

Syllabus: The Conductor's Art

Instructor: Ben Simon

Four Thursday mornings, 10 – noon

April 3, 10, 17 & 24

Golden Bear Center, 1995 University Ave. It is Suite 202/204.

The glamor, the fame, the power... Have you ever wondered what a conductor really does up there in front of an orchestra? What is the relationship between an ensemble and its leader? What's the difference between a great maestro and a merely competent one?

This 4-week course invites you backstage to discover the secrets of that most mysterious musician onstage, the one without an instrument. What is the path from practice room to podium? What musical and interpersonal skills are required? How does the process go from choosing the repertoire to crafting an interpretation to rehearsing the ensemble to leading the performance?

We'll be exploring the evolving role of the conductor from historical, musical, sociological and organizational perspectives, using the rich resources that stories, videos, articles and recordings provide us. We'll learn about some of the famous conductors of the past and present; how did they get there and what made them great? And what does the future hold for classical music, symphony orchestras, and their maestri?

Each class will also include an opportunity to learn basic conducting techniques so you can discover for yourself the first principles required of a conductor. Expect visits from special guests who will share their stories from behind the front lines, and learn a few conductor jokes in the process.

Week 1: Making the music come alive

A brief history of conducting, from Jean-Baptiste Lully's staff to Valery Gergiev's toothpick. We'll discuss great conductors of the past and the evolving relationship between orchestra and maestro, and begin our inquiry into what a conductor actually does. Our very first conducting lesson will cover beat patterns and how to start and stop an orchestra.

Week 2: From score to stage

By the time you watch a conductor in concert, their work is already done. It's all pretty much "show" for the next two hours. But what is that work? Together, we'll travel the remarkable journey a conductor takes from choosing the repertoire, learning the score, crafting an interpretation, preparing for rehearsals, and leading the performance. The real nitty-gritty! And we'll discuss their extra-musical roles: organizational figurehead, community leader, arts ambassador and advocate. Our second conducting lesson will discuss tempo and musical character.

Week 3: I did it my way

What comprises the art of musical interpretation? How is an artistic vision transmitted to the orchestra? We discuss the qualities of leadership that every maestro requires, and the crafting of a personal chemistry between conductor and orchestra that brings out the best performances possible. We'll listen to different performances of the same Beethoven symphony led by some of today's top conductors, and find out who we like best and why. . And in our conducting lesson, we'll learn what's in a score and the crucial role of cues.

Week 4: Back to the future

What does the future of classical music, symphony orchestras, and the conductor's art look like in our digital age? We'll talk about some of the most exciting up-and-comers and the changing role of the maestro. We'll finish our post-graduate course in conducting by integrating the baton techniques we've been learning with the concept of interpretation to express personality and experience.

Suggested reading:

Lebrecht, Norman: The Maestro Myth

Leinsdorf, Eric: The Composer's Advocate

Schuller, Gunther: The Compleat Conductor

Weingartner on Music and Conducting

Suggested viewing:

Esa-Pekka Salonen: On Conducting (8")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILkYMD8zuH8>

Michael Tilson Thomas: Conducting Lesson (12')

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Db3ixX7BI&t=83s>

Leonard Bernstein: The Art of Conducting (from the Omnibus TV series, 1955)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_Eo0qYrugY&t=2s

Just go onto YouTube and put "Conducting an Orchestra" into the search bar... there's a tremendous amount of very entertaining and interesting videos out there...