The Origins and Evolution of Centered Conducting

Jacques C. Voois, DMA

Foreword

by Wayne J. Toews

The following article originally appeared in **Notes**, *the Newsletter of the National Orchestral Association, Volume XXV, December 2017, pp.1-2.*

For some time now, Dr. Jacques Voois has intermittently researched and written sections of the monograph, *The Origins and Evolution of Centered Conducting.* He opens the document with a brief survey of the history of conducting to 1900. The balance of the work is a detailed survey of "centered" conducting and how it contrasts to other prevailing styles of our time.

Leon Barzin mentored him for five seasons in NYC (1971-76) and for a summer in France when he studied and practiced the Toscanini/Barzin conducting technique in great detail. The monograph provides a unique, firsthand description of the stylistic principles derived from this study and serves as a generous gift to those wishing to expand their knowledge of the history and development of the centered, and indeed of all conducting styles.

The work is scholarly but not stuffy; the writing is clear and focused. His special qualities of intellect, curiosity, and openness join with his extensive experience and insightfulness to examine in meaningful detail the gestures used by Toscanini, Barzin, Saito and others. Through prose and videos, it also examines how conductors of the last hundred years have come to use efficient and effective gestures to express and achieve their artistry.

During his research, I was privileged to share with him my knowledge of the Saito Conducting method developed over more than 40 years of study and teaching. I have been especially appreciative of the openness with which he sought to understand Saito's ideas. His ongoing search for knowledge of all things "conducting" is remarkable and stands as an exemplar of the best in scholarly research. Through astute questions and a gracious manner, he made sharing Saito's technique effortless and fulfilling.

This is not a "how-to" manual but rather writings and videos that will provoke thought, invite observation and analysis and provide a foundation for the study of gestures that can enable ensembles to achieve the best musical results. To my knowledge, it is a unique and admirable chronology of centered conducting, a style which began in the late 19th century and continues today, used by ever-increasing numbers of professional conductors.

Wayne J. Toews is a noted Canadian conductor and educator. For 25 years (1983-2009) he served as director of the Saskatoon Youth Orchestra in association with George Charpentier. He is a leading authority on the Saito conducting method and prepared the English edition of Saito's conducting manual, published in Tokyo in 1988.

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Prelude

A Brief Survey of Conducting from 2600 BCE to 1900 CE

Egyptian Chironomy

The birth and evolution of music is veiled in the genesis of civilization. Musicologist Curt Sachs wrote, "The oldest records of organized and systemized [Western] music are Sumerian and Egyptian. . . . " (58). Since Egypt's ancient civilization was surprisingly advanced and a large body of germane information on their music remains extant, it will serve as the exemplar of Western musical antiquity for this survey.

The earliest Egyptians integrated music into their universe, science, religion, philosophy and mythology. Their beliefs and practices included the *assimilation of music and music performance* into multiple aspects of daily living.

In his book, *Egyptian Rhythm: The Heavenly Melodies*, Egyptologist Moustafa Gadalla writes, "For the deeply religious people of Egypt [. . .] the explosion that led to the creation of the universe was an orderly event" (44). In Egyptian mythology the goddesses Het-Heru, Ma-at and Meret-Shemau participated in the creation. Meret's domain was vocal music. She "[. . .] was considered to be the personification of music" (Gadalla 86). According to Egyptian tradition, "Music came into this world with its creation, or perhaps rather creation happened thanks, among other things, to music: with her music and gestures Meret had a part in establishing the cosmic order" (Wilkinson 152).[1] [2]

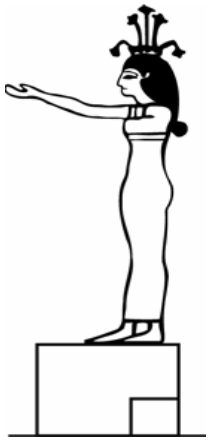

Figure i.1
The Goddess
Meret-Shemau

Figure i.2
Meret-Shemau
Brooklyn Museum

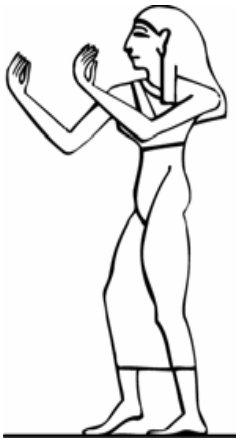

Figure i.3
Female chironomid

[1] "Meret's [also called Merit] major function was to establish cosmic order by means of her gestures, and as such, Merit is the cosmic conductor/maestro[a] who manages the notes and the musical flow of performances." (Gadalla 86)

[2] Figure i.3: "In the tomb of Amenemhet at Ta-Apet (Thebes), dated ca. 1500 BCE, is depicted a female conductor/chironomid standing before and facing the performers, pounding time with the right heel and snapping both her thumbs and forefingers." (Gadalla 94)

No evidence can be found that Meret-Shemau was a chironomid, i.e., used chironomy—finger, hand and arm signals—to lead her celestial choirs. However, her practice of clapping suggests that she was the first mythical character to be viewed as a director/conductor of vocal music in Ancient Egypt and Western civilization.

