

*David Whitwell*

# Right-Hemisphere Conducting



*Maxime's Music*

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## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 1*

*Why the students don't listen to you in rehearsal*



IN A RECENT PAPER, “Why Music Education is no longer about Music,” I reviewed for the reader the basic characteristics of our bicameral brain.<sup>1</sup> With respect to the purposes of the conductor we have a right hemisphere of the brain which is a depository of personal experiences, including the emotions. Here, then, is understood the experience of pain, but it is an individual understanding based on a particular individual’s own personal experience with pain. It is the experiential essence of the right hemisphere which makes that side the real us. It is there that we differ with everyone else on the planet.

Pain is understood in the left hemisphere only as a dictionary definition, one shared by everyone who speaks the language associated with that dictionary. In other words, all information stored in the left hemisphere is what Maslow called “spectator information,” for

<sup>1</sup> Since the initial research which won the Nobel Prize in Medicine, there has been a flood of publications which continue to attempt to map the circuits among our three trillion brain cells. All this notwithstanding, the basic division of a rational left hemisphere and an experiential right hemisphere remain valid.

it was all of it told to the individual by someone else. Someone tells you 2 plus 2 equals 4 and you memorize it. Everyone agrees; no one differs. But there is one more very significant characteristic here. *All* the information stored in the left hemisphere is past tense. But we are always in the present tense. We can think about the past or future but we ourselves are only and always in the present tense. In other words, the left hemisphere can never be us! Is it not curious, therefore, that most of education, which is said to educate us, in fact is dedicated to the hemisphere which is not us.

Every school conductor has had the following experience. We stop the ensemble in rehearsal and point out some important characteristic which needs attention. "This passage is marked *piano*, please play softly here next time." And then the next time this passage is played in rehearsal nothing is changed, it is still not *piano*. The conductor thinks to himself, "What am I doing here? No one is listening to me. Are they ignoring me on purpose? Are they testing me?"

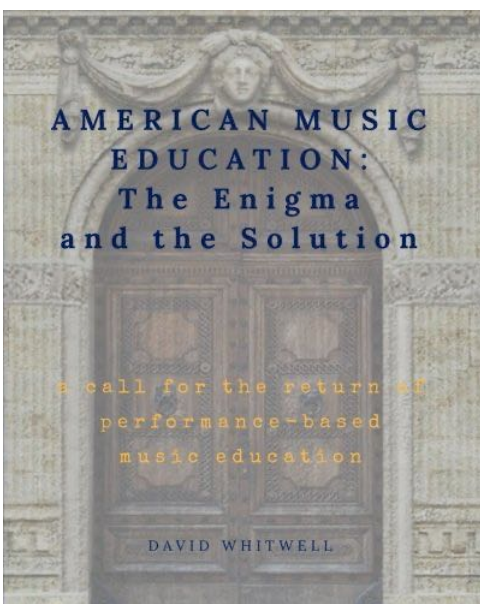
Before I explain the real problem here, let me recall an even more vivid experience of my own. I was just finishing the rehearsal of a very emotional composition, one in which myself and the students were deeply involved in the emotional nature of the music. Perhaps it was *Ein Heldenleben* of Strauss, or something like that. I gave a final release with the baton and thanked the musicians, thus ending the rehearsal. Just as I turned to step off the podium a student who was not in the ensemble, but in some class which used the room the following hour, asked me, "Is there a pencil sharpener in this room?" I recall vividly that at that moment I heard his question, I understood his question and I knew the answer to his question. But I could not answer him, I could not find the words to answer. It took several seconds before, in my mind, I could leave the experiential right hemisphere where I was so totally involved and progress to the left hemisphere which alone could form a sentence to answer the question, even though, as I said, I knew the answer all along.

And this is exactly what happens in your rehearsal. The quality of the music the students are playing in rehearsal does not matter with regard to this issue. It is the fact that when they are playing they too are in the right hemisphere experiential side. They hear, as a matter of physical sensation, your voice, but they too are not able to shift to the left hemisphere fast enough to understand in the left hemisphere what you actually said.

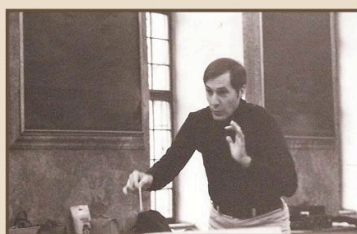
The best solution for achieving what you want in that passage is to know the score so well that you can turn to them in rehearsal, look at them, and with face, body and baton convey *piano*. Now you are communicating in the hemisphere they are in and the next time they will play *piano*.

All experienced conductors discover this eventually and then come to understand how important it is to rehearse without talking. Talking is in the wrong hemisphere and in the wrong tense.

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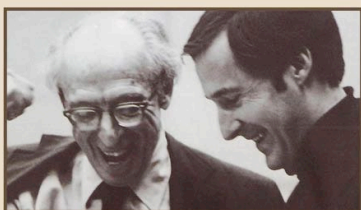


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## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 2*

### *How to Write a Love Letter*



FOR REASONS REVIEWED in the first essay in this series, here you are—the real you, trapped in the right-hemisphere of the brain which is mute, with respect to language,<sup>2</sup> and victim of an educational system which primarily failed to educate the real you. Traditional education addressed itself to educating the left-hemisphere, assembling a mountain of data you can consult if you need to and all of it outside your own experience. Traditional education ignored, or perhaps we should say was not allowed, any educational steps for you to discover your own emotional template. Here, of course, is the perfect role for music education, but so far music educators are afraid to take on this vital role. And so society leaves it to you to discover this for yourself, even though the feelings you possess as an individual will determine all important choices in your life.

<sup>2</sup> The right-hemisphere contains vocabulary known before the age of 6 or 7, but it cannot make a sentence with these words. In the case of left-hemisphere injury, however, the right-hemisphere can *sing* these words.

In the previous essay in this series I wrote of a personal experience which made a very clear distinction between the emotions experienced in the right-hemisphere and the left-hemisphere words spoken by a student, "Is there a pencil sharpener in this room?" This example, I think, makes the distinction between our linear rational left-hemisphere and the non-rational, experiential right-hemisphere very clear.

However, these two hemispheres are connected by the *corpus callosum*, a bundle of nerves, which allows the right-hemisphere to contribute emotional emphasis to the left-hemisphere dictionary of words when we speak. In fact it is this contribution by the right-hemisphere which makes sentences correctly understood, as is clear whether you mean to emphasize the first or the third word in the sentence, "I love you."

But this is only true if the listener hears your voice. The great problem comes with writing, for not only is your right-hemisphere then not able to contribute the emotional emphasis which defines meaning, but one is also helpless in face of the fact that you have no way of knowing how the reader will interpret the emotional meaning of the words.

You might write, for example, "What is this thing called love?" but the reader might read:

What? Is this thing called love?,

or:

What is this thing called, Love?

