

The contextualisation of conductor gesture

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The practice of orchestral conducting is a highly localized communicative activity, predicated on the notion that the conductor directs an orchestra through complex and specialised gestures. Conductors use physical movement of the fingers, hands, arms, torso and head, and speech, as modes of communication between themselves and the musicians with whom they work. Conductors' use of gesture is associated most strongly with performance contexts (i.e. situations in which speech is not possible due to accepted practices of orchestral performance), but also occurs in situations in which it is used as the more practical and efficient method of communication in an environment not unlike those which produce the alternate kinesic codes (Kendon 2004) seen in the Sawmill (Meissner & Philpott 1975) and Crane Driver (Brun 1969) studies.

This paper examines the gestures used by conductors, in video-data of naturally-occurring rehearsal and performance, to communicate with musicians. It will discuss manual gestures (including handshape and finger movement), tool use, head movement & orientation and body (torso) orientation. This paper will show that multiple and co-occurring layers of contextualisation allow musicians to understand conductor gesture in relation to culturally relevant 'normative' gestures (such as pointing and open-hand prone/supine gestures), which are modified, combined and used in conjunction with 'technical' (conductor specific) gestures, some of which can be argued to originate from or relate to gestures used in verbal contexts. This paper argues that conductor gesture can be conceptualised as a 'self-contextualising' system in which meaning is dynamically co-constructed by conductors and musicians. This is demonstrated through an analysis of 'beating' (the act by a conductor of showing time or 'place' within a musical bar) as an example of a contextualising act. Each beat performed by the conductor is a discrete gesture that signifies a particular 'beat' within the music being played; each gesture is however made meaningful by its relative position within an ongoing sequence of gestures, which in turn is constructed relative to context. Such context is here understood as encompassing both the music (in the sense of both the *printed piece* and the *performance*) and the more general physical and social context(s).

This paper will show that, in 'beating', the gestures can be seen to be part of the same (continuous) linear sequence, which is constrained in such a way that the gestures immediately follow and precede the gestures that contextualise them and that they contextualise. However, other physical aspects of beating which may vary to refer to *manner* of playing, rather than the *temporal* relationships, when considered with non-beating hand and head/torso gestures, are connected by a more flexible linear sequence and are therefore self-contextualising within a broader conductor interaction. This contextualisation occurs between gestures which are temporally separated (by greater or less temporal distance), or occur synchronously. Through this gestural analysis, this paper proposes a framework for understanding conductor gesture as a (potentially) self-contextualising communicative practice.

References

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