Towards a theory of choral conducting gestures

by

Benjamin William Oosthuizen

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor Musicae

by conducting and thesis in the Faculty of Arts at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

January 2007

Promoter: Harald Jørgensen
Acknowledgement

This study was made possible through the financial assistance of Norad (The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), a directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Whilst Norad has been vital in the process of sustaining the Norwegian involvement in educational programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, and more specifically South Africa, I wish to express my acknowledgment to Norad specifically for the support of the choral music education programme in South Africa since 1999.

Apart from the thesis and the conducting of concerts, the doctoral programme also involved practical coursework, presented by several Norwegian academics associated with the Norges Musikkhøgskole (Norwegian Academy of Music), Oslo, Norway.

I thank Kåre Hanken and Svein Bjørkøy for sharing their knowledge with regard to conducting and singing, always with passion. I am grateful to Harald Jørgensen, for his patience and inspiration, which went beyond the call of duty.

Gender sensitivity

In this thesis all references to “the conductor” implies both gender. The terms “he/him/his” should also thus be understood as implicating “she/her/hers”, unless quotations refer specifically to either male or female.
CONTENTS

Summary x

Part 1 The choral conductor and gestures

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Gestures in choral conducting, definitions 1
1.2 The functions of the choral conductor 10
1.3 Gestures – functionality and analogy
   1.3.1 The conductor inspires, communicates and conveys emotion 15
   1.3.2 Gestures save time conveying the correct musical intentions 16
   1.3.3 Conducting gestures can and should be practised 17
   1.3.4 The definition of gestures as seen by the different authors 17
   1.3.5 Summary 21

Chapter 2 Previous research on the topic of gesture 22

Chapter 3 Research Topics and Questions

3.1 Introduction 30
3.2 Research topics and questions 32
   3.2.1 The first research issue: the physical aspects of gesture 32
   3.2.2 The second research issue: the practical indication of preparatory gestures, simple time four-beat gesture, slow compound time gestures and fast irregular gestures 33
   3.2.3 The third research issue: gestures that indicate changes of dynamics, tempo and of articulation 34
   3.2.4 The fourth research issue: gestures indicating cues, fermata and release of fermata 35
   3.2.5 The fifth research issue: working towards a theory of gesture 35
3.3 The methodology of the literature study 35
3.3.1 Gestures and tacit knowledge 36
3.3.2 Theoretical research 41
3.3.3 The selection of the texts 42
3.3.4 Analysis of the texts 45
3.3.5 Summary 47
3.4 Overview of the thesis 47

Part 2 The physical aspects of the conductor’s execution of gesture

Introduction 49

Chapter 4 The posture of the conductor 52
Chapter 5 Arm and hand movement 56
Chapter 6 The functions of the left and right hands 67
6.1 Ambidexterity of the conductor 67
6.2 The functions of the right hand and left hand 68
6.3 The left hand “at ease” 70
6.4 Palm pronation 71
6.5 Passive preparatory beat 73
6.6 Function of the left hand with regard to cueing 73
6.7 Left hand and the release of sound 74
6.8 The indication of the dynamic range 76
6.9 Conclusion 80

Chapter 7 Baton technique 81
Chapter 8 Conclusion to Part 2 93
## Part 3  Gestures indicating time patterns

Introduction  97

### Chapter 9  Preparatory beats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>The definition of the preparatory beat</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Preparatory beat and breathing</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>The relationship between the preparatory beat and the ictus</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Relating the preparatory gesture to the indication of dynamics, articulation and style</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>The height of indication of the preparatory gesture</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>The direction of approach of the preparatory beat</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>The indication of fractional beats and preparatory beats</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>The use of the passive beat</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 10  Simple time four-beat gesture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>The placement of the preparatory beat of the simple time four-beat gesture</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>The movement of the preparatory beat compared to the rest of the gesture</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>The direction of the downbeat of the preparatory beat</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>The placement of the ictus related to the horizontal plane</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>The nature of the movement as pendulum-type or inverted pendulum-type movement</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>Indication of the rebound of the beats</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>Equidistance between the second and third beats</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>A motivation for the simple time four-beat gesture</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>Authors who are critical of other authors</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.11</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 11  Subdivision of simple time gestures

11.1 Introduction  152
11.2 The nature of the subdivisions  153
11.3 The nature of the movement between the subdivided beats  162
11.4 The type of movement of the subdivided beat  163
11.5 The placement of the icti of the main beats and subdivided beats  165

Chapter 12  Slow compound time gestures

12.1 Introduction  167
12.2 Compound duple gesture  170
12.3 Compound triple gesture  170
12.4 Compound quadruple gesture  170
12.5 German, French and Italian schools  173
12.6 Summary  174