Which brings us to the title of this essay. How do you then enter the dangerous waters of writing a love letter? Dangerous because how the reader of the letter interprets the words means everything.

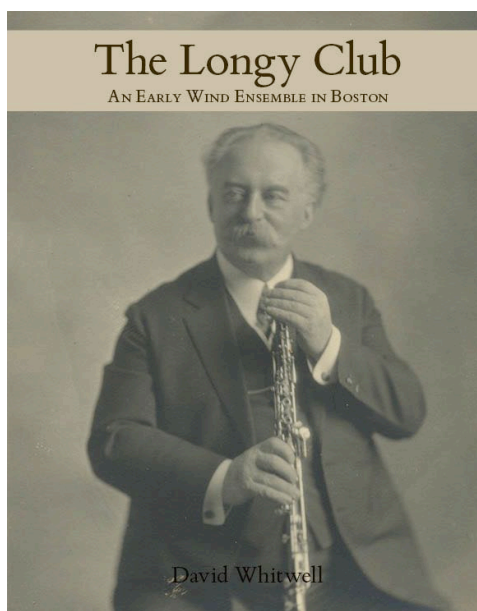
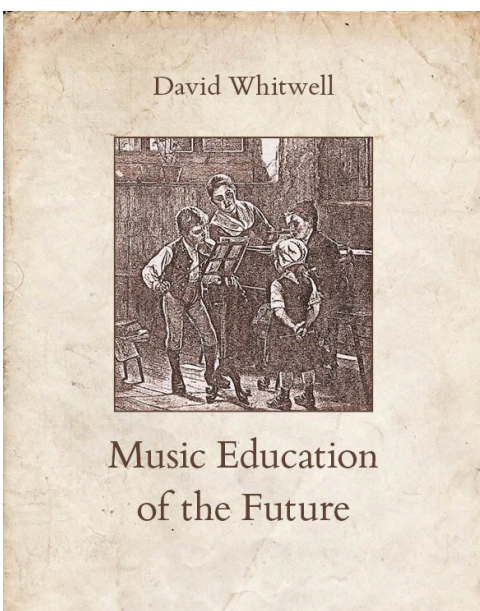
One solution, of course, is not to write the letter but to speak to the recipient in person. But how will the recipient know if you are truthful? What if you are lying? This brings us to the interesting fact that only the left-hemisphere can lie. The right-hemisphere cannot lie and neither can music. It was because of this fact that we have a large literature of love songs beginning in the fourteenth century. A noble man would hire a musician to take the love letter to the lady and sing it to her to make sure the proper understanding was communicated. It was because music cannot lie that Machaut (b. 1300) wrote to a lady,

And if it please you, my dear lady, to consider the last little song I sang, of which I composed both words and music, you can easily tell whether I'm lying or speaking the truth.

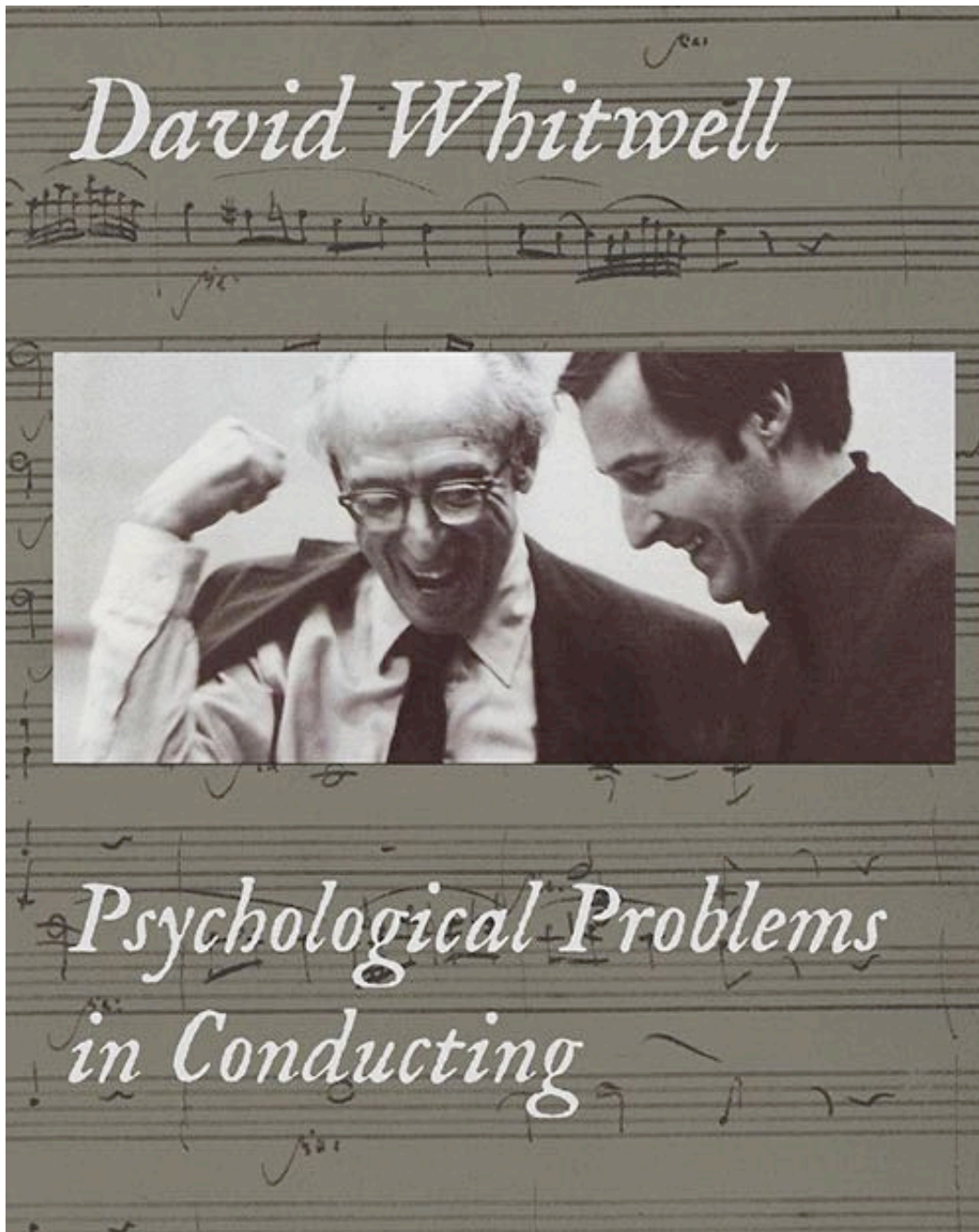


On the other hand, or perhaps we should say going the other direction, due to the *corpus callosum* we do have some ability to speak about our emotions. In terms of the rehearsal I like to think of a metaphor of a “music room,” such as was found in the Elizabethan theater, centered over the stage, a place in the center of my head where the feelings enter from the right and the necessary vocabulary from the left. I imagine them finding some common purpose in this “music room” to come to my aid in rehearsal.

