



Rehearsal Break

Intentional and Expressive Conducting: It's All in the Rebound

By Jeffery Wall

Conducting is a fairly young discipline in historical context. There are, therefore, few resources and texts that accurately describe the physical act of desirable conducting for the emerging choral conductor. Naturally, many of the existing resources focus strongly on the point of arrival or departure: the *ictus*. Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that the majority of useful communicative information lies in the rebound. Instrumentalists are often critical of choral conductors for their lack of clarity. Likewise, choral conductors are often critical of instrumental conductors for their lack of expression. This is a gross stereotype, but by closer study of the rebound in conducting gesture, choral conductors may increase clarity while maintaining an expressive quality in their conducting.

Before dissecting the rebound for its communicative qualities, it is important to clarify the term for the scope of this discussion. For this author, the *rebound* refers to any motion away from or toward the stationary *ictus* point. Many pedagogues further segment this movement as *rebound* and *preparatory gesture*, dependent on when the motion changes direction to return to the *ictus*. Teaching emerging conductors is

a challenge since all conducting students have different anatomical structures and different ideas of conducting concepts. Simplifying terminology will aid in the mastery of these very tactile concepts. If one looks at the entire movement of the rebound as a single concept, it is easier to understand the gesture as a method for communicating meter, tempo, dynamic, and articulation.

Conducting texts are peppered with all kinds of conducting diagrams containing dots, solid curvy lines, exacting straight lines, and dashed lines to demonstrate the different patterns, *ictus* placement, and articulations. It is often difficult for emerging conductors to see these diagrams and ascertain natural conducting movement. Student conductors commonly end up tracing with a baton or some point of the open hand, which is likely not the intent of the diagrams.

Likewise, there has been a fundamental pedagogical disagreement among conductors for years in regards to the placement of the *ictus* on the horizontal conducting plane. Some conductors prefer a single focal point for placement of all *icti*.¹ Others prefer the *ictus* placement of each beat at varying axes on the conducting plane. As the focus

of conducting study moves away from the importance of *ictus* and toward the study of rebound, the argument becomes moot. In David DeVenney's book *Conducting Choirs, Vol. 1: The Promising Conductor*, he does place emphasis on the *ictus* as a teaching element but also says something very revealing about the rebound.

An *ictus* is defined by the rebound, by the change of direction in the pattern at the exact moment of the beat. Singers live from *ictus* to *ictus*—this is where their activity takes place. Their response to your gesture begins on one *ictus* point and ends on the next... The conductor, on the other hand, lives in the rebound of each beat. It is in the rebound of the beat preceding each *ictus* where the conductor has the sole opportunity to convey performance information: not only tempo (indicated by the speed of the rebound), but also dynamic, style, articulation, and other crucial performance indications.²

The information needed to discern a particular *ictus* point has less to do with the placement of the *ictus* on the conducting plane and more to do with the direction from whence it came. The



same can be said about the direction of the rebound following the ictus. The ictus alone is a stationary moment in time. It has no movement and therefore contains little musical information.

Meter

The meter of any particular musical example is typically depicted by accepted patterns within conducting. These patterns have much to do with human understanding of symmetry, physics, and gravity. Many student conductors initially struggle with maintaining pattern because the link to these innate concepts are blurred by confusing diagrams and focused placement of ictus points. By concentrating on the natural rebound of each ictus point, the intended meter is clearer. Pattern only takes shape once movement occurs from one point to another.

The gesture commonly referred to as the *preparatory gesture* is simply a rebound from a previous ictus, real or imagined. There is a natural inclination to return to center from any directional movement in the body. The intended direction is therefore discerned by the direction of the previous rebound. For instance, in a three pattern, the rebound from an imaginary beat three ictus initiates the pattern sequence. The rebound travels upward, and the gravitational pull allows the upward motion to only travel so far before changing direction back downward.

