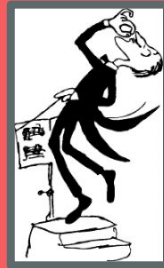


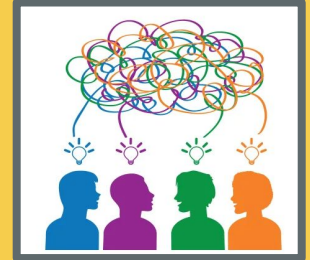
# **Teaching Through**

## **Gesture:** *Practical Approaches for Strengthening Your Chops on the Podium*



*Aaron Burgess, assistant professor of instrumental music education  
Ithaca College - School of Music, Theatre, and Dance*

# What is Conducting?



# What is Conducting?

## Study

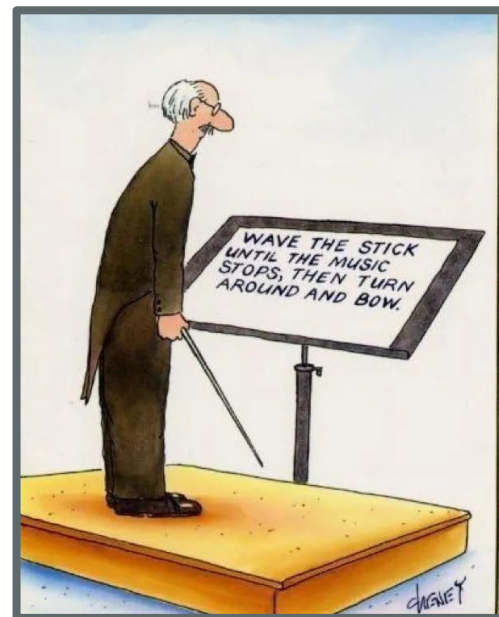
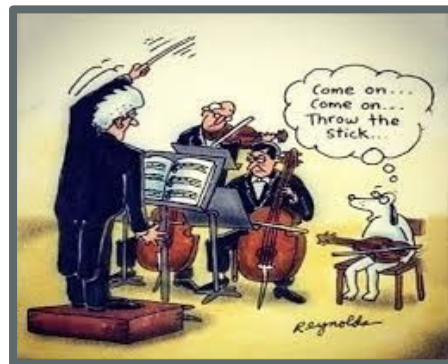
- Come to the table with a plan - interpretation!

## Communication

- Sharing the story (musicians/audience) - teaching!
- Guiding listening (musicians and audience) - teaching!
- **How** and **when** - coordination/unification!
- Collaborative - facilitator!

## Efficiency

- Shared governance takes time



*Who possesses an **insecurity**  
on the podium?*

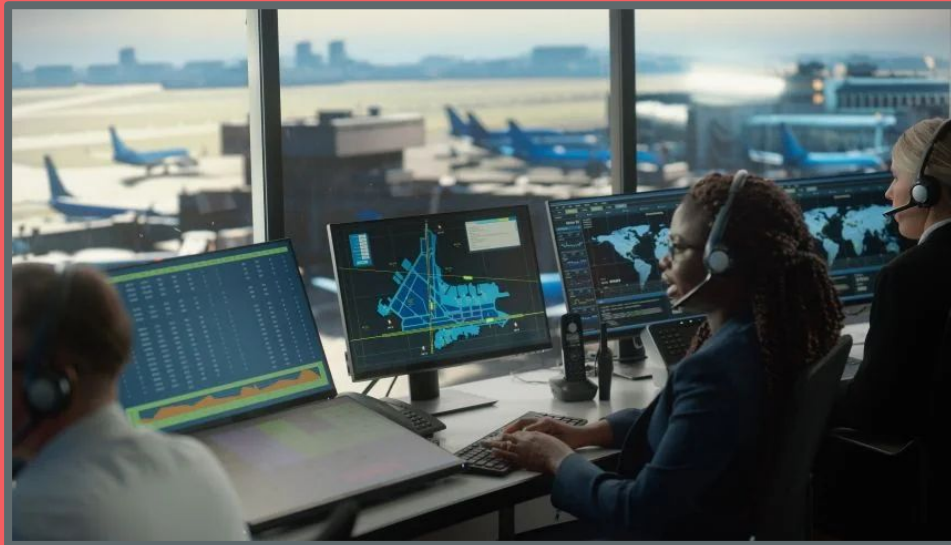


# Why are we insecure on the podium?

- We shift gears and become primarily conductors with 2 semesters of training...
  - Compared to years of study on our instrument
- We don't know the score well enough...sigh...
- We feel awkward moving our bodies in this manner...
- Our “gesture toolbox” is lacking so we just beat time...
- Our students aren't responding to our conducting so we just beat time...
- We compare ourselves to the great conductors of the world...
- Conducting doesn't seem student-centered...
- ...*what else?*



