CONDUCTORS AND CONDUCTING

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(Continued from September number, page 787.)

IV.—THE PHYSICAL ASPECT OF THE BEAT

Viewed from its physical side the act of conducting is a form of athletics. Like all exercises of the muscles it calls for co-ordination, quick response to stimulus, and from continuous practice it becomes in a sense automatic. Here we will deal with the muscular aspect, and consider the musical aspect at a later stage, involving as it does questions of personality and interpretation.

The most effective beat is that which expends least energy. The movements of the arm should be determined by the functions which its four sections, upper arm, forearm, wrist, and hand, discharge in nature. These are, large and broad movements at the shoulder, more restricted at the elbow, finer and delicate at the wrist and hand: all being preserved in a state of equilibrium. There should be flexibility at each of these points. Rigidity means fatigue, for in order to keep a joint in a stiff position the antagonistic muscles must be maintained in a state of tension, without the alteration of relaxation which comes about with movement.

We may therefore assert that when a conductor feels his arm 'give out,' it is due to the still, small voice of a muscle protesting against its misuse, and he should reconsider his style. Doubtless awkward gestures can with practice be indulged in without ultimate fatigue, but the training to acquire clumsiness is a waste of effort which would equally well be employed to attain to grace.

So, following nature, the actions are broad at the shoulder, restrained at the elbow, delicate at the wrist. If the arm is held too high, with the elbow on a level with the chin, the first muscle to give way is that covering the shoulder, and when that muscle is not in training the pain can be almost insupportable.

The advice given by Berlioz to keep the hand on a level with the head, 'dropping the point of the stick perpendicularly (bending the wrist as much as possible; and not lowering the whole arm)' does not agree with Seidl's description of his conducting. His directions, if followed implicitly, would cause intense pain in a very short time and look inelastic and expressionless. It would appear that he held his arm high and rigid, and beat à la metronome with his wrist only. If this inference is correct, it would seem that his study of anatomy and physiology in the old Ecole de Médecine, where we are told he was a student, was as perfunctory as his injunctions on this point.

In terms of music the joints should act thus: shoulder—forte; upper arm, elbow, forearm—dim... poco... a... poco; wrist and hand—piano.

Physiologically the flexor muscles have a higher tension than the extensors: it is easier to fold the arms and keep them folded than to hold them stretched out. With the right hand and arm, therefore, the beat is easier obliquely downwards and towards the body than when it is directed away from the body, as in the third beat in 4/4 time, or up at the end of a bar. These points may be regarded as splittings of hairs, but they are not to be derided by the novice or amateur, who possibly may find in them an explanation why on some occasion he had to transfer the stick to his left hand in the middle of a concert, to the confusion of the forces before him.*

Not only is it unbecoming, but also significant of lack of observation to clutch the stick as if it were a sword-hilt and hold it vertically with stiff elbow and wrist, with all the movements carried out from the shoulder alone. This excites the wonder of the orchestra and the pity of the audience. There is a certain feeling of impudence coupled with impotence when the shoulder and elbow are kept rigid and the movement is from the wrist alone. One is reminded of the inhabitants of some paddock where the gallinaceae are wont to forger. Perky dabs at the air, leaps, acrobatic performances, may hold up to nature so distorted a mirror that the eye-impression drives out the ear-impression.

Quite as bad a practice is to hold the stick horizontally with the tip pointing downwards to the left, the movement being up and down in the vertical plane. This might pass when the time-signature is one-in-the-bar, or two-in-the-bar, but for other subdivisions a different movement would be necessary, and confusing. This beat is a peculiarity of some theatre conductors.

The diagrams given in some books, if followed too literally, would result in hard and mechanical gestures. The most that they indicate are the relative points to which the hand should be carried. The movements are most easy and graceful when the conductor traces in the air with the point of his stick fancied waves and curves.

So far as movements of the body are concerned restraint will be found more profitable than a display of agility. The wise conductor who harbours his resources stands in one position only, with his muscles relaxed. The feet need not be moved except when it is necessary to turn to the violins. Our conductors stand full face to the orchestra. This is a good plan, for it prevents them, when half-face to the platform as some Continental musicians used to do, from copying their bad example and addressing more or less pertinent remarks to the audience during the progress of the music.

Such actions as stamping the feet or slapping the score with the stick have no place in the concert-room. Beating time on the upper edge of the desk seems to be a vice of alien origin. One author suggests that the edge should be padded with leather in order that the knobs may at least

be muffled. Another authority recommends a small piece of metal, fixed to the top of the desk, to be struck when it is necessary to interrupt a tutti. These devices would appear to indicate that the orchestra does not notice the cessation of the beat, and that the desk is of the old-fashioned, sloping pattern. With the large score-paper now in use a table and not a desk is required.

