The Benefit of Pilates for the Choral/Instrumental Conductor

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Abstract

Even the most innately musical conductors sometimes struggle with the transfer of musical expression into physical communication. Effective gestural communication requires the utmost in body awareness, subtlety of movement, balance, posture, and strength. It should come as no surprise then that conductors often develop postural deficiencies and shoulder issues. In this essay, I address issues related to the shoulder, upper back, and core as well as discuss a conditioning program specifically suited to the choral/instrumental conductor.

My case study, Dr. Brian Galante, is a healthy 37 year old male. A choral conductor for over 15 years, he has developed an awareness of postural limitations, the need for greater core strength, and the desire to be proactive in maintaining the energy, expressivity, and vitality of his current conducting. The objectives put forth by Dr. Galante during the initial evaluation process were met. In fact, he had a Pilates session on the morning of his Fall Concert and commented that the session helped him have better postural awareness, balance, and flexibility while still maintaining strength in a communicative gesture.
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Anatomical Description of Upper Back & Shoulder Area

These images depict many of the important muscles involved in providing a strong and expressive conducting gesture. The serratus anterior and lower trapezius muscles allow the conductor to maintain a relaxed scapular depression while moving the arms for a prolonged period of time. The deltoid, rotator cuff, and pectoralis muscles are instrumental for the conductor’s range of motion and fluidity through the conducting gesture while maintaining proper scapulohumeral rhythm.
Introduction

There are three primary pivot points associated with the conducting gesture - shoulder, elbow, and wrist. Each has a specific function when it comes to conveying expressivity. For example, a piano (soft) dynamic level can be communicated simply with wrist movement; however, that gesture can be amplified and become much more meaningful if it originates from the shoulder joint. Gestures originating at the shoulder can inform breath, breadth of phrase, strength, warmth and vitality of tone, and a physicality from the performers: these movements are small; these movements are subtle. Even the most innately musical conductors struggle with the transfer of musical expression into physical communication. Effective gestural communication requires the utmost in body awareness, subtlety of movement, balance, posture, and strength. It should come as no surprise, then, that conductors often develop postural deficiencies and shoulder issues. In this essay, I will address issues related to the shoulder, upper back, and core as well as discuss a conditioning program expressly indicated for the choral/instrumental conductor.

A Pilates program tailored for the choral/instrumental conductor should include the following: (1), strengthening the core and back extensors for improved co-contraction, which provides better balance and stability; (2), strengthening and coordinating the use of the serratus anterior and lower trapezius muscles to allow the conductor to maintain a relaxed scapular depression while moving the arms for a prolonged period of time; and (3), strengthening and stretching of the deltoid, rotator cuff, and pectoralis muscles to improve range of motion and fluidity in the conducting gestures with proper scapulohumeral rhythm.
Case Study

My case study, Dr. Brian Galante, is a healthy 37 year old male. A choral conductor for over 15 years, he has developed an awareness of postural limitations, the need for greater core strength, and the desire to be proactive in maintaining the energy, expressivity, and vitality of his current conducting. The goals he would like to achieve through Private Pilates sessions are improved posture and postural awareness, increased strength and mobility in the shoulders and upper back, as well as strength in the core to provide stability, balance, and control for more expressive gestures. His professional bio is below.

BRIAN GALANTE is Associate Director of Choral Activities at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, where he conducts the University Chorale, Men’s Chorus, and University Singers (Women’s Chorus). He also teaches undergraduate courses in Vocal Pedagogy for the Choral Music Educator, Choral Methods and Choral Literature.

Dr. Galante received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Choral Conducting, with a related field in Voice Science and Pedagogy, from the University of North Texas. He holds Master of Music and Bachelor of Music Education degrees from Louisiana State University. Previous choral appointments include Interim Associate Director of Choral Studies at Louisiana State University; Conductor of the 160-voice UNT Men’s Chorus and Conducting Associate of the UNT A Cappella Choir.

Choirs under Dr. Galante’s direction have offered invitational performances in Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall, New York; the Meyerson Symphony Center, Dallas; Notre Dame Cathedral and Sacre Coeur, Paris; the 2010 Washington Music Educators Association conference; and the 2011 Northwest MENC Conference.

Frequently in demand as a clinician and adjudicator, Dr. Galante has conducted honor choirs at all levels. He served as President of Louisiana ACDA from 2001-2003, and remains an active member of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), National Collegiate Choral Organization (NCCO), Chorus America, the College Music Society, Washington ACDA, and the Washington Music Educators Association. He served as Program Chair of the 2010 Northwest ACDA Division Conference, and continues to serve on the National Technology Committee and 2013 National Conference Committee.
# Progression of BASI Comprehensive Block System

## for Dr. Brian Galante Over Several Weeks

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Key: M=Mat, R=Reformer, WC=Wunda Chair, C=Cadillac, P=Pole, LB=Ladder Barrel, LW=Leg Weights
At our first session, I completed an initial postural assessment, reviewed the client’s goals, and introduced him to the Pilates principles as we worked through a Fundamental program. Based on the information I received in that session, I designed a BASI Comprehensive Program that focused on three areas vital to his work as a choral conductor: co-contraction of the abdominals and back extensors, scapular stabilization, and shoulder girdle strength and mobility.

