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The conductor

There are many misconceptions concerning the guy who stands there waving his arms.

By **TIMOTHY MANGAN**
The Orange County Register

What is it, exactly, that a conductor does?

Misconceptions abound concerning that man - or sometimes, woman - waving his arms in front of the orchestra.

He is thought to be unnecessary by some. They see the conductorless chamber orchestra or an orchestra led by the soloist getting along swimmingly without benefit of the baton and conclude that a conductor is a mere convenience, a holdover from the unenlightened past - in short, window dressing. But they conclude mistakenly.

What a conductorless orchestra is doing is an illusion. By sleight of hand, it is replacing one form of conducting with another. With such machinations as nods and eye contact and audible breaths executed by various members of the orchestra at agreed-upon times, the conductorless orchestra is conducted by other means. In effect, it has 80 hands on the steering wheel instead of one, but a steering wheel it still has.

So a conductor is, among other things, the steering wheel of an orchestra. But he also has his foot on the gas and control of the brakes. He makes an orchestra go where he wants it to and *how* he wants it to. Which brings us to a second misconception - that the conductor's primary job is keeping time and keeping the orchestra together. True, as the person with the baton, he becomes the focal point of the beat, the source for time among a hundred or more musicians, the Greenwich meridian of the orchestra. It is an important function of his job to act as this visual metronome - perhaps it is his *first* function - but a 12-year-old with 20 minutes instruction could do the same.

No, time keeping ain't it. It is more meaningful to think of a conductor as the player of an orchestra, having the same relationship with it as the violinist has to the violin or the pianist to the piano. True, he does not produce the actual sounds emanating from the orchestra, but then neither does a violinist or pianist directly produce the sounds coming out of their instruments - they apply a mechanism that produces the sound.

As that sound-producing mechanism, the conductor creates the orchestral sound through the manner of his gestures. In this capacity, he is part thespian, part interpretive dancer, part magician, part hypnotist: His facial expressions, bodily motions and personal charisma all have an effect on how the music sounds, even if the instrumentalists only respond to them on a subconscious level.

A heavy baton beat, for instance, produced with the large muscles of the legs and arms, will invariably produce a heavy sound, the pulse thumping, the sonorities thick. A conductor who delicately traces a phrase in the air will produce graceful music free of gravity.

Everything a conductor does in front of an orchestra counts, in a way, whether he likes it or not. "The performers should feel," wrote Hector Berlioz of the conductor, "that he feels, comprehends, and is moved: Then his emotion communicates itself to those whom he directs, his inward fire warms them, his electric glow animates them, his form of impulse excites them; he throws around him the vital irradiations of musical art."