Part 2

The physical aspects of the conductor’s execution of gesture

Introduction

The conductor should have an awareness of the manner in which he should use his body in order to convey gesture to the ensemble to interpret the music which the ensemble will perform. The conductor’s posture might influence the gestures he is conveying to the ensemble. This awareness should not only include the manner in which gestures are executed by the arms and hands, but also about his posture and the manner in which he presents himself physically. The conductor must be mindful that his own posture provides a model for his ensemble. This posture must be conducive for good breathing and should enforce good singing habits. If the conductor presents a poor posture, it is most likely that his ensemble will reflect this posture and produce inadequate breath, resulting in poor vocal technique and intonation problems.

The conductor must have an awareness of the different functions of the left and right hands. The “traditional” functions might not be adequate in the conducting of 20th Century and more contemporary work, where different demands are made on the conductor’s skills. These might include different combinations of irregular time gestures, the execution of polyrhythmic work and works which are written not in regular notation demanding a metric beat, but tones indicated in seconds. In such works the “traditional” functions of the left and right hands might have to be completely abandoned, as each hand might have to regulate different sections within the ensemble.

If the conductor chooses to use a baton, his baton technique should successfully convey similar gestures to the ensemble.
The conductor’s gestures should reflect an anatomical awareness: gestures must be indicated in such a manner that they will be visible to the ensemble at all times, show clarity of intent, give adequate information with regard to all musical aspects, are predictable with constant movement, will be understood by the ensemble at all times and reflect a musical interpretation of the text.

Conducting gestures are executed by the conductor using the upper body extremities (hands and arms), supported by the torso and the lower extremities (legs). In Part 2 all relevant aspects concerning the physical aspects of the conductor will be addressed through the works of the chosen authors. These aspects will include the conducting plane (the horizontal and vertical components), as well as placement of the ictus. Research questions have been posed in Part 1, and in this part these questions will be answered in the following way.

In Chapter 4 the posture of the conductor with regard to the lower body extremities and the torso, as well as the following related issues, will be addressed: the distance between the two feet, the horizontal alignment of the two feet, body weight distribution, the positioning of the legs and knees, the way the chest is held, the way the shoulders are held, and the effect (negative and positive) of the reflected posture of the conductor on the singers in front of him.

The role that the upper body extremities play in the execution of conducting gestures will be addressed in Chapter 5. Several authors have written about aspects which will be described broadly as: the upper body extremities, the torso, and then more specifically on the conducting plane, the placement of the ictus and the reflective sound which the conductor’s gestures might derive from the choir. The relationship between different aspects of the upper extremities will also be examined.

In Chapter 6 all issues relating to the functions of the right hand and the left hand will be addressed through the literature. While it is accepted that the right hand is
responsible for the indication of basic beating patterns, modern day convention has it that the left hand has specific functions to execute.

Finally, in Chapter 7, baton technique is debated through a representation of the work by different authors. Tradition seems to associate the baton-wielding conductor with the instrumentalist, and the bare-hander with a choir. However, Holden indicates (Holden, 2003:4) that Pierre Boulez beats time with his bare hands, arguing that with smaller contemporary ensembles, “the more one is inclined toward contemporary music, the less one needs this particular extension”. Leopold Stokowski and Dimitri Mitropoulos both used bare hands. The former conductor is quoted as saying, “whether or not a conductor uses a baton is of little importance. Personally I find a baton unnecessary – I am convinced that inessentials should be eliminated”. On the other hand, Bruno Walter said that “the renunciation of the baton … carries the seeds of decay”. (Holden, 2003: 5)

As stated in Part 1, I will use two functional requirements as a basis to discuss gestures: the anatomical (research questions 1.1 and 1.2), and the functional requirements of gesture (research question 1.3 and 1.4). The functional requirements have necessarily to be satisfied in order for the gesture to be successfully indicated. The requirements of gesture are that they are visible, show clarity of intent, are informative with regard to all musical aspects, are predictable, have constant movement, are accompanied by breath by the conductor and are understood by all in the ensemble. These functional requirements will be used as a basis to discuss the authors’ opinions in each chapter.
Chapter 4

The posture of the conductor

The research question to be answered for this chapter is: “What is the recommended posture of the conductor in terms of the positioning of the legs and torso, and how is this description related to an anatomical awareness?” (Research question 1.1).

Seventeen authors contributed to aspects surrounding the “posture of the conductor” with regard to lower body extremities and the torso.

The elements which should be addressed in terms of the posture of the conductor should include mention of the upper body extremities (head, arms and hands), the torso, as well as the lower body extremities (hips, legs, knees and feet).

Hylton (1995:95) states that the body “should be aligned in as straight a manner as possible from the head, through the shoulders, chest, waist, and legs.” But then Hylton says that the feet should be 18 inches apart, which is not necessarily the shoulder width for everyone.

As far as the positioning of the torso is concerned, Gordon is the only author who gives an anatomical way of checking that the chest remains in a high position: “This position can be established by raising your arms, fully extended, over your head, then slowly lowering them without allowing the chest to lower. In order to maintain the choir’s tone support he should display a high chest.” Gordon (1977: 30); Gordon (1989: 65, 66)

The following authors advocate an erect torso (or high chest) implicitly: Hansen (1997:49), Hylton (1995:95), Gordon (1989: 65, 66) and Busch, who require the upper torso to be straight, but none of them give an anatomical reason for this recommendation.
Most authors mention the position of the shoulders as “back”, but also without giving any anatomical reasons. (Busch 1984, 26); Decker & Kirk (1988: 7), McElherhan (1966:36), Phillips (1997:7).

It is interesting that Lamb (1983: 121) suggests that “the head should be held slightly in front of the shoulders: “The conductor should lean slightly towards the choir”. He also suggested earlier that one foot should be slightly in front of the other. Lamb’s suggested posture is based on an unbalanced placement of proportions: if the head is leaning towards the choir, with the feet placed six inches apart with one foot in front of the other, it will be impossible for the body to be balanced, or vertically aligned.

Busch and Jordan are the only two authors dealing with the issue of the head and vertical alignment explicitly. Busch advises: “Your head should remain in vertical alignment with your body, neither tilted to one side nor jutting forward.” Along with Jordan (1996:17), these are the only two explicit references from all the authors with regard to vertical alignment. Jordan mentions the head’s alignment with the spine explicitly, but no more details in terms of vertical alignment are given, and it must be concluded that the author assumes that these concepts are implied.

Three authors mention implicitly the role of the head with regard to vertical alignment, but no anatomical model is given by anyone. (Hansen 1997:49) (Lamb 1983, 121), (Phillips 1997:7), (Hansen 1997:25).

Many authors discuss by implication the anatomical position as far as mentioning that the conductor should stand erect. It is mostly implied that the basic posture should be erect. No reference is made by any author to an anatomical definition of “standing erect.”

Phillips (1997:7) says that “the spine should be stretched and the sternum elevated”, but this is not further related to the basic anatomical position. Labuta (2000: 23) is of the opinion that the conductor must walk on to the podium with
confidence, standing erect. Decker & Kirk (1988:7) also say that the conductor’s posture should be “erect.” Roe (1983: 196) suggests that the conductor should have a commanding posture before the singers start, but does not define what “commanding” is.

Rudolf (1993: 307) speaks of “control of physical gestures”, but he does not say how to do it. Hansen stresses that “a natural positioning of the body that allows for the greatest of freedom of movement is important,” but she does not say what “natural” is.

As far as the positioning of the feet is concerned, seven authors describe this aspect either implicitly or explicitly. The description of the distance between the feet varies from slightly apart to 18 inches apart. (Decker & Kirk 1988:7), (Ehmann 1968: 117), (Phillips 1997:7), (Lamb 1983: 121), (Busch 1984:3).

Gordon (1989: 65, 66) is the only author who makes an anatomical connection between the shoulder width and the distance between the feet. He says that the “feet should be approximately a shoulder width apart”. When the feet are placed in this manner, the conductor will be balanced, and movement of the gesture will not influence his balance negatively.

As far as the alignment of the feet is concerned, Gordon also says that the feet should be placed “even with each other”. Should the feet be placed “shoulder width apart”, the shoulders would be in alignment with the hips and knees, and then they would not have to be placed one in front of the other, but “even with each other”.


Another aspect is added by Phillips (1997:7), who says that in order to prevent the body from swaying from side to side, one foot should be slightly in front of the
other. Ironically, he also suggested previously that the distance between the feet should be six inches apart. In this position, the feet will most likely not be a shoulder’s width from each other, which means that the alignment between the shoulders and feet does not exist. This could be the reason that he requests one foot to be placed in front of the other in order to regain balance.

