

# American Guild of Organists

## CONDUCTING MASTER CLASS with ALLEN HIGHTOWER

- I. **Alignment**
  - Are we modeling good singer alignment in order to engender good air flow and sound production?
- II. **Independence of Hands**
  - Become far more creative with the left hand: pluck a rose petal, throw a dart, shoot fire, press a ball under water, stop an on-coming car. And on and on, adding more real-life gestures to our conducting.
  - Exercise with left hand gestures on various beats.
- III. **Baton Technique**
  - Henson Method: Fingers, Wrist, Half-Arm, Whole-Arm (Right-Left-Both)
  - Conducting planes
- IV. **Malko/Green Exercises**
- V. **Imagination and Conducting from the Inside-Out (Not your tired 4-pattern from undergrad!)**
  - A good conductor must have a vivid imagination. Do you remember how to play?
  - When practicing, imagine the music in your mind, and your body reacting.
  - What do you want to hear? Do you understand what your distinct sound is?
  - How does your body feel with each different piece, the climax of Mahler 2 and the *Et Incarnatus Est* from the B minor Mass?
  - Imagine the character. Understand what it feels like to be that person or character.
  - Does your pattern evoke line?
  - Let us see how much you love this piece.
  - Imagine the most exquisite creature. Now conduct from that image.
  - Can we tell from your eyes what the sound is to be about?
  - Dynamic, intention, color, phonics... we must imagine all this at once. Take the time to go inside and find the sound that you desire to hear.
  - Is it as beautiful as it can be?
  - We must think more about the poetics and the color implications of the text.
  - I must (like an actor) find all the human impulses within myself.
  - The conductor must have a very clear picture of what they expect to hear.
  - Make your passion to be less focused on the technical aspects of the music, and more consumed with the essence of the music. (Yes, the technical is very important, but have you gotten to the core yet?)
  - How does my body feel when I speak various languages?
  - Can you love their sound more?
- VI. **Breath**
  - It all begins with the breath. This is the spiritual/human connection within each of us.
  - Breathe more and move less.
  - The magic happens on the breath, not the sound.
  - Go inside, imagine. Breathe the color of the sound that you anticipate from the ensemble.
  - We (the conductor) must exhale the air, or we begin to stack air on air.
  - The conductor exhales in empathy with the singers as their air creates sound. Meet the sound.
  - Think "open", "down", "breathe".
  - Try hissing for two measures and then deeply seat the breath upon inhalation.
  - Think about sharing the beach ball. Up: inhalation. Down: exhalation (phonation). Groan.
  - Sweep out, gather laundry, and then deliver it.
- VII. **Preparation**
  - Listen inside before the sound begins.
  - When we conduct we must always expect something truly marvelous.
  - Conducting is a series of preparations.
  - The preparatory breath must include: the weight, color, density, and air-speed of the sound.
  - Far too often we remain highly active gesturally, when all that activity is really not helping the singers.
  - Does my own body (as the conductor) embody everything about the sound?
- VIII. **Musical**
  - We don't need lots of weight on each ictus.
  - How do we get spin on the sound?
  - Where does the line go?
  - Modulate the size of the gesture so that we have direction and shape in the line.

- To generate direction in the line, go more horizontal than vertical.
- In finding the tempo, we must think about the characterization of the piece.
- The moment the conductor makes it look hard, it becomes harder for the singers.
- Conduct less, except at *THE* moment.
- If the line gets stuck, then move horizontally. (Demonstrate on-set gesture.)
- Are you showing the destination of the phrase with your gesture?
- Can you sculpt small phrases, and then larger phrases? (Jim Casey)

**IX. Deep Listening**

- Just listen and move.
- You don't have to always show the music. (Stop moving so much, and really listen to the sound.)
- Sometimes we try too hard to be musical, and we get in the way.
- Just listen and respond.
- If the conductor really listens, we see it in the conductor's eyes, and we see the music singing inside them. When we conduct, we must always be singing inside!
- Just listen. The moment you start thinking, the magic stops, and you disconnect from the sound.
- Your whole being must listen. As you listen more deeply, they become more connected to the sound.

**X. Leading with Confidence**

- It is evident to all when one comes from (leads from) a place of self-confidence.
- Can I help the singers understand what the music is about from my body language?

**XI. Remaining Centered and Grounded**

- Don't do anything that distracts from your eyes and hands.
- When one gathers oneself, then it becomes a completely different sound.
- You must be connected to the inner pulse.
- Entrances given in the high plane run the risk of being disconnected from the solar plexus.
- Relax after the ictus, or you'll get tight.
- Size, weight, and where the gesture sits in the body: these have enormous influence on how we generate the line.
- Share the moment with the singers.
- Be in the exact moment of each phrase.

**XII. Contact with the Sound**

- Is the sound changed by my presence? Is sound palpable to you?
- It's all about releasing and connecting. (It's not about control!)
- Lift out of the beat to give it a more "singing" sound.
- You must stay with the sound as it unfolds.
- Are you focused on receiving the sound, or are you constantly giving information?
- Don't be outside the sound. (Vera UCLA story)
- Don't use the left hand to sustain the sound, instead sustain through the energy of the beat. The throbbing of the constant pulse, not the slower longer more sustained gesture is most useful in order to sustain the sound.
- When you apply muscle to move the line, it kills the spin.
- Allow the line to speak on its own terms.

**XIII. Vulnerability**

- All vocal sound has its impulse (origin) in the primal cry. To find this, we risk being completely vulnerable.
- Be gentle. Don't make it complicated. (Conducting)
- Conducting is not about control, otherwise you make it about yourself.
- Trust your singers!
- Look at us. Share your insides. We want to see what is inside you.
- Am I getting in the way of the singers?
- Trust begins by trusting ourselves, and then we bring that trust to the singers.
- Pulling the beat is a matter of not trusting.
- We must allow ourselves to feel deeply, if we're to lead our singers into a deep place.
- On the podium, we must seek to let down the barriers that separate us from our singers.
- To be vulnerable is to be real and honest. From that place the most meaningful music comes.