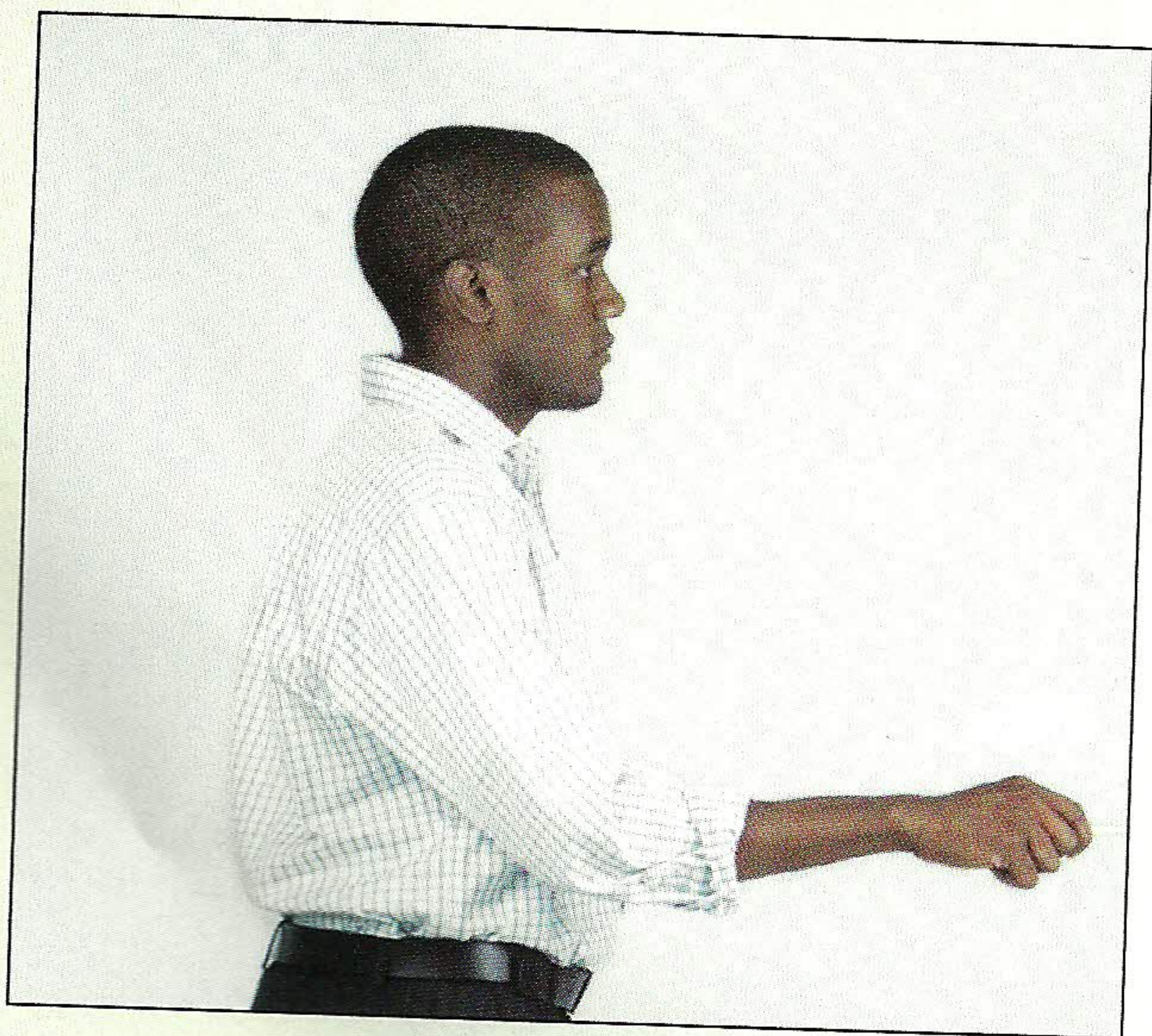


Dissecting Conducting

By Craig Fuchs

The art of conducting cannot be learned by osmosis. Most conducting students have played in ensembles for many years but few have stopped to consider the amount of physical training necessary to communicate musical ideas effectively. A simple movement of the baton can change a dynamic, while a change of facial expression can alter the mood. In my university teaching I have seen many conducting students face common pitfalls that are resolved with attention to technique and considerable practice.



