

## THE METHOD BEHIND THE MUSIC

### **Introduction to Conducting**

**Conducting** is the art of directing a musical performance, such as an orchestral or choral concert. It has been defined as "the art of directing the simultaneous performance of several players or singers by the use of gesture."<sup>[1]</sup> The primary duties of the **conductor** are to interpret the score in a way which reflects the specific indications in that score, set the tempo, ensure correct entries by ensemble members, and "shape" the phrasing where appropriate.<sup>[2]</sup> Conductors communicate with their musicians primarily through hand gestures, usually with the aid of a baton, and may use other gestures or signals such as eye contact.<sup>[3]</sup> A conductor usually supplements their direction with verbal instructions to their musicians in rehearsal.<sup>[3]</sup>

The conductor typically stands on a raised podium with a large music stand for the full score, which contains the musical notation for all the instruments or voices. Since the mid-19th century, most conductors have not played an instrument when conducting, although in earlier periods of classical music history, leading an ensemble while playing an instrument was common. In Baroque music from the 1600s to the 1750s, the group would typically be led by the harpsichordist or first violinist (see concertmaster), an approach that in modern times has been revived by several music directors for music from this period. Conducting while playing a piano or synthesizer may also be done with musical theatre pit orchestras. Communication is typically non-verbal during a performance (this is strictly the case in art music, but in jazz big bands or large pop ensembles, there may be occasional spoken instructions, such as a "count in"). However, in rehearsals, frequent interruptions allow the conductor to give verbal directions as to how the music should be played or sung.

Conductors act as guides to the orchestras or choirs they conduct. They choose the works to be performed and study their scores, to which they may make certain adjustments (such as in tempo, articulation, phrasing, repetitions of sections), work out their interpretation, and relay their vision to the performers. They may also attend to organizational matters, such as scheduling rehearsals,<sup>[4]</sup> planning a concert season, hearing auditions and selecting members, and promoting their ensemble in the media. Orchestras, choirs, concert bands, and other sizable musical ensembles such as big bands are usually led by conductors.

Conducting is more than waving your arms in front of the band. The conductor has two primary responsibilities:

1. To start the ensemble, to establish a clear, uniform tempo, and keep it throughout the performance.
2. To help the musical quality of the piece (expression, dynamics, cues).

There are many different conducting styles. The one presented below is a very basic style, suitable for beginning conductors. It is recommended that beginners start at the beginning of this page and look at the practice tips as they continue.

## The Starting Position

The starting position is important because it not only sets the correct conducting posture, it sets the **focal point** as well. The focal point is where the heels of your hands rest when in the starting position.



Fig. 1

Your upper arms should be away from your body. They should be slightly in front. Your forearms should be parallel to the ground. Your palms should show a little bit and your fingers should be up.



Fig. 2

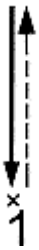
Your upper arms should be slightly away from your sides, elbows out, but not too far. (If you feel like you are doing the little birdie dance, you are out too far). Your hands should come in and should line up with your arm pits.

## Conducting a Down Beat



Moving your arms from the shoulder, bring your hands straight up, so that your wrists are at about eye level. All of the palms of your hands should show. Your elbow should not change position much, if at all. This is the preparation position to conduct the down beat. To conduct the down beat simply bring your hands back to the starting position. Quickly flick your fingers down to hit the focal point. This little flicking motion determines the actual beat.

[\(Practice techniques\)](#)



This is the basic down pattern simplified.

The solid line is the down beat.

The dotted line is the rebound.

### 5 Rules for Conducting

These rules should be kept in mind when conducting. They are very important for clear and consistent conducting.

1. All beats are down beats.
2. All beats strike the focal point.
3. All beats rebound.
4. All rebounds are equal in all ways to the down beat.
5. The size of the rebound depends on the speed of the music.

A good conductor is mindful of the rebound. If the rebound is too large, the conductor must rush to get back to the focal point. If the rebound is too small, the conductor may be forced to pause to get back in tempo, confusing the beat and the musicians. Rebounds, and thus downbeats, determine the speed of the music. Smaller downbeats are used for faster music, larger downbeats are used for slower music. The reason for this is because in fast music you don't have time to move your hands too far, and in slow music you do. To try otherwise is a waste of energy.

