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The conductor's gesture and the sound of the choir

The subject I have proposed for today's presentation has been a focus of my professional interests for many years. Among those who inspired my interest in the impact of conducting technique on choral sound was Professor Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt, an outstanding conductor and a distinguished authority in the field of vocal technique, whom I first met during the Postgraduate Choirmaster Studies in Bydgoszcz in 1992. It was this direct contact with Professor Gałęska-Tritt and her research¹ that became my starting point for the reflections I present to you today, which I also base on nearly 35 years of work as a conductor and choirmaster, as well as on observing countless choral performances and on experience gained from leading a choral conducting class and choirs at the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław.

What we say without words, or how we are seen, is how we are perceived

When discussing today's topic, I would like to draw attention, among other things, to the issue of the conductor's non-verbal communication with choristers, as well as to which factors influence the sound of the choir and which elements of conducting technique best support it.

Professor Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt repeatedly emphasised that, in singing, "the whole body is an instrument"². I believe this statement can successfully be applied to conducting as well, although when we talk about the basic tools of a conductor's

¹ J. Gałęska-Tritt, *Kształcenie gestem dyrygenckim techniki wokalne chóru* – paper presented at a meeting of the Department of Choral Studies at the Academy of Music in Warszawa on 23 February 1991 (typescript from the collection of J. Szybalska-Matczak).

² Cf. J. Gałęska-Tritt, *Dzieci lubią śpiewać, a my razem z nimi!*, Poznań 2007, s. 10, p. 49.

work, we most often think of the hands and face; yet we know that in the process of conducting, consciously or not, the entire body is involved. Moving from the general to the specific, it is therefore worth first considering what our instrument is, what its strengths and weaknesses are, what we can influence and what we cannot. In summary, we should consider what we need to understand in order to make full use of our instrument and work as effectively as possible as choral conductors.

As we know, a human being is a biological organism; we are born with traits that determine our body structure. Some of these, such as height, limb length or eye colour, we cannot significantly influence, as they are genetically determined. However, in the vast majority of cases, in healthy individuals, our skeletal, muscular and nervous systems operate through the same mechanisms. We tend to react similarly, both physiologically and through body language, for example, to external factors such as:

- high or low air temperature (we sweat, we swell, we fan ourselves or seek shade; we hunch, try to cover every bit of our body, shiver with cold, develop redness in areas exposed to the cold, etc.)
- stress (we have stomach ache, digestive problems, blood pressure fluctuations and an increased heart rate; our hands or knees tremble, we sweat, etc.)³
- satisfaction and joy (we are relaxed, our bodies move freely, we bounce, we smile, we utter joyful exclamations, etc.)

Similarly, although often unconsciously, we read the non-verbal signals sent by other people. Our mind forms an absolute unity with our body, and the complex mental processes and their impact on our physical and emotional reactions are the subject of research by many scholars⁴. This is an extremely interesting, important and extensive topic that could form the basis of an entire conference involving relevant specialists, so I shall not elaborate on it here. I strongly encourage you, however, to explore these issues independently, especially if in your work as a conductor you experience, for example, a lack of conscious control over tensing and relaxing specific areas of the body, or a level of stress or stage fright that, instead of motivating you, paralyses you and thus undermines your work⁵.

In the context of non-verbal body language, I would like to highlight elements that significantly affect both the conductor's communication with the choir and

³ B. van der Kolk, *Strach ucieleśniony. Mózg, umysł i ciało w terapii traumy*, Warszawa 2023.

⁴ Cf. A. Lowen, *Język ciała. Fizyczna dynamika struktury charakteru*, Warszawa 2023.

⁵ R. LaDyne, *Odetnij napięcie. Jak pokonać stres dzięki praktykom psychosomatycznym*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2021.

the way the conductor is perceived by the audience⁶. These elements take on particular importance during a concert, when we cannot communicate verbally with the ensemble or, for example, interrupt the piece to correct musical elements that, in our opinion, the choir could perform better. It is precisely then that the subtle language of the body, eye contact, facial expression and gestures become particularly important in creating an artistic interpretation together with the ensemble.

Moving on to practical considerations, it is worth asking when, as conductors, we begin our non-verbal dialogue with the ensemble and the audience, and examining the sequence of events.

1. Entrance onto the stage: most often the choir is already waiting for us on stage, and in front of it is the audience awaiting a musical experience. Whether we intend to or not, we draw their attention with our entrance. As we appear on stage, walk across it and bow, we must be aware that our body has already begun sending signals. They may indicate that for various reasons we do not feel comfortable in this situation – our posture is slouched, our head lowered, our gaze uncertain, etc. We may also appear before the choir and the audience in a way that emphasises that we are calm, in control of the situation and prepared for what is about to happen, with a positive or even enthusiastic attitude. We express this, for example, through an upright posture and by establishing eye contact with the choir and the audience. Our facial expression – cheerful or more focused – as well as the tempo and character of our steps may already suggest the mood of the first piece or the whole concert. To give extreme examples: it is hard to imagine a conductor running energetically onto the stage with a broad smile at a concert of Passion music, or entering a carnival concert with a look of existential contemplation.

