

The Conducting Baton of James Ripley

Joop Boerstoeel



There may be something to the notion that, as in the “wizarding world” of Harry Potter, the wand will indeed choose you instead of you selecting one. You have to be willing to try a number of different handle shapes to find the one that really feels comfortable to you and allows the freedom of movement to execute the musical gestures you intend. I was lucky to have had my wand choose me very early in my career, at a St. Olaf College Conducting Symposium with H. Robert Reynolds as our clinician. Since that time I’ve tried various other shapes and sizes of batons, but have always found that the somewhat stubbier “pear-shape” wood handled baton that Bob used was just right for my hand as well.

Legendary baton maker Charles Olson was typically in residence at these conducting workshops, and he (and later his successor Chris Blount) was able to provide me with the first of what would be many excellent incarnations of these batons.

I started using natural wood shafts of 13-14 inches, impressed with the lightness of feel and secureness of intent. At that point in time, fiberglass shafts really were too flexible. However, I ended up breaking so many (even with a reliable leather case that I still have 40 years later) that when a reliable graphite shaft became available I switched to that.

The length of my baton has also increased in the past five years. At 6’ 3” tall I’ve had no problem being seen on the podium. I’ve also found that my basic set-up for conducting has the baton tip centered over my

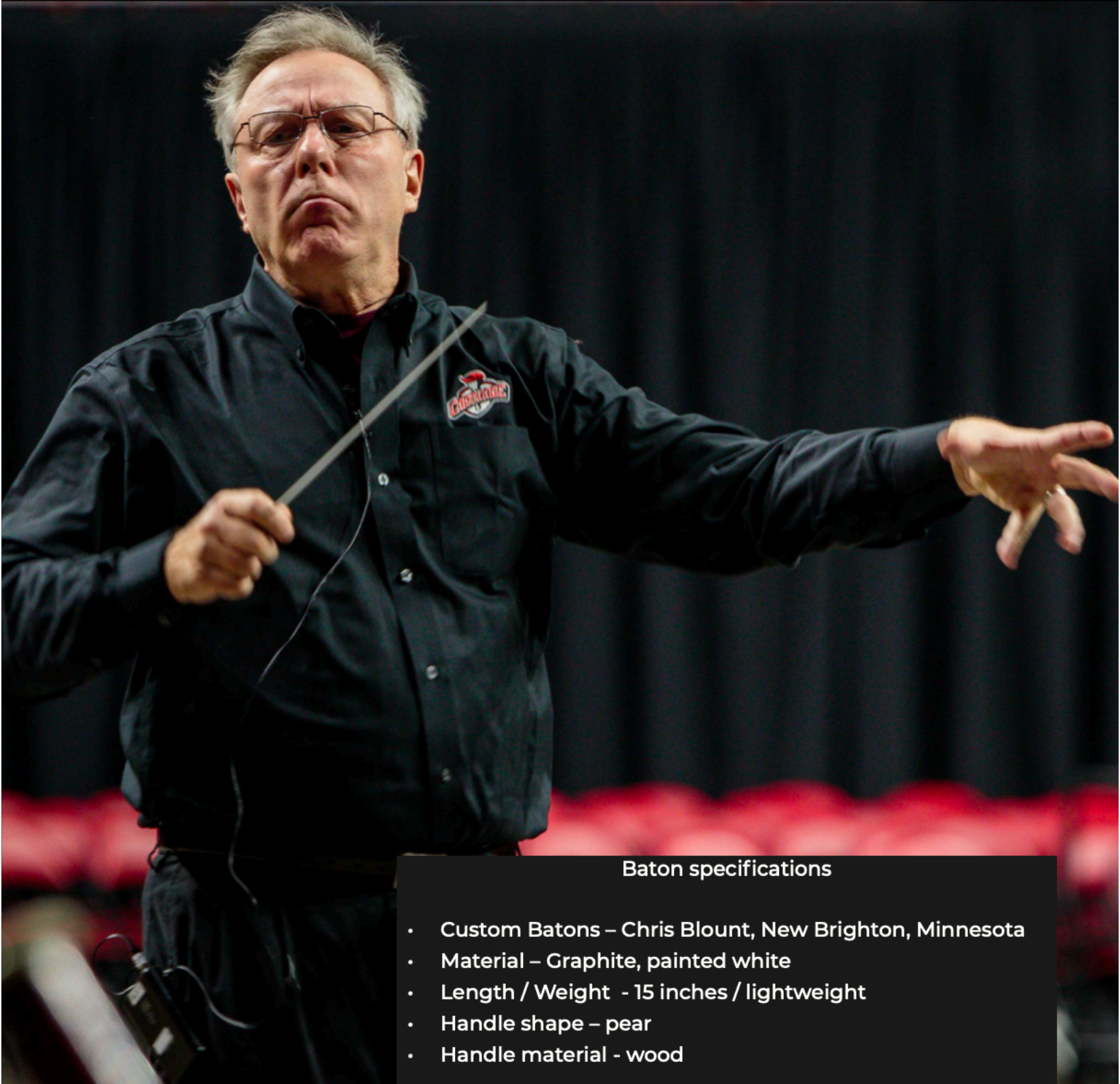
sternum, allowing for me to move in all directions from that location for effective gesture. In recent years, I’ve become even more aware of the baton tip activity, and that has brought me to use a longer shaft to maintain directional focus in my conducting (again, “flick and swish” for you Harry Potter fans). There have been a number of variants and additives to baton design over the years, but I have continued with a pretty basic approach. Each time I pick up one of my batons (I currently have three of my standard batons and another that I use for large festival bands) I want to know it will complete those gestures I intend.

Some of the experimentations with handle shape, material and “creature comforts” all leave me with a different tactile sensation. I don’t need to feel the stick, nor to have it have a mind of its own because of its weight or flex, but to simply take on intent.

I do have one very special baton, one that I reserve for occasions where I am conducting music associated with one of my musical mentors, John Paynter. I’ve actually had wonderful teachers throughout my career, from my high school band director, Tom Haugen, who was so dedicated to us as students and our development that he’d use practically anything as a baton in rehearsal—knowing how he showed us the music meant more than what he held; to Donald Hunsberger, who brought eloquence and finesse to every gesture.

The mentor who developed in me a sense of focus, however was John Paynter. His sense of clarity and refinement was remarkable, and his way of gathering attention by bringing his left hand in next to the baton tip to ready the ensemble created a magical effect. Mr. Paynter's family had commissioned Charles Olson to make a baton for the retirement ceremony planned in 1996. This was unfortunately never to be presented, however, as Mr. Paynter passed away earlier that same year. In the fall of 1996, as I began my final year as Assistant Band Director at Northern Arizona University, I contacted Charlie about some

new batons for myself and the conducting classes. At that time he mentioned that the family had no need for the retirement baton, but that he knew that I would find it of great personal value. He gave it to me, and I've cherished it since. It is what Mr. Paynter called a "fourth finger" baton, and the kind he regularly used. The handle is an elongated oval, which allowed him to use a squeezing motion of the hand—from the fourth finger only! – to execute the most subtle of tip movements on the baton.



Baton specifications

- Custom Batons – Chris Blount, New Brighton, Minnesota
- Material – Graphite, painted white
- Length / Weight - 15 inches / lightweight
- Handle shape – pear
- Handle material - wood