## **Practice Techniques**

These are some easy practice techniques which help with conducting form. Included are also some tips, tricks, hints and interesting points of note to help the beginning conductor.

### **Downbeats**

To refine arm movement and make sure you are correctly hitting the focal point, tape some paper to a wall. Hold a pen in each hand and stand before the wall. Move your arms as if you were conducting the down beat. Try to keep the strokes in relatively the same place and all hitting the focal point.

To find your focal point, stand in front of a table with a height approximately where your focal point would be. Mark Xs on the table where your fingertips should hit. Conduct in front of the table and try to tap the Xs briefly every down beat. (Substitute the table with a friend's open palms if you can't find a good table).

**\*Helpful Hint\*** Think of the focal point as a hot-plate. It's hot so you only want to touch it briefly. Flick the focal point quickly, avoid slapping it.

To get the flicking motion down, get a big rubber band and loop it around your middle finger. Pull the band back to your elbow and conduct down beats with one hand. Feel the rubber band pulling your finger back as you flick downwards. Try to remember this feeling and copy it without the rubber band.

To check whether your hands move in towards your chest, stand in front of a mirror in the starting position. Have someone mark on the mirror (with post-it notes or tape) the edge of your chest starting from under your arm pits. Next conduct downbeats in front of the marked mirror, trying to keep your hands from crossing the marked line.

**\*Helpful hint\*** When conducting, think 'down'. Often one can begin to emphasize up as the beat. Severe emphasis on the upbeat turns into hitches, or little accents at the top of the patterns. Thinking 'down' helps to eliminate this. Raise your arms but focus on them dropping to the focal point.

### **Conducting two**

**\*Helpful Hint\*** At the end of beat one, the hands and arms should remain in front of the body, not way out to the sides on a plane with the body.

Be mindful that on the swing up, the hands stay out and do not come back in. (Quick check: at the end of beat one, if your hands are anywhere closer to your body than your elbows are, your hands came in.)

Be mindful of spreading your hands too far apart in the 'out' part of the pattern. If you throw your hands way out, you will rush to bring them in again, and the beat will not be consistent.

**\*Interesting note\*** Most marches are conducted in two. Why? Well, you have two feet, right? Some songs in four can be conducted in two. Since four can be divided into two, marching bands can play songs in four even though normal band members have two feet.

### **Conducting three**

A further step-by-step explanation:

Down: bring arms down, hit focal point, go back up.

Out: bring arms down hit focal point, go out.

Up: bring arms down and in, hit focal point, go straight up.

**\*Tip\*** *The Lord is my Shepherd, a popular hymn, is conducted in three, NOT in four, a common mistake.*

**\*Interesting note\*** Waltzes are also conducted in three.

### **Conducting four**

Down: bring arms down, hit focal point, go back up.

Down: bring arms down, hit focal point, go back up.

Out: bring arms down hit focal point, go out.

Up: bring arms down and in, hit focal point, go straight up.

This is a great teaching pattern since much music is in four and since it can be broken down into the three, two and one patterns very easily. The basic four pattern works with a variety of patterns, making it the best pattern for conducting a tempo change or for recovery when the band falls apart.

### **Fast tempo**

Remember, the fast tempo pattern is the same but much smaller to accommodate the lack of time. Keep the upper arm relatively still; the elbow replaces the shoulder as a pivot point, so try to eliminate extra motion in the shoulder and upper arms to conserve energy and keep a consistent beat. Conduct with the forearms. Any extra movements in the arms must be with the hands to keep the beat clear.

Conducting with small relaxed patterns conserves energy and prevents much frustration.

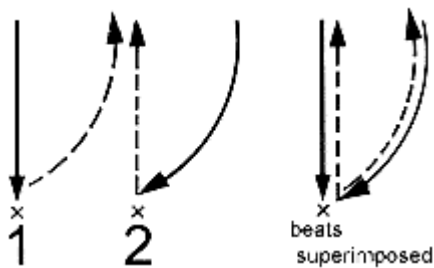
Remember: The key to conducting a tempo change is the rebound.

