PART ONE

Practice

1 The technique of conducting

RAYMOND HOLDEN

Any discussion of conducting technique can be problematic. The potential for disagreement over what constitutes a conductor's technique is huge, so this chapter will be limited to the ways in which conductors express their thoughts and ideas through physical movements, the tools they use, and the skills that they employ.[1] The film footage of conductors like Willem Mengelberg, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Klaus Tennstedt, and Pierre Boulez demonstrates that there are as many styles of conducting as there are conductors, and to attempt to codify, to dissect, and to analyze fully the variety of gestures used by conductors is beyond the scope of this, or perhaps any, chapter. Although the gesticulations that they use seem to vary widely, all conductors' techniques have a basic task in common: to act as a kind of conduit through which their ideas are transmitted to the musicians. Of course, body movements are not all they use: a conductor also communicates verbally in rehearsal and makes eye contact with fellow performers throughout the performance process. A member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra once remarked laconically to the present author that "it matters not whether a conductor stands on his head and wiggles his toes or beats time like a metronome as long as his intentions are clear." While the first position described has more in common with yoga than music, the player's basic thesis has merit; clarity of intention is paramount for any conductor.

The baton

The tool that is most often associated with the conductor is the baton. Today, batons are still used commonly and their length and materials vary according to the requirements of the individual conductor. Generally, they are made of light wood with a point at one end and tapered to a grip, usually made of cork, at the other. Conductors who use batons often have them made to their own specifications, insisting on a stick that suits their physical demands and the nature of their performance style. Sir Henry Wood, for example, had his batons made by Palmer's of Great Yarmouth, and his requirements were set out precisely:

> WEIGHT: Slightly under 1 ounce
> LENGTH of exposed Shaft: 19 inches
> of Handle: 5 [inches]
> TOTAL LENGTH: 24 [inches]
> SHAFT made of seasoned straight-grain poplar wood, carefully rived by hand to ensure that the grain runs straight. Painted white with two coats of water paint. The shaft runs right through the handle.
> HANDLE of cork 5 inches long, diameter at base 1¼ inches, diameter at shaft end 1 inch.[2]

Sir Henry's preference for long batons was not shared universally. Herbert von Karajan preferred a short baton, while Sir John Barbirolli opted for a stick of moderate length, arguing that "it is as absurd to use a baton which resembles a diminutive lead pencil as it is to wave a weapon of exceeding length and frailty."[3]

The baton is usually held in the right hand, though some left-handed conductors hold it in the left. The ways in which batons are held vary as widely as the styles of batons used, but many conductors hold the grip between the thumb and the first two fingers. This was the approach suggested by Max Rudolf who wrote that "the most advisable way to hold the baton is with the thumb, first and second fingers, and with the butt against the palm of the hand."[4] Ideally, the method of holding the baton should ensure that the stick acts as an extension of the arm, and that the point of the baton is the focal point of the beat.

Some conductors, however, prefer not to use a baton. Pierre Boulez, who beats time with his bare hands, argues that with smaller contemporary ensembles, "the more one is inclined toward contemporary music, the less one needs this particular extension."[5] Other eminent conductors who did not use a baton included Leopold Stokowski and Dimitri Mitropoulos, both of whom were leading figures in the performance of twentieth-century music. Stokowski's use of bare hands gained wide exposure with the release of Walt Disney's film, *Fantasia*. It has often been argued that his abandonment of the baton was an act of showmanship, a notion that should be treated with caution. In his book, *Music for Us All*, Stokowski explained his reasons for conducting with bare hands, arguing that "whether or not a conductor uses a baton is of little importance. Personally I find a baton unnecessary – I am convinced that unessentials should be eliminated."[6] Choral conductors also tend to conduct without a baton. This is particularly common for conductors who perform in churches and cathedrals. As the singers often stand close to the conductor and have rehearsed extensively with him or her, the use of subtle hand gestures can be interpreted more easily. But conducting without a baton has provoked a hostile response from those who prefer to use a stick. Bruno Walter, for example, argues that "the renunciation of the

baton . . . carries the seeds of decay."[7] For him, the baton extends "the obviously restricted beat of the bare hand, magnifying it to distantly visible proportions" and enhancing the "clarity and plausibility of its movements, a better aid to precise orchestral playing."[8] While it is hard to reconcile the notion of decay with the practices of Stokowski, Mitropoulos, and Boulez, Walter's advice is generally sagacious.

