

Developing Conducting Skills – Saito’s Secret by Wayne Toews

Some call it Saito’s “secret”. Hideo Saito was principal cellist in Japan’s NHK Symphony Orchestra when, in August 1936, Joseph Rosenstock arrived in Tokyo and began elevating the group to world-class status. Saito was exposed to a wide variety of conductors when he studied in Germany during the 1920s and many more as a player in the NHK Symphony orchestra. He was left wondering why it was so much easier to perform well with conductors such as Rosenstock than with other famous conductors. Through analysis of conducting gestures, Saito identified four components of gestures: the before-point motion, the beat point, the after-point motion and the secondary point. For example, a pendulum, beginning at its highest point, falls with acceleration at an even rate in the before-point motion, passes through the beat point at the fastest speed and decelerates in the after-point motion. Saito called the place when the motion is slowest before the pendulum falls the “secondary point”. The placement of the secondary point in space and time is the “secret” that makes conducting gestures clear and empowers conductors to elicit a musical response.

Prof. Saito’s method is the only one to have identified and revealed the importance of the secondary point. His observations and analysis resulted in his teaching a wide range of gestures that give conductors multiple options to express their musical ideas with precision. The method addresses the problems of unclear motions and musically incongruous gestures. The most obvious problem is the ensemble that doesn’t begin together caused by erratic deceleration in the preparatory motion. Another common problem is an imprecise attack resulting from a sudden change of speed in the downward motion when the conducting arm is flung or pushed rather than dropped. A bland performance is the usual result when conductors make all motions at a constant speed throughout the before and after-point, regardless of tempo or dynamic. Not only does control of acceleration and deceleration in a gesture improve its clarity but also it elicits different levels of energy from the players. Saito teaches several ways to make legato gestures without loops because loops incorporate unpredictable acceleration and deceleration that destroys ensemble precision. Conductors can discover for themselves the importance of the secondary point by decelerating and sustaining the upward after-point motion and observe how players are forced to wait for the next downward motion. Players who can confidently anticipate the beat point focus their attention on playing more musically. Unlike other methods that focus on arrival at a particular place to show the beat, the Saito method teaches how the motion and its timing creates the beat point.

The basis of technique in the Saito method is control of acceleration and deceleration in the conducting motion; the basic skill is the arm drop. This too is unique to the Saito method. By allowing the arm to fall by the force of gravity alone, physical effort is minimized and even the loudest sounds can be shown with ease. It takes time and patient practice to learn to relax the muscles of the arm so that the gestures can be made easily and with control.

Saito selected eight study pieces that are rich with fundamental conducting challenges. At the Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo, which Prof. Saito helped to found, students take two years to learn the studies. In the first study, Von Weber’s Theme from La Bella Dorina, students learn how to make into-point gestures in a way that doesn’t disrupt the feeling of the undulating eighth notes and allows them to be performed evenly. This common problem is caused when conductors shorten the

after-point motion and displace the secondary point, causing the eighth notes to be crushed or rushed.

Study 1

Variations on "Vien'qua, Dorina Bella", Op.7

Carl Maria von Weber

Andante ♩ = 92

p

poco cresc.

In this first study, students also learn gestures to show the end of the phrase in measure 4, to shape fermatas, to indicate different types of releases, to bring out the bass line, to show subdivision, to change dynamics and tempo and to change moods and energy levels.

Haydn's "Allegro" is used as Saito's study #4.

Study 4

Joseph Haydn

Allegro ♩ = 104

mf

The techniques to show very fast music such as this include successive bursting motions followed by even deceleration so that the conductor gets out of the way of the music and allows it to move along easily. These are a class of gesture called from-point gestures that are taught only in the Saito method. A special technique called Kazutori, an instantaneous baton flick, is used to add a pulse before the offbeat entrance so that it is easy for the ensemble to begin together. Saito recommends that the focus of the conducting be the internal musical lines, here the lower clef. He notes that if the underlying rhythm is secure the melody can sing freely.

Swinging motions are called into-point gestures because of the motion accelerating into the beat point. A succession of into-point gestures not only shows the beat point, where the motion is fastest, but also the "secondary point", where the motion is slowest. The placement of the secondary point in space and time allows the players to anticipate the beat point and to play together precisely. By comparison, from-point gestures show the beat point by a burst that is made exactly on the beat; followed by even deceleration. From-point gestures are used when the tempo is steady and one wishes to show the sustaining quality of the sound rather than just its onset. From-point gestures can also be used to shape phrases by inviting a breath or suspending time. Saito conductors develop a wide variety of Into-point and from-point gestures

that, used in combination, allow them to show their artistic ideas and to adjust instantaneously to unforeseen circumstances during a performance.

