

**EXPANDING CONDUCTING GESTURES THROUGH THE USE OF AMERICAN  
SIGN LANGUAGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The hearing world already utilizes hand signals and gestures for common words, numbers, or actions. However, these gestures are instinctual and tend to vary person to person with their various interpretations of these gestures. In music, there can be many interpretations of the same conducting gesture. This can cause miscommunication between the director and the members of the ensemble and hinder the progress of preparing a piece of music. This paper explores methods of using American Sign Language (ASL) to clarify and streamline communication from conductor to performer in concert and rehearsal settings by taking common terms used by conductors and pairing them with ASL signs that either directly translate or visually represent the desired concept.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>ABSTRACT</b> .....  | 2  |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....                                       | 4  |
| <b>LIST OF MUSICAL TERMS</b> .....                                 | 5  |
| <b>CHAPTER 1: CONDUCTING</b> .....                                 | 6  |
| Great Conductors .....   | 8  |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE</b> .....                     | 13 |
| History of American Sign Language .....                            | 13 |
| Signs in Music .....   | 14 |
| <b>CHAPTER 3: USING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE IN CONDUCTING</b> ..... | 16 |
| Term 1: Heavy .....  | 18 |
| Term 2: Stress .....   | 21 |
| Term 3: Smooth .....   | 25 |
| Term 4: Ferocious.....   | 28 |
| Term 5: Rough.....   | 31 |
| Term 6: Going to (Direction).....                                  | 34 |
| Term 7: Blooming .....   | 37 |
| Term 8: Springy/Bouncy .....                                       | 40 |
| Term 9: Light/Floating .....                                       | 42 |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b> .....  | 45 |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....  | 46 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                |    |                |    |
|----------------|----|----------------|----|
| FIGURE 1.....  | 7  | FIGURE 27..... | 31 |
| FIGURE 2.....  | 9  | FIGURE 28..... | 32 |
| FIGURE 3.....  | 11 | FIGURE 29..... | 32 |
| FIGURE 4.....  | 12 | FIGURE 30..... | 33 |
| FIGURE 5.....  | 15 | FIGURE 31..... | 34 |
| FIGURE 6.....  | 18 | FIGURE 32..... | 34 |
| FIGURE 7.....  | 19 | FIGURE 33..... | 35 |
| FIGURE 8.....  | 20 | FIGURE 34..... | 36 |
| FIGURE 9.....  | 20 | FIGURE 35..... | 36 |
| FIGURE 10..... | 20 | FIGURE 36..... | 37 |
| FIGURE 11..... | 21 | FIGURE 37..... | 37 |
| FIGURE 12..... | 21 | FIGURE 38..... | 38 |
| FIGURE 13..... | 22 | FIGURE 39..... | 39 |
| FIGURE 14..... | 23 | FIGURE 40..... | 39 |
| FIGURE 15..... | 23 | FIGURE 41..... | 40 |
| FIGURE 16..... | 24 | FIGURE 42..... | 40 |
| FIGURE 17..... | 25 | FIGURE 43..... | 41 |
| FIGURE 18..... | 25 | FIGURE 44..... | 41 |
| FIGURE 19..... | 26 | FIGURE 45..... | 42 |
| FIGURE 20..... | 26 | FIGURE 46..... | 42 |
| FIGURE 21..... | 27 | FIGURE 47..... | 43 |
| FIGURE 22..... | 27 | FIGURE 48..... | 43 |
| FIGURE 23..... | 29 | FIGURE 49..... | 43 |
| FIGURE 24..... | 29 | FIGURE 50..... | 43 |
| FIGURE 25..... | 30 | FIGURE 51..... | 44 |
| FIGURE 26..... | 31 |                |    |

## LIST OF MUSICAL TERMS

*Crescendo* – smoothly increase the volume

*Diminuendo* – A directive to a performer to smoothly decrease the volume of the specific passage

*Forte* – A directive in music to perform the indicated passage loudly

*Forte-piano* – dynamic marking (usually abbreviated as *fp*) directing the performer to attack the written note at the dynamic level of *forte* (loud) followed by an immediate decrease in volume to *piano* (soft)

*Fortissimo* - perform the indicated passage very loudly symbolized by "ff"

*Glissando* – A rapid ascending or descending of the scale

*Niente* – A directive to perform the indicated passage of a composition in a whisper with almost no sound

*Ostinato* – A short melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic pattern that is repeated throughout an entire composition or some portion of a composition.

*Pianissimo* - directive to perform the indicated passage of a composition very softly, even softer than *piano* (*p*)

*Piano* - Dynamic marking meaning quiet or softly. A directive to perform the indicated passage of a composition softly. The abbreviation for *piano* is *p*

*Staccato* – A style of playing notes in a detached, separated, distinct manner

*Tenuto* - A directive to perform the indicated note or chord of a composition in a sustained manner for longer than its full duration

*Tutti* – A directive to perform the indicated passage of a composition with all instruments together

