

## THE ROLE OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE ART OF MUSICAL CONDUCTING

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**SUMMARY.** Facial expressions can be regarded as an accurate reflection of the inner emotions people manifest towards the surrounding reality, filtered through their own emotional „strainer”. The source of these feelings lies not only in external influences, but also in a man's own thoughts, experiences, level of education and culture, as well as the degree of development of their own volitional and emotional capacities, in which muscle movements are merely just a simple mechanical means of rendering. The entire array of facial expressions acts as a unitary system which does nothing but complete the movements of the conductor's hands, filling them with meaning. We can say that this type of communication represents a way of combining the most delicate, vibrant, profound, and subtle feelings. It would be impossible to imagine that the movement of the arms, unsupported by the expression of the eyes and face or by the position of the body, were able to express a large array of emotions (joy, pain, sadness, rage, fear, surprise, or confidence) accurately and unequivocally.

**Keywords:** facial expressions, mimicry, nonverbal communication, conductor, performance.

Throughout the years, many professors and theoreticians of the conducting art have labeled facial expressions as one of the most important elements that pertain to the nonverbal language specific to the art of musical conducting. Some consider mimicry as being a conductor's main ability, doubled by their will and capacity to expressively convey the musical content by means of gestures. However, the role of facial expressions in the conducting art has been insufficiently tackled in specialized treatises. Some authors tackle this subject pretty modestly: “mimicry plays a main role in conducting. Particularly, the look in the conductor's eyes can

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suggest states of the soul, inspirations or impulses of the moment”<sup>2</sup>. It is likely that this loophole be dictated by a certain caution, thus avoiding mimicry or the emergence of some unnatural, studied grimaces, which are not authentically experienced. Consequently, it is important to mention that the development of mimicry is attained naturally, through intuition, by authentically and directly experiencing the act of musical performance. “The movement of the arms, the body stance and the mimical facial expression of the conductor are keys that operate in the performers' conscience”<sup>3</sup>. Having aesthetic and communication functions, mimical gestures represent a means of nonverbal bidirectional communication (from the conductor to the ensemble and vice-versa), which results in both a unitary interpretative vision and a single emotional thrill. As there are two parties involved in this complex process (the conductor and the performers), it is only logical that the emotional expression of the ensemble's members affects all the aspects of the musical performance (vocal, intonational, expressive, etc.).

At the same time, for some components of the art of choral singing, such as breathing, the precision of pronunciation or the closure of certain consonants, the exclusive use of the arms is insufficient. To complete the message, some additional gestures are required for the character, sensitivity and quality of pronunciation and these elements can be suggested through the mimical and articulatory movements of the conductor's facial muscles. Mimicry completes the arms' movements, and, at the same time, it conveys a certain inner content. It is impossible to imagine that the movements of the arms, unsupported by the expression of the eyes, face, or body position, would be able to express a large array of emotions accurately and unequivocally (joy, pain, sadness, rage, fear, surprise, confidence, etc.).

The forefront of the head includes several parts: forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, eyes, nose, mouth, chin... however, not all of them are able to subtly convey a complex array of feelings and nuances of the emotional experiences. Although all these elements can be studied separately, they complete one another and are interdependent. The most expressive ones, according to researchers, are the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth. The information about a person's feelings is transmitted to the entire facial ensemble, not only to the eyes, mouth, or eyebrows. By perceiving facial expressions, we can have a glimpse at a person's inner world, by correlating our own knowledge and experiences with the person we are interacting with.

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<sup>2</sup> Bena, Augustin, *Curs practic de dirijat coral (A Practical Course of Choral Conducting)*, Editura Muzicală Publishing House, Bucharest, 1958, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Golcea, Ioan, *Gestul cu funcție de semn, în comunicarea dirijorală, Introducere în stilistica dirijorală I (Gesture as a Sign In a Conductor's Communication. Introduction in Conducting Stylistics I)*, Almarom Publishing House, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, 2006, p. 37.

Scientists classify body movements in hereditary and acquired. The first category includes the unconscious movements, which come from the subconscious and outwardly express feelings of joy, surprise, despair, etc. The second category refers to the movements acquired throughout a person's lifetime, and they represent a set of gestures that accompany and accentuate the verbal language, or they simply convey nonverbal information.

„Mimicry is the ensemble of dynamic changes in a person's physiognomy, which express or accompany their emotional states and thoughts”<sup>4</sup>, representing a reflection of the feelings manifested by people towards the surrounding reality, filtered through their own emotional strainer. The source of these feelings lies not only in external influences, but also in a man's own thoughts, experiences, level of education and culture, as well as the degree of development of their own volitional and emotional capacities, in which muscle movements are merely just a simple mechanical means of rendering.

