

# On Conducting Technique

*Ho-Chung Yeh, Conductor*

**Biographical Note:** **Ho-Chung Yeh** studied in Taiwan, the USA and Russia, receiving a DMA in conducting. His mentors include the legendary Ilya Musin, as well as Alexander Polishchuk at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, Daniel Barenboim, Neeme Järvi, John Nelson, Larry Rachleff and Harold Farberman. A winner at the First Neeme Järvi Master Course/Conducting Competition in 2000, he shared the podium with Maestro Järvi at the grand finale concert of the David Oistrakh Festival in Estonia. During his professional career, he served as the Principal Guest Conductor of the St. Petersburg Chamber Philharmonic, Music Director of the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest Chamber Orchestra, West Suburban Youth Orchestra of Chicago, and North Shore Chamber Orchestra Summer Music Festival, Principal Conductor of the Sochi Symphony Orchestra, Associate Conductor of the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest, was a Board member for the Illinois Council of Orchestras, and on the Music Advisory Board for the Chinese Fine Arts Society in Chicago. Maestro Yeh frequently performs with orchestras including the St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra, State Hermitage Orchestra, Stanislavsky Opera Theater Orchestra, Omsk Philharmonic, Tomsk Philharmonic, Petrozavodsk (Karelia) Philharmonic, Saint Petersburg Radio Symphony Orchestra, Astrakhan Philharmonic, Murmansk Philharmonic, Sochi Chamber Orchestra, Archangel State Chamber Orchestra (Russia), Kharkov Philharmonic (Ukraine), Varna Philharmonic (Bulgaria), Karagrande Symphony Orchestra (Kazakhstan), Evanston Symphony Orchestra, North Shore Chamber Orchestra (USA), Taipei Symphony Orchestra, National Chinese Orchestra, Taipei Chinese Orchestra, Taichung Chinese Orchestra, Taoyuan Chinese Orchestra, as well as Kaohsiung Chinese Orchestra (Taiwan). In 2017 he held a conducting master class with the Symphony Orchestra of St. Petersburg. In 2019 he held the “*First Ho Chung Yeh International Concerto Competition for Chinese Instruments*”, and will serve as a jury member for the 2020 Taipei International Conducting Competition (courtesy of <http://constantinethegreat.artf.ni.ac.rs/en/ho-chung-yeh/>).

## Abstract

*Does conducting technique exist? If so, what is it? Can it be learned and taught in a systematic way? Is it possible to be a conductor, even a good conductor, without acquiring conducting technique or with only very basic pattern-beating skills? Before learning any instrument, one must go through a period of technical training before playing a piece of music. Take the violin as an example: a violinist should be proficient in how to hold a bow, bow movement, playing long notes on open string, scales and fingering before one is exposed to any piece of music. When starting to play a piece, there are more technical requirements due to the demands of the music, such as legato, Détaché, Martelé, staccato, spiccato, Sautillé, tenuto, Ricochet, and many other techniques related to attacks and articulation nuances. Conducting is a very comprehensive art and requires a great deal of knowledge. But the*

*knowledge is in the mind, what about the hands? How many techniques are required and possessed before a conductor begins to learn a score? What are the technical concepts that can be learned? How much more technique is needed after the conductor starting to study a score and conducting an orchestra? Is there any? What are they? This article attempts to explore these questions.*

**Keywords:** *conducting, conducting techniques*

## **1. Introduction**

Many conductors are faithful to the composers and the scores, asking the orchestra to execute all the details of the score. However, despite making the requests orally, the conductors often do not make the necessary gestures with their own hands. If the orchestra is completely faithful to the conductor's gestures, the music that comes out will definitely not be the same as the composer intended. All the *legato*, *staccato*, *forte* and *piano*, especially the *subito piano*, which many conductors do not show at all *with their hands*, or do not implement well, will be missing. Compared to the orchestra's performance, the conductor's *subito piano* does not seem convincing at all. In other words, there are many details in the score and so many elements in the music that the orchestra has to pay attention to so many details and use so many techniques to express different musical ideas. But the conductors? Although they know these details and demand that they are executed prudently, the conductors themselves seem to be the most out of place in executing them because they lack the appropriate techniques. Theoretically, they could have used the same set of basic conducting techniques (i.e., beating time and conducting in patterns) to conduct from Haydn and Mozart all the way to Mahler and Stravinsky.

