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Expressive conducting gestures

Reflections on the function of the left hand
Abstract

This thesis will explore the function of the conductor’s left hand, with emphasis on its expressive possibilities and the gestures. In the first chapter, the role of the conductor is discussed, and some problems around the field of expressive gestures are brought up.

In the second chapter, I present the history of conducting, or rather the history of musical leadership, as the practice of conducting we are familiar with today began in the late 19th Century. In this chapter, I also include some paragraphs about gesture and its role and function outside of musical leadership, such as public speaking.

In chapter three, I examine a selection of instruction books and how they treat the use of the left hand. During the work on this material I found several quotations and thoughts from conductors, in letters and interviews, presented in chapter four. This is interesting for this study, because it offers the personal opinions and experiences of well-established conductors and conducting teachers. It also shows how the opinions on the use of the left hand have changed over the past century.

Chapter five is a lengthy chapter of research on this topic. Not all is directly connected to the left hand, but all is in connection to gesture in some way.

These chapters form the basis of a discussion, where findings in previous chapters are pointed out and debated, and the authors personal opinion is presented. At the end follows suggestions on how this topic can be further researched and how one can create a repertoire of expressive gestures.
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1. Introduction

The hall is dark, the stage is set, the ensemble is ready and the audience is waiting. The doors go up, you enter, and for the next hour or two, you don’t speak. For the next hour or two, the only way you communicate is through body language and gestures.

“Ordinary” people often wonder: What do you actually do as a conductor? Usually I tell them: I just wave my arms.

In a way, this is the easiest solution, often just to avoid what would otherwise be a very long answer. But isn’t this also the essence of what conductors do? Being a conductor also demands knowledge of music history, performance practice, music theory and aural skills as well as pedagogical, social and psychological skills. But the same can be said for the chamber musician or the piano teacher. What distinguishes conductors from other musicians is that we make music without actually playing any instrument, we make music through gesture and mimicry. As a choir conductor one is used to grabbing the piano as soon as problems arise and as an orchestral conductor one is often tempted to describe the smallest details verbally. In rehearsals one cannot avoid speaking even so little, but in concert, gesture and body language is our only tool, and should therefore be the one which is our most well developed. After all, “waving your arms” is the core of the conducting profession, in rehearsals as well as concerts.

Returning to the situation described above; as everyone knows there is a lot of work proceeding the point where the doors open, and it often begin several months before. The conductor’s role in this situation is just one element in a process with many participants, starting with the composer’s initial idea, going through publishers, conductors and musicians, before it reaches the ears of the audience.

Composer → (score) → Publisher → (score) → Conductor → (language & gestures) → Musician → (sound) → Audience
- Composes music
- Publishes score & parts
- Makes changes to the composers score?
- Analyzes score
- Studies performance practice
- Research composer’s biography and the work’s reception history
- Compares editions?
- Plans gestures in relation to interpretation
- Plays/sings single parts
- Learns the composer’s intention and the conductor’s interpretation
- Perceives the composer’s musical intention

Fig. 1: Conductors role in a musical performance

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All in all, a conductor has three ways of communicating with an ensemble. Traditional conducting books classifies them as eyes, hands and words. A more scientific approach could result in the following classification:

- Visual communication: all body movements visible to the eye, including eyes
- Verbal communication: words
- Non-verbal, audible communication: foot stamps, snorts, breaths etc.\(^2\)

In addition to this, the psychological communication should also be mentioned. The psychological aspect falls under both the verbal and the visual, but can also be apparent in non-verbal, sounding communication like beating your baton on the music stand or snapping fingers.

In this thesis, I will focus on the visual mean, leaving eyes and body language to the side to focus specifically on the hand gestures. The term “hand gesture” also includes the movement of the arm and is not limited to the hands alone, except for the paragraphs on Cheironomy, where hand gestures are meant as solely hand gestures.

The most basic gesture, common for all conductors, is the beat pattern, but already here questions arise. A quick scope through the most common instruction books gives a rich variety of beat patterns, even for the same time signature. This is partly because some authors operate with different patterns depending on the articulation in question, such as legato, light staccato, tenuto, marcato etc. But taking this into account, the variety of possibilities is still incredibly wide.

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Fig. 2: Examples of neutral 4/4 patterns from Göstl (top left), Rudolf (top middle), Lijnschooten (top right), Green (bottom left), Ericson (bottom middle), Saito (bottom right)\(^3\)


This is confirmed by Ahrén in his doctoral dissertation, where he studied ten orchestral conducting educations and their teaching staff. Only two reported that their technique was founded in one of the major instruction books. The others reported that their technique was more or less a result of personal experience. From my own experience this situation is common. My regular conducting education started when I began the music program in high school. Over the past twelve years I have had sixteen conducting teachers, ranging from courses over a week to study programs over two years. As far as I can remember, twelve of them taught in detail about technique, and all teachers except two, had a different beat pattern for 4/4.4

At one of the courses I went to, the teacher had very specific opinions about all sides of conducting. The repertoire was Mozart’s requiem and excerpts from Händel’s Messiah, all supposed to be performed at the end of the week. The first two days were all about learning new beat patterns, and for the rest of the week, the teacher would stop rehearsals because students didn’t use his beat patterns. At one point, the teacher came up to me in a break while I was with my baton comparing my old patterns to the new ones and said: “You know, I hate standing here and watching you practice something that is not good for you!”

At another course the experience was quite different. As usual, participants came from around the world, with their own techniques and patterns, but the teacher said: “Whatever kind of pattern you use, try to make sure that …”, and then continued with a musical instruction that had to be reflected in the pattern. I was immediately surprised by this way of handling the problem, because I never experienced it before. What is certain, is that this input would be more beneficial after a week’s masterclass, than a new set of rather unfamiliar beat patterns. Diversity in beating is one of the prerequisites of shaping music, even if the left hand is as free and flowing as ever.

Conducting gestures is something very personal. When even the most basic gesture of conducting, the beat pattern, is so different from conductor to conductor, and from book to book, this proves that there is no “true way”. But there seems to be an understanding amongst conductors, that some things work better than others, and this is confirmed by the instruction books and modern research done on the musicians’ perception of conducting gestures. Nevertheless, the topic of left-hand gestures is often something left to the very end of instruction books, seldom talked about in courses, and perhaps suffers from lack of attention in conducting education as well? As Braem & Bräm describe in their study of expressive gestures:

In books on conducting and in conducting courses, the use of the non-dominant hand has usually been mentioned in a more general way, giving the impression that it is up to the individual conductor to develop gestures that will show other aspects of the music, such as sound texture, foregrounding of instrumental voices, density, atmosphere, and expression. Exactly how the non-dominant hand (together with the facial and body expression and eye gaze) actually manages to communicate all these aspects of the conductor's message has never, to our knowledge, been studied in detail.5

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4 Neutral pattern without any specific articulation such as legato or staccato.
5 Braem, Penny B. & Bräm, Thüring: A Pilot Study of the Expressive Gestures Used by Classical Orchestra Conductors, found in The Signs Language Revisited (editors: Emmorey, K. & Lane, H.), Mahwah, New Jersey:
To some extent, there is a controversy amongst conductors about the function of the left hand. For some conductors, the division between the left and the right hand is not so absolute as for others. What all conductors agree upon, is that it shouldn’t constantly mirror the right, so what does it do when much of the information needed is already in the right hand?

In my opinion, instruction books mostly assign gestures of a more technical character to the left hand, such as cut-offs, dynamics and cues. When the left hand is described with an expressive character, it is usually a confirmation of something written in the score. But the potential is larger, and so is the need:

*We don’t need you to show us when to play, we need you to show us how to play*

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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, p. 146

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2. History of conducting and gesturing

The earliest signs of communication through hands is found on stone walls in Egypt dating 2723-2563 B.C. Paintings show groups of musicians with a person in front of them showing different hand gestures. This is called Cheironomy, and it was a system of hand gestures to show the musicians which note to play. No notation system existed at this time, and all musicians played a unison, rhythmically free melody. Cheironomy spread to the Hebrew and Jewish communities in the Middle East, and is also found in high-cultures such as China and Babylonia.

Fig. 3: Musicians and cheironomists

Singing in the early Christian church was lead in the same way, by hand gestures, and this formed the basis of the first way to notate music, *neumes*. Neumes do not indicate precise rhythm or pitch, but more the general shape of the melody. The hand gesture would mirror these shapes.

Fig. 4: Early neumes written above a text

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7 http://ancientlyre.com/the_original_3000_year_old_music_of_the_bible___revealed_/  
8 Neuma, from ancient Greek, means sign  
9 http://poissyprocessional.brynmawr.edu/?page_id=206
Cheironomy is still used in synagogues and churches today, like the Greek, Coptic, Catholic and Anglican, to show melodic shapes and/or tempo.

The way of notating music developed during the Middle Ages, into what we today see in Gregorian chant. The most important contributor to this development was Guido d’Arezzo, who in 1025 published a book with a system to organize pitches and their relation. All pitches were placed in a staff system with one staff designated to be either c or f. In addition, d’Arezzo developed a system of showing pitches with the hand. Each joint of the fingers was designated a pitch in relation to the hexachord system, and with this way of showing pitches, singers could more easily sight read music.

Fig. 5: Guido’s hand showing two octaves and a major second

In the transition from unison melodies to polyphony in the 12th century, more rhythmic coordination was in need, so that the different parts would sound correctly together. The choir leader, Cantor, would indicate the tempo to the other singers by means of beating a stick in the ground, collective foot tapping, small discreet finger gestures, vertical movement of one hand or gentle tapping on the neighbor’s shoulder.

In the baroque period, a capella vocal music was led by the Cantor with the hands, often holding different objects as paper rolls or sticks. Instrumental music was led by the Kapellmeister from the harpsichord. If the composer was present he could lead the performance either from the harpsichord, playing the violin or the flute. In the classical period, the concept of continuo was slowly dismantled. Keyboard instruments disappeared form the bass group of the orchestra, and the musical leadership was maintained by the first violin player, sitting in a good position for the musicians to see his gestures and bowings.

