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[Book Review: Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique in accordance with the School of Ilya Musin](#)



Nicotra, Ennio. *Introduzione alla Tecnica della Direzione d'Orchestra Secondo il Sistema di Ilya Musin* (Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique in accordance with the School of Ilya Musin). Edizioni Curci, 2007 (includes DVD)

Reviewed by Silas Nathaniel Huff

There are many comprehensive texts that delve into the minute details of the art of conducting. Harold Farberman offered us a wispy 308-page volume, Max Rudolf covered the material in 481 pages, and Gustav Meier required 512 pages for his tome. [see the review of Meier's book in Podium Notes - ed.] Ennio Nicotra's *Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique...* is different. In a brief survey of my own library and the plethora of conducting books available online, Nicotra's text appears to be the shortest by far at an amazingly succinct 30 pages (actually 127 pages in its full four-language format, the English section is 30 pages, four of which are a foreword and an introduction). It contains no lengthy discussions of the philosophy of conducting, no entertaining anecdotes, and no beat-by-beat guides to famous orchestral excerpts. Instead, Nicotra's book earns big points for being direct, concise, objective, and comprehensible, and it is accompanied by a DVD with 214 tracks that correspond with points made in the text. The writing is clear and easily-understood (perhaps due to its lack of poetic and flowery language), and the DVD tracks are short, simple, and unambiguous. This book/DVD package is analogous to a flight safety brochure tucked in the seat-pocket in front of you on a commercial airplane—it is not subtle nor beautifully-rendered, but completely understandable to anyone.

An *homage* to the famous Russian conducting teacher Ilya Musin, *Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique* purportedly aims to help students “build a solid basis in order to establish the skills needed to lead any orchestra with clarity and effectiveness.” Nicotra compares the technique of conducting to that of playing an instrument—one must learn specific, precise movements that result in a desired sound result from the orchestra—and the ensuing lessons in the book demonstrate his belief that conducting is a concrete, learnable skill. However, the book does not reduce the art of conducting to an elementary exercise in choreography. Nicotra briefly discusses controlling the orchestra without diminishing its sense of freedom, and the expressiveness that must exist between the beats, but the overriding theme in the book is that one must learn very specific physical gestures by rote, what type of reaction those gestures inspire, and when to apply the appropriate gesture. “What we are trying to do,” writes Nicotra, “is show the difference between what is real control over the orchestra and what turns out

to be mere courtesy on the part of the players.”

The book contains no loopy diagrams of beat patterns, parabolic illustrations of ictus velocities, or graphs of musical structures—it simply addresses conducting techniques in the most concise verbiage possible and demonstrates those techniques on the DVD, often by showing examples of poor execution followed by good executions, or by offering multiple possibilities that work well. Separated from one another, the book and DVD are practically useless to a beginner, but together they offer a solid, if clinical, curriculum of study (please note that the book should be read in front of a television with the DVD cued up and ready to go).

Nicotra spends only one page on posture and arm position, four pages on beat patterns, less than a page and a half on melody and phrasing, and only two pages on rhythmic figurations (which he calls “one of the most important sections of my course of study because it contains the essence of the technique of orchestral conducting”). The greatest demonstration of Nicotra’s mastery of brevity is his half-page discussion of the left hand. He plainly states the importance of left-hand autonomy and expressiveness, then demonstrates it on the DVD, but I wish he would have offered more examples of possible left-hand gestures, or stated more clearly what types of gestures do not help.

Highlights of the book and DVD include the clear discussion and demonstration of different beat patterns (each performed *staccato* and *legato*), a short lecture on conducting in especially slow time, and a two-page discourse on the baton. Refreshingly, Nicotra advocates multiple baton “positions” (grips), rather than preaching about one non-negotiable style of grip that applies in all situations.

Weaknesses of Nicotra’s book are few and easily excused because it is intended as an *introduction* to the technique of conducting. Many important details are omitted, though, such as the importance of musicianship (i.e., that a conductor must, first and foremost, be an outstanding musician), and the ultra-brief discussions of crucial aspects such as melody, phrasing, and use of the left hand left me wanting more. Superficially, the book needs a good copy editor—extraneous spaces and curious punctuation marks are sometimes annoying—but this is common to books translated from foreign languages. I only read the English section, but after a cursory glance at the other languages, the English appears to be literally, clearly, and well translated from the original Italian.

The DVD is well-produced and as condensed as the book. The tracks are easy to follow and they move quickly. The demonstrations lack stylized conducting affectations—they are clear and well-executed. The DVD’s only weaknesses are the fact that it is only in Italian (but easy enough to follow for non-Italian speakers), and the musical demonstrations are with two pianos rather than an orchestra. I am sure this was a budgetary concern for the publisher, but it is common knowledge that two pianos are much easier to conduct than an orchestra, and I think an orchestra would have better shown the effectiveness of the techniques Nicotra demonstrates.

Nicotra’s *Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique* begs the question: can someone learn the basics of orchestra conducting in 26 pages of instructional information accompanied by a demonstrational DVD? Whatever your opinion, the package is a breath of fresh air for its objectivity and brevity. Naturally, no student could read this book, watch the DVD, and effectively conduct an orchestra without a teacher’s guidance, but I recommend *Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique* as a textbook for “intro to conducting” classes, and it would also make a great supplement to the Rudolf, Meier, and other books used to teach more advanced students. It is, at least, a good reminder of the fundamental techniques that sometimes get lost in advanced music-making.

Like the flight safety brochure that aims to prepare air travelers for crash landings, Nicotra’s *Introduction to the Orchestra Conducting Technique* provides fundamental information as a starting point. After mastering the techniques in this introductory course, student conductors may be well-prepared to start learning the *art* of conducting.