The following exercise develops the skills to combine into-point and from-point gestures. It involves adjusting the size of the after-point motions to allow the inclusion of the from-point motion. By using this technique conductors have an elegant solution to the problem of shaping phrases. The gestures are described for a right-handed conductor where inside is left and outside is right. Left-handed conductors need only reverse the directions. Saito introduced gesture diagrams that use line thickness to represent speed of the motions: the wider, the faster. The circle indicates the beat point. The double-headed arrow indicates acceleration; the arrow with the slash indicates deceleration.

For this exercise, the baton is held with the palm down and fingers wrapped gently around the grip so that it is an extension of the arm, straight in every dimension.

The following notation is the basis of the exercise that follows. Imagine the music being performed by an ensemble. Allow your arm to swing naturally. Use a mirror or make a video recording to detect uneven acceleration and deceleration. This is a very challenging exercise; it requires patience and careful observation.

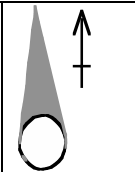
Preparatory motion exercise

M.M.circa ♩ = 76

mf

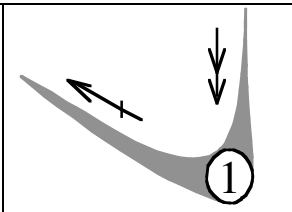
Preparatory beat

Begin with the baton tip at the centre line of the body at waist height. Burst, then decelerate evenly, straight upward to the head position.

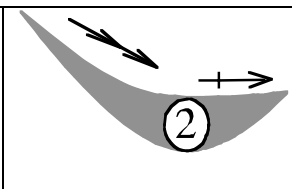



Measure 1

Beat 1 From the head position, swing downward with acceleration in an arc to create a beat point at the inside waist position; then decelerate to the inside shoulder position.





Beat 2 From the inside shoulder position, accelerate in an arc downward to the outside to create a beat point at the centre waist position. Then decelerate horizontally over a shortened space to place the secondary point at waist height at the outside edge of the body.




<p>Beat 3 From the outside waist position burst, then decelerate, upward to the centre head position.</p>	
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Measure 2


<p>Beat 1 From the head position, swing downward with acceleration moving inside in an arc to create a beat point at the inside waist position; then decelerate on a shortened path to the inside body position.</p>	
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<p>Beat 2 Burst diagonally upward with deceleration in a straight line to the outside head position.</p>	
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<p>Beat 3 Accelerate downward in an arc to create a beat point at the outside waist position and decelerate in a very shortened space to the centre waist position.</p>	
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Measure 3

<p>Beat 1 Burst upward with deceleration to the centre head position.</p>	
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<p>Beat 2 From the head position swing with acceleration downward and outward to create a beat point at the centre waist position; then move upward with deceleration to the outside shoulder position.</p>	
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<p>Beat 3 Accelerate downwards and slightly inwards in an arc to create a beat point at the outside waist position; then decelerate upward to the centre head position.</p>	
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Repeat from measure one. Remember the rhythm the gestures represent.

Wayne Toews demonstrates this exercise on YouTube – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzMskCsiYL8>

Here, the bursting from-point gesture, which invites a breath, is called the intermediate preparatory motion. This exercise intersperses the intermediate preparatory motion with into-point gestures to show how they can be joined. It leads to proficiency in conducting multi-metred music and complex phrasing. Control of the arm and precise timing are critical to success. Done correctly, an ensemble can read it to enter precisely after a single preparatory gesture.

The Saito method facilitates the development of skills and teaches them in a comprehensive and thoroughly musical way. Ensembles and audiences alike have benefited from Saito's "secret" because it provides conductors with many more alternatives to express their artistry.

Wayne Toews lives in Saskatoon, SK, Canada where he conducted band and choir musicians in school programs as well as a youth orchestra that won six successive national performance awards in a career that has spanned 40 years. After studying in Tokyo, he edited the English edition of the Saito Conducting Method textbook. In 2005 he founded Conductorschool.com to share the ideas of Hideo Saito and Morihiro Okabe. A free introduction to the Saito conducting method in an AV enhanced PDF is available on request from info@conductorschool.com.

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