In this respect I do find one thing very clear from my own experience. Speaking to an ensemble in rehearsal should be language directed toward the spiritual or emotional nature of the music. One thinks of Bruno Walter, his hand together, pleading for the orchestra to do justice to Mozart’s music. I have personally never felt that discussing the grammar of music in rehearsal, chords, form, technique, etc., found any interest among the players nor made any important audible difference in the performance.



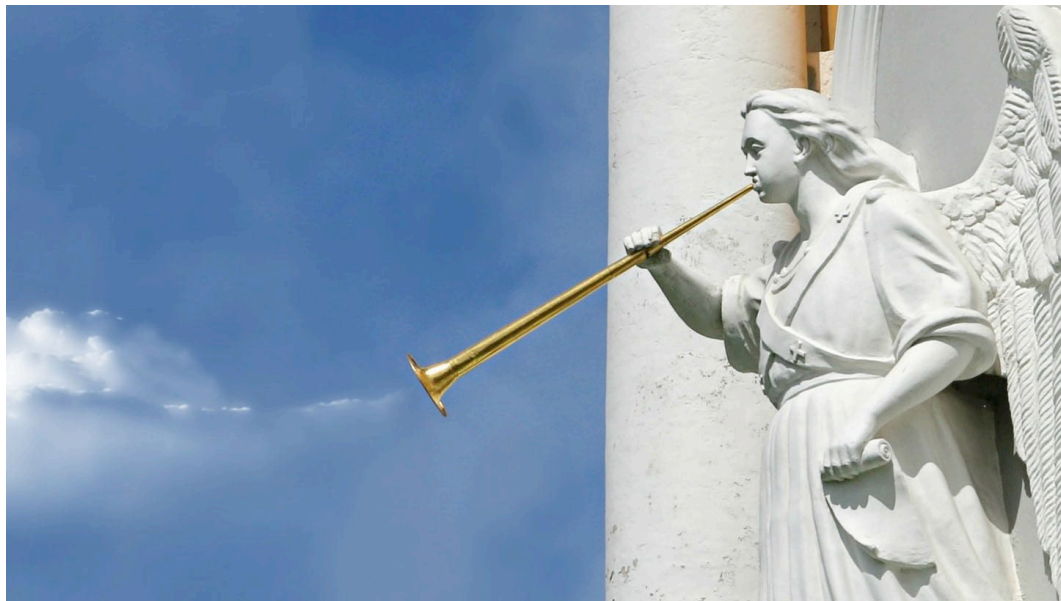
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## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 3*

*Music is not an Art Object*



A NUMBER OF EARLY PHILOSOPHERS debated what is meant by “Art.” Do we mean by Art what the artist has in his mind, or is it the actual manual activity of the artist or do we mean by Art the finished art object? The early Church fathers rejected all three, saying, No, the credit must go to God for he made the artist.

The question is even more complicated, yet more interesting, when the subject is Music. The ancient Greeks separated Music from the other arts, primarily because Music alone among them cannot be seen. This caused them to classify painting as a craft, but Music as something divine.

Certainly Music is something different from a Painting. A Painting is a past tense completed object hanging on a wall, whereas Music only exists in live performance in the present tense. For this reason, a

Painting is a noun, but Music is a verb. A Painting can be owned by an individual, but no one owns Mozart. It is for these reasons alone that Music must be treated separately from Painting and Sculpture. Dance is even more problematic but it depends fundamentally on Music. In fact, some ancient Greeks referred to Dance as the sixth part of Music, the part you could see.

But for the world of the conductor there is another distinction, having to do with the means and the end. Michelangelo, it is clear from the comments of his contemporaries, considered Art to be in the artist's head and that the finished art work was a representation of this. In between these two lay months of laborious work which was necessary but of little importance in comparison with the other two.<sup>3</sup> And we as observers of Art are not particularly interested in the means, only the end.

In Music the "means" is the rehearsal process. In earlier times because they had more power, conductors took advantage of the "means," often requiring great amounts of rehearsal time. The first performance of the Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*, required 120 rehearsals; today an orchestra requires perhaps three hours. I recall a rehearsal in college when the conductor spent two hours on the first five bars of a march!

There is something fundamentally wrong with the philosophy of such conductors. First of all, they were, in my experience as a player in such rehearsals, devoting themselves to the rehearsal of the detail they saw on paper. But there is no music on the paper, only the grammar of music. Even worse, they regarded the rehearsal time as a time for work and only the concert as a time for making music.

That is how I learned to conduct from my university experience. In my first semester of my first job, at the University of Montana, I held one rehearsal per week for the concert band, to allow all of us some relief from the kinds of music used on the football field. One of these rehearsals was visited by a distinguished music education professor at the university, Lloyd Oakland. After rehearsal he said to me, in the most gentle voice, casually holding his pipe, "It seems to me that you don't enjoy rehearsing." "No sir, for me rehearsal is a time for hard work in order that the concert will be musical." "Oh, well," he recalled from his own days as a conductor, "I always enjoyed rehearsals for they too are music making." That comment changed my life as a conductor and my next rehearsal was quite different.

If the reader will forgive me I should like to offer another personal illustration regarding the purpose of rehearsals, the "means to the end." In the year I studied with Eugene Ormandy, I was present for the first rehearsal of the season, a Bruckner Symphony. With nothing

<sup>3</sup> "It is necessary to keep one's compass in one's eyes and not in the hand, for the hands execute but the eye judges." Quoted in Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (Florence, 1878), VII, 270.



more than a brief welcome to new members, Ormandy began with the first movement and there was no break for more than twenty minutes. I, being still in my twenties and very inexperienced, was sitting there wondering when he would begin to rehearse. I was eager to observe his rehearsal technique. When the orchestra stopped, the assistant conductor sitting with me in the hall leaned over to me and said, "Oh!, it sure ruins a good rehearsal to have to stop."

So how should one rehearse? First, one must realize that the students in the ensemble probably already have more technique, as needed in their etudes, etc., than is required for any piece of band music. And, assuming there are no errors in the parts, they can probably quickly learn the notes in rehearsal without further comment. Second, the conductor must remember that the students are there because they love music and they love to play. Any time spent in lecturing them on the grammar of music will turn them off. What the students need, and what should be the point of the rehearsal, is the music which is not found on paper. Remember there are no symbols for the emotions on paper. The conductor knows, from his score study, what the composer was trying to communicate in terms of feeling. The purpose of the rehearsal is to bring into alignment the music heard in the room with the music heard in the conductor's head. If this is the goal, then all rehearsals, even the first one, will consist of music making.

And, as a bonus, you get to hear and have those wonderful musical experiences over and over again and not just once in the concert!

