

Sweet Adelines Workshop October 2005

These notes were skillfully prepared by Cherry Hartshorn, and are used with her permission, and my thanks.

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BASIC DIRECTING

Posture

Posture transmits the positive-ness, strength and self confidence of the director to the chorus. Your conducting stance should be feet shoulder width apart, one foot slightly in front of the other. Your body weight should be distributed evenly in the hips. Legs should be straight but not locked at the knees. Your chest should be held high and your head should remain in vertical alignment with the body, neither tilted to one side nor jutting forward. You should be adopting a good singing position for your singers to imitate.

As a director you are a leader and your posture alone will do much to communicate this.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is one of the most forceful non-verbal communications possible.

Eye contact should be established and maintained in a meaningful manner.

Eye contact conveys sincerity.

Hand and Arm Position

As you raise your arm into conducting position, the elbow should be forward of the body. The position of hand and arm can be demonstrated by shaking hands with someone. The position of the elbow will also pull the upper arm forward, allowing the shoulder, elbow, wrist and fingers to move freely. The entire arm should be directly out in front of the shoulder. The angle of forearm to upper arm is also important. Some directors will place the forearm parallel to the ground. Others, will raise the forearm slightly so that the hand is approximately mid chest height.

The hand should be slightly above the wrist at all times with the palm slightly open to the side or with the palm down.

The fingers of the hand should be slightly curved. Fingers should not be held tightly together or spread too far apart. The thumb should be in a moderate position, neither sticking straight up nor held too tightly against the hand.

Preparatory Gesture or Initial Preparation

The preparatory gesture precedes the onset of sound. The primary purpose of this preparation is to communicate to the chorus how the music which occurs on the next pulse is to be performed. The gesture tells the performers the character of the music and gives an indication of the dynamic and intensity levels at which the chorus should enter.

The director should inhale on this preparatory beat as a cue to singers.

The importance of posture, eye contact and initial breath cannot be stressed strongly enough. It is an almost simultaneous activity.

In order to prepare the chorus for the downbeat, begin by placing the hand about shoulder-high and approximately eight inches to the right of the position for the basic pulse. Then make a slight movement toward the left, raising the hand and forearm into position to give the basic pulse.

The right hand should now be in position in front of the right shoulder to move straight down toward the toes of the right foot. Be careful not to allow the preparatory gesture to move too far toward the centre of the body. If the hand moves beyond this shoulder line, the hand and arm cannot descend straight down toward the toes but must travel at an angle to the point of ictus.

The elbow stays approximately six to eight inches away from the body during the entire preparatory gesture. Let the movement of the hand, forearm and shoulder keep the elbow at an adequate distance from the body.

The Onset of Sound/Basic Pulse

The basic pulse or downbeat is straight down. If your posture and stance is correct your feet should be shoulder width apart and the basic pulse will be straight down toward the toes of the right foot. Drop the hand slowly straight down. The fingertips define the exact point of ictus (Latin *icere*, to strike) at the bottom of the gesture. The range of ictus placement for the basic pulse may be from the bottom of the sternum to the waist.

The portion of the gesture following the defining of the ictus is known as the rebound. It is a straight up movement usually following the path the hand took as it descended. Work on a smoothly coordinated gesture involving elbow, forearm,

wrist and hand. Remember the elbow stays approximately the same distance from the body during the entire gesture.

So, the whole procedure is as follows:

- a. Raise your hand to the correct height and position, approximately eight inches to the right of the basic pulse line. Come to a complete stop. This could be considered as a 'collection'.
- b. Make meaningful eye contact with the whole chorus, making sure everyone is watching you.
- c. Take a deep breath and perform the preparatory gesture at the same time. The gesture should be smooth, legato and in continuous motion. As your fingers reach the top of the preparation, the wrist has already begun to descend, giving the gesture an appearance of continuous fluidity.
- d. The down beat is straight down to the point of ictus. The ictus should be consistently located in the same plane and struck with the tips of the fingers.
- e. The rebound should 'bounce' back along the same line of descent for approximately half of the distance traveled.

Release of Sound

The purpose of the release gesture is to inform the chorus to stop producing sound, either within the music or at the end of the song. Because of the importance of the release, it should have a specific motion of its own.

For the purposes of this Basic Directing Course, Session 1, we will look at the 'combined' pulse gesture.

The conducting hand gives the downbeat, then, combines all other pulses into a single movement until the preparation for the release.

After the downbeat and rebound the hand and forearm begin a diagonal movement upward slightly to the right. To signify that the music is to continue and that the performers are to continue pouring energy into the sound, the hand and forearm must continue to move throughout the gesture.

The release gesture is marked with a preparatory loop and the tip of the fingers, indicate the precise moment of release. The release gesture should be performed at approximately eye level.