Stance and Foot Position

From the beginning I encourage students to conduct with one foot slightly in front of the other. There are times when the feet should be in a symmetrical stance, but in most cases it is better to be able to shift weight both left to right and forward to back as the music changes. I feel most comfortable conducting with the left foot slightly forward but each finds a preferred stance.

A common but easily corrected habit for conductors is to rock from side to side. To correct

this urge to rock on the podium, I will stand behind students with my hands firmly on the shoulders to help them feel even weight distribution on the knees when the rocking is absent. Another effective but silly cure for rocking is to have classmates begin rocking back and forth whenever they see it. Most conducting students are unaware of the rocking motion, and friendly correction from their classmates or me solves the problem quickly.

Consistent Horizontal Plane

I firmly believe that all beats should occur on the same horizontal plane unless there is a significant reason to vary the placement. If the ictus of the various beats occurs at different places on the plane, the ensemble will enter early when the ictus is too low or late if the ictus is too high. To address this issue I place a music stand in a flat horizontal position and ask students to touch the stand lightly on each beat in a measure to become familiar with the proper placement. I encourage all students to purchase a full-length mirror for the bedroom or practice area. It is extremely helpful to place a piece of masking tape on the mirror at the correct height for the horizontal plane and then practice looking in the mirror and placing the beats in the correct position.

Variety in the Preparatory Beat

The preparatory beat conveys tempo, dynamics, and style to the ensemble, and every conducting textbook devotes a section to this important skill. One drill that enhances the instruction of the books is to write the three basic categories for each of these elements on the board – fast, medium, slow; *forte*, *mezzo forte*, *piano*; and *marcato*, *staccato*, *legato*. I then ask students to give preparatory beats for varying combinations of these elements. Students have an easy time giving

a prep beat for a fast, *forte*, and *marcato* passage but a more difficult time presenting a fast, *piano*, and *legato* section. I will play a few rounds of this game to help students learn to combine the various categories in unusual ways.

Changing Dynamics

Almost all conducting texts address this aspect of conducting although often with words that are too vague for beginning conductors. Such simple descriptions as making larger conducting gestures for louder dynamics do not help inexperienced conductors. I try to give clearer instructions by breaking the hand and arm in segments and assigning specific dynamics to various parts of the arm and hand.

I like to start in the middle dynamics and move to the extremes from there. A *mezzo-piano* dynamic should incorporate just a bit of forearm motion. If the dynamic shifts to *piano*, the motion of the forearm ceases and the only movement needed is from the wrist to the fingers. A *pianissimo* only needs motion from the fingers and perhaps a slight vertical motion of the wrist to show the penultimate beat of the pattern.

