

Chapter Two: Baton Technique

This is a subject upon which whole libraries have been written, although it is not the purpose of this handbook to delve too deeply into the technicalities of, for instance:

1. The numerous different ways of holding the baton.
2. How to coordinate your right hand with your left.
3. How to coordinate your left hand with your right.
4. How to conduct with your eyes shut.
5. How to conduct but pretending your eyes are shut.
6. How to deal with complex time signatures.
7. How to get the whole orchestra to start/end together.
8. How to make a mistake look as if you were doing it on purpose.
9. Showmanship/Expression.
10. Strange mannerisms.

All of these subjects are very important aspects of baton technique and will be touched upon in the following pages.

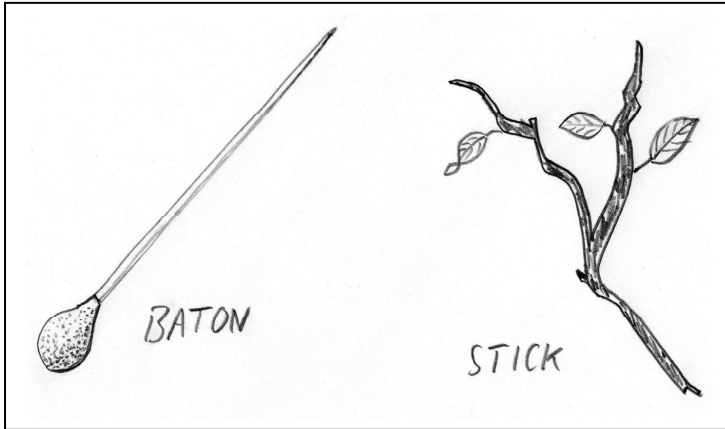
But first of all, let me set the record straight.

The *baton* should always be called *the baton*. You will undoubtedly find that your average orchestral player takes pleasure in trivializing it by referring to it as *the stick*. This is like calling Beethoven's (1770-1827) setting of 'Ode to Joy' a *tune*. So what, you may ask, is the difference? Is it purely one of semantics?

Let me illustrate: Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) wrote *tunes* in the operettas which later came to be known as the Savoy Operas. But when he became *Sir* Arthur Sullivan they became *themes* and could rival anything that Wagner (1813-1883) ever wrote in his operas. Lesson learned, need I say more?

The important point to observe here is that you, as The Maestro, should never permit yourself to stoop to the level of the players. I will be repeating this advice many times in this book. There may (or may not) be a precedent under a particular definition of socially and environmentally weighted circumstances for them to refer to the baton

as a stick but, either way, you must never do so under any circumstances.



Hence, for your own part, you may very well be tempted to retaliate by referring to the Violins as *fiddles* (a description which perhaps is more descriptive of the players than their instruments, though you cannot necessarily dissociate one from the other, as you will see in chapter nine) or, indeed, French Horns as *brass instruments*. Of course, we are well aware that they are constructed mostly of brass, just like every other brass instrument. You and I know that, as does everyone else in the entire civilized world, but for some unfathomable reason, they believe themselves to be generically woodwind players. Or indeed flutes, for example, who should by rights be called *metalwind* and not woodwind, but favour the latter as it has some historical precedent. Although it should be pointed out, however, that the reason they are no longer constructed of wood has practically nothing to do with the evolution of the instrument as such, but everything to do with the habitual pastime of the players who, to stave off boredom during rehearsals, would amuse themselves by carving bits off their instruments with their pen-knives, thereby fashioning them into strange and suggestive shapes that could (and frequently did) upset the concert going public. I quote the words of Sir Simon Tremble (1933-) during

one rehearsal: '*You play, sir, like a somewhat larger version of your instrument.*' The flautist in question, a certain Richard Head, was quick to get the point, as did his less than sympathetic brethren within the orchestra, and, in his own small way, became something of a legend whose fame owed less to his flute playing than to his consummate skills as a woodcarver. (See appendix.)

How to hold the baton:

Although batons come in many sizes, shapes and weights, and only experience, dedication and guidance will show you which is the right one for you, there are some important general rules concerning the correct way to hold one.

