

# Rehearsing Music: Nonverbal Cues, Body Language, and Facial Expression

BY ROBERT J. GAROFALO AND FRANK L. BATTISTI

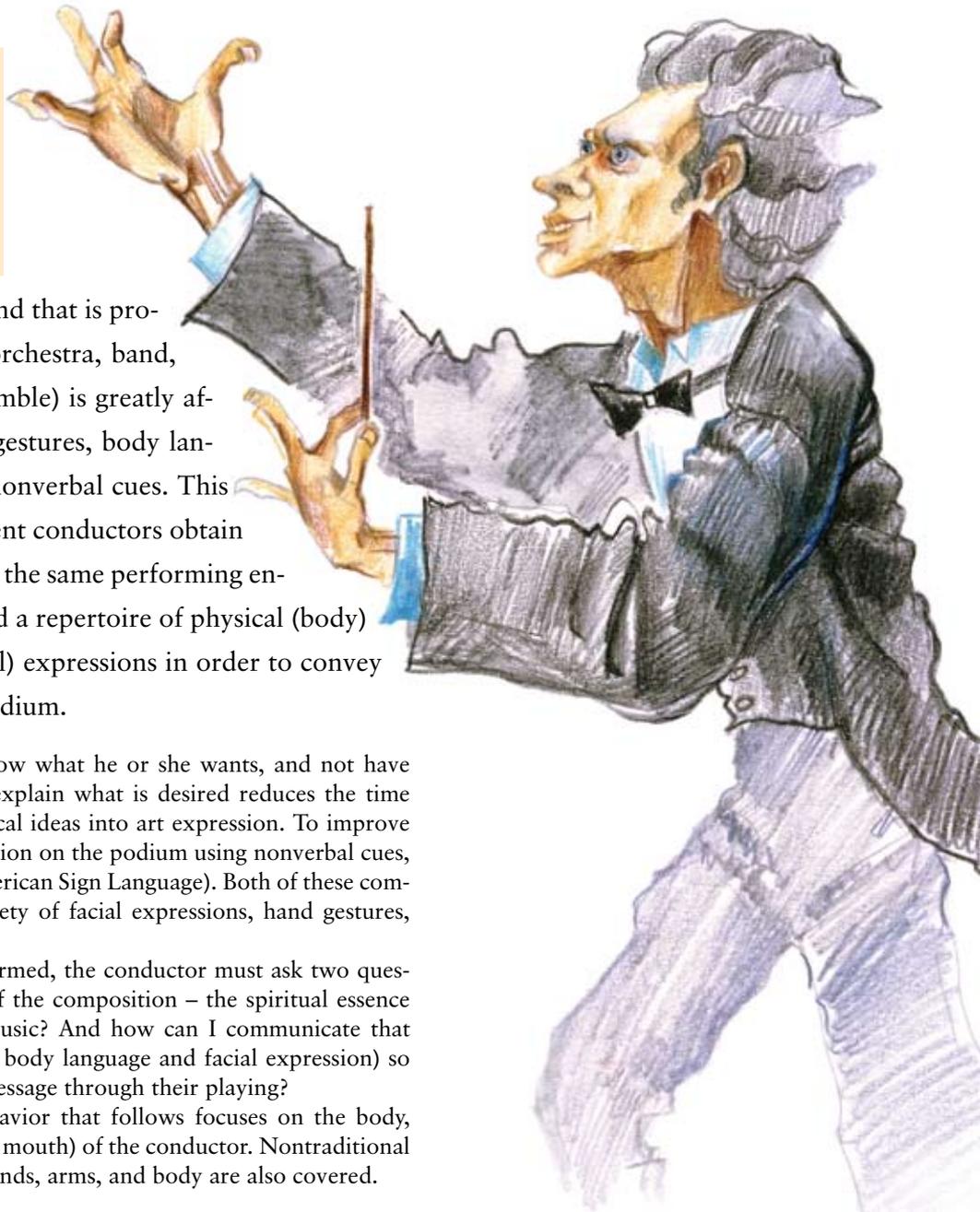
Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part feature. The first article, covering procedures, verbal cues, and pictorial imagery, appeared in the January, 2009 issue of *SBO*, which can be found at [www.sbomagazine.com](http://www.sbomagazine.com).

