Michael Tilson Thomas of the San Francisco Symphony

Behind *the* Baton

Conductors do more than mark time with their batons. They bring out the best in the score and the performers.

by Jon Chappell

Mary Ann Moble gets set to conduct the Jr. Philharmonic Orchestra

A conductor is like a chef: He not only creates the menu (the recipe for the musical performance), he executes it—cooking it up for the "customers" or audience on the spot. And conducting is much more than just waving your arms around. In fact, that may be one of the least important parts of the job, though it's the only one the audience ever sees.

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The musicians may be the ones making the sounds during the performance, but the conductor is vitally important to the modern ensemble, whether it's a concert, jazz or marching band; an orchestra, chorus or chamber choir; or any large group performing music that requires a coordinated approach to dynamics, phrasing, tempo and articulation.

A conductor's job, explains Miles Hoffman, author of *The NPR Classical Music Companion*, is "to shape a musical interpretation, to form ideas about the most compelling way to perform a piece, and to lead a group of musicians in such a way that those ideas are realized."

That definitely sounds like the job of a leader, but when you're not actually playing the instruments yourself, how do you go about doing that? A conductor can't exactly yell out a count-in, or tell the bassist to step out for a solo, the way some rock musicians do onstage. First, a conductor must have an idea of what to do with the music, and then must possess the skills to communicate those desires using signals, gestures and movements. Unlike the players, who only have to know their own parts and have a general sense of how to play along with the rest of the ensemble, a conductor must know every part of the score. He literally has to know exactly what every member of the ensemble is supposed to do, at every moment of the performance. More important, he has to know how to help them do their parts.

STICK CHOPS

The part of the job that everybody sees is the actual conducting—that is, keeping time with the music. "Conductors usually beat time with a stick called a baton, held in the right hand, using certain beat patterns to indicate metrical schemes," explains Hoffman. Besides the meter, the conductor also indicates how loud the music should be—wider

movements mean "play louder." Tempo is indicated by how quickly he moves the baton through its pattern.

Okay, that takes care of the right hand. What about the rest of the body? The left hand is used for cueing — telling an instrument or group of instruments that it's their turn to play. A conductor is the only person who can see all the parts at once (in the orchestral score), so it's up to him to give a warning to the musicians (who see only their own parts) when they should come in. The left hand is also used to give a specific direction — such as telling the brass not to play too loudly. In this case, the conductor outstretches his left palm to the brass section as if to say, "Easy there, guys."

Beyond his two hands, a conductor uses other parts of the body to communicate his intentions and instructions. He can sway with the music if it's a flowing passage, and he can use facial expressions to indicate what emotions should be conveyed. Skilled musicians can alter the subtleties of their delivery to reflect exactly what they see in the conductor's expressions. Even if a conductor has "great hands," he still needs to be able to communicate with his body language and facial expressions.

Nick Ingman leads a session with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

CONDUCTING BEHIND THE SCENES

A conductor is sometimes called the musical director, because that more accurately describes the entire job: directing how the music will take shape in the performance. Sure, a conductor displays the beat, tempo and dynamics by waving a baton. Without that, the musicians couldn't stay together. But that's at the very end of the process. Think of the conductor as the coach of a football team. Calling the plays during the game is important, but it's the preparation during training camp that puts the team in a position to win.

Conductors prepare by reading a score and marking it with symbols to indicate tempo, dynamics and phrasing. Written music is inadequate in expressing what the composer truly desired of a piece of music. It is the conductor's job to try to get into the composer's head and decide what he or she truly meant to say. The conductor then takes that score and brings it into rehearsal, where, through a combination of run-throughs and talk, he gets the ensemble to play what's in his "mind's ear."

So when you see a conductor in front of an orchestra, you are witnessing only the last stage of a journey that consisted of many hours of creative work and rehearsals. Before the rehearsals came the vision of how the music should sound. To know how a piece of music should sound — and to get musicians to play it a certain way — requires not only leadership but tremendous musicianship. So it is no accident that only the world's best musicians can become conductors. Most conductors are virtuoso instrumentalists in their own right, even if you don't see them playing.

There's no right or wrong combination of talk, playing and stick waving, but the best conductors know what works best for the task at hand and also know how to inspire the players. As University of New Mexico professor Brad Ellingboe says, "There's always a reason you want to follow a conductor, but it can be different for different people. For instance, one conductor may be such a great scholar, another, such a charismatic person that you want to do whatever they say. Another conductor may be deeply spiritual and show you things in the music you never saw about humanity and human nature. All great conductors have a combination of all those things, but you can't be a bad musician — even if you're really spiritual — and have good musicians want to follow you."

TODAY'S CONDUCTOR: CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLE WASHER

The modern conductor — or music director — must perform many tasks. He or she chooses the repertoire for the season, hires the soloists, discusses business issues with the board of directors, appears at fundraisers, and, finally, rehearses and performs with the orchestra. This combination of talents traditionally comes in the bodies of older, more experienced musicians. But today, younger conductors are being given the stick, opening up opportunities for a new generation of musicians. If you find yourself waving a pencil in the mirror while your iPod plays grand music, you may have what it takes. But what would be your next step?

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Irvin Mayfield conducts The New Orleans Jazz Orchestra.

If you have natural leadership skills and lots of ideas about how music should sound, you can take private conducting lessons or watch videos to learn the patterns. Major music schools such as Juilliard, Indiana, UCLA, Eastman and others, offer programs in conducting, though most are for advanced-degree (masters and beyond) students.

But you can also learn a lot by working on your own. Study scores (many are available at libraries), watch videos and go to concerts where you are able to sit as close to the conductor's podium as you can — close enough to hear the conductor breathe. Most conductors will tell you it's a good idea to learn to breathe with the musicians, especially since much of phrasing depends on breathing — even with string instruments!

You can also use software to aid in your understanding of conducting. NOTION, the composition program available from VirtuosoWorks, Inc., includes samples (actual digital recordings) of the London Symphony Orchestra, which you can use in the playback of your compositions and arrangements. NOTION's NTEMPO feature allows you to vary the tempo in real time, much in the way conductors do with their hand motions. NOTION, as well as some professional-level scoring programs, lets you use the mouse and keyboard to create tempo and dynamic changes, articulation marks, phrasing and slur marks, accelerandos and ritardandos, and pauses — just as a conductor would when preparing a score.

To be a conductor, you must become a student of the music and know everything about it — all the parts, the life of the composer, the time in which it was written, and the composer's intentions of how it should sound. You must have such knowledge about each piece of music you conduct because you are going to be telling people how to do it *your* way, which is the *right* way (and this should be said in a *nice* way, of course). T

Judging the Conductor

One of the best ways to understand how a conductor communicates ideas is to attend or participate in a conducting competition. When you have to establish a basis for saying why Judy is better than Johnny, it becomes crystal clear what makes for good and bad practices. There are many conducting contests held all over the world, and most of the contestants are in their late teens or early 20s. Richard Farnes, music director of Opera North and a judge in England's Leeds Conducting Competition, defines a winning conductor as one who is "a good musician who can communicate ideas as succinctly as possible, preferably through physical gesture rather than through talk. We want to see if he or she can take the orchestra further, inspire the players, give them confidence, stretch them, and make them play to 100 percent of their ability."

So judges aren't just looking for "good stick." They want to know what the conductor's ideas for the music are, and how well he or she communicates those ideas. For that, you can't just wait 'til you jump up on the podium. You have to do some homework first.