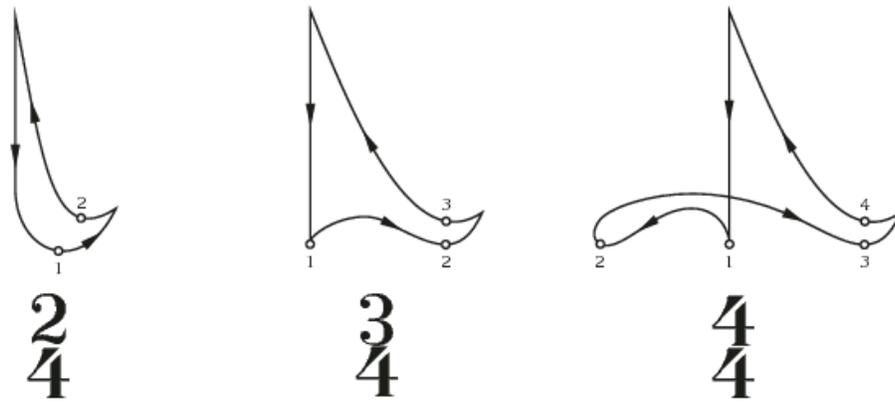
## CHAPTER 1: CONDUCTING

Like the world and other fields of study, music has its own set of languages. Classical, jazz, music theory, and conducting are but a few examples of the different “languages” within music. Each one has its own set of terms and means of communicating within the umbrella of music. Luckily for the music world, we can communicate across these different languages through a fundamental understanding of common musical terms and phrases. Conducting is essentially a dialect within the music language and it communicates through arm and hand gestures as well as facial expressions. These gestures typically take the form of a pattern that symbolizes the meter (time signature) and phrasing of the piece of music being performed. Combined with facial expressions, which normally convey the emotion of the piece, musicians can interpret and understand this language in order to unify an interpretation instantly without having to use words to explain themselves. “Studying the development of conducting gestures emphasizes that conducting gestures have an array of meanings and contexts beyond “keeping time.””<sup>1</sup> In this journal entry by Southerland, we begin to only scratch the surface of what the language of conducting is or can be.

In English, there are simple and complex sentences. An example of a simple sentence is, “the dog is brown.” This sentence provides the reader with the bare minimum and leaves no room for interpretation or misunderstanding. In conducting, an example of this would be a conductor only conducting the meter and giving no facial expressions or other indicators for phrasing, dynamics, or articulation.

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<sup>1</sup> Southerland, William. “GIVING MUSIC A HAND: Conducting History in Practice and Pedagogy.” *The Choral Journal* 59, no. 8 (2019): 30–43.



**Figure 1.** Visual representation of basic conducting patterns<sup>2</sup>

An example of a complex sentence would be, “the beautiful brown dog is napping in the shade of a tall oak tree because it is warm outside.” In this example, we are provided with a bigger picture and more descriptors to help the reader create a vivid picture in their mind. The conducting equivalent is the conductor using facial expressions to convey the emotion of the piece and conducting more than just the meter. The deeper understanding of this form of communication is applicable to rehearsals and performances alike. In rehearsals, a conductor has opportunities to speak to the ensemble to achieve a desired outcome so that the visual language they are developing has more meaning in future performances. Rudolf (1994) emphasized these traits when he said “...musicianship and thorough study of scores are of little help unless a conductor knows how to talk to people, work with them, and get results in a quick and direct manner.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Music Practice and Theory, ed., “What Are the Baton Movements for Different Time Signatures?,” Music, March 1, 1967, <https://music.stackexchange.com/questions/73007/what-are-the-baton-movements-for-different-time-signatures>.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf, M. (1994). *The grammar of conducting: A comprehensive guide to baton technique and interpretation* (3rd edition). New York, NY: Schirmer.

In Elizabeth Green's book, *The Modern Conductor*, she describes the conductor as someone who has the ability "to inspire...to feel the power of music so deeply that the audience is lifted to new heights emotionally."<sup>4</sup> The ability to communicate through the gestures used in conducting requires a "full and conceptual knowledge of the subject matter, a technical skill knowledge, and knowledge of learners and their characteristics (Green, 1969)."<sup>5</sup> This is no easy task, and it takes years to develop these skills and become an effective conductor. For many high school band directors, the role of being an effective conductor takes a backseat to things such as teaching strong instrument fundamentals and the overall administration behind running a band program. But to be an effective teacher a director also must be an effective conductor.

## **Great Conductors**

In the following section, I will be discussing three conductors and why they are considered to be some of the best conductors of all time. The standards for this prestige revolve around their overall conducting style, rehearsal methods, musical interpretations, and ability to communicate their ideas clearly and concisely.

Some of the greatest conductors of all time are also considered to be incredible rehearsalers and educators. One of the most famous in this group is Leonard Bernstein. His unique style and approach to music left a lasting impression on the music world and even changed the way the public viewed classical music. "Leonard Bernstein was active in three areas of music education: as a teacher of conducting, as a university professor, and as a teacher of music awareness,

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<sup>4</sup> Green Elizabeth A H., Mark Gibson, and Nicolai Malko, *The Modern Conductor: a College Text on Conducting Based on the Technical Principles of Nicolai Malko as Set Forth in His The Conductor and His Baton* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

appreciation, and listening.”<sup>6</sup> That last of the three areas Rozen listed predominately focuses on Bernstein’s *Young People’s Concerts* series. This was a tv series that aired on CBS from 1958-1972 in which Bernstein would pick a topic, idea, composer, or piece within music and teach an in-depth lesson on this topic. These concerts were played by the members of the New York Philharmonic and were truly geared towards the children of the time.

In all Bernstein’s varied pursuits, one can detect his agenda for expanding an event to an opportunity for learning. He was well suited to lead the New York Philharmonic for many reasons, but none more than this shared mission to enhance educational efforts and bring more people into relationship with music. His thematic and innovative program plans with accompanying program notes supported this organizational and personal artistic vision and mission significantly.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2.** Leonard Bernstein teaching children as part of his *Young People’s Concerts* series.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rozen, Brian D. “Leonard Bernstein’s Educational Legacy.” *Music Educators Journal* 78, no. 1 (1991): 44.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen A Olsen (2009).

<sup>8</sup> New York Philharmonic, ed., “Young People’s Concert - Inspirations and Tributes: ‘Celebrating Leonard Bernstein,’” New York Philharmonic, 2021, <https://nyphil.org/concerts-tickets/1718/young-peoples-concert-celebrating-leonard-bernstein>.

