AWAKENING STUDENTS TO THE ART OF CONDUCTING

Students often ignore their conductor and miss important cues. Brent Sandene offers suggestions to prevent this from happening.

BY BRENT SANDENE

It is not unusual for young performers to fail to watch or follow conductors. However, the skill of understanding a conductor can and should be taught as part of every performing ensemble's curriculum. The following techniques and suggestions may help you improve your students’ ability to follow conducting.

Plan Your Conducting

Planning your conducting is an essential element of all score study. It is important that conductors know their scores well enough so that they can concentrate on achieving more artistic levels of performance with their ensembles. Begin by developing a clear mental image of how each piece should sound, and then plan your conducting in order to obtain that sound from the ensemble. Conductors need to think about what the likely problems of new repertoire will be and how they can use conducting to minimize such problems. Score preparation should include consideration of both technical and artistic elements. Technical elements include items such as deciding which subdivisions and cues will be given. Artistic elements include interpretive issues such as where the peaks and valleys of the phrasing will be and what moods or styles should be conveyed to the students.

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Provide a Conducting Model

If students are to be taught and encouraged to follow the lead of their director’s conducting, there should be a musically attractive model for them to follow. It is very easy for conductors to fall into predictable conducting patterns that are full of distracting mannerisms and little expression. Be sure your gestures are worth watching, are varied, and are descriptive of the music. Teachers can improve their conducting in several ways: asking a fellow music teacher or musician to observe rehearsals or concerts and to offer comments; reading and studying what noted conductors and authors say about the art of conducting; enrolling in advanced-level conducting courses or summer workshops; and discussing aspects of conducting with other musicians, conductors, and colleagues.

Perhaps one of the most useful techniques for improving your conducting is to make your own videotape of classroom rehearsals or ensemble concerts. Watching a videotape makes us aware of areas in need of improvement. Since most of us are our own harshest critics, viewing a videotape is an effective way to observe how we actually look on the podium.

Once you have decided upon a gesture or method of indicating changes in the music, check to make sure that you are conducting clearly and consistently. If students are not playing a certain passage well, analyze your conducting to determine if you are showing students exactly how they should be playing. Once you are comfortable with a given gesture, check to make sure that you use the gesture in a consistent manner. For example, if students are having problems with a repeated passage, they may be more successful if you conduct the excerpt...

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in the same way each time.

Attempt to convey all of your intentions and instructions nonverbally. Although it may be temporarily expedient to stop the group in order to tell students to play staccato or legato, a more efficient long-term solution is to use your conducting to transmit this message. Instead of stopping individual students to tell them to play in a certain manner, stop the group in order to tell students that they are not playing in the style in which you are conducting. Without specifying what the change is to be, repeat the passages, and use your hands, arms, and face to emphasize the details about which you are concerned. After students become accustomed to this manner of rehearsal, they will look for more nonverbal cues as to how they should perform, rather than depending upon your verbal instructions.

Encouraging students to watch the conductor can begin with the first upbeat of every piece. Make a special effort to avoid “counting off” in order to get students’ attention or to prepare them to begin performing. Instead, train students to watch for a single preparatory beat that will convey both the tempo and the style of the opening bars. In the same sense, avoid “talking over” or giving verbal directions when you are conducting unless it is absolutely necessary. 

Importance of Knowing Parts

Students who cannot perform their parts comfortably will not be responsive to the nuances in gesture that you offer. Students who are insecure about notes or rhythms will tend to look more intensely at the music, not the conductor, for security. This phenomenon can also be observed in college and professional ensembles. Many times the failure of students to follow the conductor’s expressive gestures stems from the fact that students must devote most of their concentration and energy to performing difficult rhythms or passages with rapid successions of notes. Instructors who find that students are unable to follow them due to the difficulty of the parts should include extra practice on those sections during rehearsal.