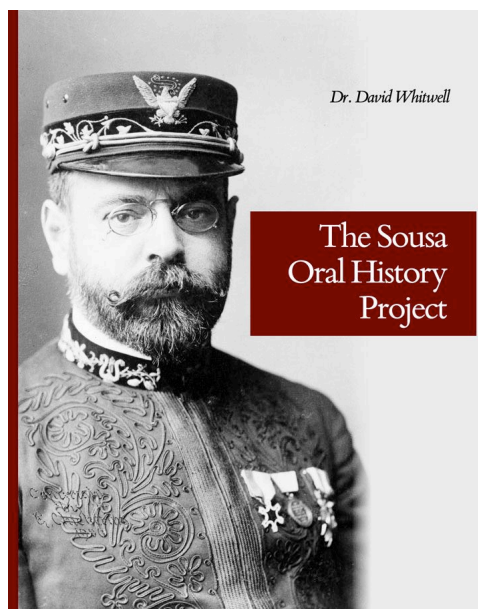
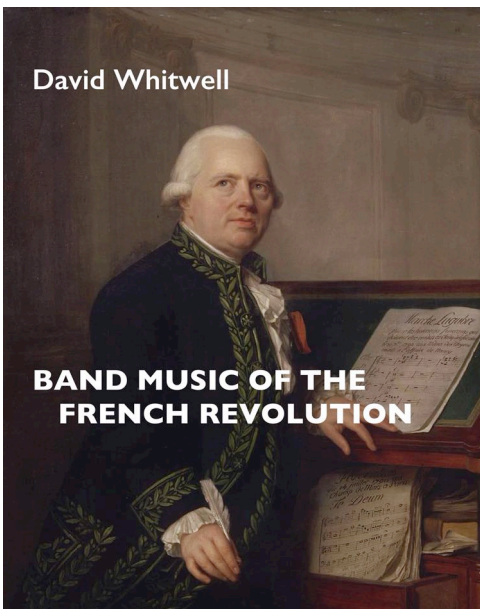
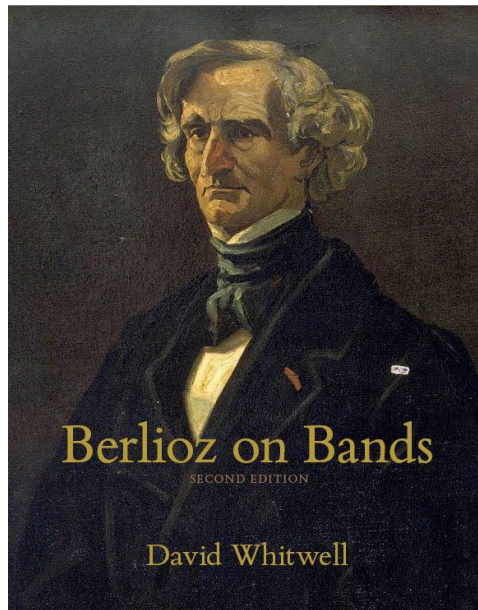
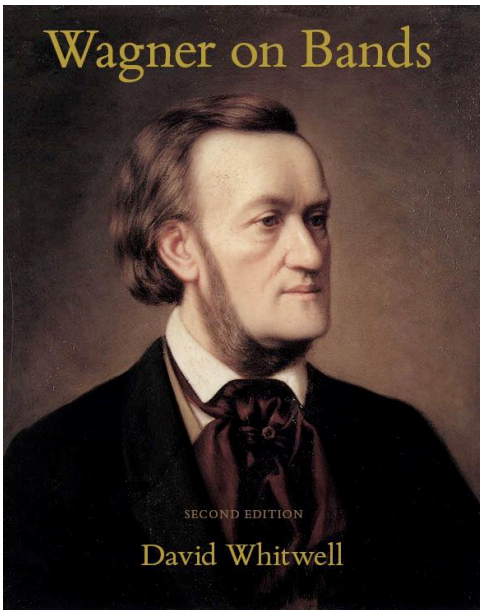
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## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 4*

*When the hall is filled by the emotions created by the music, whose emotions are they?*

FIRST OF ALL, some important facts about the emotions as pertains to conducting:

1. The basic emotions and their expression are the same for all people on earth. There is no such thing as a Chinese smile, a German smile, etc.
2. The basic emotions are genetic, thus they are in place before birth. The smile can be seen in the face of the fetus, but it is not a learned expression for it has never seen a smile.
3. Considering the several million years which span the development of the human species, the so-called modern period, our period, includes the past 10,000 years. Therefore, since all the developmental processes are in place, it has been speculated that if one could go back to the age of the cave painters in Spain and France and adopt a new-born infant and bring him to a family living today, that child would grow up as a normal child.

The significance of this is that Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are to be considered identical to us in their emotional makeup and should not be thought of as men from some distant period. If the contemplative conductor in his study comes to identify a certain emotion in some passage in Mozart, it is very likely to be identical with what Mozart himself felt. Beethoven's *Rondo*, Op. 129, "Rage over a lost penny" expresses a frustration every listener today can identify with.

4. It is important to remember that the composer had the feeling first, before he wrote notes on paper. Thus the challenge for the conductor is to try to understand what the composer *felt*, not what he *wrote*.

After the composer puts his feelings on paper in the form of music notation, the burden is then on the performer to faithfully convey this to the listener. Let us say a pianist is going to perform a Beethoven Sonata. The notes are on paper but the duty falls to the pianist to create the emotion, for the composer is no longer here to represent himself in person. The pianist must become Beethoven, and for the reasons given above, assuming contemplative study, he will succeed if discovering feeling is his goal. The great pianist, Alfred Brendel addressed this very point.

Although I find it necessary and refreshing to *think* about music, I am always conscious of the fact that feeling must remain the Alpha and Omega of a musician; therefore my remarks proceed from *feeling* and return to it.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The New Yorker*, May 30, 1977.

Carlo Maria Giulini makes the very same point with regard to the conductor.

An interpreter, in the moment he is involved in a great expression of art, becomes himself the composer. A great actor, in the moment he is playing Iago, has to be Iago. A great interpreter must live with a deep 100% conviction in what he is doing.

The reference Giulini makes to the theater is very accurate, for the dramatic arts like Music also have both a written form and a different form in performance. No critic, no member of the audience would expect the actors on stage to just walk around reading from their playbook. Everyone expects them to add the emotional qualities necessary to give the character verisimilitude. Curiously, in the field of Music there are some critics who say, "Just play the notes."

For an orchestra or a band this primary duty falls to the conductor who must cause the ensemble to join him in representing the composer's feelings. What happens next was discussed by Wagner in the analogy of a magnet. Wagner said that a kind of general, core form of the emotion, which he called the quintessence of the emotion, extends to the players and in turn is what leaves the stage toward the audience. In an audience of 2,000 it is assumed everyone will understand this quintessence form. If the music is sad, no one will find it happy. But this core form of the emotion then enters the ears of the individual and is sifted through that individual's personal experience with that emotion and it is then heard in a personal meaning in the right hemisphere of his brain.

