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CONDUCTING: HOW IT CAME TO BE

Kim Tavierne
Music History 1
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Neal Gittleman, the conductor of the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, is a very well known conductor that is loved and cherished by most. He has been working with the orchestra since 1995 and has excelled immensely. A performer of his stated; "Music Director Neal Gittleman inspires each listener's imagination with his unique programming, in-depth comments, his easy-going style and infectious enthusiasm for music."¹ Even in an orchestra as advanced and large as the Dayton Philharmonic they need someone to lead them. When one reads about Gittleman he or she can see the extreme passion and love that he has for conducting and how important it is to him and his orchestra. Conducting has become a huge part of music and its history; knowing conducting's history, where it came from and how it evolved is a vital part to knowing how conducting became the profession it is today.

The history of conducting is very hard to specifically pinpoint. There are a lot of scholars that believe that the beginnings of conducting started way back in the medieval era with Gregorian chant. However, in Clyde Holsinger's dissertation he believes that it goes back to the early Greek era. "As far back as the Sumerians, we have tangible evidence of a relatively highly developed musical culture."² This means that music has been around for quite a while. Most of the art that was presented during this time showed that as a result of this highly developed musical culture. This can be proven true because of the vast amount painted pictures on

¹ "Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra Music Director Neal Gittleman," *Dayton Performing Arts Alliance*, <https://daytonperformingarts.org/philharmonicmusicians> (accessed Oct. 20, 2014).

² Clyde Holsinger, *A History of Choral Conducting with Emphasis on the Time-beating Techniques Used in the Successive Historical Periods*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1954), 3-4.

many cave walls during the time of the Sumerians. However, this was before orchestras and bands began. So how do we know that these pictures on these cave walls are real representations of how conducting started out? Of course it did not start out as a person standing in front of a group, it started out as something simple like clapping in order to keep the song that the people were singing together.

Back in the early Greek music there was no specific written way of actually doing the conducting that we have today. However, there is a lot of indication that there was some leader that was in charge of keeping the group together. There were wall paintings in tombs that helped scientist come to the conclusion of this music leading idea. According to Holsinger, there were many pictures of multiple people in a row, which represented the song. There seemed to be a person representing a clap, which would have been the person giving the beat and keeping the song in time. These characters seemed to show up at the beginning and sometimes end of each line.³

Now during the Ancient Greek and Roman times, around 2000 B.C., one can see that there is a specific name given to the leader in these pictures and that was the time beater. "Visual time beating was being used much earlier than the existence of any organized orchestra."⁴ These time beating patterns were seen in many of these tomb paintings. Time beating by its simple definition is the beating of time. So as the performers are getting ready to sing the time beater would clap, stomp, or snap a consistent beat so the singers could stay together. This would be the same as

³ Holsinger, 7-9.

⁴ James Petty, *The Evolution of Conducting* (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 1955), 9.

a general music teacher today clapping her hands to keep her fourth grade class in time with a song. Usually during the medieval era the time beater would be in the front of the place at which the singing is planning on happening and clap as the singers sing the song. Usually the time beater would be clapping the beat, but in some situations the time beater would choose to do more than one time beating technique. For example, in the Sumerian church around 2500 B.C., if there were a large congregation in a church all singing at the same time it would be hard to hear one person clapping. In order to hear the time beater they would have to be louder. To increase the amplification of their beating the time beater could clap and stomp or snap and stomp. This would allow for the entire congregation to hear it louder and to follow it more effectively.⁵

Time beating became very beneficial when it came to keeping the singers on beat and singing together. However, there appeared to be another problem when it came to the actual singing. Some singers would be singing off pitch or not even know what they are singing. Since there was no notation developed so that they could read the pitches, something needed to be done so that the singers were able to sing songs on the right pitches. This also brings about one of the very important beginnings of conducting, which was called cheironomy.

