

# *Conducting 101 and Beyond*

## **A Hands-On Course in Basic Conducting**

### **Objectives:**

*Upon completion of the conducting workshop, the student will be able to demonstrate:*

1. Appropriate conducting stance, body posture and use of core strength
2. Appropriate hand and arm positions
3. Appropriate facial posture and eye contact
4. The common beat patterns which provide the foundation for conducting musical arrangements performed in the barbershop style
5. The use of the ictus to clearly communicate downbeats, upbeats and backbeats
6. The ability to conduct breaths, preparatory beats (for both downbeat and upbeat) and cutoffs
7. Conducting both in tempo (uptune) and rubato (ballad) styles

*Intermediate and advanced students will be able to demonstrate:*

8. Melding the common conducting patterns into the more interpretive barbershop style to achieve musicality
9. Right and left hand independence
10. The ability to communicate dynamics, tones and textures
11. Special gestures to reinforce interpretation, vocal techniques and artistry
12. Use of face, eyes and body to actively model performance expectations

### **AGENDA**

1:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.	Welcome and Introductions Review Schedule, Program Overview and Objectives
1:15 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.	Presentation, Demonstration and Practice: The Role of the Director as Conductor Skill Sets for Conductors Conducting Basics: Posture and Positions Ictus and Beat Patterns Breaths, Preparatory Beats and Cut Offs Advanced Techniques: Melding Patterns into the Barbershop Style Dominant and Non-Dominant Hand Independence Dynamics, Tones and Textures Gestures and Non-Verbal Communication Vocal Production Cues
2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	Small Group Work Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced
3:00 p.m. - 3:15 p.m.	Break
3:15 p.m. –4:45 p.m.	Hands-On Conducting Rotation with Faculty Feedback
4:45 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Summary and Next Steps

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## **The Role of the Director as Conductor**

The role of the director is vast and requires many interpersonal and leadership competencies as well as specialized technical skills. The time spent in the actual role of conducting may be only a small part of the role, but it is critically important. That is the time when we connect with our singers from the heart. When the music happens.

### ***Here are some general thoughts about conducting from Dr. Peter LaRue of Georgetown College School of Music:***

1. Conducting is a skill that is understood and developed over time. Each of us will continually grow, improve and develop as conductors as we learn the basic mechanics and use those to develop a vocabulary of gestures which create our own personal conducting style.
2. The goal of the conductor is to enhance the musical and expressive performance of the ensembles with which we are entrusted. Just as our singers spend years developing and studying our voices and vocal performance, similar time, attention and practice must be devoted to developing the skills and abilities of conductor.
3. Where the styles may differ, the *basic* skills needed for effective conducting vary but little, be the venue choral or instrumental. We conduct music. We communicate with our ensemble members. That is the goal.
4. Conducting is about creating a musical masterpiece. We move from concerning ourselves solely with our personal performance to the performance of the whole; we move from concerning ourselves with a single measure or line of music - to a score of many lines - with nearly limitless expressive and musical possibilities.

## **The Skill Set for Conductors**

### **Conducting Basics:**

- Posture and Body Positions
- Arm and Hand Positions and Movements
- Facial Posture and Expressions
- Ictus and Beat Patterns
- Breaths, Preparatory Beats and Cut Offs

### **Advanced Conducting Techniques:**

- Melding Patterns into the Barbershop Conducting Style
- Dominant and Non-Dominant Hand Independence
- Dynamics, Tones and Textures
- Gestures and Non-Verbal Communication
- Vocal Production Cues

# *Conducting Basics: Posture, Arm and Hand Positions*

The body is the conductor's instrument and sole means of communication with the singer and the audience. Effective posture and body positions, hand and finger positions and facial expression are paramount to the effectiveness of the conductor and the success of the ensemble.

## **POSTURE AND BODY POSITIONS**

**The conductor must demonstrate the posture they wish to see in their singers, because the singers will mirror the conductor.**

1. Stand with body straight and chest lifted, all of the elements of correct singing posture. The body should express energy, strength and power, but remain free and without tension.
2. Maintain a stance that allows for optimum movement and control of the upper body.
3. Use your core strength when conducting. The arms and legs are fueled by the core.
4. Keep your head and chin erect and minimize unwanted sway in the upper body.
5. Move only as necessary for phrase delivery. Avoid knee bending and bouncing.
6. Keep your distance and avoid "creeping" to maintain sound and eye contact with all.
7. The preparatory conducting position is the signal for the ensemble to prepare to sing, as in "instruments up". It secures initial attention and readies the minds and bodies. The conductor cues the pitch from this position.

