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Communicative gestures: going beyond beating time

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As a teacher of choral conducting students, I often ask myself why I spend so much time teaching “patterns” in conducting class. We spend a semester trying to perfect the most appropriate size, shape, ictus, rebounds, and hand positions. Yet, the most productive and meaningful gestures that I use as a conductor are the ones that stray from the pattern and communicate a specific nuance, whether it is one of stylistic character, textual emphasis, or vocal pedagogy.

I must state that I do strongly believe that perfecting the art of conducting patterns is the foundation of being an excellent conductor since it should communicate clarity, articulation, tempo, dynamics, phrasing, and a myriad of expressive details. However, once you have a strong grasp of the coordination necessary for conducting patterns, I think it is time to experiment by including gestures in your conducting that go beyond “pattern.”

Many of us remember from one of our education courses in college, that we can be classified into three various categories of learners: aural, visual, and kinesthetic. Teaching singing can, and should, address all three types of learning, although the kinesthetic element is often forgotten. The more experience I have as a conductor of choirs, no matter what level, the stronger I feel that having singers physically experience an appropriate body movement or gesture will encourage healthy, energetic and sensitive singing.

One of my favorite ways of incorporating expressive gestures is to use a gesture that will invite singers to sing with a certain tone color that will also be produced in a healthy, pedagogical manner. In teaching the choral composition “Dirait-on, by Morten Lauridsen, for example, I tried to develop a warm tone color and flowing, legato phrases. To encourage the sense of flowing phrases, it is important to “sing between the notes,” which emphasizes vowels and breath flow.

I asked singers to put down their music and, using both arms in front of the body in large, circular motions, position hands perpendicular to the floor with palms facing the body. In leading this exercise, I encouraged them to allow

hands to sweep close to the body from the vicinity of the abdomen up towards the head, then over, out, and back down. The singers continued this circular motion while all sang the melodic line and, after several rehearsals doing this, the choir was asked to sing the same way without the arm movement.

Whenever the sense of the flowing phrase diminished, or just as a reminder, I would break from the conducting pattern and insert a smaller version of the circular movement into my conducting. I have rarely seen a singer who fails to see the meaning of this gesture. The gesture of a circular motion simulates the movement of breath flow and, without going into lengthy explanations, supports the fact that energetic singing does not happen from the neck up and that breath should not be held or conserved in the upper chest or neck.

To encourage the warm tone color, I focused on resonatory space in the oral cavity. Although there are many ways to achieve this sensation, the images of stifling a yawn or the beginning of a sneeze seem to be the most productive. When you try to stifle a yawn, or experience the beginning of a sneeze, the soft palate lifts and tongue drops, creating quite a large resonatory chamber.

Another idea might be to place hands, palms and fingers together, perpendicular to the floor with fingers pointing away from the body. I asked the choir to sing with a sound appropriate to that type of image. Then, I asked the singers to lift and separate the palms of the hands while the fingers remain touching, which leads to a more cupped hand position. Again, I encourage the singers to sing with a sound appropriate to this position. Once the singers have felt and have sung with this sensation, the conductor can utilize this or her facial expressions and a more cupped hand gesture in either hand to serve as a reminder to the choir. When conducting, I also use this position and often lift the top hand with slow resistance upwards. This reminds the choir of the sensation of space, while maintaining constant flow and energy of breath.

As the conductor of a symphony chorale, whose responsibility is to prepare a choir for an orchestral conductor, I often use gestures that reflect appropriate technique or which assist the singers in producing stylistic elements in the music. When afforded the opportunity to conduct the chorale in performance, members commented that they now understand that the gestures I used in rehearsals, I also used in performances. These gestures were to remind them of aspects of the music or of vocal technique that we had discussed and practiced in rehearsals. Since they had not had the opportunity to observe my conducting in performances until then, they understood how meaningful the gestures were in rehearsal but not how important they were as reminders during a performance.

While it is often difficult to hand your prepared choir over to another conductor, it is important to stress to the singers that they try to remember the

“feel” of singing that was achieved throughout rehearsals. Muscle memory and the opportunity to experience the physical sensation are valuable elements in this type of preparation.

When preparing a choir for performance or working on musical skills and vocal technique, I try to be the best model I can be. My choirs have become quite effective mirrors of my posture, mood, behavior, and teaching skills! My advice to our future choral music educators at the university is to instruct their singers as to how to do something in a more correct manner rather than telling them all the things that are incorrect or bad.

I try to follow my own advice by setting up successful situations. The warm-up exercises that I use always emphasize healthy singing technique, and often incorporate appropriate movements or gestures. I use these motions in my own conducting gestures during warm-ups, rehearsals, and performances. When developing appropriate gestures, I envision the type of gesture that would enable me, as a singer, to produce the appropriate sound with good technique and not get bogged down with difficult explanations.

Physical movement has a “freeing” element that allow you to feel the energy and release tension. The results have proven to be very effective in producing a free, healthy, and energetic tone and the method has won the praise of my fellow voice teachers.



Don't be afraid to experiment with various images, such as tossing koosh balls or basketballs to toss the sound into the audience or stretching a large rubber band to encourage energetic sound throughout a note or a phrase.

When the rhythm becomes too bogged down, compare the sensation of stomping the rhythm to one of plucking petals from a flower, or step the rhythm on tiptoes to feel lighter, yet clear rhythmic flow. Allow the singers to try the corresponding movements and incorporate the movement into some type of meaningful gesture within the structure of the conducting pattern. Pattern conducting is important, but not enough! Make your conducting gestures meaningful to your singers.