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# **E-learning for choral conductors**

A study of how e-learning can be used to change the  
way we teach and learn conducting

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt arbete  
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# Introduction

Having studied choral conducting for three years, I felt that passing on some of the knowledge I achieved during the years would be a good idea given that I also have an interest for teaching conducting. Therefore, I chose a subject for this thesis that is not directly linked to my exam concert, however, the musicianship and conducting skills I will show in the concert reflect how far I have come as a conductor and ultimately a teacher. The thesis has become more pedagogical than artistic since teaching conducting is merely educational. However, I have had to be creative and inventive in many aspects to make this project come to life. I will end my studies at The Royal College of Music in Stockholm with an exam concert May 27<sup>th</sup> 2016 featuring the Swedish Radio Choir. The concert will include music by Lidholm, Sandström, Pärt, Martin and a premiere by Paula af Malmborg.

In this study, I will explore the possibilities of teaching choral conducting through the Internet with the help of tutorial videos, so-called e-learning. For this purpose, I will create a website called Conducting Academy including four different videos dealing with the same topic from different angles. The website will be divided into four categories – beginner technique, advanced technique, general issues and exercises. A number of people with varying conducting experience will watch the four videos and review the concept of e-learning for conductors. The purpose of this will be to stimulate a discussion regarding the target audience, teaching efficiency and the possible benefits of using e-learning in general. Furthermore, I will elaborate on e-learning as a teaching platform and discuss the future of the concept.

## What is e-learning?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines e-learning as “learning done by studying at home using computers and courses provided on the internet”. E-learning comes in many different variations either as written material (e-books),

audio (podcasts, language courses) or video (how-to guides and tutorials). In this study I will focus on video as a tool for teaching conducting.

My test website, Conducting Academy, is a platform aiming to be a resource for conductors at many levels. When the website is completed it will include video tutorials on conducting-related topics, interviews with prominent people from the choral world and interesting articles. The website was created in 2015 and is a test project in this study of e-learning for choral conductors.

### **Why use e-learning in the first place?**

E-learning has grown tremendously since the development of technology made it possible to use computers and the Internet as a learning platform. However, when it comes to conducting and especially choral conducting, the market is very limited. There can be several reasons for this. First, conducting is a practical skill where you are dependent on other people being your instrument. Secondly, the conventional way of improving conducting skills is to engage in a one-to-one teacher-student relation. Thirdly, conducting is a subject where there are no definitive answers. It is a skill that calls for different approaches and gestures depending on the conductor and the choir's response. There are, however, a couple of examples on the Internet of musicians, who have succeeded in creating e-learning within their topic. *Thomas Goss*, a composer and orchestrator from New Zealand, created [www.orchestrationonline.com](http://www.orchestrationonline.com) which is a website much like Conducting Academy but for orchestrators and composers. Another example is *Stefan Parkman*, who teaches at the University of Uppsala. He runs an internet-based course, where people from all over the world can interact with him and even earn a university degree in the process<sup>1</sup>. The advantage of running an Internet-based programme like this is to lower the expenses for both the institution and the student. Furthermore, e-learning practically enables the teacher to reach out to a world-wide

<sup>1</sup> See more at: <http://www.musik.uu.se/education/distancelearning/Kordirigering/>

audience and even gives the learner the convenience of having access to study material from anywhere. All in all, these advantages can create an interesting new approach to the teaching of conducting.