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Herbert von Karajan is widely regarded as one of the greatest conductors of all time. Known for his time as principal conductor of the Berliner Philharmoniker, Karajan had a unique conducting style where he often kept his eyes closed, head down, and rarely looked at the orchestra. This style of communication through gestures alone with no eye contact is difficult, but Karajan had mastered it and found a way to be an effective conductor. But one of the reasons why Karajan makes the list is for his musical interpretations and ability to hear the smallest details. His insistence on the musical ideas and phrases in his head were what made him such an incredible conductor. In the 1965 DVD, Karajan rehearses the Berlin Philharmonic in preparation for a recording session and his insistence in the smallest details is great evidence of this deep musical understanding.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kathleen A Olsen (2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Herbert Von Karajan in Rehearsal and Performance*. DVD. EuroArts, 1965.



**Figure 3.** Conductor Herbert von Karajan<sup>11</sup>

The last great conductor I will mention has been called “the greatest conductor of all time” by *BBC Music Magazine* in 2011.<sup>12</sup> The ease with which he conveyed the emotions of the music with both his face and body combined with the artistic way he described the sounds he wanted from the orchestra make it easy to see why so many of the greatest conductors today voted him “the greatest conductor of all time.” His arms would seamlessly transition from one section of the orchestra to the next all while delivering very nuanced phrasing and musical ideas.

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<sup>11</sup> BBC Music Magazine, “The Trouble with Karajan,” *Classical Music*, February 2, 2021, <http://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/trouble-karajan/>.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Wray, “Carlos Kleiber Voted Greatest Conductor of All Time,” BBC, 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/bbcworldwide/worldwidestories/pressreleases/2011/3\\_march/carlos\\_kleiber.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/bbcworldwide/worldwidestories/pressreleases/2011/3_march/carlos_kleiber.shtml).



**Figure 4.** Conductor Carlos Kleiber

The reason why these great conductors are mentioned is because of the different ways they communicated. Bernstein, for his simple, educational driven means of communicating. Karajan for his almost expressionless face and non-verbal way of conducting, and Kleiber for combining all these aspects to create one of the greatest conductors that has ever lived. While conducting is as unique to an individual as how they communicate in social settings, each conductor must find a style that fits their personality and allows them to be clear with an ensemble.

## CHAPTER 2: AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

### History of American Sign Language

Thomas Gallaudet was the founder and leader of the American movement for educating the Deaf in the early 1800's century after seeing his neighbor's Deaf daughter, Alice, try to communicate with her siblings and friends while playing. According to the Gallaudet University website, Thomas Gallaudet:

travel[ed] to Europe to study methods for teaching deaf students, especially those of the Braidwood family in England. Gallaudet found the Braidwoods unwilling to share knowledge of their oral communication method. At the same time, he was not satisfied that the oral method produced desirable results. While still in Great Britain, he met the Abbe Sicard, head of the Institut Royal des Sourds-Muets in Paris, and two of its deaf faculty members, Laurent Clerc and Jean Massieu. Sicard invited Gallaudet to Paris to study the school's method of teaching deaf students using manual communication. Impressed with the manual method, Gallaudet studied teaching methodology under Sicard, learning sign language from Massieu and Clerc, who were both highly educated graduates of the school.<sup>13</sup>

Gallaudet then returned to America with Clerc and helped create the beginnings of American Sign Language and the first American School for the Deaf in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut.<sup>14</sup>

Today, schools for the Deaf can be found in every state in the United States of America. In 1864, the United States government congressionally funded Gallaudet University and paved the way for the Deaf community to have access to higher education.<sup>15</sup> Enduring much controversy from the students and Deaf community, the Gallaudet University did not hire a Deaf president until 1988 after many protests that gained worldwide attention forced the acting

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<sup>13</sup> Gallaudet University, "The Legacy Begins," Gallaudet University, January 12, 2021, <https://www.gallaudet.edu/about/history-and-traditions/the-legacy-begins>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

