

The Acting Principles of Konstantin Stanislavski and Their Relevance to Choral Conducting

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Introduction

How one shows deep and intentional musical meaning with physical gesture is one of the most elusive aspects of conducting. The basics of starting, stopping, and keeping time notwithstanding, a primary goal of conducting is to make physical movements that promote a natural aesthetic response from the performers; however, conductors can fall short of this goal by allowing unwanted, nonverbal communication to become part of their conducting. The process of building musical depth into one's conducting can begin with an integration of basic acting techniques. In order to sort out the possibilities of blending acting with conducting, three important questions emerge: (1) What are the effects, if any, of unwanted, nonverbal communication in conducting? (2) What insights can conductors gain by exploring techniques of acting, particularly the methods of Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938)? and (3) What are the application possibilities of acting techniques to conducting?



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Understanding the Effects of Unwanted, Nonverbal Communication

Conductors use their hands, faces, and bodies to communicate thousands of nonverbal messages during a performance. It is often impossible to determine whether these messages are correctly perceived by the members of the ensemble. Furthermore, is it even possible for a conductor to elicit from their singers the same emotional response? Although it requires much more study to uncover such a notion, there is convincing evidence that unwanted, nonverbal communication could have an adverse affect on singers.¹

Conductors spend a lifetime perfecting how they communicate with their bodies and how they develop their gestural vocabulary. Alignment of the conductor's intent with the gesture and the ensemble's interpretation of the gesture is the key to understanding a deeper level of communication. It is well documented that a conductor's state of mind can be effectively projected in their physical state.²

Evidence suggests that it is possible for conductors to negatively affect singers and increase anxiety in the ensemble with unclear conducting, lack of eye contact, and unusual facial and body expressions.³ When choristers are fearful or inhibited, they contribute less to the music-making process. According to Kenny Werner, fear "is the lens through which we perceive our separateness from each other."⁴ If choristers are fearful or confused, it makes it difficult for them to perceive the intended messages from the conductor. In a recent article titled "An Investigation Into the Choral Singer's Experience of Music Performance Anxiety," Ryan and Andrews state, "The conductor emerged as one of the primary factors in choral singers' experience of performance anxiety."⁵ Although it is impossible for conductors to abandon their human imperfections, it is important for them to be aware of objectionable, nonverbal communication that inhibits singers. Desired musical communication and energy commences with the conductor.

In the Ryan and Andrews' study, specific behaviors of the conductor were examined,

and, as a result, the number one reported conductor characteristic that increased performance anxiety within the singer came from the perception that the conductor was anxious.⁶ Although seemingly an obvious conclusion, it exhibits that a conductor must possess self-awareness to honestly convey clear meaning through gesture in performance. Other anxiety-inducing characteristics mentioned by study participants include: "singling out of individuals, weak rehearsal skills, unclear conducting, lack of respect for the choir, negative body language, and lack of eye contact."⁷ Eliminating unwanted, nonverbal communication is an essential component to making conducting gestures purposeful, and not a result of nervous habit.

In a 2002 article in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Kimberly VanWeelden observed that "Researchers investigating perceptions of and preferences for conductors have found that those conductors who possess and demonstrate high amounts of productive, nonverbal behaviors are preferred by students and thought of as more effective."⁸ Productive, nonverbal behaviors in conducting are messages sent through gestures with clear musical intention. In order to be clear with musical intentions, "an effective conductor must master all forms of nonverbal communication skills."⁹

Furthermore, conductors who study techniques used in drama could gain valuable insight into helping control unwanted, nonverbal communication. Actors are always trying to be believable and bring an amount of honesty to the role they are playing. Can conductors benefit from the same techniques taught in the dramatic arts?

