Nonverbal Communication Skills for the Conductor

Researchers tell us that the impact of a typical message sent from one person to another is 7% what we say, 38% how we say it, and 55% how we look, move, act and react (Julian, 1980). In performance the conductor communicates 100% nonverbally.

The communication of music ideas is the conductor's primary function. Conductors need technique to communicate to the ensemble. This technique must involve the entire body. As conductors we are often oblivious to some of the most valuable and functional ways in which we are communicating with groups.

Time magazine, May 7, 1973 had an excellent illustration of communication by way of non verbal behaviors, by describing Georg Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Ostling, 1977):

"Throughout the performance, Solti's body language is dramatically explicit. The violins are brought in with a scoop to the floor. The trumpets are cued by the riveting spear of an arm and index finger. A starburst of fingers summons the crash of the cymbals. Movements of lyrical romance come with the left hand cradled near the heart, the right hand beating coronas of love high above. Passages of staccato brilliance are paced by chopping up and down with both arms. A furious backhand indicates a sforzando attack; a hand moving slowly across his mouth implores the players to give him a soft sound. His gestures may at times seem overlarge, but they are no mere sideshow to titillate the audience . . . He eschews and useless movement . . . There is something of the wolf or the hun about Solti. As he conducts, his eyes turn into cracks, his ears become pointed, and you can sort of imagine him riding a horse bareback across the steppes."

The history of research in nonverbal behavior began with Charles Darwin in 1872. Darwin's Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872) established facial and body movement patterns as a subject for serious scientific study. Since Darwin's original research there have been and presently are many researchers in this field.

In this report the meaning of the term nonverbal behavior or nonverbal communication will be limited to actions which are distinct from speech. I have categorized these actions into: 1) Facial Expressions; 2) Hand/Arm Gestures; 3) Body Movements-Posture and Position; 4) Eye Contact; 5) Summary. Brief reviews of research (taken from Ostling, 1977), exercises to improve conducting technique, and information from pantomime techniques will be included in each area.
I. FACIAL EXPRESSION

Probably the most expressive part of the human body is the face. It is also the most complex of the areas of human communication. It has been estimated that the face is physiologically capable of 20,000 different expressions (Lyne, 1979).

S.F. Zaidel and Albert Mehrabian reported that the facial channel is in general more effective than the vocal channel for communicating attitudes, and that negative attitudes are more effectively communicated than positive attitudes (Zaidel & Mehrabian, 1969).

Harold Schlosberg found that the facial expressions pleasant-unpleasant were the most significant in contributing to communications of emotions (Schlosberg, 1954).

S.R. Gitin reported that facial expressions, as well as head orientations can convey the full range of intensity of information (Gitin, 1970).

Like actors, conductors must communicate. This statement draws a very close relationship of the musical conductor to the act of pantomime. The following is an analysis of facial muscles (Aubert, 1927) which I felt would benefit conductors:

A. Cheeks: When closely drawn in, or hollow one can represent pain, misery and despair. Cheeks puffed out can convey "fat" and prosperity. (A conductor might also get a good laugh from the ensemble.) The jaws half-open, lower jaw thrust forward can convey a sense of fury and severity.

B. Eyebrows: Raising the eyebrows, forming horizontal wrinkles on the forehead can send messages of joy, gayety and ecstasy. The same movement, more emphasized, can convey fright and surprise. The eyebrows dropped, forehead smooth, communicates dignity and firmness. The eyebrows dropped and drawn together, causing two vertical lines at the base of the forehead conveys a sense of sadness or anger and severity. To sum up, the eyebrows have two movements, raising, which brings horizontal lines on the brow; and lowering and drawing them together, which causes vertical lines on the base of the forehead.

C. Lips: When pinched give a sense of vexation; when drawn in, wickedness and controlled anger is communicated. Both lips advanced in a pout will produce an attitude of stubbornness.
A good conductor/teacher must utilize the same tools that an actor does—the mind, the body and speech. Rosalyn Paul and Lawrence Schenbeck developed many theatre games that can be used to teach conducting with new creative energy. Theatre games are exercises designed to train both the individual and groups of people to use the tools of acting more effectively. For developing sensitivity to others, Mirror Exercise #1 works very well (Paul & Schenbeck, 1980):

Two players:
A faces B. A is the mirror and B initiates all movement. A reflects all B's activities and facial expressions. While looking into the mirror, B takes a simple activity such as washing or dressing. After a time, reverse the roles with B playing the mirror and A initiating the movement. POINT OF CONCENTRATION: Exact mirror reflections of the initiator's movements, from head to foot. SIDE COACHING: Follow the movements exactly! Keep your actions exact! Be a mirror! LOOK FOR: (1) Body alertness, (2) Accuracy of observation, (3) Ability to stay with B and not make assumptions (i.e., anticipate the next step of what B will do before he does it). Mirror Exercise #1 is perfect for achieving fluency and flexibility with beat patterns, expressive gestures, style, rubato, sudden changes of mood, tempo, etc. Students could be paired in a number of ways: strong to strong, strong to weak, and weak to weak, for different educational reasons.