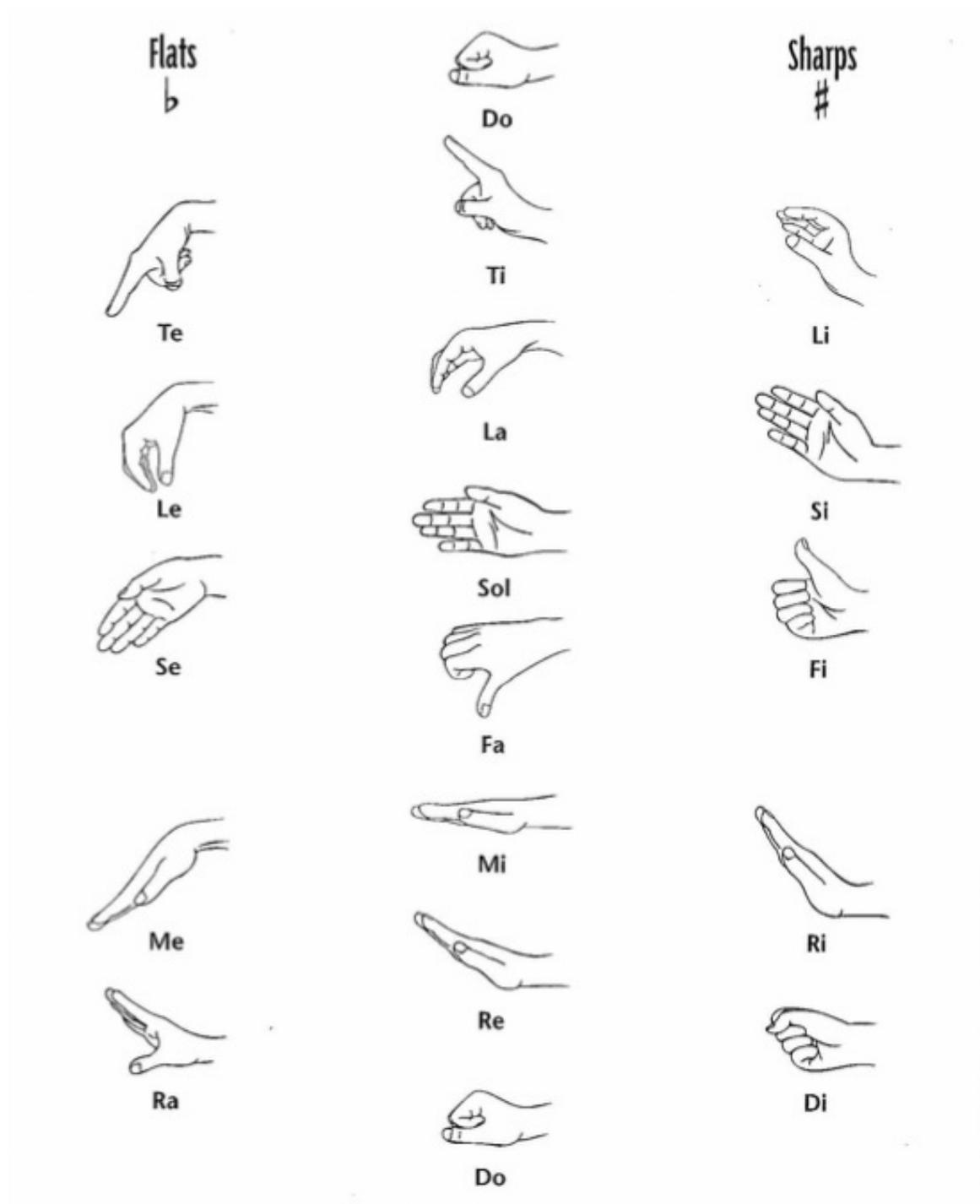
president to resign in favor of a Deaf president. This landmark event signaled a new era in Deaf culture. One where they were in charge of their own futures and development as a community.

## **Signs in Music**

Music already implements an element of sign in the use of solfege symbols. Predominantly used in choral programs, these hand signs represent the notes of a scale. Made popular through the Kodaly method<sup>16</sup>, each scale degree has a corresponding hand sign that can be used to perform musical exercises while singing and provides a visual aid to students while they learn the fundamentals of music. In an order that corresponds with the scale degrees, here is the order of solfege. Do (1), Re (2), Mi (3), Fa (4), Sol (5), La (6), Ti (7), Do (8). As you will see in the picture below, a sign has also been created for the sharp and flats of the scale degrees, depending on the direction of travel through a scale. This elaborate use of hand signs to teach and navigate music is no different than the use of ASL in aiding rehearsal efficiency.

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<sup>16</sup> Susie Petrov, "Our Mission & The Kodály Concept," Welcome to Kodály Music Institute, 2021, <https://kodalymusicinstitute.org/about-kodaly-music-institute>.



**Figure 5.** Curwen/Kodaly Hand Signs.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Concordia University, "Kodaly Hand Signs #3," Music Education, 2021, <https://wp.cune.edu/cassandramcmahan/class-handouts/kodaly-hand-signs-3/>.

### **CHAPTER 3: USING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE IN CONDUCTING**

While the face displays emotional content, a conductor's hands are their ultimate tools when conveying the dynamics, style, articulations, and mood of a piece. As the conductor's primary tools for communication, creating clear, understandable signs is important so that communication to the ensemble remains effective and does not prevent growth or cause confusion. By incorporating and explaining the terms and gestures in this paper early on, like in the warmup process, the conductor and ensemble can establish a system that everyone understands from the beginning instead of the conductor having to consistently explain what the gesture means. Setting up this line of communication from the beginning saves time in rehearsal by not having the conductor vocally describe what changes are to be made in the music.

Over the years, conductors have come up with their own gestures to convey certain musical meanings. These gestures draw upon common motions that we naturally demonstrate when talking or describing something. In the following section of this document, we will review some of the most common conducting gestures known to represent short, or more articulated, smooth, long, accented, etc. While these gestures work very well, I believe that by incorporating more standardized gestures from American Sign Language that conductors everywhere can begin to unify the language and art of conducting while keeping one's personal "dialect" intact.

First, we must determine what words and terms conductors use during a rehearsal to enhance the sound of the ensemble. Terms like faster, slower, louder, and softer are common terms that conductors use to influence the overall sound of an ensemble. These terms will be referred to as technical terms. Technical terms refer to words that directly influence a musician's technique without them having to creatively interpret the meaning. The other category is dubbed

emotional terms. These terms deal with adjectives or descriptors that deal with how we interpret a piece of music. Examples of this are ferocious, rough, dark, and bouncy. Efficient rehearsals are the result of a proper balance of both technical and emotional terminology. This would avoid some miscommunication issues between the conductor and the ensemble.

In the following sections, this study will examine ten terms and gestures that can frequently be used by conductors to influence the sound of the ensemble. These gestures take inspiration or are directly copied from ASL and integrated into conducting.

## Term 1: Heavy

This term refers to the emphasis given to the articulation of a note which may affect its duration. For the purposes of this study, it functions like an accent with a tenuto marking.