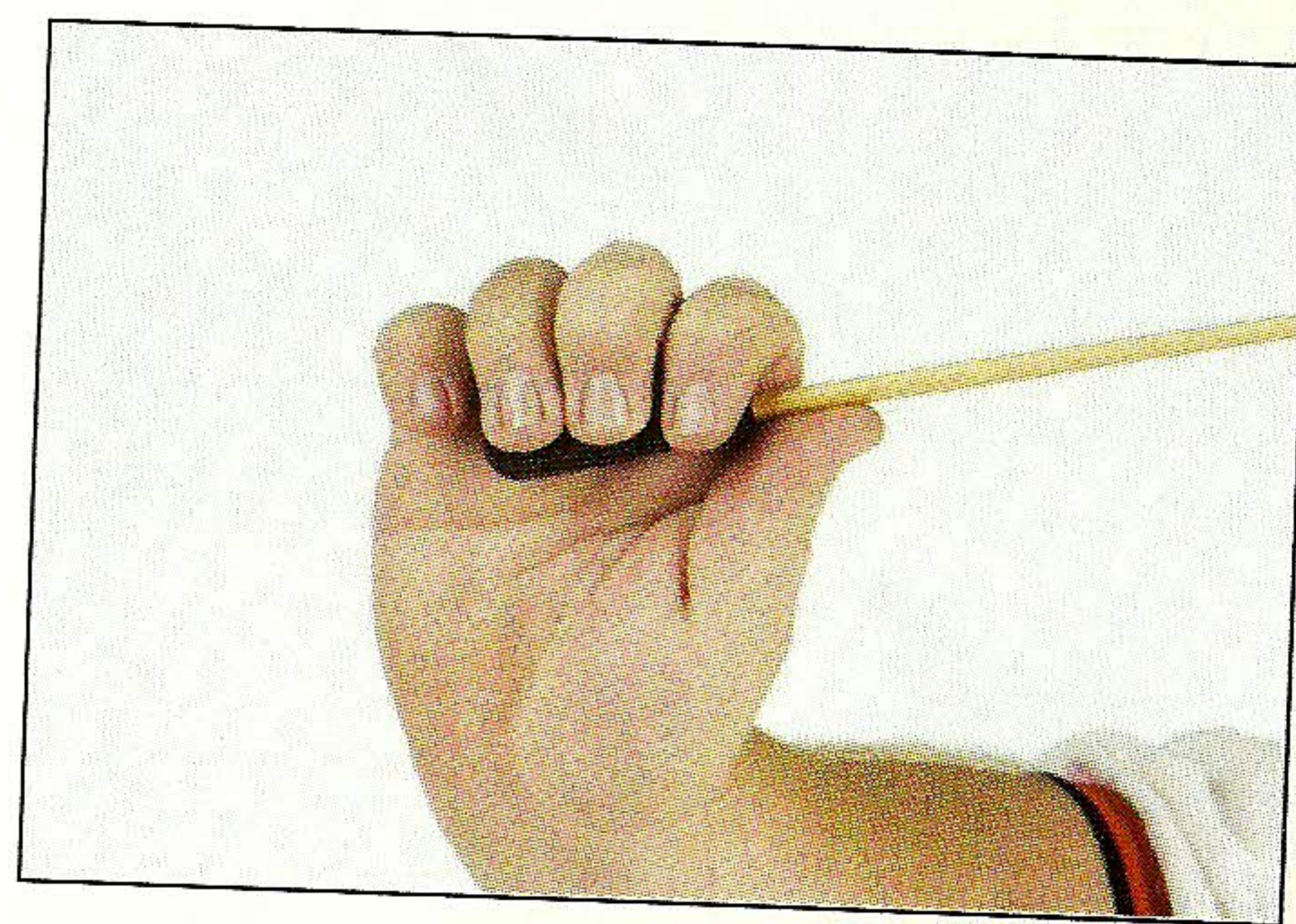
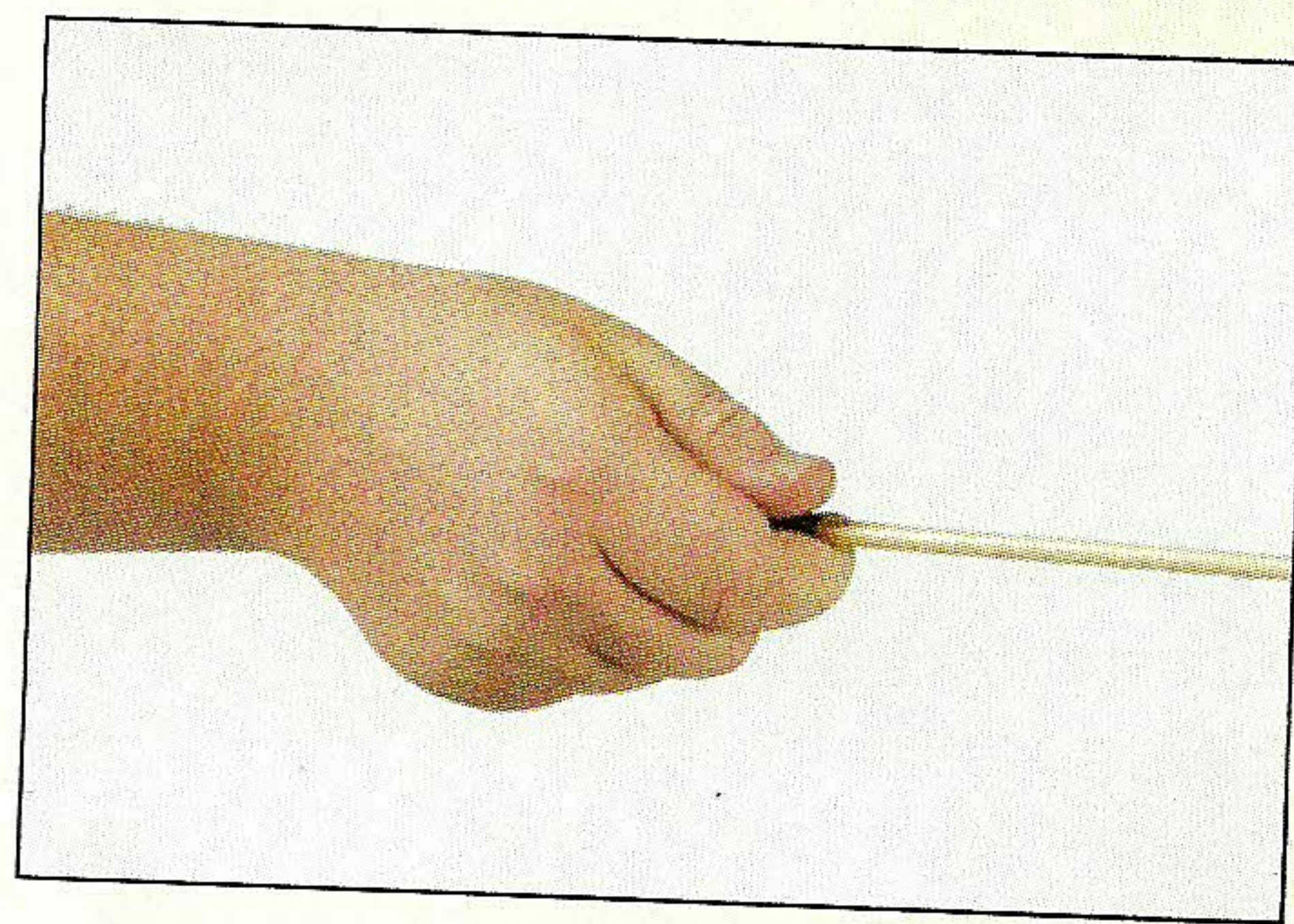
Moving in the other direction from *mezzo piano*, *mezzo-forte* requires a bit more forearm to become active but still little elbow movement. *Forte* takes an active elbow while *fortissimo* will use a slight bit of shoulder movement, again primarily in the ascending fashion on the penultimate beat of the pattern. These techniques have helped students accurately show all six dynamic levels with the baton – not just soft, medium, and loud.