Cheironomy was developed in order to help the singers of the group to actually have a pitch to sing. Even though there were no specific notes during this time, singers were able to identify high notes from low notes when they were shown with specific gestures. Cheironomy is the hand signs that were given by a

⁵ Holsinger, 10.

cheironomist during a piece of music indicating what pitch the individuals were supposed to sing and what beat they were supposed to follow. Of course time signatures were not invented yet; however there were a lot of songs composed with no specific time signature; it was more or less a compiling of notes. Cheironomy is the very beginnings of what conducting is today because this was physically someone standing in front of his group of singers keeping them on beat and on pitch. Men were still dominant in this society and the only singers that were allowed to perform in groups during this time, so men were the only individuals that were allowed to be cheironomists. "The singers knew the chants more or less by heart and performed them under the leadership of a cheironomen or conductor, who indicated the melody with movements of his hand."⁶ Cheironomy was a way to make sure that the people composing the music could share it with other churches and it would be the same as when they first composed it. "They composed the melodies, then they wrote them down, and finally they added cheironomy to ensure a more beautiful performance."⁷

A very important aspect of the wide spreading of cheironomy is the use of notation on vocal music. This allowed for the cheironomist to know exactly how long each note was and how to lead his group. The first notation symbol was the double basic time symbol, which was just a straight horizontal solid line that in modern notation would be the quarter note. Then there was the triple basic time symbol, which was the same straight horizontal line with a vertical line attached on

⁶ Constantin Floros, *Introduction to Early Medieval Notation*. (Harmonie Park Press, 2005), 12-143.

⁷ Floros, 141.

the right side. This indicated that in our modern notation it would be a dotted quarter note.⁸ This became a very important part of how conducting began, because without notation to help lead the group there would be no need for conducting. Everything would be taught by rote rather than by note.

Now that some of the history of conducting has been addressed let's continue by addressing where it came from. The story of conducting first began with singing. Wall paintings were some of the first actual signs that there was actual conducting, or time beating, during 2700 B.C.

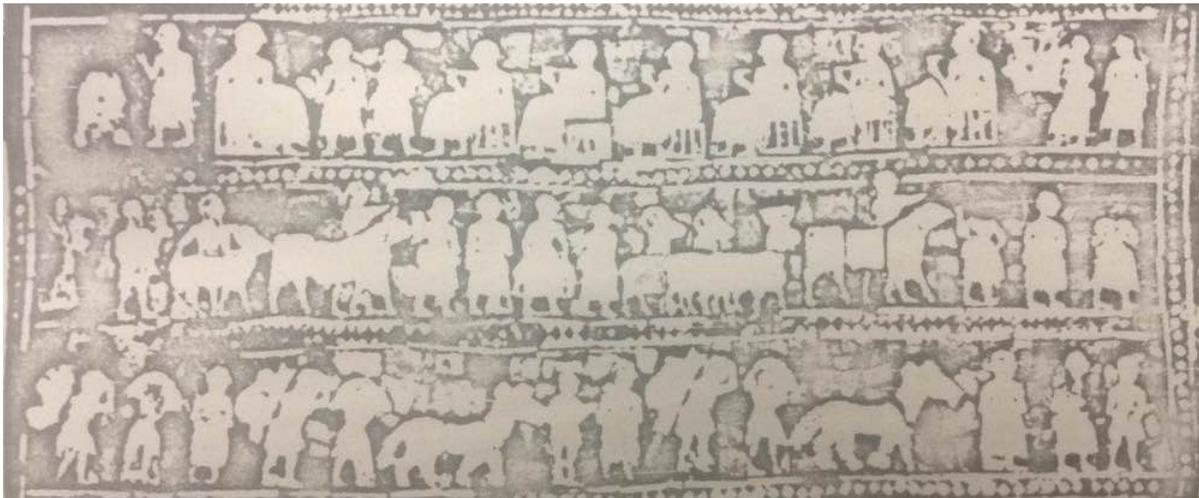


Fig. 1: Sumerian feast 2700 B.C. to the accompaniment of music.⁹

As seen in this figure there is a feast happening. One can see this by the large amount of people gathering and the seats that each person is sitting in are representative of a feast. Looking at the top row specifically on each end there is a person standing with their hands out. This would be the time beater of the song that is trying to be represented here. There are many more of these painting and

⁸ Holsinger, 23.

