Interview questions posed to Wayne Toews by Pablo Rojas

Note: On March 18, 2017 Pablo Rojas from Granada (Spain) wrote to me: “I am an wind band conductor and PhD researcher. I would like to ask you eleven questions: an academic interview for my doctoral thesis.”

PR: 1) How would you describe a good conductor? What skills should the conductor have?

WJT: Conductors must create a respectful, collaborative environment. They need to know various ways to inspire players to perform at the highest level possible.

They need excellent baton technique, independent control of right and left hands and arms, communication skills, organizational skills, time management skills, interpersonal relationship skills, oratory and dramatic (presentation) skills,

They also need these abilities: rehearsal technique, ability to analyse and prioritize tasks, superior music reading, audiation (hearing the sounds in ones head), understanding and application of the principles of artistic design (unity and variety), self-confidence, a “good ear”, rhythm precision, “podium presence”, speaking to an audience, ability to teach, encourage, recognize and acknowledge good work. One of important attributes of a conductor is the ability to smile!

A good conductor will have most of these; a great conductor will have all of them.

PR: 2) What elements allow you to distinguish two different types of gestures or two musical conductors?

WJT: The gestures are distinguished by use of acceleration and deceleration in the motion, placement, appropriate use of Into-point and From-point gestures and ultimately how the players respond.

A good test is to observe a video of a conductor with the sound off and then to clap in subdivision (2, 3 or 4 parts per beat). If the acceleration and deceleration are inaccurate it is very difficult to anticipate the Beat-point and to feel the subdivision.

Some gestures impose a Beat-point while others confirm them. Inappropriate use of either is confusing and will likely be ignored.

PR: 3) What importance do you attach to drawing a bar (beat pattern)?

WJT: The timing and character of the motion are more important than the path it takes. The beat patterns help the players keep their place more easily. However, beat patterns that use loops make anticipation of the Beat-point difficult. The use of arcs and angles in beat patterns can be important expressive elements.

Beat patterns are particularly valuable to assist players in slow tempi and when they have long periods of rest.
PR: 4) Please explain to me, regardless of musical technical slang, how a musical director communicates with gestures.

WJT: The first role of a conductor is to help the players play together. This is accomplished by making the Beat-point predictable. The placement and timing of the Secondary-point (when the motion is slowest – generally at the apex) is the key element in making the gesture predictable.

Conductors shape artistic performance with gesture. Gestures can transmit energy. Variations in energy elicit sounds of various volumes, articulations, sustaining qualities of the pitches and releases. The character of the gesture (rates of acceleration along with its placement) shape the musical expression. For example, the ensemble will respond with a strong attack when the gesture shows the Beat-point at a high rate of speed. Conducting gestures can suspend time in ways that make phrasing and expression interesting and compelling.

Gestures must reinforce or compliment the written music rather than contradict it. Because the written music guides and constrains the players, they will likely ignore gestures that are confusing.

PR: 5) How would you describe the appearance of a conductor in action?

WJT: Please clarify the question. Are you referring to body motion?

PR: 5b(revised questions) How would you describe the appearance of a conductor while conducting in a concert? Is the conductor’s attitude different in an essay than in a concert?

WJT: In English we use the word "rehearsal" rather than "essay".

Each conductor has an individual style. In a concert I prefer those that are not too showy because it detracts from the music and the players.

At a concert, conductors who encourage their players get better results than those who scowl or show anger. The age of the despot on the podium is finished and players resent it if they are not treated with respect. They will not perform as well as possible if they are angry with the conductor.

Elements of style must be worked out in rehearsal. The focus of the conductor in a concert should be making it easy for the players to play well and together. The conductor must also be ready to help the ensemble recover if there is a problem. When the ensemble and conductor feel subdivision the same way the conductor has amazing power to shape the phrases because the Secondary-point allows the players to anticipate each Beat-point. If a conductor has prepared the ensemble adequately it is best to just let them play by choosing gestures that confirm rather than impose a Beat-point unless one is needed or required.

