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Acknowledgements

The way I got started conducting was watching television. I used to watch Cliff Barrows leading the singing at Billy Graham crusades. It took a couple of different teachers to break me from those huge motions Cliff used when leading thousands of singers in stadiums. When I was thirteen or fourteen years old I led the singing for Youth Sunday at New Market Baptist Church where my Uncle Robert, who was the song-leader, gave me a few tips. My first conducting teacher was Dr. Richard Mayo at the 1970 Florida State University Summer Music Camp. I was fourteen years old and standing in front of that class of teenagers was the scariest thing I had ever done.

My other teachers were: Dr. John Hindman at Lander College (now University), Dr. James Vernon at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Joseph King at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Donald Portnoy at the 1997 Conductor’s Institute at the University of South Carolina. To all of these, I am grateful.

I also want to thank my wife, Beverly, who is not only my support system and cheerleader, but is also my in-house tech support and videographer.

And many thanks to members of the choir of First Baptist Church, Abbeville, SC and Moses Aleman, Minister of Music and Senior Adults. Singers were Donna Aleman, Jolee Beaver, Jackie Counts, Rita Gamble, Bruce Johnston, Sandra Johnston, Allen Kolb, Sherry Kolb, Rick Morris, Simone Simmons, Lamar West, and guest singer Sally Kauffmann.

Barry Wilson
Introduction

What do the late Leonard Bernstein, you and I have in common? All are conductors. Yes, it is true that we all work on different levels and in different environments, but the basic task is still the same. It is our job to take a number of independent musicians, turn them into a synergistic ensemble, and produce music. It doesn’t matter if you’re conducting a Renaissance motet or a 21st century worship song. It doesn’t matter if your ensemble is a choir of six women and two men or a choir of a hundred with a thirty-piece orchestra. The primary tool you have for accomplishing your goal is the art of conducting.

The Purpose of Conducting Gestures

Over the years I’ve had people, usually little kids, ask, “What does all that arm-waving mean?” Other people have said, “You mean those motions actually mean something?” When I tell them that I had a semester of conducting in college, two semesters in seminary, specialized courses in conducting handbells and orchestras, and worked as a conducting tutor in seminary they tend to frown and say, “Really?”

Yes, really! The choir, handbell choir or orchestra that has a good conductor will get many things from his or her conducting: meter, tempo, dynamics, style, location within the measure, and confidence. The choir that has a poor conductor will get one thing: confusion.

The Tools of the Conductor

The tools of the conductor include the right hand, the left hand, the face, and the optional baton. Here’s a quick overview of what each tool does…

The Right Hand

The right hand is the primary tool of the conductor. It indicates meter, tempo, dynamics, location within the measure, and style. From those things singers gain CONFIDENCE. In other words…the right hand does everything! Well…almost
everything. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone actually conduct left-handed and I’m sure I’ve never read a text that said it was OK. If you are an experienced lefty conductor I’m going to assume you will either switch to the right hand or you can translate everything into southpaw.

**The Left Hand**

The jobs of the left hand are to give cues, reinforce information provided by the right hand, and…are you ready for this?…turn the pages of the music! There will be a separate lesson devoted to the jobs of the left hand.

**The Face**

The face of the conductor is his or her secret weapon. The conductor’s face can magnify the emotional content of the music. Coincidentally, the conductor’s face can register approval or disapproval with what’s going on in the music. My choir members used to warn new singers to watch out for The Look. The Look first appeared years ago on a Sunday morning when two young tenors failed to follow a rehearsal instruction and sang their failure with great confidence. I continued to conduct but my mouth fell open and my eyes must have burned through those boys like a laser.