# Making the website: Conducting Academy

The initial idea of this project occurred in the Spring of 2015. At that time, I had no experience whatsoever in creating websites, but I knew that in order to make Conducting Academy a reality I had to learn basic website skills. For this purpose I used e-learning exclusively, and it was quite helpful for me at this stage to learn the do's and don'ts when making tutorial videos. When it comes to the design, I put a great deal of work into the logos and fonts, as research has found that design is an important parameter in sustaining the viewer's satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> In the start-up phase, a lot of ideas came into play, and my technical abilities set some limits on the final result. I knew I had to categorise the videos in one way or another and I chose four different categories: *Beginner*, *Advanced*, *General Issues* and *Exercises*. These four categories sought to deal with both content and level all at once, something which later turned out to be problematic. Since the user-friendly interface is a high priority I chose to change the categorisation later.<sup>3</sup>

## The making of the videos

When creating teaching material, one always has to think carefully about the pedagogical approach. In video tutorials that aim to help or inspire conductors at many levels, different problems arise: for example "What level of musical knowledge is required in order to benefit optimally from the video?" If the content is too difficult, the viewer's satisfaction will drop and the chance of that person coming back to watch another video dramatically decreases.

<sup>2</sup> As described in Welsh, Elizabeth T. (2003). *E-learning: emerging uses, empirical results and future directions*.

<sup>3</sup> See "Outcomes and Reviews"

## Choosing the test topic

In choosing the topic for the test videos, it was important that they should relate to all levels, from beginner to experienced, and that there be a main thread of increasing difficulty in the four tutorials.

For the four test videos I chose “tempo changes and relations” as an overall topic. The idea was to produce a series of videos, that focus on the same subject from different angles. When you have watched the whole series you are hopefully able to apply the knowledge gained to your gestures and understand the theory behind the gestures. “Tempo changes and relations” provided a good example because it allowed a pedagogical link from learning how to beat a 4/4 bar into how to go from a slower 4/4 bar to a faster one. Moreover, I could explain the mechanics behind tempo relations in the “General Issues” section and construct an exercise so that viewers could try the tempo changes out themselves. The videos were titled:

- Beginner: How to beat the 4/4 beat pattern
- Advanced: How to conduct tempo changes
- General Issues: How to find the right tempo
- Exercises: Conducting tempo changes

It will always be difficult to create teaching material that suits everybody but with a *degree of difficulty* indicator on each video it becomes easier for the user to find the appropriate videos.

## Working method

Creating tutorial videos requires a balance between going directly to the point while still appearing relaxed and not too rehearsed in the presentation. My way of approaching this is to figure out what to say and write keywords for each section. In this way, the language becomes my own and not just me reading aloud from my manuscript. As English is not my mother tongue, it is always challenging to explain something in the most efficient way, and it often takes several retakes to get a satisfying version.

Another consideration to be made is how long the average video should be. It very much depends on the topic, but a maximum of 10 minutes per video is a goal I try to achieve. Since videos are a medium where you can easily go back and forth I chose generally to show exercises only once. That means that teaching material which in a conventional teaching situation has to be repeated over and over can be compressed into a small video to be watched several times. Of course, the time that the student takes to acquire knowledge is not reduced, but the videos become more viewer-friendly. Since everybody is not struggling with the same problems, the ideal way of structuring a video would be not to make several repetitions of exercises.

## Testing the concept

In January 2016, the test page of [conductingacademy.com](http://conductingacademy.com) came online. I didn't want to make it public, so I put a password on the site to control who viewed the page. As described above, I recorded four tutorial videos in each of the categories; Beginner, Advanced, General Issues and Exercises with the overall theme "tempo changes and relations". To reach my audience, I posted the link in various Facebook groups where this topic might have interest. I invited the test participants to fill out a questionnaire after watching the videos. The form yielded 25 replies from conductors on many levels.<sup>4</sup> The group of people who tried out Conducting Academy is not representative of all conductors and musicians, as they themselves already had found the project interesting and therefore had a positive approach. However, the target audience for Conducting Academy and e-learning as such is, of course, people who **are** interested in this particular form of teaching.

## Outcomes and reviews

The overall reaction to the question: "How would you rate Conducting Academy as a concept, based on the material you have seen so far?" was very positive with a score of 4.8/5. When answering the following question: "What are the chances that you will use e-learning again when studying conducting?" the answer was still very positive with a score of 4,5/5. However, there is a slight decline in enthusiasm from the previous question. This might reflect a situation where experienced conductors, while curious to see the website, found that the degree of difficulty did not correspond to their level.

