

Initiating the student conductor into the basics of the conducting technique (Auftakt-The Upbeat. Types of Upbeat and practical solutions)

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Abstract: *Choral conducting, a basic component in the formation of music teachers and choir conductors is a discipline that combines the students' theoretical music and all-round education with their artistic practice. The choral conducting courses aim at shaping the artistic personality of the students, by developing their own abilities for the knowledge, understanding and interpretation of music, thus setting the bases for the complex experience required by the future artistic and teaching activities. The performance of music can be ensured through a very thorough conducting technique. The key moment of a choral work is its very beginning, as it starts with a simple, yet complex gesture – the upbeat (also known as the German “auftakt”) – a gesture that requires precision and promptness. In this survey, we intend to show what an upbeat is, the type of upbeat, but also how to execute it. We also recommend a set of practical exercises, in order to carry it out properly.*

Key-words: *Student conductor, conducting technique, auftakt, the upbeat, practical solutions.*

1. Introduction

“The role of the conductor is to create the choral instrument and to take it to the highest level, while using the arsenal of means of expression acquired through technique.”(Guţanu, 2014, 76)

As I mention: “The artistic act must be expressed both technically and interpretatively. In the process of interpretation of a choral work, the conductor’s mission is to attain a unity between the technical and artistic aspects” (Guţanu, 2012, 22).For this reason, it’s very important to initiating the student conductor into the basics of the conducting technique.

Auftakt-The upbeat “is a gesture that precedes the moment of execution of each conductor stroke, from a conducting beat pattern. In terms of duration, it equals the predetermined conductor’s stroke.”(Musin 1967, 57).

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The upbeat sets the tempo, the dynamic level, the character of the articulation and the artistic expression of the work. According to D. D. Botez, it is “the gesture that announces the beginning of the work and it is preceded by two commands: the *start signaling (warning)* and the *impetus* or momentum of beginning. The first command – as the name suggests – draws the attention of the choir on the beginning moment. The second command refers to the accumulation of energy required by any beginning and it is actually done by the conductor’s breathing in air. None of these two commands is dispensable.”(Botez 1985, 43).

2. Types of upbeat (or *aufтакт*)

In conducting, we can find the following types of *upbeat*:

1. *The complete preparatory upbeat* – also called *the preparatory stroke*. It is the upbeat that initiates a choral work (the conductor’s first gulp of air);
2. *The upbeat placed on beat*: it can be found both at the beginning or throughout the choral work;
3. *The upbeat placed on a half-beat*: it can also be found in choral works, just as the upbeat placed on beat;
4. *The upbeat within the conductor’s measure* – it is the *connecting upbeat stroke*, which links the entire chain of conducting strokes, the so-called “conducting loop”.

2.1. The functions of the upbeat

- *The preparatory upbeat* has:
 - a preparatory function, as it is the very first stroke with which a choral work begins.
- *The upbeats placed on beat and half-beat* have:
 - a preparatory function (they may prepare the beginning of a choral work, a new voice part entry or the re-entry of a voice part after a *caesura*);
 - a leading function (the actual upbeat gesture).
- *The upbeat within the conductor’s measure* has:
 - a preparatory function (it prepares the following stroke);
 - a liaison function (it makes the connection with the next conducting stroke, in fact it connects the conducting strokes between themselves);
 - a leading function (the actual execution of the upbeat – the expressiveness stage).

By means of the upbeat within the conductor’s measure (the connecting upbeat), the conductor attains the dynamic and agogic (durational) plane of a choral work.

2.2. The execution of upbeats

The stages of executing an upbeat from a conductor's standpoint are:

- *the start signaling* (the conductor announces the choir members through mimicry that they are about to start singing and makes sure they are all attentive);
- *the impetus* (the inhalation of air – the conductor mimics that he/she is taking a breath).

Attention! When executing all types of upbeats, *the starting point* is extremely important, as it requires maximum precision (it can be performed through a quasi-stopping of the hand before giving the impetus, using, at the same time, associated gestures - mimicry, etc. This rule applies especially to the upbeats used for vocal entries that appear throughout the choral work.).

In the second stage – *the impetus* – it is recommended that the conductor breathe in together with the choir. Ideally, all the vocal interventions should be mimicked by the conductor. Mimicking the inhalation of air, as mentioned before, helps the conductor correlate his/her own gestures and facilitates the conductor's gestural dialogue with the choir.