**The Baton**

The baton is optional because you can be a fine conductor with or without one. Choral groups are not accustomed to batons but instrumental groups seem to perform better with them. The baton simply makes the conductor’s patterns easier to see from a distance. The baton is helpful for instrumentalists because their eyes have to take in more detail from the printed page than the singer and, consequently, rely on their peripheral vision to get information from the conductor. For the purpose of this course I will assume everyone will conduct without a baton.
The Elements of Conducting Patterns

Before we begin drawing patterns in the air, I want you to imagine you are standing at a table. The table top is a little over waist high. This is the horizontal plane upon which most beats will fall. Never…yes, I said never let your pattern fall below this plane. Gestures that fall below the plane can be hard to see and obscure the beat. But it’s alright if your plane is a little higher than waist high. Musicians can see it just fine if it’s high.

Conducting patterns indicate beats of music. Each beat can be broken down into three elements: the preparatory (or prep), the ictus, and the rebound. These are all identifiable elements of the pattern but, in reality, are all part of one beat and should be practiced in one motion.

The prep (or preparatory beat) is the first beat of a piece of music. The time it takes your hand or baton to travel from the beginning of the prep to the ictus indicates the tempo of the music. It is also possible to show other things, but at this stage I want to keep things simple. The motion of the prep is actually the same thing as the last beat of the meter you’re about to conduct. There will be a separate lesson on the preparatory beat.

The ictus is the point in time and space where you want the beat to occur. The ictus can be modified to indicate style and articulation but in the beginning I want you to perform the ictus as a tap on your horizontal plane. A word of caution to our male students…your conducting patterns should not remind your singers of someone swinging a hammer. Perhaps you could think of the plane as the top of a hot stove.

The rebound is the bounce from the ictus that prepares the next beat. The direction of the rebound tells the musicians what will happen next, like the number of the next beat, stretch the beat, fermata, or cut-off. As you begin learning the different
conducting patterns I want you to remember that the direction of the rebound is always in the opposite direction from the next beat. For example: when we study the pattern for four beats in a measure, beat one is a vertical movement ending on the plane. The ictus of beat two will be on the plane to the LEFT of beat one; therefore, the rebound of beat one will be to the right of beat one and will cross the imaginary line drawn by beat one. This will become clearer when you watch the videos.
The Basic Patterns

In theory there can be any number of beats in a measure of music. However, for the purposes of this introductory course I will limit our discussion to measures containing one, two, three, and four beats. Most of the music you will perform with your choir will be written in one or more of these meters. Note that the first beat and the last beat in every pattern is exactly the same. What happens between the first and last beats is what identifies the meter.

You won’t use it often but the one pattern for simple meter is a simple downward stroke. Begin your prep slightly to the right of the imaginary line where the down stroke will occur and lift your hand up. Your prep should be in exactly the same tempo and style of beat one. Your hand will then fall straight down to the plane for the ictus. The rebound will follow the same imaginary line straight back up. Depending upon the style of the music, one patterns sometimes work better as circular or oval patterns.

The two or duple pattern begins the same as one but after your hand taps the plane the rebound bounces to the right of the ictus. At this point your hand is ready to fall back in the direction of beat one. For some conductors the ictus of beat two is in the same spot as the ictus of beat one. For others, it strikes slightly above. The rebound of beat two is straight back up. If the two pattern is executed in legato style it looks like a backward letter “J.” In staccato style it looks like a backward check mark.

To execute the three or triple pattern, beat one falls in the same place…always does, but the rebound now goes to the left. This is because the ictus of beat two falls on the plane to the right of beat one. The rebound of beat two is up and right so that the hand can come down and left for beat three.

The four pattern used in quadruple meters like 4/4 is the most commonly used pattern. I recommend that you master the four pattern first. Again…beat one taps the
plane and the rebound bounces up and right (as it did for the duple pattern) but this time the hand will cross over the imaginary line drawn by beat one so that the ictus of beat two can land on the plane to the left of one. The rebound of beat two then bounces up and left so the hand can cross back (down and right) over the line and place the ictus of beat three on the plane to the right of one. Beat three rebounds up and right so that the ictus of beat four can land on or near the ictus of beat one. Rebound up…start over!

The following images are rough estimations of the basic shapes of the three most common patterns. The execution of these patterns will become more clear in the video.

