

A Conducting Clinic from the greats: quotes from renowned conductors and pedagogues

by
Timothy Reynish

Timothy Reynish studied horn with Aubrey Brain and was principal horn with Sadler's Wells Opera and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. He studied conducting with Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Charles Groves, Dean Dixon and Franco Ferrara, and was a prize-winner in the Mitropoulos International Competition in New York. He has conducted the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, the BBC regional orchestras and the London Symphony Orchestra as well as orchestras in Germany, Holland, Norway and the Middle East. In 1977 he succeeded Philip Jones as Head of the School of Wind and Percussion at the Royal Northern College of Music, and in 1982 was awarded a Winston Churchill Travel Scholarship to research wind bands in the USA. After developing the RNCM Wind Orchestra into one of the world's most renowned conservatoire ensembles Tim retired from the RNCM in 1998 and since then, he has lectured and conducted widely throughout the USA, Canada, Europe and Asia. He has been responsible for the commissioning of over 100 new wind works.

Time Beating: conducting or directing?

Every precise and easily understood gesture is clear speaking, but every unnecessary motion is idle chatter.

[Nikolai Malko](#)

Technique is the immediate and precise response of the hands to the direction sent out by the mind.

[Ivan Galamain](#)

The best conducting technique is that which achieves the maximum musical result with the minimum of effort.

[Fritz Reiner](#)

If we have the music inside our bodies, it doesn't matter if the first beat isn't straight down. It doesn't matter if the left hand doesn't operate as independently as we would like it to. Be only in the service of the music, not the service of the technique.

[Leonard Slatkin](#)

The band director/conductor must possess insights into creativity, expressiveness and music, human and spiritual values.

[Frank Battisti](#)

If Toscanini's baton technique had a flaw, it was that in his desire to obtain absolute control in his musicians' performance, his right hand became an inexorable time-beating and time-controlling device, which sometimes could become – especially in fast tempos and loud passages – constricting and stifling of expression.

[Gunther Schuller](#)

The use of rubato is not a traditional band technique. Much of its avoidance came out of the Contest, where if you took too much time in a measure, some judge (who never did such a thing) would chop you up.

[Donald Hunsberger](#)

Virtues of the Ideal Conductor

Restrained gestures, good taste, rhythmical accuracy, open-mindedness, exactness, and respect for the music.

[Pierre Boulez](#)

The simple fact that sound is a part of personality has, from my earliest acquaintance with conducting, made me dubious about so-called baton technique. I have always refused to teach conducting, supporting my refusal with the argument that the motions are of no consequence. Gesture is of crucial importance in conducting as long as it carries a message. But that message cannot be predetermined in advance.

[Erich Leinsdorf](#)

The whole duty of the conductor is comprised in his ability always to indicate the right tempo. His choice of tempi will show whether he understands the piece or not. With good players, the true tempo induces correct expression and phrasing and conversely, with a conductor, the idea of appropriate phrasing and expression will induce the conception of the true tempo.

[Richard Wagner](#)

It is not necessary for a conductor to be trained as rigorously as a dancer. Still, he must find the happy medium between tension and relaxation. The two extremes to be avoided are shyness and exhibitionism. Every gesture the conductor makes should say something to the players.

[Max Rudolf](#)

In our music, there are, thank God, moments when the conductor must let himself go if he has any blood in his veins. An excess of movement is therefore always better than its opposite, since at any rate as a rule, it indicates temperament, without which there is no art.

[Felix Weingartner](#)

The force of personality and artistic potency cannot be acquired; that much is nature's gift. But all professional training is of a technical order and the technique of conducting must be learnt, as any other. The Art 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.

[Felix Weingarter](#)

To be a conductor, one must have imagination, and the power to make an orchestra play what one imagines. I firmly believe that the essential quality of a conductor is first of all to project your imagination to other people.

[Georg Solti](#)

Many of us were brought up under a dictatorial system, where you may have practised a set sequence of fortissimo-to-pianissimo a thousand times. I want to create an organised environment that encourages individual freedom of expression.

[Donald Hunsberger](#)

Technique is not beating time; you can only demonstrate technique by conducting music which needs musicality to be shown. Just as the preparation for the first note will show the pulse, dynamic, attack, quality of sound, weight, immediately that you have conducted the beginning of that note, your baton is already preparing the next beat; will the two beats be legato, will there be a crescendo or diminuendo, is there an intensification or diminution of tension due to the melodic line, the harmonic movement, the orchestration.

Tone

Restraint is especially important in fast music; the spirit begins to suffer if played too loud. The audience tires, the players tire and it becomes a very determined piece. It's hard for a band to play with restraint because speed and excitement always tend to increase the volume. But if we rely on articulations, accents, and rhythm (rather than volume) to bring about a condition of brightness, it will definitely be more musical. To get a fuller sound in your band, I would stress having the lower people fill out considerably and keep the top people down. It gives the sound a depth. The tone may not carry quite as far, but most bands are able to be heard to the back of an auditorium anyway. If we could only make our young third chair people realize their great importance in the building of a band tone, I think we might have applications for third chair. It is my feeling that any band is made or broken in its third chairs.