Where the position of the knees is concerned, Busch (1984:56), Decker & Kirk (1988: 7), Ehmann (1968: 117), Hansen (1997:49), Lamb (1983:121) and Phillips (1997:7) all agree that the knees should not be locked. However, none of them give any anatomical reasons for this. An anatomical reason will be given in Part 5, Chapter 21, as to why the position of the knees should always be relaxed.

In summary, when one looks at the literature with regard to the distance of placement between the feet, the description varies from six to eighteen inches. Only one author makes the connection between the distance of the feet and the width of the shoulders. Most authors seem to suggest that one foot should be placed a little in front of the other, with one author being the exception in saying that the feet should be aligned. Most authors agree that the knees should not be locked. When the torso is discussed, most authors seem to agree that the chest should be held back, but only two authors speak about the concept of vertical alignment, which implies some anatomical knowledge. On the whole, it seems that every author wrote about this from his own practical experience. Whenever authors have given reasons for their advice, relating it either to anatomical or functional issues, these have been mentioned in the text. For the most part, anatomical reasons are not mentioned.
Chapter 5
Arm and hand movement

In this chapter, the research question to be answered is: “What are the recommended use of the arms and hands in relation to an anatomical awareness and the functional requirements of gestures? Does this recommendation of the position of the arms and hands have implications for any spatial reference areas such as the conducting plane and the placement of the ictus?” (Research question 1.2).

The arms and hands of the conductor can be described in relation to the horizontal and vertical planes of the conductor’s gestures. The horizontal plane should be indicated in such a manner that it is visible to the ensemble. The movement on the horizontal plane should be free and not restricted, and therefore make use of the natural gravity of the hand. The forearm and the hand should not move much further than the shoulder’s width on both sides. The vertical plane is determined by the function of the biceps, which lift the arm and the triceps, which lower the arm. These two planes determine the placement of the ictus of the gestures. The ictus level of the gestures will hopefully coincide with the horizontal level of the beating plane and indicate the beating points for the gestures.

Sixteen authors have contributed to aspects surrounding the use of the hands and upper arms. In ascertaining the general area of the vertical conducting plane, five writers agree on the description of the conducting plane as the area from the waist to the shoulder, without providing an anatomical rationale. (Hylton 1995:104); (Hansen 1997, 50); (Roe 1983:196); (Rudolf 1993: 308) and (Willits 1993: 10).

Two conflicting descriptions of where the vertical plane runs in relation to the body are given. The first by Phillips (1997:10), who describes the vertical aspect of the conducting plane as an imaginary line extending from the top to the bottom
directly in front of the right shoulder. The horizontal plane runs through the base of the sternum. No anatomical rationale is given.

The second point of view comes from Rudolf, who describes the field of beating by the point of the baton, directly in front of the conductor, midway between the shoulder and the waist, which also implicates the sternum area. Rudolf (1993: 308).

A third point of view comes from Ehmann and Lamb, who argue that the conducting plane is dependent on the size of the ensemble. In addition, Ehmann is of the opinion that the hands should extend from the waist. He mentions that a short conductor should work on a higher level. The hand should be held at chest level and a hand-and-a-half times the width of hand away from the body. Lamb describes the plane vaguely as “high enough to be seen but low enough to be comfortable”. (Ehmann 1968:118), (Lamb 1983:121).

Thus, the movement of the arms and hands take place on the vertical and horizontal conducting planes, where the placement of the icti on the horizontal plane also takes place.

Various opinions are available in the literature with regard to a description of the conducting plane, ranging from the waist area to shoulder height, to the sternum and the shoulder. The placement of the vertical plane ranges from mid-way of the body to just in front of the right shoulder. In no cases do authors give any rationale for their statements. Two authors say that the vertical plane is dependent on the size of the ensemble which will be conducted.

As far as the placement of the ictus is concerned, Phillips is of the opinion that the wrist is responsible for the exact indication of the ictus. He does not, however, build a theory of placement for all the other body parts around the placement of the ictus, nor does he link the placement of the ictus with the horizontal conducting plane. (Phillips 1997:16)
Willits (1993:10) defines the ictus as the point where downward direction of the downbeat changes direction to the upbeat. She does not indicate what determines where the downbeat should change direction, nor does she build a theory of placement for all the other body parts around the placement of the ictus. The ictus is not linked to the horizontal conducting plane.

None of the other authors make any mention of the placement of the ictus explicitly. It might be that they assume that the horizontal “beating plane” is the same as the ictus, but this is not implicitly or explicitly stated.

Ehmann (1968:118) explains that the top of the forefinger can be placed on the top of the thumb in a circular or oval position, delivering a very precise entry. This motion implicitly raises the role of another ictus point in the conducting.

As far as the definition of the ictus point is concerned, none of the authors thus explicitly link the placing of the ictus with the horizontal conducting plane. Some define the ictus with reference to the wrist movement which is responsible for this indication, or the point where direction changes within the beating pattern.

The concept of the ictus deserves far more mention than assuming it is the same as the horizontal plane. The determination of the ictus point by the wrist, or by a circular movement between the top of the thumb and the forefinger, will impair the visibility of this gesture to the ensemble, and it will certainly provide for a gesture of questionable clarity of intent. The informative nature of this gesture as well as the predictability of a series of these movements will be questionable.

When looking at the literature in order to ascertain how authors look at the hands, wrist, forearm and upper arm, a number of interesting opinions come to the fore. Busch (1984:6) talks about the relationship of the hands, wrist, forearm and upper arm as best experienced when the forearm lies flat on a surface. Green (2004:2) explicitly sees the hands and arms as a unit, and actually calls it “hands-arms”. She emphasises that they do not function as separate units. Roe (1983:198) talks about the section of the anatomy which takes part in the
conducting process as the forearm, wrist and hand, saying implicitly that it functions as a unit.

Four different opinions have been identified when it comes to how the fingers are perceived: the fingers can be seen as curved, as “natural”, as pointing and lastly, as providing an ictus.

Busch (1984:4) and Decker & Kirk (1988:8) speak of the fingers as curved, as though one is shaking someone’s hand. Jordan (1996:60) believes that the curve of the fingers encourages the round interior space in the mouth. No rationale is given.

Ehmann (1968:118), Hansen (1997:49) and Roe (1983:198) say that the fingers should appear as natural as possible, but do not explain anatomically what “natural” is.

Willits (1993: 10) says that the fingers should be pointing towards the ensemble, ignoring the question of curvature completely.

Three different issues have been identified when it comes to the relation of the wrist to the hand. As far as tension is concerned, the wrist should avoid tension, but on the other hand, the hand should appear to release tension; as far as placement is concerned, the hand should appear above the wrist (which raises the question whether this position will not in fact create tension); as far as motion is concerned, the only motion necessary is wrist motion.

Busch (1984:4) and McElherhan (1989:85) say that excessive tension in the arm and wrist must be avoided. The position of the body, hand, arm and wrist must appear “normal”. Neither author defines what a “normal appearance” is, but both say that the wrist should be flexible, and should not appear rigid or limp. Busch (1984:4) continues to explain that the hand should be above the wrist, despite having just said that tension in the arms and wrist should be avoided. If the hand is above the wrist, this will most certainly cause excessive tension in the hand.
and palm. Later on, he also advocates that the hand should be in a 180° pronation position.

There are views that wrist motion is sufficient when conducting with a baton. No forearm movement should be involved. Rudolf (1993:3) believes this gesture might be sufficient when working exclusively with a baton, but without a baton the visibility of this gesture will be problematic for the ensemble.

Ehmann (1968:118) is of the opinion that the hand should appear as if it is releasing tension. This statement in itself implies that the hand has been tense, which means that on the one hand, the hand movement itself might be very rigid and not flexible, and on the other hand, that the hand’s appearance will have a detrimental effect on the ensemble.

At least three authors, then, see the hand, wrist, forearm and upper arm functioning as a unit, and not as separate parts. Three different opinions have been identified when it comes to how the fingers are perceived: the fingers can be seen as curved, as “natural”, as pointing and lastly, as providing an ictus.

Four different thoughts have been identified when it comes to the relation of the wrist to the hand: tension in the wrist should be avoided and the hand should appear above the wrist; the only motion necessary is wrist motion, and the hand should appear to release tension. In none of these statements has any anatomical reasoning been provided for the position which the authors take.

When one looks at the role of the shoulders mentioned in the process of indicating gestures, some interesting opinions emerge: only two authors explicitly assign a specific role (active or passive) to the shoulders in the process of conducting gestures.