2. Adopting the correct stance in front of the choir: the positioning of our body, the arrangement of the hands, the re-establishment of eye contact with the choir and facial expressions will have an enormous impact on the ensemble's concentration and its readiness to begin the piece with the appropriate character. I am convinced this point needs no extensive explanation. It is enough to use our imagination and envisage performing, for example, the Polish national anthem with a large choir, then *Już się zmierzka* by Wacław of Szamotuły with a vocal ensemble and finally *Oj, nasi jadą* arranged by S. Raździński with a youth choir.

3. Conducting the piece: while conducting individual compositions, our facial expressions, gestures and body movement remain extremely important at all times. Ideally, we use all these elements with full awareness. The problem arises when we cease to control them, or are unaware of certain behaviours. If, while

⁶ Cf. A. Pease, *Mowa ciała. Jak odczytywać myśli innych ludzi z gestów*, Wydawnictwo Jedność, Kielce 2001.

building tension in a piece or at a high dynamic level, we tense the muscles of the hands, arms or even back, we will certainly achieve the intended effect. Problems arise, however, if we are unable to move from this tension to a relaxed state, causing blockage and stiffness of the body. At times an inappropriate facial expression or excessive physical activity (walking, jumping, crouching, swaying), or conversely, excessive stillness and a lack of the energy that should emanate from our body, can completely disrupt the atmosphere of the composition. For example: while attending a concert by an excellent choir under a distinguished conductor, I sensed a certain dissonance in those moments when the conductor smiled broadly at the choir during the performance of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Stabat Mater* for three mixed choirs *a cappella*. It was difficult to find fault with the technical execution or interpretation, yet this behaviour, for me personally, detracted from the depth and meaning conveyed by the piece.

4. Ending the piece and leaving the stage: here I would simply like to emphasise that the conductor remains the “director” of the concert until the last singer has left the stage. It is the conductor who, with an appropriate gesture adapted to the ending of the piece, can influence the moment when the applause begins. Sensing the mood of the audience, they decide on the number of bows (their own and the choir's), and also help the performers decide when to leave the stage, as less experienced singers often have difficulty judging this.

All the stages of public performance mentioned above, and the associated issues, significantly influence the creation of the atmosphere necessary for performing a specific musical work, as well as the dramaturgical structure of the entire concert. Watching the conductor, the singers perceive the conductor's emotions and often subconsciously mirror their behaviour (especially in children's choirs) – returning a smile, but also raising their shoulders or tensing their necks, neither of which favours proper vocal production. We must, however, remember that every conductor, like every person, has their own individual physical and personality traits, including so-called stage temperament: one will be naturally more dynamic while conducting, another more static, yet another – thanks to great charisma – will achieve the desired effect by directing a single glance at the singers, without even moving their hands. It all comes down to assessing our “instrument” as accurately as possible, understanding our own traits and personality, working on elements that may negatively affect choral performance and making full use of our strengths.

The technique of playing the choral instrument

With regard to classical conducting technique, I assume that the aim of training in this technique is to achieve the highest possible level of skill, precision and

freedom of hand movement, so as to convey the conductor's intentions in a compelling and expressive way that performers can readily understand, especially those with whom we do not work on a daily basis⁷. I often compare the conductor to a virtuoso instrumentalist. Watching, for instance, the International Chopin Piano Competition or the International Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition, we can notice that participants use different playing techniques yet demonstrate an equally high level of musical virtuosity. The conductor's specific instrument (apart from the body mentioned by Professor Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt) is the choir and, even though one "plays" it without physical contact, the effect of each gesture on the manner and quality of sound production is extremely important. I must admit that for many years I asked myself whether there exists a single, universal and correct conducting technique. As a student, I believed there was, appreciating the methodical and insightful approach to the subject adopted by my mentor, Professor Zofia Urbanyi-Krasnodębska. However, the experience and knowledge I gained during Postgraduate Choirmaster Studies at the Feliks Nowowiejski Academy of Music in Bydgoszcz, where I studied conducting with professors from various music academies in Poland, allowed me to significantly broaden my horizons in this area. The initial stages were not easy, as each of these distinguished pedagogues positioned my hands differently and each demonstrated different technical solutions to the same problems. After a short period of rebellion, during which I evaluated and compared the knowledge passed on to me, I came to understand that in fact they were all right, and that the newly acquired skills would be the best path to developing my own individual language of communication through conducting.

Turning now to the interdependence between the choir's sound and conducting technique, it is worth reflecting on what determines this sound. First and foremost, the sound of the ensemble is shaped by the performers themselves as individual singers. Therefore, elements such as their age, physiological vocal characteristics and level of vocal training will be of great importance⁸. The sound of the ensemble will also be influenced by systematic work on so-called collective vocal production, which includes not only vocal exercises but also harmonic and aural training, sensitising singers to the palette of human vocal timbres.

⁷ Cf. L. Jaworski, *Podstawy techniki dyrygowania*, Lublin 2023.