To the open question: "Do you have any suggestions for improvements or feedback to [conductingacademy.com](http://conductingacademy.com)?" there were some interesting

<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2 for questionnaire.

answers. The most common feedback was related to the degree of difficulty. One person wrote: “I do wonder about the level of musicianship you would expect a beginner to have. Perhaps you should have an ideal beginner in mind and then state this at the start of the section. Likewise, how advanced is advanced? It may be more appealing if you didn't use these types of labels and instead spoke in terms of steps of increasing difficulty”. After receiving this feedback, I chose to modify the categorisation as regards both content and degree of difficulty. That means that in the future I will only have three main categories: *Conducting Technique*, *General Issues* and *Exercises*. For each video, I will mark the content from 1 to 5, where 1 requires no experience in advance and 5 is for conductors with several years of experience. The question of grading the videos after “difficulty” or “experience required” is interesting. The degree of difficulty marking would make more sense in the “Conducting Technique” section, but for the “General Issues” section it is difficult to mark the degree of difficulty for a video about, for example, repertoire planning since the topic does not relate to the student’s level of experience. This system has yet to be refined and thought through. Another general response was the wish to see interaction with real singers: ”If possible, some demonstration with a small group of singers and real conducting video on that would help in addition to the tutorials”. It is very true that giving examples with real singers would add to the value of the content and it is very likely that this feature will appear in the future.

To the question “Was it easy to implement the tips given in the videos on yourself?” 23 out of 25 answered ”yes” while no one answered “no” and 2 people said they were working on it. I read this as a positive sign. However, only 8 out of 25 succeeded in conducting the exercise. This might have something to do with the degree of difficulty; especially in this quite advanced exercise dealing with tempo changes.

All respondents answered that the language was easy to understand and only one thought the length of the videos was too long. Everyone else said it was appropriate.

# **What are the possibilities and limitations of Conducting Academy in the future?**

There are obvious differences between learning from a teacher who knows you well, and acquiring general knowledge from a stranger off the Internet. However, if we take a closer look at the differences, one method might not need to replace or overrule the other, but rather work as a supplement. For students it can be a big advantage to have access to a large database of information all the time, but actually to use that information outside of regular school hours requires self-motivation. Therefore, this comes up as both a limitation and a possibility. The possibility to acquire knowledge is always there, but without deadlines and expectations the general motivation might not be as high for e-learning as for attending regular conducting classes. Also, Conducting Academy cannot and should not offer any ECTS points at this moment, which again for some is a motivation in itself to complete a course or a programme. However, there are several techniques to enhance the motivation of the student, for example to track the student's progress - how many videos s/he has watched - by visually making a progress bar. Another tool is to enable and indeed to encourage the student to share his or her progress on social media with friends.

## **Possibilities**

To figure out what e-learning can do, we have to look at what existing learning methods can do already. Teaching methods can be divided into two main categories: physical interactive teaching and book reading. The interactive teaching often takes place in music schools, where a teacher observes the student and gives feedback right away. There is a direct communication between two persons, and often the teacher is able to correct gestures immediately. But when the student goes home s/he is able to recap fully the information given in the lesson, only if the lesson has been recorded or notes taken. With the book reading method it is obvious that the

interaction between the teacher and the student is non-existent, and the author of the book has no ability to monitor the student's improvements. E-learning combines these two methods: one achieves interaction between teacher and student, and the student is always able to go back to each lesson and watch it repeatedly. However, at this stage of Conducting Academy, there is no interaction between the viewer and the teaching source, and this is of course an issue that needs to be addressed in the future. I do believe however, that the videos produced so far still are valuable to the viewer, as there is a clear description of what the videos aim to do.

The biggest advantage of Conducting Academy is its accessibility.

Wherever you are in the world, you can always access a database of tutorial videos from your phone, tablet or computer. If you seek an answer on a specific conducting related topic, it might be only a few clicks away.