Another theatre game that conductors could benefit from is called Masks of Emotion. It can be done either in small groups or in front of the whole class.

Masks of Emotions:
Only the face may be used. Each student in the group must choose one emotion, and then try to communicate that emotion to the rest of the group by using his/her face. The others must guess what emotion has been shown. The procedure can be repeated with each member of the group. From there the class should progress to use of the hands alone, then only the torso, etc. As a culminating exercise, the entire body should be used.

II. HAND/ARM GESTURES

S.R. Gitin concluded that the hands can communicate the sleep-tension emotion more effectively than the pleasant-unpleasant expression (Gitin, 1970).
W. T. James formulated three conclusions regarding hand gestures: 1) palms up represent acceptance, offering and coaxing; 2) palms outward indicate active repulsion, avoidance, opposition, command and disapproval; and 3) palms down represent soothing and calming (James, 1932). As conductors our hands must be communicating the appropriate gestures in order to receive the desired response. Much of the time we gesture with little thought. It might be very wise to evaluate what our hands, more specifically what our left hand, is communicating to the musicians in the ensemble.

The hand next to the face is the most expressive part of the body, capable of infinite meaning. Delsarte developed a chart illustrating the relation of the hand to an imaginary cube in front of the body (Lyne, 1979). The basic premises are the following:

- Palm of hand against the face of the cube nearest body—-to reject.
- Palm of hand on face of the cube farthest away from body—-to include, protect.
- Palm of hand on top surface of cube—-to bless.
- Palm of hand on bottom surface of cube—-to support.
- Palm of hand on outside surface of cube—-to hold, include, possess.
- Palm of hand on inside of side surface of cube—-to remove, set aside.

With this information the conductor desiring a tone of depth and strength should use a gesture with the palm of the left hand up, illustrating "support". Too often we try to make larger motions to communicate depth and strength. Using the left hand in this gesture of palm up would be more effective.

The fingers play an important role in the conducting process. The conductor who uses a stiff forefinger will most often receive a tone which is "pointed" in character. The conductor should be encouraged to experiment with various positions of the hand and fingers and consider the effect upon the tone and style produced by the ensemble.

The following is an analysis of the positions of the arms (Aubert, 1927) which I felt would benefit conductors:

Forearms raised and elbows sticking out can convey a gracious and lighthearted, almost comical, expression.

This gesture could be very effective in bouncy, light and lilting music.
An exercise for developing flexibility/expression of the left hand is to practice the "glove trick" (Nutt, 1976):

Use a rather tight fitting leather or dacron glove for the left hand. Lay the glove palm up on the table...insert fingers and thumb part way into the glove...then lift it off the table and work the fingers and thumb until the glove is completely in place on the hand. Do not help with the right hand or touch the glove against anything to help get it on firmly.

Another exercise for gesturing is the theatre game "Gibberish" (Paul & Schenbeck, 1980):

Two Players:
Play on stage. Using gibberish, A tells B of a past incident (such as a fight he was in, a concert he went to, or a trip to the dentist). B then tells A of something that happened to him also using gibberish. POINT OF CONCENTRATION: on communication to each other. EVALUATION: Ask A what B told him. (Neither player must assume what the other has related, since B's assumptions will not help A to make clear communication necessary for solving the problem.) Ask the audience what was communicated to them. POINTS OF OBSERVATION: (1) To avoid preliminary discussion, the two players should be picked at random just prior to going on stage. (2) This exercise should be repeated at intervals throughout training. (3) When this exercise is first played, students will act out (tell) their incident in great detail. If relating a visit to the dentist's office, for instance, they will hold their jaws open, their mouths wide, poke at their teeth, groan, etc. When the exercise is re-done after months of workshop, whoever, the integration of sound and physical expression will be mostly subtly communicated. The players will be able to communicate the same events with a shrug of the shoulders or a slight dilation of the nostrils or a wiggle of a foot. They will be able to show, not tell.
III. BODY MOVEMENTS--POSTURE AND POSITION

Paul Ekman reported that nonverbal cues from the head and body supply varying affective information (Ekman, 1965). He explained that head cues carry information primarily about the effect being experienced, but little about the extent or intensity of the affect. Body cues are reversed--providing more information about the intensity of the affect and little information concerning the type of affect. As conductors, we should try to communicate to the ensemble the expression desired in the music with head and facial movements, and the intensity or amount of expression would be best regulated by body movements, e.g., expression can be communicated by face, particularly the eyes, and the intensity of this motion might be communicated by leaning forward or backward.