A writer who sees the shoulders as needing to be involved in the process of gestures is Hylton (1995:95): he is of the opinion that gestures should move primarily from the shoulder, less from the elbow and even less from the wrist.
In total contrast to this opinion, Phillips (1997:13) sees the shoulder as a ball and joint which serves as a major pivotal point for the movement of the arm. He makes a point that the shoulders should not be used to conduct from. “It can lift the entire arm over the head, or it can be used as a stabilizer for other arm movements,” he believes.

Jordan (1996:21) refers to five joints in the upper extremities. “The second and third joints are where the upper arm joins the clavicle (shoulder).” He also says that a lot of tension is situated in the upper torso. He urges the conductor not to “believe that you have shoulders”. This notion will work in contradiction with other authors who believe that the conductor should have an awareness of his upper body extremities in order to develop at least a vertical body alignment.

As far as the shoulders are concerned, then, one author is of the opinion that most of the movement should come out of the shoulder, with the least in the fingers. Another school represents the opposite opinion, stating that the shoulder should have the least movement, and that the wrist and fingers should move more. Clarification about the anatomical relationship the shoulder has with the gesture movement will be offered in Part 5.

In Part 5 reference will be made to the lack of complete accuracy in the following perceptions - firstly, that all the movement comes from the shoulder, secondly that the shoulder is a ball and joint responsible for the major pivotal point movement of the arm, and thirdly, the perception that there are five joints in the upper extremities.

When opinions from the authors are sought with regard to the positioning of the palms, two schools of thought can clearly be identified. Eight authors describe a pronated 180° forearm (i.e. the forearm parallel with the floor with the palm down) as the ideal palm position. No rationale or reference to the anatomy is given for this position. Busch (1984:4); Decker and Kirk (1988:8);

A pronated 90° forearm (palms facing each other) is advocated by only three authors: Green (2004:2); Jordan (1996: 60) and Rudolf (1993: 3), who describe a pronated 90° forearm as the ideal palm position. Green sees this position as “inviting”. Jordan and Rudolf make mention of the handshake position as the best initial positioning. No anatomical reason for this position is given. The one author who is adamant about this position is Jordan (1996: 121): “The most common questionable hand position is the one that remains parallel to the floor. Such a hand position severely inhibits the sound and spontaneity of the choir”. Despite his strong statement, he also fails to give an anatomical reason for opposing this palm pronation.

Busch (1984:6) speaks of the fingers, which should be curved as though one is shaking someone’s hand, which implies a palm pronation of 90°, but then changes the pronation of the hand in order to conduct from a handshake to 180° pronation, which seems to be contradictory.

Two distinct schools of thought have emerged from the literature dealing with the pronation of the palms in the conducting gesture. It can be said that most authors advocate the use of a 180° pronation, while only three authors mention the use of a 90° pronated palm position. The latter group mention that this position is inviting, as though a handshake is given, but the former group does not provide any rationale for this position.

In their description of the elbow position, three distinct opinions emerge from these writers. All three have implications for the placement of the elbow, which in turn will either restrict the movement of the arms, or allow it to move freely.

The first school teaches that the elbow should be in front of the body. Busch (1984: 4) is of the opinion that the elbow should be 6” – 8” in front of the body, and not cramped against the body. The second school of thought teaches exactly
the opposite: that the elbow’s movement should be closer the body, with the movement restricted. (Decker and Kirk 1988:8). A third school of thought explains that the elbow should be raised sideways. Ehmann (1968:118) advocates that the elbow should be slightly raised sideways. Phillips (1997:14) emphasises that the elbow should be elevated in a position between four and five on a clock face. He is of the opinion that a dropped elbow restricts the motion of the horizontal plane.

When the body of literature was looked at for ideas about the forearm position, three different schools of thought could be identified.

The first school of thought advocates that the forearm should be at an angle less than 90° from the elbow. Hansen (1997: 49) says that the arms should be raised directly in front of the body, but no higher than mid-torso. They should be brought back toward the body, leaving some space between the upper arm and the ribcage.

The second school of thought advocates that the forearm should be at an angle greater than 90° from the elbow: Jordan (1996: 60) is of the opinion that the arms should be “properly” outstretched. The curve of the arms is followed through the rest and into the hands. The roundness of the arm has an embracing attitude.

A third school of thought advocates that the forearm should be at an angle about 90° from the elbow: Busch (1984: 6) stresses the importance of the forearm to the upper arm. It should remain parallel to the ground, as if completing a handshake. The angle of the forearm could be either parallel to the ground or mid-chest high. Phillips (1997:15) also says that the upper arm should be in a position to invite a handshake. No anatomical rationale is given by any of the authors for any of these positions.
Some authors were of the opinion that the posture of the conductor will have an influence on the sound of the choir. For instance, Jordan (1996: 65), who argues that the shape of the hands influences the colour of the vowel produced by the choir. If the hands are light, with the fingers held closely together, the sound of the choir will go flat. He also is of the opinion that the conductor’s hands will mirror what he hears. The gentle curve of the hands and wrists encourages the round interior space of the mouth and pharynx for singing. He advocates a 90° palm position.

Apart from knowing the approximate placement of the hands and arms, as described above, if the conductor is aligned and listening, the body and limbs should accurately reflect the music.

However, if the conductor has undue muscular tension, then it will almost certainly manifest itself in the hands. The shape of the hands directly influences the colour of the vowel produced by the choir – if the hands are flat, with fingers held closely together, then the sound will most likely be flat, thin and a bit edgy. If the choir is singing an “oo” vowel, and the conductor hears the colour, his hands will naturally mirror a more rounded shape.

Kaplan (1985:19) writes that a conductor’s bad posture will negatively influence the sound of the choir, resulting in tension. Tense arms will also have a negative effect on the sound quality. Kaplan (1985: 23) offers a plausible reason for singers’ sharp singing, saying that the conductor’s gesture might in fact cause this: “One of the reasons why a chorus will push (the pitch) is because the conductor is “pushing” or straining his arm muscles.” The solution to this problem is simply for the conductor to relax.

“A conductor can cause his singers to sing with bad intonation without anyone, including himself, suspecting the reason. For example, an insecure cue to the tenor section may catapult most of the tenors into their vocal line without enough breath to last through the entire phrase, thereby guaranteeing faulty intonation.”
Kaplan (1985:17) emphasises the fact that adequate breath should be taken by the singers in order to produce a good tone. The lack of adequate breath will result in poor sound quality and a sore throat. In linking breath and conducting, he says that should the conductor’s preparatory beats not be secure, flowing and relaxed, the chorus cannot breathe properly before starting to sing, and is therefore susceptible to vocal trouble. Kaplan (1985:19) says: “Should the beat pattern not be clear, some sections of the chorus could become confused, and will sing hesitantly, another way of losing breath support.” Diaphragmatic breathing is advocated.

The conductor can help to maintain the choir’s tone support if he can display a high chest.” (Gordon, 1977:30). “A firm stance should have sound sonority and homogeneity as a result. For vocal coloratura, postural buoyancy is recommended and for adequate high intonation, a smile will help,” he says.

Decker and Kirk (1988: 7) state that the posture of the conductor will influence the ensemble directly. When the conductor’s shoulders are tense, the group’s sound will be tense. If the conductor’s posture is giving a bad example practically, it will become very difficult to demand the right posture from the ensemble. The feet should be placed slightly apart, with the weight evenly distributed. The knees should be unlocked, the shoulders back and erect. Should the conductor bend to his choir it will destroy his own posture, and effectively, also that of his choir.

The movement of the basic four-beat gesture is done from the shoulders to the waist. Hylton (1995:104) also states that the height of the plane of the beat pattern will have an impact on the sound quality emanating from the choir. The higher the conductor indicates the plane, the lighter the quality of the sound from the choir, and conversely the lower the plane, the heavier the quality. Hylton believes that the palms should remain down with the fingers pointed towards the
ensemble. The palms should not be pointing towards the ensemble, and neither should the palms be in a 90° position.

Thus it can be seen that several authors believe that the conducting gesture has a major influence on the sound which is produced by the choir in several different ways. It seems that the conductor’s bad posture will influence the sound of the choir because the ensemble will reflect the conductor’s posture. When the conductor’s posture shows tension of any kind, this will also negatively affect the sound of the choir, as they will emulate the tension.

Very little, if any, reference has been made by authors on the subject to the basic anatomy of the human body, and most ideas which did emanated from each conductor’s own practical experience, rather than being linked to a basic knowledge of human anatomy.