## **2. The Essential Skills for Conducting**

To become a conductor, we must learn all the theories and knowledge about music, including but not limited to harmony, musical forms, counterpoint, orchestration, analysis, sight-singing, music history, music appreciation, general history, cultural history, composer biographies, literary masterpieces, music aesthetics and even philosophy. One should be sensitive to the color of the sound, know the timbre, characteristics and basic techniques of each instrument, and have the ability to adjust the timbre produced by combining two or more instruments, have certain ideas about the background, structure, and hidden meaning of a work, and generate one's own interpretation. It is also important to learn how to get along with people, how to communicate during rehearsals, to manage time efficiently so that one can accomplish the most in the least amount of time. It is also a good idea to be fluent in several languages and have excellent oral skills.

Furthermore, the conductor trains the orchestra, improves the orchestra's playing skills, establishes the orchestra's own voice, designs concert programs, organizes the season, invites soloists, guest conductors, works closely with the administrative staff, and so on. To represent the orchestra externally, as the orchestra's advocator, he or she must have charisma, be articulate and funny on radio and television or

in public, be able to speak to the audience and the media, attract fans, and build a regular crowd for the orchestra so that the concerts are always packed and a ticket is hard to get. This enhances the orchestra's image and opens up the international market for the orchestra to establish a reputation.

All of the above is obvious, reasonable, and uncontroversial. It is the goal of every musician who is inspired to become a conductor. With these abilities, it seems that one is more than capable of being a competent conductor. However, what seems to be missing here?

That is the "technique" of conducting.

### **3. What is Conducting Technique?**

But what is conducting technique? Does it really exist? Can conducting technique be taught or learned? Or is it even necessary? I believe most people would think the answer to these questions is undoubtedly "Yes." But is this really the case in reality?

Sian Edwards, former Music Director of the English National Opera, first heard of Maestro Ilya Musin (whom I discuss more in depth in the dissertation "On the Art of Conducting Technique".) in 1981 while attending the Kondrashin conducting masterclass with Maestro Neeme Jarvi, himself a product of the St. Petersburg School of Conducting. She later studied for two years with Maestro Musin from 1983, and won the first prize at the Leeds International Conducting Competition in 1984. She noted that while she was a student at the Royal Northern College of Music: "At the end of my five years, I could do all the things expected of young British conductors - fix orchestras, put on concerts and so on - but I couldn't sense the connection, when I stood in front of the band, between my hands and the music." (Morreau, 1996). In Jarvi's class, Edwards admitted that although she couldn't really understand what Jarvi was trying to teach, she did find his style, with his grace, fluidity and power, was very impressive. Jarvi told Edwards, "Naturally, I practice five hours a day," but Edwards was flabbergasted at the idea that conducting was something you could practice at all (Morreau, 1996). Yes, how does one practise conducting? What does one practice? Most people, including those who study conducting, cannot answer these questions. Edwards is definitely not a unique case.

### **4. Does Conducting Technique Exist?**

Does conducting technique exist? Some schools suggest that, in essence, the "technique" of conducting can be boiled down to a few patterns, while the so-called "art" of conducting is demanded to a vague definition of personal charm. For others, the study and interpretation of the score is more important. The conductors are born, not made. There is no such thing as conducting technique beyond basic patterns, and the conductor's accomplishment is depending on his charisma, the empathy he can gain from the orchestra, and the professionalism of the orchestra itself. But how can this be proved?

We can see that, in practice, there are many performers around the world who have become professional conductors and have even built huge careers without having formally been “trained” in conducting. The musicians who have been playing in orchestras for many years feel that conducting is all about knowing the music and rehearsing the orchestras, all that is left is to stand in front of the orchestra and wave their arms, which they can do easily. Famous composers have been invited to conduct their own works. After all, who knows their music better than they do? Professional virtuosos, whose fingers or voices have become overwhelmed after decades of performing, have turned to conducting and are working directly with the best orchestras in the world, without having to go through all the trials and tribulations. The great violinists Pinchas Zuckerman, Itzhak Perlman, and Plácido Domingo, one of the Three Tenors, have been active as conductors in recent years with major orchestras around the world. With the reputation they have built over the decades, they have attracted curious fans to buy tickets to the concerts, generating a great deal of revenue, and orchestra managers are happy to invite them as it’s their job to find ways to sell tickets.