Baton Position

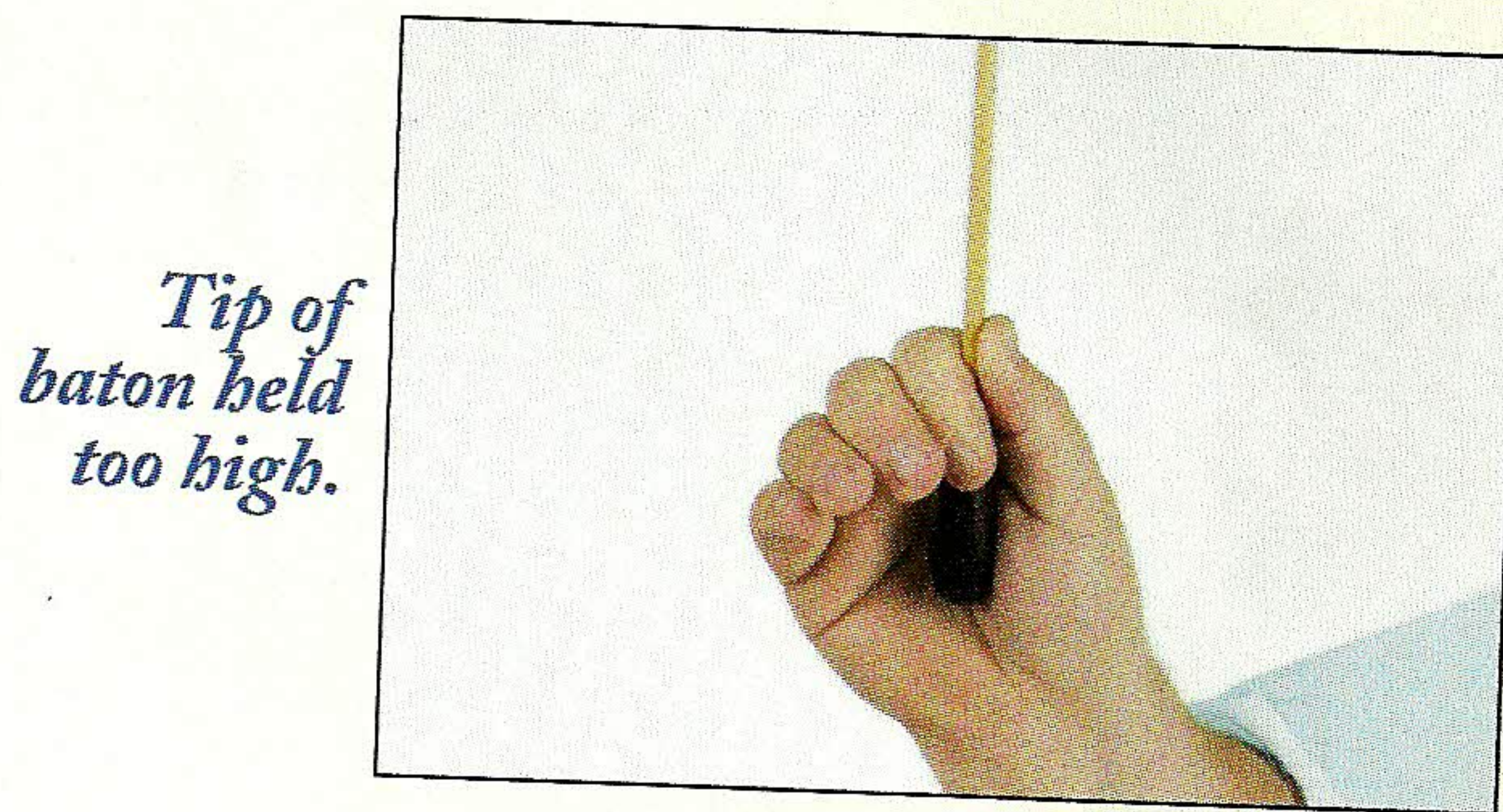
If you have ever taught conducting, you know that any technical problems students have will only be accentuated by picking up the baton. It is imperative that basic skills are learned before using a baton. One of the greatest difficulties students face is holding the baton at the proper position and angle as it exits the hand. Common problems include having the thumb on the top of the baton rather than down at the side, having the baton coming out at a sideways angle from the hand, or holding the tip of the baton at a higher position than the hand. All three of these poor techniques can be easily addressed.

I remind students that the baton should be an extension of the forearm, which sounds simple but may take additional clarification. When stu-

