

What conductors actually do

Beating time is the smallest part of it. Most of the job happens before the concert; on the night it is breathing, listening and warning.

The right hand keeps time Beat pattern, tempo, subdivision, the pulse everyone locks to. It stays clear and much the same size all evening.	The left hand shapes Dynamics, cues, phrasing, holds, cut-offs. Palm down for quieter, palm up for more. It stays still when it has nothing to say.	The eyes do the rest A cue is a look a bar early, then a nod on the beat — how a conductor asks for something without stopping.
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TEMPO WORDS A CONDUCTOR WORKS IN

WORD	ROUGHLY	BEAT FEELS	WHAT THE CONDUCTOR CHANGES
Largo	40–60 bpm	Subdivided — halves shown	Beats each half so long notes stay together.
Andante	76–108	One beat per crotchet	A plain pattern; the hand travels, it does not jab.
Allegro	120–156	Crisp, small pattern	Shrinks the beat so the ictus stays sharp.
Presto	168–200	One beat per bar	Drops to one-in-a-bar — beating four would blur.
Rubato	flexible	Stretched, then repaid	Leads with the eyes and breathes; the pattern loosens.
Fermata	held	Suspended	Stops the hand still, then gives a clear cut-off or a fresh preparation.

HOW A REHEARSAL RUNS

- Tune.** Oboe gives A; woodwind, brass, then strings. Nothing starts until it is done.
- Play it through.** The whole movement without stopping, so everyone hears the shape and the conductor hears the problems.
- Work in sections.** "From letter C, strings only." Slow tempo, one problem at a time.
- Put it back together.** Run the passage in context — from a bar before the fix, so the join is rehearsed too.
- Finish with a run.** End on a play-through, never on a correction, so the last memory is the music.

BEFORE ANYONE PLAYS A NOTE

Study the score Every part, not just the tune: who has the line, where the difficulties are, which bars need extra time.	Decide the interpretation Tempos, balance, how long each fermata lasts, which repeat is taken. The orchestra needs one answer.	Plan the rehearsal minutes Time is the scarcest thing. Eight hard bars get twenty minutes; the easy page is played once.
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ALWAYS BE A BEAT AHEAD

Everything is shown before it happens. A cue or a hold arrives late if it lands on the beat rather than before it.

SAY LESS, SHOW MORE

Talking stops the music. The best instruction is a clearer gesture next time, and a bar number rather than a speech.

THE PLAYERS ARE THE SOUND

A conductor makes no noise. The job is making eighty people agree on tempo, balance and character.