

Issues of Effectiveness in Music Conducting

Mohd Nizam Nasrifan
Sultan Idris Education University

Abstract

The challenge of narrowing the achievement gap in effectiveness in conducting among students begin with reviewing the fundamental techniques and skills that are regularly connected to the quality of their effectiveness as conductors and examining the necessary qualities needed for effective conducting. The writer explores the causes of the poor conducting skills and looks closely at the various methods for addressing these problems.

Keywords: conducting, conducting technique, effectiveness in conducting, expressive conducting, issues in conducting

Abstrak

Cabaran untuk mengurangkan jurang pencapaian pelajar dalam aspek keberkesanan dalam pimpinan muzik bermula dengan membincangkan teknik-teknik asas dan kemahiran-kemahiran yang berkait rapat dengan kualiti kepimpinan dan mengenalpasti kualiti diri yang diperlukan. Penulis seterusnya meneroka punca-punca kelemahan dalam kemahiran memimpin muzik dan meneliti beberapa kaedah penyelesaiannya.

Kata Kunci: ekspresif pimpinan muzik, isu-isu dalam pimpinan muzik, keberkesanan dalam pimpinan muzik, pimpinan muzik, teknik pimpinan muzik

Corresponding author:

Mohd Nizam Nasrifan
Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI)
35900 Tanjong Malim
Perak, Malaysia
mnizam@upsi.edu.my

Introduction

Poor conducting techniques and ineffectual gestures can easily become habits. According to Madsen (2003) humans develop habits due to of repetition. Because a large percentage of music students will use their conducting skills extensively during their career as a music educator and the development of effective non-verbal communication through conducting gestures is essential in producing superior musical performances in school. Therefore, a discussion to improve the conducting skills of students within undergraduate conducting courses seems warranted. This will include conducting techniques, personal qualities, preparation, communication and expression. Strategies and solutions will then be discussed.

Music conducting techniques

The quality of conductors' techniques and skills are regularly connected to the quality of their effectiveness as conductors. Musical ensembles such as orchestras, choirs and concert bands need conductors to merge musicians or singers, set the tempo, accomplish accurate preparations and beats, and structure the sound of the ensemble. Music conducting is the art of leading and directing a musical performance by using visible gestures. In the study of conducting, the main focus is on learning the basic styles of physical musical gestures. It is an applied art and skill that reflects all aspects of a good musical performance through the conductor's physical action. According to Nakra (2002), "Conducting is a precise system of symbolically mapped gestures. While styles can vary greatly across individuals, conductors do share an established technique" (p.11). The common fundamental techniques involved are non-verbal gestures such as the starting position, preparatory beat, beat pattern, cues, releases and styles of beating. Gillis (2010) discusses how adeptness of these basic gestures is of critical importance to convey messages to the musicians. Another view is how a conductor's non-verbal behavior off the podium is just as influential to ratings of overall conducting effectiveness as are non-verbal behaviours on the podium (Fredrickson, W. E., Johnson, C. M., & Robinson, C. 1998). Over time, as the knowledge and proficiency in conducting has developed, a conductor will be able to include his or her own unique movements to create their own touch, "a touch that will ideally be firmly grounded in a solid foundation that promotes the music effectively" (Mailman, 2000).

Technically, a conductor leads and influences the music performance using his or her entire body language, ranging from his or her general posture to the faintest bend in the back or leg (Fried, 2001). The most important part is the face and often more influential than the hands. A glance of the eye can indicate an exact entry at a certain stage and indirectly encourage the players to keep their attention through the music drama. It can also show when something is going wrong. Apart from that, during conducting, certain conductors smile briefly to thank individuals or groups for quality performances. Additionally, facial variations of the conductor indicate the style or character of the music played. This helps the musicians collectively to find the right expression. The eyes, which are a primary component of the face, should be used to create a direct link between the conductor and each ensemble member. According to McClung (2005), the conductor should begin by connecting eyes with each ensemble member at all preparatory breaths, phrase beginnings, important musical cues, and musical releases with total eye contact.

