

Breathing, Beating, Blinking for Large Ensemble
Adam Overton

[October 2004]

Conductor, Flute/Piccolo, Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet,
Percussion, Piano, Violin, Viola, 'Cello, and Contrabass

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for Conductor and 1 or more of each of the following instruments: Piccolo/Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet, Percussion (Bass Drum, Snare Drum, Suspended Cymbal), Piano, Violin, Viola, 'Cello, and Double Bass

Breathing, Beating, Blinking for Large Ensemble is a series of sonic tableaux that depict the internal activity of the performers' bodies. The piece utilizes the performers' breaths, blinks and heartbeats to determine tempo, rhythmic placement, and duration of each of the movements. The conductor serves to start and stop movements while simultaneously serving as an additional percussionist. It is important to point out that besides depicting the pulse, breath and blinks, the piece also utilizes and represents the limits of the performers' minds and attention. Some of the instructions are purposefully hard to execute, for instance where counting or checking the pulse is involved, and there may be a tendency to occasionally lose track of these. While performers should try to execute the piece as correctly as possible, they should also not be disturbed by these occasional lapses since the timing of each can be considered a unique, biological process.

Rules:

The conductor will indicate the beginning and ending of each movement. When beginning movements, the performers should execute their instructions as soon as possible after the cue, though it is quite likely not everyone will enter in unison due to differences in pulses, blinks, etc. When ending movements, everyone must stop sharply and immediately when given the cutoff by the conductor.

Movements may require the performers to observe their own or others' Breaths, Blinks, or Pulse. It is very important that the performers should try only to *observe these processes without affecting them*. Do not try to speed up, slow down, halt or begin, or otherwise consciously control any of these bodily processes.

On each player's part, a label in brackets at the top (e.g. [Breaths, Blinks] or [Pulse]) will indicate which processes will need to be followed during that particular movement.

It should be assumed that the *Quarter Note is equal to the Pulse* (♩ = Pulse) whenever one is instructed to play something in rhythm with the HeartBeat.

If you lose track of your pulse, do not fake your part. Stop what you are doing and relocate the pulse before starting again. If you are counting something and lose track of what count you were on, start again wherever you believe you left off.

A *Complete Breath* should be considered the combination of an inhale followed by an exhale.

A "monkey-mind action" is an instruction to be executed whenever one has realized their mind has wandered or that they have lost track of some attention-based process.

Performers will sometimes be asked to choose a "Number (or Tone, or String, or Tetrad) of Significance" within a certain range. A "Number (or Tone, or String, or Tetrad) of Significance" is one that seems to stick out in your mind or seems more important than the rest - a kind of superstition. Performers should choose a "Number (or Tone, or String, or Tetrad) of Significance" without trying to consciously affect the music, and without telling anyone else what they've chosen.

Performers should try to balance their sound within the ensemble so that no sound is any louder or softer than another, unless otherwise specified.

Checking the Pulse:

Find the easiest way to check your pulse. The two main ways include touching the neck near the esophagus with your first and middle fingers, or touching either of your wrists about an inch away from the base of your palm with the same two fingers. Here are my suggestions for each instrument:

Woodwinds and Brass are perhaps best off using the pulse from the wrist, where it is generally easier to maintain contact with the pulse while playing. Players may also check on the neck if they find it convenient, though when blowing through their instrument the neck tends to tense and often obscures the pulse.

Piccolo/Flute - Hold your instrument with your left hand as normal, meanwhile checking the pulse on your left wrist

with your right hand.

Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet - Hold your instrument with your right hand as usual, meanwhile using your left hand to check the pulse of your right wrist.

Percussion, Piano - Always check your pulse on the neck rather than the wrist.

Violin, Viola - Hold your instrument normally with the left hand while finding the pulse on your neck with your right hand. During this piece you will not have to bow and check your pulse at the same time.

Cello and Double Bass - If asked to bow, use the right hand to bow normally, and your left hand to check your pulse on the neck. Vice versa if instructed to pluck the strings with your left hand.

Note that checking the pulse is not required for every instrument during every movement.

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Movement # 1

Loud (fff) and Violent

(Approx. 1:30 - 2:30)

(♩ = Pulse)

Conductor - Concert Bass Drum [Breath]

Slam bass drum with all your might at the beginning of each Inhale and Exhale. Let the bass drum ring... Choose a Number of Significance between 20 and 30. This will be how many times you hit the bass drum. Before the last hit, notify the ensemble with a visual cue; hit on the next Inhale or Exhale, but this time completely muffling the head. This final hit ends the 1st movement and signals to the ensemble to stop.