Whenever authors have given reasons for their advice, relating it either to anatomical or functional issues, these have been mentioned in the text. For the most part, reasons are not mentioned.
Chapter 6

The functions of the left and right hands

In this chapter the research question to be answered is: “What are the recommended functions of the left hand and right hand in relation to the indication of functional requirements which are necessary for the indication of gesture?” (Research question 1.3)

Earlier on, a description was given by authors on the subject of the position of the hands in terms of the horizontal and vertical planes. In this chapter, information will be sought from these authors in terms of the functionality of both hands. It is clear from these writers that most of them believe that very traditional ‘roles’ have been appointed to the functions of each hand. The approach to this chapter will be to start with issues which deal with both hands, and then follow with advice on the right hand and then the left hand. At times, it might be essential for the conductor to indicate different aspects to different sections within the ensemble. The ability of the conductor to work with both hands equally well is essential in order to execute different gestures, with different meanings, to the ensemble.

6.1 Ambidexterity of the conductor

The following authors all agree that it is vital for the conductor to develop ambidexterity, offering a variety of reasons for this.

For Ericson (1978:89): “One hand indicates a fermata for a group of singers, and the other hand indicates continued movement”. He also suggests that the left hand could beat two beats against the four of the right hand, in order to assist the ensemble.

Green (2004: 78) believes that “… the goal should be to engage and disengage the left hand,” while Neuen (2002: 206) states that “the left hand should move independently from the beat pattern consistently given by the right hand”.

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Two authors go so far as to suggest that the traditional functions of the hands could be replaced: Roe (1983: 209) maintains: “However, a good choral conductor needs to be ambidextrous so that, for example, the right-handed conductor can use the left hand proficiently in a beat pattern and the right hand for dynamics and other shadings, if necessary.”

Rudolf (1993: 309) says: “The best way to test brachial independence is the ability to perform all conducting patterns with the left arm, not in reverse motion, but in strict conformance to the movements that are normally assigned to the right arm. Aside from the possibility that an accident may put a conductor’s right arm out of action, the skill derived from such exercise will make the effort worthwhile.”

When authors were consulted about their ideas on the ambidexterity of the hands, many authors were positive about this aspect. Very few mentioned the importance of the use of both hands to indicate independent rhythmical patterns.

6.2 The functions of the right hand and left hand

Most authors mention that the main function of the right hand is to indicate the beat, and for the left hand to indicate things which the right hand cannot do. Ehmann (1968:126) puts it this way: “The right hand is the time-beating hand and the left-hand is the hand of the heart (i.e., the hand that controls those aspects of music which affect the feelings and emotions).

Rudolf (1993: 309) explains it as follows: “In general, the function of the left hand is to indicate details of interpretation, while the baton focuses attention on rhythm. The ability of the left hand to express the most subtle nuances, as well as the most dramatic accents, is one of the characteristics of fine conducting.”

Kohut and Grant (1990:29) describe the function of the right hand as that of a technician and the left hand as the interpreter.
There is only one author who differs in the precise functioning of the hands, and that is Kaplan (1985:29). In his opinion, the conductor can use either his left hand or right hand to conduct. “There are numerous left-handed conductors who are very able. The convention of conducting only with the right hand is old fashioned”.

Two different schools of thought emerge on the issue of mirroring of the right hand by the left hand. The first school of authors are adamant that there should be no mirroring under any circumstance. Mostly, no rationale is given. The second school’s opinion varies from “sometimes” to complete agreement that it may happen.

The school of thought which believes there should be no mirroring is represented by Davidson (1954), who quotes Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949) as saying: “The left hand has nothing to do with conducting. The proper place is in the waistcoat pocket, from which it should only emerge to restrain or to make minor gesture for which in any case a scarcely perceptible glance would suffice”. By quoting Strauss, Davison (1954) uses the logic of *magister ipse dixit* – “the master had said so”.

Decker and Kirk (1988), Holden (2003:10); and McElerhan (1989: 37) echo this opinion. Kaplan (1985:1) is of the opinion that the left hand can be used only as a replacement for the right hand, but it should not mirror the right hand. There is a chance that a big ensemble will see a slightly different beat. For Hylton (1995), mirroring is mostly not advocated, because it distracts from clarity. The only exception is the beginning or ending of a phrase.

Rudolf (1993: 309) says the left hand can be used as replacement for the right hand, but on the condition that it makes the right hand movement. His rationale is that if the left hand is used continually, the orchestra will ignore it. This reasoning does not make any sense, as the conductor is continuously using his right hand when he conducts. The same reasoning could be used then to explain why many
members of orchestras choose to ignore the conductor’s right hand, as this is also used continually!

Neuen (2002:206) says that if the left hand does the same thing, it becomes confusing. Roe (1983: 209) says that the simultaneous use will make the conductor ineffective, and it will “remind the audience of twin windshield wipers”. This raises the question as to whether the conductor gestures for the sake of the audience or the ensemble?

The second school of thought is presented by Ehmann (1968:126), who believes that the use of the right hand alone minimizes the animation and vitality of the choir, as well as the control over the singers. The use of the left hand is therefore very strongly advocated, and some mirroring can therefore be used.

For Ericson (1978:5), the two hands naturally mirror one another, but he writes that the left hand should be freed to make other movements. Labuta (2000:42) is of the opinion that that the conductor may mirror beat patterns for emphasis and clarity. This is directly in opposition to Hylton and Neuen, who argue that mirroring will result in confusion. Phillips (1997) does not have any problem with mirroring.

In summary, as far as left hand mirroring of the right hand is concerned, two different schools of thought emerge. The first school of authors are adamant that there should be no mirroring under any circumstance. The second school’s opinion varies from “sometimes” to complete agreement that it may happen most of the time.

6.3 The left hand “at ease”

When looking at the literature about the manner in which the different authors describe the use of the left hand in an “at ease” position, four different positions have been observed as suggested by the authors:
a) Five authors agree that the left hand should be kept close to the waist when not in use but no rationale for their position was given. Garretson (1993, 40); McElerhan (1989:38); Neuen (2002:206); Phillips (1997), Roe (1983).

b) The authors Kohut and Grant (1990) and Labuta (2000: 42). qualify this position further by saying the left hand should be kept close by at waist level in front of the body. No rationale is given for their views either.

c) Rudolf (1993:309) feels that the left hand should be held on, or near the lapel, from where it can move in different directions. He fears that if it is held too long at the side it could give the appearance of indifference to the audience. This position raises the question of practicality – how tiring might it be to conduct a two-hour programme with the left hand held at your lapel?

d) Busch (1984:45) says that the left hand should either be down at the side or folded across the abdomen when not needed, although no rationale is given for his viewpoint. This position also presents the question of practicality – apart from the fact that the hand will simply be in the way of the right hand in this position, this stance will also have a negative influence on the breathing of the conductor, which will no doubt also affect the singers’ posture.

In summary, when describing the left hand in an “at ease” position, four different main opinions were voiced from the authors: that the hand should be kept close to the waist; that it should be kept close to the waist in front of the body; that it should be kept on or near the lapel, and that it should be folded across the abdomen.

6.4 Palm pronation
The position of the palm pronation specifically for the left hand is described by several authors, with some making reference to a difference for the right hand, and some offering reasons for their position.
Most authors had an opinion about the palm pronation for the right hand, but of those authors, only four had something specific to say with regard to the left hand pronation.

Green (2004: 78) says the fingers must curve naturally, and the palm should be turned to the floor, but makes the same exception for the right hand, saying that it should be turned slightly upward (pronated to 90°) "in order to invite the ensemble to play”.

Phillips (1997) seems to agree with her, saying that the left hand can be used to make sweeping movements at 90° with the fingers slightly curved. In the description of the right hand position, he advocated an 180° position. The view of the left hand pronation is now in contradiction with the right hand pronation. No rationale was given for this position.

Gordon (1977: 29) describes the palm-out position as giving a restrictive effect, and the palm-in stance as having a permissive effect. It is not specified, but it seems that “palm-out” means a “stop” position, although no rationale was given for this view.

Decker and Kirk (1988:24) are consistent in saying that the position for the right hand and left hand is 180° palm down. No other authors mention the palm position explicitly for the left hand.

In summary, as far as the position of the palm pronation for the left hand is concerned compared to the right hand, most authors had an opinion about the palm pronation for the right hand, but of these, only four had something specific to say with regard to the left hand pronation. This varied from 180° pronation to 90° pronation. This issue of hand pronation, along with other issues pertaining to anatomical issues and the posture of the conductor, will be dealt with in Part 5, Chapter 22.
6.5 Passive preparatory beat

Only two authors (Ericson and Hansen) describe the use of the left hand in the execution of a passive preparatory beat. Both give a thorough explanation for the use of this technique:

Ericson (1978: 17) says: “When preparatory beats are given and passive beats are used in the right hand, the left hand is used to keep still, avoiding any movement in the choir. This working together of the two hands in the passive preparation beat is essential in this conducting technique.”

