

Midwest 2003

"Just wave  
the stick"  
cartoon

**Good afternoon everybody, and welcome to the Waldorf room. This is *Creative Practice Strategies for the Improvisational Conductor*, so if you're supposed to be in *The Boomwhacker and Its Practical Application* this hour you're in the wrong place - but you're welcome to stay.**

**Practice strategies. I'd be a very rich woman if I had a nickel for every time somebody asked me how to be a better conductor and I said "practice," and they said "no, seriously... how do I do this better?" As music teachers we all expect our students to practice - it's a mantra. But as conductors we are often trained to ignore the obvious in deference to tradition. Tradition teaches us that a conductor's "practice" is score study. A vitally important part of a conductor's preparation is score study, but it's not all there is to it - not by a long shot. Score study is critical, but in the immortal words of Paul Harvey, today we're here to investigate "The rest of the story."**

*"When I was a kid I drew like Michelangelo. It took me years to learn to draw like a kid." (Pablo Picasso)*

**This has a direct parallel to conducting. Undergrads are very "textbook" in their approach (floor-door-window-ceiling, elevator left hand). They're very concrete, and very rule oriented. It drives them nuts when they begin to compare with others (how come I did the elevator thing and nothing happened, and you raised your left eyebrow and they blew the walls off?). The simple answer is because the elevator thing doesn't mean anything - when devised, it was simply intended to be a drill for developing independence between the arms. If anything, it means "stand up," not "get louder."**

**The more complicated answer is: it's all a matter of perspective.**

*1. It's not the face of God, it's just a bunny... 10-14 years v. 4-8 months*

Bunnies

**The undergrads are locked into trying to do it "correctly." They want the recipe: this + this = this. But if there is only one acceptable result (detailed bunny), what do you do if all you can manage is this? (whacked bunny). This is where Picasso comes in: they're both bunnies. If someone needs a picture of a bunny, either will get the job done.**

**This is fortunate for us because most of us had 10-14 years of experience playing an instrument before we began our careers, but only 4-8 months of conducting (and most of that without an actual ensemble). It's like "dog years": in "conductor years" - the time from my first conducting experience to now - I'm 15, with all the obnoxious, argumentative character traits that brings with it. My undergrads are toddlers. If they achieve "whacked bunny" status on the podium we're in great shape. But they're afraid. They have toddler skills in an adult body. Anybody who has tried to learn to ski, or ride a bike, or roller blade as an adult knows how powerful the fear**

**of looking dumb, or breaking something, or looking dumb while breaking something, can be.**

*"The great enemy of creativity is fear. When we're fearful, we freeze up - like a 9-year old who won't draw pictures, for fear everybody will laugh. Creativity has a lot to do with a willingness to take risks." (Faith Ringgold)*

**So the first step in practicing is to recognize where you are developmentally, and to reconcile it with your adult ego. In other words: get over yourself. Get comfortable with discomfort; teach your brain to be inspired by that unmistakable awkward feeling we all try so hard to avoid.**

DEMO HERE: HAVE GROUP DO THE CIRCLE LH / PATTERN RH THING, THEN REVERSE.

**Put yourself in situations that you would normally avoid. Brush your teeth with your "off" hand, put your coat on with your "off" hand first, make significant eye contact with someone you don't know, get on the elevator and don't turn around to face the door...**

"Great moments in evolution" cartoon

**Consider the fish here in one of my favorite cartoons. The comfortable thing for them is to swim away; the least comfortable thing will be to go after that ball. How we get the metaphorical baseball is a matter of will and ingenuity, but it is vital that we not take for granted what the baseball is. In other words, if we want to become better conductors we first need to be sure of what conducting is.**

2. It all boils down to 3 basic concepts, and you've got them there:
  - Conducting is the act of influencing, by design, the sound of an ensemble using nonverbal means.
  - The study of conducting is not the study of gestures; it is the study of human interaction.
  - Conducting gestures are kinesthetic metaphors.

