

Conducting

for The Band Director Who Thinks a Pencil Is Good Enough

Kansas Bandmasters Association

July 20, 2018

Dennis W. Fisher

University of North Texas

Question #1

Does conducting help your band rehearse and perform better – or is it a pretentious, visual distraction?

Answer – Are you kidding me? That's a really stupid question...

Statement – I don't really need to conduct better because I can teach them how to play and besides, if I don't tell them what to do, how to do it and when, they won't know what to do; and furthermore, conducting isn't really teaching.

Question #2

Do you conduct as well as you expect your students to play?

Answer – OF COURSE – I took conducting in College. That's a *really* stupid question...stop annoying me!

Statement – I don't need to conduct better because as long as I have a metronome to give tempo, a tuner to show how out of tune everyone is playing, mark all the cues to remind me to tell them when they're supposed to play, and I can do a reasonable facsimile of a pattern, I can get through a rehearsal and usually the concert. Besides, I have a degree in band and I'm busy and I conduct just fine.

Question #3

Are there fairly simple things you can do to improve your conducting and at the same time improve your band?

Answer – Fairly simple? Improve my conducting? That's a ***really*** stupid question...OK, enough of this harassment, I'm going to go drink coffee!

Statement – I'm not the one being judged in a rehearsal or a performance, it's the band. If something goes wrong it's not my fault anyway; it's theirs for not working harder and caring more. I tell them that all the time but they don't listen! As long as I make them sound as good as I can, I've done my job. Besides, they bury their heads in the music and don't watch anyway. I don't need to improve, I'm already OK.

Common “pencil-toting” teacher/conductor issues

Note:

buying a new or more expensive baton at the convention will NOT improve your conducting

Habits learned/developed over time that inhibit

- Stiff hand/wrist/arm/shoulder
- Plane too high, too close to body
- Mostly vertical movement
- Pattern size
- Monotony of sameness
- Limited facial expression
- Focusing only on most obvious instruments

Considerations for improvement

- Equipment
 - Baton proportionality
- Embouchure
 - Baton grip
 - Hand/arm placement
 - Conducting plane
 - Posture
- Natural movement
 - Fingers
 - Wrist
 - Arm
 - Shoulders
 - Head

- Understanding space and how to use it

Vertical
Horizontal
Sagittal

- Gestures

Preparation/releases
Ictus
Rebound
Patterns
Adding/subtracting weight
Flow
Ear mapping (cues)

- Understanding the music

Sonic strata
Melody
Harmony
Rhythm
Counterpoint
Texture
Proportionality of dynamics
Musical nuance and expression
Finding what makes the music the music
Communicating what makes the music the music

- Moving beyond the basics

Developing a menu of gestures – vocabulary
Expressiveness
Nuance

- Stop talking so much

Silent rehearsal
Limit the time of explanation
Reduce repetition
Committing to visual communication
2 item, 20 second rule
Bi-lingual rehearsal if you have command of a second language

Suggestions

1. **Acknowledge** that better conducting will help your band play better.
2. **Stop** using a pencil, drumstick, triangle beater, straw from your Starbucks or McDonalds order.
3. **Start** daily evaluation of your conducting and how it affects the students.

What/How to change

Embouchure

- Natural placement
- Relaxed/controlled motion
- Flexibility

Gesture

- Ictus – acceleration vs. gravity
- Control of rebound
- Use of space
- Variations of motion

Space

- Use more of the available space
- Penetrate the membrane

Commit to more verbal communication – less verbal

- 2 items, 20 seconds
- Silent rehearsals
- Repeat visual communication before speaking
- Trust

Improve your listening skills

- Inside out
- Back to front
- Side to side

Incremental change

Pick one or two things at a time for focus on until it becomes natural

Variation of gestures already at your command

Gradual

You have _____ years (fill in the blank) of habits to change so you will not change in one day.

It's OK to practice – and it's OK for your students to see you practicing.

There's no shame in not knowing or being able to do – the shame comes in not doing anything about it.

Questions

Is your conducting standing in the way of your band playing better?

What are you going to do about it?