

Analysing Technique – Matthew Rowe commentates on archive footage of Arturo Toscanini

Matthew Rowe: So here we have some footage of Arturo Toscanini – one of the legends of conducting – working with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in the '50s. And he uses his right hand, the hand holding the stick to show the pulse of the music. And he controls each beat and shows every beat with that hand. And then the left hand working independently is showing other things, maybe showing players where they need to come in. Or else, like in this instance, showing where the sound should stop and holding the stillness. Toscanini was quite a fiery character and you see the intensity in his expression. He had a very intense relationship with the orchestras he worked with, and was known for his quite often critical remarks to players; so players were in fear of him. But it's wonderful to see this intensity, and he really draws fantastic playing from the orchestra. And now we see more intensity and also more use of the arm as well as his hand, as the sound gets louder. And there, the left hand's showing how the sound ebbs away. And now as the music gets going and it's much smoother, we see how the right hand is always moving, always flowing; there's no jerkiness in the gesture, and that really encourages the players to make sure that there's no jerkiness in the sound; and his expression has changed, it's mellowed, and there encouraging the players to make the sound even more intense, that gesture with the left hand. And then turning to the first violins there, and showing with the right hand not only the pulse of the music but how he wants every single note to be really emphasised, showing that within each beat. And of course, the beat isn't remaining constant, the pulse doesn't stay quite the same all the time. There's a certain ebb and flow

inherent in the music and he shows that by changing the amount of space between each beat with the right hand. And again another very intense passage here and slightly leaning in, using his body to encourage the intensity as well. And here pushing the music forward to another climax and then letting it ebb away again. Remarkable footage of a remarkable conductor.