



SING
for
PLEASURE

SfP Pointers

#8: Orchestral Conducting

Here are my top tips for effectively conducting an orchestra learnt from over 20 years of getting it right and getting it wrong. This is not an empirical guide; conducting is much more complex than this but it should give a good *aide-mémoire* of priority things to remember. It is best to find a good course to go on and of course, Sing for Pleasure's 'Introduction to Orchestral Conducting' is a highly-rated favourite.

- ❑ **Know the music really well and prepare the score thoroughly**, marking anything you should know or show that you might otherwise miss. Ideally, your head should be about two bars ahead of the music in the score.
- ❑ **Conducting is one of the most sophisticated forms of non-verbal communication there is.** Everything we do (and don't do) on that podium can have an effect on the sound we help create. Ensure **your** non-verbal communication is in tune with the music. Grinning insanely through a funeral march is unhelpful, for example.
- ❑ **Know the orchestra.** If you've played in an orchestra yourself, you should have a good grounding on what an orchestra contains, how it is laid out, what instruments form its core, what occasionally get added, how they behave, who is always down the pub, etc. If you haven't, go and watch one work and read up on the subject.
- ❑ **Make friends with your leader and also your principal oboist.** Use them as a channel to communicate with the orchestra.
- ❑ **There is nothing an orchestra likes better than a clear downbeat.**
- ❑ **Place all the other beats with care**; try to think about these from a player's perspective. If I were a cellist, for example, could I easily tell what the conductor means? Where is that third beat?
- ❑ **There is a real difference between conducting holding a baton and conducting using a baton.** Aim for the latter and transmit your intention to the tip. In the words of a famous wizard, "you've really got to mean it". Don't hesitate to film yourself conducting and checking it back - am I doing what I think I'm doing or something completely different?
- ❑ **Aim to have a regular lesson with a tutor you trust.** Video a performance face on and review it together with your baton and score at hand. However good we are, there is always room for getting even better.
- ❑ **Remember that players watch you using peripheral vision**, usually not face on, unless they are performing from memory which is rare. Choral conductors find this a bit unnerving when first in front of an ensemble, don't let it. They are still watching (usually).
- ❑ **Equally, don't look at players just to be nice and engaging** unless they have something important about to happen, otherwise they may think that something important should be about to happen when it isn't, and they will find that unnerving.

- ❑ **Bowing** - if you are a string player, you have an advantage here. I'm not, so here is what I do. My leader bows her part before rehearsals start. This is then scanned and sent to the rest of the first violins and to the other string principals, who translate that into their parts, scan and send to their sections. The last thing you want to waste any time on during a dress rehearsal is a bowing debate. It should all be decided well beforehand. What if I don't like what I hear? I may sing what I want to the leader and he/she may offer me an alternative. It I may just ask for different versions and pick the one I like. Occasionally, I'm offered a better version than the one I'd planned for and it is best to smile and say yes please.
- ❑ **Get familiar with string language**; find out what spiccato, off the string, col legno, sul pointe and all these terms mean. Look them up and talk to a string-playing friend if you don't. Remember, they do want to get it right for you so let's make it as easy as possible for them to do so.
- ❑ **Setting the tempo at the beginning can be fiddly as nerves can get in the way**; carefully hear the piece in your head, from it, extract the ictus and only then do the hands come up to give the preparatory beat. Breathe with your orchestra as you bring them in.
- ❑ **Tempo changes** - prepare these carefully both mentally and in your score. These can be risky moments and are worth spending time on. If they are not going well, first ask yourself what you can do to make your intentions clearer.
- ❑ **In rehearsal, aim to play the whole movement/piece through** and then to go back and focus on bits that need fixing. The exception is when there is a really horrid time change which will go wrong unless you show how you will beat it.
- ❑ **Always restart exactly from a rehearsal figure**. Counting back x bars before B is usually a waste of time, just go from B or A.
- ❑ **You are not an octopus and cannot show everything**. Use your judgement to prioritise which cues or musical ideas you want to show at any given moment.
- ❑ **Conduct the orchestra you have in front of you** rather than the one you've been dreaming about and strike a balance between setting realistic aims and challenging your players to give of their best and a performance that they will be proud of, rather than relieved at having just got through it.
- ❑ **When trying to fix something, try it up to three times**. If it still doesn't work, for whatever reason, move on and come back to it at another time. Check that your gesture is accurate and clear.
- ❑ **Aim to use positive language wherever possible**. Avoid "No! That was TERRIBLE! (useless, lousy, awful)" etc. Try "This is what I heard, and what I would like to hear is this". "Great work, x is coming on really nicely and next, I'd like to work on y getting better". Be specific, set realistic goals, stretch them as far as they can reasonably go. Be honest, don't say that something was fabulous when it wasn't because when it *is* fabulous, how will you sincerely describe it?
- ❑ **Try not to talk over the orchestra whilst it is playing**; they won't hear you. If it is worth saying, stop and say it. Generally speaking, talk less and play more, show it, don't say it.
- ❑ **Have fun**. The sense of achievement when hours of hard work culminate in a performance everyone can be proud of is gold dust.

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