[Walter Beeler](#)

Working for good colour and blend is far more crucial to intonation than making the difference of two cents in the pitch.

[Craig Kirchoff](#)

The problem is that we hear a band and say "that's a great sound" but it's like a steady diet of chocolate caramel ice cream – rich, thick, beautiful, full...and boring. I like to create different timbres within the parameters of a good sound. Sometimes those sounds may be on the brink of "not so good", but they are interesting and even demanded by some contemporary compositions.

[James Croft](#)

Band tone is of the utmost and primary importance because until we get what we call "a good basic band tone" there isn't any point in going on to anything else. It's interesting that we all have different concepts of tone; it would be pretty monotonous if each band sounded like every other one. My ideal is to strive for a round, relaxed, soft concept. The reason I like a rather mellow tone is that I think we tire of anything too sensational. So often we hear bands with constant intensity and enthusiasm of sound, and they completely exhaust us. If a band has a general failing, it is probably that its overall tone is too brilliant and often much too hard. It's possible to do a lot of damage with brass instruments. To create a more pleasing sound, it helps to think of blowing a lot of air slowly through the instruments rather than a small amount fast. In other words, I think it's the speed of the air stream that creates the hard sound. I would rather the players feel that they are getting the horns filled up, but in a relaxed way. Band clarinetists, particularly in the high registers, are inclined to play much too loudly, probably in an effort to get up over the brass. It's my opinion that reed instruments cannot play very loudly successfully, so they just shouldn't try. Forced, heavy qualities would be okay for a measure or two but would probably get on your nerves if you had to listen for very long, so we try to keep that sound to a minimum.

[Walter Beeler](#)

Dynamics

The smallest voice in the texture determines the dynamic. Nothing is constant. If the brass are playing against the woodwind, it is the woodwind who define "forte". The brass cannot play like "brass" but must think of themselves as "brass players who are balancing woodwinds".

[Walter Beeler](#)

There are times when respect for the musical text alone does not serve much purpose. You may have a secondary part written for a relatively weighty instrument, and a principal part written for a much lighter instrument. You have to change the dynamics. I have no qualm about doing that. As a fellow composer, I say to myself, "That's what he wanted to hear, but he didn't have enough experience to write down the exact dynamics." So I change them, that's all. The composer has written a certain number of instrumental lines and on the whole, he hasn't done so just to make a general amount of noise. He's composed those lines so that we can hear certain things, so that we can experience a certain hierarchy that's dependant on his writing. What I try to do is to bring out that hierarchy in a very precise way, even when it's difficult.

[Pierre Boulez](#)

It is at that very highest level of performance that a wealth of interpretative choices and decisions become available at least to the really sensitive and imaginative recreator. It is in this realm that there is not one pianissimo but many subtly different pianissimos, not one forte but many different kinds of forte, not one slur but many different kinds of legato.

[Gunther Schuller](#)

For me, an orchestra's lack of discipline is always reflected in a feeble dynamic range. Something I do very often is to push the dynamic register to the absolute maximum until it reaches what I think are appropriate levels for a given work.

[Pierre Boulez](#)

Composers often wrote one dynamic mark for the entire vertical scoring involved. They expected performers to adjust their instruments' relative strength according to the primary or secondary importance of their roles. There is one fundamental physical law that bears repetition, since so many musicians are unaware of it; a sustained note is always stronger than a moving voice. There is so much to be decided by the conductor who cares for a balanced performance that no amount of detail can possibly cover the permutations presented by such considerations as types of instruments (and players), size and acoustic of hall, seating arrangements, types of scoring etc.

[Erich Leinsdorf](#)

Preparing scores for performances, the conductor will discover the differences between a wind choir of 1810 and 1910 to be so great that any resemblance is almost co-incidental. The dynamics of brass instruments must be adjusted, especially on long-held notes.

[Erich Leinsdorf](#)

Diminuendo signifies forte, crescendo signifies piano.

[Hans von Bülow](#)

A premature crescendo - too early, too much - is wrong from a technical point of view, on the simple ground that if one has crescendoed much too early, it leaves no room to crescendo further.....if one husband's one's crescendo curve and feels part of the way through that one has perhaps fallen behind, it is always possible, and quite easy, to catch up.

[Gunther Schuller](#)

Phrasing

A phrase lives essentially through the distribution of energy.

[Pierre Boulez](#)

Boulez is incapable of phrasing. It's as simple as that.

[Hans Keller](#)

In my view, the only way to conduct is to conduct with a purpose. If I hear something that has remarkable moments but no special design, it leaves me unsatisfied.

[Pierre Boulez](#)

