

# MOVEMENT THEORY FOR CONDUCTORS



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## Movement and Performance Theory for Conductors

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### Goals of the Clinic

- Expand awareness of and the potential for movement (availability) in the entire body while conducting
- Develop an understanding of how the body naturally counterbalances gestures and their corresponding shifts in weight
- Examine figure drawing to provide a context for how expressivity in the body is perceived
- Develop an understanding of how increased availability allows for heightened expressivity
- Examine the link between self-focus (excluding) and stillness/tension as opposed to open focus (including) and availability
- Participate in exploratory movement exercises designed to heighten awareness of availability in the body

### A Context for Expressive Conducting: Figure Drawing and Movable-Masses

According to George B. Bridgeman, in his work *The Complete Guide to Drawing From Life*, there are three large masses of the body: the head, chest, and pelvis. These three masses (the **Movable-Masses**) can be thought of as three-dimensional blocks that are immovable when considered in isolation. If the three blocks were perfectly balanced on top of each other there would be no movement. But when these blocks balance differently, they reveal the action of the figure through their interrelationships.

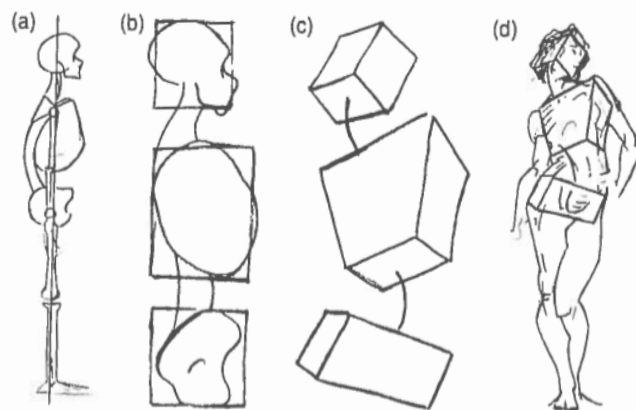


FIGURE 1.6A Balanced body (static)

FIGURE 1.6B The Movable-Masses (static)

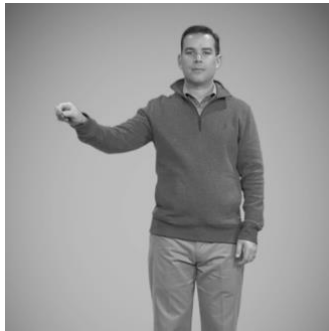
FIGURE 1.6C Movable-Masses balanced differently

FIGURE 1.6D Expressive gesture

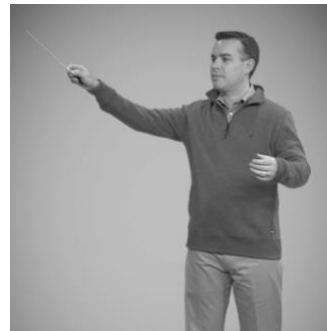
## Movable-Masses and Conducting:

Many conducting texts often include photos of conductors with fixed/or static Movable-Masses. This is especially true when discussing posture or “starting positions” for conducting. These are usually well intended and not necessarily incorrect. However, they can cause the reader to subconsciously assume that posture is static. In reality, posture is dynamic (constantly moving). In one moment, vertically aligned Movable-Masses may be absolutely natural. However, as soon as weight shifts (even a small amount of weight like the moving of a hand or baton) some twisting, turning and rotating of the Movable-Masses will be required for efficient movement.

Both of these photos show a conductor whose baton is moving horizontally and upward to the right, yet the subtle shift in Movable-Masses along with the baton creates a very different quality of motion.



Static Movable-Masses

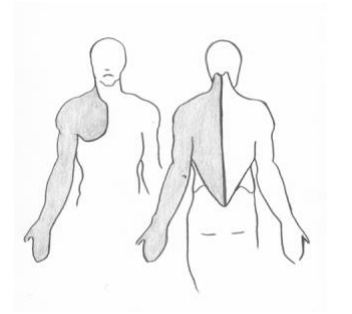


Dynamic Movable-Masses

Suppression of natural movement throughout the body, including the Movable-Masses, may be perceived as inauthentic and unexpressive. Gestures that lack authenticity are subconsciously rejected (or at least questioned) by the viewer (the ensemble).