At one end there is a cork (or similar lightweight material) which acts in a tactile sense both as handle and as counterbalance, and it is this end where you must always grasp the baton. Cradle it in your fingers, allow it its own freedom of articulation, feel it become part of your hand, arm and body, indeed, let it be an extension of your whole being. The baton wields tremendous power in the hands of a true maestro. Verily it is a magic wand through which the whole spirit of the music communicates itself. Treat it as such. The first time you stand proud and erect before an orchestra grasping in your hand the hard won symbol of your status as the *Maestro*, you will feel the thrill of power surging through your fingers. Then, and only then, as you thrust your baton through the air, will you know for certain that you are adopting the correct baton hold.

There are those of a more superstitious disposition, however, who strongly maintain that the sharp end of the baton should never be touched for fear of weakening its power. It has taken on an almost religious importance to many conductors, some of whom will no longer use a baton which has had its point handled, although I should caution against becoming overly paranoid in such events, it being rather down to the instincts of the individual concerned and what feels right for them. Needless to say, all the best conductors keep several spares close to hand should a baton spontaneously (as sometimes happens) suffer loss of power. These events are rare but they can occur and it is hard to be prepared for them when they do. Keep a clear head and avoid making

that fatal lunge which will be your first instinct when you suffer a *catastrophic baton failure*.^{*} You will be playing right into the hands of the orchestra if you do. Nothing delights the orchestral animal more than seeing a conductor going down in flames.

One fascinating and widely adopted technique employed in solving the problem in the event of baton failure is known as ‘The Heiflik Manoeuvre’ after Otto Heiflik (1878-1955), who perfected the defensive art of either ejecting his baton in its entirety across the concert platform, or more cleverly splitting the faulty tip off and sending it flying, with unerring accuracy, over great distances during actual performances. It became such a fashion that an unofficial conductors Olympic games evolved with its own complex scoring system based upon:

1. How far a conductor could flick a baton:

Front row of strings - 1 point.

Rank and file strings - 5 points.

First row of woodwind - 10 points.

Second row of winds and trumpets - 15 points.

Last row of winds and brass - 20 points.

Percussion, Timpani, Harps - 30 points.

2. Who he could hit with it:

Principal players - 20 points.

Sub principal players - 10 points.

Rank and file players - 5 points.

A miss - minus 5 points.

3. How many mistakes he could force a player to make:

One wrong note - 1 point.

Missed entry - 5 points.

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If you ever wondered what those notches were that one used to observe carved into the music stands of the orchestra in the days when they were constructed of wood, then I can tell you that each and every one represents a catastrophic lunge by a panicking conductor on experiencing baton failure. It is a sobering thought is it not?

Wrong transposition - 5 points.

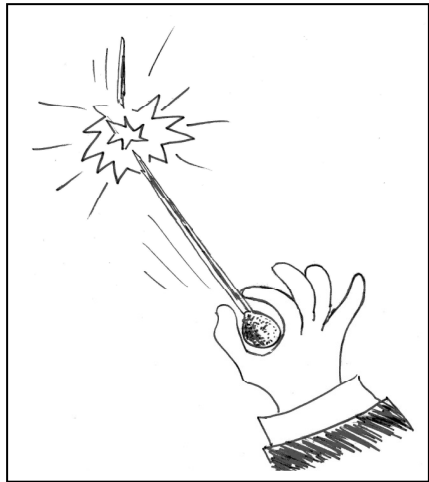
Wrong dynamic - 1 point.

No mistake - minus 5 points.

4. How much injury it could cause:

Alas, no longer accepted by the educational and arts regulatory organization - Technical Workshop for Artistic Training (or T.W.A.T. as it is known) as being a creative use of the baton (though still hotly contested by some eminent exponents of the art).

Sadly, these days the new generation of conductors tend to use batons constructed of modern composite materials which, although stronger and lighter than wood, have largely put a stop to this enjoyable and stimulating diversion, the historical significance of which was in every sense a case of necessity being the mother of invention – and lots of healthy fun into the bargain. (Please refer to appendix)



The Heiflik Manoeuvre.

Co-ordination:

‘They make it look so easy’.

How many times have we heard those foreboding words? Flattered? Well, don’t be.