Duple Meter  Triple Meter  Quadruple Meter

Video # 1 The Basic Patterns

Practice
You now know four conducting patterns. Before going any farther you should practice these and try to get them into your head and your muscle memory. Find a mirror tall enough that you can see yourself from waist up and wide enough that you can see your rebounds that go to the right of your body. Those narrow dressing room mirrors are not satisfactory. Perhaps you have a large mirror on your bedroom dresser. You can also use the top of the dresser as your plane.
Practice all three patterns slowly. Perhaps I should say very slowly until you can do them without thinking. Count the beats of each measure aloud and with a steady beat. A metronome would be helpful. I recommend that you practice the four pattern the first day, the two pattern the second day, the three pattern the third day, and the one pattern the fourth day.

After you have practiced without the music, use the following videos to practice the three basic patterns.

- Video #2 Quadruple Meter Choral Demo, *Holy Holy Holy*, music page 21
- Video #3 Duple Meter Choral Demo, *Holy Holy Holy*, music page 21
- Video #4 Triple Meter Choral Demo, *The Star Spangled Banner*, music page 23
The Preparatory Beat

As I wrote earlier the prep (or preparatory beat) is the first beat of a piece of music. The purpose of the prep is to get the music started. The prep shows musicians the Tempo, Volume, and Style.

When planning your prep you need to have a good idea of the tempo, volume, and style you want from your musicians. Then you need to translate that into a single motion that reflects those things. In addition, you need to consider upon which beat the music starts. The prep should always look like the beat in the conducting pattern that occurs immediately prior to the start of the music. For example, if a piece starts on beat one, your prep will look like the last beat of the meter. Here are some specific examples.

Meter 4/4 If the music starts on beat 1 the prep is beat 4.

Some conductors think they have to conduct and entire measure to get an ensemble started but any group can be trained to respond to a single prep.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video #5 The Preparatory Beat</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video #6 Preparatory Beat on 4 Choral Demo, Doxology, music page 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video #7 Preparatory Beat on 2, Lonesome Valley, music page 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video #8 Preparatory Beat on 3, Michael Row Your Boat, music page 22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mirroring

Mirroring is when you do the same thing with your left hand that you do with your right hand. Inexperienced conductors tend to do this because they either don’t know what to do with their left hand or they have not yet mastered left hand independence. They might also lack confidence and mirroring seems to give the conductor a little extra confidence. It is typically considered a conducting fault and should be avoided. But experienced conductors know that occasionally they need to do the same thing with both hands. Here are some situations when mirroring is useful:

Sometimes musicians are located in awkward positions on either side of the conductor, or even behind, rather than directly in front.

At the very beginning of a piece of music. This is the time when musicians are most nervous and need a strong dose of confidence from the conductor and mirroring can help.

At the end. You want your cut-off to be seen easily by everyone, so don’t hesitate to mirror.

For emphasis. Sometimes you may feel the need to emphasize the volume or style.

However, I want to strongly emphasize that mirroring should be used sparingly and your musicians should be taught that your left hand is important, and not just a reflection of your right hand. More on this in the lesson on the left hand.
Style

There are two BASIC styles of conducting patterns: legato and staccato. As you become more proficient and move into more advanced techniques these two basic styles can be modified for specific musical requirements but, for now, we’ll limit our study to the two basic styles: staccato and legato.

I will demonstrate style more fully in the video, but for now I will just say that the staccato pattern shows an obvious, clearly marked ictus on each beat. In the legato style, the ictus is less defined…or even visually absent. When executing either of these styles your hand should maintain a consistent pace. During legato that will not be a problem, but some people, when executing staccato, tend to slow the pace of their pattern as they approach the ictus. I’ve seen extreme cases where students even stopped the flow of their pattern during staccato. Stopping the pattern is a special technique that is usually limited to the conducting of recitatives in oratorios and operas, instrumental music, and some twentieth century genres.