This technique is extremely useful to prepare an ensemble before the entrance is given, while the right hand is still giving information. The activation of the previously still left hand signifies the beginning of singing activity.

Hansen (1997: 51) describes the use of the left hand in a similar way for the indication of a preparatory beat: “The second method employs an independent technique for the right and left hands. The first beat (if falling on the third beat of a quadruple pattern) is passively conducted by the right hand alone, while the left hand is in the ‘stop’ position. The second preparatory beat (which falls on the upbeat of a quadruple beat pattern) is actively and energetically conducted by both hands. In either case, it is important to maintain the same tempo for the passive beat as well as the final preparatory impulse.”

6.6 Function of the left hand with regard to cueing

Four authors all contribute to the idea of the function of the left hand when it comes to cueing: Busch (1984: 45); Ericson (1978: 73); Green (2004: 80) and Hansen (1997:58).

In addition to this idea, Gordon (1977) and Rudolf (1993:309) suggest the use of the finger in the air which can be used for a warning of an upcoming entry. Both authors also suggest that the fist can be used as a firm entry. Gordon (1977) as well as Rudolf (1993: 309) suggests the raised finger can be used to warn an
instrument which is about to enter which has had a long period of no playing. Rudolf (1993: 309) also suggests that changing from four beats in the bar to two (alla breve), can be done by using the left hand’s fingers to indicate the new beat number. Gordon also uses a “pinpoint entry”: thumb and forefinger moved together and released at the moment of entry – thus a pinpoint entry. But this method does not give enough time as a period of warning to the musicians, and therefore mars the effectiveness of this system, as the indication of the release (pinpoint) will be a beat too late!

Kaplan (1985: 30) suggests a completely different system: the conductor points with the left hand at the group a beat before, but then leaves the actual process of cueing for the right hand. The question here is whether this practice will not cause confusion in the group, as the right hand has the task of maintaining a pulse as well as cueing. Surely the hand which prepares the ensemble and warns it of a looming cue should also take care of the actual giving of the cue as well?

Hylton (1995); McElherhan (1989: 37) and Neuen (2002:206) make mention of the left hand as the cue hand, but do not give any more details in terms of the actual method itself.

In summary, many authors make mention of the function of the left hand for an execution of a cue, mostly suggesting that the left hand has the function of cueing above the right hand. Kaplan suggests that the left hand should indicate warning of an upcoming cue, but that it will be the function of the right hand which will ultimately indicate the cue.

### 6.7 Left hand and the release of sound

Some authors describe the use of the left hand in the process of release of sound as a cue. Some of them use the alternative terms “release of sound” or “cut-off”.


a) Five authors describe the release of sound as a cue specifically to be executed by the left hand: Busch, Hylton, Labuta, Neuen and Roe. Of these authors, the following give an indication of the preparation, as well as details of the execution of the release.

Busch (1984: 63) and Labuta (2000: 11) are very clear in their descriptions of the manner in which the sound must be prepared, on what level, and how it should be done. Busch says the left hand rises from its neutral position on the pulse before the release is to be given. The release is given at approximately eye level. Use is made of the loop as the release. This activation of the left hand will be seen as a disturbance if it does not maintain the line once it has entered, and it could be perceived as the actual cut-off, as the left hand did not maintain the sound with a “dead beat”.

Labuta (2000:11) says that in choral music, “You must give a precise release gesture at the end of a phrase to assure precision of ensemble and clarity of the final consonant. The release gesture is a concise cut off, a precise signal to ease playing. To secure precision, a preparatory gesture, usually a circular motion, must precede it. Just as a “ready-go” must be given at the beginning of a composition, so a “ready- stop” must be indicated at the end.”

b) The following authors give an indication of the release as a left hand function, but do not describe this specifically in terms of a preparation before the release: Hylton (1995) and Neuen (2002:206) state that the left hand can be used to indicate release. The method is not described in terms of a preparatory beat.

c) The following authors offer other ideas for the left hand release:
Roe (1983: 208) is of the opinion that the left hand has a specific role when it comes to showing how vowels can be sustained for a period of time. He advocates that the right hand should continue beating a normal pattern, but the left hand can start on the same ictus level as the right hand, but instead of beating the time with the right, it “will pull upward and outward with tension for the duration of the pitches and sounds that are to be controlled. This gesture can be
questioned, as the upward and outward movement with tension in the hand will have a negative effect on the pitch of the choir, as well as resulting in the relaxation of the vocal chords.

The release of sound in a cueing pattern is mostly described as a function of the left hand only. So two completely different schools of thought have been identified in the literature: in general terms, there are authors on the one end of the spectrum who advocate that dynamic changes should be indicated on a vertical plane, and on the other hand, an author who advocates that dynamic changes should be indicated on a horizontal plane: Only Kohut and Grant explicitly state that the horizontal plane could be used for this function with both hands involved.

6.8 The indication of the dynamic range
Many authors describe the indication of dynamic change, showing differing schools of thought. In general terms, there are authors on the one end of the spectrum who advocate that dynamic changes should be indicated on a vertical plane, and on the other hand, an author who advocates that dynamic changes should be indicated on a horizontal plane.

Six authors suggest that the dynamic change can be indicated on a vertical plane: Gordon and Kaplan describe the movement broadly in terms of the movement of the hand, without reference to the pronation of the palm of the hand: Gordon (1977: 29) is of the opinion that a “downwards movement means quieting or singing softer, and an upwards movement is climactic, singing louder”. Kaplan (1985: 28) also supports this statement, adding that the “movement of the left hand should be devoid of any rhythm”.

Green and Rudolf refine this description of vertical movement also in terms of the palm pronated position: Green (2004: 78) says that when the palm of the left hand is facing downwards it is seen as an indication to get quieter, while the palm upwards is seen as an indication for a louder sound. She describes the position of the crescendo as a gesture of the left hand with the palm facing
upward, right up to the head level of the conductor, and after the climax the palm is turned downwards, following the downwards movement to indicate a decrescendo. In this gesture the “stop” sign is not used. The high position of the hand right up to the head might have an effect on the sound of the choir in terms of intonation changes.

Rudolf (1993: 74, 75) suggests a similar gesture, but with the palm of the hand facing the ensemble in a “stop” gesture with the decrescendo. He suggests that the crescendo is indicated with the left hand, used palm facing upward from the “level of the hip to eye level”. For a decrescendo the hand is turned slowly so “that the palm faces the players; then start dropping the hand gradually, the palm still toward the orchestra, until it reaches the starting position”. In my opinion the high position of the hand right up to the eye level might have a detrimental effect on the sound of the choir, as this does not support good posture.

Willits, Neuen and Labuta echo the previous two authors, but also add that the upwards motion needs to be done with considerable tension in the arm. Willits also uses this description of vertical movement in terms of the palm pronated position, and also adds a forwards and upwards movement too. Willits (1993: 75) writes: “Use the left hand from a palm down position to a palm up position.”

The hand gradually rises as it extends toward the ensemble with the palm up. She suggests that this gesture is done with “a considerable amount of tension in your hand and arm”. For the decrescendo the action is reversed, by “drawing the hand back to your body and relaxing the tension. “Do not turn the palm over too soon”. The “stop” sign is used as part of the decrescendo. “As soon as the group sees an open palm facing them, it functions as a ‘stop’ sign. Do not turn the palm over completely until your hand is almost to your chest, as this should be your beating hand….the beating hand in the exercise should reinforce the dynamic action as well.”
But this gesture will surely have a negative effect on the singers’ voices, as the tension in the hand might have a direct effect on the sound of the choir. The position of the hand going toward the choir is also very difficult for the singers to see, and they might not react to this, or react differently to this, depending on where they stand in front of the conductor.

Labuta (2000:42) has the same gesture as Willits in mind, but gives as the rationale for the lifting of the palm at an upward angle that it is done because the palm “flat up” will look very awkward. He advises indicating the crescendo by gradually lifting the left hand thumb side up, palm at an upward angle, with increasing tension in the forearm.

He suggests a change in the appearance of the right hand too: as one indicates the crescendo, one should “simultaneously increase the size and intensity of the right-hand beat pattern. Be certain the left hand rises smoothly, without jerking at each beat of the right hand”. For the diminuendo, Labuta says that one should “turn your palm over gradually to face the group, lowering it slowly while continuing to turn it downward (or turn it inward to the body). If you turn the palm over too quickly, performers may respond with a subito effect, instead of the desired fading effect”.

