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Author(s): Gillian MacKay

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Mimes and Conductors: Silent Artists

By Gillian MacKay

Music educators who conduct ensembles can learn from mime technique how to convey more meaning through their gestures.

In conducting workshops, attention is sometimes drawn to the relationship between conducting and the art of mime theatre. At some, professional mimes lecture on fundamentals and provide feedback on participants' conducting. Although I always found mime concepts compelling, my attempts to transfer them to my own conducting were frustrated by a very superficial understanding of the art form. This frustration led me to study mime theatre myself, hoping to develop an understanding that would enhance my own conducting and teaching.

My brief studies have taught me that mime can assist us both physically and artistically as we strive to bring clarity, economy, and expression to our musical leadership. With the help of mime techniques, we can talk less and conduct more, allowing our students to make better music.

There are some obvious parallels between the two art forms. Mimes and conductors both refine silent techniques to maximize clarity and optimize their message. There is a great deal of similar vocabulary: Mimes talk about phrasing, unison, counterpoint, and canon. They also deal with issues of pacing, shape, style, articulation, and dynamics—

many of the same things that define and animate music. What follows is a selection of mime concepts that have inspired the most reflection on my approach to conducting.

Begin in Stillness

Most mime plays begin with the lights coming up on a still figure—rarely does a mime enter or exit the stage.¹ This creates a stillness on stage that frames the mime's initial motion and gives it meaning. As conductors, we need to do the same thing. If we start without truly achieving stillness, meaning is taken away from the first gesture we make. Because of our motion of entering the stage before the music begins, we must take a moment to establish a physical quietness in preparation for the music. Beginning from stillness also helps our players and singers become calm and focused before the music starts.

Gestural Meaning and Intention

Every motion a mime makes will have meaning ascribed to it by the audience.² When the lights come up on a motionless mime, the audience strains to observe the first gesture, which will seem very "loud" because it comes out of stillness. Mimes thus

Gillian MacKay is an associate professor of wind conducting and music education on the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. She can be contacted at gillian.mackay@utoronto.ca.

choose even their tiniest motions extremely carefully. Mime audiences learn to be attentive to every gestural detail, and they can become frustrated if they invest meaning in a gesture that turns out to be meaningless. Mime is a “less-is-more” art form. As with conducting, clarity comes from efficiency and economy of gesture. Our mime teachers admonished, “You’re babbling!” if our gestures were too fast, too numerous, or too busy.

Every mime gesture must be driven by a character’s intention.³ Excellent mimes have such technical control that that they make no gestures or motions of which they are unaware. If we seek to apply this to conducting, we see immediately that there are some gestures that lose their meaning either through repetition (beat patterns) or through a lack of connection to specific musical intentions. If we chose our gestures as specifically and carefully as mimes do, how much more efficient and effective would our conducting be? A challenging way to assess our own effectiveness in this regard is to *stop* conducting and gesture only when something specific needs to be indicated. This daunts conductors who tend to believe they are needed to keep the music going. If we are able to overcome this fear, we are free to choose distinctive gestures, driven by a particular musical message. Our gestures will be more meaningful to our musicians because they will be free of other physical “chatter.”

The Eyes and Face

Mime is an art that breaks an action into discrete components. This fundamental concept makes it unique among movement art forms. Each portion of a normally connected series of motions is considered separately: Mimes talk about using their art to show a series of snapshots, rather than a video. By this they mean that there must be moments of clarity and discovery that connect to create the flow of a play. In all cases, the eyes of the character are the starting point for the expression of a thought or idea. Even a simple series of actions must be clearly articulated. For example, rather than seeing an imaginary object, reaching for it, and picking it up, the mime will first (1) show that she has seen the object by responding to it physically, (2) show the *idea* to pick it up, which comes directly from the eyes, (3) reach for

