

CONDUCTING TIPS

by Kevin McChesney

BEATS – Think of a board or a table directly in front of you, about chest high. Each beat you make in your pattern, regardless of the meter, bounces on this table. If you put the bottoms of your beats at different levels, your pattern becomes unpredictable and difficult to follow.

THE DOWNBEAT – Ringers have one primary focus as they ring - they want to know “where we are.” Put another way, they don’t want to get lost. For the ringer, most other considerations are secondary. A clear downbeat is the most secure signal for indicating where you are.

The downbeat, beat “1,” should be clearly bigger than the other beats in your pattern. Think of it as being about one foot in length, vertically. Like all of your beats, the downbeat should “bounce” clearly on a plane about even with your lower ribcage – think of a ball bouncing always to the same height and you catch it every time. Never flip the hand in various directions while directing – the basic direction of every beat is down, and even the upbeat has a short downward motion before bouncing up to return to the top of the beat pattern. And never stop at the bottom of a beat - bounce, bounce, bounce!

Make sure that you give your downbeat in a position that is clear to your whole group. If you turn your body too far in one direction or another, you have blocked the view of some of your ringers. And make sure that the downbeat is nice and big – not so big that it is not clear where it starts and ends, but large enough that those ringers watching from either side of you can differentiate this beat from the others.

THE UPBEAT – The upbeat or final beat of each measure will bounce higher off your imaginary table than the preceding beats so that you can be in position for the next downbeat. Make sure that it’s “bounce-point” or ictus is still on the level of that table.

THE BEAT PATTERN – Beat patterns are no place to be creative. They’ve been around for centuries and there’s no sense in re-inventing the wheel. Be sure you know your beat patterns well so that they are automatic. Some practice will be necessary at first. I’ve seen some amazing variations on beat patterns and remarkably the groups seem to have followed, but I think that was in spite of the director rather than because of him/her. 4/4 is “floor-wall-wall-ceiling.” There is no effective substitute.

THE BATON – Practice your beat patterns in front of a mirror. Decide for yourself if a baton is helping to make your beats clearer and reduces fatigue for your arms and shoulders. If it helps, use it; if not, don’t. There is no right and wrong here. If you elect to use the baton, remind your groups that the primary function of the baton is to reduce stress on the arms, wrists, shoulders, neck, and back of the director. It does aid the ringers in seeing your beat clearly, but that is secondary.

In other words, certainly do whatever is within reason to make sure the movements of both the hands and the baton can be seen, but if the director is standing against a white background that renders the baton invisible to some ringers or if the color of the baton blends into the director’s clothing and so on, there is no need for concern. Ringers are following the movements of the director’s hands, wrists, arms, and body and the baton simply directs attention to those movements. If the baton is difficult to see, remind the ringers that they should be able to follow a director who isn’t using a baton and the baton is really being used as a physical aid to the director.

WHEN NOT USING A BATON – Be sure to keep your hand in a steady, relaxed position as you direct. Flipping the hand in various directions or a floppy, loose wrist is a terrible distraction. “Downbeat” does NOT mean to point your hand down; “upbeat” does NOT mean point to the sky. And the hand shouldn’t flip and point to the walls on either side when the pattern takes the hand in those directions. This all-too-common habit is easily corrected. Think of bouncing the palm of your hand on that table that is at the height of your lower ribcage in a consistent manner for all beats. I have my conducting students bounce a tennis ball, letting go of the ball at low ribcage height and catching again at that height. First, we do this straight down and back up, then we vary it by bouncing the ball in a 4/4 pattern - straight down and back up (beat 1); down and to the left, catch to the left (beat 2); then down and to the right, catch to the right (beat 3); down and to the center, catch at the center (beat 4). The ball is let go and caught at the height of the imaginary table and the hand is kept flat, palm parallel to the ground. This exercise gives a good idea of the feel of directing, with the hand making small but clear movements to indicate beats and keeping the pattern at a height that is clear to the ringers.

This exercise also helps with baton technique. The light energy used to indicate beats and the height of the beats is the same. I also believe that the position of the hand holding the baton is still flat, parallel to the ground, though there are other schools of thought on this.

MIRRORING – The primary conducting hand is always the right hand, even for left-handed directors; it is very confusing for players to have to read a beat pattern in the opposite direction. Despite the unfairness to left-handed directors, there simply needs to be a consistent system for there to be clear communication in all situations.

You need to make some careful decisions about mirroring your beat pattern with the left hand. Constant mirroring generally gives no information and can be very distracting. It is (or should be) strongly discouraged in choral, band, and orchestral conducting.

However, the handbell choir has a need that many other musical groups do not have. Most bell choirs are physically set up so that they take up a good deal of room from end to end. The director is positioned in the center for greatest visibility, rightly so. Those ringers on the left hand side of the director (from the director’s point of view) will have some difficulty seeing the beat pattern because they are situated poorly to see the right hand clearly at all times. Therefore, I believe more mirroring is allowed and even necessary in handbell conducting than in conducting many other musical groups.

However, mirroring constantly is distracting for both the ringers and those watching the presentation, so it is important to use mirroring only when necessary to make a musical consideration clear. It is very important to drop the mirroring and use the left hand for dynamic indications, cues, etc., at the proper times, and those are frequent.

Many directors feel awkward about their left hand when they are not mirroring. Simply let your left hand rest at your side and concentrate on the right hand. This will become natural very quickly.