There are some mannerisms which it is well to avoid. A frequent tendency when one-in-the-bar is beat is to make the down stroke so short and quick, a kind of flick, that the up stroke, the recovery, gives the accent. One conductor used to revel in constantly describing circles and figures-of-eight with the point of his stick, which were so bewildering that from the orchestra it was well-nigh impossible to tell where the beat began or ended. To add to the confusion he sometimes conducted from memory, but as he never ventured from the beaten track of the repertoire, which everybody knew, no great harm was done. The change from a three-beat to a four-beat in a continuous movement, or vice versa, becomes automatic in time, but at first the muscles do not respond unless the mind is concentrated on the new beat. But even with this effort of attention the muscles resist the call of the music, and having become habituated to one kind of rhythm will persist for at least a bar of the change of rhythm.

Again, there is a disposition to cut short the last beat of a bar which precedes a bar containing an important ‘lead.’ While it is the aim of these papers to discuss points of general rather than of special interest, there is necessity here to refer to an example, and the Prelude to ‘Tristan’ provides us with a case in point. So far as the conductor is concerned the time-signature of 6/8 is somewhat awkward, for the dynamic accent falls impartially on the first or fourth beat, in slow time. The mental impulse is to shorten the third or sixth beat and not give it its full value, so that the second half of the bar, instead of consisting of quaver, dotted quaver, and semiquaver, sounds like two quavers and semiquaver. The character of the work in question, with the constant repetition of similar phrases, induces this tendency to bring the arm up too sharply for the sixth beat.

It will be clear that exuberance of movement, or restraint, will be determined to a large extent by the quality, experience, and strength of the musical body under control. If wise principles have been laid down in rehearsals, a small and efficient orchestra or choir will not need the efflorescence suitable for a ‘Handelian’ festival. Trained musicians have so delicate a responsiveness to the slightest nuance that excess of movement is merely waste of energy.

As most human beings are right-handed, the play of the left hand is less free and spontaneous, and of all the conductor’s gestures it is the most abused.

In the concert-room, with nothing to obstruct the view of the beat, there is no necessity to keep it perpetually in action, and it should be reserved strictly for definite signs. A wise rule to observe is, The right hand for tempi: the left hand for nuances. If the left is kept moving throughout, its value at critical points is annulled, but when held in reserve till wanted its co-operation with the right conveys a message of special import and cannot be misunderstood.

The left arm should hang loosely by the side in readiness for communicating and enforcing dynamic effects of intensity or softness, as well as for bringing out middle parts while the right hand is occupied with the general effect. The soundest maxim is to use it sparingly, and only when the purpose is clear.

The pose of the hand also calls for remark, and its powers of expression are wide. It is generally extended when some emphasis or modification in nuance is required, but nothing signifies want of understanding or of taste so much as when the fingers are bent stiff like a bird’s claw. It is not suggested that the hand should move with the little flutters—petitements—as it were, of the wrists associated with the tip-toe points of the ballerina. It is only when its gesture is clumsy or exaggerated that it catches the eye. It is not given to everybody to have a graciousness of hand-movement, and when it is not a natural endowment, it can be acquired, but only with much practice.

From what has been said it will be clear that the left hand should not know what the right is doing, or at least should not imitate, but co-operate.

For the novice some suggestions may lead him to a line of thought of his own. Let him study his own movements before a looking-glass, standing erect, without stooping. Nothing is more unattractive than the doubled-up body, with the arms wildly waving. Conducting is not Swedish drill: the concert-room is not the place for that: but it would not be a bad plan were some of our youth to practise it in its proper place, to their own physical and moral advantage.

As the student is certain to know orchestral works by heart, let him think the music in silence before the glass, as if he had the orchestra in front of him, or let him read the score in silence while beating time. It is better to discover weakness and clumsiness when alone than to show muscular inexperience on the platform, no matter how far it may be transcended by musical ability. Orchestras are sympathetic, but at the same time they can be severely critical.

There is nothing derogatory in this study in private. Executants, whether pianists, or violinists or cellists, have to practise in solitude before they come before an audience. Everyone who has to appear in public has to submit to a preliminary and exacting routine. Why, then, not the conductor? Above all, let the novice study the method of the experienced, and not hold to the rigid, impersonal school, whose exponents leap at the conductor’s desk when no leap is needed, and do not leap when the avalanche of music overwhelms them.

(To be continued.)