When talking about facial expressions, we are mainly referring to the muscular component, which is responsible with changing our facial expressions. The mimic muscles are thin, flat formations, made up of short muscular packages which are covered by the skin of our face. When a muscle relaxes, the face of the skin, thanks to its elasticity, returns to its initial state. Because of this, a slight contraction of any facial muscle is extremely visible and determines a corresponding change in the facial expression. It is estimated that the human face and neck account for 15 % of the human muscles.

According to researchers, there are three main facial components which can be distinguished when communicating emotions<sup>5</sup>:

1. The upper component includes the occipitofrontalis muscle (epicranius muscle) and the eyebrows. In facial expressions, these two components are connected, therefore, when the occipitofrontalis muscle contracts, the skin of the forehead is lifted, and the eyebrows are arched. Usually, this muscle contracts when it expresses attention or surprise. If it contracts only on one side and lifts an eyebrow, then these expresses doubt or the existence of a question. Often, a conductor's expressively lifting just one eyebrow is enough for the performers to sense his or her disapproval. When only the interior side of the frontal area is contracted, the interior edge of the eyebrows is also lifted, thus contouring a facial expression associated with a state of joy.

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<sup>4</sup> Larousse, *Dicționar de psihologie (Dictionary of Psychology)*, “Univers Enciclopedic” Printing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Corniță, Georgeta, *Comunicare și semnificare (Communication and Significance)*, The Northern University Publishing House, 2006, p. 14.

The most significant activity of this muscular group is produced before the initial *Auftakt*, a moment in which the conductor creates the emotional field required for the musical debut. In this case, the activity of the muscles from the upper part of the face plays an extremely important role, as they are the ones that accentuate the conductor's warning gesture and increase the concentration of the members of the musical ensemble.

2. The average muscular group of the eyes and cheekbones. Unquestionably, the most important element of connection between the conductor and performers is *eye contact*: "without it, people cannot feel they are really interacting with one another, they cannot fully communicate"<sup>6</sup>. Eye contact plays the role of a control action, offering feedback regarding the partner's behavior and to their degree of involvement in communication.

Indeed, the eyes can best express a person's state of mind: joy-sadness, calmness-unrest, pleasure-pain, etc. The look can be attentive, preoccupied, approving, contemplating, sharp, sad, etc. The emotional impact of eye contact depends on its duration, on the amplitude of the eyelids' opening, as well as on the degree of radiance coming from within. The closing of the eyes for just one moment may signify acceptance, peace, and calmness; wide-open eyes may suggest surprise, admiration, unexpected joy, excitement, or exuberance. By establishing eye contact, one may ask a question or offer a positive answer (by closing the eyelids), or even express a position towards the present unfolding of events.

In a conductor's communication, the look significantly helps to maintain the interpersonal interaction of the conductor with the members of the ensemble. Singers follow the conductor, who, by employing gestural technical means and facial expressions, gives them the information necessary about the manner of interpretation and the conductor receives feedback. There is no doubt that the conductor's gestures are deprived of meaning when they are not sustained by an expressive look. In this case, we would only have a correct indication of the beat of the music and not a genuine art of musical conducting. The members of the ensemble could not understand the profound significance of music just by following the movements of the conductor's arms.

No matter how perfect the arms' technique may be, it would have no effect unless the conductor's mimicry and look corresponded to the expressive meaning of the music. Consequently, his/her look should be sincere, energetic, open, and direct and should accompany each important event in the score: musical entrances, cutoffs, thematic emphases, etc. An

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<sup>6</sup> Chelcea, Septimiu, et al. *Comunicarea nonverbală: gesturile și postura (Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture)*, Comunicare.ro Publishing House, 2008, p. 74.

expressive look may indicate to the performers in what style and nuance they should enter, it may cheer them up or calm them down before a musical entrance, but it may also express the gratitude for a musical fragment well executed. In all these cases, the eyes' expression means much more than the movement or position of the arms.

Visual contact represents, perhaps, the most convincing element of the conductor-performers relationship, as it implies the transfer of feelings at a much deeper level than the verbal or gestural one. We can say that this type of contact created between the eyes of the conductor and of the performers represents a form of combining the most delicate, vibrant, profound, and subtle feelings.