Whether or not a conductor uses a baton is a matter of personal choice, but whichever method is chosen, it must have direct relevance to the music being performed. Leonard Bernstein believed this to be true and stated: "if [the conductor] uses a baton, the baton itself must be a living thing, charged with a kind of electricity, which makes it an instrument of meaning in its tiniest movement. If [the conductor] does not use a baton, his hands must do the job with equal clarity. But baton or no baton, his gestures must be first and always meaningful in terms of the music."[9]

Beating patterns and tempo

One of the primary functions of the baton, or the hand in which it is customarily held, is the indication of the music's beat with both vertical and lateral movements. While gestures vary, the basic beating patterns are relatively standard. In general, the baton should move in a fluid manner, with the beats being outlined at the point of the stick. Fig. 1.1 illustrates the various patterns that are commonly used today. If the music is to be rendered fast, slow, staccato or legato, the conductor must manipulate the stick accordingly, using short, long, jerky and smooth gestures that are in direct proportion to the effect required.

The preliminary beat, commonly known as the upbeat, is one of the conductor's most important gestures. Otto Klemperer remarked that "it's the upbeat and not the downbeat that makes an orchestra attentive,"[10] a notion that is shared, at least in part, by Wilhelm Furtwängler who argued that "it is not the instant of the downbeat itself that produces the precision with which the orchestra enters, nor is it the precision of the conductor's gesture but the way he prepares for it."[11] To achieve a clear upbeat, Bernstein suggested that a conductor should treat it "exactly like breathing: the preparation is like an inhalation, and the music sounds as an exhalation."[12] Although this might sound peculiar, a short, silent, rhythmic intake of breath often helps to communicate the conductor's intentions to the players. Whichever approach is used, clarity of movement is essential. As the upbeat directly precedes the first sound rendered, the speed, character and direction of the movement has a direct bearing on the initial tempo of the work.

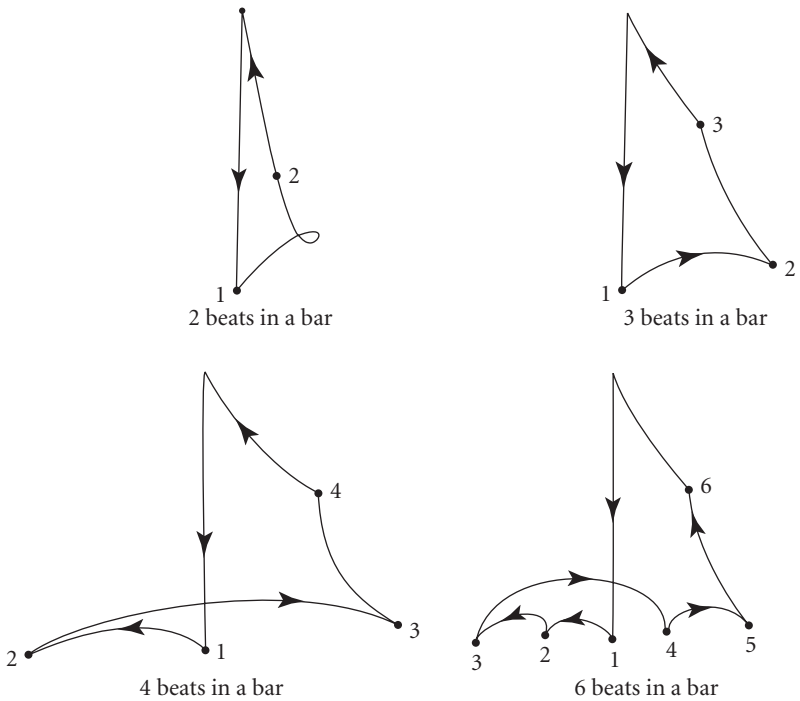
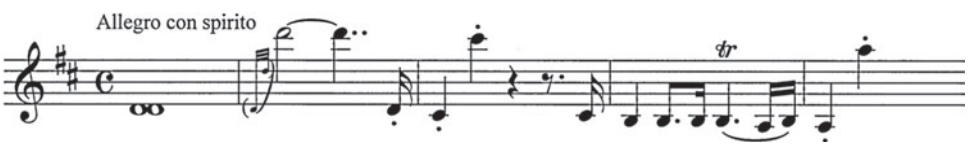


