



Revista de Psicodidáctica

www.elsevier.es/psicod



Original

Gestural Learning in Orchestra Conducting Through Self-observation[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 April 2017

Accepted 24 July 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Gestural competencies

Self-observation

Peer-observation

Orchestra Conducting

Video feedback

Palabras clave:

Competencias gestuales

Auto-observación

Hetero-observación

Dirección de orquesta

Video feedback

ABSTRACT

The Orchestra Conducting training has traditionally been based on the imitation of the gesture of experienced conductors. It has only recently begun to work on other methodological alternatives for the teaching of gesture in the orchestral conducting. In this research, gestural learning in this field has been approached by means of self-observation through video with 28 students from first course in Conducting at Higher Music Education Conservatoire of the Basque Country – Musikene. The results have shown that with this methodology the participants' gestural activity has improved, especially in those competencies more difficult to acquire, such as facial expression, visual contact and the use of the left arm. Significant differences have also been revealed in the improvements produced over time and in the assessments of the different types of judges involved. Gender differences have not been significant, but it is worth mentioning that women in this study have scored lower (themselves and others) than men.

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El aprendizaje de la gestualidad en Dirección de Orquesta mediante la auto-observación

RESUMEN

La formación en Dirección de Orquesta se ha basado tradicionalmente en la imitación del gesto de directores experimentados. Solo recientemente se han empezado a considerar otras alternativas metodológicas para la enseñanza de la gestualidad en la Dirección Orquestal. En esta investigación se ha abordado el aprendizaje gestual mediante la auto-observación a través del vídeo de 28 estudiantes de primer curso de Dirección del Centro Superior de Música del País Vasco, Musikene. Los resultados han mostrado que con dicha metodología ha mejorado la actividad gestual de los participantes, sobre todo en las competencias más difíciles de adquirir, como son la expresión facial, el contacto visual y el empleo del brazo izquierdo; asimismo se han puesto de manifiesto diferencias significativas en las mejoras producidas en el tiempo y en las valoraciones de los distintos tipos de jueces intervinientes. Las diferencias en función del sexo no han sido significativas, pero es reseñable que las mujeres de este estudio han puntuado más bajo (a sí mismas y a los demás) que los hombres.

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Introduction

The profession of orchestra conductor within the framework of Western classical music is one of the newest in the field of musical performance – around 150 years – and the field of training in this

area is even more recent – around 50 years (Brandão, 2011). That is why no agreement has yet been established on how to teach it, and as a consequence, there is an absence of methodological approaches and references in didactic issues in the Orchestra Conducting and should lead us to reflect on the reasons for this state of affairs. We share with Brandão the idea that what really underlies is the fact that the conductor is still considered more a myth than a professional whose activity can be taught and learned.

The Orchestra Conducting has traditionally been an eminently practical art, with great doses of oral transmission of knowledge, more understood as advice of veteran teachers to beginners pupils,

[☆] Please cite this article as: Lorenzo de Reizabal M, Benito M. El aprendizaje de la gestualidad en Dirección de Orquesta mediante la auto-observación. Rev Psicodidáctica. 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psicod.2017.07.006>

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than as theoretical and technical concepts that should necessarily be argued, written and ordered in methodological proposals (García Vidal, 2011), and the teaching has been one-to-one. So far, the training of students in this specialty has been based on imitation and a reproductive model that does not allow personal styles. From all this, it is necessary to update the process of learning in this area through the introduction of new methodological approaches, strategies and didactic tools to promote a learning that responds to a socio-constructivist model incorporating, in addition to individual activities, collective activities that promote the collaborative work and the interaction between the apprenticeship community. It is also essential to promote autonomous learning and critical reflection so that the student discovers the aspects that must be changed or improved and is able to solve the problems that he or she faces when acting as conductor, thus putting in place a self-regulating approach that enables lifelong learning.

The frame of the reflexive approach that is presented in this research is the awareness of the own gestural action on the podium as motor of the process of development. As stated by Knezedvic, "the development of consciousness is a process that reduces the discrepancy between what we do and what we believe we do" (cited by Bailey, 2009, p. 39).

