

Recitative Conducting

Accompanied recitative places great demands on conducting technique and on the ability of the conductor to follow (the singer) and lead (the orchestra) simultaneously. Successful recitative conducting is based on thorough preparation and on having command of several types of beats. It is the best way to develop the sensation of not giving repeated beats of the same type.

The insights and skills gained from mastering this demanding genre are very helpful in building a fluid, varied technique that works well for conducting orchestral music.

Beat types: There are four basic types of beats used in recitative conducting. The first two are common to every kind of conducting:

1. Beat with the music (W)—the normal beat used when the orchestra is playing. It conveys the character and shape of the notes (as always!).
2. Beat before the music (B)—usually called an “activating,” or “preparatory” beat. It invites sound and conveys tempo, dynamic and mood to the orchestra. The BBM normally has to coincide with the TRIGGER SYLLABLE.*

Other more specialized beats are used frequently in conducting recitative—somewhat less so in orchestral conducting:

3. Passive beats—beats without energy or ictus used to indicate the passage of beats or measures when the orchestra isn’t playing, but when the players must count rests. They must conform to normal beat patterns, but in a way that does not invite sound.
 - a. Neutral beat (N)—given in tempo, but without musical energy
 - b. Passive beat (P)—more flexible in time; very legato

If ALL of the beats in a bar(s) are passive beats, use a single, large ONE for each measure that passes. If any part of the measure is a float or activating beat, however, all beats must be given.

4. Float™ (F)—an important kind of passive beat normally used TWO beats before an orchestral entrance, while the conductor waits for the singer to arrive at the trigger syllable.*
5. The Nudge™ (Nud)—rarely used, but sometimes indispensable, a “nudge” is an impulse given during a float to nudge the singer on to the next note or syllable. Nudges are sometimes needed in dotted rhythms, or when fermatas are immediately followed by an orchestral entrance (i.e. when there isn’t time for a float+beat before the music combination).

The purpose of a nudge is to activate the singer, but not the orchestra.

Overview of Recitative Conducting Technique (or, “Hurry Up and Wait”):

1. Beat with the music until the orchestra music ends.
2. Using passive beats, mark time quickly so as to get AHEAD of the singer.
3. Without completely stopping the movement of the baton (i.e. using the “float”), WAIT TWO beats before the orchestra enters (i.e. if the next orchestral entrance is on a downbeat in 4/4, you will be “floating” on beat three of the preceding measure).
4. Listen to the singer and follow the text, waiting for the trigger syllable.*
5. When the singer arrives at the trigger syllable,* your role instantly changes to that of leader: Give a decisive “beat before the music” (on beat four) and LEAD the orchestra.

*The “trigger syllable” is the syllable of the text that triggers the “beat before the music.”

Score Study for Recitatives

TEXT

1. Study the text as poetry, and learn the correct pronunciation of the words (the Nico Castel “Red Books” of libretti translations are very helpful)
2. Study the meaning of the text
3. Study the text as rhythmic sound (i.e. speak it in rhythm)
4. Study how the text is set to pitches in relation to its meaning and to vocal technique

ORCHESTRA

5. Study the accompaniment from the piano score for harmony and rhythm. Is there word-painting or other ways in which the accompaniment is used to highlight or comment on the text?
6. Study the accompaniment from the orchestral score. What are the choices of instruments and how are they used in relation to the text?

CONDUCTING

7. Decide which syllables are the appropriate trigger syllables, based on orchestral tempos and likely pace of the recitative singing.
8. Decide what gesture is needed for each beat:
 - a. Beat before the music / Nudge
 - b. Beat with the music
 - c. Neutral/Passive beat
 - d. Float

PRACTICE

9. Sing recitative; play accompaniment on piano
10. Sing recitative; give appropriate beats
11. Sing and conduct while someone else plays
12. Conduct while two other people sing and play