It is unclear when ensemble music-making and chironomy began. One of the earliest and most sophisticated depictions of Egyptian ensemble music led by chironomids comes from the wall of a tomb from the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2600 BCE). It portrays the instrumental and vocal private ensemble of an Egyptian gentleman named Tebhen. The tomb painting is impressive in its detail and suggests that the music being performed may have contained harmony. (Only the painting's lower two panels are shown below.)

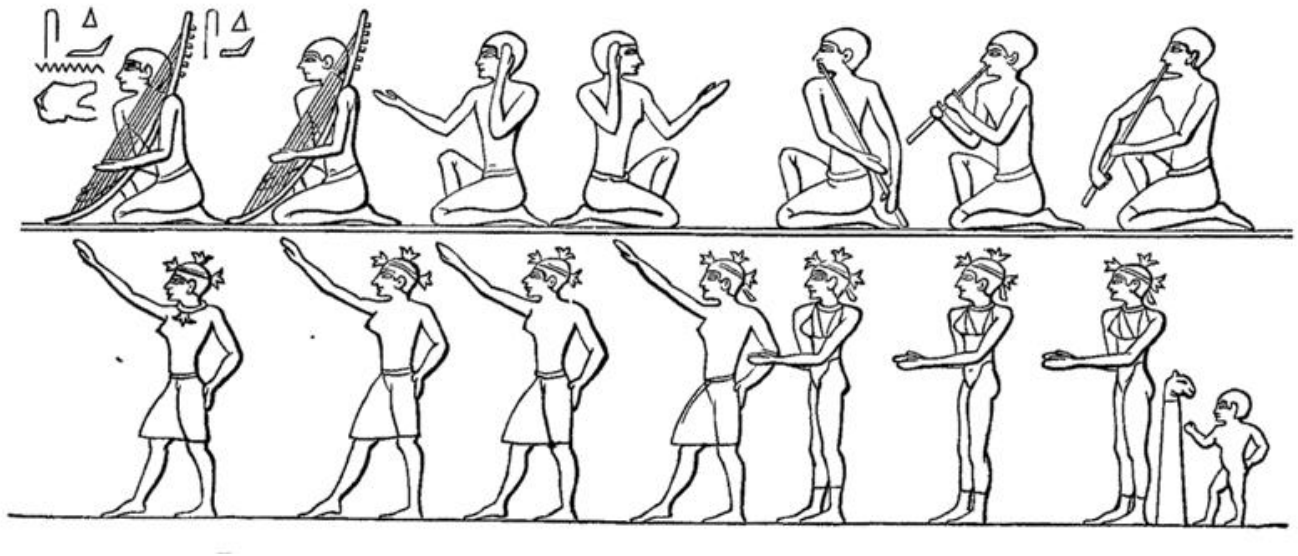

Figure i.4
Wall panel from an Egyptian tomb of the Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2600 BCE

The panels depict both *audible* and *silent* direction: two harpists with a conductor/chironomid; one flute and two pipe players with another conductor/chironomid; four male singers, with the right arm extended towards their patron (visible on another panel) and three female singers, who also mark time by clapping their hands. Lastly, there is a child, who beats time on a bronze instrument adorned with an animal head. The pipers and flute player are clearly playing in harmony, owing to the varied lengths of the pipes. It is possible, though, that the painting has captured the simplest form of harmony, i.e., playing in octaves. Sadly, no proof exists to support either theory. (Chappell 65-67)

The use of chironomy to lead song and chant continued throughout Biblical times. Chant exists to this day in the religious music of Egypt and Israel. Chironomy and chant were adapted in the Christian Era for use in Church liturgical music. Pope Gregory I (560-604) is reputed to have been a renowned *chironomica*.