One of the greatest conductors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957), music director of Milan's Teatro alla Scala, the New York Philharmonic, and the NBC Symphony, was known for his tension, perfectionism, an ear to hear all the details in music, and his amazing memory. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1886, Toscanini's opera company arrived in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The Brazilian conductor scheduled for the performance was unable to appear on stage and so Toscanini, a cellist and choral rehearsal assistant, was persuaded to take up the baton at 9:15 p.m. and conducted the 2½-hour opera from memory. He went on to conduct 18 opera performances that season. He was only 19 years old and starting his career as a professional conductor having never conducted before. So, where did his "technique" originate? What other professions in the world, other than conductors, could have reached the top so quickly, without studying or training on conducting techniques and without experience?

Gilbert Kaplan, a graduate of New York University School of Law, worked as an economist at the American Stock Exchange in 1963 and founded the magazine “Institutional Investor” in 1967, which was sold in 1984 for an undisclosed amount rumoured to be \$75 million, according to the New York Times. Kaplan was so passionate about Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony that in 1982 he rented Avery Fisher Hall in New York City, the home of the New York Philharmonic, to conduct the piece with the American Symphony and the Westminster Symphonic Choir. That was his public conducting debut. Since then, he conducted over 100 live performances of Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony before the end of his life, recorded and published it twice with the London Symphony Orchestra (1987, MCA Classics) and the Vienna Philharmonic (2002, Deutsche Grammophon). This is an astonishing achievement that many professional conductors with a lifelong ambition could never have achieved, yet it was done by a "self-taught" conductor with no formal musical education, not to mention training in conducting.

These are real phenomena. So, does this mean that there is really only a very limited amount of conducting technique, or that conducting technique is really nothing more than just beating time? Does

it mean that anyone can pick up a baton and become a conductor as long as he or she has a deep understanding of music and the charisma needed?

Or is it appropriate to say that none-musical reasons such as being a wealthy person can possibly help in building a conducting career?

In contrast, how long would it take for a world-renowned violinist to play a Beethoven piano concerto for example? If you have the money, you may be able to "rent" a good orchestra to conduct, or even publish your own recording, put your name on it and call it yours, but this can only happen with a conductor. For any instrumentalist, playing violin, cello, flute, trumpet, if it is not within the same instrument family, it is not possible to switch instrument and reach a decent level in a short amount of time. In other words, even still in the field of music, even if there is a lot of musical theory in common, even if you already have all the knowledge about music, it still takes years to learn a new instrument in order to master the new techniques. Switching instruments still requires practice from the beginning and a long time of practice. Conducting is the only exception. In practice, the minimum requirement is to pick up a baton, beat in patterns, have enough courage to stand in front of an orchestra and wave your arms, if the orchestra allows it. It seems the transition to become a conductor can happen overnight, without years of study or lessons.

Perhaps in the musical field, from the point of view of technique aspects, conducting, with the exception of a few percussion instruments such as bass drum and triangle, are indeed the least technical? (But no one wants to specialize in bass drum or become a triangle expert). Why is it that in the music profession, conductors usually have the highest status, the highest pay, and should be the most demanding and competent, but the threshold for entry seems to be the lowest? Is the technique of conducting really that worthless? Everybody can beat time; everybody can beat in patterns. If this is the minimum technical requirement for a conductor, then indeed most musicians can do it with ease. Perhaps it is necessary to know some cues and indications of dynamics, which is also not very difficult to do. That is why there is an active maestro still saying, "Conducting is very easy, if you want to learn it, I can teach you how to do it in one lesson." (NTSO X LOL, 2020). In many conducting "courses" and textbooks, there is not much left about conducting techniques other than beating patterns. How many musicians who have played in orchestras all their lives think they can also be conductors and feel they can easily do what they have seen over the years? How many teachers simply use "experience" as the answer to technical problems, telling students that they must develop their own techniques through practice and experience?