A Conductor's Introduction to Acting Techniques

Conductors should always strive to "look like the music." In a manner of speaking, the conductor is acting out the music with physical gestures, facial expressions, and body language. In order to explore musical truth in gesture, turning to the work of Konstantin Stanislavski is a logical step toward connecting conducting with acting. Born in Moscow in 1863, Konstantin (sometimes spelled as "Constantin") Sergeyevich Stanislavski is perhaps the most influential figure

in modern acting. Over a forty-year period, Stanislavski studied and developed his acting methodology—one that is still used today. In his system of acting, Stanislavski writes about how acting is "no longer thought of as imitation but as process."¹⁰ Stanislavski believed that it was the actor's responsibility to truthfully act out the role by creating "links between the actor's own personality and the character he was playing."¹¹ Acting is no longer thought of as a reproduction of an emotion. Actors bring their own, inner emotions and personal experiences to the characters they are portraying. Furthermore, Stanislavski began to realize that the creative moment was often unconscious. "Conscious activity in preparing and rehearsing a role needed to be coherent and so organized as to create the condition in which spontaneous, intuitive creation could occur."¹² The search for training the creative process seems applicable to conducting, particularly if it involves linking personal experience to emotive physical action.

In his article, "Belief: Living the Music," Simon Fischer writes about how musical expression in violin playing relates to acting. He categorizes Stanislavski's acting methods into three models. They include mechanical acting, representative acting, and belief acting. In each of these three models, the actor brings a certain amount of personal experience to the role. Through complex study and extensive writing, Stanislavski was one of the first to discuss bridging the gap between actors' own personalities and the personality of the character they were playing.¹³

In mechanical acting, the actor does not feel the emotion of the character at all. When the actors are playing the role, they simply remain themselves and say the words of the character. Fischer points out that acting in silent films is often similar to this. When actors wanted to show emotions in early silent films, their gestures were very large and clown-like.¹⁴ As it pertains to conducting, mechanical gesticulation is simply keeping time with no musical interpretive nuance or emotional response. Fischer relates this to violin playing by stating, "you can learn how to raise and drop the left fingers, how to vibrate, change position and so on. All the time you remain 'in your head' rather than playing from the heart."¹⁵ Likewise in conducting,

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conductors can easily learn to wave their arms in a prescribed pattern while the brain issues commands to the arms and hands.

The second model of acting in Fischer's article is representative acting. At the onset, the actor has genuine inspiration and acts with conviction. As one is playing a role, they use certain gestures and expressions that come naturally at first, but over time, those well-intended moments and emotions become rehearsed and repeated. When the actor repeats the scene, the "rehearsed" gestures and emotions are identical to the previous performance. What is missing is the believability of the emotion and spontaneity of the moment, which is emphasized in Stanislavski's philosophy. As it relates to

conducting, "Representative Acting" is the conductor's mechanical reproduction of emotions in the gesture. Although those emotions and creative ideas came naturally in the preparation process, as one seeks to relive those emotional responses, the aliveness and spark in the gesture are gone.¹⁶ By 1889 in his notebooks, Stanislavski had begun writing of a system of acting whereby the actor and the character merge. The goal was to produce truth in the action and make the performance fresh each time. He began to create a process of training actors to become a believable representation of the characters they were portraying.

Stanislavski believed that an actor had to unlock the unconscious by recalling past

experiences that directly relate to the emotional state of the character. This ability to recall genuine, personal feelings in character building was, as Stanislavski called it, "Emotion Memory."¹⁷

An immediate stimulus—a touch, a sound, a smell—can trigger off the memory. It is possible that similar experiences tend to merge. The memory of a particular incident can evoke memories of similar incidents, similar feelings. Stanislavski realized that this faculty of vivid recall—dependent, in life, on chance—could be harnessed to the creation of performance. If the actor



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could define the emotion that was required of him at any given moment and then stimulate analogous feeling from his own experience then his interpretation could attain a new level of reality and the gap between the actor as individual and the actor as performer could be bridged. The actor and the character would become one.¹⁸