### Slow pattern

In a slow pattern, most of the arm movement is from the shoulder. Make sure you have a straight, even rebound on beat one, to maintain tempo consistency. Slow patterns are bigger than fast tempo patterns.

### Basic Patterns

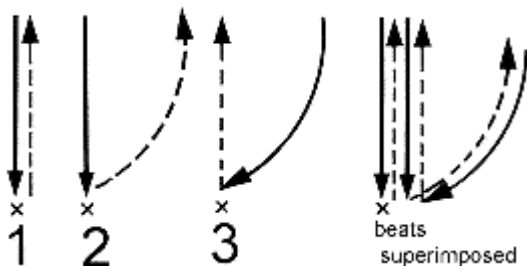
#### Conducting a Two Pattern



When conducting a two pattern, conduct the down beat but instead of coming straight back up, veer to the side. Beat two brings the hands back to the focal point and then straight up again.

This movie shows a variation on the above two pattern. This pattern is a more classic two pattern.

#### Conducting a Three Pattern

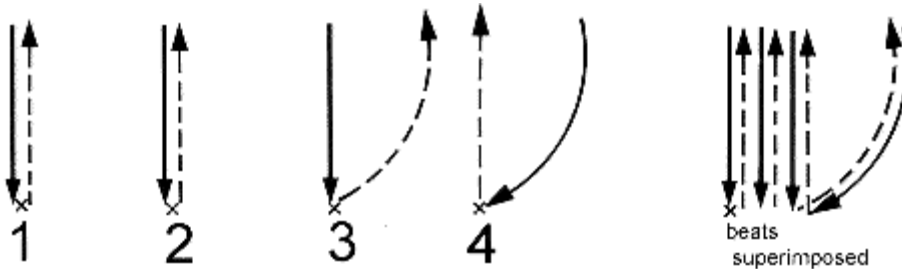


The three patterns, also known as 'down-out-up' is a combination of the two pattern and the one pattern. The first beat is a one pattern, which goes down and rebounds straight up. The second beat goes out, similar to the beginning of the two patterns. The third beat finishes the two patterns.

Watch Kate, the drum major, doing a **three** pattern!

This is another variation on the three patterns. This is a more classical pattern.

### Conducting a Four Pattern



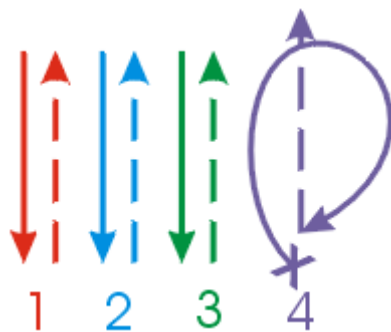
The four pattern is one of the most commonly used patterns. When learning the pattern, say to yourself 'down-down-out-up'. This pattern follows the same trend as previous ones. The four is the same as the three patterns but the four has an extra down at the beginning.

### Advanced Patterns

Many of these patterns can be used with the basic patterns to help with phrasing and/or dynamics. These patterns are all based on the four-beat pattern, however they place less importance on the focal point, the rebound and other proper conducting guidelines. We've taught you the basic rules; here is how to bend them.

In the Flash movies below, the patterns are shown slowed down to make them easier to follow.

### The Down-Down-Reverse-Around Pattern

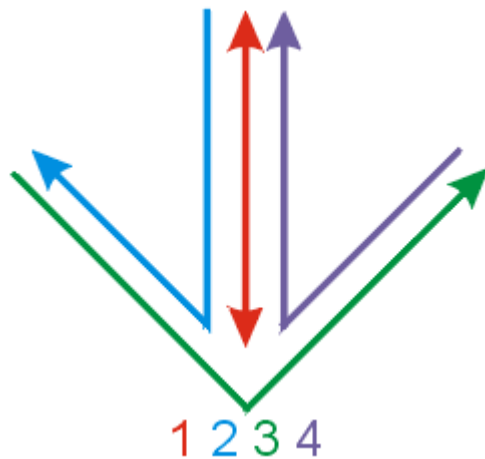


This is the 'down-down-reverse-around' pattern. The first two beats are simple downbeats, but the third beat rebounds in a circle towards the outside. The circle continues around until beat four. At beat four, give a flick of the wrist at the focal point (your hand should be there) and rebound up.

