PART TWO

# History

# 8 The rise of conducting

JOSÉ ANTONIO BOWEN

The history of conducting is hardly a linear progression of technical watersheds. The modern practice of conducting emerges slowly over several generations, but through a variety of different practices in different countries, genres and venues. During the first half of the nineteenth century, audible time-beating, different forms of divided leadership, and violin-bow direction all continue, with experiments in where to stand, which way to face, what to hold and generally what to do to bring order as larger ensembles struggle to play increasingly complex music.

To complicate things further, the rise of conducting happens while other aspects of European music-making are changing. The eighteenth-century musician may not have had a high place in society, but it was a clear place. The Kapellmeister was either a civil or high-level private servant charged with providing musical events from start to finish. This would generally include composing, copying, rehearsing, and performing the music. Musicians "wrote" music largely as notes for their own performances. Then technological changes made cheap music printing and mass-produced pianos possible. Political and economic changes ended the wealth of many royal patrons, who disbanded their orchestras and "freed" the musicians, creating a new middle-class market for their services. While musicians tried to piece together a living from teaching, composing, and performing (in both private and the new public concerts), music-making fragmented. The ability to purchase a piece of music on paper (instead of hiring musicians to perform) was a profound shift. The ability to compose for an unseen and unsophisticated public changed the nature of scores (which gradually incorporated details that would previously have been either assumed or given orally in rehearsal) and led to new ways of thinking about musical production. Composers now produced musical works (which had to be protected with new copyright laws) while others could learn simply to read notes and play an instrument. The very definition of a musician had changed.

Today, we routinely classify musicians as either composers or performers, but the early conductors were both. Conducting emerged simultaneously with the rise of an independent performer who was a "mere" interpreter of another's work. The role of these new musical interpreters in performing a canon of great musical works quickly became a topic of discussion in

the (also new) musical press. At first, conductors were hardly capable of interpreting at all; conductors and music critics alike seemed content if orchestras played without major mishap. The gradual increase of power and ability into the conductor's baton, however, raised questions about how it should be used. Not everyone was pleased when Liszt tried to transfer his virtuoso style from the piano to the podium or Wagner learned to control the tempo of the music in midstream. Some pleaded that the conductor should serve the composer, but the power, prestige and money gradually shifted to conductors, who became the focus of modern music-making.

## Early leadership

Musical leadership (if not also conducting) has existed since musicians began to gather together in groups. For small groups, eye contact or a head nod still works and is often unnoticed by all but the musicians. Larger groups require more formal leadership. Not surprisingly, one of the earliest reports of a huge ensemble (eight hundred performers in 709 BC) also comes with a report of "Pherekydes of Patrae, giver of Rhythm," who sat on a high seat, surrounded by the players waving his golden staff so that the "men began in one and the same time" and beating "with his stave up and down in equal movements so that all might keep together."[1]

While the baton has no musical properties, it has long been a symbol of power: the Pope has his staff and the Queen her sceptre. A mace too is a large club that symbolizes authority; it is still carried in university processions and set before the Speaker in the House of Commons. Military leaders also adopted this symbol of power, which may be how drum majors began to use a large mace (grasped in the middle) to lead marching bands in the seventeenth century. Even in the nineteenth century, Spontini still grasped a thick staff in the middle like an orchestral field-marshal and used it not to beat time, but to command. Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87), the Maître de musique for Louis XIV, also used *une canne*, a very large stick which he banged on the floor as required. In 1687, while conducting 150 musicians in a performance of his *Te Deum*, he beat perhaps too forcefully and stabbed his toe with the sharp point. He refused to allow his physician to remove the gangrenous toe and died two months later.[2] Audible time-keeping continued in French opera until the nineteenth century, although later conductors were more careful.

In vocal music, however, there is a long tradition of using the hands. Hands are capable of more varied signs and there are many ancient and modern systems for indicating pitch or melodic shape with the hands.[3] In some cases, the shape of hand signals used as a mnemonic aid for melodies

became the basis for later notational systems.[4] Medieval choir directors held a staff in the left hand as a symbol of office, but led the choir with the right hand. In the eighteenth century, a rolled-up paper was used to beat time for large choral groups. This was replaced by the baton for the large choral festivals of the nineteenth century, but for small *a cappella* choirs, conducting with the hands remains traditional to this day.[5]

With the rise of rhythmically complicated polyphonic choral music, it became necessary to coordinate the different parts with a visible pulse, and many sixteenth-century treatises give instructions for how to mark the *tactus*. Some authors complain about audible time-beating and generally prescribe a simple up and down motion of the hand to control the music. Koch tells us that the strong beat is called a "down-beat" because the hand moves down on this beat and up on the weaker beats.[6] Rousseau tells us that the Italians also beat time up and down, but that the French additionally move the hand to the left and right.[7] In 1701, lexicographer Thomas Janowka describes *tactus* for an ordinary measure as a right-hand movement of down, left, right, up: the pattern that became the standard.[8] Until the early nineteenth century, either silent or audible time-beating (*tactieren*) with batons, rolled-up papers or the hands remained largely a church-choir activity (see Fig. 8.1),[9] while directing (*dirigieren*) with an instrument (i.e. leading by example with a keyboard or the violin) was the standard procedure for opera or instrumental music. This was a reflection of the differing musical styles and conventions, but also of practical logistics; the more scattered the forces for a large choral work, the more likely there was to be a time-beater.

