# “Tempo is Affect; Duration is Drama”:
# The Conducting Methodology of Dr. Carmen-Helena Téllez

Presentation by Dr. Brandon Hollihan, Director of Choral Activities at Carson-Newman University, for the 2024 ICDA Summer Conference

**1. “Tempo is affect; duration is drama.”** Carmen’s primary principle in conducting and performance focused on tempo and its impact on music. The overture of *Messiah* is a suitable example; conducting the “Grave” in two vs. conducting in four produces dramatic differences in expression. Duration primarily relates to the sustenance of longer notes and phrases, in particular with fermatas.

1a. In determining tempo, for choral works, analyze the text and its meaning; is it joyful, such as in BWV 229 *Lobet den Herrn*, or is it contain a possible element of melancholy such as in the first movement of Brahms’ *Ein deutsches Requiem* (“Selig sind die da Leid tragen”)? Also analyze the rhythmic passages of all musicians. More eighth or sixteenth notes, including those seen in the *Messiah* choruses “All We Like Sheep” or “And He Shall Purify,” will often require a more manageable tempo, especially with a more amateur ensemble. On the contrary, passages with longer notes/phrases might be able to use a lighter tempo to assist performers with breath support or overall phrasing (“Hear My Prayer” by Purcell, “Ave Maria” by Franz Biebl).

1b. Duration can be very powerful in three instances: fermatas, especially at cadence areas; in certain moments of recitative; and as a conclusion to entire musical movements or compositions. (Example: opening Evangelist recitative from J.S. Bach’s *St. John Passion*)

**2. The conducting exercise of changing tempos, from conducting in one to eventually subdividing to eight.**

This exercise requires a pianist. After being cued by the conductor, the pianist plays a melodic major triad (any key is fine) at an exceptionally fast tempo so that the conductor begins the exercise conducting in one. Gradually, the conductor must *lead* the pianist—the pianist does <u>not</u> follow the conductor—into a slower tempo, so that he or she begins to conduct in two, then in four, and eventually into a subdivided eight pattern.

**3. Orchestral/large-scale markings and preparation of the entire score.**

Three points to remember and implement in your own score preparation:

-Use arrows, instead of brackets or any other notation, for various vocal and/or instrumental entrances. *Always* accompany the arrow with the writing of which part is entering (i.e. Fl. for flute, B2 for second bass, etc.)

-Carmen’s second marking pertained to the breakdown of phrases within the composition. This exercise conditions the conductor to break down an entire instrumental/choral movement into individual measures and gain a higher analytical understanding of the music. Carmen recommended her students to isolate

musical phrases into measure groupings not larger than five, and then break these phrases down further, providing a theoretical scope of the music and its function. For example, a four-measure phrase in which the first two measures of material neatly complemented the latter two measures, the conductor would write 4 (2 + 2) into the score.

-Carmen's third primary score marking component consisted of the subdivision of polymetric measures into simpler groupings of three's and two's. While this sounds self-explanatory, conductors must not fail to break down measures of compound time into simpler rhythmic patterns that are easier to manage for both the conductor and their ensemble. We should also note how many conductors use a marking method very similar, if not nearly identical, to this system.

**4. Preps in conducting; analyze the number of notes in the first beat, along with tempo, rhythm, and texture.** An active accompaniment or fast tempo with busy parts often needs two preps, whereas a phrase with longer notes and/or no moving parts can often begin with only one prep. ("Confutatis" from Mozart's *Requiem* may have two preps; the "Tuba mirrum" may have one prep.)

**5. Conducting using certain emotions and expressions.** Place anywhere from three to five different emotional expressions—happy, cheerful, sad, frightened, relieved, etc.—inside a hat. Then, have the conductor try to conduct according to the following motion. A skilled pianist will improvise a tune based on the conductor's gestures and expressions. While the conducting and gestural motions can become affected, it is the facial expressions and reactions of the conductor themselves that are the key component in this exercise.

**6. The Analysis Checklist.** This task that takes a large amount of work and research, but as we know, it enhances the conductor's understanding of a musical composition. Any time you might be preparing a large work for performance, it is strongly recommended you follow a complete checklist of the work that reviews the following areas:

Part I. Background of the Music and General Details
Part II. The Text (for Choral Compositions)
Part III. Context of the Music
Part IV: Musical Sources and References
Part V: Graphic Analysis of Each Movement in a Major Work or Suite
Part VI: Personal Perspective

***This information also appears in a Choral Journal article from 2023 and can be accessed scanning the QR code below:***