

Ohio Choral Directors Association Conference 2018

Conducting Masterclass

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I. Conducting as gesture:

“The conductor should always work to describe, with the tip of the stick, the music in hand and the spirit underlying it. In this way, the conducting can become as varied as Music itself. ... Feel the texture of the tone as you call it forth. Sense that the hands and baton are molding, shaping, sculpturing a living thing, for Music is an Art that exists and breathes only while it is being performed.”

Green, Elizabeth. *The Modern Conductor*, 3rd. ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982, 241.

Gesture serves to remind musicians about details in the score.

Conductors must know the score to show the score (“what you know is what you show”).

All gestures come from the score itself.

Clarity and expressivity are basic.

Less is more.

II. Basic visual rules:

1. Posture – model breathing space; stand like a singer.
2. Weight distribution – feet apart slightly, under your shoulders.
3. Plane height – not too low or too high (bottom of rib cage).
4. Extend arms slightly – do not hug rib cage; give breathing room.
5. Hand position – inviting, not rigid; stable, not floppy (let the arm follow the finger tips).
6. Body hinges – shoulder; elbow; wrist; fingers
7. “Look like the music.”

III. Gesture and tone:

Rodney Eichenberger says “what they see is what you get.” In other words, the chorus will mirror what you show. Sometimes, however, choirs are so well taught that they seem to sing well despite what we do. Still, common sense dictates that it is logical to “practice what we preach” and to reinforce verbal directions with compatible gestures. (Professional situations may involve less verbal “teaching” than our typical school, church, and community settings.) Think about what you want to hear, about the nature of the music itself, and aim to show that. *Gesture size and quality influence tone.*

1. Anticipatory stance:

“Stand like a singer.” Model the posture you expect so the singers can produce good breath to energize the tone.

2. Preparation:

“Breathe with the singers.” Give eye contact, a clear breath, in the tempo and style of the music, and with a clear gesture. Breathe in the shape of the vowel if you are reinforcing visually with your face.

3. Onset of tone:

“Have the breath in motion.” A harsh gesture will elicit a harsh onset, perhaps even a glottal attack. The quality of the breath, preparatory gesture and downbeat will combine to convey an appropriate or inappropriate onset.

4. Ongoing tone:

“Healthy energized singing is the goal.” Avoid undue body tension so singers do not translate what they see into throat/vocal tension. Continuous gestures with flow between beats communicate continuity. Even in staccato articulation, there is motion between beats. Robert Shaw said that “what happens *between* the beats is more important than what happens *on* the beats.”

5. Releases:

“Let the sound breathe.” The way one ends a phrase affects the beginning of the next. An abrupt release can result in tension that carries over into the next phrase. Cutoffs need to match visually the desired sound. A “slam-dunk” release will create a sharp stop; a release that has a bit of rebound in it allows for a natural breath release. A simple gesture is the *pull-tap* (“Apfeltap”).