Video #9 Styles
Pattern Size: Tempo and Dynamics

One of the most common mistakes beginning, and even experienced conductors make is the size of their conducting patterns. Let me illustrate with a personal story. My first experiences in “conducting” (note quotation marks) were during youth-led worship services where I was the “song leader.” The only “conductor” I could remember seeing was my great-uncle, the regular song leader, who had no formal musical training, just a nice voice and the willingness to serve. Other models I had during those formative years had similar styles of conducting. They included several band directors and one full-time minister of music. Furthermore, I loved to watch Cliff Barrows lead those massive crusade choirs on TV.

The things all of my early models had in common were big personalities and big conducting patterns. By the time I got to my undergraduate conducting class, I had already taught myself the basic patterns and, in comparison to all the other students, I was a conducting genius (at least in my own mind). Consequently, I spent the first few years of my ministry leading both congregational singing and choirs like a band director at half-time or like Cliff Barrows leading a gigantic crusade choir.

After graduating from college I did not go directly to seminary. I was burned out from squeezing a four-year music education degree into five years and had gotten married. I got away with this type of conducting for a number of years, not through skill, but through personality. Finally, in 1989 the Lord made it possible for me to pack up my little family and enroll in the Master of Music program at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, TX. My high opinion of my conducting skills actually got a small boost when I passed Dr. Robert Burton’s conducting entry test and did not have to take “kiddie conducting” like most of my classmates.

You can imagine my shock and surprise when in the first few weeks of master’s level conducting class I learned that my patterns were far too big and my ictus was

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indiscernible. My conducting was useless for anything other than congregational singing. (By-the-way, you do know that congregations rely more upon hearing the accompanists than on seeing the leader, don’t you?). The day I passed Dr. Burton’s entry exam my nerves probably helped keep my patterns under control because, for all practical purposes, I had to relearn conducting from “scratch.” Consequently, over the next two semesters, the conducting faculty and my tutors worked with great dedication to break my bad habits and help me replace them with good habits. This breaking took the form of analyzing conducting gestures in much the same way I’m presenting them to you here.

The size and pace of conducting patterns influence both the tempo and the dynamics of music. In music, the term *dynamics* refers to the volume of the music and the process of changing from one dynamic level to another. Here are the most common dynamic levels in music:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Spoken as</th>
<th>Pronounced</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pp</td>
<td>pianissimo</td>
<td>pē-ā’ni-sa-mō</td>
<td>very soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>piano</td>
<td>pē-’ā- nō</td>
<td>soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mp</td>
<td>mezzo-piano</td>
<td>’met-sō pē-’ā- nō</td>
<td>medium soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mf</td>
<td>mezzo-forte</td>
<td>’met-sō ’för-tā</td>
<td>medium loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>forte</td>
<td>’för-tā</td>
<td>loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ff</td>
<td>fortissimo</td>
<td>for-’tis-si-mo</td>
<td>very loud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Getting a choir to sing a certain dynamic level or change from one level to another is a cooperative effort between the conductor’s right hand, left hand, and face. Let me make a few general statements concerning pattern size, pace, tempo, and dynamics.

Large conducting patterns usually indicate slower tempo and/or louder volume. If you want a group of musicians to *crescendo* you can actually get them to do it by doing
nothing more than increasing the space and speed of your hand between beats in your pattern. This makes the pattern look larger. You can also slow them down by increasing the space between beats while simultaneously slowing the speed of your hand. This will be clearer on the video. Large patterns are easier to see through the peripheral vision of musicians and from a distance (like the width of a football field) but even the largest church choirs are not so big as to require overly large gestures. In addition, large gestures provide tacit permission for singers to limit their view of the director to their peripheral vision when, in reality, they should be watching with direct vision as much as possible. One serious problem with large patterns is that there seems to be a tendency for the conductor to drop the ictus of beat number one below any normal plane. This came home to me the day my conducting teacher asked me to prepare and conduct beat one, then freeze in place. When I did so, my hand had stopped below my belt and my baton was pointing at the ground!