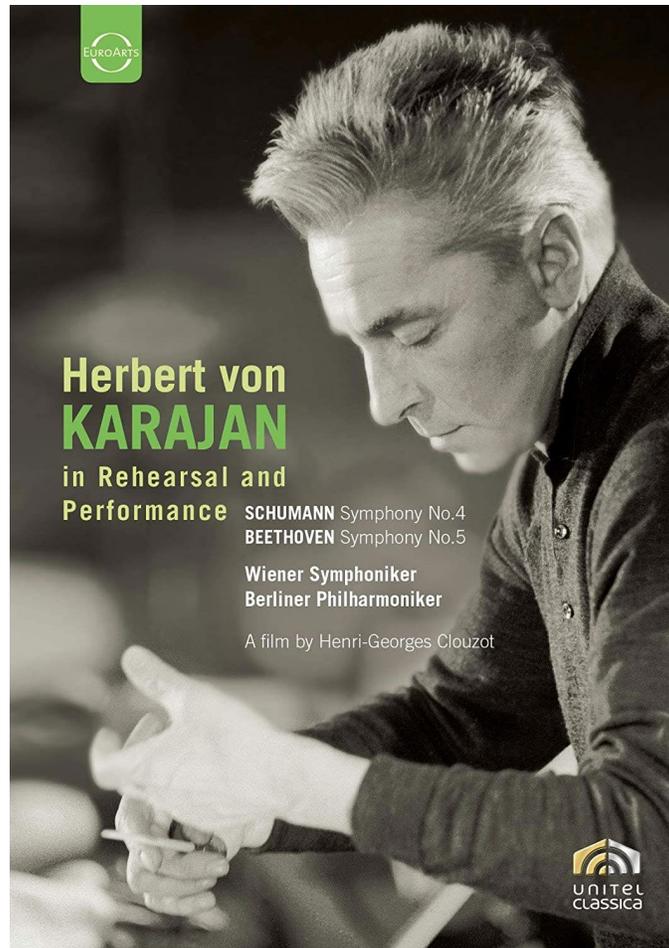
| <b>Musical Articulations</b> |                      |                                    |
|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b><i>Symbol</i></b>         | <b><i>Name</i></b>   | <b><i>How to Play the Note</i></b> |
| •                            | Staccato             | Short                              |
| —                            | Tenuto               | Long                               |
| >                            | Accent               | Hard                               |
| ∧                            | Accent (Housetop)    | Harder                             |
| >•                           | Accent with staccato | Hard and short                     |
| ≡                            | Accent with tenuto   | Hard and long                      |

**Figure 6.** Music articulation chart with descriptions for common articulation markings.<sup>18</sup>

A good representation of this gesture is to think about lifting a heavy object, like a boulder, then dropping it. This would naturally put your arms in a low, round shape with palms facing up and fingers pointed towards each other. Herbert von Karajan represents this well on the first downbeat of his rehearsal of Schumann’s *Symphony No. 4* with the Wiener Symphoniker (Vienna Symphony Orchestra) on the DVD “Herbert von Karajan in Rehearsal and Performance” (1965).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, ed., “How to Articulate Your Piano Playing,” dummies (John Wiley & Sons, 2021), <https://www.dummies.com/art-center/music/piano/how-to-articulate-your-piano-playing/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Herbert Von Karajan in Rehearsal and Performance* (EuroArts, 1965).



**Figure 7.** Herbert von Karajan demonstrating beginning of ‘heavy’ gesture

In the photo above, Karajan is in the first step of this gesture, where his hands are mid-body, palms are up like he is carrying something heavy, and his elbows are slightly flaring outwards. The next movement of this gesture is a downward motion, keeping the above form and emphasizing the landing point of the hands like they are the heavy object that is hitting the ground. While there is no evidence that Karajan knew ASL, he was most likely drawing on personal experiences and an understanding of the word combined with his personal interpretation of the music to create a gesture that mimicked what the music sounded like. This exact gesture that has been described is the ASL sign for ‘heavy.’



**Figures 8-9.** Visual representation of ‘heavy’ gesture<sup>20</sup>

Below is an excerpt from the first two measures of Schumann’s *Symphonie No. 4*, where this gesture was used by Karajan in the DVD mentioned earlier. The *forte-piano* marking is a good indication for when this gesture can be used as it somewhat mimics the sound when a boulder is dropped where it is loud at first then quickly dissipates.



**Figure 10.** Excerpt from Schumann’s *Symphonie No. 4*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> SignSchool, “Learn American Sign Language Online,” SignSchool, 2021, <https://www.signschool.com/tools/dictionary/all/>.

<sup>21</sup> Schumann, Robert. *Vierte Symphonie, Op. 120*. Breitkopf & Härtel, 1882.

## Term 2: Stress

When we hear the word ‘stress,’ there are a few definitions that come to mind. While similar to the term “heavy,” “stress” does not have a long duration of weight to the note and typically refers to a note that has a more emphasized beginning and quickly tapers, like a note with an accent marking (refer to figure 6). In ASL, the sign for ‘stress’ uses two hands. The left hand is balled into a fist while the right hand is an open hand with palm facing down on top of the left hand. Both hands then bounce up and down multiple times like the right hand is pressing the left hand down, putting the left hand under stress. For conducting purposes, the gesture can be thought of like banging on a door with the meaty part of a closed fist, symbolizing the type of articulation desired on the front end of the note then quickly fading away.



**Figures 11-12.** Visual representation of ASL sign for ‘stress’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> SignSchool

For the purposes of this study, we will be focusing on two different types of stresses in conducting. The first being a very heavy stress with no fade and the second being a stress with a gradual fade. The first stress is demonstrated in figures 12-13 below and symbolizes an articulation that is heavy and loud in volume with no diminution. This could be applied to styles similar to the arrivals in measures 21-22 in the first movement of Dvořák's *Serenade for Winds in D minor*. As you can tell from the score sample, Dvořák put accents and a *crescendo* on the notes leading to the *fortissimo* and no *diminuendo* during the first full measure of the excerpt. This denotes a hard attack and no decay in the volume, much like the description previously provided.



