

Why Does a Conductor Wave His Arms?

Before starting my conducting career, I often wondered “What is so difficult about standing up in front of a choir and waving your arms? ‘Seems as if anyone with a modicum of rhythm could do that.”

The simple answer is: “Indeed, anyone with rhythm and a knowledge of the music can wave his or her arms and direct a song.” But - the performance is the easy part.

What most people don’t realize (nor did I until rather late in life) is that the importance of the director or conductor is manifest long before the audience ever sees the performance. The most important role of the music director is to study the musical score in detail, anticipating sections that may cause trouble for the musicians, making minor “director’s interpretation” changes, and then causing the ensemble to make a beautiful sound. Beautiful music does not just happen; the director makes it happen. And the better the director, the better the sound. A good director can take a mediocre band and improve its sound significantly.

She takes the performing forces that are available to her, and through repetition-and-correction, correction-and-repetition, ensures that each musician is playing or singing the right notes, coming in at the right time, cutting off at the correct time, breathing at the proper time, going loud (or soft) at the same time, and speeding up or slowing down together. Additionally, vocal ensembles fuss with such issues as proper enunciation so that their words can be understood by the audience. Vocalists also have to worry about such nuances as the “color” of their sound – is it “dark and mysterious” or “light and airy.”

“A cappella” choirs – those that sing without accompaniment – have an even more difficult task. To be good, they must be even more precise than an accompanied chorus. If even one voice comes in early (or leaves late), it will stand out very noticeably. Good acappella singing also requires a purer sound because it does not have instrumental assistance to enhance the natural sound of the voice. And the pitch must be perfect.

Whenever we see a clown act, it looks as if it would be easy to be silly. “Anyone could do that.” But serious clowns rehearse and rehearse their “stunts” until they can do them flawlessly, and seemingly spontaneously. Good musical performers do exactly the same. The beauty of the sound during a performance is directly proportional to the amount of effort exerted during rehearsals.

And as a final bit of trivia, you may have wondered the difference between a “director” and a “conductor.” A “conductor” is one who directs an orchestra or chorus. A “director” does the same. The terms are often used synonymously; however, the term “conductor” is normally reserved for directors of symphonic orchestras and choruses.

So, the next time you enjoy a musical performance, realize the importance of the director/conductor in making it pleasing to you. Waving his arms is the easy part.

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