2.3. Examples of upbeat execution:

➤ *The preparatory upbeat.*

It shall be made on the stroke that precedes the starting of the musical discourse. It shall be made according to the choral work tackled, its characteristics (the beat pattern, its tempo, dynamics, the specific articulation and artistic expression).

To illustrate this, I used a fragment from the suite “*Flăcări și roți*” (English translation: “*Flames and wheels*”) by Corneliu Cezar (part 15 – **a** and **b**):

Fragment **a**, which starts off with the verse “*Această lume-am sărutat*” (“*This world I have kissed*”), shall begin with an upbeat corresponding to the tempo ‘*Moderato*’, of small amplitude (since we have the dynamic marking of *piano*), a rounded beat pattern and an energy meant to determine the narrative nature of the choral piece. The work is written in a 4/4 measure and it starts on the first beat (Bass), which means that the upbeat shall be given on the preceding beat, namely on beat 4.

15 a. RABINDRANATH TAGORE CORNELIU CEZAR

Alto
A - ceas-tă lu-me'am să - ru-tat cu o-chii si cu

Tenor
A - ceas-tă lu-me'am să - ru-tat cu o-chii si cu

Bass
A - ceas-tă lu-me'am să - ru-tat cu o-chii si cu

a

Fragment **b** shall start on the first beat, just as fragment **a**, but this time, we have a 9/8 measure (conducted as a 4-beat pattern, with the downbeat containing the ternary formula and the other 3 strokes – binary formulas, each: 3+2+2+2). The upbeat shall correspond to a lively tempo and an angular beat pattern, using energetic movements meant to illustrate the bright, joyful and lively nature of the choral work.

S
f Zi - ua să'ti dea lu - mi - ne-le, frun-tea, tot in - se - ni - ne-le,
A
f Zi - ua să'ti dea lu - mi - ne-le, frun-tea, tot in - se - ni - ne-le,
T
f Zi - ua să'ti dea lu - mi - ne-le, frun-tea, tot in - se - ni - ne-le,
B
f Zi - ua să'ti dea lu - mi - ne-le, frun-tea, tot in - se - ni - ne-le,