Neuen (2002: 206) firmly believes that it is important that the extending of the left hand to ask for a crescendo is done with “intensity toward the ensemble. Do not move out too far or too quickly. Distance and speed dissipate intensity and effectiveness.” The crescendo gesture is also done “up toward the face” in order for the performers to see the facial expression of the conductor, along with the conducting gesture. Surely the intensity and height of the conducting plane must add to the tension of the singers here, too?

The authors who suggests that the dynamic change should be indicated on a horizontal plane are Kohut and Grant (1990). Their rationale is that this
movement will result in a less jerky movement compared to the vertical movement.

Kohut and Grant (1990) state that the left hand has a special function in that it has to portray the expressive qualities of the music. “Indicating crescendo and decrescendo with the left hand in conjunction with the right hand on a horizontal plane can be more successful than using the vertical up and down, which may result in a jerky movement.

Four authors indicate the dynamic change unspecified in terms of the use of a horizontal or vertical plane. Davidson (1954:12), says that the left hand should be used mainly to indicate dynamic changes but does not indicate how this should be done.

Ericson (1978: 82), states: “When conducting without dynamic changes, the beats remain the same size. When making a crescendo, the beats become bigger and also more intense, while a diminuendo calls for smaller, less intense, beats. In both cases, the relaxed left hand is important because it can indicate the dynamic flow and can work freely in relation to the pulse to show the melodic phrases of a crescendo and diminuendo. Develop the independence of the hands by using the left hand exclusively to show the dynamic patterns and the right hand to beat the figure.” Ericson, however, does not explain how the dynamic should be indicated, but insists that the left hand should remain relaxed, which is in stark contrast with Willits, Labuta and Neuen.

Hansen (1997: 58) advocates that the left hand can be used “in conjunction with the right hand to distinguish dynamics. The levels of dynamics are generally differentiated by the size of the movement, where a larger gesture generally means a louder dynamic and the position of the hand in space, with the arm extended away from the body, inviting more sound, and the arm brought in closer to the body, inviting less sound.”
In this description of the movement away from the body, and in reverse closer to the body, Hansen does not indicate whether the movement is upwards (vertical) or outwards, (horizontal).

6.9 Conclusion

Davidson (1954) quotes Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949), who said: “The left hand has nothing to do with conducting. The proper place is in the waistcoat pocket from which it should only emerge to restrain or to make a minor gesture for which in any case a scarcely perceptible glance would suffice”. It could be that Strauss is right that his own music can be conducted with one hand, but it is impossible to conduct modern choral (or instrumental) music, consisting of complicated polyrhythm (which did not exist in the choral or orchestral repertoire in Strauss’ day), only with one hand.

The authors deal with the right hand and left hand in a very traditional fashion in the sense that the right hand is used to beat time, and the left hand is used on a vertical plane to deal with change of dynamics.

When one deals with 20th and 21st century music, it becomes evident that it is not possible to assign these traditional and exclusive roles to the left and right hands. Composers very often write music where the different voice parts are grouped, each group working in its own manner of meter and dynamic requirements. In such a setting it becomes impossible to indicate differentiated “lines” within the texture without reverting to other techniques to help the singers perform this music. Examples of such music will be cited in Chapter 5, the traditional roles of the left and right hands challenged and alternative ways suggested.
Chapter 7

Baton technique

In this chapter, the research question to be answered is: “What are the recommended uses of the baton in choral conducting, and how is the use of the baton related to the function requirements of the gestures?” (Research question 1.4).

The following issues have been identified with regard to baton technique and related issues: While most authors writing in this domain expressed the requirement that the choral conductor should be able to work with both the baton and the hand, they made certain suggestions as to when the one method is preferable to the other. The reaction and motivation of each author is highly individualistic, and therefore their reactions are quoted rather than summarised. None of the authors referred to the historical background for the use of the baton in conducting, nor was there any reference about the historical development of the use of the baton linked to the performance practice of specific music. Five main topics were discussed by authors in this area.

The first is the notion that the conductor should make the decision based on what suits him best as an individual. Davison (1954:12) suggests to the novice conductor that both techniques - with and without the baton - should be tried, and the conductor should then decide which one suits him best. He does not quote any musical considerations for the use of the baton, but suggests rather that it would be easier for the conductor working with only his hands to stop a chorus by clapping his hands, that for the conductor working with a baton to produce the same effect by tapping against the stand. This motivation for not using a baton seems very capricious.

The notion that the size of the ensemble should determine the use or not of the baton is suggested by Garretson. He is of the opinion that the size of the performing force will have an influence on whether to use a baton or not. He
argues that when great musical forces are used, “the distance between the conductor and performers becomes greater and therefore the clarity of the beats becomes increasingly difficult to see, thus making the decision to use a baton more reasonable and attractive”. Garretson (1993: 23)

Green (2004:20) echoes Garretson, saying that the decision to use a stick should be based on the score and the size of the ensemble with whom you are working. It is mainly used with big ensembles, in order to be more visible to all performers. But for Kaplan, the use of the baton is advantageous “when conducting a large ensemble, conducting opera from the pit and when a very crisp and fast beat is desired”. (Kaplan, 1985:1) Rudolf, (1993: xvi) agrees with the notion that the right hand without the baton is more expressive, but in his opinion, the advantages of clear direction for the orchestral player, as well as visibility for a larger ensemble, are advantages for the use of the baton that are greater than those achieved by not using it.

Garretson (1993: 23) feels that the character of the music will determine if a piece should be conducted with or without the baton: more rhythmical, intricate pieces are better served by a baton, whereas long sustained lines might find better expression with the use of the hands only. Gordon’s (1977:35) view is that the baton offers more clarity and precision than the hand, but that the hand offers more expressive possibilities than the baton. Ideally, the conductor should be able to use both methods. Neuen (2002: 209) believes that the main reason for using a baton is the need for more precision and accuracy than hands and fingers alone can provide. It is a more precise object than the hand. When precision is needed, use a baton. When it is not, do as you prefer, bearing in mind that the conductor should be at ease either with or without the baton, he says.

Garretson (1993: 23) says that a baton is more helpful and saves time when musical forces get together in a very short period of time. If clarity of gesture is critical, then a baton might serve the musicians better. The implication here is
that a conductor working with his hands only will not be that clear, and therefore
time will be wasted. Lamb (1983: 121) clearly favours the use of a baton. He
says that although fewer choral conductors seem to use a baton than
instrumental conductors, there is no reason why a baton should not be used for
choral conducting. It is perfectly acceptable to conduct an accompanied or
unaccompanied repertoire with a baton. The conductor who does not use a baton
regularly will find that the use of a baton will tend to force him toward better
conducting habits. Unnecessary gestures made with the hands are impossible
with a baton. Usually, the conducting technique improves considerably with the
use of a baton. Conductors are also encouraged to alternate between the use of
the hands and the baton during rehearsals. The conductor will find that
Renaissance scores are best conducted without a baton. The music of the
Renaissance is not metered and our modern conducting gestures are not as
appropriate for this music. Many choral conductors use the baton when
conducting works that involve instruments with voices. The addition of
instruments alone does not necessarily warrant the use of a baton any more than
the absence of instruments denies the use of the baton. The decision is a
personal one, and should be based on the music being performed and on how
comfortable the conductor and the ensemble are with each other.

Gordon (1977: 35) says that the prevalence of choral or instrumental music
should determine the use of the baton or the hand for what will be required in a
particular work. If choral music is more prevalent, then the hand should be used.
If instrumental work is more prevalent, then the baton will be better. Roe
(1983:199) says some conductors have indicated that conducting with a baton
refines the gestures. The wrist, hand and fingers are all involved in conducting
with the baton. He makes the observation that most choral conductors work
without a baton as they feel that the hand’s expressiveness is lost if the baton is
used. But by the same token, it is important for the choral conductor to be able to
use the baton, depending on the demands of the group in front of him. Hansen
(1997: 56) remarks that there is certainly the expectation from different
ensembles (orchestral or choral) as to whether a conductor should conduct with or without a baton: an orchestra normally expects the conductor to appear with baton in hand, but an a capella chorus might expect its conductor to lead with the hands alone. He believes that when one is conducting a large orchestra, the baton can be a distinct advantage in the sense that the conductor can beat time more decisively with smaller arm movements, making the gestures more readable than might be accomplished with a hand alone. On the other hand, he maintains that when one conducts an a cappella chorus, the empty hand functions as a more natural human connection to voice and can show specific vocal nuances. When a chorus and orchestra combine, however, the overriding need for rhythmical precision which ensures a good ensemble, calls for baton use.

In the next two sections the issue of the conductor’s baton as a natural extension of the arm will be raised, as well as the physical attributes of a baton and how it should look. Busch, Kaplan, Labuta and Neuen all think that the baton should be seen as a natural extension of the arm, bearing in mind that the movement required would be far less than without the baton.