Figure 1.1 Beat diagrams for music in 2, 3, 4, and 6

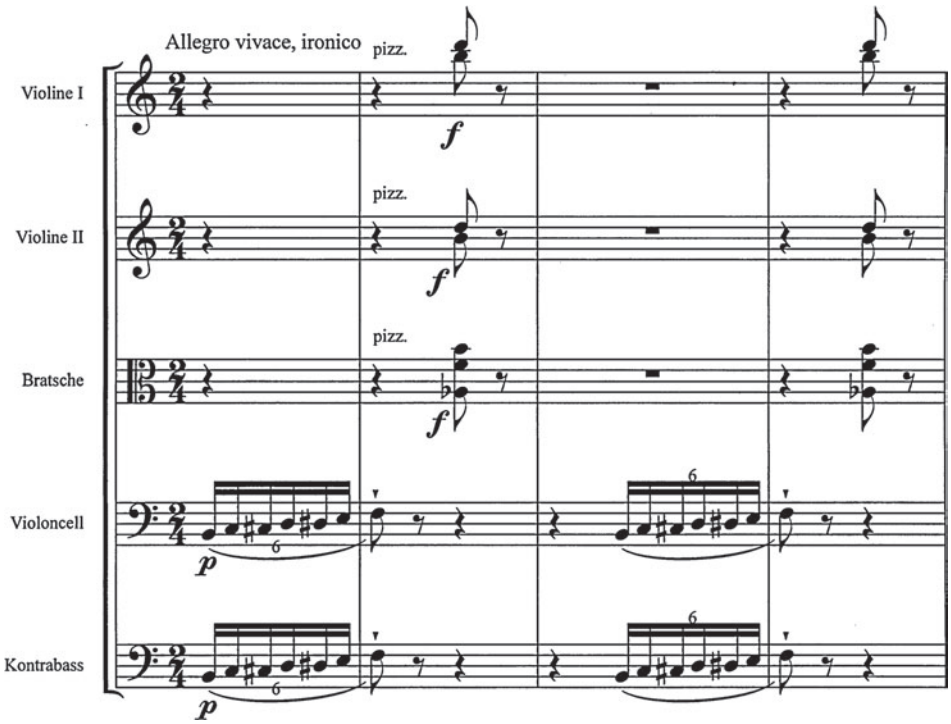
Example 1.1 Mozart: Symphony No. 35, first movement, opening measures



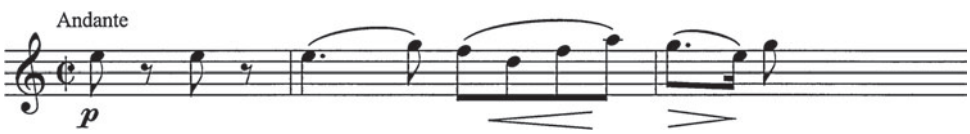
The conductor's preliminary beat acts as a kind of code for the musicians and singers being led, and the direction and speed adopted are related directly to the rhythmic disposition of the bar performed. For example, the preliminary beat is a vertical upbeat when the music begins on the first beat of a bar (Ex. 1.1), a vertical downbeat when it begins on the second beat (Ex. 1.2), or a lateral movement to either the left or the right when it begins on the third or fourth beats (Exx. 1.3 and 1.4).

The preparatory beat becomes more complicated when a work begins with rests. If the first bar is written out fully, the preliminary beat will vary according to a number of factors. Some conductors argue that all the beats must be indicated, even if they are silent; others maintain that it is only necessary to give a single, preliminary beat. The rules, however, are not defined clearly and the gestures used depend upon the tempo

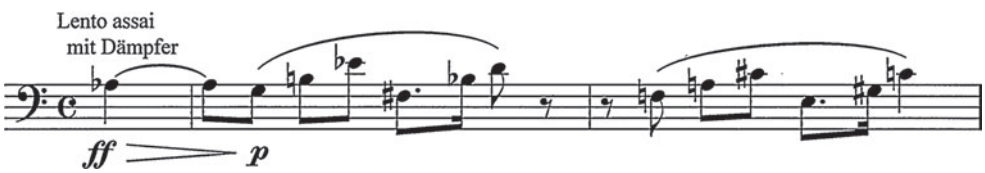
Example 1.2 Liszt: A *Faust Symphony*, third movement, opening measures