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10 Drawing by Tabea Schwarz, 2016
the beginning of the romantic era, the complexity of instrumental music increased and the orchestras grew larger. In 1820, the German violinist and composer Ludwig Spohr wrote about his success of conducting in front of the orchestra:

It was still the custom in London at that time, when symphonies and overtures were performed, for the pianist to have the score before him, not exactly to conduct from it but rather to read and to play with the orchestra at pleasure, which often produced a very bad effect. The real conductor was the first violin, who gave the tempi and gave the beat with his bow. Thus, a large orchestra, standing so far apart from each other as the members of the Philharmonic, could not possibly be exactly together, despite the excellence of individual members. The ensemble was much worse than we are accustomed to in Germany. In rehearsal on the day I was to conduct the concert, Mr. Ries took his place at the piano and readily assented to relinquish the score and to remain wholly excluded from all participation in the performance. I then took my stand with the score at a separate music desk in front of the orchestra, drew my directing baton from my coat pocket and gave the signal to begin. I could not only give the tempi in a very decisive manner, but could indicate all confidence they had not known hitherto. The result at that evening was more brilliant than I could have hoped. It is true, the audience was at first startled by the novelty and there was considerable whispered comment, but when the music began and the orchestra executed the well-known symphony with unusual power and precision, general approbation was shown immediately on the conclusion of the first part by long-sustained applause. No conductor was seen seated at the piano any more during the performance of symphonies and overtures.\(^\text{11}\)

The rehearsal and the concert became a great success, and the “novel procedure” established itself very quickly in leading orchestras, which had suffered under the lack of precision for a long time. According to Wagner, the situation was not much better in Germany:

\[\ldots\] in the days of my youth, orchestral pieces at the celebrated Leipzig Gewandhaus Concerts were not conducted at all; they were simply played through under the leadership of Conzertmeister Mathai, like overtures and entractes at a theatre. \[\ldots\] those who have experience in such matters are aware that, in most cases, the defective constitution of German orchestras and the faults of their performances are due to the shortcomings of conductors.\(^\text{12}\)

Specialized conductors were not common yet, it was still the conducting composers, such as Weber, Mendelssohn, Spohr, Berlioz, Liszt or Wagner, who led performances. In the beginning, it was considered rude for the conductor to turn his back to the audience, and it was custom to face the audience. Wagner changed this:

To my knowledge, Wagner was the first to lead the orchestra with his back to the audience. Previously, conductors assumed position facing the audience from a three-quarter angle. One can imagine how little influence a leader could have on his players if he stood with his back to them. But in those days, conductors were mainly timebeaters who did not even take the trouble to rehearse, but left that to the concertmaster. \[\ldots\] Wagner and Mendelssohn unleashed a

\(^{11}\) Lee, p 13

veritable revolution in the field of conducting. They no longer beat time but build up the musical phrase. Nevertheless, this was still far removed from the modern art of conducting. Mendelssohn’s style was perhaps closer to the practice of our period than Wagner’s, since his approach was more abstract.  

Not until the end of the 19th century did the profession of conducting evolve into the independent occupation as it is today, and can be studied at most music universities. In the 20th century, conducting continued to evolve as the music got more and more complicated. George Szell expressed it in the following way:

The problems that the contemporary conductor has to face are very different from those of, say, fifty years ago. This is due to the general evolution of conducting from mere time-beating and “keeping things together” to a highly differentiated craft; [...] to the general demand for a degree of clarity, precision, and smoothness of orchestral performance undreamed of even as recently as Richard Wagner’s time.  

Another side of this was the development of public radio broadcasting and records. Earlier, excellent performances could only be heard in cities in Europe and the United States fortunate enough to have an orchestra of that level, but now, highly polished performances could easily reach a larger audience, and the standards of live performance rose to a higher level. This also increased the demand of specialized conductors with a broader repertoire and capacity to deal with more music in less time.

In the field of gesture, John Bulwer’s studies in gesture is often cited as the first documentation of effective nonverbal communication. Bulwer wrote five books exploring the human body and communication, and especially gesture. In the compendium Chirologia (1644) he explores manual gestures, citing their meaning and use from a wide range of sources; literary, religious and medical. And Chironomia (1644) is a manual for the effective use of Gesture in public speaking. With this he laid the groundwork for the British Sign language, and many of his gestures are still in use today.

Investigations actually began much earlier than the 17th Century. In the 1st Century, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, discusses gestures from Ancient Roman times. In the eleventh book of Institutio oratoria (Education of the Orator), he speaks of “gestus” or gesture, in which he refers “not only to actions of the hands and arms but also to the carriage of the body, the postures it can assume, the actions of the head and face, and the glance”. Interestingly, it is precisely these aspects which form the nonverbal communicative vocabulary of a conductor.

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15 Gallops, Ronald W.: The Effect of Conducting Gesture on Expressive-Interpretive Performance of College Music Majors, research article, University of South Florida, 2005, p. 20
3. Instruction books on left-hand gestures

In this chapter I will examine how the left hand is dealt with in three orchestral conducting books, Scherchen, Rudolf an McElheran. For a fuller picture of the early literature on conducting, short descriptions of the first writings on conducting in form of essays and letters is also mentioned.

Berlioz was the first to write about conducting. His essay Le Chef d’orchestre was published as a chapter in his treatise on orchestration in Paris in 1855, and compromises 21 pages. Berlioz systematically treats conducting from a technical point of view. He focuses on beat patterns and the secure feeling for pulse that one must have as a conductor. He mentions the role of the eyes in combination with the arms, but nothing specific about gestures or the role of the left arm.

The next essay to be published, Wagner’s Über das Dirigieren, in Leipzig in 1869 compromises about 120 pages. The essay mostly deals with Wagner’s own reflections and personal thought surrounding interpretation. He attacks contemporary conductors for their many mistakes and wrong-doings, but does however recognize the new understanding of the function of the conductor, both the external factor (set the tempo and hold the performance together) and the internal factor (giving spirit and soul to the performance). Wagner states that both factors are equally important, he doesn’t give much for the simple “time-beaters”, a conductor must also communicate the characters and nuances of the piece. On the other hand:

We should not laugh at a talented, young conductor whose vehemence prevents him bridling himself, but exhort him in a friendly way to keep his body quiet, and to train himself not to make any more movements than are necessary. The expression of each passage will then generate an appropriately great or small motion of the baton. A complete harmony between music and gesture will indeed only come with the years […]\(^\text{16}\)

Wagner recognizes that there is a problem with guest conductors. He describes how the orchestra often have trouble understanding the gestures of the visiting conductor, and underlines the importance of enough rehearsal time. The degree of misunderstanding is dependent on the orchestra, and mentions that the very good orchestras, like Berlin and Vienna, do fine in the hands of guest conductors. As a solution for other orchestras Wagner suggests that orchestras go on tour with their own conductor, instead of conductors going around to visit different orchestras.

Deldevez’s book L’art du Chef d’orchestre was published in Paris in 1878. It is seen like a historical manifesto, mostly because Deldevez champions the bow of the violin as the preferred tool to conduct with. He does however distinguish between “signes, “gestes” and “mouvements”, but does not succeed in defining them as three separate categories. He does not mention the left hand at all, but states that gestures have to mirror the inner feelings of the conductor.

After Weingartner’s book *Über das Dirigieren* was published in 1895, it became more common with publications on the subject. From 1910, approximately one larger book was published every fifth year, mainly in Leipzig, London or the US East Coast, and older writings were also re-edited and published. From 1930, roughly one book per year would be published. One of those was Hermann Scherchen’s *Lehrbuch des Dirigierens* (1929). Scherchen worked extensively on contemporary music and promoted the younger generation of his time including Xenakis and Nono. Scherchen commonly avoided the use of a baton, and he worked largely by giving verbal instructions - his scores were often full of reminders about what to say to the musicians at different points. His book became one of the most influential books on conducting, and is still considered as one of the top three instruction books together with Rudolf’s *The Grammar of Conducting*, which will be dealt with later, and Malko’s *The Conductor and his Baton*.

Scherchen describes in the beginning of his book:

> My intention is to show that a technique of conducting does exist, and can be learnt and practiced down to its smallest details before a student first attempts to conduct an orchestra.\(^{17}\)

> All books on conducting published so far contain remarks on practical points, polemics on various conceptions of works, and, at best, advice on how to conduct certain works. Some of them give diagrams showing the principal movements used in conducting.\(^{18}\)

During the course of the book, he also presents many ideas about the role and methods of the conductor:

> There are three distinct purposes in conducting: (1) to present the metric course of the music; (2) to indicate its expressive structural features: (3) actually to guide the orchestra – preventing faulty playing and correcting fluctuations or inequalities. To present the metric course of the music is the basis of conducting. But the gestures which effect this presenting must simultaneously achieve the other two functions just mentioned\(^{19}\)

> The act of conducting can be defined as follows: gesture, the conductor’s one and only medium during performance, must indicate perfectly clearly the metrical course of the work: and at the same time, it must convey in unequivocal fashion the varying expression and general shaping of the work\(^{20}\)

> The conductor has three methods of conveying his interpretations: representative gesture, expressive mimicry, and explanatory speech. Of these means of establishing understanding, the first alone interests us. Mimicry and words are of questionable value; they hamper as well as help. Words, moreover, can be used at rehearsals only.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Scherchen, p. 151

\(^{20}\) Scherchen, p. 14

\(^{21}\) Scherchen, p. 14
Scherchen proceeds by presenting beat patterns, and how different beat patterns can show different articulation, but nothing about how to differentiate the right and the left hand. Scherchen presents several musical examples and how they can be realized within the right hand’s beat pattern. At one point he does mention how the left hand can assist: through “helping upbeats”, where the left hand beats a preparatory beat before the actual upbeat. And another instance, where the left hand can indicate the length of pauses:

[…] the duration of the pause is sustained by the raised left hand while the right hand, beating sideways, carries out the upbeat-like conclusive motion

In two examples from a slow movement in Mahler’s Symphony no. 3, Scherchen designates one role to each of the two hands:

For here each hand has a distinct function: while the left (sic!) merely marks the metric value of the 3/2 time, indicating them without ambiguity to those performers who have rests, the right represents the melodic significance as made clear by Mahler with the help of pauses and caesuras

Fig. 6: Excerpt from Mahler’s Symphony no. 3. (Dot missing on the second quarter note)

In the chapter about the Conductors bearing, Scherchen states:

Conducting should never be confused either with dramatic acting, pantomimic presentment, or gymnastics. Its ideal should be that no part of the body except the right arm should move. Yet, one page later he writes: […] the left hand is a splendid method of articulating, intensifying, reinforcing, emphasizing, hushing and refining.