DYNAMICS – The most obvious musical direction you can give with your conducting besides the beat and tempo is dynamics. The principle is very simple – bigger movements mean louder, smaller movements mean softer.

Directing dynamics has two considerations:

- 1) Conducting with enthusiasm (or nervousness, as the case may be) is not the same as conducting dynamics! As you get more excited or anxious, your movements tend to get bigger. Stay in the character of the piece. Excitement can still be communicated at a soft dynamic level using small but clear movements.
- 2) Your job as director is to *LEAD* the ringers in what they are to do. That means you have to anticipate. If the music is to get suddenly loud on beat 1 of measure 42, you need to give a strong indication with a larger upbeat on the last beat of measure 41. Your movements in directing are always a step ahead to indicate what is coming.

CUES – Cues for entrances (whether for one ringer or a whole group of ringers) should be carefully practiced. The left hand may be used to indicate an entrance. A cue needs to be given by facing the ringer or ringers who are to enter as far as is practical, and making a preparatory motion the beat before the entrance. Clearly, it's too late to bring ringers in on the beat they are to enter. Give a strong, confident motion (though not necessarily a large one) the beat before the entrance; if your motions are confident and solid, the entrance will be, too.

A trick for cues that works quite well is to actually take a breath as you cue. It's like taking a breath before singing a phrase. Clearly, the ringer does not need to have this breath the same way a singer does, but if *YOU*, the director, take a breath as if *YOU* were going to sing the phrase, it brings the ringer in on time and with more confidence. Try it – it does work!

CUT-OFFS – A cut-off does not need to have a fancy or intricate movement. The simplest way is the best – hold still, then give two short motions, one up, one down, returning to where you started. Prepare, cut - it's basically another beat with your right hand. You might add a simple closing of the fingers with either hand, but there is no need for an e-shaped motion, a twist or flourish of any kind, or any more elaborate movement. However, I do find it helpful to give an indication with my left hand as to how long the note to be cut off is to be held. So if it is a long note, my left hand makes a slow movement in the shape of a ringing movement, indicating about how long we have to go before I give the cut-off. For a short note, I just give what amounts to another beat with my right hand

CHARACTER – Your motions remind the ringers of the character of the piece. If you are using broad, flowing motions, so will they. If you are using sharper, march-like motions, so will they. But remember to make your beats bounce on that imaginary table, regardless of the character of the piece!

ANTICIPATE – The second most important function of the conductor, after indicating clear beats in a clear tempo, is to LEAD ringers in what is coming, to REMIND them of what happens next. The director ANTICIPATES the musical elements to come, and makes indications BEFORE the ringers play.

Examples:

- A larger beat just before a change from piano to forte.
- A smoother beat just before the change to a more flowing section.
- A stronger beat just before a ritard. (This indicates “watch me – the tempo is going to change!”)
- A clear beat and a breath before an entrance.
- Lifting the left hand before a cut-off.

The indicators can take on many forms. The important thing is to anticipate and indicate things before they happen. This leads to the next important subject...

PRACTICE – You as director have some homework to do. Clear directing is a PRACTICED skill. Go over your music ahead of time, listening to the music in your head or as someone plays it for you on a keyboard, or listening to a recording of the piece. Physically conduct the piece as you do this – just listening does not constitute practice! Be sure you can anticipate all cues, dynamics, fermatas, cut-offs, changes in tempo, changes in meter, etc.

The mirror is the best tool to use to develop your conducting skills. It may seem intimidating at first, but the mirror gives strong, accurate, and indispensable information as to what information you are communicating to your ringers. As you direct in front of a mirror, ask yourself if you could follow what you see. What would you change? Is the downbeat standing out from the rest? Do the beats clearly bounce in a clean pattern? Is your hand flipping (unclear) or bouncing (clear)? Are your movements too big to be clear, too small? Are you indicating loud, soft, slower, more flowing? Are you mirroring with your left hand too much? When you do use your left hand, is it giving clear and important information?

A word of caution about using a recording to practice your conducting: Remember that the recordings you receive from publishers are produced for the purpose of promoting the music. While it is true that there are a great many of these recordings that constitute very fine performances indeed, the primary goal of these promos is to give the customers an idea of how the music goes, not to produce a Carnegie Hall performances. Even the performances recorded on commercial recordings may not contain the interpretations and tempos that are right for your group. Also, practicing with a recording leads to a tendency to follow what you hear rather than to truly lead as a director. Recordings can be a good tool for practice, but be sure to practice what is valuable to YOUR group.

SUMMARY – Clear beats with a clear “bounce” give ringers all the information they need for tempo and counting. (Note that this information is NOT on the printed page, though many ringers are convinced it is. The ringers’ job is to continually develop their skill in watching the director; the director’s job is to continually strive to give as much helpful musical information as possible.) Use carefully practiced movements to indicate dynamics, cues, cut-offs, etc. And above all, anticipate these elements.

Which brings us to one final important function of the director...

INSPIRATION – When you direct with confidence, your ringers ring with confidence, and your movements become clearer and more expressive. Those who are newer to conducting find it hard to direct with strong, clear movements, particularly if they are “flipping” their beats. The best thing you can do for you and your choir is to **DIRECT WITH CONFIDENCE ANYWAY!** If you make your motions strong and the way you present yourself is kept in character with the music, your skills will improve quickly, and you cannot help but inspire a more musical and rewarding performance.

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PREVIEW