Necessary qualities needed for effective conducting.

One of the most valuable resources available to improve the quality of the orchestras, choirs and concert bands is effective conducting. Conducting refers to comprehensive and detailed responsibility that requires extensive study and practice of music. An effective conductor is an individual who: demonstrates a broad interest in literature and culture; has mastered the musical competencies in the areas of conducting technique, theory and harmony; sight-reading, music history and literature; performance practices, as well as a practical knowledge of the instruments within the

ensemble (Phillips, 1997). The research has discussed some of personal qualities, skills and knowledge needed for effective conducting.

Leadership

One of the major factors in the effectiveness of the music conducting is leadership quality. Yukl (2001) stresses how leadership abilities not only affect the leader's effectiveness in relationship to his or her organisation but also the effectiveness of the organisation itself. A conductor must be able to inspire and challenge musicians to perform at their highest possible level through leadership. The conductor should be supportive and positive rather than destructive to the performer through unhelpful approaches. Lebrecht (2001) reiterates that the conductor is the crucial feature in successful musical ensembles. He describes how lacking of admirable leadership skills, choirs and orchestras are performing in unproductive musical activities. It is the effective conductor who creates the difference. Rothwell, Hohne, and King (2000) point out that performance and behavior are separate, but that behaviours are what lead to great performance. They discuss, however, that behaviors can positively or negatively affect performance and it is up to the leader to lay the foundations for success by from the beginning.

The conductor Erich Leinsdorf (cited in Battisti, 2007), expresses a belief that all conductors even those with extra ordinary talent, superior insight, and in depth knowledge of music – need persuasive leadership abilities in order to succeed. The conductor Leonard Bernstein (cited in Battisti, 2007) describes how a conductor's leadership skills refer to his or her ability to motivate and inspire players and is the major key to successful an exciting ensemble performances. Leonard Bernstein feels that a conductor “must not only make the orchestra play; he must exalt them and lift them”. Furthermore, Battisti (2007) states that, “The conductor leader must be totally committed to what he or she does, and enjoys leading” (p.80). He also stresses that “the ability to complete tasks is the measure of a conductor-leader's leadership. Only through accomplishments can leaders gain and retain the confidence, trust and support of their constituency” (p.81).

The conductor's preparation

Conducting has a series of preparations that occur before the musical event. According to Boonshaft (2002), being prepared is the most important factor of a successful conducting practice. When a conductor is unprepared, he will be relatively useless and ineffective. Boonshaft added that the conductor who has truly prepared a work will allow his or her ensemble to progress at a far greater speed with better results and more accurately represent the composer's wishes. Other opinions revealed that time spent in preparation before the actual conducting performance contributes to conductor effectiveness (Lane, 2004; Price & Byo, 2002). Gillis (2008) states that in order to present quality instruction in rehearsal, a vital component is the conductor should have sufficient time for score and rehearsal preparation. It is important therefore, that every conductor or music educator should have their own personal system of preparation in order to successfully deliver and create meaningful musical experiences in every rehearsal.

Mastering the score

This begins with the conductor's initial interest in a work to be performed and continues to the point to which the musical event actually sounds. Price and Byo (2002) reported that the internalisation of the score will assist the creation of an idealised aural image of a performance as it should occur whereby the aural image is an “end goal” to which an actual rehearsal or performance can be compared to. This means that the conductor must be able to hear the score in his or her head. The conductor must literally be able to hear each musical event in the mind's ear before it is sounded. Knowledge of the musical score appears to be a pivotal aspect of determining appropriate gestures in

addition to experience (Lane, 2004). Score analysis allows one to discover the complexities and artistic qualities which good repertoire can offer (Gillis, 2008). Here, mastering the score will strengthen the ability to recall a variety of score details over an entire phrase with a minimal glance at the score.

