

Conductors

In shaping a musical interpretation, a conductor has many specific responsibilities, which are similar no matter what kind of group he or she conducts. (In this discussion, an orchestra is assumed for the sake of convenience.) These responsibilities may be grouped as follows:

1. **Accuracy** — The conductor must ensure that the composer's intentions and instructions are faithfully carried out. At the very least, this means making sure that everybody's playing all the right notes and rhythms.
2. **Ensemble** — The conductor must make sure everyone plays *together*, in precise rhythmic and musical coordination. The conductor is also responsible for giving "cues," signals with a hand motion, nod, or look that indicate (or confirm) the right moment for an individual player or section to make a musical entrance.
3. **Tempo and dynamics** (speed and volume) — Again, the conductor's job is to ensure the realization of the composer's intentions, but it's also to *interpret* those intentions, which means choosing general levels of tempo and volume as well as supervising all the fine shadings.
4. **Phrasing** — Tempo and dynamics are part of phrasing, but so are such elusive factors as "direction," "emphasis," and "pacing," all of which affect the shape and coherence of musical phrases or passages.
5. **Quality of sound** — The conductor is at all times responsible for the kind of sound the orchestra produces. Whether it's full, thin, harsh, gentle, powerful, rich, light, heavy, round, lean, muscular, or "noble," the orchestra's sound should always suit the music.
6. **Balance** — The conductor must make sure that what should be heard is heard, that different but simultaneous musical "lines" are at the proper volume levels relative to their importance, that one instrument, voice, or group of instruments doesn't inadvertently drown out any others.
7. **Style** — The conductor must elicit from the orchestra an overall character of performance that is best suited to the composer, the period, and the piece.

The way a conductor ensures that all the members of an orchestra start together and stay together is to beat time. The fundamental principle is simple: the speed of the beat indicates the tempo of the music. Conductors usually beat time with a stick called a baton, held in the right hand.

A good conductor, however, can indicate much more with the beat than just information about tempo and meter. It's not only the pattern and speed that count, but also the *qualities* of the beat. Expansive gestures, tight gestures, large or small gestures, and motions that are smooth, choppy, delicate, or violent all convey different information and can elicit different musical results. With a good conductor — and a good orchestra — the quality of

sound the orchestra produces is influenced by the qualities of the beat, by the *character* of the conductor's physical gestures.

And these physical gestures are not limited to the hand with the baton. They include complementary gestures of the left hand, as well as overall "body language." In fact, especially from the point of view of musical expressiveness — dynamics, phrasing, sound quality, and so forth — conductors lead by a kind of multilevel physical seduction, a seduction of which the orchestra musicians may not even be aware. This is why even individuals who have fine musical minds and/or "great hands" — some instrumentalists turned conductor, for example — don't necessarily make good conductors if they are unrefined in their larger movements or physically awkward in a general way. Then again, people can be seductive in many different ways, and conductors of widely differing physiques, physical styles, and temperaments can be effective. In conducting, as in everything else, the absolute rule is that nothing is absolute.

What makes a good conductor? Musical imagination, intelligence, and judgment certainly come first, since there's no point learning how to communicate with an orchestra in the absence of musical ideas that are worth communicating. A conductor must also have confidence in his ideas and the self-assurance and personal presence to lead well, to be completely convincing, even inspiring, in the role. A good ear is essential, both for judging overall qualities and for pinpointing specific problems within large and complicated masses of sound. A well-trained "inner ear," too, or "mind's ear," is very important for studying scores and for "hearing" music just by looking at the printed page. In order for an orchestra to feel at ease and confident enough to play freely and beautifully, a conductor must also demonstrate a rock-solid sense of rhythm. Tempos must be consistent and steady, beating mistakes rare, and rhythmic complexities handled securely. A good conductor also possesses a certain physical grace, or at least coordination, which translates into a clear beat and musically meaningful gestures. A good conductor must be at ease facing large and complex forces and coordinating their efforts, and he must know how to run an efficient, well-organized rehearsal. It may seem a simplistic thing to say, but with a good conductor, both the music and the orchestra playing it should sound better *after* rehearsal than they did before. Like all good musicians, a good conductor must also have a flair for performance, the ability to remain in control and yet bring a little something extra when it counts the most.

And bad conductors? Some are unimaginative or uninteresting, even if they're technically competent. Others are just not very gifted — they have difficulty communicating musical ideas, either physically, verbally, or both. Some may even put on quite an extravagant physical show (complete with rapturous facial expressions that look great on TV), but without necessarily communicating much that's musically relevant or useful to the members of the orchestra. Other conductors are unprepared or undependable, and in fact they get in the way. They're uncertain in their gestures and cues, and they make mistakes. In rehearsal they may be disorganized or inefficient, which means they either allot their time poorly or use it poorly. They may mistake little problems for big ones and vice versa, or they may not even notice problems. And when they do notice them, they may not know how to fix them.