We conductors don’t want the public going about saying things like that about us. What have we been working for night and day for all those years? It’s not easy - you and I know that, and it is our job to make sure the public and press are aware of it also. We don’t want it to look easy; we want it to look very difficult indeed.

This is the true and ultimate art which, in the case of the greatest exponents, is a spectacular ballet of swirls, swishes, swoops, swats,

swipes and swaggers - enough to take your breath away. There have been some real heavyweights of the conducting world who could launch themselves into the air as if they were weightless with their arms a veritable blur of motion. And we've watched them perspiring by the bucketful so that the water flying in the air around them creates a dramatic rainbow effect as it refracts the lights of the concert platform. It is truly magnificent. And it looks very, very hard. This must be your aim also. Don't waste your time trying to beat 'fives' against 'fours' or 'twenty-eights' against 'seventy-sixes', that is for the amateur. What our profession is calling out for is not mathematical precision (which a machine could easily be taught to perform) but dynamism, panache, virtuosity, temperament, style, élan, huge waistcoats, and enough wobbly flesh to create a small earth tremor when you execute the final chord.* This is what will earn the respect of the players and the public.

Conducting with your eyes shut - Yes or No?

There is certainly an element of risk here, but that is partly what conducting is all about, is it not? By way of caution, though, I would quote the last words of the great Ukrainian maestro Igor Toppaloff (1821-1914): '*Arrrrrrrrgh!*' - who sadly died young, aged ninety three, as he fell from the podium during an energetic rendition of Mahler's (1860-1911) Adagietto. His words translated into English means something like: '*Whoops!*' (I think Russian is a far more expressive language - Ed). To his eternal credit however, and the reason his name will never be forgotten in the buffet lounge of the 'Old Conductors Club' known as 'Carvers R Us', is that he never missed a beat even as he fell.

We conductors exist in a world that measures roughly four-foot by four-foot and danger surely lies all around us.

Question: How do you know how the music goes without looking at the score?

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Please note that within the conducting fraternity it is a long held conviction that those much sought after 'knighthood points' are awarded as much by advancement of body weight as by artistic achievement. When it comes to good eating do not stint yourself.

Answer: In the oft quoted words of the prolific nineteenth century musicologist Mortimer Dedbete (1843-1915): *'Don't be so damn silly.'*

What Mortimer was surely driving at, reading between the lines (actually, there was only one line, and a short one at that - Ed), was that if you know how the tune goes then you know all that is necessary to know. So why on earth do you need a huge score in front of you with confusing little dots printed all over it simply to tell you what you already know anyway? If that sounds a little obvious then so be it.*

If I had a penny for every young scholar who has asked me this very same question I'd have retired on my luxury yacht years ago rather than getting yet another apology from the luxury yacht suppliers about the problems they are having fitting the eighteenth century Venetian chandeliers into the third-deck lounge.

Trying to read the notes of the score while you conduct is like trying to play the violin and remove your trousers at the same time. And I speak from some experience here - though not my own, I hasten to add.

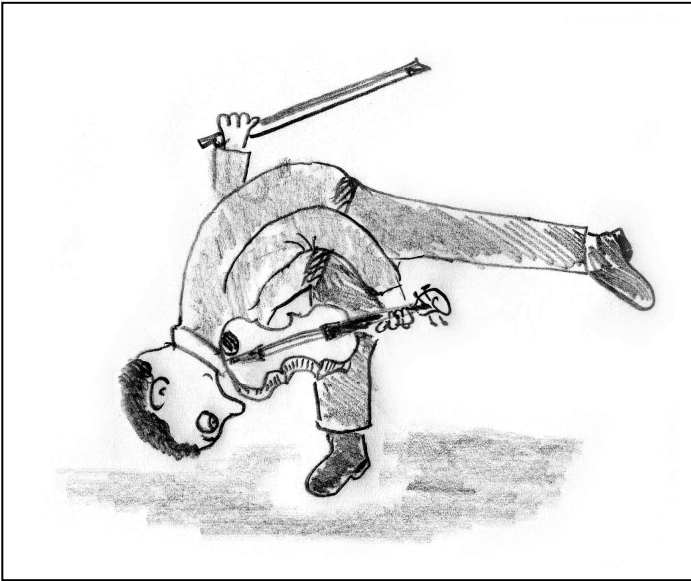
The celebrated violinist and Concertmaster Jasha Loepitz (1909-1940), though no Adonis, could charm the ladies with his exquisite playing until their knees wobbled. Such was his virtuosity and passion that one particular aristocratic beauty, who had requested a private audience with him at the palace, was so overcome by his playing that she could no longer contain herself. Jasha was eager to reciprocate, so hurriedly put his violin down to allow his hands the freedom of movement which the situation clearly demanded of them. Instantly, with the absence of his masterly playing, the lady went off the boil, leaving Jasha empty handed so to speak. However, as soon as he resumed his expert rendition, the lady's passion re-awoke. This was a most frustrating dilemma. What was poor Jasha to do about it?