**T**he quality of musical sound that is produced by an ensemble (orchestra, band, chorus, or chamber ensemble) is greatly affected by a conductor's gestures, body language, and facial expressions – nonverbal cues. This may partially explain why different conductors obtain different results and sounds from the same performing ensemble. Conductors need to build a repertoire of physical (body) gestures and psychological (facial) expressions in order to convey music more effectively on the podium.

A conductor should be able to show what he or she wants, and not have to explain it in words. Stopping to explain what is desired reduces the time the ensemble has to put desired musical ideas into art expression. To improve your ability to convey musical expression on the podium using nonverbal cues, consider studying mime and ASL (American Sign Language). Both of these communicative modes utilize a wide variety of facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language.

For every composition to be performed, the conductor must ask two questions: What is the musical message of the composition – the spiritual essence and/or expressive character of the music? And how can I communicate that musical message to the ensemble (via body language and facial expression) so that the performers can convey the message through their playing?

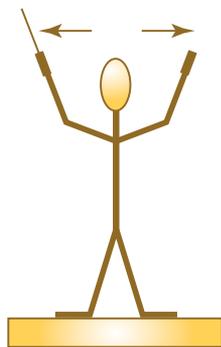
The taxonomy of conducting behavior that follows focuses on the body, head, and face (especially the eyes and mouth) of the conductor. Nontraditional conducting gestures that utilize the hands, arms, and body are also covered.



## Body Language

The torso of the human body is a major source of energy, emotion, conviction, and confidence. A conductor can project these qualities from the torso (which includes the heart and the lungs), but not from the arms and hands. Conductors sometimes mimic the music they are conducting through body motions, in some cases literally. For example, they march when the music is a march and swing when the music swings. Conductors occasionally bend their knees, drop down slightly, and hunch their shoulder to signal “play softer.” These procedures can work in reverse to signal “play louder.”

A nontraditional conducting gesture is an unconventional or atypical motion that is not standardized or customary. For example, Frederick Fennell, in a rehearsal with a university wind ensemble, conducted Holst’s transcription of Bach’s Fugue alla Gigue with both hands moving in parallel motion high above his head; his upper body was swaying back and forth in synchronized mo-



tion with his arms and the beat which was in compound time. See illustration below.

Conductors sometimes use nontraditional gestures and body language that reflect the playing motions of performers, a practice that we call “visual onomatopoeia.” With aural onomatopoeia, one uses words to vocally imitate the sound of a thing or action; for example, buzz, hiss, boom, bang, clang, ring, and so on. With visual onomatopoeia, one uses body language to imitate the motion of a thing or action that elicits the sound. In other words, the conductor “mimes” the actions of the players using body movement. For example, conductors often mimic the motions of string players in order to increase musical expression and intensity. The hands are held in the position of either a violinists or cellist with the left hand imitating the motion of vibrato and the baton hand bowing directions. Also, conductors sometimes use gestures that imitate the motions of percussionists when cuing percussion instruments. These nontraditional gestures are fairly easy to learn and do. For bass drum, use a right to left beating motion with the baton mimicking the playing the instrument; the baton may even be turned around in the hand to act as a beater. For timpani, use a downward pounding motion. For crash cymbals, use both hands moving together then apart as if you were actually playing the instrument. In

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addition to strings and percussion, there are other band and orchestra instruments that are occasionally mimed by the conductor. Two instruments that quickly come to mind are trombone and harp. Can you think of others?

## Facial Expression

“Even the most expressive of patterns can never communicate the emotional content of a composition as effectively as the face,” says Sir David Whitwell. Conductor Max Rudolph agrees:

“The expression of your eyes and your general facial expression can tell players more about the music than fancy hand-waving.”

The conductor’s face must reflect the emotional expression of the music to be effective on the podium. To do that, the conductor must internalize the music.

The human face is rich in communicative potential. In fact, it is the primary source of information next to speech. Although our facial muscles are capable of producing nearly four-dozen movements, which in turn can create more than 10,000 different expressions, in his book *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, author Mark L. Knapp suggests that researchers have discovered that humans reveal six universal facial expressions (infants by the age of one show these basic expressions in their faces). They are:

1. Surprise
2. Fear
3. Anger
4. Disgust
5. Happiness
6. Sadness

These six emotions seem to be at the foundation of most human expressions; others appear to differ only in intensity or are blends of the

primary emotions. Most, if not all, of these states have been captured in music, which indicates that it should not be too difficult to show the emotions facially when conducting music. Can you think of a musical composition that expresses the emotion of surprise? What about fear, anger, disgust, happiness, or sadness?