Piccolo, Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet - [Pulse, Blinks]

Pick a Tone of Significance from among the highest and loudest that are possible to be played. Repeat each of the following rhythms in sync with your Pulse on your Tone of Significance, moving back and forth between the rhythms (left-to-right, then right-to-left) whenever you Blink:

||: 1/4 Notes :||: 1/4 Note Triplets :||: 1/8 Notes :||: 1/4 Note Triplets :||: 1/4 Notes :|| etc

Percussion - Snare Drum (snares on) with stick [Pulse, Blinks]

Repeat each of the following rhythms in sync with your Pulse, moving on to the next whenever you Blink; play a RimShot to start off each section following a Blink:

||: 8th Note Triplets :||: 16th Notes :||

Piano - Forearm on Piano [Pulse, Blinks]

Mentally split the piano into three equally sized registers. Repeat each of the following rhythms in sync with your Pulse and in the indicated register of the piano. Move back and forth between each of them (left-to-right, then right-to-left) whenever you Blink.

Use your right forearm to attack the piano in order to hit as many keys as possible.

||: 1/2 Notes :||: 1/4 Notes :||: 1/4 Note Triplets :||: 1/4 Notes :||: 1/2 Notes :||

Half-Notes = Lowest Register

Quarter-Notes = Middle Register

Quarter-Note-Triplets = Highest Register

Violin, Viola - Violent Tremolo Near Bridge [Breath, Blinks]

Violently tremolo near the bridge on the two highest strings, pressing your bow hard to achieve a loud, gritty sound. Whenever you Blink, briefly bow the two lowest strings, but then quickly return back to the two highest ones.

With your left hand, glissando up and down the strings following your Breath - the Inhale Maximum should be near the bridge, Exhale Maximum should be at the end of the fingerboard, or possibly even with open strings.

'Cello and Contrabass - Violent Bowing Near Bridge [Pulse, Blinks]

Repeat each of the following rhythms in sync with your Pulse by bowing on the two high strings of your instrument, moving between the rhythms (left-to-right, then right-to-left) whenever you Blink.

Also with each Blink, briefly bow the lowest two strings, but then quickly return back to the two high strings.

||: 1/4 Note Triplets :||: 1/8 Notes :||: 1/8 Note Triplets :||: 1/8 Notes :||: 1/4 Note Triplets :||

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Movement # 2

Sparse, As Softly As Possible (ppp)

(Approx. 3-4:00)

(♩ = Pulse)

Everyone - [Breath, Blinks, Pulse]

Get into pairs with a performer that is near you and check their pulse either on the neck or the wrist, whichever is most comfortable (note that the neck may be more visually interesting, though more tiring to maintain). If there is an odd number of players, then the Conductor should check his or her own Pulse.

Choose a Number of Significance between 60 and 80.

Count your partner's Pulse up to that significant number, always resetting back to 1 once you've reached the top.

Monkey Mind Action: If you lose track of what count you're on while checking your partner's Pulse, make a short, staccato coughing sound, and then resume counting where you think you may have left off.

Stare into your partner's eyes for the duration of the movement, and alternate between the following instructions whenever your partner Blinks:

- Inhale quickly and audibly through the nose
- Exhale quickly and audibly through the mouth

(Try not to breath on your partner)

Do not make these breathing sounds while you are in the middle of executing your Tone of Significance (see below).

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Individual Instructions

Conductor - Bass Drum, unmuffled, let ring [Pulse]

Hit the bass drum on each Pulse Count of 1 each time. Do this 4 times, cueing right before the end of the final time so that the ensemble knows to stop, then hitting a 5th bass drum to end the movement.

Piccolo, Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet - [Pulse]

Choose a Tone of Significance that is playable while checking your pulse.

On each Pulse Count of 1, lightly fade in and then out of your Significant Tone for a duration of approximately 8 pulses. Repeat this until the conductor cues you to stop.

Percussion - Medium to Large Suspended Cymbal with Stick [Pulse]

Hit the cymbal with the tip of the stick on Pulse Count 1 each time. Repeat this until the conductor cues you to stop.

Piano - Holding pedal down [Pulse]

Choose a Tone of Significance that is playable while checking your pulse.

On each Pulse Count of 1, lightly play your Significant Tone. Repeat this until the conductor cues you to stop.

Violin, Viola, 'Cello and Contrabass - [Pulse]

Choose a String of Significance.

On each Pulse Count of 1, lightly pluck your Significant String, allowing it to make a snapping sound on the fingerboard. Repeat this until the conductor cues you to stop.

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Movement # 3

Softly (p) and Evenly

(Approx. 3-4:00)

(♩ = Pulse)

Everyone - Stop checking your partner's pulse, and instead look across the way to stare into the eyes of a different performer, watching for each other's Blinking. If there is an odd number of players, then the Conductor should observe his or her own Blinks.

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Individual Instructions

Conductor - Bass Drum [Blinks]

Count your new partner's Blinking up to 101. (If you find that on average your partner rarely Blinks, causing the movement to end up being overly long, you may cut the number of Blinks in half to 50 - but this should only occur in rare instances).

Hit the rim of the bass drum with the wooden part of the mallet every 10th Blink, starting on 'Blink 1'.

Cut off the ensemble and end the movement on the 101st Blink.

Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Trumpet - [Breath, Blinks]

Choose a Tone of Significance that feels neither too high nor too low.