This pattern has a weak fourth beat. It is very useful in conducting the last half note on the last two beats of a measure. This pattern is good for building up to a new phrase or as part of a dynamic change. This pattern is generally not used over and over, but instead only as needed.

This movie shows the pattern described above.

### The Down-In-Out-Up Pattern



The 'down-in-out-up' pattern is a variation on the four patterns. The first beat is a normal down beat. The second beat comes down, hits the focal point and goes across the chest at a 45-degree angle. The third beat retraces the second beat's path across the chest, hits the focal point and veers out at another 45-degree angle, this time away from the body. The fourth beat come back to the focal point and rebounds up. The pattern looks like a down pointed arrow. Be mindful of keeping the focal point and using your arm rather than the wrist.

Softening the sharp arrow into more free-swinging pattern is great for just that: swing beats. This can be done by turning the 45-degree angles into slight curves (the arrow will look more like an anchor).

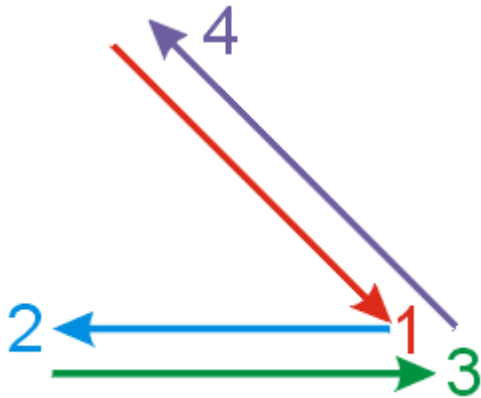
This is a difficult pattern to mirror the hands on since the hands would both come in towards the chest on beat two and possibly hit each other. Even if they don't touch, the proximity of the two hands could cause the conductor to slow beat two and speed up beat three to compensate, and thus mess up the tempo.

Watch Kate doing a **down-in-out-up** pattern! Notice how she accents the last beat with her left hand.

This is the 'down-in-out-up' pattern.

### The Thump Pattern





The 'thump' pattern is good for very fast music. The first beat comes to the focal point at an angle. The second beat slides in on a plane with the focal point. The third beat slides back across the focal plane to where the first beat ended. The fourth beat retraces the first beat back up. The pattern doesn't rebound, but still accentuates all the beats, hitting the first beat especially strongly (freeze on beat 1 for a moment).

This pattern is mostly wrist movement (because of the fast speed). Because your hands go in, watch out that your arms stay apart (or your hands will run together and mess up the tempo).

Never use this pattern to change tempo.

### **Important Extras**

#### **Tempo Changes**

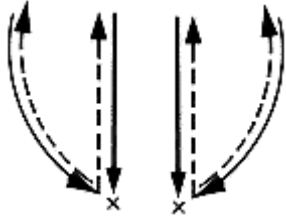
Remember to conduct especially clearly during tempo changes and to pay particular attention to these areas of the music. Tempo changes are potentially hazardous areas. As the tempo changes, change the size of your rebound, but strike the same focal point. This change in the pattern clearly indicates to the musicians that the tempo has changed instantly. The rebound size will indicate to them that the tempo is faster or slower.

Fast Tempo [tips](#).

#### **Using Two Hands**

Never cross your hands, it confuses the band and slows the pattern and thus the tempo.

When using two hands, the conductor has two options.



The first option is to mirror the hands. In this case each hand does the same thing, but in the opposite direction. When conducting with mirrored hands, never cross your hands. The advantage to using mirrored hands is increased visibility. This is very useful for drum majors and field conductors.

The basic four beat pattern is the best for mirrored hands.

The second option is to use the right hand to conduct and use the left hand to cue the musicians, show dynamics and phrasing. When this is done, the left hand generally remains at the side or at the stomach except when it is being used.

