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PREVIEW

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LABAN-BASED PRINCIPLES OF MOVEMENT AND PREVIOUS
MUSICAL TRAINING ON UNDERGRADUATE BEGINNING CONDUCTING STUDENTS'
ABILITY TO CONVEY INTENDED MUSICAL CONTENT

by

Timothy G. Yontz

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Administration, Curriculum and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Glenn Nierman

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

The Effectiveness of Laban-based Principles of Movement
and Previous Musical Training on Undergraduate
Beginning Conducting Students' Ability
to Convey Intended Musical Content

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LABAN-BASED PRINCIPLES OF MOVEMENT AND PREVIOUS
MUSICAL TRAINING ON UNDERGRADUATE BEGINNING CONDUCTING STUDENTS'
ABILITY TO CONVEY INTENDED MUSICAL CONTENT

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University of Nebraska, 2001

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The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Laban-based principles of movement and previous musical training on undergraduate beginning conducting students' ability to convey intended musical content. The subjects, 91 undergraduate beginning conducting students in a large midwestern university system, were randomly assigned to two treatment groups. One treatment group received instruction in the area of Laban-based movement; the other treatment group received instruction in the area of expressive gestures. At the end of the treatments, the students were administered a videotaped posttest. Three conducting professors evaluated the students' ability to convey intended musical content through their conducting using the "Conductor Evaluation Guide II" developed by Stephen W. A. Miller. The effects of the independent variables, instructional method (Laban-based movement or expressive gestures) and previous musical training (instrumental or choral), on the dependent variable, ability to convey intended musical content, were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA ($p < 0.05$). Based on the statistical analysis, the results obtained from this study had the following implications:

1. Laban-based movement appears to have value as an instructional tool for undergraduate beginning conducting students.
2. Conducting orientation, the tendency to see oneself as an instrumental or choral conductor, did not significantly affect students' ability to convey intended musical content.
3. There was no significant interaction between conducting orientation and the conducting treatments investigated.

PREVIEW

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I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

(2 Timothy 4:7)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The Problem

“Conducting is surely the most demanding, musically all-embracing, and complex of the various disciplines that constitute the field of music performance” (Schuller, 1997, p. 3). Preparing students for the art of conducting has generated a wide array of pedagogical methods covering a broad range of skills and knowledge necessary to successfully lead an ensemble. Numerous books on conducting have been written and used as texts in conducting classes (Curtis & Kuehn, 1992; Demaree & Moses, 1995; Green, 1997; Hunsberger & Ernst, 1992; Labuta, 1995; Long, 1977; Maiello, 1996; Phillips, 1997; Prausnitz, 1983; Rudolf, 1994; Schuller, 1997).

Although these texts have been comprehensive in their scope of topics relating to the basic skills of conducting, most have a limited discussion of the principles of conducting associated with nonverbal communication. In a study by Grechesky (1985) about the analysis of nonverbal and verbal conducting behaviors and their relationship to expressive musical performance, he states, “Findings indicate that conductors who sharpen their nonverbal communication skills can have a very positive effect on their groups’ musical performance.” Nonverbal communication plays a direct role in the conductor’s ability to convey intended musical content, which is considered by many to be the primary role of the conductor. According to Green (1997), “Showing rather than stopping to tell saves an appreciable amount of rehearsal time – and boredom for the

players” (p. 43). Similarly, Anthony Maiello (1996) suggests the challenges faced by a conductor to develop the ability to communicate silence. He states:

A conductor is not afforded the luxury of using words to communicate the musical intent to the performers, nor to the listener in a concert situation. This crucial aspect of music making must be done in total silence. This barrier can be one of the most challenging aspects of conducting to overcome. Gestures with arms, hands and fingers, face, eyes, mouth (breath), body and general physical presence (stance) are all vital aspects of general technique, tools of the trade. These items are part of our basic anatomy. (p. 9)

There are those in the conducting world who hold fast to the concept that the ability to convey intended musical content nonverbally through conducting is an inherited skill.

Some musicians maintain that success in the conducting profession is totally dependent upon innate factors, and they refuse to engage in a scientific approach to conducting education. They hold that conducting talent is entirely hereditary and, therefore, cannot be taught; their educational approach is one of coaching rather than teaching. However, since much recent research in the psychology of music has focused attention upon the importance of acquired rather than inherited skills, scientific research in the area of nonverbal communication might well be applied to analysis of conducting skills and the teaching of those skills. An objective approach to factors such as facial expressions, gestures, and movement is entirely possible, given the wealth of material to be gleaned from available research. (Ostling, 1976, p. 30)

The dilemma of teaching how to convey intended musical content may be due to the lack of discrete knowledge in the area of nonverbal communication. This quandary forces those who write conducting texts to explore a subject that is not as historically defined as the mechanics of conducting patterns and styles.