⁸ Regarding the individual contribution of each performer, professional ensembles employ singers whose timbre and technical skills match the needs and distinctive characteristics of a given choir. The requirements at auditions for an early music ensemble differ from those for an opera or philharmonic choir. Conductors of amateur choirs do not have this advantage; when admitting new candidates, they most often test their general musical and vocal aptitude.

For a gesture to have an effective influence on the choir's sound, the conductor must fully understand and identify with the vocal technique requirements of their singers⁹. This applies to the following elements:

- the tempo and energy of inhalation before the beginning of the piece and before individual phrases, taking into account their length
- the work of the abdominal press muscles responsible for the respiratory mechanism, rhythmic impulses and the execution of particular types of articulation
- shaping dynamics by creating space in the pharyngeal cavity, using proper breath support
- shaping timbre by directing the sound towards the resonators and through the action of the articulatory apparatus, as well as through timbral imagination
- awareness of the needs of the articulatory apparatus responsible for diction (tongue, lips, jaw)
- awareness of more demanding passages in the melodic line (leaps, high or low tessitura, etc.)

Let us now consider the tools that conducting technique offers us to support and inspire our singers to perform at their best¹⁰. The most basic tools include:

- the preparatory gesture – its length, tempo and character
- shaping dynamics by varying the amplitude of movement; in *forte*, one should use a gesture that releases a large volume of sound (a wide range of motion and anchoring of the gesture at the point of support are recommended, in keeping with the character of the piece), while in *piano* the range must be significantly smaller, yet with a clearly defined preparatory motion and attention to the point of support. Equally important is awareness of the work of the hand that “holds” and shapes the sound¹¹
- eliciting a bright timbre through a light gesture, guided gently upwards by the hand; for darker, more dramatic timbres, the gesture should be more firmly grounded

⁹ Cf. A. Zeman, *Komunikacja między dyrygentem a zespołem wokalnym: wybrane zagadnienia*, [w:] *Kreatywność i tradycja we współczesnej chóralistyce: studia i materiały*, red. K. Szatravski, Olsztyn 2018, p. 95–105.

¹⁰ This part of the paper, as delivered during the conference, was supplemented with practical conducting demonstrations.

¹¹ In shaping dynamics, non-verbal communication between the conductor and the choir can play a crucial role. The conductor's posture, appropriate muscular tension and relaxation, eye contact and other signals are especially important when sustaining notes of long duration and shaping the volume of sound through gesture (*crescendo*, *diminuendo*).

- realising articulation: *non legato* with a slightly pulsating, steady gesture, active in each preparatory movement; *legato* with a very smooth, “viscous” gesture, as if the hand were moving through a dense substance, struggling to detach from the support point; preparatory movements within the pattern become more passive; *staccato* with a short and light gesture, determined by the ability to initiate the preparatory movement appropriately, comparable to the reflex of a quick rebound or the hand “escaping” after touching a very hot surface. It should be remembered that the communication of a specific articulation is determined not only by the moment the preparatory motion begins, but also by how the gesture is finalised at the sound's support point (*marcato*, *portato*, etc.)
- controlling intonation by subtly indicating with the hand the need to raise or lower the pitch.

Only when the conductor is fully aware of the vocal technique and musical challenges involved in performing a particular work can they guide its performance and thus shape its sound through gesture and non-verbal body language. It is therefore extremely important that the conductor's preparatory gesture and subsequent conducting of the entire piece be consistent with the singer's breathing needs, the requirements of the abdominal press muscles, the opening of the pharyngeal space, the activity of the articulatory apparatus, etc. The conductor's gesture should release the energy necessary to convey, for example, fast and slow tempi and rhythmic patterns (e.g. syncopation), and should appropriately manage this energy. An inappropriate gesture can negatively affect performance quality and cause vocal blockage in singers; non-verbal communication contrary to the character of the work can disturb the mood and emotional interpretation of the piece.

Conclusion

The conductor's distinctive body language and a clear understanding of their verbal and non-verbal signals form the basis of communication with the choir. A conductor who uses good technique and a choir that sings well together form a single organism in complete symbiosis. Only the integration of conducting technique with an awareness of the singers' vocal needs can guarantee effective and fruitful collaboration, enabling free music-making and thus appropriate “management” of the emotions of both performers and audience. As conductors, we should constantly develop and refine our technique, and, in moments of doubt, remember the principle popular among doctors: *primum non nocere*. We should also take care of our physical condition so that our bodies allow us, for as long as possible, to practise a profession which is often our passion and a source of vitality.

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Abstract

The conductor's gesture and the sound of the choir

This paper explores the impact of the conductor's gesture on the sound of a choir, taking into account both conducting technique and non-verbal communication with the ensemble. Drawing on the author's extensive professional experience and taking inspiration from the research of Professor Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt, the paper highlights the importance of the conductor's body awareness and its influence on the quality of choral performance. It discusses the significance of posture, facial expressions and preparatory movement, as well as techniques affecting articulation, dynamics, intonation and tone colour. Emphasis is placed on the necessity of an individualised approach to conducting technique, tailored to the conductor's physical and emotional characteristics, as well as the needs of the ensemble. The conclusions are supported by specific repertoire examples and practical exercises.

Keywords: conducting, communication, effectiveness, sound

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