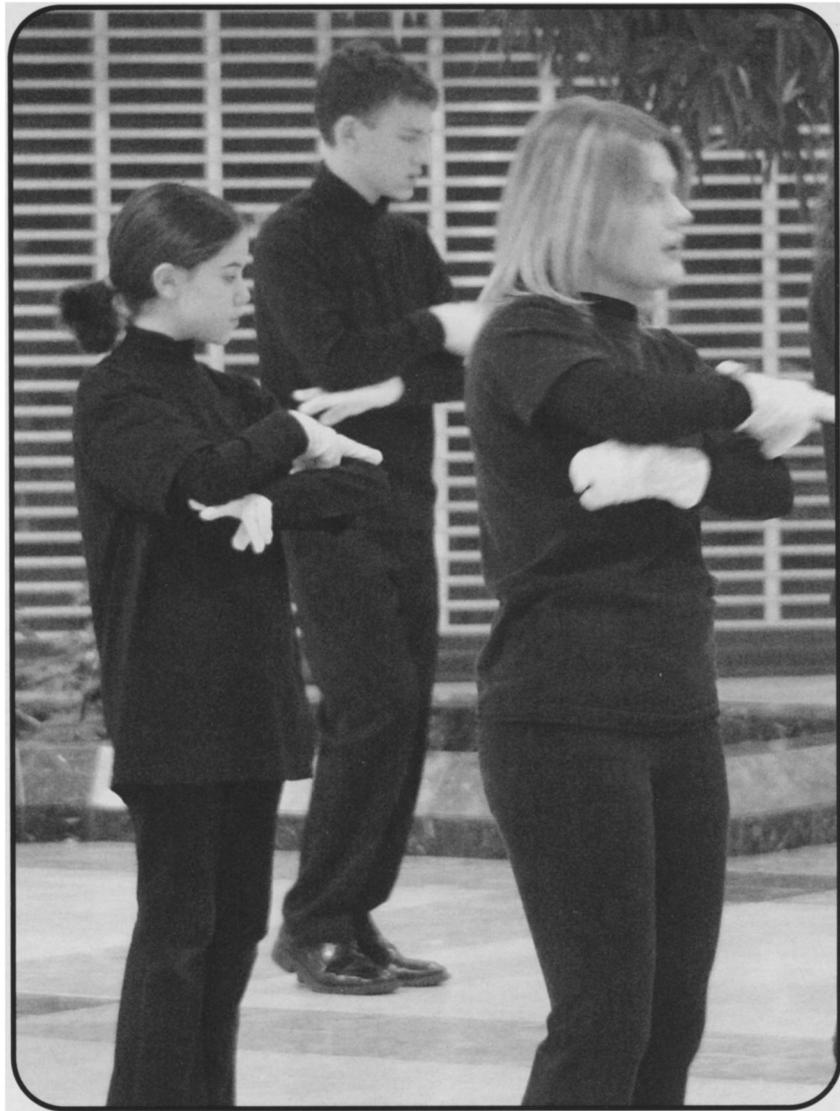


Photo by Becky Spray

As with conducting, clarity in mime comes from efficiency and economy of gesture.

the object, (4) make contact with it, thereby defining its shape and texture, and finally (5) pick it up, thereby defining its mass. This separation of thought and action is crucial to understanding in mime, and takes real work to enunciate physically. Mastery of this concept is often the real key to making a mime play understandable.

Since the eyes show the birth of a character’s thoughts and decisions, it is crucial that the audience is able to see the mime’s eyes. Mimes work to keep their eyes wide open for maximum expression and communication with the audience. Every set of eyes has a natural shape and size, and those with small or narrow eyes must work particularly hard to

make them visible to the audience.

If the audience cannot see the mime's face, the audience cannot effectively see the mime. If a mime's face drops to the floor and out of view, the audience immediately loses connection with the character on stage. Novice mimes often unconsciously work with their heads down or their eyes closed because they are pre-occupied by their own technique. Novice conductors also tend to look down due to insecurity or lack of knowledge of the score. Conductors need to appreciate how much our face and eyes mean to the ensemble. The potential for clarity and richness of communication is immediately magnified when the conductor's face and eyes are visible to the group. Mimes work without eyeglasses and generally do not have facial hair, either of which would obscure their faces from their audience's view. The eyes and face are keys to most of our communicative power as conductors, and we need to do everything we can to make them visible to our musicians.

The Whole Body

Mimes deal with "whole-body" presentation; the entire body is their expressive canvas. Tremendous effort is put into creating specific shapes with legs, arms, and torsos. Our mime teachers frequently admonished us to "make an interesting shape" to encourage us to develop awareness of the entire body. In mime theatre, asymmetry is generally valued much more highly than symmetry, because it is more dramatic and potentially more expressive.

When a character undertakes an activity, her whole body must be involved. This is most crucial in situations where mimes are working with imaginary objects on the stage. If the mime is twisting something, her whole body will twist to extend the message of what is happening to the object. If throwing something, the mime needs to follow the imaginary object with her eyes to physically reflect the direction and manner in

which the object is traveling. In this way, both the object and the action on it become more visible to the audience. Similarly, if a character is expressing an emotion such as joy, fear, anger, or sadness, her entire body needs to express the same emotion.