Audible and Silent Direction

Audible and silent direction coexisted for centuries. In the treatise *Musicorum Liber III* (1512), Vencelaus Philomathes declared that he *objected* to audible time-beating. Unfortunately, by then the practice had existed for some four millennia and would persist well into the 19th century, all the while evoking endless protests from musicians and listeners alike.

Adriano Banchieri reported in 1614 that waving a handkerchief was a means of musical direction and, in 1696, Caspar Printz told of a *Kapellmeister* who had tied a handkerchief to a baton and beat time with it.[3] In a 1787 article entitled "*bâton de mesure*," we learn from Meude-Monpas that the material used for time-beating "is frequently a [rolled-up] piece of paper [. . . but] in the Opera, it is a piece of wood." The author justified this practice, stating "it is necessary for the Choristers and Dancers to be able to hear the beat which is established by the conductor of the orchestra" (qtd. in Galkin 193).

Figure i.5
Arturo Toscanini: Caricature by Enrico Caruso ca. 1910

In his comprehensive book, *The Compleat Conductor*, the late Gunther Schuller (1925-2015) provided a succinct summary of the methods and instruments of pre-baton time beating. He wrote:

> The use of a baton in conducting did not take hold as a consistent, common practice until the third decade of the 19th century. Before that, performances were led by musicians—more often than not the composer of the work being performed—either from the keyboard [harpsichord or organ] or the concertmaster position (sometimes both simultaneously) or with the director or *Kapellmeister* using a variety of methods, implements, devices, tools and instruments: violin bows; three- or four-foot long batons, used to keep time by stamping them loudly on the floor; rolls of paper (silently or, when struck together, audibly); various-sized pieces of wood; diverse vocal sounds (grunts, hisses, etc.); rapping on the music stand; and, of course, foot stamping. (78n)

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[3] It has been reported that Toscanini would, on occasion, use a silk handkerchief to demonstrate the delicacy and lightness of tone quality he was trying to achieve from an orchestra. The following anecdote was retold by conductor, Wilfred Pelletier.

> "During a rehearsal of Debussy's *La Mer*, Toscanini found himself unable to describe the effect he hoped to achieve from a particular passage. After a moment's thought, he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it high into the air. The orchestra, mesmerized, watched the slow graceful descent of the silken square. Toscanini smiled with satisfaction as it finally settled on the floor. 'There,' he said, 'play it like that.'" (Fadiman 548)

Baton Conducting Comes of Age

Throughout the 18th and into the 19th century, chamber and other small-sized ensembles were generally led by the concertmaster using a violin bow for direction. As late as 1887, Edouard Blitz recognized the validity of the then already old-fashioned violin-bow style of conducting that was still being practiced in France: "One may conduct either with a baton or with a violin bow." He confirmed Deldevez' report that the violin-bow conductor was most frequently found in the theater (Blitz qtd. in Galkin 315).

By the early 19th century, Germany had developed a tripartite division of responsibility: the *Musikdirektor,* for administrative matters pertaining to the presentation of concerts; the *Kapellmeister*, for supervision of all aspects of performance; and the concertmaster as his assistant in charge of all the technical details of ensemble (Galkin 212).

After his first concert tour in Germany (1843), Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) provided more contemporary information of the German musical hierarchy which, by that point, had undergone nearly a century of refinement. While comparing the state of conducting in the countries he visited, he wrote:

> In Germany [. . .] I found an almost universal order and attention combined with real respect for the master—or masters. For in fact, there are several masters: first, the composer himself, who almost always conducts his own rehearsals and performances, without in the least wounding the conductor's self-love; next, the *Kapellmeister*, usually an able composer, who conducts the principal operas and all important musical works of which the authors are either absent or dead; and the leader [concertmaster] who directs the small operas and ballets and also acts as first violin when not conducting, in which case he conveys the *Kapellmeister's* remarks and directions to the further end of the orchestra, superintends the material details of the studies, sees that nothing is wanting either in the way of music or instruments, and sometimes indicates the bowing or phrasing of a passage--a task forbidden to the *Kapellmeister, who always conducts with a baton*. [italics original] (Berlioz, *Memoirs* 246)

Major 19th Century Conductors

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

Regarding the conducting styles of the 19th century, Arrey von Dommer, a music critic who disdained flamboyant conducting and was author of the dictionary, *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1865), cited as his prototype of the perfect conductor, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1803-1847). In his *Lexicon*, Dommer wrote that Mendelssohn—who had died in 1847, twenty years before the *Lexicon's* publication—was quiet and reserved in his podium motions in contrast to such conductors as Wagner, Liszt, and Costa, whose theatrical gestures excited audiences and served as a means for self-aggrandizement. (Galkin 219)