# How is conducting... “designed to work?”



# Air traffic control!

## Air traffic control analogy

- Trust
- Highly trained constituents
- Preparedness
- Autonomy but guided by common purpose
- Predictability (so the unpredictable stands out!)
- Efficiency



# *How does conducting typically work in the public school arena?*





# NO SHADE...but let's be honest...I include myself here too!

**Underprepared scores**

**Incomplete “gesture toolbox” - Beat time by default**

**Insecurity on the podium which radiates to the students**

**Students don't watch so why bother trying to make this better?**

- Too busy trying to play the notes!
- Don't know how to glean information from the conductor
- Varied levels of student experience and engagement
- Don't fully understand their role in the ensemble - teacher does it all

**Classroom management concerns which may distract from the mission**





Start with our **students!**

**If they cannot learn the notes in the first ⅓ of the “cycle,” the music is too technically demanding**

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# The conductor is a collaborator!

*Think: “air traffic control!”*

*Make space for your student’s interpretive ideas!*

*Clarify who “has the con” - it’s not always us!!!!*

***Conductors...***

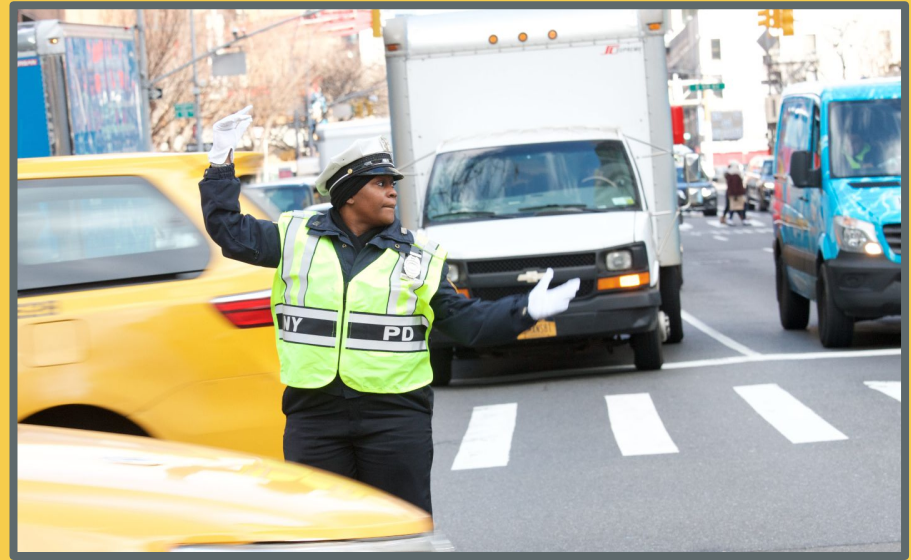
...start

...stop

...and modify time

***The players...***

...maintain time!



**Hold all constituents  
accountable!**

# Calibration & Sensitization

## Calibration

### Translating gestures into actions:

- *What does it mean?*
- *How do I do it on my instrument?*
- *Give me time to process!*
- *Healthy repetition for skill development!*

### Let students in on your process

- *Why am I doing this gesture?*
- *Tie back to story/study of score!*

**Let's sing *Happy Birthday!***

## Sensitization

*Wait...that was conducting? I thought you were swatting at a fly!*

**Describe in EXACT detail, the image below...no detail is too obvious**



# Teach your students to conduct!

Theatre exercises/games - Charades!

**Move to the music!** (turn off the lights/close eyes for this...)

**Happy Birthday OR Mary Had a Little Lamb OR an excerpt from your rep**

Students to lead warm-ups (this is not so you can do attendance!!!)

Engage them in rehearsal: *"Sally...if you were me, what might you tell the clarinets?"*

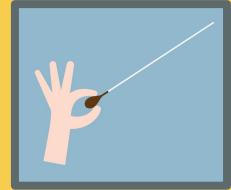
Encourage them to **MOVE** when they play to guide their sections!