**It is critical to focus on influence. It doesn't matter if you stand on your head and wave your feet. If it's influential in a positive or constructive way, go for it - in spite of what the book, or tradition, might dictate.**

**Chances are, however, that something as radical as standing on your head and waving your feet won't work because of how humans relate to one another. We're conditioned to respond to certain behaviors in certain ways. Part of building awareness is studying how we relate to each other. Experimentation then becomes part of your practice routine.**

DEMO HERE: HAVE GROUP TRY TO EFFECT THE BEHAVIOR OF THE PERSON SITTING NEXT TO THEM WITHOUT SPEAKING OR MAKING PHYSICAL CONTACT.

**Creepy huh? Unfortunately, conducting isn't as simple as influencing others by acting in accord or opposition to accepted norms of**

**behavior. We call that professional wrestling. Conducting requires us to interact, through performance, with a work of art. This touches upon an area in which we could spend weeks exploring, so I offer concept #3 only as a "teaser." For those hip to the latest trends in research, kinesthetic metaphor must not be confused with hermeneutics, semiotics, or the assignment of meaning to music. Using metaphor in conducting is simply applying what we know of physics and psychology to the interaction between musicians. In the most basic terms, suffice it to say that conducting gestures - whatever they may be - work because they are directly linked to what we know of the world around us. Gestures fail to be influential because they are disconnected from, or contradict, natural phenomena.**

*"The highest human capacity is the capacity for metaphor" (Aristotle)*

*"Metaphor, a form of artistic shorthand, is one way among many through which the artist seeks to make known the unknown, by working, as with any other aspect of imagination, with and through known experience... You cannot imagine something that is not based in images you have already perceived, nor can you imagine something whose elements you have not perceived." (David Downs)*

"It's just snow"  
cartoon

**So in keeping with the spirit of Calvin here, high flown as working with metaphors can be, it all comes down to behaviors and concepts we already know (Well c'mon, it's just a stylized version of what we all do every day – or it should be).**

**Which brings us to the obvious: practicing is practicing. You would be appalled at how few of us were actually taught how to practice. For many people, it's sit down, open the book, and play what you see... over, and over, and over again until a) somebody tells you to move on b) the egg timer rings and you know your 20 minutes are up or c) you wonder why you continue to do something so stultifyingly boring and give up. At the risk of seeming remedial, let's take a quick look at what a typical and effective strategy is - whether you're a conductor, a violinist, a golfer, or a lumberjack.**

3. *What you already know (but might not have realized): practicing is practicing*  
*Three general "zones" & the loop back principle:*

- *Warm ups & calisthenics: building of self-awareness, mental focus & physical capabilities. "Physician, heal thyself." (Luke 4:23)*
- *Technical studies & etudes: building vocabulary & refining technique. "Start with bad sounds [awkward gestures] and make them into good ones. Silence cannot improve." (Arnold Jacobs)*
- *Standard repertoire: putting it all into play. "Technique, wonderful sound... all of this is something astonishing - but it is not enough." (Pablo Casals)*

**Warm ups do just that - literally. They are designed to increase blood flow to key areas of your body to enable greater flexibility and dexterity and decrease the chances of injury. Good warm ups also promote mental focus and self-awareness. They usually are not repertoire specific, nor do they isolate or focus on any particular technique. That's what the etudes are for.**

**Technical studies and etudes are designed to focus on a few very specific aspects of an activity (range, or speed, or endurance for example). The best tend to be progressive and creative in content. If you're wondering what a non-musical etude might be, I have one I use for golf. It's my patented "chip, one bounce, hit the fence post" etude and it's amazingly effective (just ask Chris – he watched me hit the same drinking fountain 4 times in a row out on the course one day). My etude is creative given the confines of my back yard, and variable (distance, no bounce, over the fence). For musicians, the best etudes are musically motivated and place the focal techniques in a musically compelling context. Working with the standard repertoire is then a natural outgrowth of working the etudes.**

**Standard repertoire in practice terms would be whatever you are currently working on with an ensemble, as well as a good dose of works you may never actually perform but need to know in order to qualify as an educated, well-rounded musician. Typically, the difference between working etudes and working rep has to do with flexibility and continuity. Etudes isolate techniques to improve them, rep calls on the gamut of technique, often in weird and wonderful ways.**