When to Watch the Conductor

You may have greater success in encouraging students to watch you if you give them a checklist of important musical details that call for them to give special attention to the conductor. You should feel free to give students directions to mark their music with written comments or symbols denoting “watch the conductor” at crucial points in the music. The details of a list of common instances in which performers should normally watch the conductor will be unique to the repertoire performed and the skill levels of the students. As a preliminary list, you could use the following:

- at the beginning of every piece and movement
- at initial entrances following a multi-measure rest
- at the beginning of every piece
- at all sections in which the conductor has specifically asked students to mark in their parts to watch the director
- at difficult sections in which it is important that students make a special effort to stay together.

Awareness Activities

Classroom activities that can be used to increase students’ awareness of conducting include both warm-up activities and activities that are derived from the repertoire that they are learning. For example, as a warm-up activity, have students play, clap, or sing notes or scales in response to variations in your conducting pattern. Begin with exaggerated gestures and gradually progress to passages of longer duration, using more subtle gestures that require more refined adjustments by the students. Use a variety of meters and styles. Vary the dynamics, tempo, articulation, tone quality, and attack that you want to elicit.

Have students memorize a short passage and play with their music turned over on the stand or left in the folder. Change the tempo, dynamics, or balance of the ensemble to make sure that students are watching. Begin this technique using passages that are simpler, and then progress to more problematic areas of each piece.

Have students complete a game in which you do not continue unless all students are watching at a specified point in a given piece. Periodically give eye contact to each student in the ensemble. Gradually increase the length of each section and the number of passages at which you check for student attention as you proceed.

Three types of exercises may be useful in training students to follow your conducting more closely. In the
first exercise (see figure 1), students sing or play a concert C major scale. Every note is performed at a different dynamic level. In order to know how to perform each note, students must watch the conductor. Use a similar procedure for the second exercise (see figure 2). Tell students to sing or play four quarter notes on each pitch of a scale. Change your gestures periodically to indicate the articulation and tempo the students should maintain. In the third exercise (see figure 3), students perform a pattern on a single note. With your gestures, indicate changes in note duration and meter. Once students learn to watch and follow your gestures, create more complex exercises that incorporate many musical elements.

**Teach Most-Used Gestures**

Although experienced musicians develop an understanding of what the most commonly used conducting gestures denote, younger and less experienced performers need to be taught what standard conducting gestures mean and how to follow them. For example, students should be able to answer questions such as: “How does the conductor indicate faster tempos?” “What is the role of the left hand?” “What does the right hand show?” and “How does the conductor indicate an accented style?”

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**Figure 1. Exercise for dynamics**

When conducting especially difficult passages, direct students’ attention toward specific gestural patterns that you will be using and specify how this will influence their playing or singing. You may say, for example, “Trumpets, I will show your fermata with my left hand. Woodwinds, as the trumpets are holding, I will give you one preparatory beat with my right hand before you are to come in.”

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**Teach Students to Conduct**

Learning the basic conducting patterns is an objective that should be included in every performing ensemble. Younger and less-experienced students can be taught the basic beat patterns, and older and more proficient students can be taught more advanced techniques.

From time to time, have students conduct selected warm-up exercises or short excerpts. In addition to providing variety and novelty to the classroom routine, students will enjoy the opportunity to lead or be followed by their peers. Teaching students to conduct makes them more aware of the role of the conductor in performances. This can help both the student conductor and the ensemble members have a better understanding of gestures.

**Ask and Encourage Questions**

Encourage students to ask relevant questions as part of the rehearsal process. If the ensemble is having problems in a certain area, ask students if there is something you can do to help them perform the passage with less difficulty. Check to make sure that students understand what it is you are trying to teach them. Have students demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways, such as performing, answering questions, and teaching others.

Teaching students to be more sensitive to your conducting is worth the effort. The benefits of student awareness of conducting include more efficient use of rehearsal time, the potential of higher quality performances, greater student understanding, enhancement of the aesthetic values of music, and your increased personal growth and satisfaction as a musician/teacher.