## **5. Can Conducting Technique be Learned and Taught?**

As a result, the art of conducting is shrouded in mystery. Some teachers advise students to watch films of great conductors of the past and to attend rehearsals when they have the opportunity, and stories such as "Bernstein conducted a symphony with only his eyes and facial expressions" have spread like myths and are considered models of study. Film study of great conductors of the past can be helpful, but for

most people, parroting, even if harmless, is not going to do a great deal for you, especially for beginners. The truth is that most people do not understand conducting enough to distinguish between good and bad techniques, or even the presence or absence of technique. Often, without a technical reference, students will try to mimic famous conductors and try to make the same gestures, even imitating their mistakes and imperfections unfortunately. Conductors make mistakes in conducting that few people can see, hear, or detect because they are unable (or do not know how) to establish and connect gestures with the orchestra's responses. Many conductors are unaware of the impact of their gestures on the sound of the orchestra. This is because they are often "tricked" by the orchestra, which, for the sake of its own reputation, will "correct" itself, or "save itself" by playing the way it was told to do during rehearsals, by muscle memory, or by playing the "right" way, rather than following and responding to the conductor's gestures and movements at that moment.

Some may argue that because conducting is a highly integrated art, there are many requirements and subjects one needs to master in order to become a conductor. Before one learns how to conduct, one must spend years or even decades preparing oneself. It is not as simple as picking up a baton and going on stage the next day, but rather a process that has taken decades to develop. This sounds very reasonable.

However, this explanation supports exactly the theory that there is no "special technique" or "something extra" to be learned in conducting, so that after spending decades to get everything else in order, the "technique" of conducting does not require much time and everything just falls into place.

To learn the technique of an instrument is to learn to perform a series of movements that corresponds to specific sound reactions. In other words, to make a connection between body movement and the sound, and to analyze what kind of sound is produced by what kind of movement. Once a musician has mastered technique, she or he can use it appropriately to express musical ideas through the instrument. The musician does not think about these techniques when playing, just as we do not think about what to do with our tongues, lips and mouths when we speak. When learning an instrument, every teacher will teach you the techniques step by step, from how to hold the instrument, how to make a sound, and then how to practice long notes. For wind instruments, you need to practice long tones, and for string instruments, you need to practice long bows on open strings. If the sound is not satisfactory, you have to find out where the problem lies, and the problem must be in yourself, whether it is unstable breath, wrong angle, or wrong bow speed or wrong bow pressure. Once you can produce a relatively nice and stable sound, you can then start practicing some simple exercises. No one will think that the instrument is the only reason for the poor sound and blame it entirely. What about conducting? When you first learn to conduct, your teacher will not tell you how to hold the baton properly, how to swing it so you can produce a beautiful sound, or how to practice conducting long notes. It is often said that an orchestra is a conductor's instrument, and when the conductor's "instrument" does not sound as good, it is the conductor's "instrument" that is the problem. The conductor stops the playing to communicate verbally

with the orchestra, to "tell" the orchestra what he wants it to sound like. Very few people's first reaction is, "Can I conduct differently to see if I can get a different sound?" You can't expect to "tell" your violin or piano that you're not happy with its sound and it will change all by itself - but conductors can.

As a result, as the orchestra continues to improve, the conductor's style of conducting does not necessarily change. Because the conductor does not make any sound personally, she or he can use other simpler and more direct means (speech, verbal communication) to achieve the required goals. It means that there is no urgent need for the conductor to make any technical changes or even to acquire any conducting technique. So, we have seen great conductors whose body language is in fact lacking, just standing in front of an orchestra like a human metronome or a robot beating with no emotion. However, this did not prevent them from building great conducting careers, because they were able to achieve their goals through verbal communication and leadership during rehearsals. In the long run, it is difficult to make significant progress in conducting techniques because, in practice, it does not seem to be so necessary. This status quo has become the norm, and people are accustomed to it, thinking that this is the way it should be.