## Keyboard and violin leaders

As the *basso continuo* became the rhythmic engine of seventeenth-century music, it became easy for the keyboard player to lead. The keyboard player was often the Kapellmeister, who organized, rehearsed, and usually composed the music, and the keyboard was always part of the ensemble. While the right hand could add notes, it could also be raised to signal an entrance, while the left hand continued to play the bass line. If things began to fall apart, both hands could quickly pound out a rhythm, returning the conductor from the role of a signal-giver to that of an audible time-keeper. C. P. E. Bach advocated keyboard leadership on precisely these grounds:

> The keyboard, entrusted by our fathers with full command, is in the best position to assist not only with the other bass instruments, but the entire ensemble in maintaining a uniform pace . . . The tone of the keyboard,


**Figure 8.1** Frontpiece of Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musiklexicon* (1732). Johann Kuhnau beats time with two rolls of paper in the Thomas-Kirche and has his back to the band. The organist pictured is thought to be J. S. Bach.

> correctly placed, stands in the center of the ensemble and can be heard clearly by all . . . Should someone hasten or drag, he can be most readily corrected by the keyboardist, for the others will be too much concerned with their own figures and syncopations to be of any assistance.[10]

Playing the melody and standing in front, the violinist was also in a good position to lead by example. As musical style changed during the eighteenth century and the keyboard bass was gradually eliminated, the leader (in England), *Konzertmeister* (in Germany), *premier violin* (in France) or *capo d'orchestra* (in Italy) could lead the orchestra by beating the neck of the violin in the air, making other movements or simply playing louder (again leading by sound rather than by sight). Flautist Johann Joachim Quantz and violinist Leopold Mozart lobbied in favor of violin leadership, arguing that melodic nuances were more important than the rhythmic and harmonic control possible at the keyboard.[11]

As the keyboard disappeared from orchestral music at the close of the eighteenth century, it appeared that the violinists would triumph, as they did indeed in France.[12] In England, Italy, and Germany, however, opera and concert music in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were most often led by some form of divided or alternating leadership, although these arrangements varied greatly. Composers like Bach, Haydn and Mozart could lead from either position depending on the situation. In German and Italian opera houses, the violinist was responsible for the orchestra and led the instrumental music, while the performer at the keyboard focused on the singers. Even the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, the first orchestra devoted exclusively to symphonic music rather than opera, retained this model of alternating leadership.

## Gewandhaus

From its founding in 1781 until Mendelssohn became its first baton conductor in 1835, the Gewandhaus had four keyboard conductors: Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804), Johann Gottfried Schicht (1753–1823), Johann Philipp Christian Schultz (1773–1827), and Christian August Pohlenz (1790–1843). Initially they beat time from the keyboard; it is reported that Hiller planned to beat time for two measures before the beginning of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, but not all of the players remembered the plan and the symphony had to be restarted.[13] While these men continued to sit at the keyboard, they eventually "conducted" only the numbers with singers, the arias and duets that separated the symphony movements, and the concluding piece of each half, which was usually a grand chorus from an opera or oratorio. The instrumental music, which was increasingly seen as the serious portion of the

evening, was led by the concertmaster, who stood, as did all the musicians until 1905.[14]

Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 created unprecedented challenges. From 1817 until Mendelssohn's arrival, the first three movements were led by the concertmaster Heinrich August (Karl) Matthäi, but since the final movement involved the chorus, it was "conducted" from the keyboard. As Wagner witnessed in 1830, this arrangement was insufficient for the challenges of the new music.

> At that time, this institution was run in a very casual manner: instrumental works were not led by any conductor but rather by the first violinist (Mathäi [sic]) from his desk; but as soon as any singing began, the prototype of all fat and happy music directors, the highly popular Pohlenz, would appear at the conductor's stand with a very imposing blue baton. One of the strangest events was the annual performance [from 1828–30 and 1834–37] of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in this manner: after the first three movements had been played through like a Haydn symphony by the orchestra on its own as best it could, Pohlenz would appear, not to direct an Italian aria, a vocal quartet, or a cantata, but to undertake this most difficult test of a conductor's skill . . . Pohlenz sweated blood but the recitative never came off, and I really began to wonder uneasily whether Beethoven had not written nonsense after all.[15]

Most music, of course, did not require this level of leadership. Once started, even most Beethoven symphonies could be played by following the concertmaster, who was also allowed to lead concertos until 1843.[16] Similarly, a few notes from the keyboard were enough to keep choral music from crashing to a halt. As the complexity of music increased, however, both violin and keyboard conductors proved to be inadequate.

## Divided leadership in England

From Handel to Mendelssohn, English musical life was dominated by all things German, but what in German practice was largely alternating leadership between the keyboard and the first violin became an established system of divided leadership in England. For the "Grand Commemoration of Handel" of 1784 at Westminster Abbey, the 525 performers were jointly led by Joah Bates (1741–99) who led the choirs from the organ, and England's leading violin-bow conductor, Wilhelm Cramer (1746–89), who directed the orchestra.[17] When Haydn came to London in 1791 and 1792, he sat at the keyboard while Johann Peter Salomon, the impresario who had arranged the concerts, led from the violin.[18] From the middle of the eighteenth until the middle of the nineteenth century, English concert notices were unique in

listing two directors for most performances. At least some of this continued attachment to divided leadership was due to the cooperative nature of the Philharmonic Society.