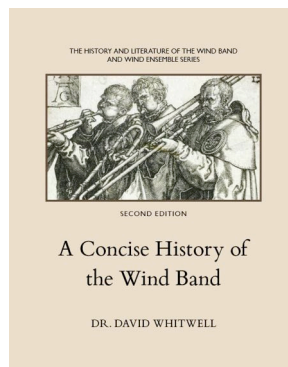
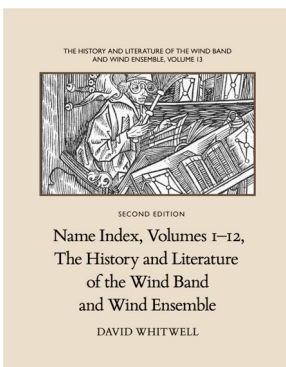
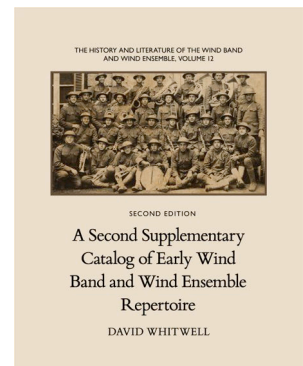
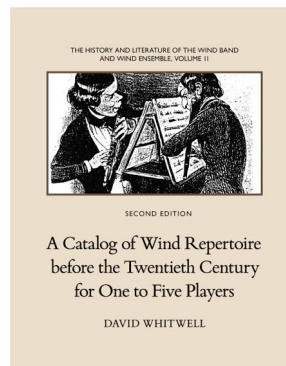
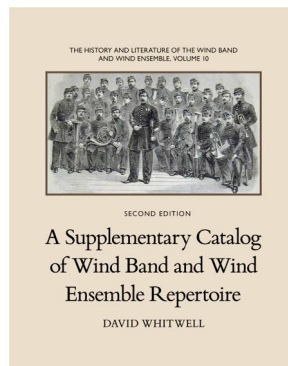
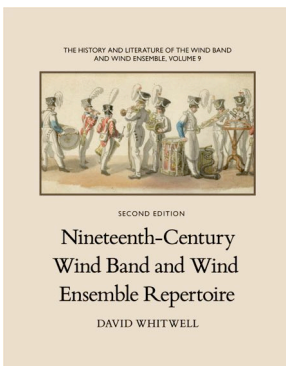
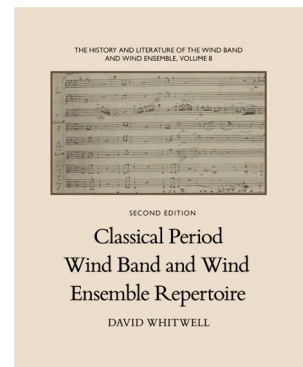
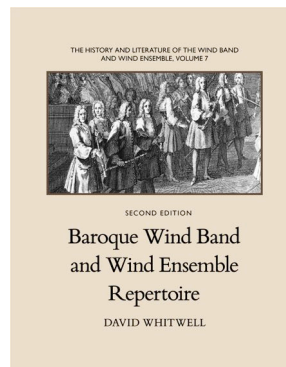
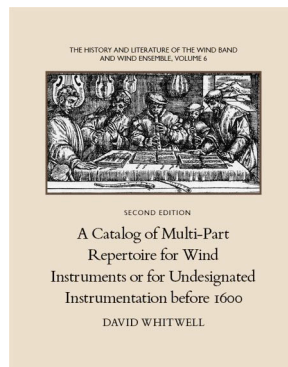
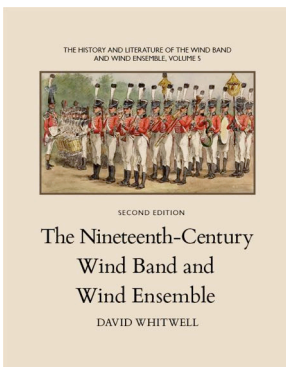
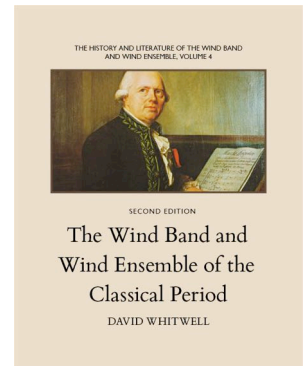
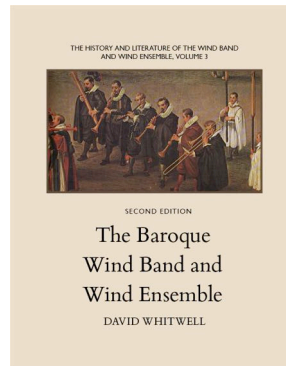
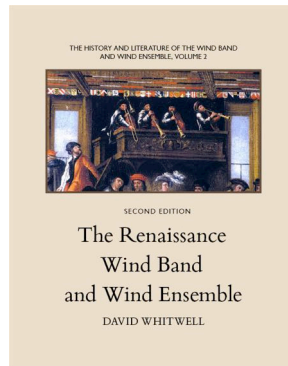
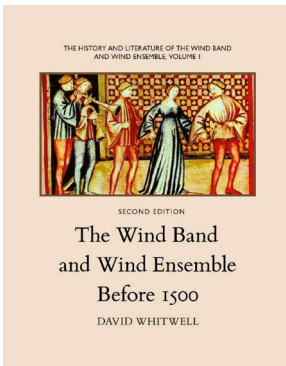
This is one of the unique aspects of music, that it communicates in both a general and an individual language of feeling at the same time. Since music makes no sense without a listener, then the answer to the question asked in the title is you, the emotions you perceive are your own. It is your emotions as a listener that give meaning to

music. Are we minimizing Beethoven? No, for communicating with you was his very purpose in composing.

This is the power of Music, that the experience goes directly from composer to listener. This is not true in Painting, for example, where a canvas stands between the artist and the viewer. Neither does the listener have to “know anything” about Music, for his understanding of Music as a language of feeling comes to him also through genetic transfer.

It is this direct experience in Music which often makes it possible for an individual to have the feeling of a personal relationship with a particular composer. It is also this direct experience with the composer that raises a question in programming. What if the composer is, or was, a bad person? Can we have true empathy with such a person. I think of Manuel de Falla who loved the music of Debussy and decided to write an opera on the life of that composer. He began composing, but as he became more familiar with the life of Debussy he found him to be a contemptible person and so closed his score. This strictly ethical composer found he could not empathize with such a person and therefore could not create music representing him.

This leads us to comment that while it is rare in orchestral circles, in the band field there often appears a composer who is not a genuine artist, but rather a shallow fellow writing only for money. Given the direct experience between composer and listener, here the player, should we not supply his music to our students, who live already in a society filled with shallow and commercial interests? Or, do we just play his music and make everyone happy? For a conductor who is charged with the development of young people, perhaps it is a question worthy of some thought.



## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 5*

*"Time" is not of our World*



Whosoever danceth not, knoweth not the way of life.—*Jesus Christ*<sup>5</sup>

Muscles were made for movement, and rhythm is movement. It is impossible to conceive a rhythm without thinking of a body in motion. To move, a body requires a quantum of space and a quantum of time. The beginning and end of the movements determine the amount of time and space involved.—*Emile Jacques-Dalcroze*<sup>6</sup>

TIME, AS THE WORD IS USED in ordinary conversation today, does not exist in the natural world. Time, as we use the word today, refers to an artificial man-made regimentation of our lives and is so foreign to our nature that we rebel against it every day, as, for example, is exemplified in our individual sleep requirements.

Society has had a very difficult struggle in regimenting Time. Even in so basic a problem as the definition of the calendar year, the regu-

<sup>5</sup> Found in a Gnostic Hymn of the second century, quoted in Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: Norton, 1937), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, in *Rhythm Music & Education* (London: Dalcroze Society, 1980), 39

lators still, after centuries, have not got it right—on 31 December 2008 it became necessary for the world to add one second to its clocks.

“Time” with respect to man himself must be thought of as a natural part of his right-hemisphere, experiential world. Since the right-hemisphere also enables us to understand and deal with aspects of space, I would think that the earliest of men, as Dalcroze suggests above, were aware more of space than Time. To throw a spear at an animal required something to happen here and then there. It was the *space* between the here and there that early man would have understood, but not as a matter of Time. It is interesting in this regard that the fifth-century writer, Martianus Capella, still defined a “tone” as something “stretched over a space.”

The earliest of men, of course, truly lived in the present tense and having no need to think of past or future they had no need for a concept of Time as we know it.

The history of musicians is a history of the rebellion against the regimentation of Time. This has so frustrated the linear, rational world of philosophy that critics have had to invent words to describe the unexplainable actions of musical artists. In the early twentieth century, for example, critics invented the term “elastic style” to label the free romantic interpretations of the late nineteenth century. Earlier critics adopted the Italian word, *rubato*, to account for musicians having the audacity to tamper with the rigid meter notation on paper. The literal definition of *rubato*, “stolen Time,” reflects the unbendable ethics of the critics.

Many who hoped to bring a left-hemisphere order to our experiences with Time have suggested that all matters of Time in music had their origin in the human pulse. But this makes no sense because no two people have the same pulse—they vary greatly.<sup>7</sup> No doctor will answer you if you ask, “What is the official standard pulse?” And as it turns out, in so far as I can determine from my own reading, that there was in fact only one early writer, Franchino Gaffurio (1451–1518), who mentioned the relationship of the pulse to tempo. But in the same treatise he confesses that singers were making “sounds which cannot be written down.”<sup>8</sup>

There are innumerable examples of our great composers who have fought against the regimentation of Time and in particular the regimentation of pulse. Monteverdi pleaded with a singer to reflect the beat of the heart (a common metaphor for feeling) and not the beat of the hand. And then there is Beethoven’s contention, which should be engraved above the doors of all music departments, “Feeling has its own tempo.”

Similarly, there are many examples of early composers urging the performers to feel free to ignore their notation of Time and Tempo.

<sup>7</sup> One of my personal doctors told me he has had a patient with a pulse rate of 200 and he was unconcerned about this.

<sup>8</sup> *Practica musicae*.



These pieces should not be played to a strict beat any more than modern madrigals which, though difficult, are made easier by taking the beat now slower, now faster, and by even pausing altogether in accordance with the expression and meaning of the texts.—Girolamo Frescobaldi, *Toccatas and Partitas* [1615], Book I.

In accordance with the feeling one must guide the beat, sensing it now fast, now slow, according to the occasion, now liveliness, and now languor, as indeed anyone will easily know immediately who possess the fine manner of singing.—Giovanni Bonachelli, *Corona di sacri gigli ...* 1642.

During the sixteenth century Italian composers began using the familiar Italian words we find at the upper left-hand corner of a score. But whereas we have been taught to think of these words in terms of tempo, they thought of them in terms of character. And thus, since character is native to the right-hemisphere's emphasis on individual experience, we find no agreement among those early writers. The German, Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), thought *Andante* meant *hope*.<sup>9</sup> But the English critic, Roger North (1653–1734), thought *Andante* meant “walking about full of concern.”<sup>10</sup>

And similarly in the Classical Period, Quantz gives the tempo of *Adagio* as quarter-note = 16 (!!), whereas in Mozart's beautiful *Ave verum corpus*, a work written in *alla-breve* which is usually performed about quarter-note = 140, we are astonished to see *Adagio*.

It is easy to imagine the concept of pulse with regard to dancing by an individual, but getting a group of dancers to dance on the same pulse is another matter. Now they may all be forced to dance to a pulse which is natural to none of them. This is why in European palaces you will sometimes see affixed to a wall a huge club, with which the dancing master pounded the floor to enforce the pulse. Lully died from infection after accidentally hitting his toe with one of these clubs in rehearsal.

In a similar example, the English audiences were very excited in seeing and hearing for the first time the new seventeenth-century Italian custom of coordinated bowings. But this is also a form of regimentation and in the twentieth century Leopold Stokowski engaged in serious experiments by having the Philadelphia Orchestra string players return to the bowing of their choice as he believed there was a loss of individual musicianship in coordinated bowings. Needless to say, the thoroughly regimented Philadelphia critics would not let him get away with this.

For band conductors of the present day I believe there is no greater obstacle to musicianship than the fear of breaking the barriers inferred by the measure bar lines. Gunther Schuller once expressed the same concern as follows:

<sup>9</sup> *Der vollkommene Capelmeister* [1739]

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in John Wilson, *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello, 1959), 119ff.

How is it that the rubato style adopted by most pianists is generally regarded as a favorable proof of sensibility, whereas it would not be tolerated for a moment in an orchestral performance?<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *The Compleat Conductor* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 71

My advice for the conductor who wants to be more musical is to first remember that the composer began with feelings he wished to communicate but in order to communicate them he was required to force them into our very strict and regimented arithmetic metrical notation. Therefore you help him by removing the chains which hold his music in place; you do not insult him by setting him free. On the contrary, if you perform exactly what is on paper you will only join him in chains.

Always hold dear Beethoven's advice that feeling has its own tempo. And follow Leopold Mozart's advice in his book on violin playing that you should ignore those Italian words in the upper left-hand corner and let the music itself tell you the proper tempo. The danger in those Italian words is that when you see "Allegro," for example, you are immediately prejudiced with the thought that here is a fast piece. Better to follow Leopold's advice, which is based on an old etiquette of court life: never speak to a noble unless spoken to. Give the music a chance to speak to you first before you impose your will upon it.

Regarding the application of the right-hemisphere to melodic and rhythmic elements, let me cite two examples from a repertoire work everyone knows, the Wagner *Trauermusik*.