## **6. The Relevance between Conducting Technique and Conducting Career**

The examples of Toscanini and Kaplan were mentioned earlier. Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954) was the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic for more than 20 years, a contemporary of Toscanini and also one of the greatest conductors of the last century. Furtwängler famously and very publicly walked out of a concert conducted by Toscanini and proclaimed openly: "That man is just a time-beater!" (Burton-Hill, 2014)

If these two great conductors of the same era had a love-hate relationship with each other, let us look at the example of Kaplan, whose success was certainly hailed by some in the media and critics. But as Sergiu Celibidache, conductor of the Munich Philharmonic and Berlin Philharmonic, said in a 1978 interview on Danish television: "Conductors are the most ignorant people in the musical field, after press men. They (the press) don't know even the notes. Conductor..... At least they can read the score, the critics wouldn't. They can only say if it's good or not."

It is the orchestra musicians who work with the conductors know them the best. David Finlayson, a trombonist with the New York Philharmonic who participated in Kaplan's December 2008 performance with the New York Philharmonic, commented:

"Having not previously heard either of Mr. Kaplan's two recordings of the symphony, nor having seen him conduct, I came to our rehearsals with an open mind ... As a conductor, he can best be described as a very poor beater of time who far too often is unable to keep the ensemble together and allows most tempo transitions to fall where they may. His direction lacks few indications of dynamic control or balance and there is absolutely no attempt to give phrases any requisite shape.

In rehearsal, he admitted to our orchestra that he is not capable of keeping a steady tempo and that he would have to depend on us for any stability in that department ...

I have to take extreme exception to the many reviews I have read of his performances. Some critics have written that he brings the finest details of the work to the surface. If his past performances were anything like ours, Mr. Kaplan excels in ignoring the blizzard of Mahler's performance direction ...

Much has been written about Mr. Kaplan's passion for Mahler's great symphony as if this emotion is unique to him. This assertion is an insult to all professional musicians who have dedicated their entire lives and have sacrificed much toward the preservation of all the great works of history's finest composers. His continued appearances are also an affront to all "real" conductors who have toiled relentlessly for the recognition they duly deserve" (Finlayson, 2008)."

Finlayson even goes so far as to call Kaplan an "imposter" in his review. In any other profession, it is inconceivable that a person who is not very proficient could achieve such a great success. However, as we can see in the film, Kaplan has little "technique" to speak of. His hands were doing the same thing over and over most of the time, just beating patterns, and very obviously, as Finlayson noted, not very consistently. From another great conductor of the last century, Fritz Reiner, who brought the Chicago Symphony to world class, to today's Zubin Mehta, music director of the Israel, Los Angeles, and New York Philharmonics, whose conducting tends to be mechanical and repetitive, there is a lack of technique in body movement. The list goes on and on.

Riccardo Muti, the Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was awarded "Musician of the Year" at the Musical American Awards in 2010. In his acceptance speech at the awards ceremony, he said:

"I had great teachers in Italy, great teachers. And my teacher of conducting was Antonino Votto, he was the first assistant of Toscanini in the 20's in La Scala, the golden period of La Scala ... And he was the teacher of conducting in Milano, in the Conservatoire of Milano. And coming from the Toscanini school, he was very basic, to the point. So, when we ask questions about how to do this, how to do that, he always said, why are you worried? You don't have to play, just do this (hand gesture from top to bottom), something will happen."

In Hermann Scherchen's (1949) book "Handbook of Conducting," you have to read about halfway through the book to find something about conducting techniques, and at the bottom of the page, the author sums it up in a dozen lines, which can be summarized in one sentence, "The gestures of a conductor must be clear." This is very illusory.

So, if the technique of conducting does exist, what is it?

## 7. Closing Remarks

Whether or not studying the score and generating interpretations is more important than conducting techniques and body movements, it is not a question of choice after all. It is not like you can only choose one without the other. The importance of technique or body language cannot be ignored or downplayed on the grounds that something else is more important. Any musician must convey his or her understanding of music through techniques, and conductors should not be the exception. Conducting is, after all, a relatively young art. In the twenty-first century, the art of conducting needs to develop and improve continuously, and the technique of conducting needs to be redefined and re-examined. This is a subject that deserves further study by all musicians who are inspired in conducting.

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