## **ARM AND HAND POSITIONS AND MOVEMENTS**

**The conductor primarily "speaks" with the hands and arms, using them to reach out into the heart of the singer.**

1. Stay within the "Power Box" as *the basic conducting position*: no higher than the eyes, no wider than where the arms naturally hang, no lower than elbow bend. This allows for use of the arms as a tool for exceptions, such as a very loud or dramatic cut off, etc.
2. Keep the wrist firm and flat to the floor as *the basic conducting position*. This allows for use of the hand as tool to conduct interpretation, dynamics, etc.
3. Keep the fingers naturally together, as if offering a friendly hand shake.
4. Keep the right elbow slightly elevated and a comfortable distance from the body to minimize tension and maximize mobility.
5. Use the dominant hand for tempo/rhythm, movement of sound. Use the other hand for dynamics, embellishments, carry-overs, swipes, etc. The other hand is the "extra" hand. When not using it, keep it relaxed and at your side or in front of your body.
6. The downward, inward and outward motion of the arm when moving from beat to beat has purpose, like pulling a bell rope or moving the arm through water.

# *Conducting Basics: Facial Posture and Expression*

## **FACIAL POSTURE AND EXPRESSION**

**The eyes are the windows to the soul, and the face is without question the most powerful means of communication for a conductor next to the hands.**

1. Conduct with the face of SINGER: involved, animated, engaged and lifted. Again, the singer will mirror the conductor.
2. Maintain CONSTANT and CONTINUOUS communication with eye contact, speaking to each singer every song. Eye contact sustains the relationship of conductor and singer during the performance. Conductors must refrain from forsaking eye contact to maximize ear contact... only *listening* versus *communicating*.
3. Use the face to express the music. The mood and the meaning of music should be ever present on the conductor's face, and the singers will reflect directly what they see.
4. Maintain congruence of facial expression, mouth signals and hand signals.
5. Avoid mouthing the lyrics. This robs the conductor of the use of the mouth as a tool to communicate special cues for interpretation, mouth shape, diphthongs, etc. This "over communicating" also gets in the way of hearing. A conductor must always balance the roles of communicator, that of *expressing* (sending) and *sensing* (receiving).
6. NEVER sing. A singing conductor hears only themselves and not the ensemble.

## **Conducting Basics: The Ictus**

### **THE ICTUS AND PRIMARY BEAT**

The ictus is the invisible horizontal plane where the conductor begins the preparatory gesture and where the primary beat (downbeat) "lands" in front of the body. The location is usually level with the elbow between the sternum and waist. Your hands should tap the imaginary plane and immediately bounce off, much like bouncing a ball. The ictus must remain a constant... along the same level plane at all times.

## **Conducting Basics: The Patterns**

**It is the role of the conductor to help people sing together. They do this by directing clear beats and tempo, using arm movements that are based on and follow certain patterns.**

The **beat patterns** are the foundation of all conducting and should be mastered so that a conductor can meld the patterns into a personal, more interpretive and musical style. While using patterns seems to lack musicality, conducting beats is so much more effective than conducting words, which is the trap that most beginning conducting students fall into.

The most common **beat patterns** are the 2 beat patterns (2/2, 2/4), the three beat pattern (3/4), and the 4 beat pattern (4/4). Patterns help establishing tempo, but are typically not maintained in barbershop and other choral conducting. More common is to conduct only the downbeat in 3/4 tempo, one beat (downbeat) or 2 beats (beats 1 and 3) in 4/4 and one beat to the measure in 2/2 (cut time). Always remember, what it comes to conducting, LESS IS MORE.

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## DOWNBEAT – 1 PATTERN



Each **beat pattern** begins with a strong downward arm motion. The diagram above shows the downbeat. It occurs on the first beat of every measure regardless of the time signature. This diagram does not show the preparatory beat.

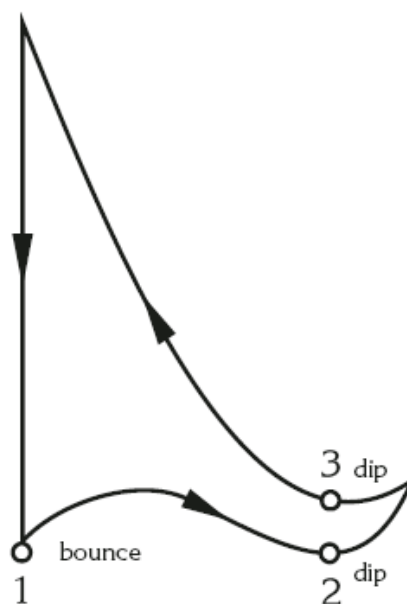
## TWO BEAT PATTERN



The **two beat pattern** (above) moves slightly to the right or left and up following the downbeat. It is similar to making a "comma" with the arm and hand. This diagram does not show the preparatory beat.