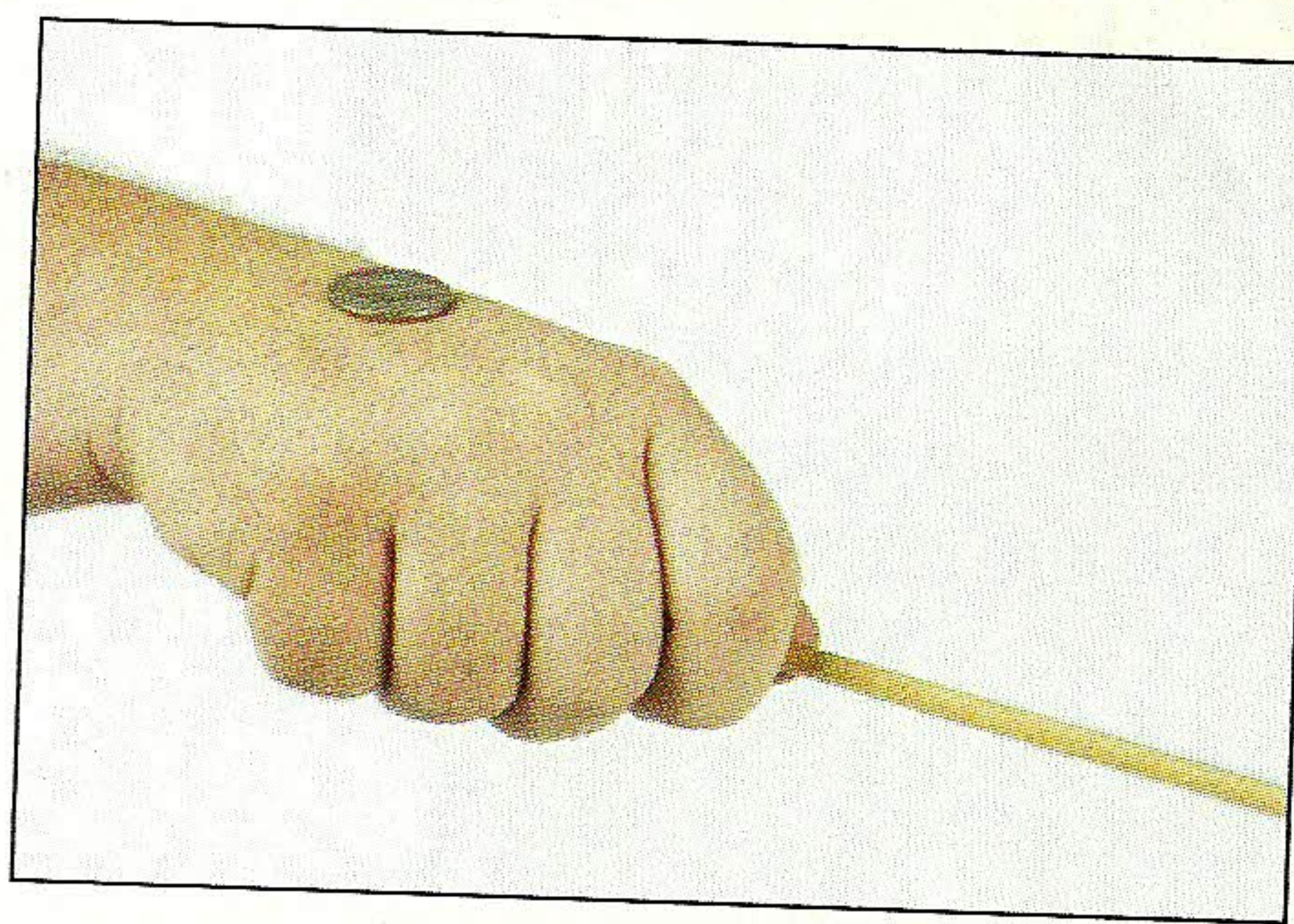
Baton incorrectly held with thumb on top.



Baton held at sideways angle.