I attempt to create a consistent approach and to maintain the gestures that I used in rehearsal. So that they can maintain focus during a performance the ensemble must trust the conductor and that trust can be destroyed if the conductor creates a distraction. The conductor is in a unique position to determine blend and balance. Signals with the left hand should be used in rehearsal so that the players understand what they need to do in concert.

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PR: 5b(revised questions) How would you describe the appearance of a conductor while conducting in a concert? Is the conductor’s attitude different in an essay than in a concert?
Conductors who acknowledge good playing will get better results. It is important that all soloists be acknowledged during applause.

Good rehearsal technique involves deciding the best way to get the best result efficiently with any particular group. Children usually need more instruction but all need to know what you are trying to achieve.

It is very valuable if the conductor describes the music briefly, even if just to suggest a mood or characterization. I like players to understand when we are increasing or decreasing the energy in a passage. If there is an important story that relates to the music the players need to know it, but rehearsal time is valuable and it is best if one shares the story on paper or online.

I don’t scold players in rehearsals. I give honest feedback in a restrained but enthusiastic voice. In rehearsal we are working to eliminate problems as quickly as possible. Long speeches are not appropriate. Since the conducting gestures often create the problems, a conductor must be prepared to change gestures when they do not work as intended. From the beginning I strive to create a respectful relationship while sharing a clear artistic vision of the music we are performing. If a conductor helps players understand how their part fits with the others the result will be much better.

**PR:** 6) Do you agree with the following statement? "The parameters to evaluate a conductor's gestures are: a) gestural precision, b) gestural clarity, c) synchronization between music and director movement, d) expressiveness, e) peculiarity, and f) mark all entries to the different instruments ". If not, what parameters would you add or subtract?

**WJT:** I choose different wording and more categories:

- a) Gestures have a predictable Beat-point
- b) Gestures are appropriate to to meter (ie 2/4 is different from 6/8)
- c) Gestures are focused on the players who need help (usually the middle voices)
- d) Gestures are appropriate to the music and reflect the expressive elements in the music
- e) Acceleration and deceleration are used appropriately
- f) Sufficient and appropriate cuing is used
- g) Conductor makes significant eye contact with the players
- h) Into-point and From-point gestures are used appropriately so that they guide and shape the performance without interfering.
- i) The gestures are located in the field of beat so that they are easily visible
- j) Loops and extraneous motions are not used. There is no dancing, walking on the podium or bouncing at the knees.
PR: 7) Regardless of verbal communication in an rehearsal, how would you define accuracy in sign communication? Is the baton involved?

WJT: Please clarify. What is “sign communication”? 
7b (revised question) Regardless of verbal communication in an rehearsal, how would you define accuracy in gestural communication? Is the baton involved? (accuracy, also, in a gestural sense).

WJT: Gestures can impose or confirm a Beat-point. Into-point gestures generally impose a Beat-point while From-point gestures confirm them. The timing of the Secondary-point allows players to anticipate the next Beat-point and also to show whether the metre is simple or compound. The players must feel subdivision of the beat as indicated in the written music. When the baton is aligned with the arm it improves the visibility of the gesture. Misalignment of the arm and baton makes the use of a baton ineffective. If a baton is not used the conductor must create a specific focus on the hand. Players have just a small fraction of a second to observe the gesture and they can become confused when a focus is not evident.

I demonstrate Into-point and From-point gestures here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzMskCsYl8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzMskCsYl8)
One must not forget that the written music contains information that is the primary guide for the players. Gestures that are not congruent with the written music cause confusion and are typically ignored.

Gestures communicate musical intentions accurately when they are congruent with the written music in every dimension (to represent the attack, sustain and release of the sound as required), easily visible, appropriately timed (see reference to the Secondary-point), sufficient for the sophistication of the players, placed along the torso to show expression and energy and aligned with facial expression, posture and use of the left hand.

