

Performing Your Music

If you've read through the book chapters, you've learned enough theory to compose your own piece of music, and you've arranged it for a vocal or instrumental ensemble. Now it's time to venture out into the real world, and get that music played.

Scary, isn't it?

Having your music performed can be a nerve-wracking experience. Will all the parts fit together? Did you write in the proper ranges? Did you transpose all the parts properly? How will it sound?

Of course, to hear your music performed, you have to arrange for a group to do the performing. If it's a simple song, that might be as easy as gathering together your local garage band for a quick read-through. If it's a vocal arrangement, you might be able to recruit your school or church choir for the job. If it's a big band piece, your high school or college jazz ensemble probably is the group to ask. And if you've written a symphony or other orchestral work, it's time to call in some favors from your community orchestra.

Once you have the group lined up, the fun really starts—and you get to be a conductor!

Preparing the Parts

Every musician must have his or her own personal copy of the music. That doesn't mean copying the conductor's score a few dozen times; it means writing out the specific part for that individual instrument or voice.

Most commercial music you purchase or download comes with all the individual parts you need for your group. However, if you're playing an original piece, it's your responsibility to create the individual parts for each instrument or voice, and to pass them out to the musicians. Ideally this happens well in advance of the first rehearsal, so they'll have the opportunity to practice their parts on their own.

Remember to transpose the individual parts to the proper keys (most notation programs do this automatically), and to include proper signposts and road mapping throughout. That means numbering the measures, lettering individual sections, and including cues of some sort when you're coming off an extended section of rests.

Rehearsal Routines

You've arranged the music, and arranged for the musicians. The big hand of the clock is almost in the full-up position, and it's time for your first rehearsal. What do you do?

When you're rehearsing a chorus, band, or orchestra, you need to warm up the group before they start playing (or singing) full blast. Then you have to effectively and efficiently rehearse the piece—you have to get the musicians up to speed as quickly as possible. (Time is money!)



WARNING

Your rehearsal time will inevitably be limited—and less than what you'd ideally like to have. Plan out your rehearsal routine in advance to take best advantage of the time you have. Don't spend so much time on the beginning of the piece that you never get a chance to rehearse the end!

Here's a suggested routine you can use when you're working with a large ensemble of any type:

1. **Setup.** If you're dealing with professionals, they'll know to be set up and ready to play at the appointed time. If you're dealing with younger or amateur players, you need to allow them time to get settled in and ready to play.
2. **Tuneup.** You need to take a few minutes to get an instrumental group in tune with itself.
3. **Warmup.** It's especially important for nonprofessional players—both vocalists and instrumentalists—to “limber up,” musically before they tackle the hard stuff. Have them

play or sing some scales, or run through a simple and familiar piece of music, to help them stretch their musical muscles, so to speak.

4. **Play-through.** Once everyone is set up, tuned up, warmed up, and ready to go, you can start rehearsing your music. You might want to start by playing the piece all the way through, to give everyone a feel for the piece. Then you can go back and rehearse specific sections, focusing on those parts of the music that are particularly tricky, or that seemed to give the musicians problems on the first play-through. Remember to end the rehearsal with a final play-through of the entire piece.

How to Conduct Yourself

If you've composed or arranged a piece of music, you'll probably be expected to lead the band or orchestra or choir when it's time for that music to be played. That means you need to know a little bit about conducting—at least enough to get everybody started and stopped at the same time!



TIP

Most conductors for instrumental ensembles use a baton (a short wooden or plastic stick). Many choir conductors eschew the baton and use their bare hands. There are no hard-and-fast rules about this, however.

At its most basic, conducting is about setting the correct tempo, counting in the musicians, and leading the way through any important changes in tempo or dynamics throughout the music. Professional conductors also shape the flow of the music, and can turn a generic orchestral or choral performance into a personal statement and a moving work of art.

However, when you're first starting out you'll have your hands full just finding the downbeat. Fortunately, better musicians can soldier through, even if you're busy waving your arms around like a broken Dutch windmill.

The thing is, conducting is pretty simple. There are a few set patterns you need to learn, then it all falls into place.