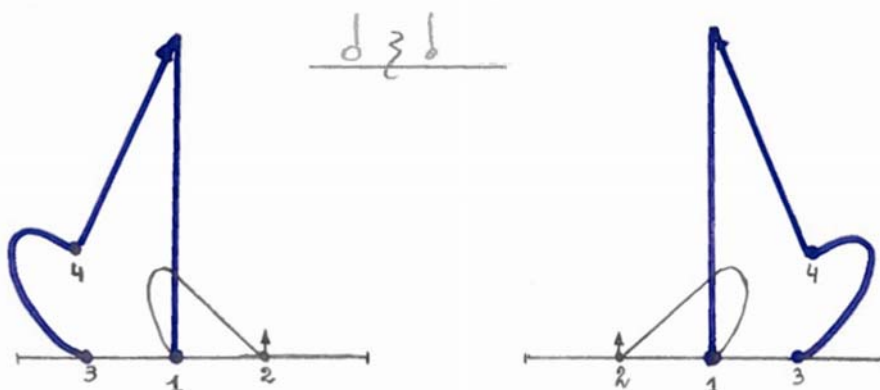
➤ *The upbeat placed on beat*

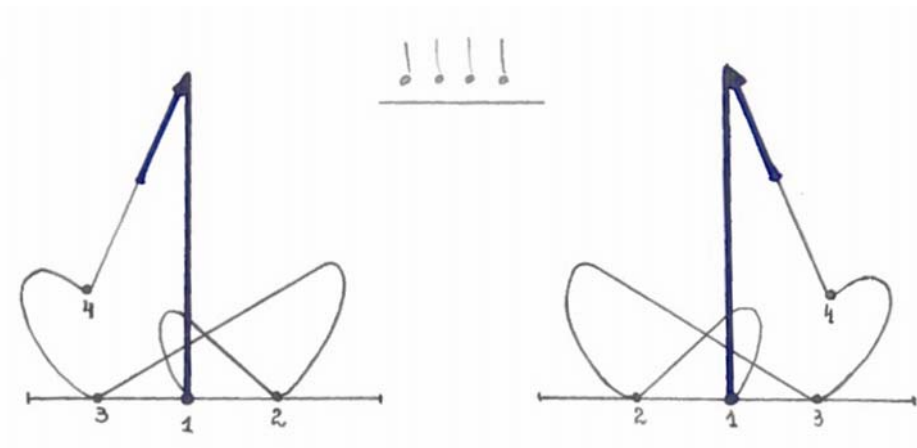
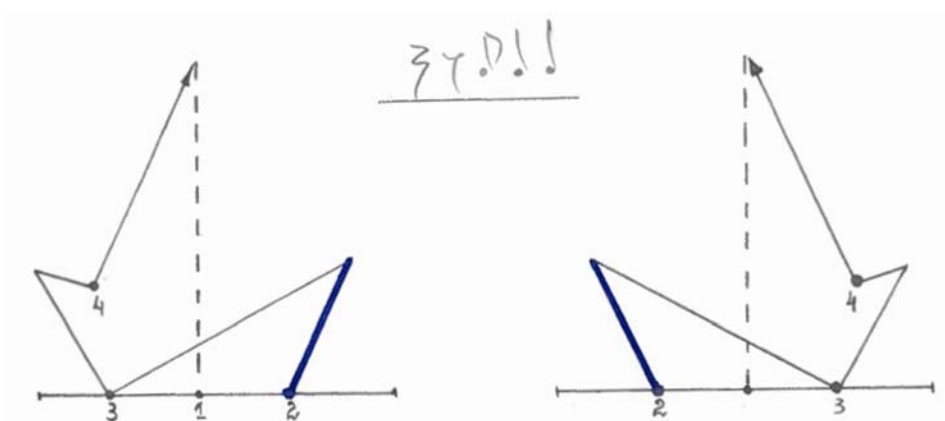
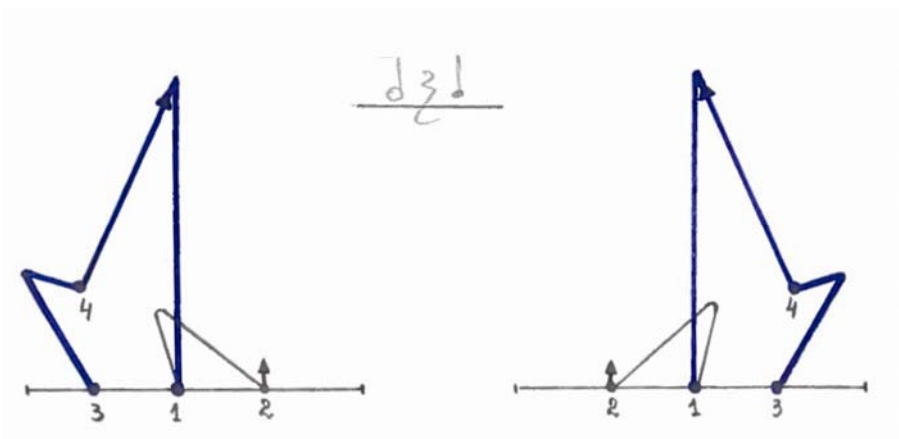
It shall be performed on the beat preceding the one which launches the musical discourse.

