

# The Conductor's Role

Missouri Bandmasters Association  
56th Annual Convention  
Margaritaville Lake Resort  
Osage Beach, Missouri

Tuesday, June 17, 2025  
10:30–11:30 a.m.  
Windgate Hall

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This session explores what we hope to accomplish (and what we hope to provide our students) as conductors and teachers; the fundamental relationship between conductor, score, and ensemble; and common barriers to success, progress, and growth. Though primarily philosophical in nature, the session also includes participation in technical and expressive gestural exercises.

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## A CONDUCTOR'S GOALS

- Express feelings
  - Convey emotion
  - Affect audiences
  - Grow artistically and personally
  - Share music with students
  - Make the world better
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# THREE SPHERES

- Self  
Who you are and all you bring to the enterprise
- Study  
What you know, what decisions you have made, and what you believe
- Execution  
How you communicate your self and your study with the ensemble

## STUDY AND EXECUTION

investigate — incorporate  
commitment to score — understanding of context — awareness of relationships — access to emotion

facilitate = ||: instigate — evaluate :||  
effectiveness of communication

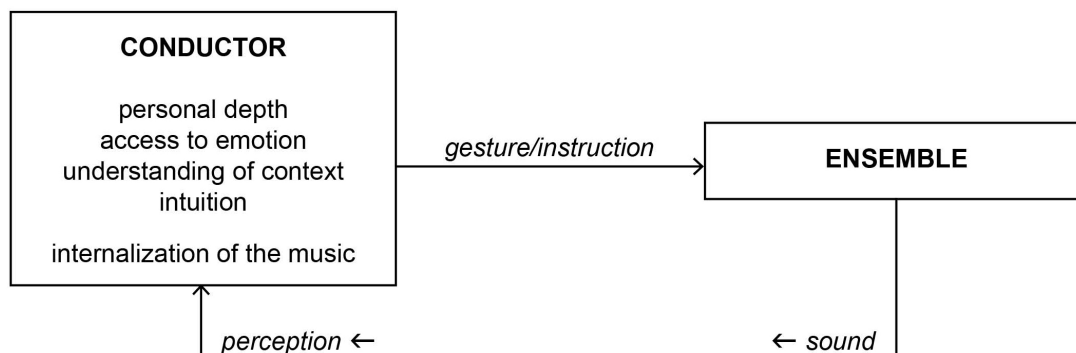
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# ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

- Originator
- Idea or message
- Recipient
- Delivery system
- Confirmation of understanding

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# THE FEEDBACK LOOP



## Where can the feedback loop break down?

- Music that lacks meaning or expressive potential
- Within the conductor
  - Personal depth
  - Understanding of context surrounding the music
  - Knowledge of the score
  - Commitment to artistic decisions
- Conductor's delivery (clarity and effectiveness of gesture)
- Sounds created by the ensemble
- Conductor's perception of the actual sound
- Conductor's ability to adjust delivery in real time

*Which area is your greatest strength? Which is your greatest liability? Which has improved most over your career?*

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## DOES CONDUCTING MATTER?

Whether it's beginning band or the Berlin Philharmonic, the point isn't how the conductor moves. The point is how the ensemble sounds. But whether it's beginning band or the Berlin Philharmonic, how the conductor moves inevitably affects how the ensemble sounds.

You can conduct ineffectually and still have an ensemble that sounds good—but why not move in a way that helps your players sound better? It saves time in rehearsal and results in a more artistically fulfilling experience for you and your students.

Effective conducting teaches effectively.

Rather than conducting being performative, can it instead be predictive and responsive?

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## HOW CONDUCTING TEACHES

Consider what you want to hear and what the players need to do to create that sound, and then your gesture becomes apparent.

There is no absolute gesture for any musical event—because what you show depends on what those players need in that moment.

Conducting is situational. Gestures are transactional. But with every gesture, conductor and players alike build memory and gain (or lose) trust.

Some questions to ask when figuring out how to move in order to influence the players to make the desired sounds:

- How should players take in and move their air (or bow)? How much? How fast? How consistently? In what direction? Towards which notes or beats?
- Should they tongue harder or lighter?
- Should they play faster or slower?
- To whom should they listen?

Can we have a fluent understanding of what physical changes we need to make in order to instigate change from the players?

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## PHYSICAL MOVEMENT VARIABLES

- Speed
- Space
- Weight
- Direction
- And manipulations thereof (e.g., acceleration)

How the tip of the baton interacts with the plane generally influences tonguing. How the shaft of the baton moves through space generally influences airstream (or bow speed).

The speed of the hand or baton influences the speed of the air/bow. Changes in the speed of the hand or baton (whether intentional or not) elicit changes in the speed of the air/bow.

Acceleration through the vertical plane elicits an accent. Acceleration through the horizontal plane elicits a crescendo. Acceleration through the sagittal plane elicits resonance.

What percentage of the beat do you spend in the heat? Is it just the attack? Or does your gesture sustain (like the air or the bow) through the duration of the beat—if that is what you hope to achieve musically? (Sometimes you want to achieve fast heat, followed by decay, lift, or space, and then your gesture should not sustain!)

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## FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

What does the ensemble need in order to bring the music to life most successfully?

What helps the ensemble most? More drama, inspiration, and excitement? Or clearer, more even time? (These are not mutually exclusive, but *sometimes* emphasizing one diminishes the other. Fortunately, they often coexist beautifully.)

There are good reasons to “break” even flow of time. (“There is no absolute gesture for a musical event.”)

- Achieve a desired effect (e.g., accent, crescendo)
- Change the tempo or articulation through overcompensation
- Excite and inspire!

Unintentional distortions of time often cause accuracy issues, dampen resonance, and lead to less expressive and compelling music-making.

Often we do something (physically) either because it has become habit or because it feels good to us. We are fooled into thinking we’re communicating musicality because we are feeling musicality. But it may have no positive (or even a negative) effect on the actual music the ensemble makes.

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## **A CLOSING THOUGHT...**

Teaching through conducting welcomes trial and error and adjustment. We learn whether a gesture elicits the desired outcome through what we hear from the ensemble. If a gesture doesn’t work, we can keep trying others until we find one that does.

Ultimately, we fail our way to success.

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# ON CHANGE, GROWTH, AND SUCCESS

He said, "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

— Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

When I'm good, I'm really good, but when I'm bad, I'm better.

— Mae West

It is good to remember that no one ever died of uncomfortable.

— Cheri Huber, *The Key: And the Name of the Key is Willingness*

It's a terrible thing, I think, in life to wait until you're ready. I have this feeling now that actually no one is ever ready to do anything. There is almost no such thing as ready. There is only now. And you may as well do it now. Generally speaking, now is as good a time as any.

— Hugh Laurie

If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.

— Lao Tzu

You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking.

— Henri Nouwen

This is your best opportunity... There will never be a better opportunity than this one. No better time, no better place, no better circumstance. Right here. Right now. Right this minute. If it's really a hard time for you, you're closest to the truth. When you are drowning, that is your best opportunity to learn to swim! Why? Because there is nothing else on your mind, nothing you need to get done first. It is your first priority. And we always do what is truly our first priority.

— Cheri Huber, *The Key: And the Name of the Key is Willingness*

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

— R. Buckminster Fuller

The talking about the thing isn't the thing. The doing of the thing is the thing.

— Amy Poehler

Do it. Just do it.

— Shia LaBoeuf