Busch (1984:7) sees the baton as an extension of the arm. Because the baton is an extension of the arm, the baton’s tip should be out in front of the body. “The tip should not be angled too sharply toward the centre of the body, nor should it be pointed too high”. Kaplan (1985:1) agrees that the baton is always seen as an extension of the arm and wrist motion. “Special care must be taken that the conductor’s elbow never moves in the opposite direction to the baton. Many a conductor has been driven mad by the fact that one section of the orchestra is playing half a beat apart from the rest of the orchestra; but from where they were sitting, the conductor’s elbow (moving in contrary motion) attracted more attention than the baton.” (Kaplan: 1)

Labuta (2002: 7) considers the baton a conductor’s technical, if not musical, instrument. He sees it as an extension of the forearm. It should provide for better
visibility for the performers and facilitate precision in the ensemble. Labuta defines a role for the left and right hand separately: The right hand should be used for conducting basic beat patterns, and the left to indicate phrasing and expression. Neuen says that, when using a baton, the position of the arm, the hand, fingers, and baton should be as natural, relaxed, and free as possible. “Allow the baton to become a true extension of the arm, not an unnatural, obtrusive, obstacle-like addition to it.” (Neuen 2002:208)

Authors describe the physical appearance of the ideal baton in terms of the length of the baton per definition, the length of the baton related to the individual conductor’s physical appearance, the matter from which it is made, as well as the grip of the baton in terms of size, shape and material.

As far as the length of the baton is concerned, the advice given by the authors ranges between 12 to 20 inches: Green (2004: 20) recommends a stick which is twelve inches from the heel. Lamb (1983:121) says that most choral conductors will find that a shorter baton (approximately 12" to 14") is desirable for most situations. Rudolf (1993: xvi) goes to the other extreme and advises a conductor to use a baton of about twenty inches long. Holden (2003:4) quotes Sir Henry Hood, who specified his batons should be “19 inches long”.

Hansen (1997:56) emphasises that the most important factor determining the baton’s length is the individual physical size of the conductor. The conductor with longer arms needs a longer baton, whilst one with shorter arms can use a correspondingly shorter baton. When this principle is ignored the baton may appear unnatural in the conductor’s hand. As a general rule,she recommends that the length of the baton should be approximately the distance between the tip of the thumb and the elbow.

Phillips (1997: 63) says that it is very important to match the length of the baton to your physical shape. Standard baton lengths are ten, twelve, and fourteen inches. The majority of conductors can use the twelve-inch baton. When
purchasing a baton, he recommends that one experiments with various sizes to
determine what length best suits you. Conductors with long arms are often able
to use longer batons, while those with shorter arms may need shorter ones.
Another factor that also influences the length of the baton is the size of one's
torso. Phillips recommends that the conductor use good arm positioning, and
keep the elbow up and extended. If the baton is positioned correctly, it will angle
slightly to the left and the tip will be directly at the centre (the button line of the
shirt/blouse) of the body.

Neuen (2002: 209) is of the opinion that the distance from your shoulder to your
elbow, and from your elbow to your hand, is approximately 12 to 14 inches. If the
baton is to be a natural extension of your arm, it should not exceed 14 inches
and it should also have a small, tapered handle.

Green (2004: 20) recommends a baton made of wood, which will account for a
lighter, more thinly tapered shape. Phillips (1997:63) says that the best
conducting batons are made of wood and can be quite expensive. Beginner
students are encouraged to purchase fibreglass batons, as they are relatively
inexpensive and more durable. Holden (2003:3) quotes Sir Henry Wood, who
had his batons made by Palmer’s of Great Yarmouth, which set out that the shaft
of the baton should be made from “straight-grain poplar wood, carefully rived by
hand to ensure that the grain runs straight and painted white with two coats of
water-paint.”

Lamb (1983: 121) recommends that conductors experiment with several batons
before they find one that is most comfortable for them. Batons that have small
wooden or cork handles are recommended over those that have plastic or rubber
balls on the grip. He thinks the former are comfortable for more people and
usually weigh less.

Phillips (1997:63) says small, ball-like handles may encourage too much wrist
action and requires that the baton be held primarily on the shaft. While this type
of handle is fairly common, it lacks the flexibility needed to vary the conducting articulation. Phillips recommends that the best type of handle is made of rubber or wood, approximately two inches in length, and rather small in diameter. He adds that it is good if it tapers naturally to the shaft. A good baton should be light in weight and well balanced, so that it can lie across the upturned palm of the hand without falling to the floor. Batons that are too heavy and too long lack the flexibility needed for varying conducting gestures.

Large, long handles (often made of cork) should be avoided, especially for people with small hands. This type of handle is often held under the fingers because it is too long to maintain in the palm of the hand. This may result in a baton angle that is too far left and a compensatory action by the wrist that makes the wrist look unnatural. Also, a long handle tends to be held with too much grip, which reduces the subtle response action needed in conducting.

Neuen, (2002:208) says the baton should have a small, tapered handle. The nicely tapered handle helps it to feel natural, as if nothing were in your hand. We should not feel as though we are holding onto something or gripping something foreign. Ideally, the baton should evoke the feeling of a feather. If the weight of the handle is equal to that of the shaft, the baton will balance perfectly at the point where the handle meets the shaft, further establishing the baton's weightlessness in the hand.

Rudolf (1993: xvi) writes: “The choice of a baton with or without a handle depends upon the individual. You must decide for yourself which grip is the most convenient. You must be able to control the baton completely and feel perfectly at ease; this is the test of a good grip. The most advisable way to hold the baton is with the thumb, the first and second fingers, and with the butt against the palm of the hand. You will feel more secure in the energetic beats if you use an even fuller grip.”
In this section, the question as to how different authors view the manner in which the baton should be held will be answered. Most writers on the subject seem to agree that the baton should be held in the hand but that the thumb and the forefinger would have most of the control. The baton should be comfortable in the hand, with no tension. Nearly all the authors make mention of the fact that a small wrist movement will suffice.

Of all the authors, Neuen (2002: 208 and further) goes into greatest detail about the way the baton should be held. He insists that everything the conductor does must be natural. He hastens to add that it may take practice and time to get used to the technique so that it will feel natural. A natural position should be found where the hand is hanging at the side of the body. “The hand will be at a slight angle, with the thumb pointing slightly toward the left, just barely touching your leg. This is a natural position for the hand. The thumb aiming straight out (forward) is unnatural. If you were to relax and hang both arms down to your sides, they would both be this way. If you were to swing them naturally front and back, they would swing slightly toward the centre in front, and slightly out from the sides when going back.” The place where the baton will rest will be where one touches the pads of the thumb and the first finger. “Notice that the other three fingers remain relaxed, curved, and with a slight breathing space between each one.”

Neuen continues, saying that the hand should be brought up, but the fingers should be kept in exactly “the same relaxed, curved, breathing position as they were when at your side. Place the baton in it, gently gripping the baton with the pads of the thumb and first finger at the point where the shaft meets the handle”. He insists that there should be a natural curve to the left. He also maintains that the conductor should be thinking about leading from the elbow and not with the baton or the hand. (Neuen: 211)

“If you bring the arm and hand up in a natural manner, the baton will be pointing toward the second violin section (or the stage-right side of the chorus) at a 45° in
your hand. Avoid allowing the baton to point either straight ahead or toward the first violin section at 90°. Remember to raise the tip of the baton slightly.” The next instruction from Neuen is for the conductor to find the “4 o'clock position” The elbow is at approximately the same angle as a clock hand pointing to 4 o'clock when the hand is brought upwards. Neuen deals with the position of the baton in detail, and provides a 14 point checklist for “baton-hand-arm” positioning. (Neuen 2002: 210) A long checklist of eleven points follows for what can go wrong.

Completely on the other side of the spectrum, when providing detailed instructions, is Rudolf (1993: xvi), who believes that the conductor must decide for himself which grip is the most convenient. “You must be able to control the baton completely and feel perfectly at ease; this is the test of a good grip. The most advisable way to hold the baton is with the thumb, the first and second fingers, and with the butt against the palm of the hand. You will feel more secure in the energetic beats if you use an even fuller grip.”

Busch (1984: 7) says that when the conductor is using a baton, the “palm of the hand should be down, with the baton held between the thumb and the forefinger. The baton, gripped firmly, should lie across the first joint of the forefinger with the ball of the baton resting comfortably in the palm of the hand.” Busch says that the conductor should be aware that only a small wrist movement will move the baton very far.