Like so many great love stories, this one has a tragic end which is often retold amongst violinists over a late night, post-concert glass of wine.

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Please refer to musical example on page 87.

Jasha found after some frantic experimentation that if he bent almost double as he played then he could unhook his braces with the little finger of his right hand while at the northern extreme of the bow's up-stroke. Whatever it was he was attempting to do is still the subject of some debate within the violin fraternity, and some of the greatest minds have written technical volumes on the subject (here's a typical example of violinist mentality), trying to perfect the 'Loepitz bow stroke' as it has now come to be known. But poor old Jasha died not only of a broken heart, but of the injuries sustained by impaling himself with the sharp end of his Stradivarius which had to accompany him to his grave (since no one particularly wanted his violin anymore knowing whence it had come).



Executing the Loepitz bow stroke.

The beautiful countess lived long into her old age, but the memory of the event stayed with her always, and she could no longer listen to the sound of the violin without tears coming to her eyes. I've

often thought this tale would make a fine story for an opera. (See appendix for additional information.)

Starting and finishing:

Starting a work; bringing the whole assembled orchestra in together with split-second timing, gathering all your forces about you, making the orchestra speak with one voice. This is surely one of the most exacting of your roles as general of your army. How is it done? What can make all those individuals perform as if they were one player? I hope to unveil the mysteries of the first ‘downbeat’ from the mists of confusion that has woven itself about this almost legendary use of the baton. Take, for instance, one of the most famous and most notorious works - Beethoven’s fifth symphony with its unmistakable four-note motif which has become synonymous with all that is classical about classical music. This has always been a toughie for us conductors. So many times have we heard the four note motif played with such appalling degrees of inaccuracy as to transform it into a twelve note motif, or worse.

Here is how it should be done:

It is not the downbeat which matters, but the upbeat. So where is the mystery in that, you may well be asking?

Forget about the baton for one moment. Although it is there before you in your hand - an ominous symbol of power like Hamlet’s codpiece, it acts but only as a visual diversion - a decoy if you like. What really starts the piece off is gravity. Yes gravity. Hurl yourself into the air with all your strength, and then, as if by magic, the orchestra will start playing the instant you hit the ground - it never fails. Try it and see.

How it works is very simple. Imagine for one moment you are sitting within the orchestra (I am well aware that this is not a pleasant image, but hold onto it for a moment longer). Now imagine it is the start of the performance; you are tense, terrified, expectant, your nerves are stretched to breaking point - not knowing when to start playing; scared to play too early, horrified at the thought of being too late. This is the normal frame of mind of your average orchestral musician (small wonder they always look so ill). Then, with much the same

psychological effect as standing your player blindfold in front of a firing squad, and then exploding a paper bag in his ear. So, as you launch yourself into space with your baton twirling about your head, and land with a loud crash, his instinct will over-ride all else, his overstrained nerve will snap, and he will automatically start to play. This is the trick and it never ever fails.



The opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

There are many such examples and they frequently require little or no use of the baton.

What to do if you make a mistake:

Even conductors are human... (All right, if conductors are human, then what are musicians? Here is a worthwhile job at last for all those anthropologists who spend their time groveling about Africa looking for

the bones of the ‘missing link’*, when all the time whole armies of them have been marching on and off concert platforms for years and years right under our very noses.)

