THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF CONDUCTING

By KARL W. GEHRKENS

WHAT is conducting? It is a leader’s expression of a musical composition by means of physical movements—especially of the arms, face, and upper trunk—, made in such fashion that the group of performers who are being led will become sufficiently imbued with the conductor’s feeling and interpretation to play or sing the music in accordance with his ideas and desires.

This definition implies that the conductor must have general musicianship, a specific and detailed knowledge of the composition he is conducting; that he must possess not only the ability to understand and feel many different kinds of music but the power to express each one so vividly, so dynamically, that he can lift the performers to emotional states amounting often to exaltation. And, at the same time as he stirs the performers, he must make perfectly clear to them the whole design and structure of the music, so that they will render it with intelligence as well asunction. But the combination of artistic intelligence, emotional versatility, and expressive power is rare; hence there are few really great conductors.

It is easy enough to comprehend the structure and texture of music. Any reasonably good mathematician can do that. And it is not difficult for persons of strong emotional tendencies to feel music deeply. But the emotionalist is often hard put to it to understand the more intellectual phases of music, and the mathematician sometimes finds it difficult to follow the various moods of different musical compositions. In general, the ability to do both is seldom found in the same individual. But even when that ability—however paradoxical it may seem—is actually present in one man, it still affords no guarantee that he will be a good conductor. It is the power clearly and adequately to express ideas and emotions by means of bodily movement that must be present, and it is in this faculty that many conductors are wanting.

We are trained from youth to repress our feelings. In the old days, it was the child who sat still who was referred to as “good”; the lively, imaginative, inventive boy or girl was constantly being scolded and told
to "be good." Our ideas of "goodness" and "badness" have changed considerably since the turn of the century, and today children are much more natural, free, and expressive than they formerly were allowed to be. While they are small, that is. For, as soon as the child attains the age of nine or ten, he learns that he cannot safely show his feelings and desires for fear of censure or, at least, misunderstanding. So he begins to fashion a protective armor out of a conventional type of facial expression, a repressed and artificial physical demeanor, and a habit of concealing his real feelings and allowing only those types of speech and action to be produced that will be approved by parents, teachers, and other adult associates.

When children of nine or ten are alone together and are certain that no adult is eavesdropping, they sometimes leave off their mask of artificiality and get rid of their constraint enough to express themselves freely. On such occasions, the youngster who is thought to be self-conscious, awkward, and quiet even to the point of being "tongue-tied," often becomes voluble in expression, lithe and graceful in body, and dominating in leadership. But, when he returns to his home or school, he once more assumes the rôle of a "good," self-conscious child.

As adolescence dawns and waxes, the fear of free expression grows apace, and finally, by the time the boy has become a man, he has grown so thick a shell that he may live on for forty, fifty, sixty years, without ever again showing his real self to a single person.

In other words, society, even under modern educational conditions, is training us to repress and conceal, rather than to express and reveal our real selves, that is, our sentient, inner beings.

But the conductor must lead the people of his chorus or orchestra by revealing his feelings to them and by expressing, through appropriate gestures, the structure as well as the mood of the music. So, in order to conduct well, he must in some way release himself from the fear of revealing his true inward state, and must bare his very soul in the presence of his followers.

It is the revelation of a great artistic soul to a group of singers or players that constitutes real conducting, for the conductor works largely through suggestion. It is not so much the words which he speaks that convey his feelings and ideas, as the significant movements of his arms and trunk and the mobile and expressive power of his face.\(^1\) For these

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1 In Basle, a few years ago, Felix Weingartner invited us to visit his conducting class at the Conservatory. We found a sizable orchestra, composed of pupils, the wind section being reinforced by a pianist who played from the score. That morning the "lesson" was the first move-
are the things that give the members of his chorus or orchestra an insight into the workings of his mind and spirit. And, if these workings are portrayed with sufficient vividness by his body and are accepted as appropriate and authoritative, those who play or sing follow the leader gladly. Often they do not know exactly what the conductor wants, or even what response they are making to his demands. Sometimes it is almost as though they were hypnotized, as though another mind—a master mind—were controlling their responses. The highest type of control, of course, occurs only when really great music is being performed under the direction of a genuinely great personality.

Suggestion, then, is the psychological basis of conducting, and the true power of the conductor inheres in his ability to dominate the artistic response of his followers by means of significant gestures and facial expression.

