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Busy Kids Love
Music
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Hi everyone, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast where we explore the music we love and the instruments and people who make it. I'm your host, Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're here today.

Last time, I left you with a little riddle. I told you there was one more part of the orchestra we hadn't talked about — something that isn't an instrument family at all, but is still one of the most important parts of the whole group. Did you figure out what it is?

Here's a hint from our own podcast. Every single week, I tell you we explore the music we love and the people who make it. And today, it's all about a person. Because the last piece of our orchestra puzzle isn't something you blow into, or strike, or pluck. It's the one person standing up front, waving a little stick, with their back to the whole audience. Today we're talking about the conductor.

Now, I'm willing to bet you've seen a conductor before, maybe in a movie or a cartoon, waving their arms around while the music swells. So let's try it ourselves. Stand up if you can, and hold one hand out in front of you. Now move it down, and up, down, and up, nice and steady, like you're gently bouncing a ball in the air. Congratulations — you're conducting. Keep that steady bounce in the back of your mind, because believe it or not, it's a big part of the job.

Before we go any further, I made one more printable to go along with today's episode. It's called "Be the Conductor," and it shows you the simple patterns that real conductors trace in the air to lead a piece of music. You can download it for free in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/185. Print it out, grab a pencil or a chopstick to use as a baton, and you can conduct right along with me.

So let's start with the most surprising thing about the conductor, the fact that trips up almost everyone. Out of every single person up on that stage — and there can be a hundred of them — the conductor is the only one who doesn't make a sound. No instrument. No notes. Nothing. So if they're not playing anything at all, what in the world are

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they doing up there?

It turns out, quite a lot.

The conductor's first job is to keep everybody together. Picture an orchestra, sometimes eighty or ninety or a hundred musicians, all playing at the very same time. Somebody has to make sure they begin together, stay at the same speed, and finish together. That somebody is the conductor. With every beat of their hand, they're telling the whole group, "Here's the pulse, everyone stay right with me." They're a little like the heartbeat of the orchestra. And if the music needs to speed up or slow down, the conductor leads the way, and everyone follows.

But keeping the beat is only half the job. The conductor also decides how the music should feel. Should this part be soft and gentle, like a secret you're barely whispering? Should it suddenly grow huge and loud? Should the violins sing out here, or hold back and let the flute take a turn? The conductor shapes all of it. They'll often keep the beat with one hand while using the other hand to shape the sound — lifting it up to ask for more, or gently pressing down to hush everyone to a whisper.

Let me show you what I mean. Listen to this section of “In the Hall of the Mountain King”. It starts out slow and quiet and sneaky, and then little by little it grows faster and louder, until by the end it's practically exploding. Every bit of that speeding up and building is the conductor's doing.

Did you hear how it crept in so quietly, and then completely took off? Now imagine being the one in charge of guiding all those musicians through that, faster and faster, louder and louder, without a single person falling behind. That's the conductor, steering the whole thing like the captain of a ship in a storm.

Now, about that little stick. It's called a baton, and its whole purpose is to make the conductor's beat easier to see. When you've got a hundred

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musicians, and the ones way in the back are pretty far away, a slim white stick moving crisply through the air is much easier to follow than a hand. Not every conductor uses one — plenty of them lead with just their hands — but when they do, that baton works like the tip of a pointer, drawing the beat in the air for everyone to see.

Here's something you might not have thought about, though. By the time you see a conductor at a concert, the very hardest part of their job is already finished. Long before that evening, the conductor sat down with something called a score. A score is a big book that shows every instrument's part all at once, stacked up line after line down the page — the violins, the oboes, the trumpets, the timpani, all of it together. The conductor studies that score until they know the whole piece inside and out: every entrance, every big moment, every quiet one. They decide exactly how they want it to sound, and then they spend hours and hours rehearsing with the orchestra to bring that sound to life. The concert you see is really just the last little piece of a whole mountain of work.

I get a small glimpse of this every time I go watch my daughter's band. There's one person standing up front, and the entire group — dozens of kids — keeps their eyes glued to that director, starting and stopping and swelling and softening all together, just because of the way those hands move. It gets me every time. One person, holding no instrument at all, holding the whole thing together.

And here's my very favorite way to think about what a conductor does, especially after the series we've just been through together. Remember Peter and the Wolf, the story we kept coming back to? The flute was the bird, the oboe was the duck, the clarinet was the cat, the French horns were the wolf, and the timpani and bass drum were the hunters. Well, somebody had to gather up all of those characters and decide just how the story got told — how gentle the little bird sounded, how sneaky the cat crept along, how truly scary that wolf became. That somebody is the conductor. They're the storyteller of the entire orchestra.

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One of the most famous conductors who ever lived was a man named Leonard Bernstein, and I've always had a soft spot for him, because he loved teaching children about music. He spent years putting on special concerts just for kids, explaining how all of this works, really not so different from what you and I are doing here together. If you'd ever like to see a conductor at work, ask a grown-up to help you look up one of his concerts. You'll spot everything we've talked about today, right there in his hands and his face.

So let's step back and take in the whole picture, because we've built something pretty wonderful over these last few episodes. We started with the strings, that we bow and pluck. We added the woodwinds, that start with our breath. We brought in the brass, that start with a buzz. We filled things out with the percussion, that we strike and shake and tap. And today, we've met the one person who gathers every one of those families together — the breath, the buzz, the bow, and the clap — and turns them into a single, living piece of music. That's the conductor. And now, my friend, you know the whole orchestra.

If you printed out your "Be the Conductor" page, keep practicing those patterns. And if you haven't yet, remember you can grab it in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/185. The next time you listen to a piece of music, picture the conductor up front, and see if you can feel where they're speeding things up, slowing things down, or hushing everyone to a whisper.

That brings our orchestra series to a close, and I have loved building the whole thing with you, one family at a time. We'll be back in two weeks with something brand new to explore together.

Until next time — keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music. Thanks for joining me on Busy Kids Love Music!