So, conductors, like humans, are fallible and can at times make errors with the baton. What do you then do about it? Here is where your training really kicks in. You need to make a split second assessment of the situation and it is important to get the order of events right - yet you have about one tenth of a second to do it. There are just three things you must do:

Firstly: Did anyone notice other than yourself? Look for clues. The most obvious will be a member of the strings smirking. They do this for just two reasons which they erroneously believe no one except themselves know about. Namely:

(1) They really relish seeing conductors going wrong with the baton and making fools of themselves. Watching an orchestra emerge blinking into the daylight after a rehearsal can be an interesting experience. Make a note that if they have a spring in their stride, a smile on their lips, and a song in their hearts then you can be pretty certain things went badly for the conductor.

(2) Each separate string section has an on-going scoring system whereby the individuals therein can acquire points for spotting baton errors. The sad truth about this futile pursuit is that they are blissfully unaware that for years conductors have known about this. It probably never occurred to them to hide their scores. One simply has to take a look inside the front cover of any string part to see written in pencil the latest score of any given individual player. Indeed, for a while conductors would get some amusement themselves by deliberately making small errors in order to see whom in the strings was most on the ball. It is a game of bluff and double bluff...

...*They* think that *we* think that when *they* reach for *their* pencils during rehearsals, it is to highlight some pertinent musical point in the music. But little do *they* know that *we* know what it is *they* are really doing - and it was all because *we* deliberately made an error. Amusing

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See Homo Symphonicus - Chapter Seven.

though it may be, most conductors tend to grow weary of an opponent who is so gullible. Besides, I personally would not endorse a policy of deliberate errors for fear of the wind changing. Mark my words, I have seen it happen.

Secondly: How bad was your mistake? Nine times out of ten it is unlikely that anyone even noticed, largely because the most likely time for an error would be where the music was most complex, precisely where, indeed, they are least likely to be watching for fear of going wrong themselves. It is a hazardous matter for a musician to take his eyes off the copy even for an instant. Be that as it may, it is very rare that any errors on your part need be fatal. There are many ways of turning the beat around if it goes wrong. A skilled conductor can disguise his beats within a bar so cleverly that it is impossible to know with any degree of certainty which one he is on. This being the case, he can then jump either forwards or backwards within the bar at will (known as ‘beat-hopping’ in the trade). It is a common tactic used by all the greats. It has the virtue of removing counting from the equation (which is a severe impediment to artistic expression) and also of confusing the players, which has much the same reciprocal effect on their concentration and nervous systems as may be achieved by removing the safety net from beneath a tight-rope walker who was attempting to cross a piranha filled gorge. Also beating round in circles should one lose one’s way within a bar is a well-tried and tested escape route. Some conductors even prefer this to the more conventional beating patterns. Or why not adopt one of the many emergency-procedure-beats designed specifically to get you out of trouble. These are all described in detail in the numerous technical books which can be found on the shelves of every conductor’s music room, library, music shop or green room. Your instinct and experience will hopefully take over and before you have time to even think about it your baton will find itself back on the rails. Problem solved.

Thirdly: The cover-up. Here, as previously hinted, is where you employ the many beat variations which conducting college and practical experience have taught you together, I’m sure, with a few of your own personalized ones which, as we have seen, have certainly become quite

a hallmark of many of the great maestri past and present. Rather than go into lengthy technical explanations at this point, which is not the purpose of this volume, let me recall the case of the (now retired) aristocratic maestro, Viscount Attall (1919-) who, for his entire career, would never beat anything except ‘two-time’. However, far from putting severe constraints upon his repertoire as one might imagine, he was able to perform Strauss waltzes, the Rite of Spring, Shostakovich Symphonies, Holst’s Planets to name but a few. How did he do it?

He was a master of the art of being *expressive* (or *vague* as your average orchestral player prefers to describe it). Although he beat everything in ‘two-time’, he could make his ‘two’ fit *any* bar length that had been written. It was sheer poetry to watch. His ‘downbeat’ could swirl about like kelp in the ocean tide, and his ‘upbeat’ could shoot back and fore like a demented rocket so that you’d never know where it was going next. He started a whole new way of thinking for the school of up-and-coming conductors who formed the ‘Company for Rehearsal and Performance’ (or C.R.A.P. as it is more widely known) in his honour. He found himself unwittingly to be the young conductor’s guru. There are still many faithful devotees of his art heroically beating everything in ‘two-time’ to this day. (See appendix.)