Figure. i.6
Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

Mendelssohn appears to have been the first renowned performer/conductor/composer/editor of the romantic era,

whose musical efforts regularly attempted to maintain fidelity to a composer's intentions. Clara Schumann wrote, "Of mere effects of performance he knew nothing [. . .] in hearing him one forgot the player and only reveled in the full enjoyment of the music." (Schumann qtd. in Bowen 78)

Elise Polko, a public vocalist and novelist, became a friend of Mendelssohn in 1845. Although her writing was often infused with hyperbole, the following quote seems consistent with the general perception of Mendelssohn's piano performances:

> [It] was his absolute and unqualified devotion to the master whose work he was executing that imparted to his playing a character of perfection. . . . *In rendering the creation of others, he introduced nothing of himself*; he was entirely absorbed in the soul and spirit of the composer. [emphasis original] (Polko qtd. in Bowen 78)

José Bowen, renowned specialist in 19th-century performance practices, agreed. He wrote that "Mendelssohn was successful in 'depersonalizing' his performances, and virtually all of the contemporary critics remarked upon his avoidance of surface effects, associating this with his fidelity to the composer" (77).

Despite Mendelssohn's best intentions, occasional flights from strict fidelity did occur. For example, he would use large choruses in performances of early oratorios. Although that demonstrated a willingness to adjust to the unique exigencies of each situation, it did not adhere to established performance practices for a given composer (Bowen 80). For the briskness of his tempos, he was the recipient of constant criticism from leading musicians of the day. They included Berlioz, Bülow, Joachim, Wagner and numerous others (Bowen 80*n*). Nevertheless, his ongoing attempts at "fidelity," i.e., to let the music "speak for itself," led to an ideal of performance that seems remarkably like that of modern authenticity. All of this was accompanied by an unflagging loyalty to the inner spirit of the work.

Hector Berlioz

Drawing from various writings that appeared from the middle of the 16th to the middle of the 19th century, the theory of *non-audible* conducting leading up to Hector Berlioz was summarized by Elliott Galkin (1921-1990) in his extraordinary study, *The History of Conducting*. It read:

> 1. Until about 1700, vertical motions were utilized to control the rhythm of the music; no mention was found of gesture being used to express nuance.
> 2. By 1800, as beating time became a continuous process, lateral movements were introduced and were integrated into beat patterns, some of which remain in use today.
> 3. Variations in tempo and nuance were specified in scores and, in an attempt to express such indications

Figure i.7
Hector Berlioz

visually, time-beating procedures became increasingly flexible.

4. The Italians continued to use the earlier vertical time-beating patterns longer than any other country in Europe, while the French were leaders in developing and codifying a theory of modern conducting.

5. By the middle of the nineteenth century a theory of conducting was firmly established; however, some procedures *(fermata, cut-off,* beginnings after a beat) and gestures to indicate accent, phrasing, or rhythm had not yet been analyzed.

6. The first important study to treat the conductor as a specialist with responsibilities—divorced from those of composition or violin playing—was Hector Berlioz' *L'Art du chef d'orchestre,* published in 1855. In it, for the first time in print, *conducting* was recognized as distinct from *time-beating*. [emphases added] (Galkin 285)

Berlioz specified two responsibilities for the conductor: (1) fidelity to the directions of the composer; and (2) communication of personal conviction, intensity and spontaneity. He wrote:

> The conductor must be able both to see and to hear; he must be agile and energetic, he must know the construction, principles and range of the instruments; he must be able to read a score and must have, besides the special talent whose ingredients we shall attempt to describe, other almost indefinable gifts without which an invisible bond cannot be struck between him and those whom he directs; without them the ability to convey his feelings to them is missing, and consequently the power, control and direction will slip from him completely. He is not then a leader and a director; but simply a time-beater—assuming that he can beat time and divide the bar into regular units. (Berlioz *L'Art du chef* 337)

Regarding the members of the orchestra, he added:

> The musicians must share his feelings, his perceptions and his emotions. His feelings and emotions will then pass to them, his inner flame will warm them, his electricity will charge them, his drive will propel them. He will radiate the vital spark of music. (Berlioz *L'Art du chef* 337)