The Philharmonic Society was established in 1813 with a fiercely democratic set of laws; women were offered full membership, program decisions were made by the directors, and both the violin "leader" and the member "at the pianoforte" rotated for each concert. Music critic George Hogarth described the division of conducting duties:

> The duty of the leader was not only to execute his own part with exemplary accuracy and firmness, but to attend to all the other performers, who were to look to him for the time of the movements, and to be governed by his beat. His coadjutor, at the pianoforte, and with the full score before him, was to watch the performance and to be ready to correct any mistake. This method, borrowed from the usages (far from uniform) of foreign theatrical and other orchestras, was liable to obvious objections. Neither of these functionaries could efficiently perform his duties separately, and they could not perform them jointly without interfering and clashing with each other. The leader could not execute his own part properly, and at the same time attend to, and beat time to, the whole band; while the person at the pianoforte could scarcely exercise any influence on the "going" of the performance without coming into collision with the leader.[19]

Over the next forty years, this increasingly out-of-date system, and the restriction of having only a single rehearsal, forced the Philharmonic to limit its repertoire to older and easier works.[20] The press began to complain about both standards of playing and the repetition of the same repertoire.[21] Critics like Henry Chorley, who had heard continental orchestras, were quick to point out the benefits of increased central control.

> No unfortunate flute there chirps half a note before its time, – no plethoric bassoon drops one of its thick Satyrlike tones in the midst of a pause, – no horn totters on the edge of coarse and mail-coach falseness when the tug of difficulty comes![22]

Given this history, London would seem an unlikely destination for conductors, but as the Society became wealthier it began to commission works and to hire famous guest conductors.

## Spohr and the baton

According to legend, initiated by his own account, Louis Spohr (1784–1859) introduced the baton on April 10, 1820, while conducting his second symphony with the Philharmonic Society in London. Spohr's three descriptions

of the event, however, do not correspond and suggest different dates and that he may only have used a baton in rehearsal.[23] While the word "conductor" now appeared on the program, there are no other reports of this event, and Spohr's claim that "the triumph of the baton as the time-giver was decisive, and no one was seen any more seated at the piano during the performance of symphonies and overtures" is certainly false.[24] All witnesses continue to complain that the conductor "sits there and turns over the leaves of the score, but after all he cannot, without his marshal's staff, the baton, lead on his musical army. The leader does this, and the conductor remains a nullity."[25]

On his first visit to London in 1829, Mendelssohn was led "to the pianoforte like a young lady" where he produced a baton and "some perhaps laughed a little."[26] This time, however, the event was confirmed in the press.

> Mr. Mendelssohn conducted his Sinfonia with a baton, as is customary in Germany, France etc., where the discipline of bands is considered of more importance than in England . . . We hope to see the baton ere long at the Italian Opera; it matters not whether it be a violin-bow or a roll of parchment.[27]

When Mendelssohn returned in 1832, the violin leaders objected to his baton and Mendelssohn could see no reason to appear as the conductor at all, but Michael Costa, John Ella and Giacomo Meyerbeer convinced him to go on with his baton.[28] By the following year, however, the baton was in regular use at the Philharmonic. Both a leader and a conductor continued to appear in the program until 1846, when Sir Michael Costa (1806–84) was appointed the first permanent conductor, on the condition that he would have full responsibility for the performance.[29]

The introduction of the baton, however, happened repeatedly. The reports of first use include Haydn, at the first performance of *The Creation* in 1798,[30] Ignaz Franz Mosel in Vienna from 1812,[31] and Johann Reichardt (1752–1814) who removed the piano from the court opera in Berlin in 1776 and directed from a separate desk.[32] Hallé reports that Daniel Türk (1750–1813) was using a baton in 1810, with motions so exuberant that he occasionally hit the chandelier over his head and showered himself with glass.[33] While Spohr, Spontini, Weber, and Mendelssohn all adopted the baton, Schumann disapproved:

> For my part, I was disturbed, both in the overture and in the symphony, by the conductor's baton, and I agreed with Florestan that in a symphony the orchestra must be like a republic, subordinate to no higher authority.[34]

In France, the baton was used to beat audible time, but the violin bow might wave silently. The earliest reference to baton conducting is of the nuns at

St. Vito in 1594. A contemporary composer reports that both instrumentalists and singers sat at a long table.

> Finally the Maestra of the concert sits down at one end of the table and with a long, slender and well-polished wand (which was placed there ready for her, because I saw it), and when all the other sisters clearly are ready, gives them without noise several signs to begin, and then continues by beating the measure of the time which they must obey in singing and playing.[35]

The next two hundred years saw this innovation repeated until baton conducting gradually found acceptance between 1820 and 1840.