This leaves the impression that the role of the left hand might not have been given so much attention at that time. It could also be considered a viewpoint of someone accustomed to conducting contemporary music, which in its gesture is more “technical” and minimalistic. A more thorough description of the left hand is finally presented in the last chapter, practical examples, where Scherchen goes through every movement of Beethoven’s First Symphony in

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22 Scherchen, p. 163
23 Scherchen, p. 172
24 Scherchen, p. 178
25 Ibid.
26 Scherchen, p. 187
27 Scherchen, p. 188
detail, as well as Strass’ *Till Eulenspiegel* and Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat*. He describes the music, how to learn it, what to focus on, and how to conduct it in a technical way describing upbeats, the gestures of both the right and the left hand, and in a musical way describing dynamics, character and so on.

The left hand is designated the following tools:

- position: palm turned outwards to moderate the orchestra, open and compelling to intensify the singing tone
- ringing out important notes
- sustaining long notes
- mark melodic movement
- vertical movements for dynamics
- entries of instruments
- show articulation (tenuto, legato, staccato) and dynamics (sfz, ff, pp)
- conducting different groups (often left hand winds, right hand strings, sometimes the other way)
- syncopated beats (must be kept still before and after doing so)
- keep silent, in reserve

In *The Grammar of conducting*, published in New York in 1950, Max Rudolf takes the same approach as Scherchen:

> One of the first things that the student is usually told is that his beat must express the music, […] But the advice is of little value unless he has the variety in his beat … This cannot be achieved if the conductor has only one way of indicating rhythm, […] It would be impossible to teach all the different gestures and their combinations […]

He then presents six beat patterns: non-espressivo, light staccato, full-staccato, espressivo-legato, marcato, tenuto. These are based on his own experience and common practice of conductors of his day. On the other hand, Rudolf seems to give more attention to the left hand already from the start by defining what the role of the right and the left hand is:

This book deals with the technique of conducting, which involves using the right arm in wielding the baton, of the left arm to lend support, and the function of the eyes. The most elementary things indicated by gestures are when to start and stop, the tempo of the music, and the holds and interruptions. These are indispensable, but in themselves are merely sufficient to keep the orchestra together. To obtain an artistic result the conductor must be able to communicate with nuances in dynamics, details of phrasing, articulation (legato and staccato), and general expression. For this, mere time-beating is not enough; the appropriate gesture for each musical expression must be mastered, before we can speak of conducting.

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28 Rudolf, p. ix
29 Rudolf, p. 2
While each conductor has his own highly individual manner of directing, there are certain principles of “good usage” in conducting. ¹⁰

During the first chapters of the book, these left-hand tools are mentioned:

- sustaining a forte (palm upwards or inwards, fingers are somewhat bent)
- indicate a piano (palm towards orchestra, fingers together)
- crescendo and diminuendo (lifting left hand, palm facing upwards – dropping the hand, palm facing downwards)
- entries (don’t point, give cues in the character of the entrance)
- cut-offs (move hand inwards, palm facing down or snap the hand downwards)
- indicate accents
- sustained notes
- leading one group of instruments (while the right hand leads the other)
- showing pizzicato (by imitating the movement of the string players)
- cuing (one finger for warning, two – four for showing how many beats there are in a bar)

Rudolf also discuss phrasing and melody building, but all from the perspective of changing the beat-pattern of the right hand, the left hand is not mentioned, except for sustaining notes. In the chapter about the independence and use of the left hand, most attention is given to how to practice independence with different rhythmical exercises. ¹¹ He claims that the left hand’s ability to show subtle nuances as well as the most dramatic accents is one of the characteristics of fine conducting. But only at one point in the entire book does he describe such a gesture:

[… ] the left hand can help express the inviting quality with a smooth, gentle motion toward the orchestra ³²

The chapter called “Free style” would be the obvious place to elaborate on the forms and functional possibilities of the left hand that according to himself “is one of the characteristics of fine conducting”. Rudolf strains himself in describing many of the gestures experienced conductors do that do not fit with the teachings of previous chapters, and urges the “student” not to fall into the many pitfalls that this kind of conducting may lead to.

Like Scherchen, Rudolf also goes through selected music in the last chapter. Three more descriptions appear there:

- Vibrato with the left hand
- Economical use in the beginning, more effective towards the end (in a movement where the beginning is soft and the ending is loud)
- Left hand index finger towards the lips for pp

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¹⁰ Rudolf, p. x
¹¹ Rudolf, p. 243
³² Rudolf, p. 247
Brook McElheran’s book *Conducting technique*, published in New York in 1966, has the impression of being a manifesto towards all bad conducting and conducting teaching. It contains much of the same information as in Scherchen and Rudolf, yet only half the length. The writing is more personal, and even quite entertaining in some instances. Some pages in, he lists the biggest misbeliefs in left hand conducting:

1. The right hand gives the tempo and the left the expression
2. The left hand should be constantly in use
3. The left hand should duplicate the right, so that it can take over if the right hand gets tired

In the first point, the main reason for not making such a clear division between the hands is that then the right side of the orchestra will chiefly get tempo information and no expression, contrary to the other side, who gets lots of expression but no tempo. 

He proposes:

Use the right hand for everything that it can conveniently show: tempo, volume, character, phrasing, and cues when they fit into a pattern. Use the left hand as follows:

a) To take care of duties beyond the scope of the right hand, such as cues that do not fit into the beat pattern, volume or balance indications to certain sections of the group, exhortations to supplement the right hand, such as imploring gesture for a richer sound in a cantabile, page turns, and many other duties.

b) To reinforce and emphasize what the right hand is indicating. For example, add left hand for a sudden accent, a subito pp, the climax of a crescendo, an important cue, etc.

c) Under no circumstances allow the left hand merely to mirror the right for more than a few beats at a time. This is a common fault. In a 3-pattern it is merely a waste of a good hand: in a 4, awkward, and in a 6, ludicrous.

d) When the left hand is not in use, either let it hang at the side or close to the body in a relaxed position, bent at the elbow.

Before moving on to other “problems” he sees in conductors and their teachers, he states that when you practice the complete independence of the left hand, it will start to take care of musical things by itself, with a little supervision from the owner.

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34 Ibid.
35 McElheran, p. 38
4. Conductors on left-hand gestures

During the work on this thesis I came upon several descriptions and quotations from conductors. At first I thought of them as curiosities, fit to be put in between paragraphs as a kind of entertainment, but as the range ended up covering a century and including many of today’s teachers, it became apparent that thoughts on the function of the left hand have changed quite a lot since the first conductors climbed the podium. In his essay *Dirigentenerfahrungen mit klassischen Meisterwerken*, published in 1949 as a part of the book *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, Strauss takes a rather extreme position, even for that time, judging by the way he formulates himself:

> The left hand has nothing to do with conducting. Its proper place is the waistcoat pocket from which it should only emerge to restrain or to make some minor gesture for which in any case a scarcely perceptible glance would suffice. It is better to conduct with the ear instead of with the arm: the rest follows automatically.  

Another surprising account came from Furtwängler:

> One day a young musician asked Furtwängler: What is, in fact the role of your left hand when you conduct? Trying to answer his question, the German conductor said: After over twenty years of conducting, I must say I had never thought of it.

It seems obvious that the left hand wasn’t offered much attention in the early 20th century. This might be because of the conducting aesthetics of the time, Strauss e.g. was a minimalist when it came to conducting, judging by other statements in essays in the aforementioned book. Scherchen would assumingly take the same position, judging by the focus in his book, and by his acquaintance with the music of Schönberg and so on.

One would think that Furtwängler, whose core repertoire was Beethoven, Brahms and Wagner, might have seen the left hand as very useful, especially in a time where phrasing and rubato were key points in interpreting music. Either he didn’t use it that much, or he was so talented he didn’t need to think about it. One of my teachers once said:

> Some people just have a talent for moving their body, while others have to think about it and practice it.

Accounts concerning how the left hand is actually in use, and designated other tasks than the right hand can be found in conductor George Szell’s description of Toscanini:

> Toscanini […] made a distinction between the responsibilities of the right and left arms. His right arm generally moved in broad, clear, compelling strokes, not merely beating time but

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36 Strauss in Bamberger, p. 120  
37 Interview with Pablo Casals, found in Bamberger, p. 151  
38 Kenneth Kiesler at a masterclass in May 2016
drawing the musicians into the music and helping them to progress through it, persuading them to bring it to life; it activated and shaped the music. His left hand was responsible for the fine tuning: from a position directly in front of him, where it was invisible to much of the audience, it cautioned and exhorted.\textsuperscript{39}

This stance is nevertheless debated amongst conductors. The idea that the right and the left hand are designated two different functions, the technical and the expressive, is maintained in many instruction books and by many conductors. Bernstein challenges this notion claiming:

\begin{quote}
This is sheer nonsense. No conductor can divide himself into two people, a time-beater and an interpreter. the interpretation must always be in the time-beating itself\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Carlos Kleiber’s approach is in line with Bernstein’s: both hands are simultaneously and interchangeably in use communicating both rhythmic and expressive information.\textsuperscript{41}

In 2002 Thomas du Quercy Ahrén published his doctoral thesis where he looks into the field of orchestral conducting teaching. Starting off with a thorough examination of conducting books, he continues with a field study of ten orchestral conducting institutions in Europe. Studies include observations, lengthy interviews with teachers and students, as well as investigations into study plans, repertoire lists, teaching material and so on. A must-read for all involved in conducting education!

