

This is an abstract of my music cognition senior thesis at Northwestern University. The project was completed in May 2006 and was advised by Prof. Richard Ashley.

Handshape and Orientation in the Expressive Gesture of the Musical Conductor's Nondominant Hand

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Boyes Braem and Bräm (2000) argue that the expressive gestures in the musical conductor's non-dominant hand are limited to a small set of handshapes. While their findings resulted from the descriptive analysis of video samples from a large pool of conductors, the current study aimed to replicate and question this limited set by experimentally manipulating the handshape of twelve expressive gestures. The orientation of these gestures was also systematically varied in order to investigate whether the orientation or handshape was the meaning-bearing component in the conductor's expressive gesture. Given a musical context (e.g., decrescendo), participants were asked to rate constructed gestures on how well they conveyed this context. It was found that changes in both orientation and handshape resulted in significantly lowered ratings. Further, the study confirmed the basic set of handshapes found by Boyes Braem and Bräm. Given that the orientation parameter permitted a greater degree of variance without changing participants' ratings, the overall meaning-bearing component of expressive gestures was found to be the handshape. However, the degree of variance was also shown to dependent on the metaphorical base of each gesture.