The more complicated the music, the simpler the pattern required. There are many different styles of conducting, and many ways to conduct the same music, even with the same pattern.

### **More Techniques**

Conducting is a means of communicating artistic directions to performers during a performance. Although there are many formal rules on how to conduct correctly, others are subjective, and a wide variety of different conducting styles exist depending upon the training and sophistication of the conductor. The primary responsibilities of the conductor are to unify performers, set the tempo, execute clear preparations and beats, listen critically and shape the sound of the ensemble, and to control the interpretation and pacing of the music. Communication is non-verbal during a performance, however in rehearsal frequent interruptions allow directions as to how the music should be played. During rehearsals, the conductor may stop the playing of a piece to request changes in the phrasing or request a change in the timbre of a certain section. In amateur orchestras, the rehearsals are often stopped to draw the musicians' attentions to performance errors or transposition mistakes.

Conducting requires an understanding of the elements of musical expression (tempo, dynamics, articulation) and the ability to communicate them effectively to an ensemble. The ability to communicate nuances of phrasing and expression through gestures is also beneficial. Conducting gestures are preferably prepared beforehand by the conductor while studying the score, but may sometimes be spontaneous.

A distinction is sometimes made between orchestral conducting and choral conducting. Typically, orchestral conductors use a baton more often than choral conductors. The grip of the baton varies from conductor to conductor.

## Beat and tempo

At the beginning of a piece of music, the conductor raises his hands (or hand if he only uses a single hand) to indicate that the piece is about to begin. This is a signal for the orchestra members to ready their instruments to be played or for the choristers to be ready and watching. The conductor then looks at the different sections of the orchestra (winds, strings, etc.) or choir to ensure that all the orchestra members are ready to play and choir members are ready. In some choral works, the conductor may signal to a pianist or organist to play a note or chord so that the choir members can determine their starting notes. Then the conductor gives one or more preparatory beats to commence the music. The preparatory beat before the orchestra or choir begins is the upbeat. The beat of the music is typically indicated with the conductor's right hand, with or without a baton. The hand traces a shape in the air in every bar (measure) depending on the time signature, indicating each beat with a change from downward to upward motion.<sup>[16]</sup> The images show the most common beat patterns, as seen from the conductor's point of view.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

The downbeat indicates the first beat of the bar, and the upbeat indicates the beat before the first note of the piece and the last beat of the bar. The instant at which the beat occurs is called the *ictus* (plural: *ictūs* or *ictuses*), and is usually indicated by a sudden (though not necessarily large) click of the wrist or change in baton direction. In some instances, "ictus" is also used to refer to a horizontal plane in which all the ictuses are physically located, such as the top of a music stand where a baton is tapped at each ictus. The gesture leading up to the ictus is called the "preparation", and the continuous flow of steady beats is called the "*takt*" (the German word for bar, measure and beat).

If the tempo is slow or slowing, or if the time signature is compound, a conductor will sometimes indicate "subdivisions" of the beats. The conductor can do this by adding a smaller movement in the same direction as the movement for the beat that it belongs to.

Changes to the tempo are indicated by changing the speed of the beat. To carry out and to control a *rallentando* (slowing down the pace of the music), a conductor may introduce beat subdivisions.

While some conductors use both hands to indicate the beat, with the left hand mirroring the right, formal education discourages such an approach. The second hand can be used for cueing the entrances of individual players or sections, and to aid indications of dynamics, phrasing, expression, and other elements.

During an instrumental solo section (or, in an opera orchestra during a vocalist's unaccompanied solo), some conductors stop counting out all the subdivisions and simply tap the baton down once per bar, to aid performers who are counting bars of rests.

There is a difference between the "textbook" definition of where the ictus of a downbeat occurs and the actual performance practice in professional orchestras. With an abrupt, loud *sforzando* chord, a professional orchestra will often play slightly *after* the striking of the ictus point of the baton stroke.

## **Dynamics**

Dynamics are indicated in various ways. The dynamic may be communicated by the size of the conducting movements, larger shapes representing louder sounds. Changes in dynamic may be signaled with the hand that is not being used to indicate the beat: an upward motion (usually palm-up) indicates a crescendo; a downward motion (usually palm-down) indicates a diminuendo. Changing the size of conducting movements frequently results in changes in the character of the music depending upon the circumstances.