Example 1.3 Mozart: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, second movement, opening measures

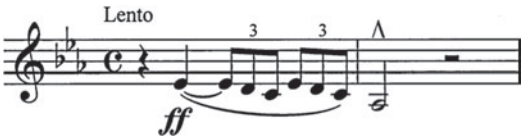


Example 1.4 Liszt: *A Faust Symphony*, first movement, opening measures

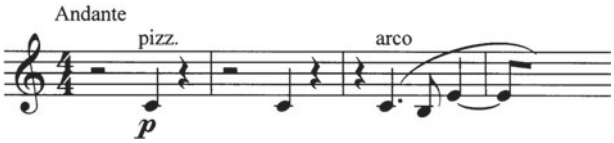


and the character of the music to be directed. In Ex. 1.5, a vertical downbeat is usual; in Ex. 1.6, a vertical downbeat followed by a lateral movement to the left is common; while, in Ex. 1.7, a vertical downbeat followed by lateral movements to the left and then the right are customary. Ex. 1.8 can be approached in two different ways. If the Andante is played by a competent, professional orchestra, a single vertical upbeat is sufficient, but, if the

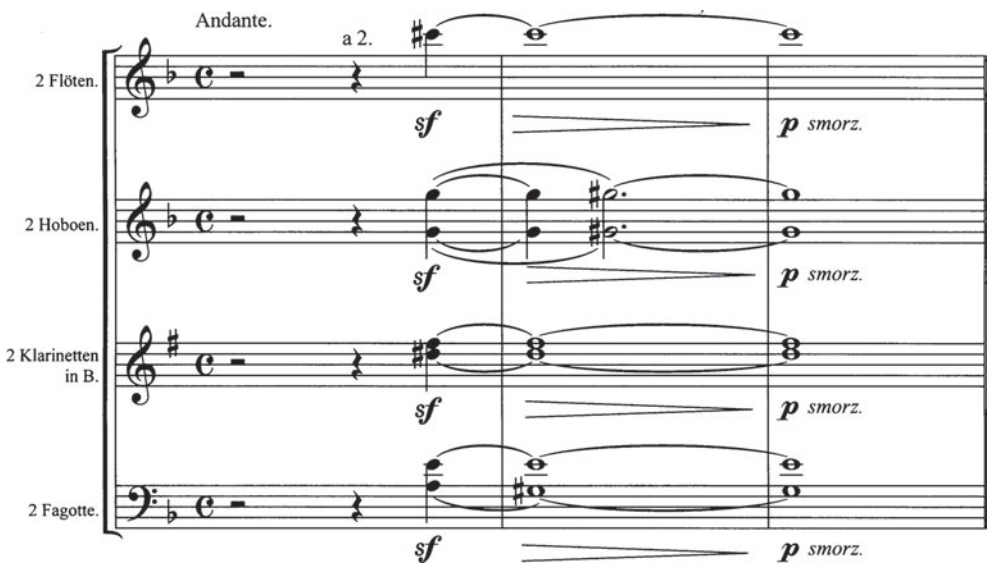
Example 1.5 Liszt: *Tasso*, opening measures



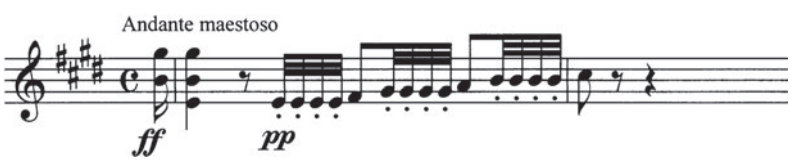
Example 1.6 Liszt: *Les Préludes*, opening measures



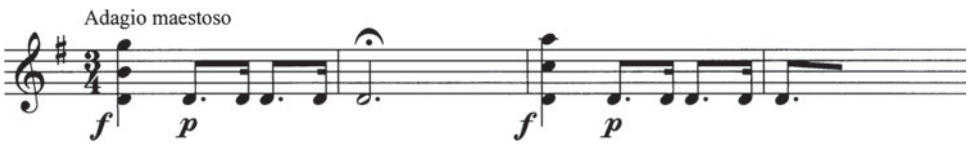
Example 1.7 Liszt: *Die Ideale*, opening measures