For instance, in Elizabeth Green's book, The Modern Conductor (1997, p.44), expressive gestures are divided into two categories, active and passive gestures. The active gestures are the "control" gestures. They are endowed with great "Impulse of Will" on the part of the conductor, and they request an active response from the players. The passive gestures request silence. They show the passing of time when the players do not play. Green lists active gestures as legato, staccato, tenuto, and the gesture of syncopation (controlled reaction that must come after the beat instead of on the beat). She lists passive gestures as dead gestures and preparatory beats. While this text is used widely as the definitive source for conductors, less than ten percent of the text is devoted explicitly to expressive nonverbal gestures.

The first chapter of Anthony Maiello's book, Conducting: A Hands-On Approach, is devoted to nonverbal gestures. Possibly one of the most comprehensive approaches to nonverbal communication by the conductor, this text devotes less than five percent of its pages to "spatial exercises." These exercises emphasize the exploration of the area surrounding the individual conductor and the limited options for utilizing that space.

To experience the total space available for conductors it is helpful to draw on the analogy of the blank/white canvas the artist has at his/her disposal when beginning to paint or draw. The size of the canvas is the limit in which the work

of art can occur. Conductors cannot go beyond the tip of the hand and/or baton on both the horizontal and vertical planes. (Maiello, 1996, p. 12)

The preparation of undergraduate music education students in the area of conducting has focused on the use of competency-based instructional tools that are essentially student-centered. In one such study, it was noted that students can efficiently change their conducting and rehearsal behavior by studying operational definitions, participating in practical conducting experiences, observing themselves via videotape, taking data through systematic observation, and writing self-evaluative critiques (Yarbrough, 1987).

Another similar study by Price (1985) examined the effect of a competency-based program on basic conducting skills and student attitudes. In this study students conducted a laboratory chorus enabling them to practice modeling beat patterns, tempos, dynamics, styles, preparations, releases, cues, and eye contact. The program included student self-observation of each practicum and written critiques. Results indicated that students gained in all eight conducting skill categories.

Lonis (1993) presented the following:

In 1985 a report presented at the national convention of the College Band

Directors National Association revealed a lack of consensus regarding the goals and appropriate sequence of learning activities for undergraduate basic

conducting courses. Conclusions were drawn that conducting gestures have often been learned intuitively or handed down from mentor to student.

Traditionally, conducting has been taught through practical apprenticeship, the advice and guidance of experienced conductor-teachers, and through the observation and

emulation of distinguished professional conductors (Yarbrough, Wapnick, & Kelly, 1979). This mentorship atmosphere has been the main thrust of undergraduate conducting courses. Generally, the professor in such a class uses an established conducting text. He or she utilizes the explanations, diagrams, and exercises to support the philosophical and practical approach to conducting any given ensemble.

Typically the first required conducting courses for undergraduates are comprised of students preparing to conduct in both the instrumental and choral mediums. This causes the professor to generalize many of the concepts being presented so they may be applied to either musical medium. It is only in advanced conducting classes that students are given specific instruction in their preferred teaching or conducting area of focus. It is at this point in the students' conducting education that the role of the instructor as a model of instrumental or choral conducting becomes important.

Prior to beginning conducting courses in college, most students' only conducting model is their high school instrumental or choral director. Therefore, the impact of how the student's high school music teacher conducts may influence the conducting style of the student. Perhaps musical background (i.e., instrumental vs. choral) influences conducting style of a beginning conducting student and their ability to convey intended musical content.

An area that has not been utilized frequently in developing the young conductor, who brings a rather narrow concept of conducting to the classroom from past experience, is the infusion of new techniques of instructor-based teaching. New techniques of teaching motion in a way that conveys intended musical content are difficult to devise because of the complexity of the subject area. Rarely is this animated portion of

conducting discussed in conducting method books and related materials. A study by Hayslett (1996) “. . . reveals that subjects that received movement training showed significantly higher gain scores [in the area of aural acuity] than those who had not.” His conclusion proposed “the integration of movement-based training into the conducting curriculum.”

Even Madsen and Yarbrough (1985) concur that their model of competency-based conductor education “. . . is intended as an *example* of competency-based instructional procedures. It is not intended as the definitive model for developing conducting skills. . . . It must be remembered that there are many ways that the *art* of conducting could be analyzed and subsequently taught” (p. 99).

