

## PREFACE

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Music can be beautiful. It can move us, it can exalt us, it can make us better. It offers a transcendent experience of the essence of our selves, one that affirms and strengthens us in our everyday lives. Such an experience is literally transcendent: in our consciousness of the sounds we become the sounds; we transcend the duality that exists between us and them. Beauty—which can occur at different levels of the consciousness and to different degrees—exists to the extent that we experience this transcendence.

In my previous book, *Looking for the “Harp” Quartet: An Investigation into Musical Beauty* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), I explored the contributions to that experience by the listener, who absorbs sounds; the composer, who suggests them; and the performer, who brings them to life. The conductor guides an ensemble of performers in that undertaking. But how?

In one common understanding, the composition is a script inviting diverse realizations by creative interpreters, the ensemble is a collection of individuals with divergent musical sensibilities and instincts, and the job of the conductor is to visit a unifying interpretation on the group. In another, the composition is a definitive text, the ensemble is a collection of willing but imperfect souls, and the conductor’s job is to honor the composer by ensuring the requisite reading. Both understandings require a controlling figure, called a “director,” “chief,” and even “military commander” in Latin, Germanic, Slavic, and Asian languages. Both assume the musicians’ responsibility is to respond to the demands of that controlling figure.

*On the Principles and Practice of Conducting* is grounded in a different understanding of the process and thus of the function of the conductor. In actuality, an ensemble is a collection of essentially like-minded beings with an inherent inclination to come together and a proclivity to respond

to the demands of the sounds in the same or similar ways. In fact, the most beautiful, most moving experience requires a limited range of conditions in sound: a limited range of the temporal placement of tones that we perceive or can perceive as simultaneous; a limited range of pitch that we all perceive or can perceive as in tune, similarly a limited range of tempo, a limited range of phrasing inflections, and a limited range of global tempo direction (pacing) that we all perceive or can perceive.

Conducting a body of sentient musicians, we are not—as the driver of a car—in complete control of speed and direction; rather, we are like the equestrian: with shared sensibilities we guide and influence, by conforming the rhythms of our physical motions to those of the living, breathing organism. At best the conductor can join with the musicians in responding to the demands of the sounds, confirming and synchronizing and guiding them to a shared purpose. A musician responding to the demands of the sounds rather than to the demands of the stick is much the better one, and so the English *conductor*—a transmitter of energy—is much the better term.<sup>1</sup>

*On Conducting* attempts to answer the question “But how?” Chapter 1 concerns the responsibility of the conductor for understanding the conditions in sound necessary for the most beautiful, most moving, most transcendent experiences. It addresses dynamic structure and balance, two of the performer’s responsibilities treated in far greater detail in *Looking for the “Harp” Quartet*. In fact, *On Conducting* is a kind of sequel for conductors to that earlier book; a concentrated working-through of “*Harp*” *Quartet* would be a helpful prelude to undertaking this one. Making beautiful music is overwhelmingly the conductor’s most important responsibility; a conductor who comes to the podium without an understanding of how the tones can come to life to allow the most moving experience is sorely deficient.

Chapter 2 discusses the necessity of focusing the consciousness on all the sounds and only the sounds, as well as the critical issue of trust. Hearing everything has a particular bearing on finding a tempo and on rehearsing. Chapter 3 discusses the function of the conductor, the value of physical alignment and balance, and the importance of using only the muscles necessary. The chapter also presents the three fundamental conducting

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<sup>1</sup> We absorb and collect and contribute and transmit energy throughout the entire body of musicians. To be sure, as the most influential musician onstage, the conductor’s contribution is determinative within the range of conditions that allow a sublime performance; and different sublime performances within that range will necessarily be unique.

patterns, and it identifies the particular muscles that generate the motions of arms and hands through each of those patterns.

Finally, chapter 4 describes in detail how the conductor can join the freed mind and freed body to the sounds, ultimately our highest, most effective, most rewarding *modus operandi*. It discusses conforming the beat gesture to the character of the musical beat, to the shape of the phrase, to the overall volume, and to the quality of sound.

Addendum A addresses the technical challenges of starting works or movements, of ending them, and of conducting fermatas. Addendum B deals with assorted issues large and small that arise in the curious process of using physical gestures to aid the making of music by an ensemble.

*On Conducting* is at essence a practical manual for building musical understanding and physical skills, intended for anyone who picks up a baton or stands on a podium with the intention of helping an ensemble make music: a great symphony orchestra or a church choir or a middle-school wind ensemble. It is offered to serve a classroom of beginners or to provide a path to growth for an advanced student or even an experienced professional.

Each chapter begins with underlying principles; most include PRACTICAL MATTERS,<sup>2</sup> discussions of real-life applications, and EXERCISES for developing skills. Occasionally, ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES are highlighted. A website, [www.markandthakar.com/OnConducting](http://www.markandthakar.com/OnConducting), offers links to video demonstrations of the exercises in chapter 3 and chapter 4, as noted in the text. It also offers downloadable scores and parts, available for a *mélange* of transposing and non-transposing instruments, which allows for hands-on experience conducting a group of friends or the often motley group of instrumentalists found in conducting classes.

The material of *On Conducting* is interrelated: a thorough grasp of any chapter will be informed and enhanced by a thorough grasp of the others (which has made organizing it into sequential book form challenging). I have long considered shampoo bottle instructions to use, rinse, and repeat the sign of a defective product. Nonetheless, I find myself suggesting something similar: work through the book, live it, and work through it again. May you prevail over its defects, may you venture forth cleansed of any occluded consciousness and scrubbed of any unnecessary tension, and with a free mind and a free body may you empower the musicians in your care to their most magical, most beautiful efforts.

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<sup>2</sup> Practical matters in two senses, as practical applications most certainly matter.