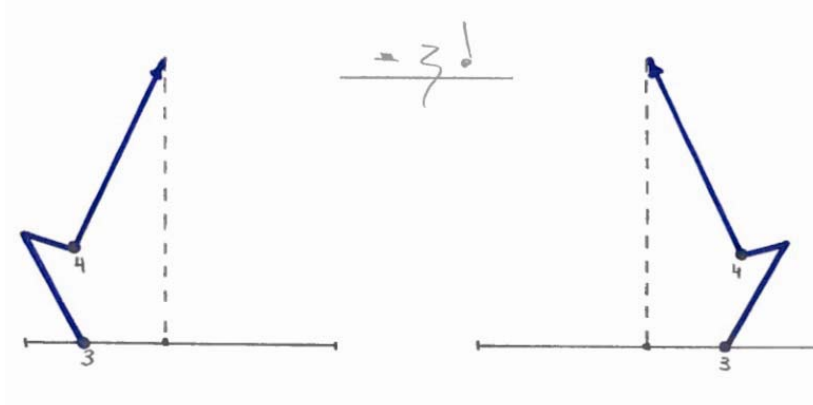
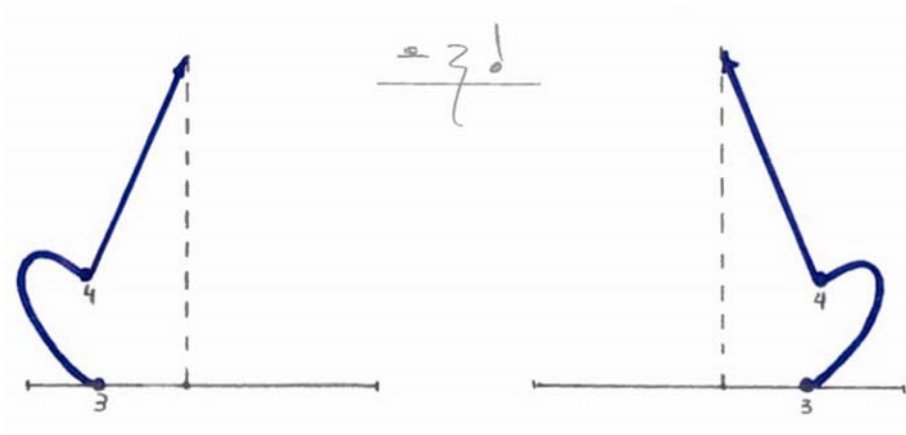
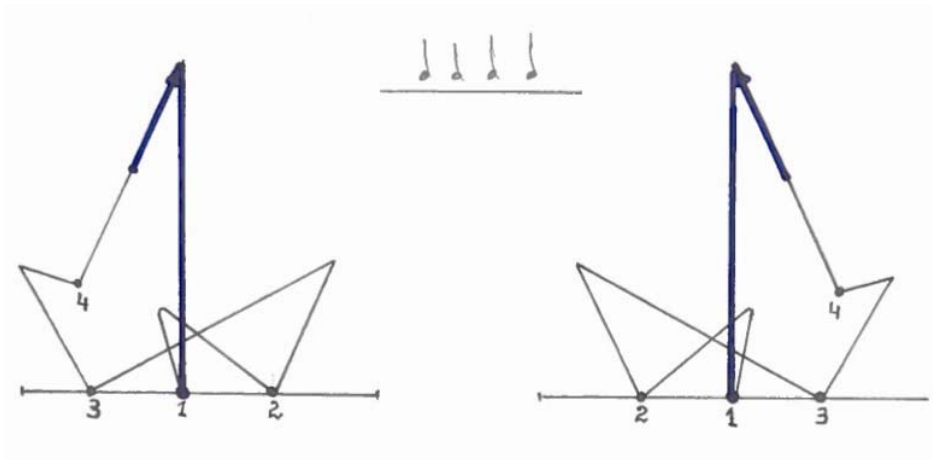
➤ *The upbeat placed on a half-beat*