Turn your large ensemble into a chamber ensemble whenever possible

In place of describing music, have them "conduct" it for you

Have them "conduct" (physical movements) when they sing

Have them conduct and **YOU** play...perform **EXACTLY** what they show you!





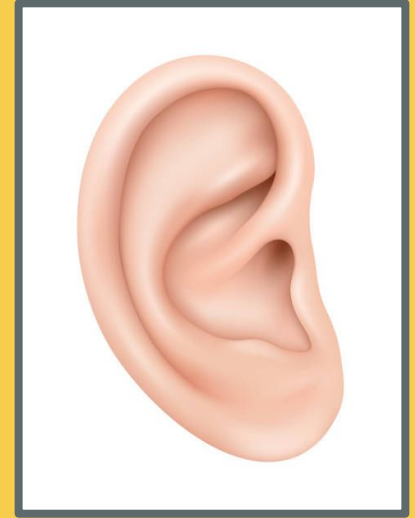
# Teach our students to listen!

## Where to listen at any given moment in a piece

- *"Joe - who plays the same melodic line as you?"*
- *"Trombones...listen to the horns and mimic their note length."*
- *"Flutes...pay the timpanist an objective complement!"*
- Ask more...tell less: *"saxes...your line stagnates...why? How do we fix it?"*
- Guide listening by **showing** whenever possible
- Stop conducting/deputize soloists or sections to lead
- Program a work with a soloist! (LISTEN and the watch conductor)

## Listening to great music!

- Teach listening through the analysis of a painting!
- Start a listening club!
- Asynchronous assignments





# Host guest conductors at your school!!!



# How do **WE** improve?



Ask yourself: *do I have to talk or can I show it?*

# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

**Selecting great and accessible works of music** (the music inspires YOU!)

## Score study...

- Battisti/Garofalo checklist - spend a few moments each day reading through the piece at your desk
- Experiment with gestures for specific moments
- *Conduct the music in your MIND, not the music you are hearing...REACT to the music you are hearing!*

### SUMMARY of the SCORE STUDY PROCESS

Steps:

#### 1. SCORE ORIENTATION

**Objective:** To acquire an overview of the entire work.

**Method** (3 phases):

- A. Read all information printed on the cover and on the introductory pages to the score.
- B. Examine first full page of music and answer two questions:
  1. Is this a transposed score or is it a score in C?
  2. Is there anything unusual about the instrumentation and score layout?
- C. Leaf through of score:
  1. Observe all tempos, meters, and key signatures.
  2. Identify and clarify unfamiliar musical terms and notation.
  3. Determine an appropriate slow reading pulse.

#### 2. SCORE READINGS

**Objectives:** To achieve an overall sound image of the music in the mind and to develop an intuitive musical feeling for the expressive potential of the music.

**Method:**

- A. Use a comfortable slow reading pulse.
- B. Don't stop.
- C. Give full reign to your musical imagination, feelings, and intuition.
- D. Do not analyze details or attempt to memorize the music.
- E. Do not use the piano or listen to recordings.
- F. Reread the score several times every day until you have achieved the objectives of step 2 in a natural way.

#### 3. SCORE ANALYSIS

**Objective:** To acquire detailed knowledge of all components of the composition.

**Method:**

A. Analyze each component of the music:

1. Melody
2. Harmony
3. Form
4. Rhythm (tempo, meter, rhythm)
5. Orchestration and texture
6. Dynamics
7. Stylistic articulations and expressive terms.

B. Complete a synthesis analysis of the composition.

#### 4. SCORE INTERPRETATION (*The Goal of Score Study*)

**Objective:** To achieve a personal interpretive image of the music in your mind.

**Method:**

- A. Apply all score knowledge and insight acquired through score study in arriving at your interpretation of the music.
- B. Resolve questions bearing on the interpretation of non-objective elements of the music:
  1. Tempi
  2. Phrasing (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic)
  3. Dynamics (vertical, horizontal)
  4. Timbres and textures
  5. Stylistic matters
- C. Refine your interpretive sound image of the music as you play it back in your mind.

Concurrently with score study, investigate background information about the composer, the composition, and the style period.

# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

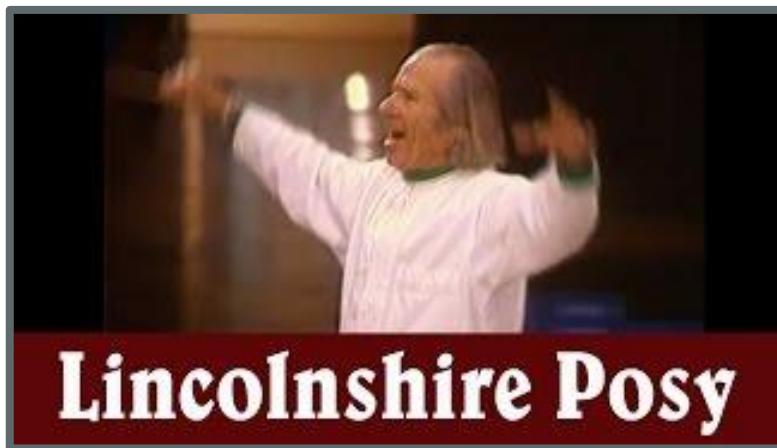
**Take a lesson or host a conducting masterclass at your school (PD session for area directors!)**

**Attend a conducting masterclass in the summer or over a school break**

**Be insistent with your ensemble** (check out Fred Fennell's video below for a glimpse into insistency!)

**Patience and trust** (of yourself and of your students)

- Give them think time - this work will slow your rehearsal progress initially
- Start infusing more “descriptive gesture” ASAP...then explain what you did. NO scaffolding required!



# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

## Arm independence

- Elizabeth Green exercises (let's try a few)
- Beat time and hold a conversation or read a document or practice conducting a piece in the “wrong” meter



In the Schoenberg *Variations* there is a very rancid odor of the midnight oil. This is machine-made music, the fruit of travail and long sleepless hours. . . But when it is all done, one feels that Schoenberg reached some such conclusion as ‘a straight line tangent to a circle is perpendicular to the radius drawn to the point of contact.’ Schoenberg’s music is huge labor to demonstrate a simple enough theorem, namely, that if you employ the chromatic scale as fundamental, you can make some very weird harmonies.  
(New York Sun, October 23, 1929)

# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

## Expanding your gesture toolbox

Observe great conductors!

Let's watch Leonard Bernstein work:

- What are you seeing?
- No detail is too obvious.
- Be exact in your description.
- Steal gestures - pause - try them!
- Scads of great content on YouTube!

**Patterns are necessary but change character of the patterns**



# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

## Expanding your gesture toolbox

Observe great conductors!

Let's watch Carlos Kleiber work:

- What are you pulling from his conducting?
- What can you realistically apply with your ensemble? More than you may think!!!
- Breaking the conducting rules is OK!!
  - It doesn't matter what you do so long as direction changes happen in time!
- Conduct phrases, not beats!





# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

*Facial expressions require practice*

**Go to the mirror...make these faces!**

- Exhilaration
- Melancholy
- Anger
- Contentment





# Strengthening our chops on the podium...

**Video-record your rehearsals...reflect... (here is a checklist...in no particular order)**

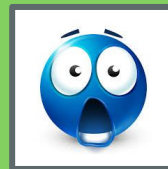
- Is my technique consistent or inconsistent?
- Is my prep in the same tempo as the downbeat?
- Is the size/style of my gesture in alignment with the musical moment?
- Have I developed “nervous habits?”
- Do I promote a “vibe of trust?” (if not, what is my podium vibe?)
- Am I insistent when they miss it the first time?
- Am I leading or following?
- Am I showing the MUSICAL more than the TECHNICAL?
- Am I illuminating the magical moments through gestural contrast?
- Am I being inventive or using the same three tricks over and over?
- Is this worth watching?
- Do we radiate authenticity? Joy? Pride in our students' work?



# Coda

## When we engage in this work...students soar!

- Are we holding our students back without even realizing it?!?
- Deepens musical sensitivity
- Expands collaborative potential in the large ensemble
- You will engage on a deeper level with the music, projecting this passion onto your students



## Pace yourself - one step at a time!

- Journey of 1000 miles!
- Fix **ONE THING AT A TIME!**
- Every bit helps!

## Show more...talk less!

## Be creative - there is NO harm in trying something new!

# Thoughts?

# Questions?



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