**Figure 13.** Excerpt from Dvořák's *Serenade for Winds in D minor*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Antonín Dvořák. *Serenade for Winds in D minor*, Op. 44/B. 77. Kalmus Music, 1878.



**Figures 14-15.** Visual representation of gesture for ‘stress’ while conducting<sup>24</sup>

An example of the second type of stress, which does have a decay in volume, can be shown by using the shape of the right hand from figures 10-11. The open hand that presses down but then comes back up can be applied to styles similar to the arrivals used in measure 55 of Richard Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from his opera *Lohengrin*. Referencing the score sample below, the accents shown suggest an initial stress in the sound but then backing away gradually, much like the sound a church bell makes when struck.

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<sup>24</sup> SignSchool



**Figure 16.** Excerpt from Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from his opera *Lohengrin*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Wagner trans. John R. Bourgeois. “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from *Lohengrin*. Wingert-Jones Publications, 1997.

### Term 3: Smooth

The term smooth applies to works that many conductors and musicians have performed. When we think of the word smooth, we usually think of a level, bare surface like a granite counter in a kitchen or we think of the phrase “smooth as silk.” The legato articulation marking, and certain instances of tenuto, can be used to help represent this concept. Imagine you are at a fabric store selecting the base for a new shirt. As you sample various materials, you are presented with a very smooth sample of silk. Naturally, your hand will move slower. For this reason, I chose to use the ASL gesture for slow to symbolize ‘smooth.’ To execute this sign, the left arm is held out in front of your body, palm down, while the right hand, also palm down, glides over the top of your left hand and up your left arm, as seen in figures 17-18.



**Figures 17-18.** Visual representation of ASL sign for ‘smooth’<sup>26</sup>

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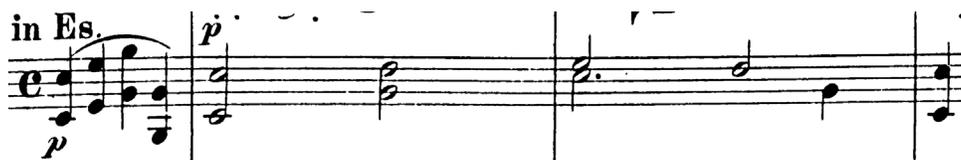
<sup>26</sup> SignSchool

For conducting purposes, this gesture can be altered to convey a smooth sound by using the gesture laterally instead of going front to back. This lateral gesture can be used to affect either one note or a series of longer notes. The last quarter note before the rest in the second measure of the first movement in *Serenade for Winds in D minor* is a place where using this gesture would be appropriate to deliver the idea that note should be played its full value and stop at the very beginning of the rest.



**Figure 19.** Excerpt from Dvořák’s *Serenade for Winds in D minor*<sup>27</sup>

The next example is from measures 1-4 in the third movement of Mozart’s *Serenade No. 10 in B-flat Major*. This excerpt is an example of when it is possible to use the smooth gesture to effect a longer passage of music rather than just a single note like in figure 16. When conducting a passage like this, the conductor can use the smooth gesture in one or both hands to convey the style and keep time.



**Figure 20.** Excerpt from Dvořák’s *Serenade for Winds in D minor*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Dvořák. *Serenade for Winds in D minor*, Op. 44/B. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



**Figures 21-22.** Visual representation of gesture for 'smooth' while conducting

#### **Term 4: Ferocious**

The term ‘ferocious’ is defined by Merriam-Webster as, “exhibiting or given to extreme fierceness and unrestrained violence and brutality; extremely intense.”<sup>29</sup> For our study, “ferocious” will refer to the energy with which a musician plays their music. Conductors will usually have a serious, somewhat angry facial expression when conducting a piece of music that calls for this type of intensity and their gestures will usually increase in size, move quicker, and have a more articulated initiation. Because of this, a conductor’s arm, baton or non-baton, will frequently cross the mid-line of their torso.

The ASL sign for ferocious uses two hands and a quick, more articulated gesture along with an intense facial expression (see figure 24). Both hands will be in the claw shape with the left hand by your belly button, palm towards the ground, and your right arm across your body with the right hand on the left side of your head and the palm facing away from you. Then, with a quick snatching motion, both hands move opposite directions, left hand goes up while the right hand goes down, and your hands close into fists like quickly ripping a piece of paper. While conducting, one could imagine this motion with a baton in your right hand and the affect of the baton whipping down and seeming to strike the area in front of you. By utilizing the ASL sign and facial expression for ferocious, we can convey a more accurate representation of the musical intent and personal interpretation for pieces of music that embody this mood.

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<sup>29</sup> Merriam-Webster, “Dictionary by Merriam-Webster,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, 2021), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.



**Figures 23-24.** Visual representation of ASL sign for ‘ferocious’<sup>30</sup>

Much like the definition of ferocious, this gesture would usually be saved for pieces of music that have large *tutti* sections with loud dynamics. We see this in Holst’s *The Planets*: “Mars, the Bringer of War” in measures 38-40. The *ostinato* leading into the downbeat of measure 40 builds dynamically to triple *forte* and everyone in the orchestra is playing at this dynamic. The gesture from figures 22-24 can be used in this instance at the arrival in measure 40 to show the intensity of the triple *forte* dynamic Holst has chosen.