The program I have provided shows Dr. Galante’s progression using the BASI Comprehensive Block System over the course of several weeks, beginning with the 5th session. He continued performing exercises on the Fundamental level, as he did in sessions 1-4, and worked to maintain a neutral spine and pelvis throughout.

By the 15th session, Brian has made a nice transition to the Fundamental Plus/Intermediate level. I chose the *Short Box Series: Round Back-Tilt* to focus on the co-contraction of the abdominals and back extensors. These exercises helped Brian to focus on both sides of the coronal plane to provide a stable foundation through the trunk for his conducting gestures. In *Elephant* and *Up Stretch 1*, we built on the previous stabilization of the trunk and added shoulder stabilization for Full Body Integration 1. *Shoulder Push Double* and *Single Arm* added yet another layer as he worked to maintain scapulae control. The focus on the triceps and elbow extensor strength in this arm work also made a valuable contribution to the fluidity and strength of the conducting motion. *Breaststroke Prep* and *Breaststroke* contributed to this motion as well, strengthening the back extensors, shoulder abductors, and elbow extensors.

The 21st session shows the progression Dr. Galante has made to the Intermediate Plus level with his work on the Cadillac. Although the *Roll Up Bottom*
*Loaded* is an advanced move, he was successful in maintaining the necessary co-contraction in the trunk as it had been our focus from the beginning. *Shoulder Stretch*, while difficult due to Brian’s very tight shoulders, provided an excellent stretch and helped to increase his shoulder mobility and range of motion for conducting. *Side Reach* is beautifully tailored to the conductor’s needs. The objectives of this Full Body Integration 1—oblique stretch, shoulder adductor stretch, and abdominal control while maintaining pelvis stabilization—hit upon many of the postural challenges of an active, energetic conductor. The Latissimus dorsi are instrumental in allowing the conductor to maintain a constant hand speed in the transverse plane. As such, *Shoulder Adduction Sitting Side and Forward* were very welcomed exercises for Brian: he was able to isolate the Lats fairly quickly and enjoyed the unique muscle focus. Finally, *Prone 1 & 2* combined to once again cover all of the target areas—keeping the scapulae depressed and engaging the abdominals while strengthening the back extensors and providing a deep stretch for the shoulders.

For his more advanced work, we returned to the Reformer in session 25. *Double Legs in Straps and with Rotation* were very intense abdominal exercises for Brian, but he was pleased to see that he had made this much progress in his abdominal strength. *Down Stretch* used the co-contraction as well as shoulder extensor control to perform the movement properly. The *Side Arms Kneeling Series* was absolutely essential for Brian. Each of the four exercises utilized muscles and movement patterns that every conductor uses during the course of a performance. The symmetry required for *Arms Overhead* with resistance on only one arm (while trying to maintain a stable trunk) directly translates to the symmetry often required in a conducting pattern as a conductor...
attempts to convey completely different ideas in independent hands.  *Tendon Stretch* was an excellent choice for the focus on the Serratus anterior, the unsung hero of the scapular abduction and stabilization that conductors strive to maintain.  Both *Pulling Straps 1 & 2* worked on two objectives that Brian set out to achieve—back extensor strength and shoulder extensor strength.  The required external rotation of the shoulders throughout both exercises was an effective reminder of the proper posture that Dr. Galante needs to employ in his conducting.  *Shoulder Stretch 1 & 2* on the Ladder Barrel were a wonderful follow up to the *Pulling Straps* exercises as they allowed him to open up his slightly rounded shoulders and tight pectoral muscles.

The final session outlined here is Brian’s 30th.  At this stage, he has excellent body awareness and enjoys the more demanding *Foot Work on the Wunda Chair* as it challenges him to maintain a consistent co-contraction of the abdominals and back extensors for proper posture and pelvic stabilization.  *Pike Sitting* helps Brian focus on the Latissimus dorsi which contributes to one of his objectives - scapular depression.  *The Shoulder Stretch Series* is one of his favorite stretches.  He requests the series often, especially if he has a conducting engagement later that evening.  Although they have difficult moves to master involving abduction and adduction of the scapulae, *Scapula Glide and Sitting Side* bring attention to a vital component of the conducting gesture.  Allowing the scapulae to glide while maintaining proper depression is a hallmark of a fluid and relaxed conducting style.  The balance work of *Leg Press Standing* on the Wunda Chair helps Brian remember to stay anchored and even weighted on both feet while using the co-contraction mentioned earlier to provide a stable base for his conducting motion.
Conclusion

It is quite obvious to both client and instructor that Pilates can be immensely beneficial to the choral/instrumental conductor. The objectives put forth by Dr. Galante during the initial evaluation process were met. While there is always room for improvement and growth in Pilates, Brian has show great progress so far. In fact, he had a Pilates session on the morning of his Fall Concert and commented that the session helped him have better postural awareness, balance, and flexibility while still maintaining strength in a communicative gesture.

We plan to share the findings in this paper at the American Choral Directors Association Northwest Division Conference in Seattle, Washington in March 2012. Perhaps we can encourage others to explore the BASI Pilates program further and find a certified instructor in their area.
Bibliography


Images

Page 4: images from the book Pilates Anatomy (cited above) pgs. 24, 38, & 141.

Page 6: Dr. Brian Galante conducting the Pacific Lutheran University Choir and Orchestra on December 6, 2010 in Seattle’s Benaroya Hall (Seattle Symphony Hall)