

## Learning and Teaching Undergraduate Conducting: Principles and Applications

Wayne Abercrombie, Professor Emeritus, University of Massachusetts Amherst  
(Prepared for the NCCO national convention panel discussion, November 4, 2006.  
Revised July, 2010.)

The impetus for articulating the principles outlined below was the comparison of the traditional paths of development of (mainly orchestral) conductors, both in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the apparently predominant approaches to undergraduate conductor training of the last fifty or so years. This latter approach is taken to be that of most of the textbooks published for that purpose in the last c. 30 years.

A fundamentally different orientation seems to exist between the two, a difference that could be misleading for the conductor whose formal study of conducting will end with undergraduate courses. (These are, most often, those who teach in K-12 music programs through ensemble classes. That is, they do most of their teaching as conductors.)

Put in the starkest generalities, the difference in orientation is striking. Traditionally (and often in the “upper” levels of professional conducting today), the neophyte enters the profession as non-conducting performer, and is expected to know the music completely. They are coaches or *repetiteurs* in the opera house or assistants in other professional organizations, and are expected to conduct when they are needed. Their training focuses on knowing the repertoire. In undergraduate training, however, music/repertoire most often seems secondary, used primarily as material for practicing the so-called “techniques” of conducting. With some notable exceptions, most undergraduate conducting textbooks occupy most of their pages with “how-to” pictures, charts and diagrams of metrical patterns.

This has seemed untenable to me over the years, as it focuses the beginning students’ thoughts on their appearance, rather than on the music they are to lead. If the traditional path to successful conducting is valid, then we should be able to adapt it to undergraduate training, despite the obstacles presented by radically different situations (individual vs. class, private vs. institutional setting, etc.). If it is to be adapted, the principles underlying effective conductor training must be articulated, and curricula built upon them.

\*\*\*\*\*

### I. Two Fundamental Theses.

- A. Conducting is applied music, a complex intertwining of performing and teaching.  
Limiting training to the classroom is antithetical to this skill set.
- B. The most successful conductors began as performers, rarely with prior training in “technique.” Their learning was experiential.

### II. The Two Fundamental Skills of Conducting

- A. Of the complex of skills that “conducting” music implies, primacy is to be given, from the beginning, to learning the most essential ones:
  - “knowing” the music to be conducted (learning music as a conductor);
  - teaching music to others (rehearsing through sequencing, listening, personal interaction and body language).
- B. To isolate ancillary aspects – in teaching and/or assessment and evaluation - is to distort their meaning and importance, and is likely to undermine progress in learning the essentials. Various facets of these are learned best in the context and support of these skills.

### III. Implications for Learning and Teaching

(While the focus of this discussion is undergraduate conducting study, the principles are those of learning conducting at any level, individually or in classes or “workshops”. Paths to, and materials for learning will vary, but the principles should be served in any case.)

A. Activities and assessment/evaluation focus the student's attention on the music: their musical ideas, goals, and the sounds they are to help shape. Appearances or "baton techniques" are addressed only in the context of what the student wants to hear. They should be addressed in a manner that allows the student to maintain their authority and truly test the effects of changes in the musical outcomes. (Often an ensemble is responding to the teacher's suggestions rather than to the student conductor's leadership.)

B. Music/Repertoire is central to the course, so should be

1. worthy of serious study,
2. progress from the less to more complex;
3. demonstrably learned before being conducted

C. As conducting is more an individual performance skill (such as instrumental or vocal applied study) than knowledge acquired academically (such as theory or history), it is more effectively learned through individual coaching and tutoring.

It follows that the ideal model for conducting study is more that of applied study: individual lessons plus performance class. Some modified version of this would include significantly more conducting practice, i.e., actual leading of an ensemble, than the standard undergraduate conducting class format allows. The effectiveness (and flexibility) of such a model will become clearer when a music program bold enough to test it alongside the usual format. May such a trial come quickly.