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<sup>30</sup> SignSchool



Figure 25. Excerpt from Holst's *The Planets: Mars, the Bringer of War*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Gustav Holst. *The Planets: Mars, the Bringer of War*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1921.

## Term 5: Rough

While I have not come across many conductors who have a specific gesture for this concept, many do have a facial expression. The grimace that humans commonly show after smelling something foul is a typical example. The nostrils flare, the upper lip comes up and helps form a sort of frown while the brow furrows and your eyes somewhat squint because of the unpleasantness. The ASL sign for ‘rough’ has the left hand open with palm down and the right hand in a claw shape like you are scratching something, and the right hand then scrapes from the left hand away from your body.



**Figures 26-27.** Visual representation of ASL sign for ‘rough’<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> SignSchool

There are multiple ways to utilize this while conducting. The first is to isolate the right hand of the gesture and act like you are scratching the surface of something to show that you want the harshness maintained (figures 26-27 with no left arm). Another way is to start by flipping the claw over so the palm is facing up and move it in an arch motion then flip the hand over at the top of the arch and come down aggressively to show rise in volume while keeping the aggressive sound desired.



**Figures 28-29** Visual representation of conducting gesture for ‘rough’

A musical example of figures 28-30 is measures 46-47 of Kevin Day's *Dancing Fire*. The trombone *glissando* with a flutter tongue/growl technique and the crescendo and dynamic growth provides the harshness necessary for this gesture to be effective. I have personally used this technique multiple times and find that it is very effective in conveying the correct mood or feeling in the music.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for two trombone parts. The top staff is labeled 'Trb. 1 gliss.' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Trb. 2/Bs. Trb. gliss.'. Both staves show a glissando line from measure 46 to measure 47. The dynamic markings are *fp* (fortissimo piano) at the start of measure 46 and *ff* (fortissimo) at the start of measure 47. The notation includes a fermata over the glissando line in measure 46, and a crescendo hairpin connecting the two dynamic markings. In measure 47, there are two accented notes (marked with ^) on the glissando line. The bottom staff also has a fermata and a crescendo hairpin.

**Figure 30.** Excerpt from Kevin Day's *Dancing Fire*.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Kevin Day. *Dancing Fire*. Tudda Mussa Publishing, 2016.

## Term 6: Going to (Direction)

When we ask someone for directions, more often than not, the person giving directions will begin to point where you need to go and continue to do so for every turn and direction they give you. Phrasing can often be a subjective decision based on personal preference and taste as well. Because of this, many conductors have to verbalize where they want to begin and end a phrase of music rather than show it through conducting gestures. The ASL gesture for ‘going to’ uses both hands and then starting with your hands at your chest then pointing in the direction you are going.



**Figures 31-32.** Visual representation of ASL sign for ‘going to’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> SignSchool

Pointing at something is a universally understood gesture and could easily be applied to conducting for indications of the direction of a musical phrase. Using either hand, continuously point with your index finger, or baton, and move your arm like you are following a bird through the sky and lead the ensemble all the way to the beat you wish them to either peak dynamically or end the phrase. This will help ensure that the ensemble understands exactly where you wish to lead them. In the first measures of Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral,” he has shown where he wishes to go dynamically on the page, and it is now the conductor’s job to communicate this by using the ‘going to’ gesture and altering it any way necessary to lead the ensemble towards the circled point below.



**Figure 33.** Excerpt from Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from his opera *Lohengrin*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Wagner. “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral.”



**Figures 34-35.** Visual representation of gesture for 'go to'

## Term 7: Blooming

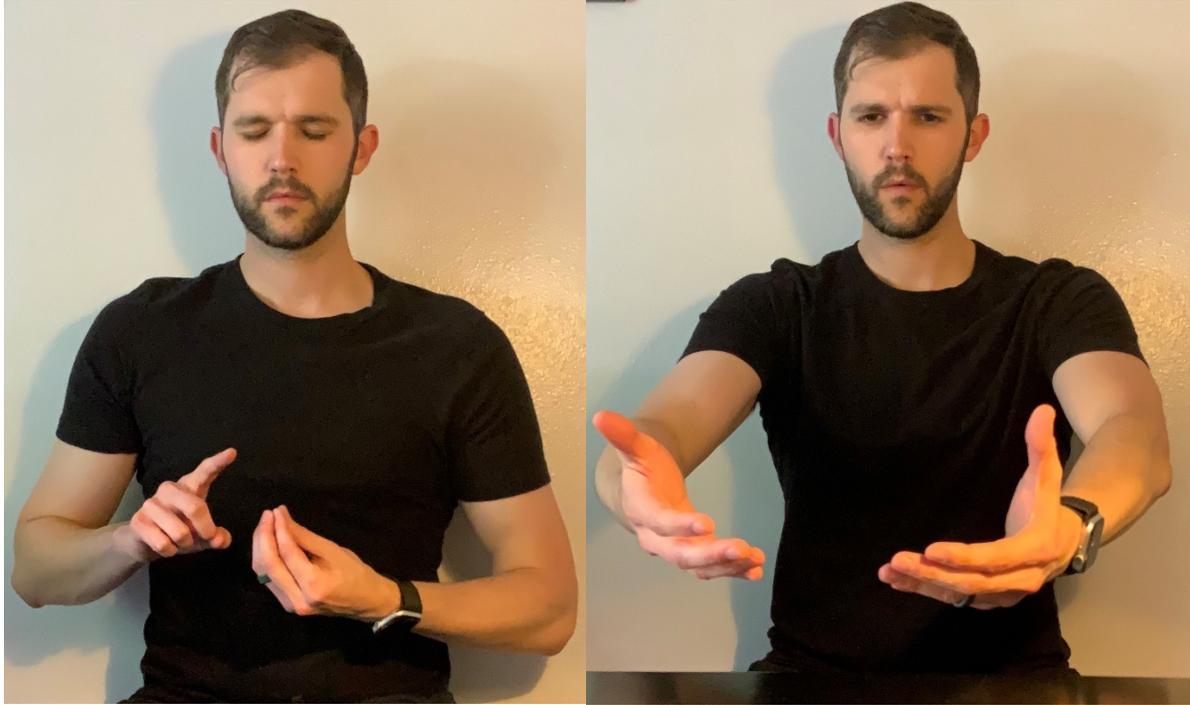
Similar to starting a note at *pianissimo*, or *niente*, and gradually growing the note over a series of beats, a blooming flower starts closed and gradually opens to reveal itself. The analogy of a blooming flower is perfectly accurate in this instance and is the term chosen to demonstrate this concept. By using either the left hand, or both hands, the conductor would start by bringing together all fingertips with palm facing up, then ‘bloom’ the flower so that the hand is completely open.