⁹ Holsinger, 7.

carvings on walls in tombs that represent the same facts of the beginnings of conducting.

Egyptians were also doing a lot of cave paintings, however theirs were more elaborate. As seen in the picture above there is a lot of clutter and one can see that there is a lot to analyze in the picture. However, the picture here is a lot more clear and precise with what it is trying to portray.

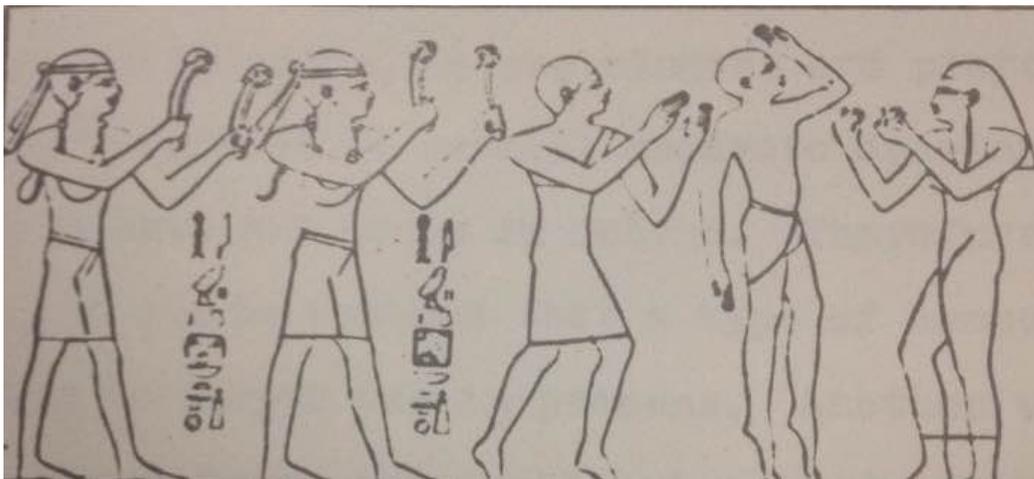


Fig. 2: Decorative painting in the tomb of Amenemhet, about 1500 B.C.¹⁰

This picture portrays men making hand gestures to a certain rhythm. “This painting depicts a man who seems to be simultaneously snapping the fingers of both hands and stamping his foot in the process of looking at the assembled musicians.”¹¹ As you can see the man on the right is the focal point to this painting. Every person is facing toward him making snapping and stomping motions. This can portray that the man on the right is the cheironomist, or the time beater. As shown in these two pictures, is just some of the evidence of early conducting that was portrayed. There

¹⁰ Holsinger, 10.

¹¹ Holsinger, 10.

are many countless tomb paintings that have visual songs. This is solid evidence that time beating during this time existed.

Now that we have addressed the history of conducting and where it came from, lets talk about how it transitioned from what it was back then to how it is today. One thing that has yet to be addressed is the actual physical conducting. So far the conducting has been limited to clapping hand signs that include the hand and wrist, but no physical up and down motion that we see today. "The up and down beat pattern, however, continued into the barred music until side notions began to be used."¹² This suggests that over the course of 100 years there was a transition from the traditional clapping to an actual up and down motion making a "V" shape. This was not exactly like the 2/4 conducting that we have today though. It was simply a motion of the hand moving from the top of the head to the waist and back up to keep the beat. This is very similar to what we know conducting to be today. Even though it is not exactly the same, it is very similar.