Small conducting patterns usually indicate faster tempo and/or softer volume. If you want your choir to sing softer... just conduct smaller... that is... decrease the space and speed of your hand between beats. If you want them to sing faster... don’t get bigger... just increase the tempo of the beats and the speed of your hand between those beats. The main fault with trying to conduct a fast tempo with a pattern that is too large is that the ictus will be hard to discern through the flurry of motion. It also requires a lot more physical energy to conduct fast and large. Unfortunately, expending all that extra energy will not result in better music. I really can’t think of any time where I’ve witnessed either a student or professional conductor whose patterns were too small.

**Video #10 Pattern Size: Tempo and Dynamics**
Practice

If you are currently leading a choir, you could get in some good practice, and have a little fun at the same time. Pick a hymn that both you and your singers can do from memory…perhaps “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”. Lead the song using various tempi and dynamics. Here are some suggestions:

1. Mezzo forte, medium tempo.
2. Piano…quick tempo.
3. Piano…slow tempo.
4. Forte…slow tempo.
5. Forte…fast tempo.

On that last one…forte/fast…notice how much energy it took. It would be good practice, and add a little fun to the exercise, by mixing up the tempi and dynamics within each repetition of the song. In other words:

(soft and fast) Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
(loud and slow) Praise Him, all creatures here below;
(loud and fast) Praise Him above ye heav’nly host;
(soft and slow) Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

But don’t give your singers too much information up front. Just tell them you’re going to change tempo and volume. Let them figure out the details as you go. This will be good practice for you and good training for them. Also, don’t limit this kind of exercise to one rehearsal. Do things like this with your choir on a regular basis to remind them of what your gestures mean and to keep them sharp. If your choir doesn’t know “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” find something that has a similar feel.
The purposes of the left hand include giving cues and reinforcing musical ideas. Yes, you can give cues with your right hand within the context of the pattern, but the left hand can be most helpful when giving cues. Look at the Christmas hymn “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” In the refrain the women sing *O come, let us adore Him*. In the second full measure of the refrain the tenors enter on beat four. This would be a good place to cue the tenors with your left hand (and your eyes). Two measures later the basses enter on beat four…again…cue with your left hand and eyes. If you wanted to sing “Father, I Adore You” as a round, your left hand would be the logical tool to cue the second and third entrances.

The other purpose of the left hand is to reinforce musical ideas. These are usually ideas you’re already giving with your right hand, but which could benefit from added information. Here are a few specific cases:

Typically, upon arriving at a fermata my right hand stops on the beat of the fermata and I extend my left hand into the same plane with my palm facing upward. It gives the appearance that I’m holding the sound in the palm of my hand.

Even though my choirs were trained to follow a larger pattern into a crescendo (and, of course, they also hear the pianist doing the crescendo), sometimes I added my left hand to the end of the crescendo to give it just a little more. My left hand position for crescendo looks a lot like my left hand position for fermata (palm up), but the choirs knew the difference because my pattern continued. When I really wanted a big sound I added additional muscle tonus to my left hand, causing it to shake a little.

You can control a decrescendo by keeping the palm of your left hand turned downward while moving it in a gentle downward motion. Be careful if you have to move
immediately from a crescendo to a decrescendo. The turning of your left hand from up
to down can cause singers to apply their volume brakes too quickly, turning a
decrescendo into a subito piano (suddenly soft).

The cut-off. Some, of my best lessons on musicianship came from my dad who
is a talented amateur keyboard player. He once told me that the parts of a song people
remember the most are the beginning and the end. Therefore, make sure the beginning
and the end are good. I think he was right! For an anthem to end well, you, the
conductor need to be able to execute the ending clearly, confidently, on the right beat,
and in the appropriate style. You’re probably getting tired of reading all my detailed
analyses of conducting gestures so let me just share a few thoughts about cutting off a
musical group.

Whatever volume and style the song ends with…let your cut-off reflect the same
volume and style. Don’t make a big motion at the end of a soft, slow song. Keep
everything in context.

Keep your hand(s) moving during the last note.

