**Conducting skills**

Conducting is non-verbal communication. To be understood, conducting gestures must be

clear, concise and consistent. Conducting is more than just arm-waving. It shows an attitude,

intent, and demonstrates the personality of the music. This chapter reviews the basics of

conducting and examines some points of good conducting technique.

**Posture**

The basic posture or stance of the conductor should be one that demonstrates energy, that

commands attention, projects a sense of confidence, and shows an aura of leadership to the

ensemble. The posture assumed by the conductor is similar to that of a well-trained singer.

It is erect, relaxed and allows for complete freedom of movement. The chest is held

comfortably high with the shoulders slightly back. Be a model for your singers. Stand with

a singer's posture that evokes good singing.

**Right hand and arm**

The right hand (for a right-handed conductor) usually defines the meter. Most often, in the

beginning stages of learning conducting, the right hand is responsible for showing a pattern

that indicates the meter of the music.

Many directors use strict patterns; others employ a modified pattern or free approach.

Regardless of the type of pattern used, there are three aspects of conducting that all good

conductors must be able to demonstrate:

~ Preparatory beat

~ Downbeat

~ Cutoff

All gestures, particularly of the right hand, should clearly show the following:

~ Tempo (reflected by the speed of the arm movement)

~ Meter (reflected by the pattern ofthe arm and hand)

~ Dynamics (reflected by the relative strength between the beat pulses)

~ Mood (reflected by the contrast within the pulses)

In barbershop music, we most commonly use one of three different patterns, 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4.

These patterns are shown below. Note that the first and last beat of each pattern is identical.

**Preparatory beat**

This gesture is the signal for the singer to breathe for the upcoming phrase. It also should

indicate the character of the music, the mood, the tempo, the degree of intensity and the vocal

tone desired. Without a clear preparation, the chorus will be unable to execute the beginning

of the phrase with accuracy. The preparatory beat should usually be the previous beat of the

pattern. For example, if the phrase begins on beat one in 4/4, the preparatory beat should be

beat four. If the phrase begins with a pickup on the fourth beat (again, in 4/4), the preparatory

beat should be that part of the pattern which shows the third beat. Practice making your

preparatory beat clear and specific and your chorus will begin with confidence. The example

below shows the preparation gestures for entrances in a 4/4 pattern.

**Downbeat**

This is the principal beat of any pattern and is the basic frame of reference for the singer as

far as synchronization is concerned. The downbeat passes, slightly, through the horizontal

plane formed by an imaginary line across the lower rib cage or upper abdominal area of the

director. By passing through this horizontal plane, the downbeat is differentiated from

subsequent beats in the pattern.

**Cutoff**

This is the indication for cessation of the sound. Cutoffs should be clear, concise and, without

superfluous movement. Extra movement will be distracting and may cause synchronization

problems. The cutoff is usually accommodated toward the upper center of the body in the

upper center of the beat pattern and the primary conducting hand moves in a counterclockwise

motion (when viewed by the director).

**Mixing patterns**

Mixing of patterns occurs most often when changing tempos within a song. For instance, in

the song, "Story Of The Rose (Heart of My Heart)," the first two measures might easily be

conducted in 3 and then the pattern might change to a 1 (a simple down beat) for the last two

measures of the phrase. This is justified by the dotted half notes for the words, "love" and

"you."

In the song, "Wait Till The Sun Shines, Nellie," the chorus might be started using a two

pattern and change to a four pattern for clarity in a ritardando (rit.) or crescendo (cresc.).The

decision to adapt a change of conducting pattern might occur in the phrase, "Sweethearts, you

and I." On the word, "I," the change to a four pattern will show a crescendo to the downbeat

on the word, "Wait... "

It is important to be comfortable with patterns so you can easily mix them as required to show

your intentions to your singers.

**Left hand independence**

The left hand (for a right handed conductor) primarily shows dynamics, sustains sections

while other sections sing an echo, and cues secondary entrances. It requires practice to

develop the left hand so it becomes independent of the right hand. Use the left hand sparingly

and have a specific purpose for it. Do not let it simply mirror the right hand.