Suppression of movement can be caused by a number of factors, including:

- Wanting to do a good job/fear of failure (self-focus)
- Limited body awareness: holding part(s) of your body still in order to move other parts rather than moving as an integrated whole (see Torso-Arm drawing)
- Unintended consequences of traditional conducting pedagogies that place emphasis primarily on the baton, hands, arms, and sometimes the face/eyes
- Inadequate preparation (score study and specificity of one’s aural image)



The **Torso-Arm**: A term used to describe all of the muscles that move the arm. Notice how many of these muscles are located on the torso (Movable-Masses)

A means of analyzing a particular conducting session might be summed up with this question: “Did I allow my Moveable-Masses to move?” If your conducting allows these masses to shift naturally as you gesture, your conducting will be more expressive.

## A Starting Point for Increased Availability: Counterbalance

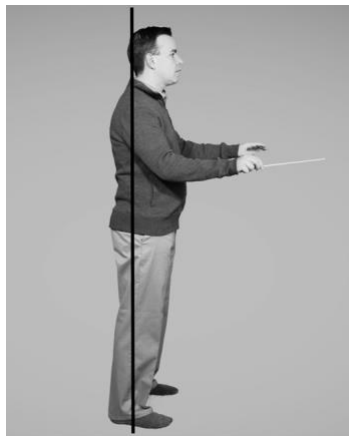
**Counterbalancing** is the coordinating of oppositional movements that offset the weight shift of a gesture or movement, allowing the body to remain in balance.



**Center of Gravity** shown with a black dot on the pelvis near sacral vertebrae number two

Counterbalance happens naturally if we do not impede it. When you walk briskly or run, one arm swings forward while the swings backward.

When both of your arms are in front of you, one arm isn't going forward while the other arm is going backward like when you were walking. So, how might your body counterbalance this weight change? The answer is that your **Center of Gravity** located on your pelvis—see illustration) and the weight of your Moveable-Masses will counterbalance the movement of your arms.



Without Counterbalance:  
requires tension to hold the  
body out of balance



With Counterbalance:  
Center of Gravity and Movable Masses shift  
subtly backward to offset weight of arms

There is so much weight in the rest of your body (your legs and Moveable-Masses) in relation to the weight of your arms that this backward counterbalancing movement of the pelvis will not be very large—but, in terms of availability it is huge! If you don't allow this counterbalancing movement your body will be tight and static and you will never coordinate and flow. If you do allow this counterbalancing movement to happen, your body can coordinate giving you the availability to convey your musical intentions with a greater sense of sincerity and authenticity.

This is only one example of counterbalance related to a very basic conducting gesture (bringing the hands up to conduct). As soon as your arms move, even slightly, they will change the distribution of weight and require different counterbalancing motions. Allowing the Center of Gravity, Movable-Masses, legs, and feet to continue to make these subtle shifts is the key to retaining Availability in the body. The result will be more expressive conducting!

## An Introduction to Performance Theory: Specificity of Intention and Open Focus

### Specificity of Intention:

Which of the following three photos conveys the most information?



The first photo is very general. The second is more inclusive, but the fingertips appear uninvolved in the gesture and the Movable-Masses are static. In photo number three, the intention of the gesture reaches all the way to the fingertips, and the Movable-Masses of the chest and pelvis rotate slightly to counterbalance the weight of the outstretched arm. Even the face looks softer and more genuine.

The third way of gesturing requires a more well-defined idea of what is being communicated. It is this **Specificity of Intention** that allows the body to move and counterbalance in an authentic manner. More specificity simply gives the body more to do. The more specific the intent, the more specifically the body will resonate with the gesture.

### Open Focus:

You need specificity of your musical intentions while you maintain an **Open Focus**. Open focus includes you, the ensemble, the music, and the audience. Without open focus, your body will not be available to your intention. You won't focus on whom you are talking to (the ensemble). You will be watching yourself.

When we watch ourselves (closed focus), our bodies respond by limiting movement. Try to make yourself happy—make a big smile. If you notice, in order to make your face smile you probably tightened the rest of your entire body. This tightening blocked the rest of your body from resonating with your performance and the result likely lacked a sense of authenticity. Your focus was inward on yourself while you tried to manufacture an emotion. But, emotions are not manufactured. They are experienced. Experiencing requires that our focus be open in order to take in information *while* we send out information.