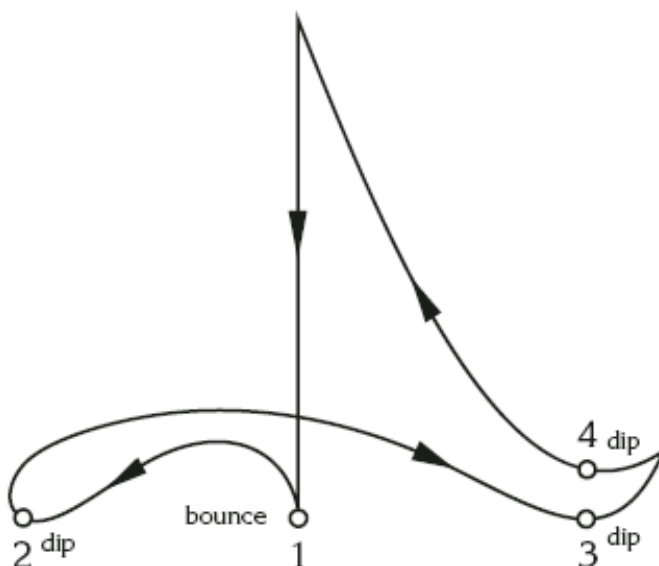
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## **THREE BEAT PATTERN**



The three beat pattern (above) moves to the outside right following the downbeat, then up. This diagram does not show the preparatory beat.

## **FOUR BEAT PATTERN**



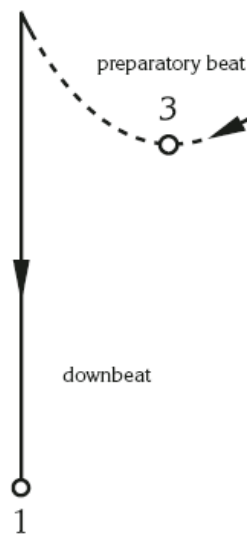
The four beat pattern (above) sweeps to the outside left across the body following the downbeat, taps the ictus plane, then sweeps to the outside right tapping the ictus plane, then up. This diagram does not show the preparatory beat.

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## The Preparatory Beat

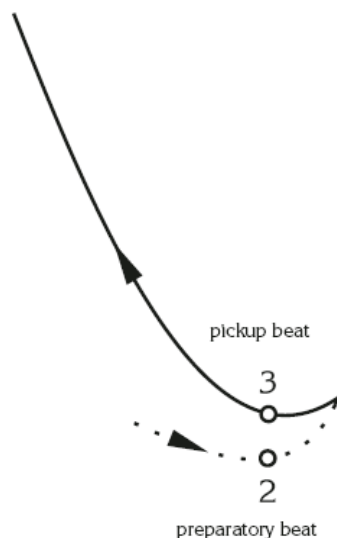
The purpose of the preparatory beat is to direct the breath, and cue the tempo, style and dynamics of the song. If the vocal entrance is on the downbeat, the preparatory beat is the upbeat. If the entrance is on the up-beat (a pick up), the preceding beat is the preparatory beat. The speed of the preparatory beat and simultaneous breath should set up the tempo. It is important that the conductor take a visible breath on the preparatory beat (and all breaths that follow) which can be mirrored by the ensemble.

### PREPARATORY BEAT – SINGING BEGINNING ON THE DOWNBEAT



This diagram shows a preparatory beat where the singing begins on the downbeat.

### PREPARATORY BEAT – SINGING BEGINNING ON THE UPBEAT (PICK UP)

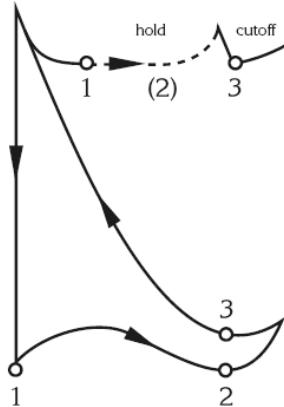


This diagram shows a preparatory beat where the singing begins on a pick up, on the upbeat or pick up. The singing begins on "3".

# *Conducting 101 and Beyond: Let's Conduct!*

## **CUT OFF ENDING A SONG**

The cut off is the gesture which cues the singer when the singing is going to end and precisely when to stop singing. Because the hand never stops moving, the "hold" is actually conducted with a continued outward movement until the cut off, which is effectively demonstrated by a finger touch, by a tapping motion or a small circle.