It is not clear when Spohr first switched from using a roll of paper, but Sir George Smart reports that in 1825, he sometimes "beat time in front with a short stick."[36] As a virtuoso violinist, Spohr felt at a disadvantage to most Kapellmeisters, who were expected to sit at the keyboard. Spohr told Moritz Hauptmann "that he would give a hundred *Louis d'or* to be able to play the piano," and Hauptmann agreed: "Spohr's inability to play the piano is one of the main reasons why our new operas come to grief in nine cases out of ten."[37] While he could have led as he played, Spohr preferred to stand at a desk and use his hands. For rehearsals, he used a string quartet.

After jobs in Gotha and Frankfort, he settled in Kassel for a long residence (1822–59). He allowed no liberties from the players and was thought precise and plain. Liszt invited Spohr to do most of the conducting at the Bonn Beethoven Festival of 1845 (probably the most reported musical event before the opening of Bayreuth).[38] Spohr received almost universal praise for his "faultless style" in Beethoven's Ninth.[39] Despite a huge performing force (from five to seven hundred) that was generally not thought terribly good, Smart believed "the pianos and fortes were so well attended to that I never heard this Sinfonia so well performed before."[40] Chorley also praised the dynamics, and Morris Barnett pointed out that "it is the fashion with some to say that Spohr's baton is made of cotton – if so the other directors would exchange their iron for the softer material."[41] It is unclear how Spohr beat time, or if he did at all, but the virtue of the baton was established.

## Weber

Already an established composer, Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) was appointed Kapellmeister in Breslau while only eighteen years old. From the start he conducted by beating a roll of paper silently, experimented with seating, and reorganized administration and rehearsals; his energetic efforts in all of these areas, and equally persistent resistance to them, would continue

**Figure 8.2** Weber conducting at Covent Garden in 1826. The baton is probably a roll of paper.

throughout his life. He resigned after two years in Breslau and toured as a virtuoso pianist. He conducted his *Silvana* in Berlin in 1812 and greatly impressed Brühl, the Intendant there, who thought Weber accomplished in three rehearsals what would have been difficult in six or seven. He continued with his roll of paper as a Berlin critic described his conducting as "quiet, judicious, firm and noiseless."[42] He was appointed to the Prague Opera in 1813 where his reforms again led to rebellion. He finally settled in Dresden in 1817 where he tried to introduce a baton.

Most reports, however, put a roll of paper in his hands. In concert he might be standing (see Fig. 8.2), but in the theatre he would sit, as was customary. Smart observes that in Dresden, Weber "beat time with a roll at a square pianoforte."[43] Some early reports complain of quick tempos, but there is general agreement that while Weber was uncompromising and energetic in rehearsal, moving from stage to orchestra to correct mistakes, he was dignified and restrained in performance. There are also reports that he did not beat time continuously. Berlioz assumed this was because "Weber trained it so well that . . . he would give the tempo of the Allegro, sometimes beat the first four bars, and then leave the orchestra to proceed on its own."[44]

Weber was also the first conductor to articulate for the conductor a role beyond keeping the band together. When asked about tempos in his opera *Euryanthe*, Weber outlined a relationship between tempo and inner feeling that would become the core of Wagner's theory a generation later. Weber saw the conductor initially as a referee between the singers who bring "a certain undulation to the meter" and the instrumentalists who divide time "into sharp grooves like the swing of a pendulum. Truthfulness of expression demands the fusing of these opposing characteristics."[45] Weber wanted to encourage individuality, which was required for the "emotional expression" of music, while "preventing the singer from letting himself go too much." While others were just beginning to think about how performers were also interpreters, Weber claimed that most of this expression came from gradual shifts in tempo.

> The beat, the tempo, must not be a controlling tyrant nor a mechanical driving hammer; it should be to a piece of music what the pulse beat is to the living man. There is no slow movement without pieces that demand a quicker motion in order to avoid a sense of dragging. In the same way, there is no Presto that does not require a contrasting, more tranquil, execution of many passages, for otherwise the expressiveness would be lost in excessive speed. But the foregoing should not, in heaven's name, be taken by any singer as justification for the type of eccentric interpretation which arbitrarily distorts certain bars, and arouses in the listener a painful reaction as unbearable, as watching a juggler deliberately put his limbs out of joint. The acceleration of tempo, as well as the retarding, must never give rise to a feeling of abruptness, jolting, or violence.[46]

As did Wagner, Weber insisted that interpretation and tempo shifts be subtle, and that the conductor, as time-keeper, had an even more important role to play; not only was the conductor to keep everyone playing together, but to make music express emotion by gently manipulating the tempo. Weber, however, was ahead of his time. With orchestras still barely paying attention to conductors, it would not be until late in Mendelssohn's career that the first successful orchestral ritardandos would be reported.