From the conductor's perspective using the right hand, the rebound of beat one travels to the left of center (Figure 1), which dictates that it must travel back to the right to return to center. Just as a clock pendulum swings, the rebound from the point of beat two must now travel to the right of center (Figure 2). The gravity of the downbeat requires the rebound of beat three to



Figure 1



Figure 2

travel upward, thus, completing the cycle (Figure 3). Seeing this pattern from the conductor, singers determine the meter not from the ictus points but rather from the direction of each rebound off of those ictus points.

Tempo

Tempo is also indicated in the conducting gesture through the rebound. The actual speed of the rebound between two ictus points is what dictates the tempo of the music. The speed at which time passes in the entirety of one rebound is often enough information for singers to determine the tempo. This is true if the rebound is used as a preparation for the onset of singing or even for a *subito* tempo change. It is important for emerging conductors to understand that if a tempo abruptly changes, the rebound from the final ictus in the previous tempo is where the new tempo actually begins and not directly where the tempo marking may be indicated in the music. One must resist the urge to show tempo only through the latter half of any rebound.

Using only the linear motion toward an ictus point after a rebound's direc-

tion change does not convey enough information to indicate tempo. It is only through the conductor's indication of time through the full retreat from the previous ictus, the *hang time* of the rebound's direction change, and the return to the next ictus that tempo can be perceived. If a *caesura* occurs prior to a tempo change, then a stop-motion and full rebound in the new tempo must be established to indicate the change. While these concepts of tempo establishment may seem rudimentary to veteran conductors, student conductors often have trouble establishing tempo. It is through focused study on the rebound that emerging conductors can learn to effectively set or change tempo.

Quality of Articulation

Expressive conducting is generally conveyed through the rebound and dictated by the quality of articulation. In an attempt to maintain pattern, many student conductors often overlook this very important part of the craft. In terms of dynamics, legato, marcato, or staccato conducting, they frequently think they are demonstrating much more than actually shown at the ex-

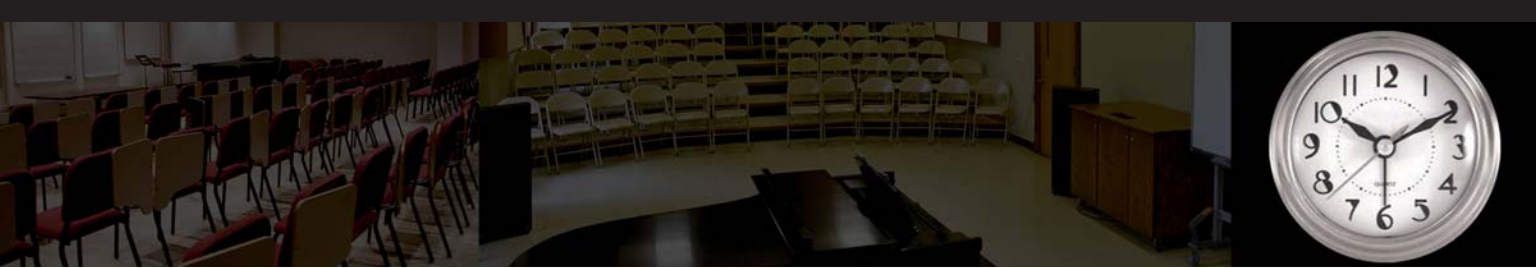


Figure 3

pense of clarity. Others focus solely on the expressive element of conducting and end up emoting in circular gestures with no real sense of time or pattern. These two extremes are seemingly where the majority of criticism resides between instrumental and choral conductors.

By intense focus on the quality of articulation in each rebound, one can effectively convey clarity of pattern, meter, and tempo while expressing the emotional properties of phrasing, dynamics, and textual implications. The manner in which one leaves an ictus and arrives at the next demonstrates the quality of the articulation. If the rebound is small, it may indicate a *piano* dynamic. If it is short and has a pointed stop-gesture at the change of direction, it may indicate a *staccato* articulation. If the rebound is large with a sweeping motion, it may indicate a *forte legato* articulation. The possibilities are endless.

A conductor must concentrate on the minutia of each individual rebound to assess if he or she is properly conveying the correct quality of articulation as dictated by the music. It is this spatial movement between each beat that contains the musical information

singers seek from the conductor: Like tempo, the quality of articulation must be demonstrated via rebound to singers at least one full beat prior to the desired point of execution.