In interviews with teachers he touches upon the potential of gesture as communication:

\begin{quote}
Two of the teachers, Rasmussen and Panula, claim it’s possible to express all of the conductors’ musical intentions with gesture. Segerstam shares the same idea, but from his answer, the conclusion that it takes some time for an orchestra and a conductor to accustom themselves to each other before an orchestra can read the conductors signals can be drawn. Other teachers speak in varying degrees about the limits they find in the gestures’ potential of expression. They mention different issues, as intonation, sound, articulation, polyphonic settings, and string instruments bowing technique. Three teachers, Levacher, Almila and Hager, are in comparison to the others rather moderate in their explanations on the potential of gesturing. In particular, Levacher stands out claiming the conductor doesn’t have gestural ways of expression in terms of sound and intonation.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

On further questions surrounding the idea of gesture as a kind of language, and if it’s possible to link the gestural language of conducting with verbal language, answers differ:

\begin{quote}
Aprea is relatively distinct in his answer when he claims that all communication can be seen as a sort of language, and then he means gesture as symbols. He expresses that he is convinced that it’s possible in a “scientific” way to codify these symbols. Rasmussen claims not only that this is possible, but that he, in relation to the teaching material he is about to produce, is working on describing such connections, and that this in general should develop the gestural
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{39} Braem & Bräm, p. 145  \\
\textsuperscript{40} Watson, p. 28-29  \\
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{42} Ahrén, p. 188-189, translated from Swedish by the author
\end{flushright}
language. He draws parallels between the gestural language and the sign-language of the deaf, saying it is as evident as the first. […] Ruud and Segerstam also speak about gesture as communication, […] Ruud mentions that communication has an output and that this is the language. Metters circles the same meaning when he says “an expression” that should be translated “into a physical domain”. Levacher, Polishchuck and Rydinger Alin all speak, in their own way, about how gestures describe the music and that the music itself is the language. Here the subject of communication as a language and not as musical output is interchanged, a distinction none of them defines during the interviews.43

Ahrén offers some of his own thoughts on the answers given:

Anything substantial about the link between language and gesture can hardly be found in Rodans, Almilas and Rophés statements. It is more spoken in metaphors of a kind very common in pedagogical situations. Panula, Thorp and Hager don’t want to speak about parallels between language and gesture at all. I think this reluctance is based on a will to wanting to express it in a simple way, and not willing to theorize too much. Hager firstly takes an extreme standing when he claims he doesn’t want to intellectualize the subject, and that he finds the question of links between gesture and language as artificial. I think that Hager champions a view that has been, and still is, relatively common amongst conductors. It as an attitude, conveyed over a long period of time, where interpretation and the practical work precedes the analytical work, such as analyzing different structures in relation to the ingredients and expression of communication, and formalizing them.44

It seems that some conductors are more committed to the idea of gesture as an interdisciplinary subject than others, and that it is possible to work with gestures on a more “scientific” level. The same conductors committed to this idea, also recognize the greater potential of gesture as an effective means of communication between conductor and musician. Others seem to take the Furtwängler-approach. It is evident how conducting is a very personal language, and that an intuitive approach based on personal experience is the ruling factor, both when describing, discussing and teaching the repertory of gestures.

Conducting: an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all.45

43 Ahrén, p. 188-189, translated from Swedish by the author
44 Ibid.
45 Edward Sapir in Fuelberth, Rhonda: The Effect of Various Left Hand Conducting Gestures on Perceptions of Anticipated Vocal Tension in Singers, research article, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004, p. 28
5. Research

Since the 70’s, conducting has been subject to an increasing number of scientific studies, often focusing more on the right hand than the left, especially in the early days of computer science. This is due to the measurable and concrete tasks of the right hand as the equipment wasn’t as developed as it is today. In the past twenty years, there has been an increasing number of studies done on the more communicative sides of conducting, ranging from the recognition and efficiency of gestures to facial expressions, muscle tension, and in relation to other fields such as sign language and public speaking. In this chapter I will go through some of the relevant studies for the topic of this thesis, including interesting opinions from doctoral theses and other articles. For clarity, I underline the results of each study.

5.1 Gesture recognition

Sousa (1988):
Based on descriptions in five instruction books, Sousa developed a list of 55 conducting gestures that he called “emblems”. A professional conductor was asked to conduct all gestures while being videotaped. The tape only showed his upper body, not his face or lower body. The videos were evaluated and categorized in beat patterns, dynamics, styles, preparations, releases, fermata/holds, tempo changes, and phrasing by a panel of experts, and shown to 195 members of junior high school, high school, and university bands without sound. The students filled out a pen-and-paper test, choosing one of four definitions for each gesture. Junior high school music students recognized 19 of 55 gestures, high school music students recognized 37 of the 55 gestures, while university students recognized 47 out of 55. The study determined that the gestural language of conducting is not universally understood but has to be learned, and that the level of recognition increase with experience.

Mayne (1992):
Based on Sousa’s findings, Mayne explored facial expressions in conjunction with conducting gestures on high-school students. He used gestures from Sousa’s study and recorded them again with the same conductor, this time with facial expressions. Contrary to Mayne’s expectations, there was no significant improvement of recognition with added facial expressions.

46 (Gesture that can be connected with a direct verbal metaphor)
47 Gallops, p. 21 & Platte, p. 29
48 Platte, p. 30
5.2 Gesture efficiency

Grechesky (1985):
Grechesky randomly selected twenty high school bands. These bands were then rated by a panel of four independent judges as musical or less musical. From these ratings five of the most musical and five of the least musical ensembles were selected to take part in the study. In addition, one band close to the mean score was selected. These ensembles were given 16 minutes to rehearse two contrasting movements of a musical selection with their conductor, and in their own rehearsal room in order to maintain a naturalistic atmosphere. The rehearsal was followed by a performance of the selection. Conductor behaviors were coded every six seconds in terms of nonverbal and verbal behaviors. Results of a regression analysis determined that conductors of more musical groups displayed significantly more body movement, approving facial expressions, left hand conducting, and left and right hand coordination. Nonverbal “emblems” were found to be the most powerful independent variables on musical performing.49

Sidoti (1990):
Sidoti gave four melodies to individual band students from four high schools that had received “Superior” ratings at their state contest. The 139 participants were allowed to practice the four melodies, which contained no expression markings, for three days. They were then given a new copy of the melodies with expression markings inserted and were asked to play them while following a conductor on a videotape. For half of the expression markings, the conductor simply beat a pattern without expressive gestures. For the other half, the conductor used gestures that matched the printed expressive markings. Results showed that expressive conducting gestures were found to have a significant effect on the accuracy of the performer in following the expressive markings.50

Serrano (1993):
Serrano explored the predictability of different conducting patterns. Hypothesizing that speed and direction of conducting movements influence the ability to predict a beat, Serrano used constantly blinking points of light to detect conducting movements for his study; he asked forty musicians and forty non-musicians to tap the beat by pressing a mouse button following the point of light animation on a computer screen. The shown conducting movements were categorized in four different modes:
- Mode A (gravity motion), representing motion with naturally occurring gravitational forces, i.e. accelerating when going down and decelerating when going up.


50 Manternch p. 23, Gallops p. 23, Grady, Melissa: Considerations of Lateral and Vertical Conducting Gestures in Evoking Efficient Choral Sound, research article, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2014, p. 123
• Mode B (non-gravity motion), showing the opposite behavior of mode A, i.e. decelerating downward motion and accelerating upward motion.
• Mode C (constant speed), presenting the same conducting gestures as in mode A and B, but with a constant speed.
• Mode D as mix of tasks from mode A-C as means of confirmation of the result of the previous tasks in mode A-C.

![Fig. 7: Mode A (gravity motion) and B (non-gravity motion)]

Although Serrano’s results for the different conditions gravity-related tempo changes vs. constant speed seem reasonable at first sight, his experimental design shows a major problem. According to the shown beat patterns of mode A and B, Serrano is not only inverting the forces of gravity (the changes of speed can be seen from the different distance between the dots: bigger distance = higher speed), he is also inverting the form of the conducting pattern, thus changing two factors at a time. Without investigating form of trajectory and speed separately, he draws two conclusions: Firstly, the conducting pattern of mode A is easier to predict than the pattern of mode B, and secondly, the gravity mode is beneficial for a precise beat prediction compared to both the non-gravity and the constant-speed mode. Serrano presumes that the main reason for a better predictability of the conducting pattern in mode A is that the trajectory in mode A shows a single, distinct beat point while in mode B “multiple interpretations of the moment of beat” might be possible.51

![Fig. 8: Predictability of the beat point in Mode A and B]

51 Platte, p. 32-33
Skadsem (1997):
Skadsem looked at four modes of giving instructions regarding dynamic level to a choir of 144 singers: verbal instructions, written instructions, changes in conducting gesture, and dynamic changes in the choir. The researcher found that although singers identified conductor gesture as the best way of communicating dynamic levels, the results of the study showed that the verbal directions actually significantly affected singers’ responses to scored dynamics.  

House (1998):
House examined the effects of expressive and non-expressive (time-beating) conducting in the performances of 60 advanced instrumental musicians. Results indicated that performances improved while observing expressive conducting and that expressive conducting elicited more favorable performer attitudes toward the conductor than non-expressive conducting.

Gallops (2005):
Gallops studied the effect of non-verbal conducting gestures on musicians by measuring their stylistic response with a Gestural Response Instrument (GRI). He also examined if gestures alone were enough to elicit consistent musical response from musicians. He determined that, even without facial and verbal cues, some experienced conductors successfully utilized gestures to communicate specific musical interpretations:

According to the results of this study, some of the experienced conductor participants lacked the gestural technique and vocabulary necessary to convey musical decisions without verbal instruction. There were however, conducting participants who possessed the technical ability required to elicit a high degree of targeted response from musicians without the use of verbal or facial cues. The study of conducting has focused primarily on effective score study techniques, verbal communication, basic conducting patterns, and facial cues. Few researchers have examined the effects of gestural technique on performance. Using the Gestural Response Instrument developed by Karpicke, this study has confirmed that there exists an unspoken vocabulary that fine conductors possess. This unspoken vocabulary, when effectively applied, may have precise influence on the interpretive response of musicians.