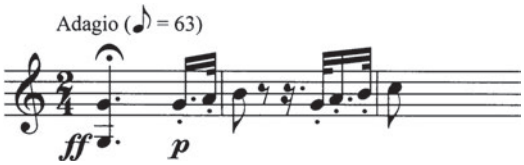
Example 1.8 Rossini: Overture to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, opening measures



Example 1.9 Haydn: Symphony No. 54, first movement, opening measures



Example 1.10 Beethoven: Symphony No. 1, fourth movement, opening measures



ensemble is inexperienced, two preliminary beats might be necessary: first, a lateral movement to the right, followed by a vertical upbeat.

Indicating the continuation of the music after a pause can be difficult. In Ex. 1.9, a vertical upbeat followed by a vertical downbeat to mark the resumption of the normal pulse at the start of the next bar is appropriate; while, in Ex. 1.10, a lateral movement to the right followed by a vertical upbeat would serve the same purpose. In passages that are either rhythmically difficult or subject to rubato, the beat might need to be subdivided. But subdivisions can often be misleading and unnecessary, and should only be used in a controlled manner. If used indiscriminately, they can interrupt the flow and direction of the music.

Setting and holding a suitable tempo is one of the conductor's primary functions. Indicating the desired tempo can only be done by giving a clear and precise preliminary beat; therefore, the conductor must have the tempo firmly in mind before making this gesture. Sergiu Celibidache argued that the best method of doing this was to subdivide the pulse mentally before making the preliminary beat.[13] This approach is particularly useful when conducting a slow tempo, where a broad upbeat can be problematic. When conducting a work that contains metronome marks, the performer is confronted with ethical, historical, and aesthetic problems. If a work has metronome marks that suggest very quick tempi and if the orchestra is amateur, it might be necessary to modify the speeds accordingly. In the case of compositions such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 4, where the tempi of the first (Allegro vivace) and last movements are linked, any adjustment to the printed speeds should reflect these relationships.

For ballet conductors, the needs of both the dancers and the composer must be considered. As dancers rely heavily on an organized pulsal plan,

the conductor must ensure that the various performance tempi correspond to any prearranged scheme. When conducting opera or choral music, the conductor must allow time for the singers to breathe and should pace the phrasing accordingly. Similarly, wind players also need to breathe and the tempo and pacing of the phrasing must be judged according to the needs and abilities of the ensembles being directed.

Often, young professional conductors will act as an assistant conductor, directing off- and on-stage bands. As these groups are generally placed at some distance from the main orchestra, the assistant conductor, when following the speed and beat of the senior colleague, might use a television monitor. From this monitor, the assistant can relay the tempo to the off- or on-stage band. In some circumstances, when the distance between the main and the subsidiary ensembles is particularly great, the assistant should beat slightly in advance of the conductor, so as to compensate for any time delay; this delay will vary according to the exact distance between the two groups and the venue's acoustics.

When accompanying in concertos, the conductor must be prepared to anticipate the soloist's reading and be ready to respond quickly to any unexpected acts of *rubato*. In passages where the orchestra is silent, the conductor should mark these bars with a single downbeat; this helps the orchestral players count the empty bars. When working with singers, the conductor needs to be especially vigilant, and when accompanying recitatives, the pacing of the drama is paramount. By indicating the recitative's isolated chords in a clear and unequivocal manner, the conductor can control the speed and direction of the stage action. These chords can be indicated by the following methods: first, they can be beaten only as they occur; or, second, the conductor can continue to beat metrically throughout the course of the recitative, giving a more decisive gesture when a chord has to be played.

The left hand

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) famously dismissed the importance of the left hand arguing that it "has nothing to do with conducting." For him, "Its proper place is in the waistcoat pocket from which it should only emerge to restrain or to make some minor gesture for which in any case a scarcely perceptible glance would suffice." He felt that it is "better to conduct with the ear instead of the arm . . . [then] the rest follows automatically."[14] As if to underline his argument, Strauss posed for a photograph (Fig. 1.2) in 1898 in which he is shown facing the camera with the baton held high in the right hand and the left-hand thumb inserted into his waistcoat pocket. What Strauss