### Advice given to actors (with significant parallels to conducting):

*“If you want to be better than 90% of the actors out there, know your lines! [Specificity of Intention].  
If you want to be better than 90% of the remaining 10%, focus on the person you are talking to  
instead of yourself” [Open Focus]*

-Jerald Schwiebert



## Expressive Conducting: Movement and Performance Theory for Conductors

By Jerald Schwiebert  
with Dustin Barr

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**Jerald Schwiebert** was one of the country's foremost authorities on the study and application of the capacity for human physical expression. His manuscript, published by the University of Michigan Press, *Physical Expression and the Performing Artist* has received critical acclaim from artists across the United States. His movement and performance theories influence hundreds of conductors, singers and instrumentalists each year throughout the world. Schwiebert spent 20 years on the faculty of the School of Music, Theater and Dance at the University of Michigan. He continued to serve on the faculties of the Conductors Retreat at Medomak, the Michigan Band Conducting and Pedagogy Workshop, the Anatomy of Sound Flute Workshop for many additional years, and offered sessions for the Medical Education Scholars Program at the University of Michigan. He led classes for the Academie de direction d'orchestre of the Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, College Band Directors National Association, Dance America, the National Association of Health Education Centers, the Syracuse Opera Resident Artist Program, members of the Detroit and Grand Rapids Symphonies, and the American Massage Therapy Association. He also worked with patients through the Henry Ford Hospital Voice Pathology Department. His approach to movement combines various schools and disciplines, including Tai Chi, Laban, Feldenkrais, Roling, the Alexander Technique, Rubenfeld Synergy, Trager, Modern Dance, Afro-Cuban Dance, Mime, Yoga, Stage Combat, Improvisation, Acting Theory, Anatomy, and Physiology. As a stage director, he directed for the Edinburgh International Theatre Festival Fringe, the Intiman Theatre, the University of Michigan, University of Toledo, UCSD, and Southern Methodist University. His principal instructors were the foremost director of the American contemporary theater, Alan Schneider, and the renowned acting teacher Arthur Wagner. He held an MFA from the University of California, San Diego.

**Dustin Barr** is Director of Wind Studies and Associate Professor of Music at California State University, Fullerton, where he actively manages all aspects of the university's comprehensive band program, conducts the Wind Symphony and University Band, oversees the graduate wind conducting program, and teaches courses in conducting and music education. Prior experiences include appointments as Assistant Director of Bands at Michigan State University, Director of Bands at Mt. San Antonio College, and Assistant Director of Bands at Esperanza High School in Anaheim, California. Barr's research includes working extensively with theatre director Jerald Schwiebert on the melding of performance theory with a variety of movement theories and disciplines to establish innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching conducting. Their co-authored text, *Expressive Conducting: Movement and Performance Theory for Conductors*, was published by Routledge in 2018. This work has made Barr a highly regarded pedagogue in the field of conducting. He has given numerous masterclasses throughout the USA and for Academia Diesis in Spain. Furthermore, his research on Scandinavian music for chamber wind ensembles has produced published performance editions of Asger Lund Christiansen's Octet, op. 43 and Svend Schultz's Divertimento for Wind Octet. Barr is a recipient of numerous accolades for his conducting and scholarly work. Under his baton, The CSUF Wind Symphony received prestigious invitations to perform at national (2019) and regional (2024) conferences of the College Band Directors National Association, and at the CASMEC 2023 conference in Fresno. Barr has been a guest conductor of prominent ensembles like the United States Army Band "Pershing's Own," he was a Rackham Merit Fellow at the University of Michigan, and he was recognized as one of the nation's preeminent young conductors as part of the 2010 National Band Association's Young Conductor Mentor Project. He and the CSUF Wind Symphony were also awarded a 2020-2021 American Prize Ernst Bacon Memorial Award for the Performance of American Music. Barr obtained his Doctor of Musical Arts in conducting from the University of Michigan. He received his Master of Music degree and Bachelor of Music degree from California State University, Fullerton. His principal conducting mentors include Michael Haithcock and Mitchell Fennell.