The notes in bars 45–46 are melodic in character. When you see a melody, go to a piano to find the pitches and sing it. In singing it you will quickly discover the natural shape of the melody, the ways some notes lead to others. You discover the right-hemisphere version as opposed to the left-hemisphere data form. Only one of these is musical, so conduct it the way you sing it. In bars 45–46 there is absolutely no reason on earth why every quarter-note should be the same length. There are no rules whatsoever which determine how long these measures must take.

Now look at the last two bars of the final cadence of this same score. Here the woodwinds have a tie making both bars become one very long uninterrupted sound, although this tie is missing in almost all editions. The brass chords in the last two bars represent large church bells. In order to communicate this to the audience, while your right baton hand stays unmoving to reflect the woodwinds holding their very long pitch, use your left hand to bring in the first brass/bell and let it sound for a time, then cut the sound off. After a pause, while the woodwinds continue sounding, whatever length of pause feels right to you, you bring in the brass/bell again and let it ring. Then cut it off, then pause again and then finally with the left

hand bring in the brass/bell to join the ongoing woodwind chord. When I conduct these two bars they can sometimes last 20 or more seconds. And longer if in a resonant hall.

In both of these two places nothing could be more unmusical than an on-going steady beating of quarter-notes. And suppose someone criticizes you for your rubato. Before you answer, remember you never have to apologize for your own *feelings*.

Finally, cadences in slow compositions generally need more time than the notated music allows, time to allow the listeners to pull back and relax from the tensions of the music. The most common error I hear is to fail to allow an appropriate taper to the final note, regardless of written duration. I have heard many performances where the final note is violently cut off by the conductor (is he afraid not everyone will stop?). It results in a terrible jolt for the listener. I am often quoted for something I said in a rehearsal many years ago—“Cadences and kisses should never be abrupt!”



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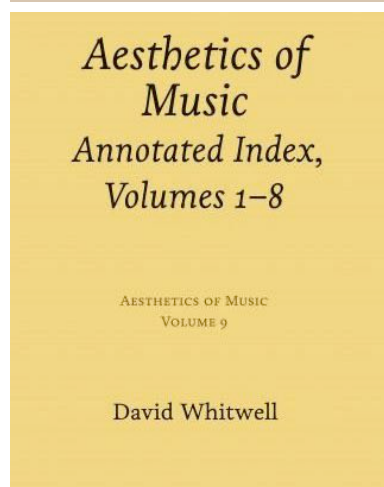
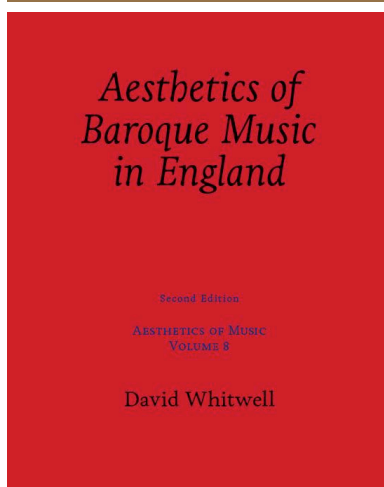
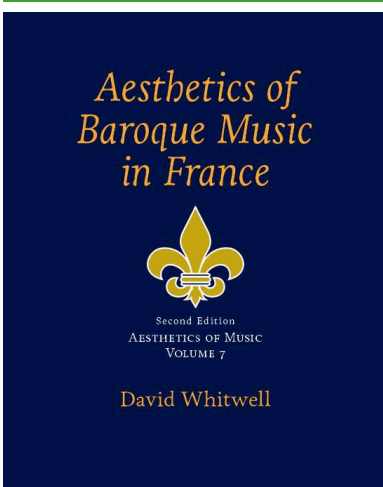
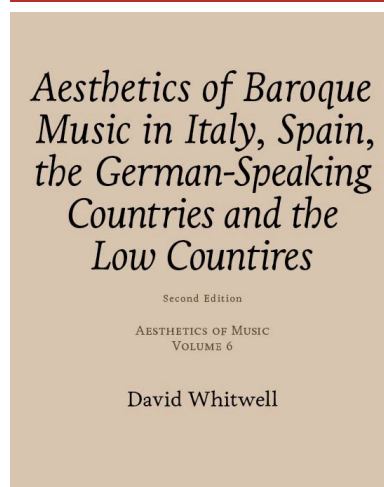
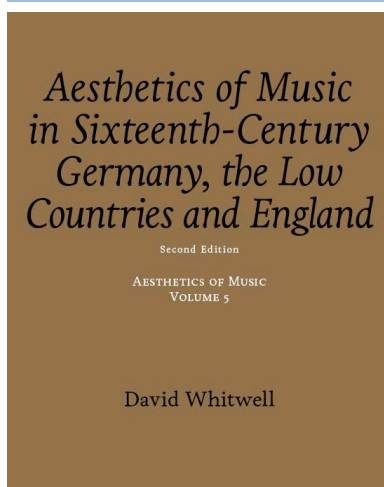
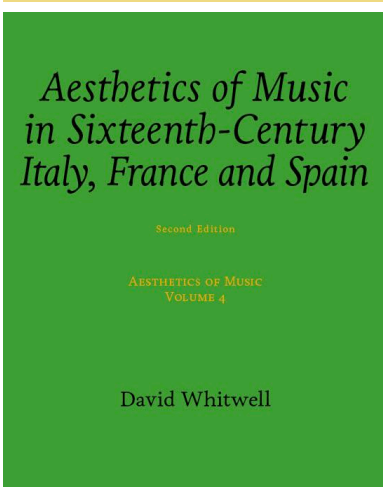
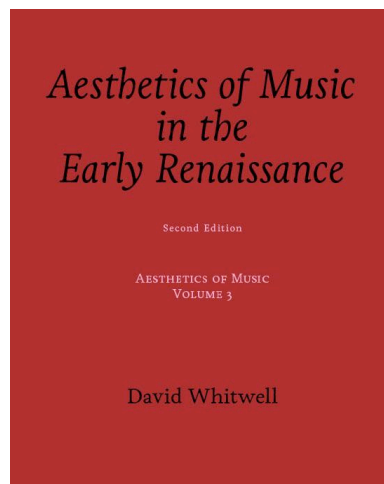
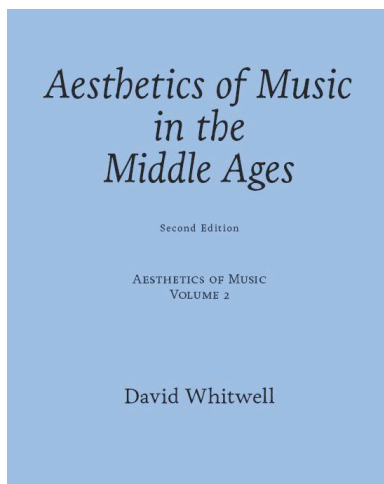
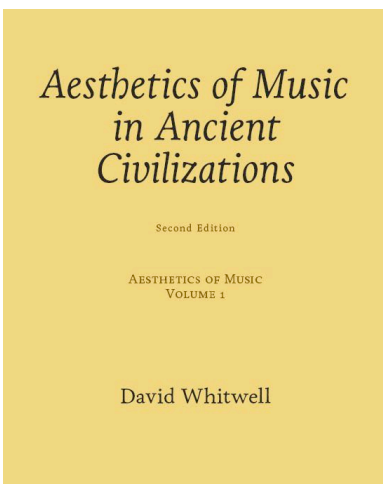
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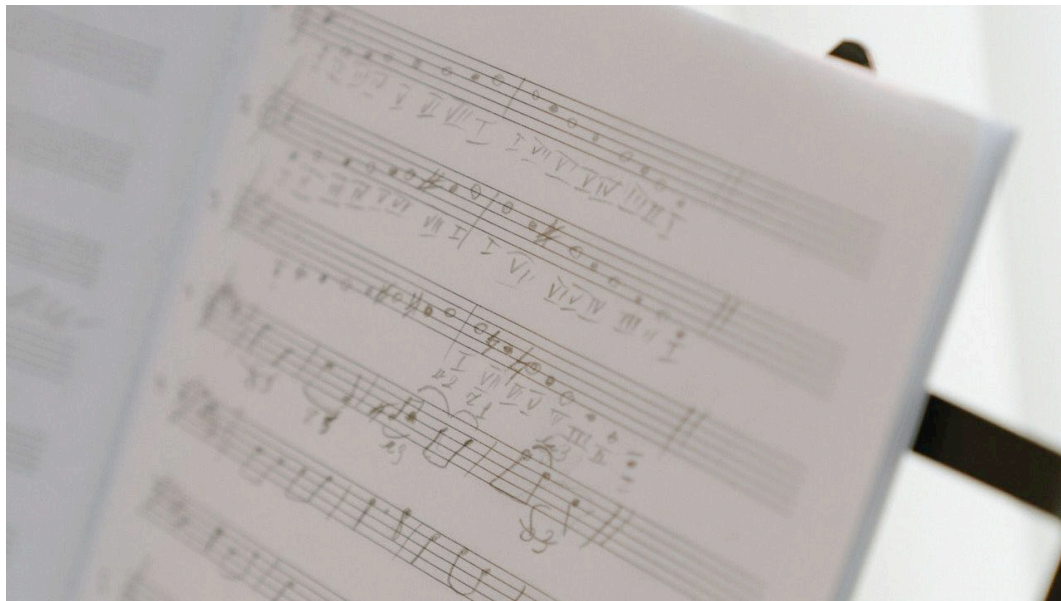