Loop  
back  
diagram

**Specific examples of each of these 3 zones will come in a minute. Now, the most important concept is the "loop back" idea that enables you to build your own program based on what you need. Most of us don't have a coach standing by, so it's up to us to diagnose problems and prescribe solutions for ourselves. This skill in itself requires practice, so don't be frustrated if you miss something.**

**It works like this: you start with warm up exercises. Each of us develops a routine over time, and as we work through that routine we may notice things (my back is stiff today, or my balance is off). This information is catalogued and stored for later use. In essence, the warm up is a diagnostic period: what's working normally, what's not, what's new?**

**After warming up, I tend to go to technical studies next. Based on what my warm up has told me, and what I know of the repertoire I'm preparing, I will choose etudes to address certain issues. If my back is stiff, then I might choose an etude that emphasizes flexibility for example (driving rather than putting). As I work the etudes, other issues may arise that I will either address with another etude, or catalogue and store for another time. Then, the next time I warm up, I might add something to my routine to head it off at the pass.**

**After some etudes, I'll move into standard repertoire. While working in this zone, it is very likely that more issues will crop up (like that drinking fountain near the 4<sup>th</sup> hole). These issues become the fuel for the next session – they determine new elements to add to the warm up process, and which etudes I'll choose the next time around.**

**So, if you're not accustomed to practicing conducting, where should you begin? You start by determining what you have to work with – your base line, or normal state of being.**

4. *Where to start: determining what you have to work with*

- "Fixed" elements v. variable elements: working for balance, range and flexibility.

*"The self-image is the root system from which our overt communication behavior grows. Our overt communication behavior is an extension of the accumulated experiences that have made up our understanding of self. In short, what you are, or think you are, organizes what you say and do." (Knapp & Hall)*

**If I were to study to become a lumberjack (lumber jill, actually), given my size, my lack of upper body strength, and my fear of chainsaws, my practice regimen would look very different than Paul Bunyan's. The goal is the same for both of us – cutting down trees for a living – but how we get there must be different.**

**There are things I can change about myself: within limits, I can get stronger. I cannot get taller. So I'm not going to waste time trying to be something I can't be; I am going to focus my efforts on making the most of what I can develop.**

**For conductors, this includes physical as well as intellectual, artistic and emotional capacities. Physical is pretty straightforward. Take Chris and I for example. (Ladies and gentlemen, doctoral teaching assistant Christopher Werner – my right hand man, a constant source of frustration... I mean, inspiration). We are both fairly average for our respective gender, but because of gender there are certain notable differences (I know what you're thinking, but this clinic is Rated G – let it go). For example: I have a lower center of gravity because I'm a girl, but he has greater muscle mass in his arms and shoulders because he's a guy. As a result, I am likely to have better balance, and he is likely to be physically stronger. Can I get stronger? Yes. Can he improve his balance? Yes. The idea is that my practice won't spend much time on balance, and his won't spend much time on strength because they're givens. The idea is to "balance your portfolio," so to speak.**

**Artistically Chris and I are different given our different tastes and backgrounds. He's a clarinetist, I'm a horn player. That immediately gives me a huge advantage... but seriously, we do hear differently, we have different timbre preferences, and we deal with risk and uncertainty very differently. His practice involves more singing and work for aural acuity, mine involves counteracting my natural bias against the timbre of the flute (it truly and significantly effects how I balance ensembles).**

**Psychologically he and I are very similar, but he's an extrovert and I'm an introvert. Because of this key difference, we relate to ensembles very differently. He practices to reign in his natural tendency to be larger than life, I practice to counteract my compulsion to stand quietly in the corner avoiding eye contact with others.**

**There are some fun ways you can find out more about yourself in a relatively painless way. There are some websites listed on your**

handout that provide some good stuff to talk about at parties. Answer a few questions and they'll let you know what your profile is. I'm an INTJ; in fact, I'm the poster girl for INTJ (it seems I have a talent for evil genius). Chris is an ENTJ – he is the epitome of the “commandant of the universe” profile.