We do not often use our entire body expressively in conducting—our

We need to get out entire expressive canvas coordinated to look like the music.

traditional canvas is from the waist up. However, two interesting issues arise from the whole-body concept when we consider it as conductors. First, we are challenged to consider what our entire body would look like if we did use it in its entirety to express the music. What choices would we make for our legs? Second, the idea of whole-body expression challenges us to consider our consistency. A conductor's face, eyes, shoulders, arms, chest, and torso all need to be working together to present a cohesive message. If our arms are liquid but our face is tight, we send a contradictory message that will confuse our musicians. We need to get our entire expressive canvas coordinated to look like the music.

The Breath

Mimes use their breath as the impetus for every gesture. Some are subtle about it, and the mime looks "right" without the audience being aware of the breathing. Others are more obvious (louder) in their use of breath, and use it expressively. There is no such thing as a gesture without a breath attached to it, and most gestures begin with an inhalation. Excellent mimes are very deliberate and specific about the quality of their breathing to increase the depth and meaning of specific gestures.

Although all gestures should originate with a breath, novice mimes tend to go through an entire play while unconsciously holding their breath. In this case, the gestures become visibly disconnected from the core of the mime's body, and lose their effective-

ness. The audience, even one that is not used to watching mime, becomes very uncomfortable. Palpable energy and life pours out of a mime's body once the breath is integrated with the physical motion.

The transfer to conducting here is clear, especially for those of us who work with wind players and choirs.

Our players and singers desperately need us, as conductors, to breathe with them—in the initial preparatory beat, but also for

cues and other entries. Also, we can help create character and style in the music by the way we breathe. The breaths we take as conductors help us connect our gestures to the inner source of the music and will naturally set the players and singers more at ease.

Suspension and Inflation: The Torso

Like dancers, mimes work in suspension, training their bodies to stay tight, abdominal muscles flexed, shoulders down and back, with an imaginary string pulling them to the ceiling as gravity roots them to the earth. Mimes are extremely strong, and they need considerable core strength to create and sustain interesting shapes. At the same time, mimes need to be capable of real lightness; one of our teachers used the expression "we are sails," meaning that there should be air filling the back and the chest. The inflation of the torso provides animation and energy to the shapes created with the body.

Although conductors do not work in tight suspension, we do need to consider the posture and presentation that we use. The idea of being lifted to the ceiling by an invisible string—being pulled up to be visible and strong, works very well for conducting. This also helps open up the sternum, which makes us appear more open and available to the ensemble.

Amplify Your Inner Sound to Amplify Your Gesture

One of the first exercises we did in the mime classes I took was to assign audible sounds to a short series of ges-

tures. This served two purposes: While causing us to think about the sound a gesture might make, we were forced to increase our awareness of exactly what motions we were making. As the exercises became more complex and lengthy, we were challenged to maintain a strong sense of the sound each gesture might make as it moved through space.

This idea offers a compelling contrast to the way we think about conducting, where we work from the point of view of *eliciting*, rather than *creating*, a specific sound with a gesture. Here is an opportunity to think about conducting gestures differently: is there a connection between how the gesture might sound by itself and the type of music it might draw from our ensemble? In all aspects of music making, the strength and specificity of the aural concept has a clear connection to results. If this idea is extended to the very gestures we make as conductors, how will this affect our technique, and how will it help with the gestural choices we make?

Center of Gravity

As they work to achieve excellent suspension, mimes manipulate their center of gravity to help their whole body reflect the weight of what they are doing. If a character is working with imaginary heavy objects, such as a rock, her center of gravity needs to be very low. Mimes will spend hours, still in suspension, “being rock,” mentally connecting themselves to the center of the earth, pulling weight and focus down toward the ground. If a character is working with an imaginary helium balloon or feather, her centre of gravity needs to be high, and up above the centre of her body. Everything she does while working with the light object needs to contribute to the illusion of lightness. Having established the two extremes, mimes then work to develop a palette of gestural variety between them.

Conductors are continually seeking to “look like the music.” To show heaviness, we need to connect ourselves with the earth and not only feel its pull on us, but drive our energy through our legs down to its core while resisting the pull. To show lightness, we need to allow ourselves to lift



Photo by Becky Spray

Conducting gestures and mime movements often resemble each other.

off the earth—to feel ourselves filled with helium and let it cause us to float. We tend to rely on our arms alone to show these things—but in what other ways could we show weight? Experimenting with these concepts off the podium can help us develop a range of weights that our musicians will reflect back to us in sound.