Timing the gesture so your hand is in the correct position at the moment of release is absolutely essential.

All releases must be in the character of the music.

Facial Expression

The impact of choral music relies on the way in which the text is expressed. As a director you need to be willing to explore and express the different ways the text may be interpreted. A word, a phrase, a song when expressed with different inflection and mood can take on new meaning. You will need to explore the emotions of various words.

You can convey mood in your face and body as you prepare to express a word, as you deliver the word and follow through until the impact of delivery is complete. Consider the face, eyes mouth and forehead in expressing an emotional concept.

Basic Hand Motion. The Four Pattern

Standardised conducting patterns are used to inform the chorus of its whereabouts in any one given measure.

The gesture for the first pulse of the bar is always down, the gesture for the last pulse of the bar is always up.

Conducting convention defines four different directions for the hand.

Down, up, to the inside and to the outside.

As you already know, each pulse has three components, preparation, ictus and rebound. The hand, after completing the rebound of the downbeat will then move in one of the four directions, depending on the metric structure of the music.

The four pattern, begins with the gestures you already know. Following the basic pulse gesture and the rebound, the hand moves toward the inside for pulse 2, then to the outside for pulse 3 and then up for pulse 4.

As you practice a legato four pattern, it is important to keep the hand, wrist and forearm in the same relative position to the body throughout the pattern. The palm of the hands should be either slightly open to the side or down throughout the entire pattern.

Throughout most of each preparatory gesture the wrist precedes the hand. The wrist must remain supple, yet controlled. The sequence of motion follows the

wrist as the hand travels to catch up with it, passes it by and then indicates the ictus with the tip of the fingers. As the fingers define the ictus the wrist moves away in a different direction so that the appearance of continuous motion is maintained. During pulses 2, 3 and 4 of this pattern the hand should not drop below the wrist, but should be slightly above it. The last rebound brings your hand into position to give the next downbeat.

The Three Pattern

The initial preparation for the three pattern is given exactly as the preparation for the four pattern. After the basic pulse gesture is executed however the hand and arm move to the outside of the body to give the ictus for pulse 2. Make sure that the placement of the second pulse is along the line in the horizontal plane. Pulse 3 moves the hand into position to execute the next downbeat.

The Two Pattern

The two pattern, easy as it appears needs to be treated with caution.

It is the only pattern in which the downbeat is not straight down. Be careful because if the rebound of pulse 1 is too high, the result may appear to be another downbeat. To ensure that this does not happen, push the hand out to the side for pulse 1 and make the rebound short and also to the outside.

Preparatory Gesture 2.

When the hand is moved into initial position to make the preparatory gesture, the hand and arm must come to a complete stop. Eye contact is made with the chorus. Be sure to breathe as you give the preparation.

So far we have looked at songs which begin on Pulse 1. If the song begins on pulse 4, the gesture for pulse 3 serves as the preparation. To begin this preparation the hand should be either at or slightly to the left of the basic pulse line. Come to a complete stop. Establish eye contact the chorus. Breathe as you give the preparatory gesture on pulse 3.

When beginning a song on pulse 3, pulse 2 is the preparation. Be sure to take a strong breath on pulse 2.

If the song begins on pulse 2, the downbeat serves as the preparation. The hand should be placed on the basic pulse line and dropped straight down.

Introduction of Left Hand Function.

As we have learned, the right hand is used to conduct the meter. Although there are a few occasions when the left hand will mirror the right hand, the left hand often indicates something totally different.

Each hand must become completely independent of the other. The right hand patterns must be automatic and secure against all interruptions and shifts of concentration. Your right hand must be able to conduct a correct steady pattern while your mind concentrates on something else.

The left hand can be helpful in giving release and cues. Often the left hand will give the release or cue while the right hand continues to conduct the pattern

Left hand function and use can really only be tackled when the right hand has become entirely independent.

To achieve that independence and to move to the next stage of your directing skills, here are some exercises to help achieve that right hand independence.

Direct basic 4 pattern with right hand whilst drinking a glass of water with the left.

Direct 3 pattern with right hand whilst putting on lipstick (if you have the inclination)!

Direct 4 pattern and read aloud, expressively a paragraph from a book.

Direct a 4 pattern while you walk. Vary the speed of your walking by small amounts. Be sure that these speed changes do not coincide with the subdivisions of the pulse patterns. Concentrate on walking not directing.

I hope that these notes will serve as a reference point for you for the future and assists you in the development of your directing skills.

Good Luck!

Authored by Cherry Hartshorn. August 2002

Bibliography:

'The Complete Choral Director.' Brian R. Busch
'Conducting'. Joni Bescos