Although amusing, cultivating a keen awareness of your natural tendencies is vital. It doesn't matter if a violinist is an introvert or an extrovert because the act of playing the violin isn't effected by it. It does matter if a conductor has a certain psychological profile because it will strongly effect how he influences an ensemble. Rest assured, it doesn't matter what specific profile you have – any will do. The awareness is what counts because it determines strategy - it gives you insight into how you effect those around you, either intentionally or just by being you.

*Just for fun: the psychological "Cosmo Quiz"*

- *The principles of reflection & compensation: it's not nice to fool mother nature  
First, an obscure reference for the oenophiles  
Then, fun with physics: volume, mass, momentum & metaphors*

*"The natural laws of music are synonymous with the way we breathe and live."  
(Isaac Stern)*

Wine  
glass  
lineup

A couple of years ago, Bon Appetit magazine presented one of their annual “Best of...” awards to George Riedel. Riedel is the world's foremost craftsman of crystal wine glasses. The amazing thing about his glasses, according to the editors of Bon Appetit, is their shape. Now, there isn't just one Riedel “signature” shape. In fact, this picture shows just one of numerous different families of Riedel glassware. Each glass is designed for a specific variety of wine. And, because the shape of each glass orients one's senses to the wine in a different way, the same burgundy, for example, will taste different when drunk from different glasses. This intrigued me, and was clearly an excuse for extensive experimentation.

When I regained consciousness, it also occurred to me that it was an excellent – you guessed it – *metaphor* for conductors. Take the same piece of music and the same ensemble and bring them together with different conductors and the result should be different. Why? Because each conductor's body type, personality, intellect and musicianship is distinct and will result in a different orientation to the ensemble and the work of art. This doesn't mean we can't choose to drink merlot out of a champagne flute (my favorite kind of flute, by the way). It does mean that if I'm the champagne flute I need to know how my shape will effect the wine, and either choose to celebrate that, or practice to counteract or counterbalance it.

The conductor's choices cannot remain aloof, however. In the best of circumstances they will be bombarded by the individual choices made by each ensemble member at any given moment. This is why the conductor must be a master at improvisation, or the ability to spontaneously construct or adjust musical entities. Our ears are the

**key to it all. The conductor's internal aural image establishes the playing field. As the ensemble plays, the conductor must listen and react to their work – in the moment.**

**To enable such spontaneity, each of us prepares by finding as many "tools" as we can and loading up our kit. Then, when we get on the job and discover we need a hacksaw rather than a screwdriver we have one right there. Amassing the tools is not sufficient though. Practice is essential. It will not matter how many "tools" we have if we don't know how to use them. As we acquire each new one, we need to practice with it** (Would you trust a carpenter who had never swung a hammer before he showed up to remodel your kitchen? And yet every day conductors are blithely hacking away with untried "equipment" – or worse, not using any tools at all).

- *Audiation, listening & hearing: the heart of it all*

*"Listening is being able to be changed by the other person." (Alan Alda)*  
*"You really get your work from another actor... you've got to trust them to give it to you." (Kathy Bates)*

**So let's start loading up your kit. This will hardly be a comprehensive set of tools, but it should at least get you started. My goal is to give you one or two ideas in each category. If you like what you hear, you can always ask for more** (call, write, email – all the contact info is on the handout).

5. *Strategies for working alone:*

- **Warm ups: setting up the board (physical, mental, musical)**
  - Physical = simple stretching. Full range of motion, with awareness of resistance (isometrics). Consider balance also, with awareness of center of gravity.**
  - Mental = visualization (like skier before a run). Run the score mentally while "ghosting".**
  - Musical = uploading aural styles & textures. Not the rep you're working on, but related OR chosen to counterbalance interfering habits.**
  - Musical = uploading visual styles via videos & DVDs. Give yourself a target, gain inspiration, or counteract unwanted habits.**
- **Technical studies (includes ways of thinking):**
  - Articulation & resonance = egg shakers, drum sticks/pad.**
  - Coordination and independence = Da Vinci suggestions, athletics.**
  - Feeling time = playground balls (normal: toss & remedial: bounce)**
  - Working with time = Dr. Beat: layers, off-beats, odd meters.**
  - Sensing sound & developing vocabulary = texture balls, sound of balls, "hearing" paintings.**