Morrison, Price, Geiger, and Cornacchio (2009):
Morrison and colleagues examined conductor use of high-expressivity or low-expressivity conducting techniques and how the techniques effected evaluations of identical ensemble performances. They employed four conducting videos, two with expressive conducting and two with non-expressive conducting, with the same sound recording. 118 university wind ensemble members rated instrumental ensemble expressivity significantly higher for the expressive conducting than the non-expressive conducting.

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52 Grady, p. 123
53 Ibid.
54 Gallops, p. 68-69
55 Grady, p. 124
Napoles (2013):
Napoles examined choral sound produced by a choir while observing both expressive and non-expressive conductors. He used both expressive and non-expressive conducting from four conductors to test the effects of three presentation modes (audio only, conductor viewed from the front, and conductor viewed from the back) on ratings by 131 students at a high school choir camp. In all three modes, students rated the expressive conductors and the audio recordings acquired under expressive conducting conditions significantly more favorably than non-expressive conductors and the audio recordings acquired under non-expressive conducting conditions.56

Napoles (2014):
Napoles investigated the relative effectiveness of verbal instructions and conducting gestures in a high school choral context. Napoles asked 44 high school students (Grade 9–12) to sing the song “Music Alone Shall Live”, while viewing a video with conducting gestures and following different types of tasks regarding word-stress and articulation:
1. Follow the conducting gesture
2. Contrasting task
3. Coherent task
The resulting audio recordings were evaluated by 30 experienced secondary choral teachers and then statistically analyzed by Napoles. The results showed a significantly higher quality rating of performances under the condition of verbal instructions with consistent gestures. Interestingly, the sounding results of inconsistent gesture-task combinations were rated higher than those of the gesture-only tasks. Unfortunately, beside a brief description, no further information is given about the exact form/trajectory of the used conducting gestures for the shown musical parameters and the decision process for the selection of the specific beat-patterns.57

Schuldt-Jensen (2016):
In a recently published article, conductor Morten Schuldt-Jensen offers a detailed description of a conductor’s tasks, challenges, and tools. In addition to presenting an overview over the conductor’s different communication means and an analysis of the musical parameters, which conducting gestures should evoke, Schuldt-Jensen is the first author to give a detailed analysis of the diverse collection of beat patterns found in the different teaching books. Furthermore, he gives a detailed analysis of the conducting-studies by Luck and suggests explanations to their seemingly inconsistent arguments. Based on his experience as a conductor and a conducting teacher, he dismantles gestures to their smallest parts, offering a terminology and a functional explanation of each part of the trajectory regardless of the conducting style.58 Schuldt-Jensen differentiates between four categories of characteristics of the different conducting patterns:
1. levels of the beating point
2. form of the trajectories

56 Grady, p. 124  
57 Platte, p. 37  
58 Platte, p. 37-38
3. form of upper vertical turning point  
4. form of lower vertical turning point

Based on this analysis of general beat patterns, Schuldt-Jensen proposes the exact opposite to Serrano’s study, attributing a high predictability to convex trajectories and a lower predictability to concave.

Schuldt-Jensen hypothesizes an intuitively evoked quasi staccato reaction in the case of purely concave conducting gestures, and a quasi legato as a reaction to convex trajectories.59

**Platte (2016):**

The main purpose of Platte’s study was to explore the impact of different gestural archetypes on the musician’s body and the sounding result. In the first part of the study, she investigated the reaction of participants to three archetypal conducting gestures with different shapes of trajectories. The results correspond with Schuldt-Jensen, showing that the correlation between speech sounds and the visual shape of objects also exists between conducting gestures and the elicited tone. For the first time the spontaneous and consistent relationship between certain shapes of conducting gestures and the resulting articulation, as well as a significant correlation between size of gesture and evoked volume is scientifically documented. Different shapes of gestures do not lead to significant difference in terms of loudness of the resulting tone, but the envelope of the evoked tones varies significantly, in that there is a big difference in intuitively evoked length of sound. The loudness of the note is primarily influenced by the size of the gesture. Platte concludes that these findings could be of direct practical relevance, especially for the field of conducting pedagogy; for example, in view of the fact that there are significant differences in the intuitive reaction to concave versus convex conducting patterns, it would be especially interesting to further analyze teaching books on conducting presenting a combination of both types.60

The second part of the study focused on the predictability of the shown gesture:

Especially when it comes to delicate musical elements, such as a pizzicato or a subtle unison cue, and to tempo changes, crucial for musical phrasing, an unpredictably shaped gesture

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59 Platte, p. 52  
60 See Göstl’s pattern, fig. 2 p. 7
immediately deteriorates an interpretation, because the conductor loses control over the timing and the onset-offset-envelope. In order to measure differences in predictability of conducting gestures, we created tasks with a changing tempo and calculated the onset-delays of the participants’ touch-events. While refuting Serrano’s findings, the results confirm Schultd-Jensen’s analyses of the studies by Luck, as well as conducting patterns in general, to the effect that convex conducting gestures show the highest predictability as opposed to mixed and concave gestures, which show a higher standard deviation especially in sections of deceleration.\textsuperscript{61}

As a part of testing the musical reaction to different shapes/gestures, Platte also analyzed blood volume pulse data. The results showed a significantly higher stress level in all cases of discrepancies between a given instruction and the accompanying gesture. The negative deviations from the sounding result of the coherent combination, especially in case of articulation, seem to be caused by a relative dominance of the perceived haptic qualities of the gestures, which are obviously impossible to suppress. The attempt to play exactly as the instruction demands when gestures are incoherent, seems to increase mental stress, while “disobedience” concerning the given verbal instruction seems to be less stressful. Thus, gestures are more essential than verbal instructions. Platte concludes:

> An important implication of these findings is that not only general working conditions but also a lack of consistency between shown gesture and given verbal instruction induces negative stress, and – over a longer period of time – could cause chronic physical and psychological illness.\textsuperscript{62}

Platte also performed another study aimed at exploring the impact of different conducting gestures on muscle tension of the musicians as well as the resulting sound. The results show significant findings in all investigated categories for both the conductor’s muscle tension and the intensity of the evoked sound. The reactions on concave, convex and mixed conducting gestures show significant differences in intensity of the evoked tone; the amount of muscle tension involved in the production of the conductor’s movement seems to be in inverse proportion to the intensity of the resulting tone. Furthermore, trajectories with a natural gravitational pendulum movement, executed through lifting the arm and then releasing the potential energy into the trajectory, such as convex and (partly) mixed, apparently evoke a higher level of intensity than the concave gesture with its bouncing movement against gravity. The results of the second category show that not only the form of the conducting gesture leads to differences in intensity. Also, different forearm rotations used with the same (convex) form of trajectory influence the intensity of the induced tone significantly. Both pronation and supination evoke a lower intensity, compared to a neutral hand posture.

\textsuperscript{61} Platte, p. 74-75
\textsuperscript{62} Platte, p. 74-75
For the third category in this study, Platte tested two types of fermatas, one where the hand lay still and one where the hand was moving. The differences between the two types may seem marginal, they led to surprisingly clear results. Although the movement of the hand during the duration of the fermata needs only slightly more energy in terms of muscle tension on the conductor’s side, this action resulted in a much higher overall intensity of the evoked tone and a lower fluctuation of intensity, which combined improves the sound quality consistency of fermatas substantially.  

By using convex conducting gestures with a neutral hand posture […] the conductor can seemingly reduce his required muscle tension on a permanent basis and at the same time evoke a higher intensity of the sound from the ensemble.

From Platte’s conclusion, we read:

Our findings show that there are consistent reactions to different types of trajectories and hand postures, indicating that it does indeed matter musically how conducting gestures are formed and executed. However, our findings do not aim to define any of the investigated types of gestures as being right or wrong. But it turns out that since every gesture has a unique sounding consequence, certain gesture types are more capable – more economical and effective – of reaching predefined musical/interpretational goals than others. Furthermore, with this thesis we can prove that a mismatch between the shown conducting gesture and the concurrent verbal demand for a specific sound envelope shape has a negative impact on both the musician’s stress-level and the resulting sound itself. Thus, the key to a healthy conducting and rehearsing environment seems to be a consistency of the conductor’s imaginative musical goal, his shown gesture, and the verbal demand.

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63 Platte, p. 78-79  
64 Platte, p. 88-89  
65 Platte, p. 93
5.3 Gesture in relation to singing technique

Grady (2014):
Grady analyzed trends in conducting textbooks and current conducting gesture research, including three studies by herself, focusing on lateral and vertical conducting gestures. Her exploration sought to show the status of current research in terms of non-verbal conducting gestures, to analyze the trends in the research, and to discuss future directions for research in non-verbal conducting gestures.

In the beginning, she identifies a problem with choir conducting instruction books:

Similarly, choral conducting textbooks [...] traditionally focused on the basics of conducting patterns. Texts addressed how to use nonverbal conducting gestures to convey the intentions of the conductor (dynamics, phrasing, tempo, and style) to a choir. Very few choral conducting resources addressed nonverbal conductor gestures in relation to the physiological and acoustical efficiency of singers’ vocal production.66

The first study was a survey of 30 choral conductors with an average of 15 years of teaching. Conductors responded to four questions, two were yes or no responses and two which participants were allowed to write freely. The yes or no questions elicited responses from conductors on whether they perceived that a nonverbal conducting gesture could affect choral intonation and choral timbre. The open-ended questions requested descriptions of the nonverbal gestures that the conductor felt would affect choral timbre or intonation. Results showed the majority of choral conductors surveyed felt a nonverbal gesture could affect the intonation (yes, 97%; no, 3%) and timbre (yes, 90%; no, 10%) of choral sound. Suggestions of specific gestures broke down into six categories: non-traditional gestures, gestural plane, vowel shape, relaxation/tension, support, and facial affect. For both improvement of intonation and timbre, non-traditional gestures had the greatest number of suggestions (intonation, 39%; timbre, 45%). The smallest number of suggestions for both intonation and timbre improvement was facial affect (intonation, 7%; timbre, 4%). When differentiating conductor responses by years of teaching, those with the most years of experience tended to suggest non-traditional gestures, gestural plane, and relaxation/tension as the most effective gestures to influence intonation and timbre in choral sound.