PR: 8) From a visual point of view, when do you consider that one gestural motion is clearer than another, and what criterion does it follow to reach such a consideration?

WJT: See #2 & #4 above. The location of the Secondary-point in space and time is the key element in clarity. The Secondary-point is created by acceleration and deceleration in the gesture. Acceleration and deceleration must appear to be “natural” i.e. when an object falls or rolls to a stop with only the influence of gravity alone. When the arm is “thrown” the Beat-point is created when the baton motion begins not when it arrives at the bottom of the motion.

A conductor may choose to use what some consider an unclear gesture to allow the players more freedom. In that case the motion moves along with the music rather than dictating it. It is the difference between dancing to music and conducting it.
PR: 9) Imagine that you can explain, from the areas of neuroscience, psychophysics, or in general the fields of study of human perception, that directional gestures are perceived better than others, and with it, those musicians perceive a certain type better of movements. Do you think that such knowledge should be applied technically, or on the contrary, do you think that such scientific advances are not relevant in gestural communication?

WJT: We need to explore all ideas. The problem begins when the observer sees only the path of the gesture and not its character created by acceleration and deceleration. Conducting needs to be symbiotic and responsive. Unpredictable events often happen during a performance that require the conductor to adapt and to re-focus the ensemble. Under those circumstances a conductor must be able to use alternate gestures that were not part of the initial plan. Conductors expect certain sounds to result from their motions. When that doesn’t happen they need to adjust rapidly so that the performance doesn’t collapse. I have seen videos showing the path of conducting gestures using points of bright light. They are typically inaccurate. When they are used as a model they are incorrect.

PR: 9b) - I would like you to expand the answer on the idea of modifying or confirming elements of the steering technique through neuroscientific discoveries (#9).

WJT: To which specific neuroscientific discoveries are you referring?

Musicians are intelligent and emotional beings. Players will more likely respond to a conductor who does things that serve the players in ways that the players think are important such as giving specific instructions about blend and balance, detailed bowings or attention to intonation problems. Players will usually forgive inadequate baton technique if the conductor displays a profound knowledge of the music in the rehearsals.

We would be foolish to ignore anything that would improve the art of conducting. Saito’s major contribution to the art of conducting was identification of the Secondary-point. That specifically relates to human perception and more importantly the perception of musicians who want to perform with precision. Any further studies in neuroscience will confirm that.

PR: About question number nine: I said "Imagine". It is in a supposed case. However, I am currently working with a team from the Department of Optics and Optometry of the Universidad de Granada to explain that some directorial movements are perceived better than others. It’s a small section of my doctoral thesis.

WJT: Players respond to sudden motions and changes in speed and/or direction of the motion. Sudden motions are useful for a limited number of sounds because the players must be absolutely attentive and there is little time to respond. For example, a loud short sound at the end of a piece where all are paying attention can be shown with a sudden motion. Saito called those “Shunkan Undo” Successive sudden motions happen too late to help the players play precisely on the beat they are given. Relate this to a flashing light on a metronome. It takes two flashes to set the tempo. By contrast, Saito discovered that timing the Secondary-point correctly allows a conductor to show the attack and volume more clearly than a sudden burst.
Changing the direction of the motion can also show a Beat-point but it may also distort the sound with a sharp attack. Again, by controlling the acceleration and deceleration of the motion to create a clear Secondary-point one can show a wide variety of sounds clearly. I will be interested to learn the results of your enquiry from the Department of Optics and Optometry of the Universidad de Granada. I imagine and predict that what I have been saying about the Secondary-point will be verified.

**PR:** Without it, it is impossible for musicians to feel the stroke. But I do not understand its exact definition nor its location in the beat pattern.

