

# Choral Techniques

**By:**

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**C O N N E X I O N S**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Choral Techniques Foreward<sup>1</sup>

Choral Techniques

Dedicated to Nancy

Preface

This fourth edition of CHORAL TECHNIQUES is different in several respects from the third edition. The material has been updated, new examples are included, a video is included in the MIXED METERS portion and, most noticeably, it is available in “open source” for all with access to the internet. CHORAL TECHNIQUES has been used for over thirty years in conducting and choral methods classes as well as by individual practicing choral conductors. Still available in this setting are the features that have been found successful for the past editions such as a direct writing style, numerous illustrative examples, suggested practical learning projects, a philosophy based on experience as well as theory and suggested readings.

The “open source” format is new and one that is available to all with access via the internet. Although quite new and unknown yet to many, this format is gaining in popularity and attracting new viewers each day. The advantages to the reader/viewer are many including: no cost for the material, the ability of the reader/viewer to view smaller portions (modules) independently, to download or print any portion without further permission, and to be able to use the information in any way the reader/viewer chooses. Readers may combine it with their own material as suits their purposes. Modules are titled as well as are the chapters in which they occur. There is also a brief content explanation of each module.

CHORAL TECHNIQUES is written for conductors of high school, college, church and community choirs, and for students preparing for such positions. The material contained in this book is the result of this author’s research and personal experience with high school, university, civic and church choirs. I want to thank my colleagues in the profession including my former students, who have made suggestions for the several editions of CHORAL TECHNIQUES. Special thanks are due my wife Nancy for her continued encouragement and valuable assistance throughout these editions.

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<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m33057/1.1/>>.

Special thanks also to the several publishers who have given permission to use excerpts from their publications knowing that these examples are available to those who use this material without remuneration.

Please use [cnx.org](http://cnx.org) to contact the author with questions or comments.

# Chapter 2

## Conducting Techniques

### 2.1 Conducting Posture and Use of a Baton<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.1.1 POSTURE AND USE OF A BATON

The posture of a conductor is just as important as the posture of a singer. It should not be ramrod stiff, nor should it be so loose that the gestures have no energy. The same element of dynamic tension that is so important to the buoyancy of singing is applicable to conductors. The conductor should adopt a position of alertness that is inspired by energy but is not muscle-bound.

The feet of the conductor should be separated, the heels approximately six to eight inches apart. The knees should be flexible, not stiff. The weight should be distributed evenly on the balls of the feet. The conductor should lean slightly towards the choir. (The upper part of the body should be carried high.) The head should be held slightly in front of the shoulders, but without assuming a hunched position. A hunched position will appear extremely awkward to the choir and to the audience. It will also interfere with a good conducting style.

The arms are the part of the body with which beginning conductors are most concerned. The body posture must be such that the arms can operate freely and most naturally. How high should they be raised? The answer, "high enough to be seen clearly by the ensemble and low enough to be comfortable," may seem vague but it is true. The conducting plane (the level at which the arms operate) will vary depending upon the ensemble's size, its position from the conductor, and upon the conductor himself. The median of the conducting plane should normally be just below the height of the shoulder. Only in extreme instances should any beats go below the waist. Very few beats will rise above the head, except that the top of the last beat of a measure will, on occasion, go almost above the head.

The size of the beat will be determined by the style and tempo of each piece of music. Fast tempos demand smaller gestures as do most soft passages. The gestures for loud passages will be large and more dramatic. Exceptions will be made in musical situations that warrant excessive gestures. A chorus of six hundred festival singers will undoubtedly demand broader gestures than a choir of forty or fifty people.

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<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m20486/1.1/>>.

## 2.2 Use of a Baton<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2.1 USE OF A BATON

Every conductor should learn to conduct with a baton whether one is used for all performances or not. Choral conductors will find that a 12" to 14" baton is desirable for most situations. A longer baton may be warranted for conducting festival choruses or performances of large choruses and orchestra.

Although fewer choral conductors seem to use a baton than instrumental conductors, there is no reason why a baton should not be used for choral conducting. It is perfectly acceptable to conduct accompanied or unaccompanied repertoire with a baton. The conductor who does not use a baton regularly will find that the use of a baton will tend to force him toward better conducting habits. Unnecessary gestures made with the hands are impossible with a baton. Usually the conducting technique improves considerably by the use of a baton.