Never make a heavy, downward motion for a cut-off. A big, heavy-handed chop
can cause the pitch of the choir to dip.

To execute most cut-offs keep both hands open. On the appropriate beat trace a
circle in the air then make a snapping motion with your fingers on the ictus.

Insist that your singers look directly at you for cut-offs at important cut-offs,
especially at the end of a song. Peripheral vision just doesn’t cut it at cut-off time.
You should also be looking at your singers at the end.

Conclusion

Sometimes you can use your left hand to remind your choir of something very
practical, like…holding up two fingers to remind them to take a second ending.
Left hand independence is one of the hardest skills for the inexperienced conductor to master. Be patient with yourself and expect it to take weeks to start getting comfortable and months to become proficient with basic left hand gestures.

**Practice**

Remember earlier I recommended that you practice patterns in front of a mirror? Now you should begin adding left hand gestures to this practice. If your right and left hands are not cooperative you might need to begin by making cues with your left hand alone. Just drop your right hand to your side or put it in your pocket. Count the beats aloud and execute cues with your left hand. After a while…stop…begin a right hand pattern… then add the cues. Practice making cues on different beats. Do the same thing with crescendo, decrescendo, and fermata. Here are some drills that will help you start getting your left hand working for you.

1. With no music…slowly count quadruple meter out loud, “1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4…etc.” Keep your right hand still. Put it in your pocket if necessary. Then, with your left hand give your imaginary choir cues on different beats. Do this until you can give a cue on any beat.
2. Next, with your right hand, conduct the quadruple pattern and give cues on all the beats until you feel comfortable. Start slowly…then speed up gradually. If you can’t do it at 40 or 50 beats per minute you sure can’t do it at 90 or 100 beats per minute.
3. Find a piece of easy choral music for which you have both the printed music and a recording.
   a. Start with your right hand in your pocket. Just give cues with your left.
   b. Do it with your right hand conducting the meter and your left giving cues.

**Video #11 The Left Hand**

**Video #12 Cues, Left Hand, Choral Demo, Holy Holy Holy, music page 24**

**Video #13 Putting it All Together Choral Demo, Holy Holy Holy, page 26**
Postlude

As I said at the beginning of this study, the mastery of conducting is a life-long endeavor. If you haven’t already done so, given enough time and practice, you will be able to execute the basic conducting gestures without thinking about them. Just as you would continue trying to improve your singing…your keyboard skills…or any instrument…I hope you will continue to improve your conducting skills as long as the Lord gives you breath.

For some people, studying this manual and the accompanying videos takes as much time as they can spare. But if you have time and would like a more organized, personal, guided study of basic conducting, please contact me and I will tell you how you can enroll in a four-week, online class in which I will guide you through all of the material found in this study which will include personalized guidance using Skype and video.

My contact information is...

schoolofworshipleadership@gmail.com

Home/Office 864.374.3507
Cell 803.422.8339
Appendix

All music is in the public domain.

Holy, Holy, Holy

Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee. Holy, holy, holy merciful and mighty God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures here below, Praise Him above ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.
Lonesome Valley

\[ \text{You got to walk that lonesome valley.} \]

Michael, Row the Boat Ashore

\[ \text{Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia Michael row the boat ashore.} \]
Star Spangled Banner

Francis Scott Key

O—say, can you see, by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleam—ing? Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight, o’er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming? And the rocket’s red glare, the bombsburst—ing in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there. O say, does that—

star spangled ban—ner—yet—wave o’er the land—of the free, and the home of the brave.
Holy Holy Holy, #2

Holy holy holy, Lord God Al-might-y, Ear-ly in the morn-ing our song shall rise to Thee; Holy holy holy, mer-ci-ful and
25

mighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

mighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

God in three persons, blessed Trinity.
Holy Holy Holy, #3

Soprano:

Alto:

Tenor:

Bass:

Soprano:

Alto:

Tenor:

Bass:

The Lord God Almighty, early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee; Holy, holy, holy, merciful and

decrescendo...