In "Belief Acting," actors genuinely believe in, and personally identify with the emotions of the character by recalling emotions from their own, personal experiences. Stanislavski observed that great actors had the "capacity for belief, to inhabit the universe created by the stage."¹⁹ In uninhibited musical performance, there is a sense of merging with the music. Fischer relates the Belief model of acting to violin playing, stating "technique comes from musical impulse, rather than the musical impulse coming from technique." Can conductors have a similar experience?²⁰ Since conductors rely on other people to make the music happen, thus removing themselves from the actual creation of sound, is it possible to physically represent in gesture, this profound, personal connection to the music? An answer to such a question is speculation. However, examining the

parallels of acting and conducting provide a broader understanding of what conducting actually is. If one sees the parallels between acting and conducting, then there are certain application possibilities.

Exploring the Application of Acting Techniques to Choral Conducting

The ability to measure the physical, quantifiable benefits of conductors who study acting is doubtful, but the parallels between

Example 1

Instructions: An actor goes on stage and is given a command by the director to assume any particular position. The actor assumes the position and holds for a brief period until his inner thoughts begin to put the gesture into a justified action, at which point the actor develops the scenario on his own.

Example Exercises:

- Hands extended upward; reaching for a valued object.
- On knees; pleading for mercy.
- Crouching position; shielding himself from blows.
- Fetal position; cringing with fear.
- Hands extended; begging.
- Hands over ears; shutting out horrible sounds. Seek variations.

the two art forms are prevalent and compelling. Exploring these parallels is particularly important for choral conductors. Unlike instrumental conductors, choral directors deal with text. The dramatic element of text is one of the most persuasive reasons for a choral director to study acting; therefore, it is conceivable to apply Stanislavski's principles to conducting, even at a very basic level.

Each text in choral music has a dramatic element. Within each text, there is often an unfolding plot—one that requires imagination and interpretation. There is action in the

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Example 2

Object Focus:

Each actor is to select an object nearby which he will study with intense awareness to every detail. It is to be examined thoroughly as the director designates. Comment of every detail of the object of attention.

Without Spilling a Drop:

Fill a cup to the brim with water. Place obstacles and other objects about the stage. Each actor is to walk about the stage, even climbing over or under objects while carrying the filled cup of water. He must not spill a single drop of water as he attempts to reach his destination. There may be fun rewards for the winner(s) if desired. Or, if spillage occurs, the actor may be required to relinquish the cup to another. There may be a need to refill the cup with water.

Contact with Object in Space:

Actor is to allow an object to enter his mind. At will, the object is to be seen close by. Then it is to be allowed to be placed at a short distance. Then the object is to appear at a distance. Place it anywhere in space. In each instance, the actor is to connect with the object and relate to it so as to arouse his inner life.

text, and sometimes there are characters. Not only does the choral conductor have to interpret the music, but also what needs to be communicated in the text. In his book, *Acting the Truth: The Acting Principles of Constantin Stanislavski*, Albert Pia writes about the responsibility of the actor in regard to interpreting text. "The actor has a continuing responsibility of bringing to life what is seemingly hidden beneath the printed words of the playwright."²¹ From the conductor's standpoint, the process by which these dramatic elements become gestures is complex, and possibly applicable to Stanislavski's ideas. Many specific exercises from Pia's book can be used for conductors. One of the exercise sets in the book is used to help the actor become more persuasive in physical communication. He calls it "From Outside In."²² The premise is to help the actor convey the hidden meaning of the text. Conductors can use this same exercise to help them become more comfortable with being expressive with their bodies. (See Example 1 from Albert Pia's *Acting the Truth*.)²³

Although conductors do not overtly act, as in the previous exercises, there are applicable principles adaptable for conductors. Becoming comfortable with natural physical expression is a way to help conductors

shed inhibition, a problem for many beginning conductors. Since Stanislavski's method draws upon one's own personal emotion to achieve truth in acting, it seems that conductors, by seeing the drama in the text, could do the same by drawing on their own personal experience to reflect the emotional response in the gestures. Whether this makes an observable difference in the conducting is subject to debate. However, even Stanislavski concludes that, in applying his system, "what was important was not the physical changes themselves but the mental attitude which produced them."²⁴ Arguably, the application of these acting principles to conducting is not always easy to physically observe. Achieving a higher aesthetic in performance is one of the goals of Stanislavski's system, and exploring how expressive gestures are conceived, rather than by leaving them to chance, is crucial to understanding how conducting relates to acting.