Conductors are also encouraged to alternate between the use of the hands and the baton during rehearsals. Some compositions will seem most comfortable with a baton and the conductor will want to continue its use into the performance. The conductor will find that Renaissance scores are best conducted without a baton. The music of the Renaissance is not metered and our modern conducting gestures are not as appropriate for this music.

Many choral conductors use the baton when conducting works that involve instruments with voices. The addition of instruments alone does not necessarily warrant the use of a baton any more than the absence of instruments denies the use of the baton. The decision is a personal one but this author recommends using a baton.

## 2.3 Holding the Baton<sup>3</sup>

### 2.3.1 HOLDING THE BATON

Conductors, both beginning and experienced, often find it difficult to hold a baton with comfort. It is a slender instrument, which causes many people to try to grasp it with the finger tips rather than with the entire hand. This kind of grip creates tension in the hand and wrist and quickly becomes very uncomfortable. The conductor should grasp the baton so the handle fits into the palm of the hand and the fingers curl around the baton. The thumb should be on the left side of the baton at a point where it would touch the forefinger at about the first joint. Actually, it will not touch the forefinger because the thumb will touch the baton first. The proper basic grip is shown in the photo.

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<sup>2</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m20488/1.1/>>.

<sup>3</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m20331/1.1/>>.



**Figure 2.1**

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Conductors must experiment with several batons before they will find one that seems most comfortable to them. Batons that have small wooden or cork handles are recommended over those that have plastic or rubber balls on the grip. The former are comfortable to more people and usually weigh less.

## 2.4 The Preparatory Beat<sup>4</sup>

### 2.4.1 THE PREPARATORY BEAT

Before the basic patterns can be negotiated, the conductor must learn how to begin the conducting gestures. One should raise the hands almost as if one were going to catch a very large ball (a ball slightly larger than a basketball). The hands will come to a point slightly lower than the shoulders and the forearms will be facing inward from the elbows, rather than extending straight forward. The elbows will then be the farthest points at the side of the body. If one is not using a baton, the fingers should be curved just a little to avoid any stiffness in the hand and to present a better appearance both to the ensemble and audience.

When the music begins on a beat of a measure, the preparation beat itself will usually be one beat in advance of the first sounded note. There are occasions when a conductor will use two beats in preparation to clearly establish the tempo for the choir, and to avoid any misunderstanding of the beat on which the choir will begin to sing.

The preparatory gesture must be given in the same style, mood, and tempo of the first phase of the music. It is a vital part of the music and its importance should not be minimized. The first gesture by the conductor conveys something to the choir—either energy, style, mood, confidence and tempo, or indifference and lack of leadership.

The preparation and the downbeat should always indicate the mood of the piece. If the piece is to begin *pianissimo*, at a moderate tempo, the preparation and the downbeat must be given in a manner that will convey that information to the choir. A conductor's motions should reaffirm the character of the music, and remind the ensemble of the attitude toward the work that he and they share.

## 2.5 Starting on the First Beat<sup>5</sup>

### 2.5.1 STARTING ON THE FIRST BEAT

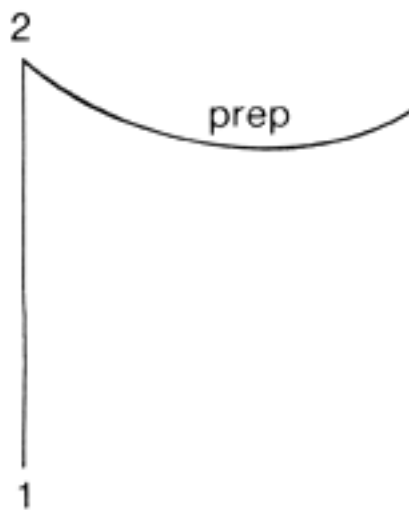
If the first beat of the measure is the first sound, the last beat of the pattern will be used as the preparatory beat (see figure 1). This piece by Handel can be used as a conducting example. Individuals can sing parts while practicing conducting the piece. Several people can trade off conducting and singing all the parts.

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<sup>4</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m20490/1.2/>>.

<sup>5</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m20491/1.2/>>.





**Figure 2.2**

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