The gesture and the communication in Orchestra Conducting

Flusser (1994) argues that the gesture is a movement of the body or of an instrument attached to it – in our case, the baton – for whose understanding it is necessary to discover its "meanings". Silvey (2011) states that Orchestra Conducting students should initially focus their efforts on developing and improving skills in non-verbal communication such as gesture and eye contact. Gestures in conducting are polysemic entities whose exact meaning becomes evident only when they take place in a specific context (Poggi, 2002). On the other hand, Sousa (1988) shows that there are concrete gestures or "emblems" used in Orchestra Conducting that result in having a specific musical meaning agreed with the instrumentalists. The results of his study also indicate the need to train the musicians in the meaning of many of these gestures, since it suggests that not all the gestures used in Conducting are understood automatically by all the instrumentalists. There are movements when conducting that function apparently as visual metaphors, some with many parallels with sign language (Bräm & Braem, 2001). Academic texts emphasize the need for all gestures made from the podium to have a communicative intention. However, for this communicative intentionality to take effect it seems necessary to attribute consensual meanings to the gestures of the conductor (Lorenzo de Reizabal, 2010). This attribution of meaning is so far undefined in the literature consulted, except for those referring to the basic gestures of beat patterns.

The gesture in Conducting includes voluntary movements and to develop the gestural abilities the development of motor skills is necessary (Bodnar, 2013). Neuroscience and motor behavior research have shown that people are not necessarily aware of the body movements we make, but rather of the intentions of the movement (Jenkinson & Fotopoulou, 2010). Given that conductors do not see themselves while conducting concerts or rehearsals, they must rely on proprioceptive feedback and feedback from the audience. It is for this reason that Bodnar defends a pedagogical line in which during the study the movements to be used are planned. This planning of the gesture aims, on the one hand, to expand the gestural vocabulary of the students and, on the other hand, to promote the motor self-consciousness. Against the pre-planning of the gestures it can be argued that then the students focus their attention exclusively on their own movements, instead of putting the focus of attention on the sound that is producing the orchestral ensemble. Another argument against this practice is defended by researchers

like Duke, Cash, and Allen (2011) who find in their studies that motor learning is more successful when the focus of attention is put beyond the motor skill itself.

Self-observation through the video

The video constitutes an invaluable auxiliary in educational research as a tool in the service of the study of thought in action, analytical thinking, cognition and metacognition (Tochon, 2008). The pedagogy through video, according to Tochon, is based on methods that lead to the emancipation of the participants. This aspect is of particular interest in the scope of this study, since it is intended that each student of Conducting classroom builds his/her own personal style in the field of gestural communication by means of self-observation through video, promoting not only an improvement of learning, but also the construction of his/her own identity as a conductor and his/her future professional autonomy.

In this research, and in line with the premises presented by Anguera (1993), an attempt has been made to combine the ideographic and nomothetic, as well as the observation of sequenced events and concurrent events in the same behavior. The aim is for the students to get by themselves not only to discover the aspects he/she wants or must change or improve, but to seek solutions and evaluate them by themselves. They thus enter into a self-regulating dimension of great importance for autonomous learning. However, for self-observation to be effective, the student must be prepared to distance himself from his/her performance and know how to observe it in a more objective and conscious way, as Esteve (2004) warns.

Pasek and Matos (2008, p. 41) define observation as "the act in which the spirit captures an internal (perception) or external phenomenon and registers it with objectivity." This perception, they add, promotes "behaviors of contemplation, curiosity, reflection, investigation, visualization of events from the outside world and the inner world." It is also of great interest for this research *introspective observation* defined as a private, personal reflection, in which it turns the gaze toward oneself and its action, toward what has happened on the podium, toward the own perceptions and reactions and those from the other subjects involved in the classroom (Esteve, 2004). This type of observation has been widely used in the field of the practical training of teachers and has full validity in the context of the Orchestra Conducting classroom, both for the teacher's reflection and for the reflective introspection of each student when observing their own gestural performance.

There is a very relevant aspect that emerges from self-observation through video: the importance that recordings can achieve to confirm or refute the beliefs that Orchestra Conducting students have about themselves, that is, their self-concept as (future) conductors.

Feedback through video in research with teachers (Ruiz-Bikandi, 2007) is manifested as a technique that reveals the hidden and awakens strong resistances in the subjects to be recorded but, at the same time, acts as a methodological instrument of great power to service of self-knowledge and reflection within the groups of teachers and students. Hermida (2013) says that the recordings allow students to become aware of the attitudes they experience toward themselves, that is, how they value their professional image and what are the feelings that encourage them to see themselves as future conductors.

From a didactic point of view, an innovative practice in the classroom would be to reduce individual teaching to a minimum by enhancing the group teaching; this would make it possible to have a collective that helps to construct social knowledge from a socio-critical perspective (Allan, 2006), taking advantage of the collective scaffolding that can be provided by the group. To share experiences, to observe oneself and to observe others, to develop constructive

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