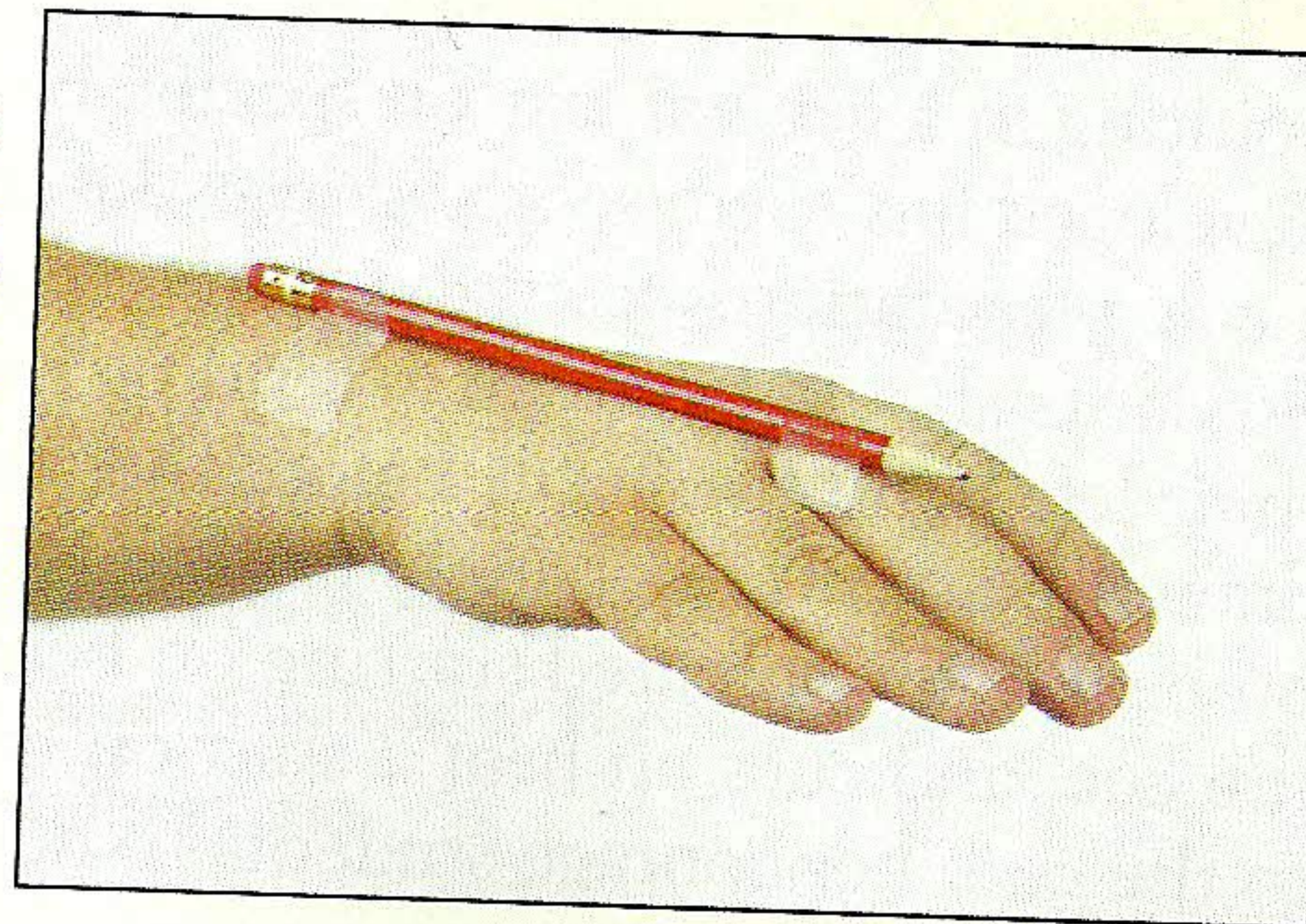


Tip of baton held too high.



Balancing a quarter on the back of the hand helps keep it straight.

Taping a pencil to the hand will keep the baton from pointing too high.