With a platform like Conducting Academy, sharing knowledge with others is also an important factor. The Facebook group of [Orchestrationonline.com](https://www.facebook.com/Orchestrationonline) now has 13.000+ members<sup>5</sup> and is used everyday by composers, who want their work to be reviewed by others. Through sharing your own work, you interact with a group of people who willingly give their feedback. This is a valuable asset which social media provides. In the case of Conducting Academy, you can share videos of your own conducting or your plans for a concert program even while it might take some courage to be the target of people's differing opinions.

E-learning is flexible in that the student actively chooses which videos to watch. That means that e-learning is able to appeal to a broad audience if the content of the videos matches the level of the viewer. I believe that you should always be able to find relevant knowledge that corresponds to your current level. The idea of e-learning is not to substitute any of the already existing teaching methods, but to add another layer to the teaching of

<sup>5</sup> Recorded February 2016.

conducting. A video can never replace real conducting lessons, or the experience the student gets when working with a choir. But what videos **can** do is to examine specific issues that you may encounter in several pieces - such as *intonation*, *tempo changes* and *preparatory beats*. Also, topics could include *score studies* and *rehearsal techniques*, whereas by giving examples with a certain piece it provides a set of specific tools that can be applied to all music. Therefore e-learning is not merely more of the same, but a resource to be developed and used alongside traditional teaching methods.

### Limitations

The most striking limitation of Conducting Academy is that you don't conduct real singers. Practical experience is vital for choral conductors because the choir **is** the instrument. A lot of basic knowledge comes from working with singers and sensing how people respond to your gestures. The e-learning student cannot experience this no matter how many videos he or she watches. Further on this topic is the interaction between the student and the teacher. A rewarding learning process often involves a longer course, where the teacher comes to know the student in detail. The teacher then observes what the student should improve over a period of time and tries to implement this in his or her teaching. In e-learning, one-on-one interaction is not possible, and that is a disadvantage as regards the development of the student's gestures and knowledge.

Conducting is a skill developed from the early middle ages and is therefore not a new profession. However, conducting technique varies from culture to culture, country to country and person to person. It can be difficult to find something all conductors have in common and even harder to find something all conductors agree on. There are no definitive answers. The content of the videos should be considered as tips and inspiration. Conducting technique is very complex and ideally should be tested and practiced in the environment where it is used. For example I would never be able to use the same finesse and details in my gestures with my children's

choir as I do with my mixed choir. That is why definitive all-encompassing answers do not work in answering complex questions related to conducting.

Another limitation that the video medium creates is the issue of conducting as a 3D activity. Choirs often stand in a half circle, and the point of view that different singers have varies. Also, when performing church music with organ accompaniment you may often encounter difficult angles. This should be taken into account when making videos that are in 2D. There are different ways to deal with the problem such as filming from two different angles at the same time or turning your body in various camera angles while showing a certain gesture. Further development of technology will make this issue easier to deal with.

## **What did Conducting Academy teach me?**

Creating Conducting Academy was like starting a business, even though I do not yet plan to make money from it. A lot of thinking was required for developing the concept and making it as user-friendly as possible. The obvious skills I acquired from the project were mainly technical, such as working with Wordpress, knowing about camera gear and video lighting. The most important part, however, was having a chance to dig down into those conducting-related topics that interested me.

In order to teach, one has to have a solid background knowledge of the topic oneself, and I realise that, as an undergraduate, my conducting and job experience are limited. Having said that, I would of course never make videos about a topic I knew nothing about. My contribution to the choral world reflects my curiosity to explore musical issues from my specific point of view and pass on that experience through my videos.