So the point of recounting this little episode from conducting history is to illustrate to you that the ‘cover up’ is not a means to an end, nay, it is in every sense an ‘end’ in itself. The baton does not go wrong; it does not make mistakes. No indeed. There are just various degrees of rightness, as we conductors regard it. Don’t ever let yourself forget this lesson.

Showmanship and expression:

This is arguably the single most important quality in a conductor, and a good baton technique plays merely a small part in the overall performance.

Consider this: You stand before the assembled performers - be they orchestras or soloists, singers or choirs, and what have you to show for it? What do you do? You don’t sing or play, so what have the public come all this way, out of their comfortable homes to see, when they

could have been sitting on their sofas with a lager and a plate of fish and chips watching their favourite soaps? I am telling you what you doubtless already know, however, yet maybe it doesn't hurt to share this valuable affirmation from time to time. Yes indeed, what they have come to see is you. And, rest assured, they must not return to their homes disappointed! The brilliance of the playing means nothing, and the beauty of the singing is worthless unless the audience can take home the image of their maestro beating as if his life depended on it. They must behold the agony on your face, the fire in your eyes, the smoldering passion on your lips – and all, for the most part, through watching the back of your head. So how is it done?

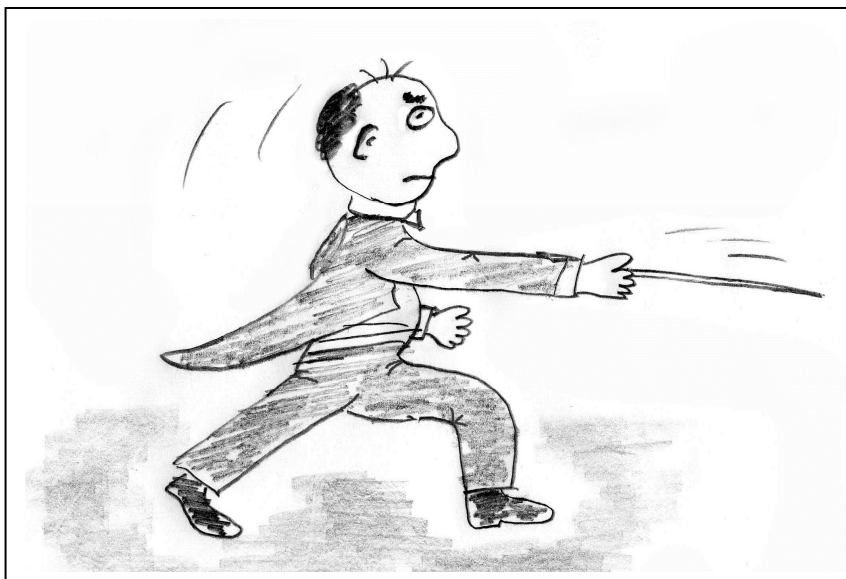
The performance begins the instant you set foot onto the concert platform. Of course the orchestra must tune up beforehand, and then the lights must dim, but now it is up to you so be sure to time your entry just right. A second too soon or too late could spoil everything. Here is where we have shared a trick with the military. Imagine you are jumping out of your plane with your parachute on your back. What do you do? You count to ten slowly, then pull the cord. Indeed, I met a top military man, Field Marshal Sir Henry Hunbasher, who became quite a regular concert supporter, with his very pretty young wife who, as I understand it, was from Wales (though I couldn't help observing, on the occasion when I was first introduced to her that, although she was apparently brought up in the Welsh valleys, to Welsh-speaking parents, whose first language was, indeed, Welsh, remarkably spoke English with a very pronounced Cockney accent. I could never reconcile that particular linguistic anomaly. The ears of the conductor are subtly trained to spot these things).

Sir Henry used to command his subordinates to attend concerts in order to observe how the conductor timed his entrance, and then pass this wisdom onto their troops. It is a gratifying sentiment to know that our art can bring the discipline required to the battlefield.

How akin is the theatre of war to the concert hall of war?