Demo rep  
list &  
Demo CD

Gelb book  
list

Circus Bee,  
Sweet Home  
Alabama, O  
Magnum  
Mysterium

Caillebotte  
"Paris Street"

f. **Reacting & improvisation = interpersonal (@ clinic, @ home...)**

- **Standard repertoire:** *establishing your game plan*  
*Putting it all together: connecting score study to gesture (bypassing choreography)*

Grainger  
"Children's  
March"

- a. **Reverse the sensing sound process to build metaphors at first. Audiate, imagine (sense), connect, adopt characteristics.**
- b. **"Roman Carnival" moment in Grainger**
  - **Audiate:** sounds like Berlioz
  - **Imagine:** swirling, free form, breezy
  - **Connect:** like dry leaves on a windy day
  - **Adopt Characteristics:** no hard edges or clear beat points, no straight lines, very little resistance (fast air stream / fluid fingers), higher focal plane, larger surface area – not confined.

Notice that the connection stage did not determine the exact gesture I would use. Rather, it resulted in the decision that the gesture would come from somewhere in this general area, depending on what the ensemble needs. It is important to recognize the difference between demonstrating characteristics and portraying a character (being leaf-like v. trying to be a leaf). This isn't acting class. Choosing among characteristics enables variety, change, and spontaneity – the sound of the ensemble will vary from day to day, and you'll need different tactics and tools to influence the sound. Characteristics can be combined in a tremendous variety of ways, or adapted as needs warrant, or abandoned when they are no longer useful. The object is to accumulate a huge reference collection of aural imagery, and practice accessing it. This can be done easily just by listening and imagining. If you're really feeling frisky, you can add movement.

CD rep list  
(again)  
Random  
demo from  
CD

DEMO HERE: RANDOM SAMPLE FROM CD

If you come up with one gesture for each of these excerpts and it fails to be influential, you're up a creek. And, if you keep using the gesture, you're no longer conducting - you're dancing. Dancers respond to sound – they don't seek to influence it's source. This brings us to Mr. Rothko.

6. *What it's all about:*

*"A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience."  
(Mark Rothko)*

- *The 3 secrets of getting over yourself:  
Fight or flight, public spectacle, and use it or lose it.*

**It's all about influence. If you're just up there portraying sound, rather than interacting with it, you're not conducting. That can be a scary thought, because most of us were not taught how to interact**

with sound. Fortunately, this is something you can practice virtually every minute of every day – if you open yourself up to it.

So I leave you with 3 secrets to success:

- a. **The fight or flight response is inevitable when you're under stress. Recognize it (ah yes, there it is again...), and welcome it as the harbinger of something new, something that will change who you are – maybe even for the better!**
- b. **Conducting is a public spectacle, bottom line. If you're alone in your room, gesticulating wildly with the stereo blasting, no matter what you may think you're doing you are certainly not conducting. Conductors have to work with other people, and those people are supposed to watch. Where else in your life are people essentially forced to watch you do whatever it is you do – even if you do it badly? Conductors have no choice but to learn in public – this means failing in public (this is where the fear comes from, and the fight or flight response). So...**
- c. **Use it or lose it. You can't save anything, secretly perfecting it until just the right moment when you will triumphantly reveal it to the world. Music only exists in time. If you're going to interact with it, you have to be in the moment – whenever that moment occurs, ready or not here it comes. If you are constantly aware of yourself and your environment, if you actively practice influencing and responding, if you continually build your vocabulary of gestural characteristics and aural imagery, you'll be ready whenever the moment arrives.**

**Thank you for spending the hour here with us. We're here for the duration of the conference if you would like to continue the discussion, and I hope you will feel free to contact me in Nebraska if something occurs to you once you get back home. (The handout will be on the Midwest website come January, in case you didn't get one).**

**Enjoy the rest of the afternoon!**