## **Conducting Academy in the future**

Conducting Academy will continue to exist and to develop further in the future. The learning methods provided by e-learning have the potential to

bring new life into the teaching of conducting. My plan is to expand Conducting Academy into a fully functioning video tutorial site, with many videos about various choral-related topics. One of the main points is to improve the already existing video experience. To rethink how a 3-dimensional activity can be taught on a 2-dimensional screen is one issue. Different camera angles and new camera technology, such as Facebook's new 360° camera, might also be a future way to improve viewer satisfaction and teaching methods.

A further step in the possibilities of e-learning would be to integrate the interactive elements in the lessons by means of having students record their progress in order to share it subsequently with me. Another form of interaction could be live lessons through Skype or other applications. The delay in communication on these platforms is still a major problem, but as technology evolves, this problem might come to an end. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the video platform has its limitations, and therefore I plan to offer old-school masterclasses to those interested.

Conducting Academy was from the beginning intended not only to be a site for video tutorials, but also for sharing problems and solutions with colleagues. At first I planned a *forum* page, but it is important to catch the viewers where they are already connected. Therefore, a Facebook group would probably be the best solution for this type of communication. The intention is to engage others to contribute to a discussion on various topics. As it is always interesting to see different perspectives on an issue, I will also integrate a *comment* function to each of the videos.

The risk of e-learning is that the audience can become very limited. Only those people who actively seek new knowledge will watch the video tutorials. To make Conducting Academy attractive to a broader audience, I will invite prominent conductors, organisers, composers or publishers from the choral world for interviews. These interviews would ideally be filmed as

a physical meeting or a Skype interview. Written articles by experts on specific topics would also add to the value of the website.

Other disciplines where video tutorials would function well are music theory, or videos on how to practice ear training by yourself or with your choir. For this, I imagine a whole new category with theory and ear training aimed at conductors. This will help support the actual conducting lessons and draw a more realistic picture of what it means to be a choral conductor.

To make Conducting Academy even more accessible, the platform could be moved to an app on your mobile device. This would make it easier to track your own progress and to make videos available offline. Also, ear training can be practised with an app that supports interactive games and audio examples. Furthermore, it is quite easy nowadays to record yourself from your mobile device, and this could be a major step towards possible interaction with me.

In the long term, a project like Conducting Academy takes a lot of work and will at some point force me to create a fee for using the service. The possibilities are many and have to be thought through. Four different solutions come to mind:

- A monthly subscription fee
- A one time fee for getting access to all videos
- A pay-per-view solution, which grants you access to only the videos you want.
- A donation-based website like Wikipedia

Although this might be several years into the future, it must already influence the way I organise Conducting Academy now.

What makes an e-learning website attractive in the long term is giving the viewer an experience that makes him or her want to come back – providing thereby an experience of continuously updated content and fast replies in order to resemble as much as possible the interaction involved in

conventional conducting teaching. Furthermore, a solid design and overall professionalism in both video quality and website interface are parameters not to be underestimated.

## **Conclusion**

There is a strong interest for e-learning in the choral world. The goal should not be to replace the already existing teaching methods, but to offer an accessible resource to conductors around the world. Even though e-learning contains several limitations, modern technology such as social media creates a possibility to share content and interact in a way that can be very valuable and even add to the conventional teaching methods. The future of e-learning aimed at choral conductors is still in its initial phase but it is only a matter of time before people will discover the benefits. Conducting Academy will continue to be developed and will be public in the Fall of 2016.

## Literature

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# Appendix

1. Conducting Academy: [www.conductingacademy.com](http://www.conductingacademy.com) -  
password: "iwanttorearn"

2. Questionnaire for test runners:

- What kind of experience do you have in conducting?
- What was your motivation in joining this test run of conductingacademy.com?
- How would you say the general level of the videos was?
- Was the language easy to understand?
- How was the length of the videos?
- Was it easy to implement the tips given in the videos on yourself?
- Did you succeed in conducting the exercise about tempo changes and relations?
- How would you rate "Conducting Academy" as a concept, based on the material you have seen so far?
- What are the chances that you will use e-learning again when studying conducting?
- Do you have any suggestions for improvements or feedback to conductingacademy.com?