Effective use of non-verbal communication

Neuen (2002) firmly believes that the effective use of conducting gestures to communicate musical intention is a primary goal of the successful conductor. He explains that the development of skilled, refined and artistic conducting technique should be as high priority as a fine violinist's right hand and bowing technique. He goes on by saying that conducting gestures are a form of non-verbal communication which effect musical sounds in predictable ways. It is thus true that a relationship should exist between verbal communication and non-verbal communications in order to reinforce specific conducting gestures. An investigation by Johnson, Fredrickson, Achey and Gentry (2003), who investigated perceptions and preferences for conductors, revealed that the conductors who possess and demonstrate high amounts of productive non-verbal behaviors are preferred by students and thought of as more effective. Moreover, Bell (2002) suggests that clear verbal communication is essential for anyone who interacts with people in a learning situation. Bell also stresses how musical rehearsals have their own vocabulary, and the conductor is the sole transmitter of essential musical information.

Other research reveals the importance of the effective use of non-verbal communication. Manfredo (2006) discusses how strong eye contact and a personalised style help strengthen communication between conductor and music performer. Johnson, Fredrickson, Achey, and Gentry (2003) also assess the effects of eye contact, facial expression, body movement, and also left and right arm movement on the overall evaluation of student and professional conductors. For student conductors, the right arm is the most important factor in evaluation of conductor effectiveness. Results also show how left hand gesture and increased eye contact were the most important factors in deciding the professional conductor's overall effectiveness.

Expression in conducting

Harris (2001) reveals that many conductors and musicians agree that nearly every emotional mood can be represented and more accurately expressed by movement than through verbalisation. He discovers that this is the essential way for a conductor to gain high quality music performances. Kruckenberg (1997) claims that the conductor is not supposed to reproduce the music visually - he should inspire the orchestra to do so acoustically. Ability to elicit musically expressive performances that are visually communicated through non-verbal expressivity is another necessary quality of an effective conductor. Expressive gestures can encourage an expressive performance by both the conductor and ensemble. As claimed by Gabrielsson (1999), the attainment of an expressive performance should be the goal of all performers and this would seem to be part of the goals that conductors have in their multifaceted relationships with their ensembles in making music. Expressive conducting can influence the musical performance of an ensemble (Cofer, 1998; Kelly, 1997; Price & Chang, 2005). However, research on the expression of conductors as it pertains to the expressivity of their ensemble performances is still uncertain. For example, research on expression and ensemble performance by Price and Chang (2005) reveal that it is not clear if the expressivity of conductors demonstrated during performances, has any relationship to the expressivity of their ensemble performances. Bergee (2003) reminds that most difficult task amongst musicians and music conductors is finding expressive performances.

In summary, the success in incorporating these qualities will enhance the ability of a conductor to demonstrate clear technique and develop a repertoire of gestures relevant to all styles of music. It is not the conductor but the ensemble that generates the sound however, playing errors may be the result of the poor conductor's skills. Further discussion will explore the cause of the poor conducting skills

Causes of poor conducting skills

Although the minimisation of errors is probably a goal of most conductors, many errors still occur. Labuta (2000) reveals that the major causes of ineffective conducting performances by students is failure to develop readable conducting techniques or gestures that represent; appropriate attacks and releases, tempo, meter, style, dynamics, balance, cuing, accentuation, phrasing and interpretation. Labuta states, “Learners acquire conducting competencies most efficiently by solving problems contained in music, not by practicing techniques in isolation” (p. 3). Poor conducting techniques and ineffectual gestures can easily become habits. McClung (2005) reiterates that bad habits, or ineffective gestures, inhibit musical intentions.

Battisti (2007) comments how the lack of personal characteristics, skills, knowledge and experience will lead to poor conducting performances. He also mentions that the development of excellent sight reading, inner and external hearing skills is vital. He warns how the lack of sight reading will seriously handicap a conductor’s ability to study score, and lack of inner and external hearing will hinder the ability rehearse ensemble effectively. Other possible causes of poor conducting skills recognised by conducting personalities are; lack of preparation (Boonshaft, 2002; Gillis, 2008; Lane, 2004; Phillips, 1997; Price & Byo, 2002), failure to completely analyse the score (Cofer, 1998; Harris, 2001; Lane, 2004; Price & Byo, 2002) and lack of confidence (Battisti, 2007; Labuta, 2000).