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## *Right-Hemisphere Conducting, No. 6*

*How the Right-Hemisphere understands Harmony*



SOMEWHERE IN THE DIM distant reaches of my memory I recall being told of the modes in music that minor was sad and major was happy. But what key is nostalgia, which is often a mixture of the two emotions?

This old definition is, of course, a vast simplification and with no real basis. If you stop to think about it, the key of A minor includes three major triads and the key of A major has four minor triads. The materials being so similar reminds me of the centuries old debate among philosophers on the fine line between pleasure and pain.

Actually, common sense, supported by clinical brain research, tells us that in fact it is melody, not harmony, which conveys the emotions to the listener.<sup>12</sup> There appear to be specific melodic patterns which are satisfying and which come genetically with birth.

<sup>12</sup> I acknowledge that all melodies have harmonic relationships.

The great book on this subject, for conductors, is the *The Language of Music* by Deryck Cooke (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). Cooke, after much study, presents a very strong case for specific melodic patterns which composers across several centuries all seem to identify with specific emotions.

Cooke, to quote an example, says that Do–Mi–Sol–La–Sol conveys the feeling of child-like innocence (think Humperdinck’s “Fourteen angels guard my sleep”). But the same with the substitution of a lowered La becomes acute pain. I invite the reader to sing these examples, but to not conduct them as you sing. You will feel a physical difference and you feel your right-hemisphere controlling your face as your singing takes you from child-like innocence to pain.

I have come to believe that the essential contribution of Harmony to Music is not to create emotions, although it can support them, but rather to creation motion, the motion from one beat to the next beat. The chord of the dominant seventh clearly has such a strong force to go forward that it drives you nuts if it doesn’t resolve.<sup>13</sup>

It is a combination of all these factors which results sometimes in a circumstance where a composer will have a strong feeling which can only be expressed by the power of a single accidental in the melody. In such cases the performer or conductor has a heavy responsibility to convey in performance just the necessary emphasis of this altered tone, not too much and not too little. Consider, for example, the beginning of the second movement, the Funeral March, of Beethoven’s *Third Symphony*. In this movement, Beethoven is beginning a symphonic journey in C minor, but already in the fourth bar there is an F-sharp, a note not found in C minor. The theorist has a name for this F-sharp—NON-HARMONIC TONE (ILLEGAL ALIEN). But this is misleading, for it is a very important note. The right-hemisphere hears this not as a curiosity of theory, but as pain. Beethoven was reminding us that when someone you know dies it can cause pain for you.

The first challenge for the conductor is to find a genuine artistic composer whose work is an honest communication of feeling. That is not so easy to find these days. Then the conductor must recreate this honest communication of feeling to his players. This is best done on a non-verbal basis, through his demeanor, his facial expressions and a conducting style which reflects the emotions. What we owe the audience is emotional honesty, through and through. You cannot fool the audience any more than you can fool someone with a phony smile.

Actually, the brain makes this conducting challenge a very easy one to accomplish. Consider the center fielder in baseball: a ball is hit toward him and his *only* thought is catch the ball. The right-

<sup>13</sup> Everyone will recall the famous incident in Potsdam when Bach was invited to a reception where he would meet, for the first time, the king. The local Kapellmeister was playing background harpsichord music for the reception and was looking forward to seeing Bach, who was by that time quite famous in Germany. When Bach entered, the harpsichordist was so moved that he stopped playing, leaving an unresolved chord hanging in the air. Bach immediately walked across the room and resolved the chord before turning to meet the king.



hemisphere solves complex problems in the affect of gravity, wind factors, height and distance, etc., and solves it so fast that the center fielder begins to run the instant the ball is hit to the exact point where the ball will fall. You will never see a center fielder running left when the ball is going to his right.

The very same thing happens in conducting. With only a simple thought, a particular emotion and the music associated with it, the right-hemisphere takes over face, body and baton in order to communicate this emotion. However this only happens if the conductor knows the score on a right-hemisphere basis and does not look down at the score. If he looks at the score, he sees left-hemisphere grammar, his face will go blank, the body expression disappears, and the students will look away from his face.

The performance, no doubt, will continue with utter precision, fine intonation and tone quality, but he will have failed the composer, his players and his audience. He will be rewarded by the audience's tepid applause which characterizes polite disinterest.



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