**WJT:** The Secondary point is that place in space and time when the motion is the slowest, typically at the apex of the gesture. The secondary point is demonstrated in these animations. [http://conductorschool.com/animations.html](http://conductorschool.com/animations.html)

From my document "Conducting Excellence" - Each **Into-point motion** has four components:

1) the before-point motion, 2) the Beat-point, 3) the after-point motion and 4) the secondary point. An **Into-point motion** resembles a swinging pendulum. The sound begins at the Beat-point. The before-point motion accelerates to the Beat-point; the after-point motion decelerates from it.

The secondary point exists where the motion is slowest at the junction of the after-point motion with the next into-point motion.

Variations in the size and rate of acceleration of the before-point motion will elicit different attacks and dynamics. Variations in the direction, rate of deceleration and size of the after-point motion will cause the sustaining quality and decay of the sounds to change. Into-point motions allow the beat-point to be easily anticipated if the rate of acceleration is even and the timing of the secondary point is appropriate to the subdivision of the beat. The placement of the secondary point in space and time is the key element in making conducting gestures clear.

**PR:** 10) **What do you think about the widespread tendency to teach a single conducting technique in each conservatory (or faculty, school of music, etc.)?**

**WJT:** The great violinist/conductor Joseph Silverstein told me that he used gestures in Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo, Japan that he knew the players would understand. That suggests that there are “dialects” in conducting. The most obvious is the tendencies of some European orchestras to play “behind the beat”. That suggests to me that conductors need to learn different techniques to accommodate the players. Prof. Saito’s analysis of conducting gestures helps us understand why such situations exist and how to deal with them. Most schools do not teach technique – they teach procedures.
PR: 11) What conducting technique did you study during your training? Are you feel currently recognized, or do you use a different one?

WJT: When I first conducted an orchestra I was taught to move in a “D” shape, repeated over and over again. 
Here is a rough diagram of the path of the D-shaped gesture:

![Diagram of D-shaped gesture]

My high school orchestra director showed the D-shaped pattern to me and invited me to conduct the orchestra. I moved along with the orchestra while they played. I had no influence on the performance.

At university I studied the Max Rudolf book, *The Grammar of Conducting*, but like most did not make his diagrams. The diagrams help one understand the time and place elements of the gestures.

PR: I think there's a contradiction here. Did not you make those diagrams? However, are those diagrams important to you?

WT: I don't understand why you think there is a contradiction. If you know the Rudolf book you know that he recommends that one enlarge the conducting diagrams that are shown on graphs in the book. I did not do that and most I have asked have not done so either. Although I see problems with the diagrams I understand that by following the paths shown on the diagrams one can better understand the time and space relationships that Rudolf is describing.

I prefer the diagrams created by Prof. Saito and me. Please see my diagrams on the attached document.
WJT: I studied the Saito Conducting Method in 1974 at the Courtenay Youth Music Camp. After that I organized workshops and invited conductors who understood most of Saito’s ideas to teach them. In 1983 I travelled to Tokyo to study with Prof. Morihro Okabe, one of Prof. Saito’s first students and the person who did most to share the ideas with the Western world. The Saito method has allowed me to develop strong basic technique and it gives me the freedom to apply the gestures in a way that is most appropriate to my artistic understanding of the music and to the performers.

I own and have read and studied most books on conducting. I have found most to be of little value. The most effective way to develop as a conductor is to conduct ensembles regularly and to get feedback from colleagues or video recordings.
When I began to Study Prof. Saito’s method I realized how my gestures could shape the music and I became highly motivated to learn more. Saito’s method evolved from his analysis of gestures. His method provides a clear path to technical mastery that empowers conductors to express their artistic ideas. I benefitted greatly from the elaborations and modifications provided by Prof. Morihiro Okabe. In turn I have worked to make it easier and faster for conductors to develop the skills and understandings. I expect that my students will continue to adapt Saito’s ideas to the music they conduct.