“Hang Time”

Another issue within the rebound that often troubles student conductors is how to effectively maneuver through the change of direction. That is, the amount of *hang time* that is needed before returning to the ictus. They sometimes rush through this element of conducting without much thought. It causes them to rush tempo and minimize the use of the full conducting plane, vertical or horizontal. In turn, it minimizes the available space to show expression in the conducting rebound and shows a forced gesture rather than one that relies on physics and their particular anatomical kinesiology.

Many conducting teachers and pedagogues rightly liken this part of the gesture to bouncing a ball. James Jordan effectively discusses this concept:

When you throw a rubber ball to the ground, the force of your downward throw gains momentum because the ball is moving with gravity ... The ascent of the ball is slower than its descent because it is now moving against gravity ... When the ictus occurs, many novice conductors make their arms rebound upward at the same rate of speed as the descent, and the same distance is covered in both directions. In actuality, just like the bouncing ball, the rebound or ascent will be slower than the descent. The conductor must wait and allow the rebound to occur naturally.³

When a conductor does not allow the proper hang time at the apex of the rebound, it is much like the “ball” hits a

wall or ceiling abruptly, and the movement to the next ictus begins much sooner than likely intended. Additionally, it is not required that the rebound be strictly vertical to achieve this sense of

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hang time. Although all rebounds should have some sense of upward motion, an appropriate amount of hang time must occur no matter the direction. The amount of hang time needed is dependent on tempo and desired articulation.

Execution of the Rebound

Acknowledging that the rebound is the communicative information center of the conducting gesture is one thing. It is quite another to execute the rebound properly. A good starting place for emerging conductors is to identify the primary muscles involved. First, it is important to realize that the rebound does not begin like launching from a trampoline or diving board. To start with any kind of downward motion is incorrect, as that motion actually belongs to the previous rebound.


As discussed earlier, the rebound begins with the motion away from the previous ictus. To concentrate on this movement alone, it is sometimes helpful to rest the entire forearm on a secure,

flat surface (tabletop or piano). Especially for open hand conducting, to lift the tips of the fingers off of the surface involves primarily engaging the posterior extensor muscles of the forearm. Of course, other muscles of the upper arm and shoulder are involved through the full range of the rebound, but they are secondary. These extensor muscles are engaged through the entirety of the rebound. They only relax at the moment of the ictus before reengaging into the next rebound. The articulation shown in the gesture is, therefore, dictated by the amount of tension or relaxation present in these posterior extensor muscles of the forearm.

Conclusion

Though there are many elements that are important to achieve clear and expressive conducting, the rebound deserves adequate attention. It is naïve to think that the rebound alone holds the key to effective, communicative conducting. Without proper execution of

the rebound, however, it is impossible to communicate meter, tempo, dynamics, or articulation to choristers. The hope is that emerging conductors will begin to focus less on placement of ictus or getting the “right” pattern. Instead, the study of natural movement and direction from one ictus to another with hang time and velocity creates gestures that are easily interpreted musically.

Among conducting teachers and pedagogues, there may be a disagreement of approach. It is the intent of all conducting teachers, however, to see conducting students achieve mastery before graduating from beginning conducting courses. By adjusting the focus of teaching and evaluation away from ictus and pattern, students will learn that the rebound can achieve intentional purpose rather than reactionary results. This shift of focus is merely an attempt to connect student conductors to intangible concepts in a different way. Ideally, it will serve to foster better understanding and achieve more desirable results in the next generation of conductors. 

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NOTES


- ¹ Atherton, Leonard, *Vertical Plane Focal Point Conducting* (Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1989).
- ² DeVenney, David P., *Conducting Choirs*, vol. 1: *The Promising Conductor* (Dayton, OH: Roger Dean, 2010): 3.
- ³ Jordan, James, *Learn Conducting Technique with the Swiss Exercise Ball: Developing Inclusive Conducting Awareness* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2004), 72.

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