Due to a frustration with podium contemporaries who were (according to Berlioz) unable to master his advanced and progressive works, he began a conducting career. In his comprehensive Berlioz biography, David Cairns wrote, "He had to learn by trial and error. There was no one to teach him. He had to be a new kind of conductor; it was a new discipline that music such as his demanded, almost a new profession." (Cairns Vol. 2, 99) His early efforts had more enthusiasm than mastery; his tendencies towards nervousness and hyper excitement did not serve him well on the podium. Although he was not formally trained, he persevered until his skills improved. He followed the advice of Spontini, who criticized his early use of large gestures. One year later, Charles Hallé reported that his movements were much more economical, enabling him to control more nuance in the music (Cairns, 100). This evolution of his podium

demeanor was confirmed by Galkin, who described Berlioz as "restrained and reserved as a conductor, using a minimum of gestures" (219*n*).

Conducting brought Berlioz fame and, like Mendelssohn, he was hailed by many of his peers as the greatest conductor of his era (Cairns, Vol. 2, 100). Nevertheless, it was his writings and personal tutoring of conductors across Europe and Russia that had the greatest and most enduring influence. His *Traite d'instrumentation et orchestration*, *L'Art du chef d'orchestre*, *Memoirs*, *Voyage musicale en Allemagne et en Italie*, correspondence and speeches were infused with new ideas, concepts and attitudes on musical topics, the impact of which continues today.

Richard Wagner

The era of romanticism in the arts began to admit human emotion and expression into musical composition and performance. The greatest proponent of musical expression in the late 19th century was Richard Wagner (1813-1883) who, in his 1869 essay *Über das Dirigieren* (*On Conducting*), wrote extensively on the application of "tempo fidelity and flexibility" in the ensemble music of his own time and the masterpieces of earlier composers.

The versatile conductor, pianist and scholar, Felix Weingartner (1863-1942), summarized the profound importance of Wagner's treatise:

> Wagner's book laid the foundation for a new understanding of the function of the conductor, in whom we now recognize not only the external factor that holds together an orchestral or operatic performance, but above all, the spiritualizing internal factor that gives the performance its very soul. (Weingartner 3)

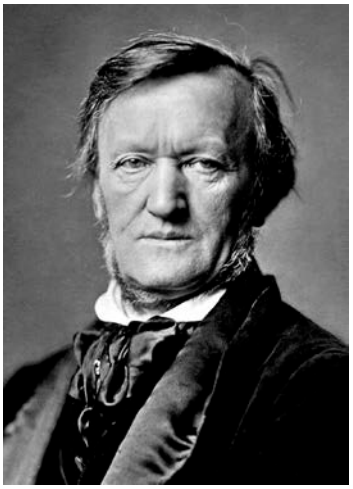

Figure i.8
Richard Wagner

Elliott Galkin noted the impact of Wagner's writings on conductors of the following and subsequent generations:

> [Wagner's *On Conducting*] contains a detailed description of those interpretive elements which typified his conducting, and which influenced the readings of such conductors in the following generation as Bülow, Hans Richter, Felix Mottl and Hermann Levi. Subsequently many of these interpretive principles were to influence Arthur Nikisch, and in the first half of the twentieth century such eminent conductors as Serge Koussevitzky, a student of Nikisch, and Wilhelm Fürtwangler, a pupil of Mottl. (Galkin 309)

José Bowen succinctly summarized the interpretive differences between Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Wagner:

> Mendelssohn [. . .] demonstrated a loyalty to both the score and the internal spirit of the work, which resulted in a performance style that attempted to be transparent by not adding external dynamic or tempo changes. [. . . Berlioz] considered timbre and orchestration also to be essential to the integrity of the work. He called for a recreative performer, who would merely illuminate the composer's masterpiece. Wagner was in the forefront of a new attitude, whereby the performer could create, and at the same time maintain that he was returning to both the original spirit of the work and the original performance practice of the composer. Wagner, in effect, turned Mendelssohn's and Berlioz's *recreative* executant into the modern *creative* interpreter. (Bowen 88)

Arthur Nikisch

The personality most credited with bringing the conductor's art and Wagner's musical principles from the late 19th into the 20th century was Arthur Nikisch (1855-1922). Nikisch was widely considered the pre-eminent conductor of his day, both in conducting and interpretation. He also brought an end to the era of time beating and, almost single-handedly, elevated the art of conducting into the realm of clear, controlled and creative musically engendered motions.