My conducting is based on the ideas of Prof. Saito and Prof. Okabe. It has been enriched by my observation of hundreds of conductors and especially that of John P. Paynter when I was a student at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL.

"Saito’s teachings are so comprehensive and yet so fundamental that they embrace all possible conducting styles" -- Seiji Ozawa

**PR: 12) What is your position regarding intrusiveness in this profession? Do you think it would be convenient to create a license to work as conductor, with a regulation procedure similar to that of lawyers or doctors?**

**WJT:** Conducting is an art that is difficult for most to evaluate. It is more like drama and dance than a legal or medical procedure. Most musicians are incapable of analysing gestures. They respond instead to the personality of the conductor. Likewise the audience responds emotionally. There are many cases where conductors have been revered for their musicianship depite being unable to give a downbeat. On the other hand there are technicians who can show interesting and sometimes clear gestures without any artistic meaning. It would be interesting if conductors had to prove that they could begin an ensemble together, to show changes of tempo and to end the piece by gesture alone. Many cannot do so. Many can evaluate the quality of a conductor’s musicianship and podium personality; very few can assess the quality of the gestures. When I watch the winners of conducting competitions I’m usually left disappointed and confused because their gestures are very poor and do almost nothing to help the ensemble.

**PR: 13) This question is asked because you are an expert in Saitō’s method: Maestro Ki Sun Lee said: <Saitō divides his beat patterns into two categories: “into-point” motion and “from-point” motion. Into-point motion describes some movement before the beat-point; Tataki, Shakui and Heikin motions are included in this category>.**

**WJT:** I invented the terms “Into-point” and “From-point” gestures. Saito called them “Indirect” and “Direct”. Maestro Ki Sun Lee used my words in the statement.
PR: Do you think these three types of gesture are similar to other conducting techniques? For example, do you think that Saitō, Celibidache and Swarovski are alike in using a horizontal straight line where they show the beat?

WJT: If you mean that the bottom of their gesture is located along a horizontal line then yes, they are alike in that aspect. Some call this focal point or focal plane conducting. Others use the term centered conducting. Saito analysed the gestures of European conductors to answer the question – “Why is it easier to make music with some conductors than with others.” He identified the Secondary-point. That revolutionized how conducting gestures can be described and taught. Tataki is made in acute angles; Shakui is made in arcs and Heikin Undo is made with even motion usually in shallow arcs. I see similar gestures from many conductors but they don’t consistently use acceleration and deceleration appropriately. Conductors must learn to drop their arms before they can use the technique taught by Prof. Saito.

PR: 14) Do you think the conducting technique should be different depending on the orchestra being young or professional?

WJT: No! My conducting students and I have shown that students need the same sensible gestures as the professionals. None want to be “over-conducted”. A conductor can keep an ensemble together only when all feel the subdivision of the beat in the same way. Students, and sometimes the professionals, need to learn how to feel subdivision.

PR: 15) - For you, what's the difference between beat-point and bottom? (#8, #13, etc.).

WJT: Most Beat-points typically occur at the bottom of the gesture but they need not be located there. Conductors can generally make Beat-points at the centre-waist position more easily and when Beat-point are made there it helps the players anticipate when they will occur. Beat-points exist at the junction of the acceleration and deceleration or a burst from a complete stop. Their placement in space is less important: it is the timing of the Secondary-point, which is the key to clarity. If I want to avoid a hard attack I can place the Beat-point above the lowest point of the motion by delaying the deceleration for a fraction of the beat as I begin to move upward. Success of this depends upon my preparatory motion. It will be easier for you to understand if I demonstrate it.

PR: Ictus = Beat-point?

WJT: Ictus means accent. Beat-points are not necessarily emphasized or accented. I prefer the term Beat-point.

I thank you for this opportunity to share my ideas and those of Prof. Saito and Prof. Okabe. I always welcome questions via http://conductorschool.com. I work with conductors from all around the world using Skype. I would be happy to meet with you and others online to share and to learn.