The Conductor as Visual Guide: 
Gesture and Perception of Musical Content

Anita B. Kumar and Steven J. Morrison 
School of Music, Laboratory for Music Cognition, Culture & Learning 
University of Washington, USA

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to determine if differing conductor gesture affected observers’ focus of attention to contrasting elements of ensemble performances.

Conductor Gesture
According to Pedagogy, conductor gesture:
• Keeps time
• Delimits content
• Interprets or affects content
According to Research:
• Expressive conducting > strict “time beating”
• Expressive conducting impacts perception of performance and vice versa
• Gesture affects perception of specific parameters:
  - Articulation and Dynamics
  - Gestural Emblems

Audio and Video Materials
In these examples of 2-part counterpoint, conductors have a choice between content to show. We hypothesized that conductor gestures would alter an observer’s perception of the musical content in various ways.

Procedure
N = 42 Participants
Two equivalent test forms: 8 Videos Each
- Same Excerpt, Same Conductor, Different Conductor Foci

10-Point differential scales anchored by descriptive terms
Articulation: Disconnected ............. Connected
Rhythm: Irregular ............. Regular
Style: Angular ............. Flowing
Phrasing: Short ............. Long

Timbre dominance
What role did these instruments play in the excerpt?
Flute: Primary, Supporting or Unsure?
Tuba: Primary, Supporting or Unsure?

Results

Discussion
Gesture affects how listeners perceive musical content. This effect appears to be mitigated by the congruence of gesture to preconceptions of the importance of melodic over rhythmic material, and of certain timbres over others.

Style > Articulation > Rhythm > Phrasing
Style was most indicative of gesture-based differences, followed by articulation, rhythm, and lastly phrasing. Style and articulation ratings were highly correlated, indicating a potential conflation of those parameters by listeners.

Gestural aspects of conducting must be considered as part of a music performance. Those training novice conductors and teachers may wish to work with students to refine aspects of gesture that can be more clearly expressive and delineative, especially in cases when they could heighten the listening experience, exposing less-perceived parameters or parts.

References