The second study was an exploratory investigation to determine whether three contrasting conducting gestures affected acoustical and perceptual measures of conglomerate choir sound. The 29 participating choristers were members of an established collegiate choir. Singers jointly performed "All Through the Night" in unison for the recording session after three ten-minute rehearsals. During the recording session, singers sang while watching a videotaped conductor who displayed three alternating right-hand gestures:

66 Grady, p. 122
1. a traditional conducting pattern
2. a vertical-only gesture with traditional pattern
3. a lateral-only gesture with traditional pattern

Long Term Average Spectra data showed significant mean signal amplitude differences between the three conducting conductions in both the 0 - 10 kHz spectrum and the 2.9 - 3.9 kHz region. The vertical conducting condition decreased mean signal amplitude while the traditional pattern recording increased mean signal amplitude. Pitch analyses indicated the sound while the chorus observed the vertical-only gesture was most in tune and the performance while observing the lateral-only gesture was least in tune. Mean pitch deviations were 4.29 cents in the vertical conducting condition, 6.59 cents in the traditional pattern condition, and 14.07 cents in the lateral conducting condition.

In response to six counter-balanced pairs of recorded choir performances, eight expert listener ratings consistently reflected majority preferences (88%, 75%) for the vertical-only condition when contrasted with the lateral-only condition, and for the vertical-only tradition (75%, 75%) contrasted with the traditional pattern. Most singers perceived differences in their own vocal sound (83%) and differences in the sound of the choir (76%) while singing under the three gestural conditions. Singers offered more positive comments about the vertical conducting gesture than the other gestures observed.

**Fuelberth (2004):**
Fuelberth tested effects of various left-hand choral conducting gestures (fisted, palm up, palm down, stabbing, and sideways phrasing gestures) on the anticipated vocal tension and the actual vocal tension of 192 university choral singers. Research involved videos of a conductor using a variety of left-hand conducting gestures and participants either sang to a piano accompaniment while watching the video or responded about their perceived anticipated tension elicited from the gestures. Fuelberth defined inappropriate vocal tension using specific visual or audible characteristics: the tongue, the neck, and the jaw are the three major sources of inappropriate vocal tension, both together and separately. He implies that tension in one muscle group often affects another muscle group, and characterizes visual vocal faults as postural rigidity, collapsed chest, tight jaw, furrowed brow, raised shoulders, tilted head, white knuckles, knees locked back, shaking legs, heaving chest and so on.

Four stimulus tapes were created including six conducting conditions. The six conditions were placed in a random sequence on each of the four tapes to control for order effect. Throughout each of the conditions the conductor maintained a legato four pattern in the right hand and the conductor used a baton in the right hand. The tempo of quarter note = 72 was chosen for each excerpt. The first four measures of each example served as a baseline where the conductor conducted using only right-hand beat pattern. The following six measures served as experimental measures where six conducting conditions were utilized:

a) left hand, no change
b) left hand, fisted gesture
c) left hand, palm up
d) left hand, palm down
e) left hand, stabbing gesture
f) left hand, sideways phrase-shaping gesture
Two experienced music educators viewed the videotape to confirm the changes in conducting gesture. The videotaped examples framed the conductor’s upper and lower torso. During the experimental measures, the video camera zoomed in to isolate the conductors hand motions and downplay facial expression. The conductor was asked to wear a black turtleneck and dark slacks for the videotape session. The conductor was asked to maintain a neutral facial expression throughout each of the six examples.

Significant differences were found between the perceived anticipated inappropriate vocal tension ratings of the fisted gesture, stabbing gesture and palm down conducting conditions. Perhaps the potential of these conducting gestures to generate perceptions of tension could cause conductors to reevaluate their effectiveness in performance and rehearsal settings. It is also to interesting to note that results indicated that the mean anticipated tension level for the sideways, phrase shaping condition was significantly lower than the mean anticipated tension level for the no change condition. This finding may indicate that a function of the left hand may also be to relieve inappropriate vocal tension.

It is interesting to note that standard deviations greater than 2.00 occurred for the no change, palm down, stabbing, and fisted conditions. These four conditions also resulted in the highest perceived tension levels. Because no left-hand gesture was present in the no change condition, the higher standard deviation may indicate that participants were unsure of how to rate an example without left hand gesture. It may also indicate a level of discomfort or tension that may arise when the left hand is apparently giving no expressive instruction whatsoever.

Although the conductor maintained a neutral facial expression throughout, 38 participants cited the face and neck, and 18 participants cited facial expression as a point of focus. Many respondents indicated their discomfort with the neutral facial expression, stating that they relied heavily on the conductor's face for guidance.

**Manternach (2009):**
This study examined 60 participants’ head and shoulder movements during two breath inhalation moments as they sang a familiar melody while viewing a videotaped conductor under five conductor preparatory gesture conditions. Results indicated that participant head movement significantly increased with conductor upward head movement and participant shoulder movement significantly increased with conductor upward shoulder movement. Participant shoulder movement also increased during a downward moving gesture as compared to an upward moving gesture. In addition, less experienced participants appeared to move their heads less, but their shoulders more than experienced participants across all gesture conditions. Finally, participant head and shoulder measurements also differed between the initial breath and the internal breath taken in the melody.

67 Fuelberth, p. 36
68 Manternach p. 74
5.4 Gesture in relation to other academic fields

Braem & Bräm (2000):
Braem & Bräm wanted to extend the traditional analysis of gestures from the conductors’ right hand onto the expressive gestures made by the left hand, by analyzing and categorizing gestures in relation to sign language:

Our research questions are the following: Is there a repertoire of "expressive" gestures? If so, how do they compare with the hand gestures that accompany speech and with the more highly coded sign languages of the Deaf? Are conducting gestures systematized in any way beyond the organizing, structuring patterns of the classical orchestral conductor?⁶⁹

Braem & Bräm categorized conducting gestures based on the underlying metaphorical association, such as the manipulation of objects (e.g. grasp, hold, touch), sensing (e.g. smell, hear), visible forms (e.g. drawing lines or surfaces) and co-speech gestures (e.g. Stop! Go!).

![Fig. 11: Gesture of drawing a line](image)

However, in their attempt to define the desired sounding results of a gesture, Braem & Bräm allocated different musical parameters to one specific gesture: If a conductor showed a gesture as seen in figure 11, the authors assigned a “slim, light, continuous tone” as sounding result, combining three different categories of musical parameters (timbre, registration and articulation) into one gesture, without further, isolated investigation of each musical parameter. What if the conductor would like to hear a slim and dense sound? Furthermore, this study only focused on, what a conductor aims to evoke with a specific gesture, and not the actual perception of the musician or the sounding result respectively.⁷¹

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⁶⁹ Braem & Bräm, p. 144
⁷⁰ Braem & Bräm, p. 152
⁷¹ Platte, p. 31-32
Krudop (2003):
Krudop videotaped eight choirs of varied age and experience singing a piece. Each choir performed once with the conductor using “neutral” kinesics⁷², whereby the conductor employed a basic beat pattern. The choir then performed again with the conductor using a high level of kinesics (more expressive gestures). A panel made up of conductors on different levels determined that the choirs sang more expressively when the conductor used high levels of kinesics. Krudop, therefore, advocated that Alexander technique and Laban methodologies be a component of conducting instruction.

Other researchers have also advocated the use of Laban methodologies in conducting. Billingham (2001) used Laban Movement Theory in order to create eight gestures to be used by conductors. The gestures were then tested during fourteen 50-minute rehearsals of a university choir. 28 choristers completed surveys following the final rehearsal in order to rate chorister recognition of the eight gestures used. Results showed that six of these gestures were deemed to be successful for conductors.⁷³

Braem & Bräm (2004):
In this study Braem & Bräm again tried to categorize orchestral conducting gestures. Bream and Bräm cite the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who claim that most communication with regards to abstract concepts is made possible through the use of either metonymic or metaphoric structures. A metaphoric structure is a gesture based on similarity, whereas a metonymic system is based on contiguity. An example of metaphor might include the use a “straight hand” gesture indicating an evenness of tone and phrasing. Braem & Bräm claim that most conducting gestures are based on metaphoric/metonymic connections between aspects of the music and the physical experiences which human beings have with objects in their everyday lives, that is gesture which presents imagery. It is through such experiences that aspects of the music can be reconceptualized into concrete objects and contours to represent and transmit musical ideas.⁷⁴

⁷² The study of communication through body movement and gesture
⁷³ Manternach p. 33
5.5 Other research

**Konttinen (2008):**
Konttinen, a former student of Jorma Panula, seeks to find “the core of the conducting profession”, by studying Panula’s pedagogic ideas and some Panula students. The doctoral dissertation is divided in two, part one is a lengthy description of the Finnish conducting education history, including the years of Panula, and part two a “field study” where Konttinen investigates the gestures of some of Panula’s students. The dissertation is on the edge of being a manifesto, close to claiming that the Finnish conducting school is the core of the conducting profession. The field study is inconclusive, as the goal of the study is unclear, and in that Konttinen doesn’t succeed in analyzing the outcome in a way that seems interesting for the reader. She does however present many ideas and thoughts around the subject of conductorship in general, and frequently connects to literature on sociological subjects.