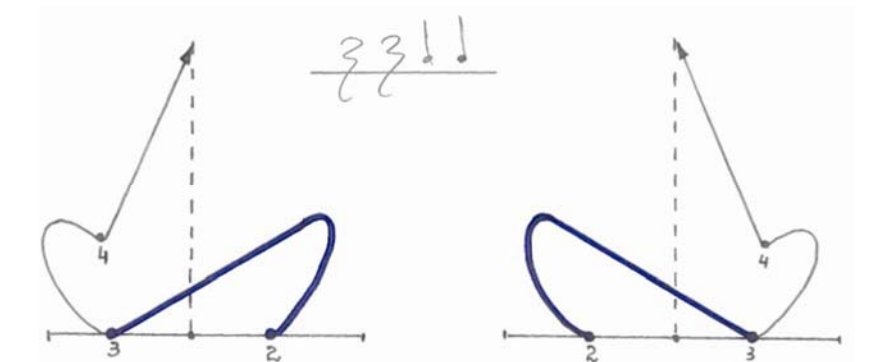
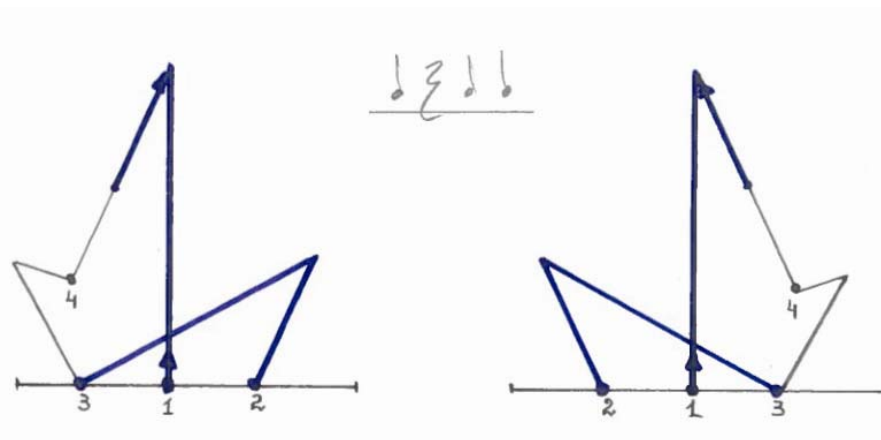
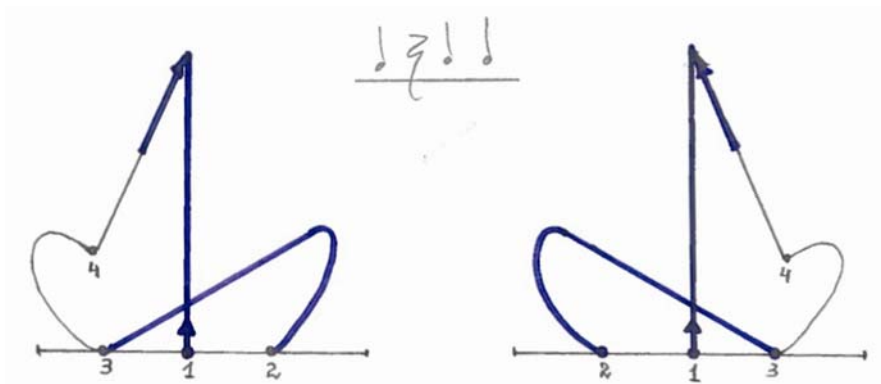
It shall be made on the half beat preceding the other half beat.

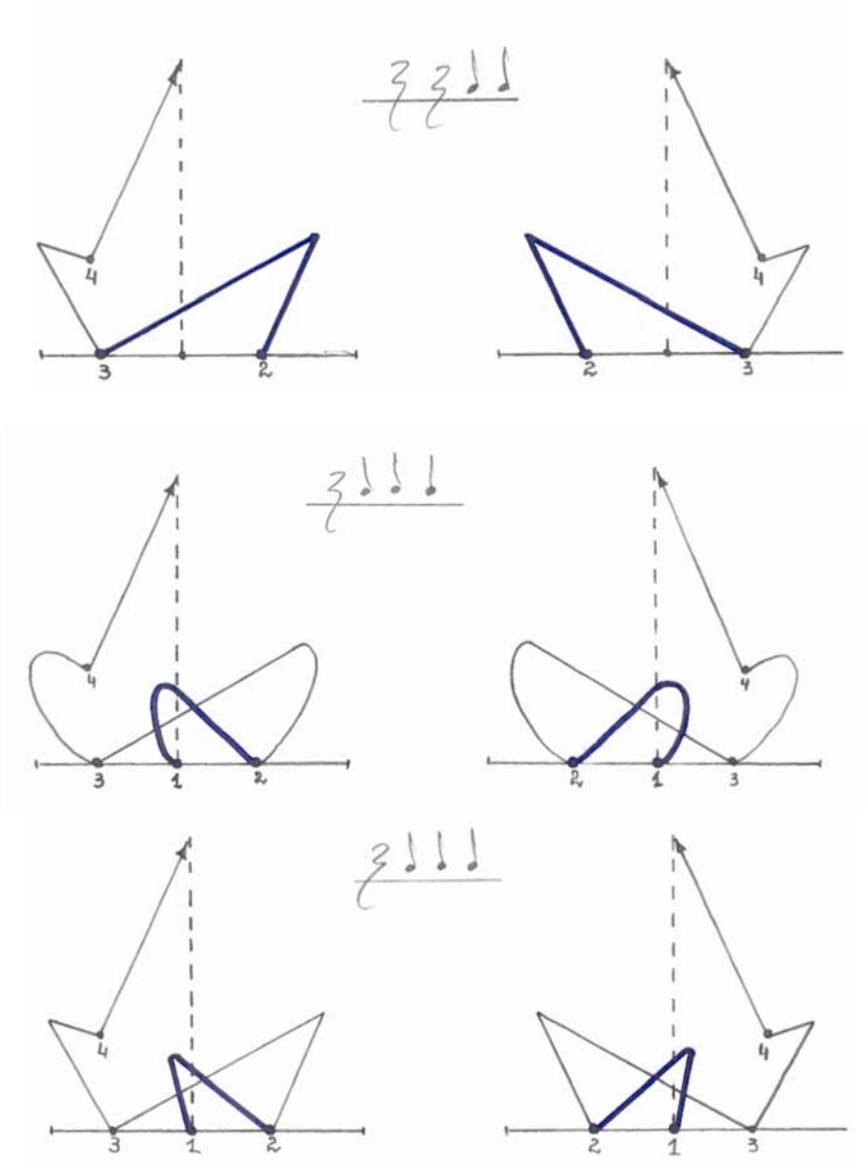
Listed below are a few examples of upbeats placed on beat or half-beat, with the corresponding beat patterns for each.