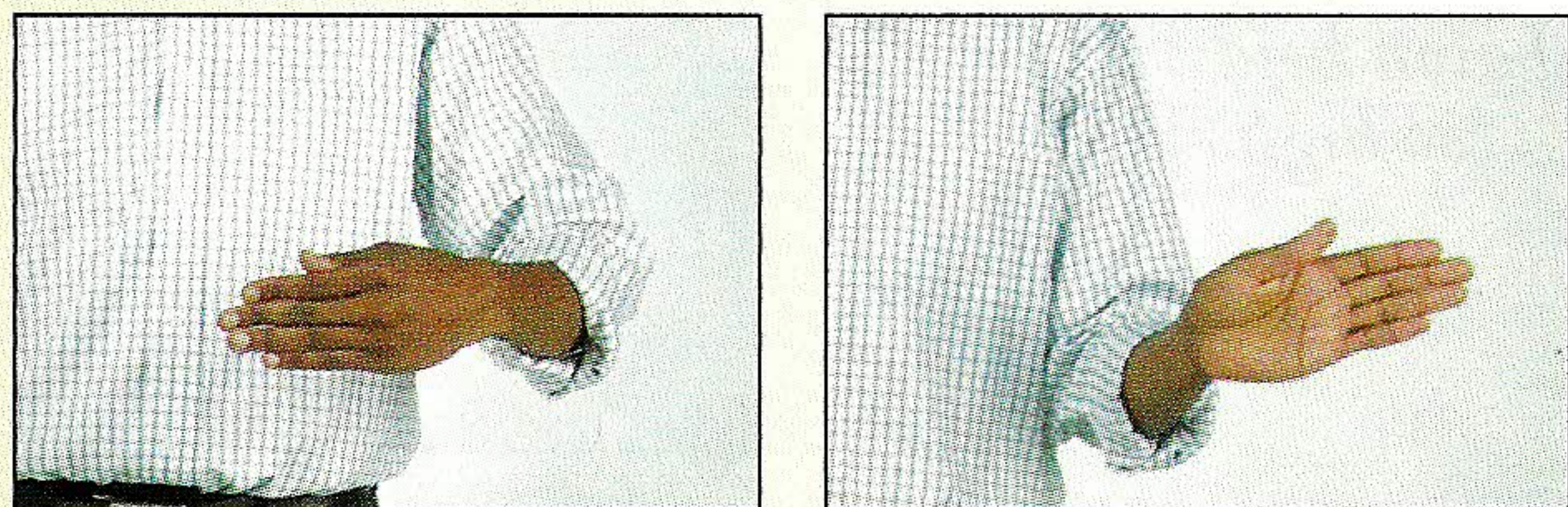


dents continue to have the thumb on top of the baton or turn the hand over on certain beats, I simply place a quarter on the back of their hands and say that they must conduct all patterns without the quarter falling off.

Problems with baton pointing to the left generally stem from where the grip of the baton is placed inside the hand. When the grip is in the crease where the fingers meet the palm, a sideways position results and produces a confusion. By repositioning the grip against the fat pad of the thumb a correct angle will result and draw the attention of players to the tip of the baton and not the hand. Finally when the baton points upward I will tape a pencil from their middle finger knuckle to the forearm. This technique prohibits bending too much at the wrist and lowers the tip of the baton into a more appropriate position.

Independence of the Left Hand

Using the left hand effectively is one of the greatest problems for conducting students. The exercises I use are not musical but are designed to develop independent motion by the two hands that can be modified for proper usage to communicate musical ideas. Students begin by sweeping the left hand out to the left and back in a variety



of counts (Out for three counts and in for one, out for two counts, in for two) while conducting a four count pattern with the right hand.

The same exercise works with the left hand moving up and down while the baton hand is executing a clear four-beat pattern. Finally practicing pushing forward and pulling back the left hand on various counts will develop the sagittal plane in the left hand. These exercises can be altered by conducting in $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, or even $\frac{5}{4}$.

Cueing Exercises

To teach that musical cues are more than just pointing in a general way on specific beats, I have developed fun exercises to address the three parts of a cue: preparation, execution, and response. Students should begin an ascending motion with their left hand two beats before the actual cue to draw the attention of students. For instance, cues on beat 1 are prepared starting on beat 3 prior to the cue, and cues on beat 2 start on beat 4 prior to the cue. I encourage students to develop a

repertoire of cueing styles and dynamics so the cues are musical. The following exercise tests my students on cueing in a musical way.

To address the response to a cue during the dead measure of each line I will call out whether the cue was too much, not enough, or just right after executing the first cue. During the dead measure, students are expected to respond with an appropriate gesture in response to my instructions before giving the second cue. The skill forces the baton hand to move almost automatically so the students do not lose the beat while focusing on cues. For assessment, I split the class into *piano* triangles, *forte* brasses, *pianissimo* violins, and *fortissimo* bass drums, and the conductors must cue the appropriate sections on the correct beat with the right dynamics, complete with response gestures between cues.

Final Examination

In my undergraduate basic conducting course, I have used Kenneth H. Phillips's *Basic Techniques of Conducting* for nine years. While there is no perfect text for every course, I find this book extremely effective in covering the objectives I have for conducting students at this level. I augment the text with numerous exercises and assignments and make minor modifications in some musical examples.

Although written quizzes and conducting exams are a successful part of the book, there is not a final exam piece that uses all of the skills learned in the course. I have written a 30-measure final exam piece that I pass out one week before the final exam. They must study and interpret the score using the skills and knowledge gained in the course. A wonderful colleague who teaches clarinet in our department comes into the conducting final each December and plays exactly what she sees from the podium. This example provides a comprehensive exam to assess the entire semester.

Craig Fuchs is chairman of the department of music and director of bands at Pittsburg State Univ., Kansas. He also conducts the wind ensemble and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in conducting and wind literature. Fuchs earned a doctoral degree in wind conducting from the University of Missouri at Kansas City, where he studied with Gary Hill.