics, articulation, phrasing—all of these characteristics may enter into your assessment of the choir’s pitch.

Next, picture the dial in your mind and turn it to *timbre*, or a combination of both *pitch* and *timbre*, since these two elements can be closely related in function. Vowels, color, sonority, texture—all are facets of *timbre* upon which to concentrate. Then, listen for *duration*. This is a complex activity, because duration will overlap with *pitch*, *timbre*, and *intensity*. Specific aspects of listen to *duration* will be linked inevitably to rhythmic accuracy, to ensemble rhythm, to tempo, to metric structure, and to speed of harmonic rhythm. The *expressive elements*—dynamics, phrasing, articulation, rubato, linear direction—are served by *duration* as well as *intensity*.

Now, turn the dial to *intensity*. Dynamics and color may leap into mind; or balance considerations will become immediately apparent. One may focus on each of the expressive elements of music by using “the dial” and listening for articulation or phrasing or line or rubato. Intensity serves most substantially, however, dynamics and balance.”

To meet the needs of each ensemble member, the successful conductor seeks to acquire a wide array of appropriate remedies. These spontaneously accessible remedies should include a methodical approach to

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Donald Neuen, *Choral Concepts* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2002), xiii
- <sup>2</sup> Rodney Eichenberger, *Video: What They See Is What You Get* (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw, 1994). Additional information on nonverbal communication and its effects on conducting gestures: Alan C. McClung, "An Interview with Rodney Eichenberger: The Relationship of Nonverbal Communication and Conducting," *Choral Journal* (vol. 36, no. 10, 1996): 17-24.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark L. Knapp, *Nonverbal Behavior in Human Interaction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972), 4. Additional resource includes: Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, *Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 189.
- <sup>4</sup> Kenneth H. Phillips, "Psychomotor Problems of Beginning Conductors," *Choral*

*Journal* (vol. 29, no. 7, 1989): 23.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll Gonzo, "The Use of Videotapes in the Choral Rehearsal," *Choral Journal* (vol. 21, no. 6, 1981): 5-8.

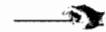
<sup>6</sup> Neuen, 204.

<sup>7</sup> James Jordan, *Evoking Sound: Fundamentals of Choral Conducting and Rehearsing* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 1996), 30-46.

<sup>8</sup> Neuen, 205.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson Marvin, "Mastery of Choral Ensemble," in *Up Front, Becoming the Complete Choral Conductor*, ed. Guy Webb (Boston, MA: E.C. Schirmer Music Company Inc., 1993), 114.

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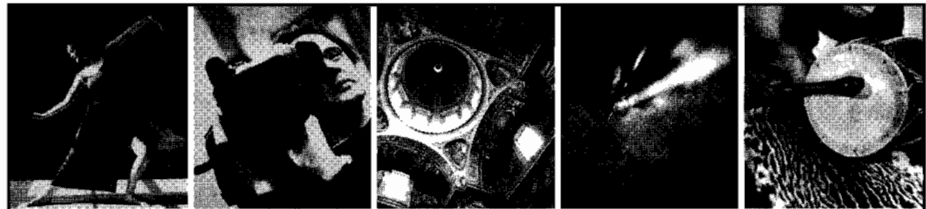
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