There is also the question of whether the core of the profession can be found, whether it can be theorized and analyzed and how. My hypothesis is that the core can be found through the theory of gestures, through which it is possible to study and analyze the working process and the situation. What is also expected is that the gestures of a conductor are analytical, gestural and social. The analytical and gestural (concrete) gestures happen on a very concrete level and together form a repertoire of gestures, which a conductor then varies. On a more abstract level the so-called social gestures develop from educational to working gestures and define the historical and sociological development of conducting as a practical skill. The key word uniting all these gestural levels is communication.\(^{75}\)

**Konttinen philosophies around technical vs expressive gestures:**

If a technical gesture is characteristic of conductors in general, an expressive gesture could be seen as a type of a gesture characteristic of a certain conductor. It is a technical gesture “filled” with something that makes it expressive – the point where, in Jorma Panula’s words, “hands begin to speak”. This is also the most difficult type of gesture to define, explain or even describe. An expressive gesture is consciously and intentionally used to bring out something very specific in music – the ideas of the conductor and the vision of the work making the musical situation a personal interpretation.\(^{76}\)

… and puts it in context of using a baton or not:

Whether a conductor’s gesture is more technical or more expressive also has partly to do with the question of whether he uses a baton and in what situations. To emphasise this I quote again John Storgårds\(^{77}\): “[…] The basic function of a baton is to make the beat more pointed, not

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\(^{76}\) Konttinen, p. 81

\(^{77}\) Panulas student, one of Konttinens study objects
soften it, and you can clarify and sharpen up your beat patterns when using it, thus helping the orchestra. On the other hand, if you conduct music where you need to work on very subtle things to do with the sound, and express things with finesse, you do better conducting without a baton.”

… and how conductors sometimes have to worship the division between the hands:

Sometimes the hands alone can express something better than with a baton:
Yes, sometimes it is, and in any case it is part of the professionalism you have to pursue, to really master the skill so that the hand holding the baton – usually the right – is the source of the clarity, while the left hand has a lot of activity producing all different kinds of things in a way that even the orchestra does not realise where it came from. This is where many instrumentalists who just decide to start conducting have problems, they talk too much and explain verbally what they want, but cannot express it gestically at all.78

On the topic of physical limitations, which quickly comes into mind when dealing with an idea of two separate hands doing different things, she seems to agree with Schuller, that not all conductors have the possibility to develop the freedom of the left hand to the same level.79

As Schuller says, almost all conductors “have more or less serious limitations as to what we can do with our hands, our arms, our shoulders, our head, our eyes – in short our body equipment. Almost all of us are to some extent or another variously inept in one area or another”. These limitations or even physical problems are very likely to affect the accuracy of our physical movements. Technical accuracy is a skill that even the best-known conductors have to struggle with, Schuller says. It could be said that there is a “realistic” view on gesture, and an “idealistic” view of what can be achieved with gestures. The “idealistic” is what is expected and the “realistic” is what is actually possible. Schuller continues: “Most of us are not free enough in our arms and torso to control fully the minutiae of movements which so crucially affect the musical/acoustic results emanating from an orchestra; and most of us are too habituated to certain physical movements to be free at the precise moment to alter or control them.”80

On the more concrete side, Konttinen assumed in her thesis that there is a certain repertoire of gestures that is common between conductors, but concludes that there is none, and that each conductor is responsible for developing this aspect on his own according to his “personality”:

The hypothesis concerning the repertoire of gestures was that there would be a set of gestures apparent during conducting. This repertoire was expected to have been developed as a result of study – that is, of becoming familiar with the technical conventions and historical practices that conductors in this study share. In other words, what was expected was that the repertoire was learned. The basic idea of a repertoire was that it is a system or a compilation of gestures that a conductor then varies, “filling” the gestures with personal expression and meaning while working with an orchestra.

78 Konttinen, p. 225-226
79 Schuller, Gunther: The Compleat Conductor, Oxford University Press, USA, 1997
80 Konttinen, p. 200-201
It turned out that actually every conductor has his or her own repertoire, which differs from the repertoire of colleagues. What is learned is the technique – the beat patterns – on which the conductors then base their personal repertoire of gestures. A very practical and simple metaphor comes to mind: every conductor has his or her own gestural “handwriting”, a personal “look” of the language that may even be recognised by watching his or her hands. The repertoire also seemed to contain the origin of the technical gesture: for example, the gestures that were seen and heard during the first rehearsal with John Storgårds – which represented a certain repertoire based on the ideas about the music – were the ones he then worked on during the rehearsals in preparation for the concert.81

**Watson (2012):**

Watson’s dissertation *Gesture as Communication: The Art of Carlos Kleiber* deals with several aspects of gesture in one of the initiating chapters, before going on with analyzes of Kleiber’s conducting. Matters dealt with are e.g. nonverbal communication, body language and facial expression and eye contact.

One statement seems to agree with Sousa’s findings, that the more experienced players are, the more they respond to gesture:

> Long […] suggests an uncomplicated conducting style will get best results when working with an amateur orchestra recognizing that when working with experienced professional musicians, a conductor is afforded greater freedom in baton technique.82

And in relation to professional vs amateur ensembles:

… Steinberg considers standard beat patterns irrelevant, suggesting orchestral players expect not necessarily those recognized gestures but rather, ones that enable them to play well. Precisely what Steinberg means by this comment, and precisely which gestures he believes orchestral players expect is interesting to ponder, as this description raises an important point. Similarly, Bailey also recognizes the limited value of manual time-beating gestures, in stating ‘once the ensemble no longer needs the beat pattern, it can be abandoned in favor of more expressive gestures.’83

Picking up on the statement by Wagner84 that there is a problem in communication between unfamiliar musicians and conductor:

> Inherent in conductors’ gestures lies a potential degree of ambiguity regarding the interpretation, even by orchestral musicians skilled in the art of decoding such cues. As Leman and Godøy point out: “For a particular observer, in a particular context, movements may be conceived as having expression and meaning, while for another observer, even in the same context, the same movements may be conceived as having no particular expression or meaning.”

Nowak and Nowak also recognize the inherent idiosyncrasies of each conductor’s vernacular. “Even though we use the same basic craft, our own individual personalities will come through

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81 Konttinen, p. 228-229
82 Watson, p. 83
83 Watson, p. 87
84 Page 15 in this thesis
its application reflecting the uniqueness of each of us.” Carse too, recognizes a common
gestural basis between all conductors but remarks there are nuances, individual mannerisms
and habits associated with certain individual. With the development of any highly personalized
and idiosyncratic language, therefore, translation, clarification and explanation are often
necessary. Stotter recognizes this potential for a degree of misunderstanding and/or
miscommunication, pointing out that ensembles need training in the interpretation of their
conductor’s specific repertory of gestures. He acknowledges that although there is a kind of
universal language, less mainstream gestures can require a degree of education and possibly
even explanation at first Busch also maintains it is essential to train musicians in the
interpretation of a gestural language in order to avoid confusion and misinterpretation.
On the other hand, Green warns of the dangers of adopting a highly personalized approached
to developing a repertory of gestures, ‘namely that we do not become so “original” that our
gestures are meaningless to the performers. This is a sentiment underscored by Busch who
warns conductors against too significant a departure from the conventions of conducting,
fearing the development of a ‘nonverbal language which nobody understands. Saito also warns
of using unfamiliar gestures which players will not be able to interpret.85

Watson continues with statements from well-known conductors describing their experiences
with musicians being familiar or unfamiliar with their gestures:

Kurt Masur […] believes that a period with one orchestra results in them developing an
understanding of the conductor’s gestures. “My orchestra and I... know each other very well.
They know exactly how I want the music to sound. They know what I want if I move my
hand, head or eyes in a certain way.” In saying this, Masur confirms it is the connection
between manual conducting signals and other physical gestures that collectively form a
nonverbal language, the vehicle by which a conductor communicates.86

Conductor Eugene Ormandy […] became aware of his own idiosyncratic gestural language
when engaged as guest conductor with other orchestras, experiencing problems in getting
these orchestras respond to his gestures as he would have liked. In offering a possible
explanation, Ormandy cited a high turnover of guest conductors meaning orchestras are
exposed to a different conductor exhibiting a different gestural language, each week. Ormandy
explained he had to “start from scratch and really work with them” in order that they play his
way.87

85 Watson, p. 88
86 Watson, p. 89
87 Watson, p. 90
6. Discussion

The stage is set and the doors go up. The ensemble is waiting eagerly on stage, ready to perform, ready to translate what you have to “say” into sound, ready to capture the audience. You enter the podium and raise your arms, but what do you actually have to say? What is your message? What do you want the audience to have experienced when they leave? And how do you convey all this through gestures, facial expression, eyes, and body language? A conductor, or any musician, has to acknowledge the fact that the center of music making evolve around the audience. Without ears listening, there is no music. As a conductor, one is situated right in the middle, literally between the musicians and the audience, being the center of attention of them both. At the same time, as fig. 1 shows, one is in the middle of the process itself, from the composers pen to the ears of the audience. Shaping music, and conveying it to the audience is the most important part of conductors’ job. This is also stated in many instruction books, warnings against “mere time beaters” flourish, and the conductors’ ability to show, nuances, expression and general mood of a piece is underlined. Yet most conducting books fail to describe in detail the expressive gestures needed to show this. This is also pointed out by Platte and Ahrén, stating that the entire chapter on expressive conducting usually consists of shallow descriptions on how to move the left hand, or is left out. An example is Rudolf, who at one point describes a certain intensity in the baton, fingers, wrist and arm, but leaves it to the reader to discover how to find this intensity. For the students actually trying this, it would most likely lead to tension and faulty technique.

Expressive gestures are vitally important for a music performance. As the studies of Sidoti and Napoles 2013 show, expressive gestures increase the musician’s level of performing. The audience also perceives a higher level in the performance with expressive gestures, even though the performance level is actually the same, as Morrison and colleagues showed in their study. And ensemble members attitude towards the conductor is more positive when expressive gestures are in use, as described in the study by House. In other words, everyone gains from expressive conducting gestures, and everyone loses from the lack of it.