Never Completely Extend

Sometimes a mime play will require extreme physical positions. The general rule is never to go to 100 percent extension. This helps prevent injury, keeps the mime from ending up in unsustainable positions, and also keeps the audience from becoming uncomfortable. It is important to keep potential in each gesture.

Mime is a grounded art form. Unlike the ballet dancer, who seeks to defy gravity, the mime uses gravity to keep herself grounded (in apparent contradiction to the earlier discussion of suspension, mimes often speak of the opposing forces of gravity [down] and suspension [up], both of which work on the body). The mime also keeps her hips level at most times, seeking to “table” her

physical plane so that she is stable. Plays usually end in freezes and blackouts, and mimes seek to find a stable final position that satisfies the play’s dramatic needs. Finishing up on one’s toes or on one foot is seen as physically undesirable and dramatically injudicious.

The parallel here to conducting is nearly exact. There is nothing that feels worse than finding oneself out in full extension in any direction. We need to avoid, at all costs, ending up on our toes, off-balance, leaning into the group, or fully extended outward or upward. The music should end with the conductor in a stable position, looking like the music while maintaining balance. If we mistakenly finish in a fully extended position, the very next gesture we make will be enormous simply because the music is over (and the lights are still on!). Retreating to a neutral position between movements or as applause begins makes conductors look disorganized.

Light up Your Sternum

Like actors, mimes talk about “finding their light” onstage—putting themselves in the spot where the stage

lights illuminate them best. There is a sensation of correctness, felt both as light and heat, which results from being “in the light.” Having found the spot onstage, mimes are encouraged to “light up” their sternum, opening up the chest to the light, and exposing it by lifting it toward the audience. The raised sternum is also a feature of correct suspension, as discussed earlier. There is a philosophical ideal that runs parallel to this physical goal: Mimes talk about putting their hearts in front of their heads. In the physical sense, the chest should be high and vertically in front of the face. Philosophically, the vulnerability expressed by this physical position is sought by mimes to increase their expressive capability and is seen as a necessary risk to creating great art.

Conductor visibility and vulnerability are crucial to our musical expression and communication with our musicians. Keeping the sternum open and lit can be easy for conductors to forget, owing to the extent to which our arms are in front of our bodies. However, the idea can encourage us to keep our arms wide and our chest and face as the focus of the group’s attention. The idea of putting your heart in front of your head is appealing as you seek to create

great music with the musicians in front of you.

Shoulders

Mimes work hard to keep their shoulders back and down, another aspect of achieving the suspension that is central to the art form. As soon as the shoulders start to rise, expressive potential drops radically, as well as the perceived strength of the character. As one of our instructors expressed it, the shoulders are the “barometers of a character’s will.” The lower they are, the stronger a character’s will is perceived to be; the higher they are, the weaker the character appears. On the podium, shoulders that are pulled down and back will help create strength while helping us open our sternums to the light and to the ensemble.

Character and Fidelity

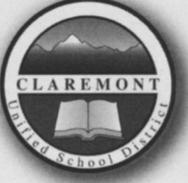
In an economical art form, character must be established as soon as the work begins. If the audience has to wonder for too long about the nature of a character, they become disinterested or irritated. Mimes do many things to accomplish this, such as a specific facial expression, a walk, or a character gesture (a small physical gesture used only by that one character). This is especially important in a

play when a single mime becomes several different characters, since the audience will begin to seek the character gestures that quickly become familiar. The more detail a mime creates in a character, the more real the character will become to the audience. As conductors, we need to establish the character of the music immediately and remain consistent (but not static) while the music retains that character. If we are specific and consistent about how we show the character of the music, our musicians will be able to orient themselves quickly as the music changes, and they will have the opportunity to be similarly specific in how they create their sounds.

Fidelity in space is crucial to illusion. Once the mime has established the character, the environment, or the object with which she is working, her ability to continue communicating clearly to the audience rests on the consistency of the illusion. If the mime is handling an imaginary spherical baseball-size object that appears later in the play in a different size, the audience will be confused and frustrated, having come to assign meaning to every detail. The mime’s initial definition of the object is a type of contract with the audience. Conductors form a similar contract with the ensemble when we define where the ictus will occur, what dynamic is meant by a gesture of a specific size, and what is meant by a cue in a specific style. Our group depends on us to be consistent with these gestures to keep the meaning clear, and musicians become frustrated if our technique seems unreliable.