Common facial expressions are delineated in three areas of the face: the brow and forehead; the eyes, eye lids, and bridge of the nose; and the lower face which includes the mouth, chin, jaw, cheeks,

## “Conductors sometimes mimic the music they are conducting though body motions.”

and nose. In the Glossary of Facial Expressions (used by permission from “Conducting From The Inside Out,” a clinic by Allan McMurray, Mid-West International Band and Orchestra Clinic, December, 1994) below, see if you can identify the expressions that reflect the six basic emotions listed above.

Most conductors will tell you that the eyes are a major means of communication on the podium. There is power in the eyes. The eyes are a “window to the soul.” Eye contact and expression are critically important for the conductor. One needs to ask: What exactly do the eyes do? And when do they do it? What psychological and emotional meaning do the eyes convey? Here are some thoughts on the matter gleaned from reflection and observation.

The eyes squint, blink, stare, glare, glance, scan, focus, recede upward into the sockets (what does that signal?), wink (close right or left eye), blink (both eyes); and look left, right, up, down, or straight ahead. The eyes can sparkle, be glazed over, or look blank.

Note, in the list below, the different ways humans refer to the eyes and

think about the signals and meaning they convey:

*We don’t see eye to eye.*

*Smiling eyes.*

*Eyes like a hawk.*

*Icy stare.*

*Shifty eyed.*

*His eyes were mesmerizing.*

*He had good eye-hand coordination.*

*She gave him the malocchio (Italian for “evil eye”).*

Can you think of additional remarks that reveal the communicative power of the eyes?

What meaning and expression is conveyed with “raised eyebrows,” “a frown,” “squinting eyes,” or “closed eyes”? Conductor Herbert von Karajan conducted with his eyes closed. What meaning or message is conveyed when the eyes are closed when conducting? Deep thought or feeling, meditation, being asleep, dreaming?

We associate various eye movements with a wide range of human expression. For example: a downward glance is often associated with modesty; eyes rolled upward may indicate that another person’s behavior is weird or unusual. Our fascination with our eyes has led to the study of every feature of them (size, color, position, eyebrows, eye lids, rings, and wrinkles).

The mouth is probably the next most expressive facial feature after the eyes. The mouth can grin, smile, or pout. Lips can be tight, teeth clenched, and so on. The mouth can be wide open or be shut tightly. Generally, one should not conduct with the mouth wide open or shut tightly for any length of time.

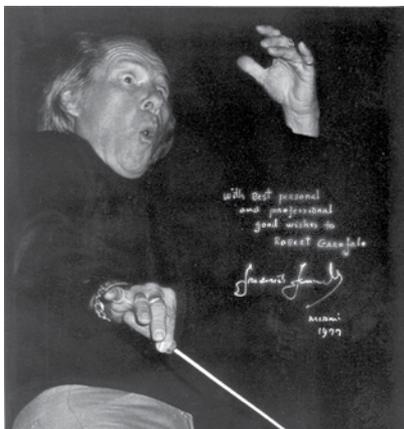
Instrumental conductors often mouth rhythms while the ensemble is playing, their mouths and lips opening and closing in time with the music using a neutral or nonsense syllable. Choral and opera conductors, on the other hand, often mouth the words with the singers. Many conductors breathe with their players, either through their mouth and/or their nose, a procedure that is highly recommended especially when starting music.

In the Glossary of Facial Expressions below, explain what is changing on the faces. Also, describe the emotion conveyed in each facial expression with one or two words.

## Glossary of Facial Expressions



Can you guess/identify the expressive character of the musical message being conveyed here by conductor Frederick Fennell by observing his facial expression and body language?



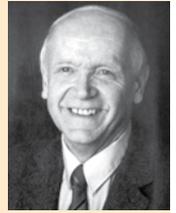
For example, is the music strong or gentle (dynamics), quick or deliberate (tempo), lyrical or dramatic (style)? Can you find a facial expression in the Glossary above that correlates with Fennell's expression?

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Conservatory Wind Ensemble. He has conducted bands and ensembles for more than 50 years. Garofalo and Battisti have coauthored several books and articles; most notably Guide to Score Study for the Wind Band Conductor (Meredith Music, 1990) and Lead and Inspire: A Guide to Expressive Conducting (Whirlwind Music, 2005), from which this article is adapted.



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