Marking those places in the music where you wish to use the left hand will assist in the

development of this skill. After you have used the left hand properly for a time, you will

become increasingly more comfortable using it to convey aspects of volume, character of the

music, degree of accentuation, etc.

**Dynamics**

Imagine that there is a cube in front of your body. The top of the cube is an imaginary line

no higher than your shoulders. The bottom of the cube is no lower than your waist. The sides

of the cube are in line with your shoulders. It might also be referred to as a "power cube" or

"power box." Most of your conducting gestures should be contained within this imaginary

box. You will find that your power to show confidence and strength to your singers happens

most when your hand and arms are within this imaginary box. You will also find that your

chorus is less likely to be confused as to what you want from them when your hands, your

upper body and your facial expressions are all easily visible to them.

Dynamics are contingent, primarily, on the size of the pattern and the intensity (degree of

pull) between the pulse points. The larger the pattern, generally the fuller the dynamic leveL

The smaller the pattern, the softer the passage. Practice, in front of a mirror, showing the

patterns at different dynamic levels so your intentions are clear. Remember to work within

your "power box." It will make you a more effective director.

**Freestyle conducting**

Freestyle (rubato) conducting is used when the meter of the song, or a section of a song, is

not in strict tempo. We use this style most often in ballads. The usual technique is to show

a downbeat followed by lesser, secondary beats on key words in the phrase. For instance, if

the phrase "I want a girl" were to be conducted freely at a slow tempo, you might beat a

downbeat on "I" and smaller beats on "want" and "girl." This would indicate that the other

word ("a") is to be sung relatively more quickly and without emphasis. In this example, too,

"girl" would be held longer than it would be if the phrase were sung in strict rhythm.

Try conducting various phrases both in meter and then in freestyle. Determine where the

stress points change. Typically, when sung in rhythm, the stress points maybe on the stronger

beats. In freestyle, the stress points may fall upon the more important words.

**Basic body language**

Everyone utilizes certain principles of non-verbal communication in everyday life. We

communicate not only with words but also with gestures, facial animation, posture, and many

other non-verbal signals. In a musical performance, the conductor can do much to control the

energy with which a chorus sings, the mood of the phrase, the tone quality employed, and

more, by being aware of the messages he imparts through his body language. A proud,

upright, carriage will elicit energy and attention from the singers. A slumped, casual one will

create the opposite. Look like you want them to sound. Show them by your every posture and

movement that a committed, engaged, involved approach to singing will produce better

music.

Mirror the emotions of the phrase on your face and you'll more likely get the desired response

from your singers. Show energy, love of what you're doing, and enthusiasm to your chorus

and they will reward you by giving the same feelings back to you. The teaching process, the

performance, and the music itself will benefit when you use all of your physical skills to

communicate with your singers.

**Questions to ask about your conducting**

~ Do I videotape rehearsals to see if I'm showing my intentions clearly to the chorus?

~ Do I practice in front of a mirror to prepare to direct my chorus?

~ Am I comfortable using patterns in my conducting?

~ Do I show clear and concise preparation for each attack?

~ Are the beats in each pattern clear and definite?

~ Are my cutoffs clear and concise?

~ Is my freestyle conducting clear and precise?

~ Do I sing with the chorus? If so, will I stop it now and never start again?

~ Do I mouth all, most, or some of the words? If so, can I reduce the frequency with which

I do this?

~ When I show vowel shapes to the chorus, are they formed correctly?

~ Do I maintain rhythmic integrity in my conducting? Do I keep the beat steady?

~ Does my left hand function independently from my right hand?

~ Does',my non-verbal communication (body, hands, face, etc.) indicate and complement

the intended mood?

~ Does my face show them the love I feel for the music?

**Other conducting tips**

~ A void large, continuous conducting gestures. Rather, use a more refined gesture that

communicates more specifically what you desire.

~ Don't allow your conducting to get frenzied or out of control.

~ Keep your conducting generally low. Center your conducting in the center of your body

(your "power box").

~ Work on showing a lift and buoyancy in each gesture. Heaviness of gesture will drive the

pitch down, coax a heavy, unmusical tone from your singers and encourage choppiness

in the singing.