Chapter 13  Fast irregular gestures

13.1 Introduction  175
13.2 Fast irregular gestures  175
13.3 Summary  182

Chapter 14  Conclusion to Part 3  183

Part 4  Expressive gestures

Introduction  188

Chapter 15  Gestures indicating change of dynamics  191

15.1 The role of the left and right hands in the indication of a crescendo and decrescendo  192
15.2 The use of the left hand on the vertical plane  193
15.3 Summary  194

Chapter 16  Gestures indicating change of tempo

16.1 Introduction  196
16.2 Suggestions for indicating change of tempo 198
16.3 Indication of ritardando 201
16.4 Indication of accelerando 203
16.5 Summary 205

Chapter 17  Gestures indicating articulation

17.1 Introduction 207
17.2 Legato gesture 208
17.3 Staccato gesture 210
17.4 Marcato gesture 216
17.5 Summary 219

Chapter 18  Gestures indicating cues

18.1 Introduction 220
18.2 Motivation for cueing 221
18.3 Use of the right hand 223
18.4 Use of the eyes 226
18.5 Use of the head and eyebrows 227
18.6 Changing the conducting orientation during cueing 228
18.7 Summary 229

Chapter 19  Gestures indicating fermata and release of fermata

19.1 Introduction 231
19.2 Kinds of fermata 231
19.3 Fermata with movement or without movement 235
19.4 Fermata with breath 236
19.5 Summary 237

Chapter 20  Conclusion to Part 4 238
Part 5 Towards a theory of gesture in choral conducting

Introduction 243

Chapter 21 Definition, functional requirements and parameters of gestures

21.1 Definition of gesture 247
21.2 Functional requirements of gesture 247
21.3 Parameter of gesture 247
21.3.1 Horizontal plane 248
21.3.2 Vertical plane 248
21.3.3 The link between the horizontal plane and the establishment of icti 249
21.3.4 Preparatory beats 252
21.3.5 Pendulum-type movement or inverted pendulum-type movement 256
21.3.6 Gestures and breath 257

Chapter 22 The posture of the conductor

22.1 Anatomical position and bilateral symmetry 261
22.2 Vertical alignment and the centre of gravity 261
22.3 Golgi type reflex 262
22.4 The arms and hands and palm pronation of the conductor 262

Chapter 23 Gestures indicating tempo

Introduction 264

23.1 Downbeat 264
23.2 Rebound 264
23.3 Use of the horizontal plane: the simple time four-beat gesture 265
23.4 The subdivision of the simple time four-beat gesture 267
23.5 Slow compound time gestures 269
SUMMARY

It is an oversimplification to look only at the manner in which a two-dimensional drawing suggests a three-dimensional movement in order to study choral conducting gestures. It must be recognised that there is a myriad of tacit aspects of knowledge surrounding conducting gestures. These aspects of tacit knowledge might be the reason why the teaching of conducting is done mostly in a continuous practicum, where the apprentice learns from the master, because in the practical situation the novice learns not only explicit knowledge, but also tacit knowledge.

On the other hand, it is vital that the process of categorising and theorising about gestures continues in order to at least gain a better explicit knowledge of the process. In doing so, a theoretical knowledge base will strengthen the body of knowledge.

This explicit knowledge should contain information with regard to the anatomy of the conductor, a basic understanding of a balanced posture, bilateral symmetry and vertical alignment, and a basic knowledge which will help to understand which main muscle groups are responsible for which basic movements involving gestures.

The study of gestures from a theoretical point of view is barely more than five decades old. The demands which 20th and 21st century composers make on conductors question the traditional approaches of the functions of the hands. It has become essential for a conductor to develop greater skill of ambidexterity in order to cope with these demands.
Despite the notion by some authors that choral conducting gestures employ “standard” gestures, it has been shown in this study that this is simply not the case.

An overview of the work of authors in the field of conducting gestures was presented through a literature study. Concepts and their definitions have been selected and explained through the answering of research questions. Definitions of parameters and functionality of gestures were clarified to decide which gestures were the most appropriate in certain circumstances.

This theory aims to be both descriptive and normative. It is descriptive in the sense that the concepts and issues and relationships around the characteristic aspects of gestures are indicated. It is normative in terms of the suggestions offered with regard to issues pertaining to gestures.

This thesis sets out to contribute to the formulation of theoretical aspects of choral conducting gestures in an effort to codify and structure knowledge which is often stored in composer’s minds and experience, in an effort to pass down this knowledge to other “apprentices” in the field.