In the study by Gallops, it is proven that some gestures work better than others. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Rudolf: “the appropriate gesture for each musical expression must be mastered, before we can speak of conducting”. When the term appropriate gesture is used, one can assume that there is such a thing as an improper gesture for a musical expression, probably several. As I see it, this is Rudolf reaching the same conclusion as Gallops. Greschesky’s study shows that “emblems” work the best. An “emblem” is a gesture that can be understood as a verbal metaphor. Skadsem’s study is interesting because it shows that musicians also prefer to communicate through gesture, but that verbal comments sometimes give the best response where there is a direct verbal metaphor. And, according to Napoles 2014, when you do give a verbal instruction, make sure you conduct it afterwards! A discrepancy between verbally given instructions and gesture results in a less convincing performance, cause frustration amongst musicians, and according to Platte causes “negative stress, and – over a longer period of time – could cause chronic physical and psychological illness”. Quite a frightening thing to think about, the next time one gives a verbal instruction.
about how to sing a comma, but this can also serve as a motivation: find a gesture that corresponds to everything you instruct in rehearsals!

Developing expressive gestures that are recognized by other musicians instantly can prove quite a challenge. Conducting books offer some, but little help. The study by Sousa acknowledges that recognition increases with experience, but the study was performed on high school students. How does this relate to a professional ensemble, does it imply they understand all gestures? From my own experience, the answer is no. In teaching situations, students often get “handed over” gestures from their teacher, often with reference to personal experience. Gestures from teacher to teacher can vary a great deal, not only expressive gestures, but also technical. The most basic technical gesture, the beat pattern, is not agreed upon by a larger quantity of conductors. According to Ahrén most of Europe’s top ten conducting educations’ teachers don’t even recognize the importance of expressive gestures and their potential in music making.

That many conductors experience a problem of being understood when guest conducting seems quite usual. Considering that nonverbal gestures is the most time efficient means of conveying a musical interpretation, I find it strange that nonverbal gestures is such an underestimated topic. According to Knapp the verbal component in a conversation between two people carries less than 35% of the social meaning of the situation; more than 65% is carried on the nonverbal band. It seems clear that conductors should strive towards developing their gestural repertoire and making their gestures as understandable as possible. Some inspiration for this can be found in studies like Platte or Schuld­t-Jensen. The variety of studies where gestures have been researched, e.g. Braem & Bräm, is sadly not always motivated by developing the art of conducting, rather the initiatives comes from other researchers in other fields with similar traits as conducting. The outcome is therefore not always directly transferable to conducting, but more suited to guide readers in a direction where more answers can be found. Some research suffers from lack of basic understanding of the profession, e.g. Serrano. Further research is needed, in musically professional environments, led by conductors! Research especially in relation to choir conducting, where care for the voice and the more human aspects of music performance are important parameters would be interesting, but also since the typical choir conductor often looks so different than the typical orchestral conductor. Is there a reason why the gesture repertoire seems so different, and why so many maintain that conducting choirs and orchestras are two different disciplines? Is there a connection between the human voice and the way many choral conductors end up conducting, is it intuitive, or does it just “sound better”? Some answers on basic elements such as hand position and orientation of beats can be found in Platte and Schuld­t-Jensen, but this is just the beginning of a very much larger topic that is yet to be theorized. Even the terminology is not properly defined and agreed upon. Descriptions of gestures from conductors in e.g. Ahrén’s study is often based on words that come in the moment, or on the teachers intuitively based experiences. The same goes for instruction books, where authors often use different terms to describe the same thing.

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88 Watson, p. 62
Konttinen mentions the term “repertoire of gestures” in her dissertation and relates it to Panula’s idea that all conductors should have a repertoire of gestures to lean upon in different situations. As Panula’s pedagogy is centered around building each student after his or her needs and on their individual personality, no concrete suggestions on what such a repertoire of gestures could consist of is presented. The idea seems good, basically it would imply that having beat patterns for the right hand for different time signatures and styles of playing, one also has a repertoire of gesture for the left hand, with pictures of shapes and hand positions. One could imagine such a gesture library would be founded on research, and not only on what different conductors claims to be working, since the list would then exceed all limitations. To my knowledge there is no such material presented in instruction books.

A suggestion on how one could categorize such a repertoire could be as follows:

- **Gestures for playing style**: legato, staccato, marcato, portato
- **Gestures for dynamics**: crescendo, diminuendo, fp, sfz, sustaining,
- **Gestures for melodic or rhythmic underlining**: articulation, shape, phrasing, direction
- **Gestures for text**: showing length of vowels and consonants, cut-offs
- **Gestures for sound management**: balance, tone quality, breath, support, brightness, darkness, intonation
- **Technical gestures**: entries, new page, letters, signs, repeats, warnings, beats in a bar, etc.

Most of this can be included in the right hands beat pattern, but if we are to take the possibilities of the left hand seriously, all of this should also be mastered by the left hand without beat patterns.

The eyes are often mentioned in instruction books, and together with facial expression and body language they are an important part of conveying information to the ensemble. Watson also expresses this in his study: “Conductors need to appreciate how much our face and eyes mean to the ensemble. The potential for clarity and richness of communication is immediately magnified when the conductor’s face and eyes are visible to the group.” And Toscanini explained to Abbado why eyes are of such an importance in conducting: “With the expression of the eyes, it is very important to communicate the expression of the music.”

But in Mayne’s study, facial expression didn’t seem to have an impact on the recognition of gestures. In this study, tested gestures were mostly of technical character such as dynamics, preparations, fermata/holds and tempo changes, fields where eyes play a lesser role. In terms of expressive gestures, the face might contribute in form of showing human emotions, which is hard to find gestures for. Feelings, rhetoric, atmosphere, and mood are examples of entities where the face might trump the hands in effectiveness. This also brings the body language as a whole into consideration. As a conductor, you work to persuade and convince your musicians of something you believe in yourself, weather it is the heartfelt love of Gustav Mahler to his wife, Alma, in a slow symphonic movement or the triumph of Gods and Kings in Zadok the Priest, by Händel. It’s like an opera singer portraying a role, not to the same extent, but I think one has to imagine one goes into different costumes, the costume of love

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89 Watson, page 77
90 Ibid.
and affection, or the costume of pomp and circumstance. The gestures alone are not enough to persuade all musicians of the same affect, and so the hands might play a lesser role in such a situation, merely confirming the impression made by your person. This is where your interpretation, and your gestures goes beyond what is written in the score.
7. Conclusion

When I set out to write a thesis on this topic I had no idea what it would result in, or how the thesis would look like when it was done. Even though there was an idea of structure and form, I didn’t know if I would find enough material and if it was relevant and interesting, surprising or confirming. In the beginning the title for this thesis was “left hand conducting gestures”, but in the end, I decided to change it to a broader definition. As a choir conductor, this topic is very interesting for me partly because I get more and more involved with instrumental ensembles, but mostly because my idea of conducting is that there is nothing that can be characterized as typical choir conducting or orchestral conducting. With instrumental ensembles, it is custom to use a baton, and once you have it in your hand it is my experience that the hands get more separated, the play different roles. Conducting without a baton doesn’t give you the same feeling, unless you pursue it yourself.

For the last six months, I had the pleasure of working with an orchestra, which inspired me to investigate the role and function of the left hand, not only in theory but also in practice. The level of this orchestra was so that most of them was in need of a clear tempo indication, a beat, basically all the time. This pretty much occupied my right hand, since any lack of a clear beat would result in immediate lack of precision. My left hand was then the carrier for almost everything that wasn’t related to tempo and general playing style, like articulated or legato. This situation was rather extreme, but a good learning experience. In orchestras on a higher level, the feeling of tempo is more secure with each player, and therefore the right hand has greater room for varying gestures. The same problem can also be found in choirs where the feeling of tempo is not so strong within each singer. Comments like “we cannot see the tempo” or “I didn’t understand when to start” might be an indication to the conductor that the singers need more than expressive and inspirational gestures, and might be a good opportunity for choir conductors to develop the independent left hand. In my own experience this is often an undermined field in choral conducting, where you often see much parallel motion both in technical as well as expressive gestures.

When looking for material on the subject of left-hand conducting gestures, my results seemed a little bit upside-down. I expected to find most information in instruction books and less information in research, but actually it turned out the other way. Some of this might have to do with my choice of instruction books. I basically went for two of the “standard” volumes on conducting plus one lesser known, but they are all written in the middle of the 20th century, and might simply just be outdated when it comes to this topic. As I discovered when working on the chapter of conductor quotes about the left hand, focus on the left hand’s independent role and function is rather modern, and subsequently not treated in these books. I have a feeling that the topic might be more carefully treated in newer conducting books.

The research surprised me in a positive way, I simply didn’t expect that there was so much research done on this field. I think there is a general notion amongst conductors that conducting is a very under-researched topic, but it is not true. Especially in the past five-ten years many interesting studies and books with a more scientifical approach has been published. My presentation of research turned out quite long, partly because I found it quite
interesting, but also because I wanted to point out that there is actually something to find. I think studies, like those of Platte, Schuldt-Jensen, Fuelberth and Serrano is the key to understanding conducting as something else than just “an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all”. Some of the conducting teachers interviewed by Ahrén clearly agree in that there is too little material for educating conductors, possibly also because the pre-existing material doesn’t correspond to their own ideas, and subsequently produce their own. But it is also evident that most conducting education is done by modelling, meaning the teacher demonstrates and the student models his or her gestures, without any reference to written literature what so ever. When the number of studies done in the field of gesture increases year by year, I think one, as a conductor, also is obligated to acquaint oneself with them, and think about what they actually suggest. Especially in relation to singers, where I think you as a conductor is partly responsible for the use and well-being of your “instrument”. In my experience, care for these aspects of choral conducting also affects the sound, intonation and so on, and might be a way to further improve the level of your choir.

I hope that reading the studies I have collected might inspire other conductors in further developing their gestural repertoire. I think this is especially important for choral conductors firstly because we work with text which not only demands a way of forming and shaping vowels and consonants but also because the meaning of the text should be expressed in some way, and secondly because we never conduct with a baton and therefore need a gestural repertoire not only for one hand but both, considering that the left hand shouldn’t simply mirror the right in whatever it does. More versatile conductors, working with both choirs and orchestra, also spend time planning how to “organize” their hands, in other words planning what each hand should do at certain moments. This thesis might also inspire them into developing a repertoire of gestures, or simply rethinking the repertoire they already have.
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