

A Conductor's Charm and Chore





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IMAGINE STANDING at the helm of a 104-person symphony orchestra. In that moment, you literally hold in your hands the destiny of the music on the page. You are the leader. You are the captain of the ship. And your musicians are awaiting that gesture from you that will release their floodgates of sound. Imagine having those 208 eyes on you, waiting to interpret your every gesture and looking to you as their guide on the journey to creating a powerful performance. Now, with one motion of the hand, those floodgates are opened, and you have the power to control this tidal wave of sound.

Welcome to the life of a music conductor.

Music can only realize its true purpose when liberated from the black and white of a page. Conductors liberate the notes by channeling them through the musicians to meet our anticipating ears. Imagine holding that enormous and exhilarating responsibility to complete that transference to an expectant audience – one wrong move may send this mammoth vessel crashing to the shore.

As you can surmise, the job of a conductor is a colossal and admirable one.

In a previous issue (“Ode to Joy,” Nov-Dec), I wrote about the amazing achievements of Western classical music conductor Zubin Mehta. To complement that story, this column offers a perspective on the role of a conductor.

We have all seen conductors, baton in hand, seemingly possessed by the music they are creating. Many of you may know the purpose of a conductor, but it takes more than a few hand gestures to execute the enormous task of bringing music to life. During my career as a classical

singer, I have had the opportunity to work with many levels of conductors – from student conductors to world-class conductors – and I can tell you that I have always revered a good conductor because he is the epitome of leadership in the musical world.

The job of a conductor is to create a musical performance through visible gestures that guide the musicians in interpreting the musical notes on a page. Of course, a musician knows how to play his or her instrument. But when you have a large group of musicians working together to achieve a similar performance goal, a guide is required.

You must understand there is meaning behind a conductor’s gestures. They do not simply move their hands and bodies in an attempt at some kind of interpretive or improvised dance. Every gesture has been meticulously studied and planned. Every gesture has its own meaning and encompasses a sort of sign language musicians must learn to interpret.

Through their gestures, conductors convey many musical indications. One of the general jobs of a conductor is to beat time or to keep the internal rhythm. That includes conveying

the preparatory beat, which starts the sound, and the cutoff gesture, which stops the sound of the music. A conductor beats time according to the time signature or the meter of a piece of music. The time signature is the notation used in Western music to specify how many beats are in each bar and what note value constitutes one beat.

Time signatures are written much like fractions, such as 4/4, 2/4, 6/8, etc. The number on the top indicates how many beats in a measure while the bottom number indicates which type of note gets the beat. A “4” is a quarter note, an “8” is an eighth note, a “2” is a half note and so on. A 4/4 time signature, for instance, indicates there are 4 beats to a measure of music and the quarter note (which is one beat) gets the beat.

A conductor conveys these time signatures through a specific beat pattern indicated by hand gestures. In all time beating, beat one is a vertical line, drawn straight down. It indicates the beginning of the measure and the passing of a barline in music. In the 4/4 pattern, beat two is a movement of the baton to the left, beat three comes back all the way to the right passing through the imaginary median of beat one. Then beat four starts where beat three ends in a somewhat upward diagonal motion. There are different beat patterns for each time signature.

A conductor historically has used a baton to aid in conducting. The baton evolved from the use of a staff, which originally was used to beat time. The baton is held in the right hand. Generally, the right hand (holding the baton) beats the time and the left hand indicates cues (preparing a performer for musical entrance) and phrasing. The left hand is used for gestures ■



MUSICAL GLORY: Facing page, Zubin Mehta conducts the 2007 New Year Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in Vienna, Jan. 1. Above, American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990).

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

◆ that control such things as musical dynamics ranging from extreme soft to extreme loud. The left hand also adds the emotional drive. When a conductor's palm faces the player, it is usually read as an indication to soften the dynamic; and when it faces the conductor, it usually indicates a command for more power.

A conductor must also convey other expressive gestures, such as passive or active. Active gestures indicate legato (a smooth phrase with not much space between notes) or staccato (detached, short-played notes) and other expressive musical markings. Passive gestures, on the other hand, indicate only silence from the players. Conductors may also use both their hands in unison to achieve reinforcement.

Conductors consistently use their left and right brain functions swiftly and simultaneously. They must have advanced hand-eye coordination. They must constantly scan the artists at all times to communicate with them and hope they are getting eye contact in return from their artists.

This is what creates that successful conductor-musician relationship. Just as people have

AN INDIAN TOUCH: Italian conductor Marco Balderi rehearses for 19th century composer Georges Bizet's opera, "The Pearl Fishers," in New Delhi in August 2005.



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different personality traits, individual conductors have very distinct ways of communicating to their musicians, but always using the same conducting language.

In the music business, we call the conductor "maestro," a term meaning "master" or "teacher" in Italian and Spanish. Having the title of maestro garners much respect and rewards, but it also carries tremendous responsibility. Conductors have the ability to decipher the precious code to discover the treasures that lie within music performance.



THE GREATEST: Legendary conductor Herbert von Karajan (1908-1989).

FACTS ASIDE

A CONDUCTOR'S education is very extensive. Many conductors play at least one instrument at the level of a virtuoso. Many successful conductors have at least a bachelor's degree and usually master's and doctoral degrees in conducting.

Conductors must learn the language of gestures. They must learn how to read every aspect of any score, from orchestral to operatic, and know the characteristics of each instrument of the orchestra, including the voice. They study extensive musical theory, music history and must have a brilliant musical ear to be able to hear the specific instruments they need to manage in the sea of sound.

A conductor must be extremely focused and be able to multitask meticulously and quickly. A conductor has to rapidly read horizontally and vertically up to 20 or 30 staves (the plural of staffs) on any given page of a conductor's score. Each staff indicates the parts of the varying instruments or voices.

Opera conductors are usually fluent in at least one language in the operatic repertoire besides their native language. While conducting opera, one must take into consideration the singer's breaths, melodic phrasing and lack of eye contact due to staging requirements. This is why practice and preparation are paramount in the life of a conductor.