In his memoirs violinist-pedagogue Carl Flesch (1873-1944) wrote about Nikisch's conducting style:

> To me he was a revelation. From the time of my work under [the renowned French conductor] Lamoureux, I was still used to the type of unimaginative stick-wagger who, strictly according to the compass, beat 4/4 time in the cardinal points. Now for the first time I saw a musician who, impressionistically, described in the air not simply the bare metrical structure, but above all, the dynamic and agogical nuances as well as the indefinable mysterious feeling that lies *between* the notes; his beat was utterly personal and original. With Nikisch began a new era in the art of conducting. . . . Nikisch's technique itself seemed unprecedented and completely individual, in no wise thought out, but experienced, felt–an instinctive expression of his personality. (148)

Figure i.9
Arthur Nikisch

Nikisch was an excellent violinist and in his youth gained valuable insights while performing under the direction of such renowned composer/conductors as Brahms, Wagner, Verdi, Liszt and Bruckner. Those rich experiences helped him become ". . . an unsurpassed podium psychologist [. . .] an orchestral technician of the highest order, a connoisseur of tonal elegance, a master of highly imaginative but seamlessly sewn tempo changes. . . . " (Bloomfield)

During his career, Nikisch was named to multiple head conducting posts spanning two continents: the Boston Symphony in 1889, the Budapest Opera in 1893, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and Berlin Philharmonic in 1895, and the Hamburg Philharmonic in 1897. With the Berlin, London and Boston orchestras, he toured from the United States to Moscow. He was a popular guest with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Vienna Philharmonic and directed Wagner's "Ring" at Covent Garden.

In 1902, he became Director of the Leipzig Conservatory where he taught a class in conducting, perhaps the first of its kind, and served for the 1905-06 season as Director of the Leipzig Opera. He retained his position with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra until his death in 1922.

"Nikisch's not undaring conducting style had roots in the conducting of Wagner. . . ." (Bloomfield) Because his beat would rise or change levels after a downbeat, his style was labeled "étagèn" or terraced conducting by Albert Coates (1882-1953). (Galkin 643) It influenced and/or served as a conducting model for many young conductors of the day who either performed under him or watched him in rehearsal or concert.[4] [5]

As stated by Felix Weingartner and Elliott Galkin, Wagner's treatise on conducting had a strong impact on 19th-century symphonic and operatic performance which continued into the 20th century. In the closing decades of the 19th century, Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) burst upon the international stage and with him came new musical ideas, especially in the area of *tempo modification*, that were antithetical to those of Wagner. This would create a significant divergence of musical "interpretation"—a word not used in its current connotation until the middle of the 19th century—and energize the well-publicized "feud" between Toscanini and Wilhelm Fürtwangler (1886-1954), the conductors examined in Part 1.

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[4] According to Hugo Leichtentritt, he [Nikisch] was responsible ". . . more than any other conductor for the world celebrity of Tchaikowsky." (Galkin 643) "By 1951, Tchaikowsky had become the most popular symphonic composer in America, and the Fifth Symphony the most frequently played of all his works in the country." (Galkin, n643)

[5] There is only one extant video recording of Nikisch conducting. It is a silent film recorded in 1913, the total length of which is 22 seconds. Although the excerpt is quite brief, Nikisch's preference for a centered conducting technique is undeniable.

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Photo and Illustration Credits

Figure i.1 The Goddess Meret-Shemau, "The Personification of Music"
Gadalla 86

Figure i.2 Meret-Shemau, Brooklyn (NY) Museum
Limestone fragment from tomb near Karnak, Egypt. The relief dates from the XVIII Dynasty, ca. 1500 BCE.

Figure i.3 *Chironomid*
From the tomb of Amenemhet at Ta-Apet (Thebes), ca. 1500 BCE (Gadalla 94)

Figure i.4 Wall Panel from an Egyptian tomb, Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2600 BCE

Figure i.5 Toscanini holding silk handkerchief. Caricature by Enrico Caruso, ca. 1910

Figure i.6 Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy
Lithograph by Friedrich Jentzen (1815-1901); from a painting by Theodor Hildebrandt (1804-1874). Uploaded from: Wikimedia Commons, Feb 22, 2016

Figure i.7 Hector Berlioz
Photograph by Pierre Petit, Biblioteque nationale de France (BNF) (1863)

Figure i.8 Richard Wagner
Uploaded from Google Images, July 13, 2017, na

Figure i.9 Arthur Nikisch
Arthur Nikisch Conducting a Concert at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Germany; Library of the Arts Decoratifs; Artist, Robert Sterl (1867-1932) Uploaded from Wikimedia Commons, Feb. 22, 2016