General Conducting Principles

When conducting, you use your right hand to conduct the beat and your left hand to add emphasis or point out specific parts. You also can just stick your left hand in your pocket or behind your back, or use it to mirror your right-hand movement.

What your right hand does is draw a *beat pattern* in the air. It's kind of like playing air guitar or air drums, except you're stressing where the beats fall. Each downstroke in the beat pattern represents a downbeat or major beat in the measure.

All beat patterns are based on a set of common principles. These principles define the movement of the baton within the pattern, as follows:

- The first beat of the measure is always the strongest and, thus, has the most emphatic downbeat.
- The beat pattern should be constructed so there's minimal danger of your right (baton) hand colliding with your left.
- In compound meters, the secondary beat is marked by a downbeat almost as strong as that of the primary beat.
- The baton should always remain in motion; it should not come to a standstill at the points marking the beats.
- The baton should not move in a straight line from any one point to another, except in the case of the straight downward movement to the first downbeat in a measure.

Conducting in Four

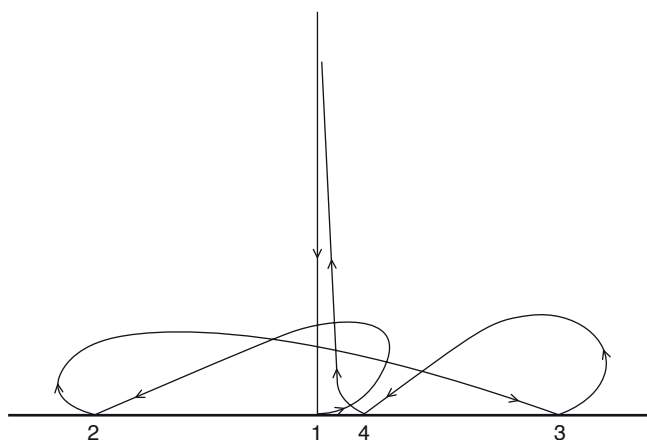
Most music is written in 4/4 time, so it's very important to learn the pattern for conducting in four. For the four-beat pattern, your hand has to move to four different positions. You don't have to use huge movements, but your hand has to move enough for the musicians to tell what the heck you're doing. Try moving your arm from the elbow, directly in front of your chest.

This pattern describes four distinct downbeats, with the final upbeat assigned to the "and" after four. The pattern goes like this: down, left, far right, slightly left. (That is, the final beat is slightly to the left of beat three—but still to the right of beat one.)

With this pattern, all four beats are placed at separate points on the horizontal plane.

Theoretically, at least, the third beat has secondary emphasis, meaning it's stronger than beats two and four (but not as strong as beat one, of course).

You start with the preparatory position, on the upbeat before the first measure of the song. This position prepares you for the strong downbeat on beat one of the next measure. In this position, your arm is positioned directly above the one position, at the highest point of the stroke.



Conducting in four.

Now you bring your arm down, all the way to the bottom-most position, exactly on beat one. This is position 1, and the movement from the previous upbeat to the big beat one downbeat is the most important movement in your conducting. The musicians have to get a solid “one,” and that’s where your downbeat comes in.

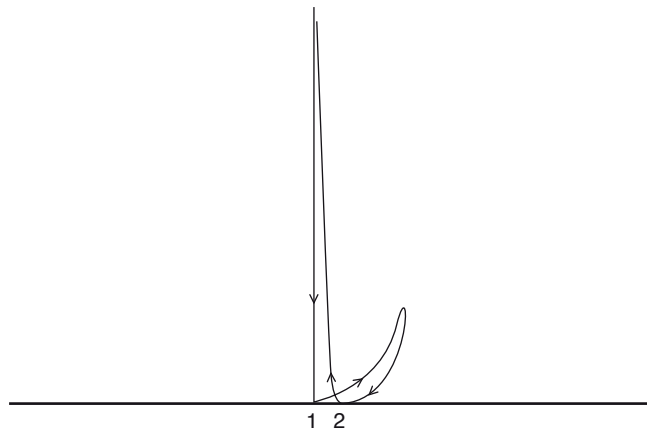
For the second beat in the measure, move your arm up slightly the left, to position 2. For the third beat, move your arm all the way across to the far right, to position 3. For the fourth beat, move your arm slightly to the left of position 3, to position 4. On the “and” after four, snap your arm back up above position 1 and get ready to start all over again for the next measure. Just make sure each beat has its own distinct bounce; you really need to “hit” each downbeat so the musicians know where the beat is.

