

Title: Elements of Conducting
Author: Emil Khan
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Reviewer: Peter Fender
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About the author

Emil Kahn (1897-1985) led the Senior Orchestra of New York for 13 years. His last appearance as conductor was at Carnegie Hall in May 1983. Orchestras for which he was guest conductor included the Vienna Philharmonic, the London Symphony and the N.B.C. Orchestra. He was, in 1945 and 1946, musical director for the Ballet Russe. He left his native Germany in 1933, came to the United States in 1935 and taught at Montclair (N.J.) State College until 1970. He made at least one commercial recording with the Stuttgart Festival Orchestra.

Review

From the book you would assume that Mr Kahn was principally a college educator. Checking his biography (see above) supports that. This book has been called a standard textbook on conducting, so one presumes his influence was substantial (at least within the USA university scene).

The book very much has college students in mind. There is much that is good, however overall I feel that he is not sufficiently thorough, is somewhat too prescriptive and gives far too many examples without an accompanying score excerpt. One excellent thing is that he lists lots of possible tunes to work on in conducting classes and he also gives useful repertoire lists. I am a little dubious about using singing a melody alone for conducting classes beyond some very basic work (Max Rudolf mentions it as a possibility but only at the very opening of his book). Over-concentration on melody is actually often a hindrance in conducting, but it can be useful as conducting classes/lessons begin.

His basic technical advice seems generally good but is not done in sufficient detail. Perhaps it was always considered to be a 'starter for 10' which would be amplified by a teacher – but that isn't stated anywhere. The same is true in other sections on how to conduct different aspects of music. He covers all the necessary ground, but how can you do justice to it all in just 90 pages?

There is a good section on ear training and score reading, sometimes glossed over by teachers. There are also sections on orchestral instruments and interpretation – in other words the scheme is broad.

Some sentences stick out a little! "In music by Debussy, Mahler, Richard Strauss – and especially Bartok, Stravinsky, and most contemporary composers – meter changes recur so often that the conductor must be thoroughly acquainted with the score. Otherwise he may become confused ...". One might have thought that knowing a score thoroughly was a pre-requisite of conducting any music! One other example is: "*Never conduct faster or slower than the musicians are actually playing*" (his italics). Taken at face value this suggests that the orchestra is in charge of the tempo. Odd.

Conclusion

For interest only. There are certainly better books about conducting technique, and about the other elements of the book, such as information about instruments. It is a valiant attempt to bring together information on quite a wide variety of topics of concern to the conductor, but none of them is really dealt with in sufficient detail, or sometimes with sufficient clarity. I may well use it for suggestions of basic tunes to sing in early conducting courses, and also for repertoire ideas.