➤ *The upbeat within the measure*

As mentioned earlier, this is a connecting upbeat. Listed below are two diagrams in which you can follow the progression of the connecting upbeats within a measure (with the two types of beat patterns – rounded and angular).

3. Practical exercises

In order to understand how to perform an upbeat, quickly and correctly, we recommend a set of practical exercises:

Exercise 1

We will practice the two stages of performing the upbeat. Sitting on a chair in front of a desk or table (positioned at the average conducting level), or, ideally, in front of a conductor's music stand, the student conductor shall put their hands on the table, in start signaling position, while leaning against the fingertips (especially on the pointing and middle fingers), setting their starting point. After they have set it, they shall give impetus (the hand will go upwards), whilst mimicking breathing, and then, they shall let the hand fall back freely to the starting position. After practicing this several times, this exercise must be repeated by the student conductor, this time from standing position, from the average conducting level (an imaginary plane).

Exercise 2

Sitting on a chair in front of a desk or table (positioned at the average conducting level), the student conductor shall put their hands on the table, in start signaling position, while leaning against the fingertips (especially on the pointing and middle fingers), setting their starting point. A chain of conducting strokes shall be made, on a 4-beat pattern, with a stopping after each stroke (**attention!** – the stopping entails the presence of the *impulse – recoil* binomial). The return to the beat pattern or the continuation of the chain of conducting strokes shall be made through the upbeat. In terms of gestures, the conductor shall start from the stroke that they stopped on, towards the next one, while mimicking inhalation. With each stroke within the measure, the same principle shall be observed. This exercise shall also be made in 3 and 2-beat patterns. After practicing several times, the student conductor must also repeat this exercise from standing position, from the average conducting level.

Exercise 3

This exercise follows the same principle as exercise 2, only, this time; each chain of conducting strokes shall start from a different beat. For instance: the first chain of conducting strokes shall start on the second beat of the 4-beat measure. This requires that the student conductor give the upbeat on the first beat. Should the chain of strokes start on the third beat, and then the upbeat will come on the second beat, etc. This exercise is also to be carried out in 3 and 2-beat patterns.

Exercise 4

Ex. 4 follows the same principle as exercise 3, only without stopping within the measure; the types of beat patterns can be alternated.

Exercise 5

The following rhythmic exercises shall be conducted:

1A

m.st. 1A
m.dr.

1B

m.st. 1B
m.dr.

2A

m.st. 2A
m.dr.

2B

m.st. 2B
m.dr.

Attention! All the exercises must be vocally seconded by the student conductor, by enumerating all the beats within the measure, with the intended character, metric pulsation and manner of attack. Similarly, it is **compulsory** that all the upbeats (the inhalations) be mimicked.

4. Conclusion

The artistic and pedagogical achievements of a student, future teacher and conductor depend on a correct education, on their creative abilities and on a proper professional training.

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