Practice this movement: (up)-down-left-right-left—again and again, at different tempos. Once you get this mastered, you’re conducting!

Conducting in Two

The most common beat pattern for 2/4 and 2/2 time draws a big beat one and a small beat two, on the same plane. There’s a small upbeat or rebound after beat one and a large upstroke on the “and” after beat two; this serves as preparation for the beat one downbeat.

On paper, this looks a little like a “H” pattern, but in reality, the two downbeats are positioned identically on the vertical plane. Here’s what the pattern looks like:

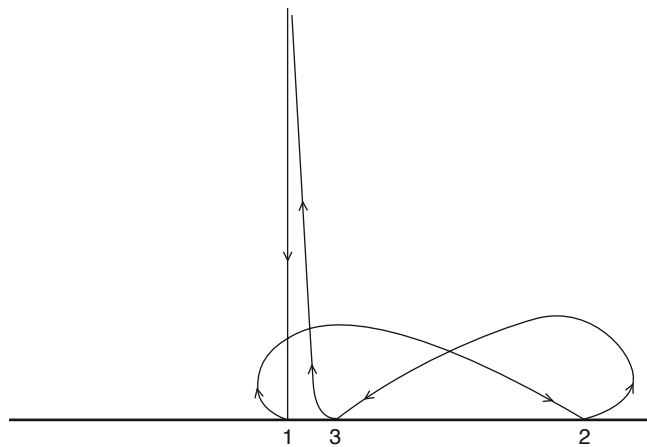


Conducting in two.

This pattern works fine at all tempos, but it's particularly suited for moderate and fast tempos.

Conducting in Three

Conducting in three is kind of like the four pattern, but without that pattern's left, or 2 position. In terms of movement, you start with the preparatory upbeat (of course), then go down for one, to the right for two, and slightly to the left for three. On the "and" after three, you snap your hand up above the 1 position, then bring it back down for the first downbeat of the next measure.



Conducting in three.



Learn more about conducting in my companion book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Conducting Music* (Alpha Books, 2012).

Finding the Beat

As I said earlier, one of the chief duties of the conductor is to set the tempo. There are two ways you can do this:

Timing the preparatory upbeat. This approach, preferred by professionals, gets you right into the music. You don't count anything out in advance, just start by swinging your arm up for the preparatory upbeat. The time between the upbeat and the initial downbeat is the duration of half a beat, and very quickly sets the tempo. (Of course, the drawback to this approach is that it's very difficult to master—and, for that reason, isn't recommended for beginners.)

Counting the beat. This approach leaves no ambiguity over the tempo of the song. You simply count out the beat, in tempo, like this: "One, two, three, four," or "One, two, ready, go." You count out one measure (or more), which serves to count the band in—and everybody starts on the same beat at the same tempo.

You can use whichever method you prefer, although when you're first learning a piece, it's probably better to count off before you start. This way you can set the tempo in your head, and the other musicians won't be guessing about where the one is.



Setting the tempo with the preparatory beat is the norm in the world of classical music. In the pop and jazz worlds, it's more common to count off the tempo.

Practicing in the Real World

The best way to practice conducting is to do a little conducting in the privacy of your own home—to your favorite songs and pieces of music. You should practice to a variety of different recordings, to get used to the different beat patterns used in different types of music.

But before you go out and face the world for your first honest-to-goodness conducting session, you need to practice with other people. Gather a few of your friends, and practice with the piece you'll be conducting—even if it's just a few of the parts. Run through the piece a few times, and encourage your friends to tell you what you could do to improve your conducting.

That first downbeat in front of a group of musicians can be daunting. Use your friends to help you get over any shyness or fear, so that you appear confident when you pick up the baton for real. (Remember—musicians, like wild dogs, can smell fear.)

Exercise

Cue up your favorite piece of music, pick up a baton, and start conducting!