Green (2004: 20) advocates that the basic position for the stick should be between the tip of the thumb and the side of the index finger. The middle joint of the index fingers is touched, and the nail area of the thumb. It is important that the thumb bends outwards at the knuckle, as this might add to the relaxed wrist. Green claims that the bending of the knuckle will contribute to a more relaxed wrist. The heel of the stick rests in the fleshy part near the base of the thumb, the ring finger has contact with the heel of the baton, and the palm of the hand faces the floor. The tip of the baton should face forward. In the ‘light grip’ the second
finger replaces the index finger. Green lists a number of actions to avoid when using the baton (Green: 22), and urges that the baton should be visible at all times to all performers.

According to Hansen (1997: 57), the baton should extend straight out from the hand with the handle held comfortably in the palm and the tip pointing toward the ensemble. The guiding principle in holding the baton is that one should use a grip which is as natural and free from extraneous tension as possible. Another important consideration is the proportion and balance of the baton in the hand.

Lamb (1983:121) says that the baton is a slender instrument which causes many people to try to grasp it with the fingertips rather than with the entire hand. He warns against this grip, as it creates tension in the hand and wrist and quickly becomes very uncomfortable. “The conductor should grasp the baton so the handle fits into the palm of the hand and the fingers curl around the baton. The thumb should be on the left side of the baton at a point where it would touch the forefinger at about the first joint. Actually, it will not touch the forefinger because the thumb will touch the baton first.”

There are numerous possible grips for using the baton, according to Phillips. He teaches the standard grip, as it is one of the most flexible for all styles of conducting. He recommends that the baton is held in the right hand by gripping it lightly between the pad of the thumb and first joint of the forefinger, at the point where the handle joins the shaft. “Notice that the forefinger makes a slight U shape.” Phillips (1997: 67) If the handle is tapered, both thumb and forefinger will grip it, but if the handle is not tapered, the forefinger will come to rest more on the shaft. This gives a certain stability to the baton. The remaining fingers should curve gently inward; they should never stick straight out.

He makes the point that the handle of the baton points to the palm of the hand, and should not lie under the fingers. In this position, the shaft will angle slightly to the left from the arm/hand position. This should place the tip of the baton at the
centre of the body, which is the vertical plane for the baton. “The direction of the shaft may be changed slightly by sliding the thumb forward or backward, and by adjusting the handle in the palm of the hand through contact with the curved fingers.” He maintains that only two points of contact with the baton (thumb and forefinger) are necessary for a flexible conducting style. “Marcato conducting requires a firmer grip; the handle is grasped by all fingers in a more closed fashion. For a lighter, open, legato style, two points of contact are sufficient (thumb and forefinger) with the remaining fingers slightly extended.”

McElherhan (1989: 13) adds his voice to this opinion with very definite views on why the baton should not be used: he says of the myth that the baton should be used for an instrumental group and not for a chorus because of rhythmical considerations, that choirs sing passages with equally “biting, incisive rhythms”, which can be compared to the percussion section. The idea that smoother cantabile lines of the choir can better be conducted with the bare hands compares equally well with the smooth sections of violins, for example. The notion that the baton gives a clear point to the beat is questioned by McElherhan: “Many baton men have no point to their beat, whereas it is possible to give a clear point without a baton.” (McElherhan 1989:13). He also says that a baton is not necessarily more easily seen than the hand - it depends on the colour against which the baton is viewed. The notion that it increases precision can also be debated, as if it is too long, “it whips and bounces in a blur”.

One could surmise that the question about whether the conductor (choral or instrumental) should use a baton or not is clearly set never to be resolved, as there are as many opinions about this matter as conductors and different schools of thought. Many choral conductors favour the bare hand, believing that instrumental conducting should be done exclusively with the baton. Some authors question this notion, saying that instrumental conductors wanting to effect precision sometimes do not succeed in doing so with the baton, while the hand might be just as effective, if not more so. Another argument is for the hand to shape the ideal legato line in choral music - the same principle surely being
possible in the instrumental musical genre as well.

It is clear that in the literature this debate will continue for many more years, and it is apt to end with a quote from Bernstein, who said: “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 be first and always meaningful in terms of the music”. (Bernstein 1960:150)
Chapter 8

Conclusion to Part 2

The research question dealing with the recommended posture of the conductor in terms of the positioning of the legs and torso, and how this description is related to an anatomical awareness, provided some interesting food for thought (Research question 1.1).

It is clear from the literature that few authors work with an anatomical awareness. The many different opinions with regard to the placement of the distance between the feet indicate that the concept of a vertical body alignment, as well as a balanced posture, is not explicitly followed. While most authors say that the knees should not be locked, no-one provides the reader with an anatomical reason for this. These two aspects will be explained in detail in Part 5, Chapter 22.

The research question with regard to the recommended use of the arms and hands in relation to an anatomical awareness and the functional requirements of gestures provided interesting answers. The recommendations for the position of the arms and hands in terms of spatial reference areas such as the conducting plane and the placement of the ictus also yielded many different opinions. (Research question 1.2).

None of the authors gave any rationale relating to the anatomy of the conductor with reference to the placement of the conducting planes. The placement ranged from the waist area to shoulder height, and from the sternum to shoulder height. If the shoulder height is used as the horizontal conducting plane, this will have a detrimental effect on the conductor’s conducting stance, and will influence his posture in that the shoulder muscles will have to be used to maintain the movement of the gesture. This will in turn place huge stress on the tendons of the muscles, resulting in possibly inaccurate movement. The placement of the vertical plane ranges from the mid-point of the body to just in front of the right
shoulder. In Part 5, Chapter 22, a motivation will be given for the placement of the horizontal and vertical planes.

It is very important that a link should be made between the placement of the different icti and the placement of the horizontal plane. The concept of the ictus deserves far more mention than assuming it is the same as the horizontal plane. The determination of the ictus point by the wrist, or by a circular movement between the top of the thumb and the forefinger, will impair the visibility of this gesture to the ensemble, and it will certainly provide for a gesture of questionable clarity of intent. The informative nature of this gesture as well as the predictability of a series of these movements will be questionable. The idea of the placement of the wrist in relation to the hand varies greatly amongst authors, and an anatomical suggestion will be made in Part 5, Chapter 21.

As far as the shoulders are concerned, one school of thought is of the opinion that most of the movement should come from the shoulder, with the least movement in the fingers. Another school represents the opposite opinion, stating that the shoulder should have the least movement, and that the wrist and fingers should move more.

In Part 5, reference will be made to the lack of complete accuracy in these perceptions - firstly, that all the movement comes from the shoulder, secondly that the shoulder is a ball and joint responsible for the major pivotal point movement of the arm, and thirdly, the perception that there are five joints in the upper extremities. Clarification about the anatomical relationship the shoulder has with the gesture movement will be offered in Part 5.

As far as the pronation of the palms is concerned, two distinct different schools of thought emerged. Those who advocate the use of a 180° pronation, and others who advocate a 90° pronated palm position. A motivation for the 90° pronated palm position will be given in Part 5. In their description of the elbow position as well as the forearm position, some authors demand a restricted use, whilst other
advocated a freer movement. Once again, this issue will be referred to in Part 5, Chapter 22.

Some authors indicated that the conducting gesture has a major influence on the sound which is produced by the choir in several different ways. It seems that the conductor’s bad posture will influence the sound of the choir because the ensemble will reflect the conductor’s posture. When the conductor’s posture shows tension of any kind, this will also negatively affect the sound of the choir, as they will emulate the tension. This issue will be taken further in Part 5, Chapter 25, where the possibility of the influence which the conductor's posture will have over the placement of the vowels and consonants, as well as pitch, will also be discussed.

Very little, if any, reference has been made by any authors to the basic anatomy of the conductor, and most of the ideas emanated from each conductor’s own practical experience, rather than linking them to a basic knowledge of human anatomy. Whenever authors have given reasons for their advice, relating it either to anatomical or functional issues, these have been mentioned in the text. But for the most part, reasons were not mentioned.

In the next chapter the research question dealt with the recommended functions of the left hand and right hand in relation to the indication of the functional requirements necessary for the indication of gesture. (Research question 1.3)

When authors were consulted about their ideas on the ambidexterity of the hands, many authors were positive about this aspect. Very few mentioned the importance of the use of both hands to indicate independent rhythmical patterns. As far as the left hand mirroring the right hand is concerned, two different schools of thought exist. A motivation for far greater ambidexterity of the hands and the abolishment of the “traditional roles” of the two hands, especially the left hand, will be voiced in Part 5, Chapter 24 with examples from 20th century music to motivate this stance. It was pointed out that some of the gestures suggested
might obscure the visibility of the hands, and this in turn might influence the clarity of intent. Other functional aspects which were affected by the suggested gestures were also mentioned in the chapter.