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To be sure, the conductor's expression of feeling has to be controlled. It must be made to serve a twofold function: to reveal both the mental and the emotional—as, indeed, must all artistic expression. The poet has to feel deeply, but he is required to control his words. The painter, too, must be susceptible of genuine emotion, but he must consciously guide his pencil or brush. The actor has to merge himself in the personality of his character, and yet he is obliged to remember, far back in his mind, that he is only acting—or he might actually kill the villain! And the conductor must so control the expression of his musical feeling that his conducting is clear as well as expressive, intelligent as well as persuasive. Otherwise he might merely carry his performers with him into a sea of uncontrolled emotion to drown their musical message in a welter of incoherence.

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To the conductors' delight, a Brahm's symphony by Weingartner was called upon one of the students to take the stick. All went on swimmingly until the young man came to a sudden transition, with change of tempo. He got mixed up in his beat, and the players came to a stop. He tried again, with no better luck. Weingartner asked another student to conduct the passage. He, too, came to grief. Then Weingartner himself picked up the stick. But before raising it, he hesitated a moment, and then said: "Gentlemen, I don't blame you. That is one of those places that I, myself, don't beat with the stick or hand. I conduct that with my eyes. Let's take the place again, and watch my eyes." The players began the passage once more, at the danger point they watched Weingartner's eyes, and the result was perfection.—We regret that our author has not dwelt on the peculiar circumstance that the conductor is the only musical performer who, when in action, turns his back to the audience. In that connection, we should have welcomed a paragraph or two on the psychological importance of Apolline proportions and sartorial elegance.—Ed.
Great conducting is not only clear and expressive. It does not merely inspire and exalt. It arouses respect for its intelligence, for its control of the body working as a musical medium. Unless conducting can do all this, it is futile.

So we come back once more to the idea that in conducting, as in other fields of artistic activity, it is the combination of feeling and intellect that evokes the response wanted. Neither is sufficient in itself; unsupported, either one can lead only to artistic barrenness. But the presence of both, in proper balance, can cause human beings to respond in a way that makes the conductor a power second to none in musical life. He can reveal to his followers the nobility of Beethoven, the grace and charm of Debussy, the tenderness of Schubert, the pathos and despair of Tchaikovsky. Not only can he do this; he can persuade his performers that his conception of the composition they are executing is right—inexorably right; that thus it was intended to be by its creator and thus it must inevitably be. His power over performer and listener is dangerous, and yet it is necessary for him to possess it. It is a power deriving from the fact that the conductor is a dictator—a dictator working through suggestive movement rather than through verbal commands.

Good conducting, besides being clear and expressive on the one hand and persuasive on the other, must always be sincere. In fact, if it is not sincere it can be neither expressive nor persuasive—though it may be clear. The conductor must express his real feelings—and, of course, this means that he must have genuine artistic conceptions to express. The untalented conductor tries so hard to be clear that, in his attempt to make gestures certain of comprehension, he forgets all about the music he is supposed to conduct. Then sometimes he becomes so imbued with the desire to make his movements graceful that he grows entirely oblivious of the music—which indeed may be so austere or martial as to make a merely graceful gesture altogether inappropriate.

“What does this composition mean to me? What kind of feeling does it inspire in me? And how can I express the feeling so that my chorus or orchestra will catch it from me by suggestion in the heat of performance and thus be able to make a reality of the rendition I have built up in my imagination?” These are the important questions. Not merely, “Is my beat clear?” or, “Do the members of the audience appreciate the quality of my conducting?”

Often the conductor actually comes between the music and the lis-
teners. Instead of revealing the music to them through the medium of chorus or orchestra he obtrudes himself to such an extent that the audience, far from being wrapt in ecstasy over the music and hardly aware of the presence of either conductor or orchestra, is merely thinking, "What precision of attack he secures" or, "How gracefully he conducts"—or perhaps, "What awkwardness!"

So we finally come to our formula: The conductor must be an excellent musician; he must be artistically sensitive; he must be a strong and versatile personality; and he must have the power of expressing ideas and feelings with his body so that, by suggestion, appropriate states of feeling and intellect may be aroused in the members of the chorus or orchestra he is conducting. In inspiring his followers to perform their music expressively and intelligently, he must not obtrude himself to such an extent that the members of the audience, in observing his gestures, forget to listen to the music. Therefore we say again: Good conducting is clear; it is expressive; it is sincere; it is unobtrusive. And, in addition, it is inspiring, exalting—both to those who are being conducted and to those who listen.