## **CONDUCTING BREATHS**

Singers breathe... and conductors breathe... yet it is one of the most frequent omissions in conducting. When the conductor breathes WITH the singers, it connects the conductor to the singer in a virtual lifeline.

The breath can be conducted on any beat and depends entirely upon the interpretation and breathing plan created for the song. It is helpful to the singer if the breath always looks the same... and that the conductor breathes along with the singer. Many conductors bring the non-dominant hand into the pattern, which serves to "flag" the breath.

## **USING THE DOMINANT AND NON-DOMINANT HAND**

Both the dominant and the non-dominant hand and arm are important tools and the conductor should learn to use them independently. The dominant hand primarily conducts the meter/music, the non-dominant the mood, dynamics, embellishments. The conductor should remember that the non-dominant arm is used deliberately with a specific purpose and intent, not habitually, or it loses its effectiveness.

- Use both arms to conduct the preparatory beat, downbeat and first few measures of the music, with the left arm mirroring the right. After a few measures, the left arm can be dropped to the side.
- Use both arms for conducting breaths, cutoffs and for mirroring the beat pattern, especially when slowing the beat (ritard) or quickening the beat (accelerando).
- Use the left arm and hand to cue a part when the other parts are doing something different, such as when a part has a sustained note or "post". It communicates instructions while the right arm and hand are conducting the beat and the phrasing.



# Conducting Basics: Interpretive Techniques

## DYNAMICS

To increase the dynamic level (make louder or crescendo), the conductor expands the space of their hand and arm movements to the largest extent of their Power Box with palms open or up. To decrease the dynamic level (make softer or decrescendo), the conductor uses smaller movements closer to the body, using gentle hands and fingers, palms down. Never use the palms facing out, this means "stop" to the singer.

## VOCAL TECHNIQUES

Palate lift, vowels, resonance, placement and vocal texture can all be cued with the hands, mouth and eyes. It is important that the conductor NOT continuously mouth the lyrics. When the mouth is used constantly for words it becomes ineffective as a tool.

## MOOD

The conductor can add animation and exaggeration to the downbeat bounce and a more angular beat pattern for a bright, joyful or fun song. They can use softer hand motions with a rounded beat pattern for ballads, sacred and serious music.

## BALLAD DELIVERY

In barbershop music, ballads are generally performed *ad lib* (at liberty) or *rubato*. Implied meter remains, however acceleration and ritard of rhythm and tempo is evident. Indication of downbeat is essential, though the emphasis is on directing a smooth vocal line.

# Conducting Basics: Developing YOUR Style

In barbershop music, we strive for continuous vocal lines and a fluid flow of music. We ultimately seek artistry, where the music and performance transcends technique. As conductors, we must realize it is our arms, hands, faces and body movements that will elicit this type of musical delivery from our singers... or will not.

As you experiment with your patterns and gestures, have a PLAN for each song and practice in front of a mirror. Use feedback from your singers and the performance to continually improve the musical performance.

If you lose your place or the chorus is out of synch, focus on directing beats. Conduct a one beat or other patterns, or the all-purpose figure eight (diagram at right).



Keep your conducting simple. Flourishes and extra gestures are unnecessary and confuse the singer. A good conductor is a conductor who is easy to follow. And keep your arm motions a moderate size. They should be large enough to be seen by the ensemble, not the audience. The eyes of the audience should be on the singers.

The job of the conductor is to set the direction and reinforce the plan, then let the chorus sing. Simplicity wins over complexity. Less is more. Empower them. Just let the sing.

# *Conducting 101 and Beyond*

## **Faculty:**

Jean Flinn, Greater Cleveland Chorus  
Michael Hengelsberg, Greater Harmony Chorus  
Lynne Peirce, Battle Creek Chorus  
Kay Seymour, Pride of Toledo Chorus  
David Smotzer, Lake Ridge Legacy Chorus  
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## **Sources:**

Joni Bescos, Sweet Adelines International  
Brian R. Busch "The Complete Choral Director"  
Paula Davis, Sweet Adelines International  
Larry Dodge, Barbershop Harmony Society  
Rodney Eichenberger, Florida State University  
Dr. Jim Henry, University of Missouri – St. Louis and Barbershop Harmony Society  
Dr. Peter LaRue, Georgetown College School of Music  
Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints  
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Harriette Walters, Sweet Adelines International  
Marge Zimmerman, Sweet Adelines International

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## **Notes:**

**Things I want to follow up on:**

**My faculty person is:** \_\_\_\_\_