Once the shift from the clapping hands to the up and down motion to keep the beat, there was another advancement in beginnings of conducting. Now during this time there were advancements in musical notation. There were actual signs given to notes and rhythms. There were symbols such as the Darga, Tevir, Silluq, Merkha, Titha, Atnah, Munah.¹³ Each note having a different name and different use. The Darga in today's notation would be called the submediant. The Tevir is the subtonic and the Silluq is the actual tonic note. The Merkha is the supertonic and the

¹² Holsinger, 250.

¹³ David Mitchell, *Resinging the Temple Psalmody*, (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 2012), 355-78.

Titha is the mediant. The last two were the Atnah, which is the subdominant, and Miunah that is the dominant.¹⁴ Each part of the scale was used above each word in the written score giving the singers something to refer to when they did not know the song or were learning it for the first time. However, one aspect of this notation that was very hard to follow was the placement of the notation. In the score one of these markings would be either above or below each line of music. This was actually not very important in interpreting the music. Basically, the notation of the notes was either written above, below or before the words. This simply meant that the word had a specific note that the singer was supposed to sing.

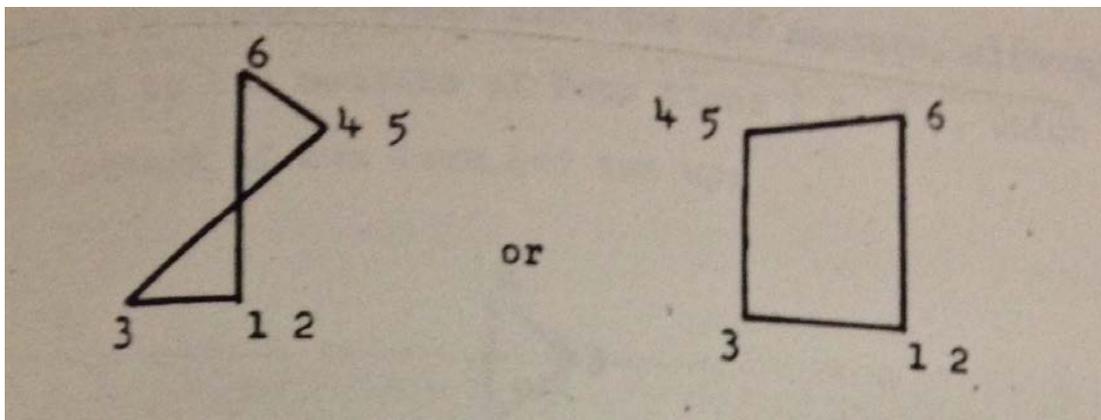
Along with the many advancements of music notation happening there were an equal amount of advancements in conducting. However, around the 1680's, it was still referred to as cheironomy. Closer to the end of the 1700's is when composers started writing music that was barred. This meant that there was actual structure to music opposed to music that was free and had no set meter. This allowed for the distinguishing factors between 2/4 and 3/4. During this time there were no time signatures it was just called a two-beat and a three-beat song. Due to the development of the three-beat bars it allowed for the conductor, or cheironomist, to have a three-beat motion. Instead of having a triangle-like beat pattern like we know today, he would make a wave affect. This motion almost resembled two waves within two walls.¹⁵

As conducting progressed there were more beats added to the motion of the cheironomist. In 1687 is where we see the beat pattern that is most like what we

¹⁴ Mitchell, 358.

¹⁵ Holsinger, 251.

know our 4/4 pattern to be. Daniel Speer was a very important person during this time in music history. He was a German composer and writer of the Baroque era. “Daniel Speer showed a pattern of 12/8 time. His diagram is the earliest example of the modern four beat pattern.”¹⁶ This pattern is exactly like what we know the four beat pattern to be today, however the counting is different to accommodate twelve beats in each measure. The first beat would consist of beats 1,2, and 3 and the



second beat consists of 4,5, and 6 and so on and so forth.

Fig. 3: Early Chironomy Patterns¹⁷

After this method of conducting was presented different chironomists tried to figure out the best way to represent the counts in each bar. There were two different ways to represent a six-beat pattern. The first way was in the shape of an hourglass, which is represented on the left of the pictures. The second is on the right in the shape of a square. The only difference is the placement of beat 4,5, and 6.¹⁸

¹⁶ Holsinger, 252.