So, after observing the vital check-list (see chapter five - Do's and Don't's), you have made your well-timed entrance. All this while, your baton has been in 'neutral', so to speak. Now, as you raise it, every soul in the house will hold their breath (I guarantee it), such will be its

spellbinding power. Now, hold this stance for just as long as you dare. Keep in mind, the only limitation will naturally be for as long as one can comfortably hold one's breath, as there is nothing better assured to short-circuit the electrifying atmosphere than a whole auditorium exhaling noisily just as the orchestra is about to commence. And as it swishes and swirls, loops and swoops, every eye will follow it as if it is the hypnotist's pendulum. Thus the most important use of the baton has been achieved, and what remains will be relatively plain sailing.



The 'Errol Flynn'.

Strange mannerisms:

Though not strictly part of baton technique, they are an important nuance that lends spice to not only your performances, but also stimulating interest in rehearsals, thereby strengthening your relationship with both the public in the auditorium, and the musicians whilst in the rehearsal studio. All the great maestri indulge in them and I have often been tempted to write a compilation on this very subject; cataloguing the types and varieties that have been practiced since

records began.

Of course, the best way to learn is to observe. Get yourself into some rehearsals, go to concerts, try to get those seats behind the orchestra affording a clear view of the conductor, and don't forget to bring along your binoculars and a sketch pad. If the musicians ever wondered who those occasional visitors were who seem to form part of the maestro's entourage, and pop up during rehearsals, then nine times out of ten it will be a conducting scholar making little drawings of the maestro's idiosyncrasies to add to his private reference library.

As far as the baton is concerned, all conducting textbooks list hundreds, but they broadly fall into the following categories:

Quivers, Ricochets, Bounces, The Errol Flynn, The Napoleon, The Samurai, Stabs, Tickles, The Twister, Salute, Hand Shake, Boxer, The Catapult, Flick, Tick, The Fisherman, Tennis, Golf, Hockey, Cricket, Ping-Pong, The Archer, The Tightrope Walker, The Windmill and, of course, The Cheerleader.

to name but a few of the generic types which may be observed.

It is appropriate to mention at this point, that mannerisms need not always be purely visual. It is quite acceptable to add a few vocal ones to your repertoire, so long as they are used sparingly and do not intrude too much upon the music. Namely:

Grunts, Gasps, Groans, Gargles, Gulps, Sighs, Sucking noises, Squeaks (yes, really), Puffs, Pants, Grinding teeth, Death rattles, Strange Drowning Noises, Consonant Sounds (Important where a chorus is involved), Whimpers, Warbles and Whistles.

I must emphasize strongly, however, that vocal mannerisms should never be used as an alternative to the baton in the event of the music going wrong, which as we know can, and does happen. The harm it could cause hardly bears thinking about. Certainly, a visual diversion in such circumstances is quite acceptable, since it will serve to focus the audiences' attention away from the musicians and back onto you where it is supposed to be. But to lend your own vocals to the music when the boat is rocking will reflect, by virtue of its association, back onto you,

which will be a truly tragic method of committing professional suicide. Don't do it ever!

Notwithstanding this, your public are certainly very unlikely to forget you if they can take home the enduring memory of a few of the aforementioned which, let's face it, is arguably, in a very pragmatic sense, the most one can expect of them under normal circumstances. I will not elaborate on the extensive topic of giving certain members of the public something to take home under 'extra normal' circumstances, for which there is enough anecdotal material to fill up several books, though I would not recommend as reading material for the faint of heart or weak of stomach.

Should you wish to pursue this sordid topic further there are a few autobiographical works which can be found if you look hard enough. Try:

'My Greatest Scores' - The secret life of a composer, by Frederick Devious.

'When They're Not Upright They're Grand' - A book of unusual techniques on the piano, by Sir Gay Rakhmaninov

'Fingering and Position Changing Exercises' - By Yehudi Menonly

'Cor! What a Lovely Pair of Timps' - By Herbert von Carryon

'Leading Ladies I Have Seen' - A 'behind the scenes' peep into the world of the Musical as never before revealed, by Ivor Novelcro

'My B flat Prelewd' - Confessions of a Diva by Dame Janet Candlestick-Maker

'Viola - The life of a pansy' - By William Primrose

'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts' - By Richard Wagner

'The Oxford Companion to Music' - 0898 69 69 69 (not actually a book - Ed)