In summary, errors occur naturally in the conducting learning process, and how instructors deal with inevitable errors in student performance is one of the fundamental components of teaching expertise in conducting. Cavitt (2003) stresses that the task for instructor of conducting performance skills is to quickly correct errors that occur, before inaccurate or incorrect aspects of performance develop habits that make them resistant to change. Next, the writer will discuss solutions in order to resolve the poor conducting skills that cause errors in conducting performance.

Strategies to solve these problems

Correcting errors in conducting involves knowing what, when, and how to bring about positive changes in student performance (Cavitt, 2003). There are several strategies proposed by scholars in the music conducting field to improve conducting ability, especially for beginner conductors. Battisti (2007) suggests that young conductors potentially minimise conducting errors and develop their conducting effectiveness through experiences in; rehearsing ensembles, observing other conductors, participating in conducting courses, clinics and symposiums, reading articles, journals and books. He also thought that young conductors can benefit greatly from observing excellent professional and school or amateur orchestras, instrumental ensembles, and choral conductors rehearsing their ensembles. McClung (2005) also suggests that monitoring personal conducting techniques and eliminating ineffective gestures can produce desirable results. Another alternative, Bell (2002) stresses that a novice conductor instills confidence in the performers if he or she; shows enthusiasm during rehearsal, gives clear and easy-to-understand directions that correct errors and improve the ensemble's performance, and chooses repertoire that is appropriate for the group. Another solution, Battisti (2007) proposes that young conductors need to take advantage of all opportunities to conduct live musicians. He believes that by conducting live musicians skills, techniques, and procedures needed for rehearsing and conducting ensembles be developed.

Guest conductor’s special performance programs can be a worthwhile strategy because it offers great chances for students to develop and learn conducting skills at the hands or baton of an accredited guest conductor. Glosser (2005) believes that when the host and guest conductor have shared expectations, there is a greater likelihood that conducting students will have an outstanding performance, grow as young musicians, and enjoy the learning process. The guest conductor can make a great impact on the conducting lesson, but Glosser gives condition that, “If students come unprepared, the rehearsals can be gruelling, even with the best guest conductor (p. 39).

Study the score

To communicate the expressive potential of a musical composition to an ensemble in an effective and efficient manner, a conductor must first acquire an understanding of the score. Failure to completely comprehend the music and formulate specific interpretation possibly will decrease the conducting effectiveness. Hence the conductor's first solution of conducting error is score study. Battisti and Garofalo (1990) notes that:

Interpretive decisions are based on insight and knowledge gained through thoughtful and imaginative study of the score. To create music on the podium, the conductor must know the score completely and have a clear conceptual image of the piece in his or her mind. When conducting, the priority should be realization of the mental model of the music and not the mechanical execution of the composer's notation. To reach the stage, it is necessary for the conductor to have completely internalized the score through study (p.1).

Effectiveness of future conducting depends on the students' ability to analyse and prepare the score. Labuta (2000) calls the score study process as "conception" which refers to the constructing of conductor's inner hearing of the correct performance. Labuta notes that the inner hearing of the score is the basis for interpreting music and for developing conducting technique. Score study also helps student conductors to anticipate problems that may arise during conducting and rehearsal (Gillis, 2008; Lane, 2004; Labuta, 2000). Labuta (2000) recommends procedures for score analysis consisting of three interrelating steps; (a) acquire a conception of the music which encompass phrase movement, nuance, harmonic tension, climax, evolve, and dynamic aspects of the musical line; (b) anticipate problems of conducting which identify the location of possible trouble spot by mark the potential conducting difficulties area using color coding system, and (c) anticipate problems of ensemble which take note of the expected technical and interpretive errors by the performers, and plan how to correct them if they occur in rehearsal.