¹⁷ Holsinger, 255.

¹⁸ Holsinger, 255.

These two ways of conducting were adapted to each beat pattern that such as three and twelve beat patterns.

In the early 1700s the four-beat pattern was developed almost exactly like we use it today. However, the beat pattern was used in both hands. This is where we ultimately developed how we have conducting today. Well at least when it comes to the four-beat pattern. Later in the 1800s and 1900s the two beat pattern and the three-beat pattern were more fully developed.

Conducting is a vital part of how music is produced today. Having someone that is fully knowledgeable about music and how to direct a group is something that music needs today. There are rarely musicians that have not had some sort of director giving them instruction and help them along in their musical journey. Knowing where conducting comes from and how it came to be is something that is very important to someone who is aspiring to be a music educator. Conducting was not originally called conducting it has gone through so many different stages to get where it is today. The early ages of cave paintings that were representations of time beating are an important part to contributing to conducting. Even though conducting did not really start developing much until the late 1600s it is still very important to see where it all started and how it developed into something that involves instruction and schooling to obtain the position.

Conducting today is a job that includes teaching music by not only keeping the musical group in time, but on pitch as well. Being a conductor today has two different sides. There are the professional conductors that are well known and their faces are all over billboards. Then there are the conductors that are the teachers in

the classroom. Both kinds of conductors have the joys of sharing their love for music that was developed so long ago and has turned into a wonderful gift that can be given to the specific group or class. That is why some teachers sing Gregorian chants or play instrumental works by Bach and Haydn. It is to look back on what conductors have developed and the beauty that was created through it.

Annotated Bibliography

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This source is a "dissertation" discussing, specifically, the choral conductor. This source gave insight to the specific gestures that were developed in the beginning of conducting.
- Borthwick, E. K. "Notes on the Plutarch De Musica and the Cheiron of Pherecrates." *Hermes*, (1968): 60-73.
This source has some interesting facts about how cheironomy was part of the Cinesia's Pyrrhic dance. This gives some interesting truth to how widely spread this was and what eventually contributed to the popularity of conducting.
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This source provides insight into the discussion of middle age music. It provides information specifically on cheironomy and some of the aspects that makes it such a vital part of our music history.
- . "The Performance of Plainchant: Some Preliminary Observations of the New Era." *Early Music* 10, no. 3 (1982): 316-28.
This source has been very helpful with giving insight into early plainchant. It gives information about the Gregorian chant's rhythm and also gives some interesting findings about the earliest manuscripts with cheironomy and how it was notated.
- "Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra Music Director Neal Gittleman." Dayton Performing Arts Alliance. Accessed October 20, 2014.
<https://daytonperformingarts.org/philharmonicmusicians>
This source was used to talk about Neal Gittleman. It was used as a creative hook showing how important conducting has become to professional music.
- Floros, Constantin. *Introduction to Early Medieval Notation*. 2nd ed. Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2005. 12-143.
This source gave great insight to cheironomy and how it generally works. It also talks about the neumes and how they are actually very important to how we view conducting today.
- Friedlander, Arthur. "Notes on Facts and Theories Relating to Jewish Music." *The Musical Times* 55, no. 851 (1914): 21-27.
This source specifically talks about theories and how cheironomy is used in Jewish music. This article also talks about the actual system of cheironomy and how to use the fingers and hands.

Gilbert, Arthur. "The History of Conducting" (PhD diss., Westminster Choir College, 1937).

This source is a "dissertation" on the beginnings of conducting and how we got to the place that we are today with it being a profession.

Holsinger, Clyde. *A History of Choral Conducting with Emphasis on the Time-beating Techniques Used in the Successive Historical Periods*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1954.

This source provides insight into time-beating, which was a new concept in the early world of choral singing in the medieval age. It provides great description and history behind conducting and where it got its start.