## Spontini in Berlin

Gaspare Spontini (1774–1851) brought military discipline and all of its trappings to the Berlin Opera from 1820 to 1842. While probably not the first conductor to be despised in spite of his results, this Napoleon of the orchestra realized that obedience to a powerful conductor could raise standards. He was childish and vain, but had a dramatic flair which applied both to his

own appearance and the proceedings on stage. Moritz Hanemann played under Spontini and writes:

> Like a king, Spontini strode into the orchestra, and taking up his field-marshal's position, he looked all round with his piercing eyes, fixing them on the heavy artillery – that was what he called the cellos and basses – and then gave the signal to begin. Like a bronze statue he stood at the desk, moving only the lower part of his arm. He was the perfect model of a conductor. The orchestra players sat in wholesome fear of their master, but nevertheless played with undiminished enthusiasm from the beginning down to the last note.[47]

When Spontini came to Dresden in 1844, Wagner was required to have a baton made: a thick ebony staff with ivory knobs at either end. Wagner reports that Spontini held it in the middle "with his whole fist, and manipulated it in a way to show one plainly that he looked on the baton as a marshal's staff, and used it not for beating time with, but commanding."[48] Hanemann's description of Spontini standing "like a bronze statue" would seem to confirm this, as would Spontini's own emphasis on the eye: "my left eye is for the first violins, and my right for the second violins; wherefore, to work by a glance, one must not wear spectacles as bad conductors do."[49] Other witnesses suggest he did beat time.

> These two masses [of orchestra and chorus] are under the sole guidance of the conductor, seated close to the stage with his back to the audience; and as he only follows the score and marks time.[50]

This same English visitor recognized the superiority of this mode of direction to the English one of "two distinct beats," but still did not "entirely approve of the position in which the conductor is placed, being too conspicuous to the whole house, and thus apt to distract its attention by the incessant waving of his wand."[51] Like other aspects of conducting, the placement of the conductor remained highly variable through the early nineteenth century.

Eighteenth-century manners dictated that all performers face the audience. Adding the musical requirement that the keyboard be centralized, Quantz proposed an arrangement with the tip of the harpsichord facing the audience, "so that none of the musicians turns his back to the listeners."[52] Both Haydn and Salomon faced the audience in 1791–3 and this practice was still common when the first conductors appeared. In 1826, Weber "took his place on stage facing the audience."[53] It is reported that both Clementi and Mendelssohn faced the Philharmonic, but they were almost certainly only partially turned to the players, as Wagner caused a stir in 1855 by wanting

to be fully in the center and not diagonal to the players or audience. Further, Mendelssohn conducted the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 with his right side to the orchestra as "it was not yet customary for the conductor to turn his back to the audience, except at the opera."[54] Mendelssohn's sideways position seems to have been the preferred compromise. Generally this meant facing the first violins, with the left shoulder to the audience. At the Bonn Festival, Smart complained that this was a bad plan as both Liszt and Spohr "had to turn round to them [the singers] and to the secondo side when necessary."[55] While conductors did sometimes face the stage in the theatre, it was often at the prompter's box, so they had to wheel around to face the orchestra. While Spontini's position facing both orchestra and stage was imitated, sideways conducting persisted in the concert hall until the end of the century.[56]

Facing the orchestra allowed for greater discipline, and Spontini became conducting's first drill sergeant. His performances were renowned for their precision and dynamic extremes.

> Spontini's *piano*, played by the whole mass, sounded like the *pianissimo* of a string quartet, and his *forte* surpassed the loudest thunder. Between these extremes were his inimitable crescendo and decrescendo. He bestowed the greatest care on the light and shade. By means of numerous rehearsals, sometimes as many as eighty, everyone who took part in them became completely familiar with the operas. As a result of constant rehearsal the ensemble was impeccable.[57]

With the support of Frederick William III, Spontini could call both sectional and tutti rehearsals as he pleased and only go forward with the performance when it did not require much conducting. He also limited his conducting to his own and a select few other works. This probably explains the contradictory reports about his awkward motions and whether he moved much at all: by the time of the performance the production ran itself.

When Wagner heard Spontini conduct his opera *Fernand Cortez* in 1836, he was overwhelmed by the dynamic contrasts and a level of rhythmic precision beyond anything he had yet encountered:

> The spirit of his conducting astonished me in a way virtually unknown to me before . . . the exceptionally precise, fiery and superbly organized way the whole work was brought off was entirely new to me.[58]

But Spontini pursued accuracy and precision as ends in themselves, and Wagner found the performance cold. Wagner would eventually try to turn conducting away from the pursuit of precision toward the realization of internal truth, but for the moment, conducting still needed discipline.

## Mendelssohn and the consolidation of power

Like the opera conductors Weber and Spontini, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–47) was primarily interested in raising standards. He also used a baton, largely faced the band while conducting, and had to reform the organizations he conducted. While Spontini succeeded in Berlin and at the opera, where he had the resources for unlimited rehearsals, his methods did not transfer to other venues. It was Mendelssohn who consolidated power on the podium for choral and concert conductors and established modern methods of rehearsal.

The first battle in raising standards was to get performers to notice the conductor. While Spontini used intimidation and Costa tried to fine his orchestra into submission, Mendelssohn seems to have always remained the calm gentleman. Virtually everyone who recalled Mendelssohn on the podium had a story about his kindness. Devrient, for example, wrote that "he knew how first to commend every point that was at all commendable, and then with the greatest delicacy and firmness point out the defects."[59] Berlioz added that "his criticisms are invariably good-humoured and polite. The choir would be more grateful for their good fortune if they knew how rare these qualities are among chorus-masters."[60] Both Mendelssohn's music and his manners were the perfect match for English society; with his father's wealth, Mendelssohn was technically an amateur. But his concern for the working conditions of musicians also earned him deep respect.