The shoulders can act as thermometers since their use indicates how strongly an emotion is felt. Try saying the phrase "I love music", first with the shoulders at complete rest. Now say the same phrase, this time utilizing a slight raising of the shoulders on the word "love". The phrase now holds a great deal more conviction and "degree of passion" (Lyne, 1979). Just think of how much more effectively we can "draw the music" from the ensemble by employing our shoulders appropriately.

The following is an analysis of body movements and positions of head (Aubert, 1927) which are important for conducting:

A. The Legs: to stand erect, legs straight, heels together with body supported equally on both legs in the posture appropriate to humility, modesty and passiveness. To stand, the body resting equally on both legs, but the feet separated, gives the impression of carrying heavy burdens. The same position with legs bent can be used to indicate fear. To stand erect, both feet flat on the floor, but the body's weight sustained by one leg only, produces more graceful and expressive posture. (This last posture represents the majority of a conductor's postures). The attitude of carrying the body on the forward leg conveys a persuading or desiring expression. By bending the forward leg will accentuate the same expression. (These movements would be used in cueing a very important musical line.)

B. Positions of the Head: to lean back and lift chin up slightly will convey a sense of dignity and pride. To bend the head sideways with the shoulders raised can communicate fear and suspicion. Turning the head and bent back will produce an expression of defiance and bravado. The head sunk and leaning forward can convey ferocity or preparation for a fight. The head straight and drawn back will express horror or scorn.
IV. EYE CONTACT

There has been some discussion of eyes in part I, Facial Expressions. This section however, will attempt to study the role of eyes in more specific ways.

Our eyes serve as the primary site of emotional states and they reflect attitudes. The role of eye contact and the expressiveness of the eyes has long been noted in communication.

The following is a quote by John Culshaw (Culshaw, 1978):

"I remember my astonishment on the one and only occasion, after the war, when I saw Richard Strauss conducting at the Royal Albert Hall. I have to report that his beat was infinitesimal. What Strauss had was a special kind of communication by eye...It was by eye communication that Leopold Stokowski...nearly lifted the roof off the Royal Festival Hall while playing Tchaikovsky's Marche slave as an encore. He had already played what I supposed to be the loudest fortissimo I had ever heard when he suddenly looked directly at the brass section, which, having given him everything it had promptly gave him more, yet without any sign of force...The oddest thing of all is that most audiences never see the conductor's eyes and so probably don't realize that they are his secret and most powerful weapon."

Eye contact is an influence in exhibiting the feelings of dominance. Stephen Thayer concluded in his study that recipients of extended looks judged the looker to be more dominant than recipients of brief gazes (Thayer, 1969). As conductors we need to be careful of the degree of dominance that we communicate.

In research by James Gibson and Anne D. Pick, error of judgement does not appear to be significantly greater when the eyes look obliquely at the subject than when looking directly at the subject (Gibson & Pick, 1963). We can conclude from this research that the expression of the eyes during a cue can be read accurately even if the eye contact is at an indirect angle.

Direct eye contact with individuals or groups within the ensemble must be used when their parts are to be prominently heard. Research has shown that avoiding direct eye contact breaks down lines of communication (Julian, 1980).
The following is an analysis of the eye muscles (Aubert, 1927):

Direct look, the head erect with eyelids half closed can convey timidity, suspicion, suffering and doubt. Both eyes entirely closed signifies pain, death and extreme concentration according to the gesture or posture. Very wide open eyes will communicate anger, surprise and fear. Certainly the eyes play the most important role of all the parts of the body, for there is not an instinctive or voluntary dramatic movement which is not accompanied, preceded and followed by movement of the eyes.

V. SUMMARY

The contents of this report are not new or revolutionary. We use these elements of expression in our everyday living as well as in our profession of conducting. However, we have been using them unconsciously for the most part. It is very possible that as conductors we might not be communicating as well as we could. It would be very advantageous to evaluate our nonverbal communication with the use of a video recorder, in light of the information given in this report.

The awareness of nonverbal and gestural communication may well improve those moments in rehearsal when we might be accused of uninspired conducting.

I would strongly recommend conductors to read Charles Aubert, The Art of Pantomime, or any book on pantomime acting. The art of pantomime is so closely related to the art of conducting. As conductors we most likely have not received very much information about "acting". In this report I have taken only a small portion of an infinite amount of information that is available in this book. The many illustrations and pictures of the various expressions of nonverbal communication would be very valuable to the practice of expressive conducting.
REFERENCES


*Review of research found in Ostling, 1977 journal article.