A second compelling reason to explore the application of Stanislavski's philosophy of acting to conducting is to help broaden and deepen the definition of the conductor's role in physically interpreting the music. Conductors are more than timekeepers; they portray dramatic messages with their bodies. Using Stanislavski's system, which he

described as a "process," can help people unlock the potential of the imagination.²⁵ Using the creative process to deepen one's connection to the drama of the text is one of many ways to clarify nonverbal, physical communication. Much more study is required to establish whether choristers can perceive a difference between conductors who have been trained in acting and those who have not. However, there is no system, similar to Stanislavski's that conductors can use to develop the skill of emotive physical gesture. The exploration of acting techniques, and how they aid in the creative process of the conductor, remains largely unexplored.

The final application of Stanislavski's method should be addressed in conducting pedagogy. Young conductors often show their insecurities on the podium, causing potential problems for the choristers they are leading. Becoming self-conscious is often a problem for student conductors, and these resulting behaviors can prevent them from being confident with expressing themselves on the podium. Young conductors can have the tendency to over conduct or to imitate the gestures of their favorite mentors. Focusing attention on physical expression is a viable part of improving gesticular communication. In *Acting the Truth*, Pia incorporates many exercises in attention focus and states, "A major fault shared by many actors is the inability to maintain a strong power of concentration, which completely destroys any form of creative work."²⁶ Pia incorporates 22 attention-focusing exercises that could be useful in a conducting class. Below are just a few examples that he claims can aid in attention focus. (Example 2 from Albert Pia's *Acting the Truth*).

There are hundreds of examples of exercises in Pia's book. The above are just a few of many that are relative to conducting. Other exercises fall into categories such as "Dramatic Quality, Dramatic Action, Focusing of Attention, Tension and Relaxation, Recalling Feelings, Mind Will and Feelings, and Musicality of Speech."²⁷ Many of these exercises are used to develop nonverbal communication, which is an essential component of conducting. Implementing these kinds of basic acting techniques early in conducting pedagogy could help young conductors be

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more focused, thoughtful, and persuasive in their physical expression without seeming contrived.

Conclusion

There are many compelling and thought-provoking reasons for choral conductors to explore the acting methods of Stanislavski. Whether one is seeking to improve non-verbal communication or to hone skills of physical expression, understanding the principles of the Stanislavski method have a tremendous impact on the aesthetic experience. By finding relationships between acting and conducting, conductors can gain valuable insights into their role on the podium. Combining acting techniques with the study of conducting has the potential to lead to a deeper understanding of how musical communication is physically represented through gesture.

NOTES

- ¹ Kimberly VanWeelden, "Relationships between Perceptions of Conducting Effectiveness and Ensemble Performance," *Journal of Research in Music Education* (Summer 2002, Vol. 50 Issue 2): 165–76.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Charlene Ryan and Nicholle Andrews, "An Investigation Into the Choral Singer's Experience of Music Performance Anxiety," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 57, no. 2 (July 2009): 108–26.
- ⁴ Kenny Werner, *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within*, (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996), 52.
- ⁵ Ryan and Andrews, 108.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ VanWeelden, 166.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1982) 30.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Simon Fischer, "Belief: Living the Music," *Strad* 118, no. 1405 (May 2007): 76–77.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Benedetti, 31.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 32.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Fischer, 76–77.
- ²¹ Albert Pia, *Acting the Truth: The Acting Principles of Constantin Stanislavski and Exercises* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006): 18.
- ²² Ibid., 81.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Benedetti, 32.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 30.
- ²⁶ Pia, 36.
- ²⁷ Ibid., vii.



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