Alternate the following with each new Complete Breath:

- just breathe through your instrument, with no tone
- play a very soft, breathy version of your significant tone

Breathe as naturally as possible through your instrument, in and out, audibly tonguing whenever your partner Blinks.

When playing your Significant Tone, always approach it with a short glide from the nearest tone above or below (please choose one method and stick to it).

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop with the bass drum.

Percussion - Snare (snares off) on rim (with stick) and Medium to Large Suspended Cymbal (with tip of stick) [Breath, Blinks]

Observe your Breath and your partner's Blinking.

Whenever your partner Blinks:

- while you are Inhaling, then hit the rim of the snare
- while you are Exhaling, then simultaneously hit the rim of the snare and the cymbal
- while you are neither Inhaling or Exhaling, then hit the cymbal

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop with the bass drum.

Piano - Holding pedal down [Breath, Blinks]

Choose a Tone of Significance that feels neither too high nor too low.

Whenever your partner Blinks:

- while you are neither Inhaling or Exhaling, then lightly play your Significant Tone
- while you are Inhaling, then simultaneously play your Significant Tone AND a tone a minor or major 2nd above it
- while you are Exhaling, then simultaneously play your Significant Tone AND a tone a minor or major 2nd below it

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop with the bass drum.

Violin, Viola, 'Cello and Contrabass - Bowing lightly with the Breath [Breath, Blinks]

On either your 2nd or 3rd string, choose a Tone of Significance.

Bow lightly back and forth along with your Breath on your Tone of Significance.

Alternate the following with each new Complete Breath:

- softly play very near or on the bridge, but without producing any tone (mostly bow & bridge sound), possibly even muting the string
- softly play a bit further away from the bridge, now making the tone audible.

Whenever your partner Blinks:

- while you are Inhaling, then briefly play both your Significant Tone AND a "Parallel Tone" (i.e. same finger position) on the string above it
- while you are Exhaling, then briefly play both your Significant Tone AND the "Parallel Tone" on the string below it
- while you are neither Inhaling or Exhaling, pluck the string of your Significant Tone with your left-hand-fingernail

During all of this, make sure to keep the bow in sync with your Breath without interruption.

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Movement # 4

In 3, Build

(Approx. 3-4:00)

(♩ = Pulse)

Everyone - Stop watching your partner and resume observing your own bodily processes. Watch for the conductor's cue to begin or halt your part. You may have to do this repeatedly. If your part directs you to choose a Tone of Significance, you may change this Tone of Significance each time you are turned off and then back on, though it is not necessary to change. All parts are to be played at a dynamic level of around **mf** to **f**.

Individual Instructions

Conductor - [Breath]

Follow your Breath, trying at all times to keep a clear mind. With each exhale, cue a performer to begin or halt their part. Move around the group, turning performers On and Off randomly, methodically and/or superstitiously, however always trying to keep the mind clear. Go through various permutations with various densities. When your mind begins to tell you that you've gone far enough, silence those thoughts by returning to the breath, and build back down to silence by turning the remaining players off one-by-one.

Flute - Octave Runs [Blinks]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Choose a Tone of Significance no higher than one octave below your highest note, and play it continuously.

On every 6th Blink, alternate the following:

- make a very quick (1/2-second or less) scalar or chromatic run up to the octave and hold it
- make a very quick scalar or chromatic run back down to your Significant Tone and hold it

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

Oboe, Clarinet - Varispeed Trills [Breath]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Choose 2 Tones of Significance, each of which can be trilled.

On every Breath, continuously play one of your Significant Tones with a trill, alternating every 3rd Breath between the tones.

Count your Breaths up to 12 and then reset; gradually vary your trill-speed based on this count:

- A count of 1 or 12 indicates a super slow trill
- A count of 6 indicates a super fast trill

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

Trumpet - Flutter Tonguing [Blinks]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Choose a Tone of Significance and play it continuously.

On every 3rd Blink, play a burst of flutter-tonguing for one half second

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

Percussion - Snare (snare on) [Blinks]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Continuously play a buzz roll. Accent the buzz with each Blink.

On every 3rd Blink, do a rimshot.

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

Piano - Chords [Pulse]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Choose a Tetrad of Significance to begin with and play it.

Observe your Pulse. Every 6th beat, move one of your fingers a half-step in either direction, and re-articulate this new chord. Move around the keyboard however you wish in this manner.

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

Violin, Viola - Plucking [Pulse]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Observe the Pulse on your neck with your right hand. Pluck each string with your left hand on every 3rd Pulse, starting with the lowest string and moving one at a time up to the highest. Once you've reached the highest string, start over at the bottom again.

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.

'Cello and Contrabass - [Pulse]

ONLY ON CUE FROM THE CONDUCTOR - BE PREPARED TO STOP AND START

Observe the Pulse on your neck with your left hand. Strum the following rhythm in sync with your Pulse:

Lo2Hi Hi2Lo



-Lo2Hi = Strum lowest to highest strings

-Hi2Lo = Strum highest to lowest strings

Repeat this until the conductor indicates for you to stop.