When Mendelssohn arrived at the Gewandhaus he increased the strength of the orchestra from forty to fifty, weeded out some of the bad players and hired Ferdinand David (one of the best violinists in Europe) as the new concertmaster. All of this greatly improved the quality of the orchestra, but Mendelssohn also "never rested till he succeeded in effecting a real improvement in the position of the members of the orchestra."[61] He managed to increase wages and secured pensions. In exchange, Mendelssohn increased the number of rehearsals and the Gewandhaus became perhaps the best orchestra in Europe.

Rehearsals, however, were also becoming more sophisticated. The London Philharmonic, for example, had a single open rehearsal every Saturday before its Monday evening concerts, but with an audience, complete performances and applause, these "rehearsals" were hardly different from the concerts. Under Mendelssohn, however,

> The orchestra was compelled to "buckle to" its duty with a new and strange closeness to attention. The trial of Mozart's familiar symphony in E flat, must have been amazing to some, interesting to others – humiliating perhaps to a few, who remember Philharmonic rehearsals of entire

> symphonies infinitely more difficult at which the band has never once been stopped, and of solos where neglect sufficient to destroy the chance of a singer or instrumentalist has been overlooked.[62]

Mendelssohn's interruptions led to the suggestion that Saturdays become more of a "private rehearsal" as "it is clear the audience is not qualified to judge of the nature of the many interruptions."[63] Even more astonishing to contemporaries was Mendelssohn's ability to hear and correct wrong notes.

> He not only heard it but knew whence it came. Once during a grand performance, when there were about three hundred singers and over two hundred instruments, all in chorus, in midst of the music he addressed a young lady who stood not far from him, and said to her in a kindly way, "F, not F sharp."[64]

During the 1830s and 1840s, other composer-conductors were also inventing new rehearsal techniques. Spohr, who wrote long operas, added reference numbers (which became modern rehearsal letters) to scores and parts to facilitate working on shorter sections. Berlioz wrote music that was so different and new, he was often able to bring it to performance only through the use of sectional or "partial rehearsals."

Toward the end of his career in the 1840s, critics began to notice that the sum of Mendelssohn's innovations placed more responsibility for the performance on the podium.

> A man who has as it were lived in an orchestra – whose habitual duties as director have enabled him to detect individual errors amidst the densest mass of performers – to guide them when hesitating at new rhythm or unaccustomed effects, and to infuse one spirit into them – above all who occupies the post as a distinguished composer – stands altogether in a different light from those who have hitherto filled it as a temporary distinction.[65]

Musicians and critics began to realize that this new form of leadership involved many non-musical skills; Weber, Spontini, and Mendelssohn were all highly successful administrators and their musical success was due as much to their ability to reorganize and persuade as it was to increased technique. So at the same time that higher levels of precision began to be desired, it was recognized that conductors needed new skills.

Berlioz also had these administrative and musical skills, and most of his treatise is devoted to these. While the conductor has to "criticize the errors and defects," "economy of time should be reckoned among the most imperative requisites of the orchestral conductor."[66] But Berlioz also thought a conductor needed

> other almost indefinable gifts, without which an invisible link cannot establish itself between him and those he directs; the faculty of transmitting to them his feeling is denied him, and thence power, empire, and guiding influence completely fail him. He is then no longer a conductor, a director, but a simple beater of the time, – supposing he knows how to beat it, divide it, regularly.[67]

Critic James Davison thought Berlioz had this ability and made explicit the connection between "enchanting their attention" and the "marvelous precision."[68] Mendelssohn's improvements were also connected to a magical ability to engage with the orchestra.

> The magnificent band followed him as if under a spell, which his genius alone kept unbroken . . . The eyes of the musicians were all, as it were, focused within his own; he communicated with them as if by electricity.[69]

The possibilities for abuse also quickly became apparent. "I am struck with what you say about conductors; a first-rate leader ought to be a really clever man, though, alas! we know from experience that, given a man with a certain amount of stupid audacity and unselfconsciousness, he often achieves more than a skilful [sic], intelligent musician!"[70]

## Liszt and the new vocabulary of gesture

The influence of Franz Liszt (1811–86) on conducting remains grossly underestimated. At age thirty-five, he accepted his last fee for playing the piano and devoted the rest of his life to conducting, composing and teaching. He spent ten years (1848–58) as a resident conductor, leading the most difficult modern repertoire, and continued to conduct into the 1880s. Many of the conductors in the next chapter (including Bülow, Damrosch, Mottl, Nikisch, and Weingartner) spent time as Liszt piano students or were deeply influenced by Liszt's playing. Wagner's protégé Bülow, who married Liszt's daughter Cosima and then lost her to Wagner, first studied interpretation, instrumentation, and Beethoven with Liszt.

Liszt read widely and his copious letters and essays outline a sophisticated German idealist theory of art. He thought sculpture was the most accessible art because of its basis in the human body.