Use of the videotape

The use of videotape recording as an observational tool is a reliable method of utilising and categorising non-verbal communication of conductors (Manfredo, 2006; Price, 2002). Zielinski (2005) and Morrison, S. J; Price, H. E., Geiger, G., and Cornacchio, R. A. (2009) suggests for instructors to set up a videotape rehearsal, set a day for constructive criticisms and discussion; and allow students to critique themselves. This is parallel of what Battisti (2007) mentions, "Reviewing video recordings of rehearsals and concert performances is an excellent way for young conductors to evaluate the effectiveness of their rehearsal procedures and conducting technique" (p.129). Browning and Porter (2007) recommends that pre-service music teachers can be trained to identify those effective behaviors while observing others and themselves, and that they can demonstrate those behaviors on demand if they have had proper instruction and practice in this area. According to Gillis (2010), part of the conducting learning educational process is "periodically video-recording oneself to assess deficiencies and note progress with consideration given to technique and communication" (p.37). Another view, McAlister (2009) states that the activity of video recording and watch back to observe personality characteristics is effective in self-evaluation. Manfredo (2006) suggests, "To effectively pace rehearsals, all ensemble conductors-young or old-should regularly videotape themselves and analyze their behavior" (p.42). He also adds, "Reflective self-analysis can be a very productive means of professional development" (p.42). Researchers have studied self-evaluation in a number of educational settings, for example, two pedagogical approaches in particular-peer interaction/feedback and observation of videotape-have enhanced students' ability to self-evaluate music conducting skills as it has potential to bring about positive change in students. (Colwell, 1995; McClung, 2005).

Instructor feedback

A fundamental component in creating stimulated and confident conductors is by providing a forceful, reflective and responsive attentiveness of matters within instrumental conducting that facilitate student teachers to remain actively appointed with their own conducting. The core goal of giving feedback is to effect positive change and refine the quality of student performance in conducting. According to Brock and Grady (2007), beginning teachers need frequent feedback on what is working and areas in which they need improvement. The authors notes that unaddressed problems may have a negative effect on their future teaching career and their perception of the teaching profession. According to Cavitt (2003), “The process of correcting errors in the context of instrumental music rehearsals is a large part of what takes place when teachers and students work together to refine students’ music performance skills” (p.18). In a study, Manfredo (2006) discusses how ensemble instructors should strive for a learning environment characterised by a consistent level of positive effort, with a proper balance of time allocated for instructor feedback. Manfredo stresses that, effective instructors must be able to make the proportion for feedback regarding to student performance. In view of that, Stanulis R. N., Campbell, P. E., & Hicks, J. (2002) notes that good instructors give feedback about students’ strengths and weaknesses and can help the trainee teacher develop self-confidence. Conway (2005) relates the case of a student who was so grateful to her instrumental director for the feedback she received, that he considered this a model for excellent teaching.

Summary

An important factor in successful musical ensembles is the conductor. Lack of good conducting skills will result in poor musical achievement. It is the effective conductor who makes the difference. This is a critical factor in the ensemble becoming successful and the quality that an effective conductor must possess. To this extent, the writer justifies that it is crucial for the each student conductor to review and evaluate the conducting techniques he or she used during the rehearsal. In conjunction with the use of videotape, the interactive instructor feedback and responses will help students identify and take the appropriate action.

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Biography

Mohd Nizam Nasrifan studied for a Bachelor of Education (Music) at Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI), Malaysia and later continued his study for a Masters of Education (Music) at the same university. He is currently working at UPSI where he lectures in conducting. In 2011 he completed his studies towards a Doctorate in Music Education at NOVA Southeastern University, Florida, USA. Mohd Nizam actively involved in various musical activities including marching bands and orchestras. He has judged various international Marching Band competitions in Malaysia. He is also an active conductor, arranger and percussionist.