There needs to be a discipline of linking principles of movement to conducting. Thornton (1971) observes:

A great variety of different kinds of activity use and make reference to movement. To the musician it has one meaning, to the painter it implies something else, whilst to the teacher of dance or physical education it has yet other and distinct connotations. Underlying all these differences is a fundamental unity, for the word “movement” implies that something is happening. Movement is a universal human characteristic and a person’s movement experience begins even before birth. Thus to study movement is to study man, for movement is both the medium and the vehicle for all kinds of human activity and a deeper understanding and a heightened awareness of movement can bring a greater richness to life. (p. 1)

An examination of Rudolf Laban’s words assist in linking his principles of movement to conducting:

Movement can be studied like any other reality of existence. One can see its mechanical implications, coming from the instrumental character of our body. The parts of our skeleton are levered by muscles in a way not dissimilar from the function of a mobile crane with which we lift and transport merchandise. But in the crane sits a mastermind, the crane-driver, who organizes the motions of the crane, enabling this contraption to serve a definite job. We can know all about every single screw and pulley of the crane without being able to drive it by our thinking only. For the driving we need movement.

The body is crane and crane-driver in one well-assembled unit, and this unit follows - knowingly or unknowingly - the invariable rules of bodily and mental motion. ("Laban Art of Movement," 1957, p. 2)

Laban's principles of movement were based on the theory that all movement shares common elements that can be analyzed. Laban termed the components of movement "motion factors." The implication for undergraduate conducting students is that through Laban movement training, the students can be trained to apply the appropriate degree of body movement and effort to convey any given circumstance as presented in the music they are conducting.

Implications of Laban's principles for conducting concern communication of feeling, translation of expressive musical line into gesture, phrasing, podium presence, efficiency in rehearsal, visibility, clarity, bodily awareness of movement, and range of expression in movement (Bartee, 1977). The above implications have a direct link in training conducting students to convey intended musical content. By including movement

studies such as Laban movement in early conducting training, students may be able to incorporate more than just the mechanical movement components of conducting.

There is some research and practical application indicating the use of Laban-based principles of movement as a viable way of teaching movement in conducting (Bartee, 1977; Bengt, 1996; Holt, 1992; Miller, 1988; Poch, 1982). Laban-based movement could be one such instructional tool to teach undergraduate conducting students how to convey intended musical content, and it could raise the level of conducting maturity over a span of time if included with a traditional setting of conducting instruction.

Though some research has been done in this area, there is still a need for the continued study of nonverbal movement instruction in beginning conducting classes. Furthermore, movement-based instruction might affect students whose background is primarily instrumental or choral ensemble participation differently. This research could lead to a better understanding of how nonverbal movement instruction can result in more effective training of undergraduate beginning conducting students.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Laban-based principles of movement and previous musical training on undergraduate beginning conducting students' ability to convey intended musical content.

Hypothesis

The following null hypotheses will provide organization and focus for this experimental study:

- 1) There will be no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level of confidence between the posttest conducting means of the Laban-based movement group and the expressive gestures group with respect to students' ability to convey intended musical content, as assessed by a panel of experts using the "Conductor Evaluation Guide II."
- 2) There will be no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level of confidence between the posttest conducting means of students whose conducting self-image is instrumentally oriented and those whose conducting self-image is chorally oriented with respect to students' ability to convey intended musical content, as assessed by a panel of experts using the "Conductor Evaluation Guide II."
- 3) No statistically significant interaction will exist at the 0.05 level of confidence between the treatment (hypothesis 1) and conducting self-image orientation (hypothesis 2) with respect to students' ability to convey intended musical content, as assessed by a panel of experts using the "Conductor Evaluation Guide II."

Definition of Terms

In designing this study it was necessary to define the following terms:

Competency-based Approach

In [a competency-based] approach, students accept responsibility for learning, that is, for achieving the competencies at a criterion level. They compile evidence that they have attained competence through demonstrations, videotapes, checklists, rating scales, portfolios, and certification by the faculty. (Labuta, 1995, p. 3)

Two characteristics are essential to the concept of competency-based instruction. First, precise learning objectives, defined in behavioral and assessable terms, must be known to learner and teacher alike. The second essential characteristic is accountability. The learner knows that he is expected to demonstrate the specified competencies to the required level and in the agreed-upon manner. He accepts responsibility and expects to be held accountable for meeting the established criteria. (Houston and Howsam, 1972, p. 4)

Expressive Gestures

Expressive gestures are movements made by conductors intended to invoke musicians to respond by reproducing the intended musical content of a score. Green (1997) states, "Mastery of the expressive gestures will gradually enable you to obtain musical effects from your players just by using your skilled manual technique" (p. 43). She divides the expressive gestures into two categories: active gestures and passive gestures. The active gestures involve a response from the players for legato, staccato,