The Writer’s Art Form

There is one significant difference between the art forms that we can consider to make our conducting better. Mime is a writers’ art form. There is no historic canon of mime masterpieces that everyone studies—no Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms. The evolution of mime and the work of specific individuals have resulted in standard techniques that all mimes work to master (the wall, the ladder, walking in place) but public performance of an established play from another mime’s repertoire, unless specifically

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in historical homage, is not generally done. Mastery of the standard technique and creation of new technique serves the art as the mime *creates* a play. The ideas for the play come first, and the gestures arise from the struggle to communicate them clearly. The mime chooses what to show, how to move, based on what *meaning* she wishes to relay to the audience. For conductors, the music already exists. We sometimes tend to project *ourselves* on the music as conductors, or project our students onto the music, focusing on technical aspects of what we will physically show: crescendos, decrescendos, beat patterns, fermatas, cues. What if we considered the music as the mime does the play, by putting meaning first? Based on our score study, we can determine what meaning we feel the music conveys, then embark on the path of determining how to show the meaning, rather than focusing on the beat patterns, the cues, or the changes in dynamic. Once we have made decisions about musical meaning, conducting ges-

For Further Exploration

Beyond the Word: The World of Mime by Stefan Niedzialkowski (Royal Oak, MI: Momentum Books, 1993); www.momentumbooks.com.

“Perspective and Summing Up” by A. K. McIntyre, in *Proprioception, Posture and Emotion*, in ed. D. Garlick (Kensington, NSW, Australia: Adept Printing, 1982), 246–250.

tures should come more readily and naturally, and will be directly connected to specific character and moments in the music. This does not mean we should completely abandon repeated beat patterns and cues—but it does mean we have the opportunity to imbue each one with specific meaning.

Proprioception

To movement artists, *proprioception* is a well-known concept. Also known as “deep sensibility,” this is our awareness of our own posture and position of our extremities in space.⁵ Try this

exercise: Extend both arms straight out from your shoulders to the right and left, creating a T with your body. Now, while looking straight ahead, bend your arms and raise them above your head, touching the tips of your index fingers together at the top. Your ability to touch your fingertips successfully is based on your level of proprioception—your sense of the position of your fingers in space. Like other kinds of awareness, proprioception can be developed. Along with their other training, mimes, dancers, and conductors all do some work in front of the mirror, pairing the visual

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with physical sensation. Reinforcing the sensation away from the mirror is the crucial next step. Conductors need to be aware of how we are positioned in space so that we can control what the ensemble sees.

Experimentation

There are a multitude of things to try if you do not have the opportunity or desire to study mime yourself. It does take a little courage. Banish onlookers from the house, and indulge in some play in front of a mirror. Experiment with raising and lowering your centre of gravity—looking light and looking heavy. Work to accomplish the same feeling away from the mirror. Experiment with incorporating this into your body as you conduct. Listen to the results in a rehearsal. Experiment with lifting your sternum and lowering your shoulders. What effect does this have on your presence? Play with gestures of pure expression: Can you show joy, fear, sadness, longing? How much of your body can you use

to express these emotions? Experiment with assigning specific sounds to unusual physical gestures you invent.

Videotape a rehearsal or concert, and ask yourself questions about what you see. How much of the time can your ensemble see your face? How specific is your facial expression, and how consistent is the message your body sends to your musicians? Turn off the sound on the tape, and imagine the music based on what you see. What does it sound like? Repeat these experiments over several days to get used to any initial self-consciousness or discomfort you might feel.

The world of mime has a great deal to offer conductors. Despite differences in the artistic materials with which we work, many of our goals are similar. At the points at which the two art forms intersect, mimes seek to develop many details of the gestural language that conductors also try to master. On issues where the two art forms diverge, the differences can

serve as the impetus for reflecting about our art in ways we may not have examined before. Questions arising from these reflections may lead to a path of experimentation and discovery that enriches our own work and, ultimately, the experience of our musicians.

Notes

1. Mimes use the noun *play* to describe all their work, whether a short exercise or an extended professional piece.

2. The audience for mimes is seated in the theatre. For conductors, of course, our “audience” is the ensemble in front of us.

3. Character is a general term mimes use, to describe the animate beings in their plays; depending on the type of play, characters have very little or a great deal of specificity.

4. For an excellent discussion of the expressive use of breath, consult Stefan Niedzialkowski's book *Beyond the Word: The World of Mime*, Chapter 3: Breathing, pp. 17–22.

5. A. K. McIntyre, “Perspective and Summing Up,” in *Proprioception, Posture and Emotion*, ed. D. Garlick, (Kensington, NWS: Adept Printing, 1982). ■

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