

Learning the Basics and Fundamentals of Conducting for Musical Ensembles



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Publication by
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INTRODUCTION

About the Author

Riley McCain is a saxophone, flute, and recorder tutor with Rhythm In Place. Outside of tutoring, he is the director of the highly-esteemed Select Student Ensemble program. The Select Student Ensemble (SSE) is a group that focuses on creating a meaningful extension to band for the talented student musician. It is completely student-led and student-organized. While being the director, Riley has learned several tips & tricks about conducting that he will be sharing in this publication.

Check out the [SSE Instagram](#) and the [SSE Twitter](#) to follow our journey as we continue to provide this thoughtfully-curated extension to our band students.

About the Article

Conducting and leadership are very important skills to have as an aspiring leader or music educator. This article will focus on providing you the basics of conducting to ensure that you can succeed wherever your future endeavors may lead you.

WHAT IS CONDUCTING?

A conductor is one of the most important components to a band, orchestra, choir, or any other musical group. A conductor serves as a teacher, leader, and metronome for the entire ensemble at any given time. Without an experienced and passionate conductor/director, the ensemble would not be able to function properly.

A conductor serves as a teacher. Conductors are often called upon to help the group with their music to ensure that everything is flowing together. Conductors often demonstrate rhythms, passages in a piece, or correct musicianship to ensure that their ensemble will have a satisfactory performance.

A conductor serves as a leader. People will look at you, the conductor, as a leader of the ensemble. You are the person standing in front of the members trying to reach a goal: have balance and structure during rehearsal time to have the best possible performance you can pull off.

A conductor serves as a metronome. During a performance, this is the most vital function of a conductor. You are the heartbeat of the entire ensemble, and you have to keep a steady pulse to make sure that members of the performing group stay together and in balance with one another.

Conducting is a mixture of all the components above. You have to find the perfect balance between everything in the ensemble to get the best performance quality from all members.

Note: this article will mostly be focusing on the third and most important function, which is keeping a steady beat during a performance without a metronome.

GETTING READY TO CONDUCT

Posture

While conducting in front of an audience, or even just during a rehearsal, it is very important to have a confident and correct posture.

When conducting, your back should be straight and tall. Think of it as if you are standing in an important event. You should never slouch while conducting. Carry yourself with an air of confidence, ALWAYS. Even if you're nervous and have a slight doubt, confidence is always the right way to go.

Hand/Feet Position

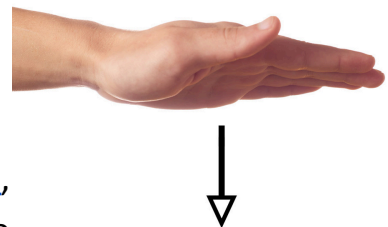
When you are getting ready to conduct, your hands will be doing most of the work.

Your **right hand** is mainly used to keep the tempo and the beat flowing. This is the hand that will use the conducting patterns mentioned further in the article.

Your **left hand** is mainly used for cuing the entrances and exits of sections, dynamics, style, musicality, and will occasionally mirror the right hand conducting pattern.

Both hands should mostly be flat and relaxed during the conducting process (see figure 1)

FIGURE 1



Using a Score

Occasionally, it is necessary to conduct using a [score](#), which is basically a sheet music that conductors use to show all of the parts in the musical ensemble on one page. Most scores are more than one page, and you will need to flip the pages during a performance. Score pages are usually flipped using the left hand, while the right hand keeps the steady beat tempo flowing. Score flips should be done quickly and painlessly.

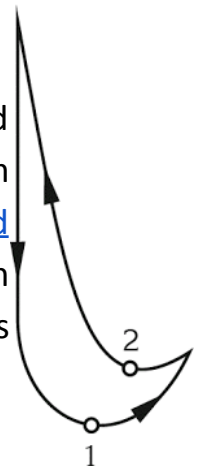
CONDUCTING IN MULTIPLE TIME SIGNATURES

Overview

In music, there are many different [time signatures](#) that may be in a piece. The most common ones that will be mentioned in this article are 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4.

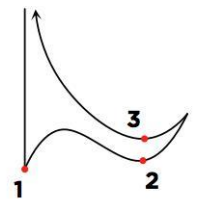
2/4 Time

To conduct in 2/4 time, follow the pattern shown to the right. This is used when there are two beats in a measure. It is important to not let the arm get too sloppy when conducting in this time signature. Also, on [accented](#) downbeats or half notes, you have the option to bring both hands down firmly at the same time, like you are pushing something DOWN towards the ground.



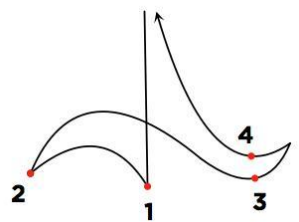
3/4 Time

To conduct in 3/4 time, follow the pattern shown to the right. This is used when there are three beats in a measure. It is important while transitioning from beats 1 to 2 to not go too far up on your turnaround. Then, it will look like you are conducting in a 4/4 pattern. The 3/4 pattern is also in the shape of a triangle, because the triangle has three sides.



4/4 Time

To conduct in 4/4 time, follow the pattern shown to the right. This is used when there are four beats in a measure. In fast and intense music, this pattern can be very firm. In slow music, make sure to have it very flowy and emphasise the eighth note [subdivision](#).



HOW TO PRACTICE CONDUCTING

Practicing is one of the most important aspects of conducting. You will never get good at conducting until you memorize the major time signature patterns and can successfully and cleanly carry them out.

Tips for conducting practice:

- Practice in front of a mirror.
- Practice in front of others.
- When you have the patterns memorized, you should play music (audio recording) while you're conducting.
- Practice using correct posture. (practice like you perform)

It is also important to watch other conductors to see how they conduct to get a feel for what they do. You will eventually develop your own unique style, but most conductors base their personal style off of lots of things they've watched and learned. Try to practice along with a video of them conducting. What things do they do that you can add to your basic conducting pattern (dynamics, phrasing, LEFT HAND material, etc.)?

EXTRA RESOURCES & CONTACT

Extra Resources

Please watch these conducting videos linked below for more information on patterns and how to conduct to the best extent possible.

- [How to Conduct Music: Lesson 1](#)
- [How to Conduct Music: Lesson 2](#)

Want more? Visit us online via:

Our Website: www.RhythmInPlace.org

Instagram: [@rhythminplace](https://www.instagram.com/rhythminplace)

Idealist.com: [Looking for Musically - Inclined High School & College Students to Teach Online through Rhythm In Place](#)

Have questions for Riley?

You can reach him and the Select Student Ensemble (SSE) through Rhythm In Place at rhythminplace@gmail.com.



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