**Figures 36-37.** Visual representation of the ASL sign for ‘bloom’

The common conducting gesture used to convey this is starting with your hands close together to convey something small, which correlates to quiet, then gradually moving your arms





**Figures 39-40.** Visual representation of conducting gesture for 'blooming'

**Term 8: Springy/Bouncy**

Like a bouncing ball, the term bouncy is used to describe music that has a strong pulse and seems to float a little before coming back down to the strong beat. This description, while not exclusively, is often applied to music that is in a compound meter such as 6/8 and 9/8. The ASL sign for bouncy mimics the movement of a bouncy ball by using the right hand in a closed five shape and then moving your hand up and down, pausing at the top of the shape a little and then tapping the bottom of the shape like you are touching a hot stove. This gesture is particularly useful in the right hand, baton hand, when conducting music that has a lilting feel, as it will help deliver the correct feel and help keep time as well.



**Figures 41-42.** Visual representation of ASL sign ‘bouncy’<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> SignSchool

The *staccato* articulation marking (see figure 1) is often used when music sounds bouncy. The fourth movement of Holst's *Second Suite in F for Military Band* is a great example of this term and style of music (as seen in figure 43). Notice how Holst even hints at where the strong beats, beats one and four, are located by writing in the slurs. As mentioned earlier, the 'bouncy' feel is not solely reserved for compound meters. The 3/4 meter, when used at a faster tempo like a waltz, can also be considered bouncy and light. Measures 72-73 of the second movement in Dvořák's *Serenade for Winds in D minor* utilizes the *staccato* marking and the slur to indicate the strong beat and light, bouncy feel of the music (as seen in figure 44).



Figure 43. Excerpt from Holst's *Second Suite in F for Military Band*.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 44. Excerpt from Dvořák's *Serenade for Winds in D minor*.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Gustav Holst. *Second Suite in F for Military Band*, Op. 28, No. 2. England: Boosey & Hawkes, 1922.

<sup>39</sup> Dvořák. *Serenade for Winds in D minor*, Op. 44/B. 77.

## Term 9: Light/Floating

The last term chosen refers to the lightness with which one plays a piece of music. The articulations are usually slurred, or they are very legato and there are typically no sharp movements or sounds. This is like trying to move your body while underwater and it is hard to move quickly. For that reason, the ASL sign for jellyfish has been chosen to represent light/floating. To perform this sign, take one hand and open all fingers and point the palm to the side, then mimic the motion of a jellyfish moving in the water by pretending to grab a tissue with your fingertips and pull it out of box while moving the hand laterally.



**Figures 45-46.** Visual representation of ASL sign for 'jellyfish',<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> SignSchool

To use this gesture in conducting, instead of fully mimicking the motion of a jellyfish, bring the fingers together in a closed five shape and then mimic the motion of a wave starting in the wrist all the way to the fingertips. For reference, follow figures 47-50 in order.



**Figures 47-48.** Visual representation of conducting gesture for ‘light/floating’



**Figures 49-50.** Visual representation of conducting gesture for ‘light/floating’

By referencing the gestures shown for the terms ‘smooth’ and ‘go to,’ we can create more gestures for light/floating that convey even more musical meanings than one alone would. This combination of gestures works well in the first measures of Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from his opera *Lohengrin* (see figure 32).



**Figure 51.** Excerpt from Wagner’s “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral” from his opera *Lohengrin*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wagner. “Elsa’s Procession to the Cathedral.”

## CONCLUSION

Alone, all of the gestures from the previous sections are useful, but combined they can create a fluent, beautiful form of communication. A piece of music usually conveys multiple emotions from beginning to end, therefore, conducting gestures need to have a wide range as well. In a piece like Kevin Day's *Dancing Fire*, we can use the gesture that is fast and sharp like 'ferocious' then switch to something completely different, like 'smooth,' halfway through the piece. Finding ways to connect these gestures to form one fluent conversation between conductor and ensemble can be a difficult task, but by using gestures that work well as transitions between styles, like 'go to,' we can begin to bridge the gap and create full sentences that combine to tell the story within the music. In order to fit these gestures into the patterns of the more conventional meters, see figure 1, a conductor will sometimes have to break out of these patterns, or not conduct them at all, to properly convey the messages and feeling of the music.

The next step towards developing a more unified conducting language is for conductors to practice these gestures, along with other common gestures, and begin to explain them to the members of ensembles early in the music making process. By doing so, we can begin to eliminate communication issues and provide a more open dialogue between the conductor and the ensemble in order to create music that is truer to the composer's intentions. To better understand how to connect these gestures and concepts, I suggest watching videos of respected conductors such as Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, and Carlos Kleiber. These can be found on multiple websites and are a good reference.

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