Hucke, Helmut. "Toward a New Historical View of Gregorian Chant." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33, no. 3 (1980): 437-67.

This source provides information into the Gregorian chant and how it was shared. Specifically it talks about Cheironomy and how the hands were used almost to paint a picture of what they were suppose to sing, which was used before neumes were invented.

Kilmer, Anne. "A Music Tablet from Sippar(?): BM 65217 66616." *Iraq* 46, no. 2 (1984): 69-80.

This source gives excellent insight to the in-depth study of cheironomy. It talks about the relationship with cantillation system and how it is so similar to cheironomy. It also explains how to actually do the hand and finger signs.

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This source is a dissertation that was written to discuss the technique of conducting. This source showed a good progression from early conducting to now and how it progressed over time.

Meschonnic, Henri. "Translating Biblical Rhythm." *Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 4 (1985): 143-56.

This source talks about the Hebrew rhythm apposed to the Greek sign. It gives a lot of specific detail into what the accents mean and the reasons why they were very important to the piece.

Mitchell, David. "Resinging the Temple Psalmody." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (2012): 355-78.

This source provides a look into the history of music notation, which eventually brought about the beginnings of cheironomy. It also provides a chart with symbols and names that the people of that time period would use to know what note and duration they are suppose to sing.

Petty, James. "The Evolution of Conducting" (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati,

1955).

This source is a dissertation giving the evolution of conducting and where it got its roots. This source explained the medieval time period and how notation was so vital to the beginnings of conducting and why there needed to be a leader of the group.

Randhofer, Regina. "By the Rivers of Babylon: Echoes of the Babylonian past in the Musical Heritage of the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 1 (2004): 21-45.

This source gave some very interesting insight to Cheironomy. One very interesting fact was that in modern day descendants of Pharaonic Egypt still practice cheironomy.

Smith, Melville. "The Interpretation of Rhythm in Gregorian Chant According to the Theories of Solesmes." *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*, no. 8 (1945).

This sources gives insight into rhythm specifically and how the need for cheironomy became more prevalent the more difficult the music became. Also it has some interesting input on the individual's interpretation of cheironomy. Basically, that there could be a different version of each chant based on who was doing the cheironomy and how he thought the composer wanted it to be.

Spector, Johanna. "The Significance of Samaritan Neumes and Contemporary Practice." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 1965, 141-153.

This source provides more in-depth information about cheironomy and how it is the first major milestone in the beginning of musical notation. It also talks about the neumes and how they became very popular as well.

Treitler, Leo. "The 'Unwritten' and 'Written Transmission'" of Medieval Chant and the Start-Up of Musical Notation." *The Journal of Musicology* 10, no. 2 (1992): 131-91.

This source provides information into how the medieval chant was started with the use of musical notation. This was stemmed from the beginnings of early conducting or cheironomy.

Warren, Mich. *Introduction to Early Medieval Notation*. Harmonie Park Press, Sterling Heights, MI, 2005.

This source provides information about the beginnings of Medieval notation. It addresses Cheironomy and how it is related to the notation that they started to develop during this time period. It talks about the beginnings of writing down songs and the need for a leader to help the group stay together and know what to sing.

Weiss, Susan. "Disce Manum Tuam Si Vis Bene Discere Cantum: Symbols of Learning

Music in Early Modern Europe." *Music in Art* 30, no. 1-2 (2005): 35-74.
This source provides a history to the beginnings of the hand signs, Cheironomy, and its role in music during the early Europe. It also talks about the history of Cheironomy, which was brought about in the eleventh century, and how it was even started in the first place.

Widdess, D. R. "Tāla and Melody in Early Indian Music: A Study of Nānyadeva's Pāṇikā Songs with Musical Notation." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 44, no. 3 (1981): 481-508.
This source talks specifically about the unison of the ensemble and how cheironomy helped this immensely. Before cheironomy it was hard to keep groups together and the development of cheironomy made it easier for more challenging works to be performed.