The conductor's look is a true epicenter, a genuine source of energy that encourages the singers, completely willingly and consciously, to subject to the conductor's artistic will. As it can be demonstrated, nearly all the prominent conductors have used this ability, throughout the years, doubled by a natural, volitional impulsivity and by a pronounced hypnotic capacity. There are many, widely known examples of conductors with a modest gestural technique, but who, thanks to a certain hypnotic ability and a luminous personality, have managed to compensate for the weaknesses of the conducting technique.

Despite all these, the conductor's look, aimed at the entire ensemble or vocal section or towards a certain performer, should be used cautiously, without constraining or intimidating. Hence, a friendly look, approving or calm, strengthened by the conductor's subtle smile, represents the most suitable state for the usual activity of a musical ensemble.

3. The lower component comprises the nose, mouth, and chin, the last two being articulation organs. Since choral art is an art that combines music with poetic text, the articulation of phonemes becomes of great importance. The articulatory apparatus is comprised of active organs (tongue, lips, soft palate, lower jaw) and passive organs (teeth, hard palate, upper jaw).

The choir conductor often mimics the text during the conducting process of the musical performance. During rehearsals, the choirmaster provides indications by means of the verbal language and gives vocal examples, whereas during the concert performance, he/she only leads them in silence, by using the entire arsenal of gestures, mimicry, and posture to attain the transmission of the artistic message. By putting their index finger to their lips, conductors suggest a peaceful sonority; by widely and actively opening their mouth, they impose expressiveness and timbral richness.

In the case of the lower facial area, we mainly talk about the orbicular muscle of the mouth, the zygomatic muscle, and the masseter muscles. The movements of all these muscles are responsible for the formation of the human smile. By smiling, any person radiates friendship, joy of life and a natural optimism. The closed mouth, according to scientists' observations, denotes a firm, strong will, determination, perseverance, the desire to act silently, whereas tight lips give the impression of inner tension.

The expression of a smile on a conductor's face is very important, both in the moment prior to the musical attack, as well as during the artistic act. It may be approving, encouraging, or comforting. In any case, to singers, the conductor's smile represents a sign of approval or support, stimulating the sensitiveness and good development of the performing process.

The facial expressions of a conductor during the performing process are continuously changing and transforming, under the influence of several factors, being in a continuous oscillation between present and future. On one hand, their mimics varies according to the degree of satisfaction they are experiencing or discontent with the sonority already created. On the other hand, it anticipates the emergence of certain states of mind that he/she are trying to transmit over to their stage partners.

There are two main directions of facial expression: on one hand, a positive facial tone, when the forehead wrinkles are smoothed, the corners of the mouth are slightly lifted, a smile appears and the face gets a luminous, friendly expression; on the other hand, a negative facial tone, when the eyebrows are furrowed, the forehead is frowned, the corners of the mouth lowered, and the face gets an angry expression.

We must emphasize the fact that facial expressions are determined by the nature and „image” of music. They should not only convey directly whatever is enciphered in the musical score but should also render personal emotions and states of mind that characterize the conductor's vision and his/her specific methods of conveying them to the performers. The body stance, gesture, look and facial expressions – the main means of nonverbal communication between the conductor and the choir – act as a unitary system, completing one another and having an organic unity.

From this perspective we can notice two distinct types of conductors: some with impulsive personalities, with radiant facial expressions and in a continuous movement and some with a withheld expression of emotion, but with significant feelings. However, the lack of personality and expressiveness in the conducting art is inconceivable, which means that the facial area represents the most important ensemble of elements that directly sustain the achievement of a full communication between the conductor and the members of the ensemble.

Relaxed, untense cheeks, the mouth opened as in a large yawn or in a half-smile – these are the characteristics of the conductor's face that describe their positive or satisfied attitude towards the sonority of the ensemble. On the contrary, tense cheek muscles, lips closed tight, a tense jaw, doubled by a piercing glance, looking to identify the person responsible for an error or trying to correct it, all these make up the portrait of the disgruntled conductor, so familiar to musicians in the case of a failed performance.

Consequently, we can certainly state that a conductor's facial expressions, even against their will, reflect those feelings and experiences that emerge in their soul. When we admire something, for instance, we open our eyes wide open; in moments when we experience discontent, anxiety, or pain, we frown; when smiling, we lift up the corners of our lips; when saddened or upset, we lower them down. Therefore, a conductor must control their own facial expressions and must try to transform them into an instrument of expressiveness, but without exaggerating and without stepping into the realm of fake drama. An authentic conductor rules out any attempt of acting and their gesture is exclusively functional”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Bugeanu, Constantin, *Perspective creatoare ale actului dirijoral (Creative Perspectives of the Conducting Act)*, „Muzica” Magazine, Issue no. 9, 1987, page 18.