> All the arts are based on two principles: reality and ideality. Ideality is perceptible only to cultivated minds but the reality of the sculptor can be perceived by everyone because its prototype is the human form, familiar to all . . . This, however, is not the case with music: it has not reality, so to speak; it does not imitate, it expresses. Music is at once both a science like algebra and a psychological language that is intelligible only to the poetic consciousness.[71]

As in Schopenhauer, Hegel, and later Wagner, music expresses ideal "passions and feelings." The performing artist attempts to connect this ideality with the reality of the work in performance, although as for Wagner, the inner content of the music is more important then surface features. For Liszt this meant that technique and virtuosity were empty without "the true expression of the character of the piece."[72]

While Liszt is remembered as perhaps the greatest piano virtuoso of the nineteenth century, his early reviews hardly mention the mechanical or technical; instead critics focus on his poetic and musical taste: "To do justice to the performance of Master Liszt is totally out of our power; his execution, taste, expression, genius, and wonderful extemporary playing, defy any written description."[73] Liszt, today, is too often compared to Paganini. For Liszt, virtuosity was a means to an end. What Liszt heard in Paganini was not technique, but soul.

> René, what a man, what a violin, what an artist! Heavens! what sufferings, what misery, what tortures in those four strings! . . . As to his expression, his manner of phrasing, his very soul in fact![74]

For contemporary audiences, Liszt had a "divine energy"[75] and brought out the "spirit" of the music in a new way. "Liszt does not just play the piano; he tells at the piano."[76] It was Liszt, more than any other nineteenth-century performer, who transformed the performer from a machine (who merely recreated pitch sequences) into a poet.

When he moved to conducting, Liszt attempted to recreate this relationship, but whereas Liszt had complete control of the technical requirements of the piano, his conducting was usually shackled by limited rehearsals and his attempt to abandon traditional technique. Liszt thought time-beating was "a senseless, brutal habit which he would like to forbid in all his works. Music is a sequence of notes which demand to enfold one another, not something to be chained together by thrashing the beat." He asked conductors to "scarcely mark the beat," and complained of "mechanical, measured, chopped up beating up and down which is customary in many quarters."[77] It is no wonder his results were mixed.

> Liszt does not beat time, he only marks the accents. An orchestra, that is not absolutely intimate with him and his musical intentions, would hardly be able to manage under Liszt's conducting.[78]

In the age where Mendelssohn and Berlioz had only just established standard practice, it is no wonder orchestras were mystified, when Liszt tried to reinvent conducting technique as he had on the piano.

In his short conducting "manifesto" Liszt connects his earlier theory with his practice. Beethoven's work uses a higher level of rhythmic phrasing which requires a bond

> between the musicians at their desks and the musicians placed in charge of them, but a bond unlike that which is struck by imperturbable time-beaters. For there are certain passages where simply to maintain the beat and each individual part of the beat | 1, 2, 3, 4 | 1, 2, 3, 4 | very much runs counter to a meaningful and intelligible form of expression. Here, as elsewhere, the letter kills the spirit – a death sentence which I would never sign.[79]

While he could deliver both as a pianist, Liszt emphasized the poetic over the mechanical, summarizing his thesis as "We are pilots not oarsmen."[80] As a conductor, this meant Liszt had to invent new movements.

The descriptions of Liszt on the podium present a catalogue of modern conducting gestures.

> For motives with a singing character, he waves his white hand in long slow curves in the air, then suddenly clenches his fist when a firm chord occurs. During agitated rhythms, the baton often moves with each sixteenth-note, if he has not already taken it out of his hand as he often does. As the ending comes with loud, broad chords, he lifts up both arms and spreads his hands out wide; at a *piano* entrance, his whole body suddenly seems to sink down, only to grow massively as the crescendo comes. Liszt often goes right up on his toes as high as he can and reaches his arms above his head. He does not need the score. He scarcely looks at it, just glancing if at all for a moment, which he makes himself, as for example for a long flowing theme in a slow tempo and simple time, when he casts his eyes down, with his arms folded and not moving a muscle. Then he is all ears, responding totally to the majestic stream of melody, until he suddenly rises to life to engage his daring and energy.[81]

Liszt's contemporaries found these gestures original and strange, but they have become recognizable as the physical vocabulary of modern conducting. This new body language was (and often still is) a distraction, but it was Liszt's way of trying to communicate the inner nuance to the orchestra.

## Wagner

Initially, charisma was thought necessary only to command the attention of the orchestra. Gradually, however, the "master-spirit to command" was connected not to increased precision but to an "imaginative glow."[82] While the word *interprétation* is largely absent from Berlioz's treatise and other