Dynamics can be fine-tuned using various gestures: showing one's palm to the performers or leaning away from them may demonstrate a decrease in volume. To adjust the overall balance of the various instruments or voices, these signals can be combined or directed toward a particular section or performer.

## **Cueing**

The indication of entries, when a performer or section should begin playing (perhaps after a long period of rests), is called "cueing". A cue must forecast with certainty the exact moment of the coming ictus, so that all the players or singers affected by the cue can begin playing simultaneously. Cueing is most important for cases where a performer or section has not been playing for a lengthy time. Cueing is also helpful in the case of a pedal point with string players, when a section has been playing the pedal point for a lengthy period; a cue is important to indicate when they should change to a new note. Cueing is achieved by "engaging" the players before their entry (by looking at them) and executing a clear preparation gesture, often directed toward the specific players. An inhalation, which may or may not be a semi-audible "sniff" from the conductor, is a common element in the cueing technique of some conductors. Mere eye contact or a look in the general direction of the players may be sufficient in many instances, as when more than one section of the ensemble enters at the same time. Larger musical events may warrant the use of a larger or more emphatic cue designed to encourage emotion and energy.

## **Other musical elements**

Articulation may be indicated by the character of the ictus, ranging from short and sharp for staccato, to long and fluid for legato. Many conductors change the tension of the hands: strained muscles and rigid movements may correspond to marcato, while relaxed hands and soft movements may correspond to legato or espressivo. Phrasing may be indicated by wide overhead arcs or by a smooth hand motion either forwards or side-to-side. A held note is often indicated by a handheld flat with palm up. The end of a note, called a "cutoff" or "release", may be indicated by a circular motion, the closing of the palm, or the pinching of finger and thumb. A release is usually preceded by a preparation and concluded with a complete stillness.

Conductors aim to maintain eye contact with the ensemble as much as possible, encouraging eye contact in return and increasing the dialogue between players/singers and conductor. Facial expressions may also be important to demonstrate the character of the music or to encourage the players.

In some cases, such as where there has been little rehearsal time to prepare a piece, a conductor may discreetly indicate how the bars of music will be beat immediately before the start of the movement by holding up their fingers in front of their chest (so only the performers can see). For example, in a 4/4 piece that the conductor will beat "in two" (two ictus points or beats per bar, as if it were 2/2), the conductor would hold up two fingers in front of his chest.

In most cases, there is a short pause between movements of a symphony, concerto or dance suite. This brief pause gives orchestra or choir members time to turn the pages of their part and ready themselves for the start of the next movement. String players may apply rosin or wipe sweat off their hands with a handkerchief. Reed players may take this time to change to a new reed. In some cases, woodwind or brass players will use the pause to switch to a different instrument (e.g., from trumpet to cornet or from clarinet to Eb clarinet). If the conductor wishes to immediately begin one movement after another for musical reasons, this is called *attacca*. The conductor will instruct the orchestra members and choristers to write the term in their parts, so that they will be ready to go immediately to the next movement.

## **Roles**

The roles of a conductor vary a great deal between different conducting positions and different ensembles. In some cases, a conductor will also be the musical director of the symphony, choosing the program for the entire season, including concerts by guest conductors, concerto soloists, pop concerts, and so on. A senior conductor may attend some or all of the auditions for new members of the orchestra, to ensure that the candidates have the playing style and tone that the conductor prefers and that candidates meet the highest performance standards. Some choral conductors are hired to prepare a choir for several weeks which will subsequently be directed by another conductor. The choral conductor is usually acknowledged for their preparatory work in the concert program.

Some conductors may have a significant public relations role, giving interviews to the local news channel and appearing on television talk shows to promote the upcoming season or particular concerts. On the other hand, a conductor hired to guest conduct a single concert may only have the responsibility of rehearsing the orchestra for several pieces and conducting one or two concerts. While a handful of conductors have become well-known celebrities, such as Leonard Bernstein, most are only known within the classical music scene.