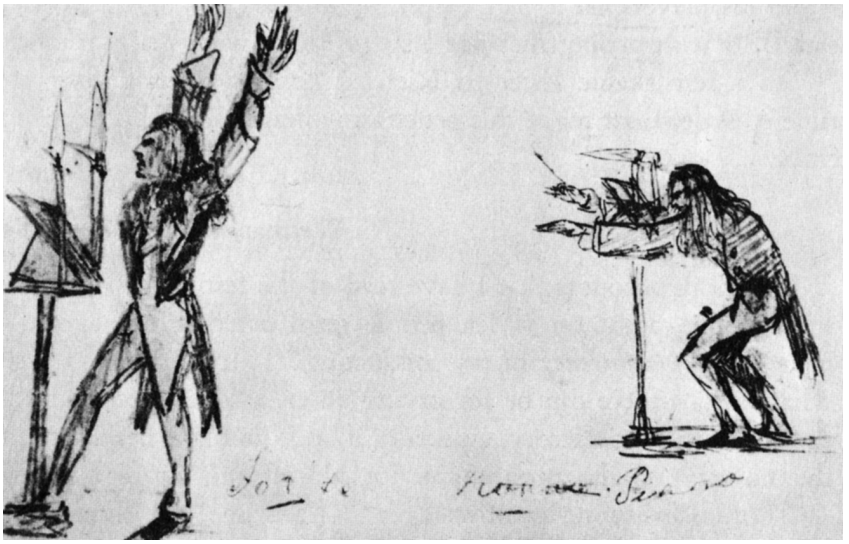

**Figure 8.3** "Forte and Piano," anonymous caricature of Liszt conducting (*c.* 1851)

mid-century writing, it is at the heart of *Über das Dirigieren*, the treatise by Richard Wagner (1813–83). Berlioz writes about rehearsals and beating time, but for Wagner these are only the means to an end.

For Wagner, as for Liszt, Beethoven demonstrates that music can be about something; it has an emotional or intellectual content. Interpretation is the art of discovering this "poetic object" and then transmitting "to the layman an understanding of these same works."[83] In the same way as Liszt worked from inside out, the answers to all questions about the nuances of performance are found in the inner content of the work; Wagner was deeply influenced by the dramatic performances of Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient who was acclaimed for her powerful acting, even though, as Wagner admitted, she "had no voice at all."[84] But vocal beauty is only skin-deep and Wagner uses the metaphor of a speaker reciting a poem in an unknown language:

> only the most superficial aspects of the work can be taken into account: the speaker can never articulate and emphasize the words according to his own conviction, but must stick strictly and slavishly to the most random superficiality of sound as represented by the phrase he has learned by heart.[85]

Wagner insists that performers must understand the content to make sense of the surface details. In this way, Wagner elevates and ties performance to the creation of true art, and thus to German idealism. Performing artists now join other Romantic artists as priests of truth.

The most important nuance for revealing musical truth turns out to be tempo – precisely what the conductor controls. The correct tempo leads almost automatically to correct phrasing. In *Über das Dirigieren*, however, Wagner complicates things by writing that tempo is determined, not by the poetic content of the music, but by something called *melos* and described as sung melody in all its aspects. Wagner argues that all music is dramatic; how it is sung determines what it says. The proof for Wagner is that earlier composers used only the general Italian tempo indications.

> Bach hardly ever gave any tempo indication at all, and in a purely musical sense this is the ideal course. It is as though he were asking "how else can one who does not understand my themes and figures and feel their character and expression be helped by an Italian tempo indication?"[86]

Not surprisingly, Wagner thought he understood Mozart and Beethoven better than anyone else and by all reports took new tempos: his slow tempos were extra-slow while he took some Allegros more quickly and some more slowly.[87]

For Wagner, however, the character (or *melos*) changes through the course of a movement and the tempo must respond to these changes. And thus the most contentious debate in conducting begins:

> When I now turn to consider more closely this principle, summed up in the phrase, modification of tempo – a thing our conductors are so ignorant of that they stupidly denounce it as a heresy – the reader who has followed me thus far will realize that what we are dealing with is the principle conditioning the very life of music.[88]

Like Weber, Wagner proposes that tempo should be flexible and that the conductor should subtly increase and decrease the speed of a piece in response to changes in character. Liszt's piano performances were also known for these tempo modulations, but where he was largely unsuccessful in transferring this technique to the podium, Wagner succeeded.

While Liszt tried to move the orchestra with new gestures, Wagner talked to the orchestra and explained what he wanted to do. (This may have added to his difficulties in England.) While many criticized his baton movements, the loudest complaints were about the results. Wagner was repeatedly criticized for "frequently hurrying or slackening the time,"[89] and "so many quickenings and slackenings of tempo, we never heard in a Haydn-symphony before."[90] Wagner advocated a "continuous modification" of the time, and was, it seems, successful in practice.

While Wagner stressed that these tempo modifications should be "imperceptible" or "unnoticeable,"[91] opinions about their magnitude were divided. In Vienna one critic recalled "the surpassing delicacy of all effects;

modifications of force and tempo were almost incessant, but were for the most part modifications by a hair's breadth only."[92] Smart, however, reported: "he reduces the speed of an allegro – say in an overture or the first movement – fully one third on the entrance of its cantabile phrases."[93] Davison saw it as a general principle for Wagner to "slacken the speed in cantabile passages" and this Wagnerian tradition continues to this day.[94]

Conducting would, in fact, remain largely Wagnerian, in both theory and practice, until the beginning of the twentieth century. Even today, loyalty to the emotional content of music, as theorized by Wagner and Liszt, remains a common principle. The danger to the surface of the music, however, was recognized almost immediately. Many were critical of Wagner's modifications to Beethoven's scores, both tempo adjustments and re-orchestrations, even though they were always made in the hope of clarifying the inner meaning. Tempo modulation reached a peak in the beginning of the twentieth century, but was soon losing the battle to a new breed of conductors who rejected both the practice of tempo modification and the philosophical idealism upon which it was based.