

Lecture IV: Performing

Back in an earlier lecture, I spoke about how the arts are not fair – how someone can love what they do, prepare maniacally, give their all, and nothing comes of it. The arts work in mysterious ways, and the music business is highly unpredictable. Often, things turn out very differently than expected.

The whole idea of this course, though, is to try to identify strategies and ways of thinking that can be counted on to position musicians as well as possible for success. And the way I'm doing that is by recalling all I have observed in the successful and happy musicians I know, finding what traits they have in common, and describing them to you.

Performing is of course what most musicians do, and even composers are often called upon, or elect to participate in the playing of their works. For most of us, the concert is the moment of truth, where all we have put into the preparation of it proves to have worked or not. But, while our careful planning may have satisfied us, has it satisfied the public? Just because we are happy doesn't necessarily mean that they are as well. And of course it can work the opposite way as well: the public is ecstatic for some reason but we were not happy at all with our performance.

So our objective in this mysterious practice of music performance is to try to have, as often as possible, everything turn out on the positive side: we are satisfied that we did our best, the public is involved, enthusiastic and appreciative, the critics write good reviews, and we are re-engaged. How often does this happen, say, in my life? By no means in every concert, but it's happened enough that I gratefully enjoy a career in music that sustains me and my family. I consider myself very lucky.

So now I'll try to map the road that leads to the performance, and what steps along the way might just lead to higher batting averages for all.

The first element of a performance that we encounter is the repertoire, or the **programming**. Sometimes we have control over the programming and sometimes we don't. In fact, presenters these days are becoming increasingly picky about repertoire, and often, the pieces their audiences are hearing is a more important consideration than who plays them. I actually think this is a good trend.

As an example, I'll put on my presenter's hat to tell you that both at Lincoln Center and our summer festival in California, we program all the music before we have selected any artists. Only after we've got the pieces we want our audiences to hear – and we look at their diet from season to season very carefully – do we begin to think about which players from our roster of musicians would best play certain works, and which groups of musicians would work well together. At the point at which we have made definite decisions, we make calls to musicians to offer them the concerts, but they have to agree to our repertoire. Usually, they do.

At the point you get asked to play a certain piece by a presenter like me, you will need to make a quick decision, as the presenter has to move on quickly to secure performers before they become unavailable. When I am asked to play a specific piece, I always ask for just enough time to consult my schedule, which shows me all my existing repertoire obligations and other circumstances which might be called obstacles to doing justice to the presenter's request. I sometimes have to ask myself whether I like the piece enough and the performance circumstance to really be able to give it my all. And if I'm not sure, for whatever reason, that I won't be able to give it my best, I turn it down as quickly as possible so as not to hold up the presenter's process. Being a presenter myself, I know how irritating that can be.

But if you are in the repertoire driver's seat, another perspective comes into play. The idea for playing the piece has really come from you, and you should be able to articulate your reasons for choosing it. In most of the interviews I give concerning upcoming concerts, I am asked why I chose a particular program. The audience always thinks it's you who picked the program, even if you didn't, and it's probably better to let them think that in any case. And why you chose a piece to play is something that should stay in the forefront of your thinking during the entire practicing process, and especially as you walk on stage and begin to play. It's your real reason for being in front of the public: to share your enthusiasm for the piece with as many people as possible.

Let's move on to **preparing for performance**.

This subject has a big relation to my previous talk on **learning**. Naturally, a brand new work requires a certain distinct effort to bring it to concert level, but no matter how many times a serious musician plays a piece, he or she re-learns it to some degree every time. So every performance is indeed the result of a learning experience.

If we are looking for confidence on stage – and I believe we all are – the first step in building it comes from knowing as much as you can possibly know about the piece you are playing. Not just the notes, but about its composer, the context of its creation, the traditions of performing it – likely learned from listening to great recordings, and last but far from least, everything we can learn about the work's construction.

When I began my career I learned pieces quite differently from the way I do now. I was a very on-fire kind of young cellist: I heard pieces I loved on record, and even if they were beyond my ability at the time I would buy the music and play them with abandon, probably not too well. I hardly cared for what the printed page said as I interpreted just out of my own head, copying what I liked from recordings. All I needed the printed music for was to get the notes, which I likely knew pretty well already.

It was only after I got into my 20's, and into chamber music, that I began to become a musician really conscious of the presence of the composer – dead or alive - in the performance process. And it was through chamber music rehearsal that I arrived at the conclusion that arguing your interpretive points based on only how you felt the music should go just didn't fly among musicians equally accomplished, each with his own strong musical instincts.

The ultimate referee in the middle of a musical debate is the composer. It matters enormously what the composer has left us on the page in terms of interpretive instructions. It is equally important what one knows about composers, their lives, their styles and especially their other music. Scores are like puzzles to be solved, with clues littered here and there. Our best friend in the rehearsal and study process is the best possible edition of a work - one that adheres as closely as possible to the composer's manuscript. And if we have access to the composer's manuscript – called a facsimile – then we really have a treasure trove of clues off of which to base our interpretation, and later defend it, if necessary.

All of what I might call the research and development process I've been described can happen simultaneously with your **practicing**. How to practice is a whole lecture in itself. All a musician can really do is to say what works for them, but that does not necessarily mean it will work for them every time, or for you any time. However, those of us who are teachers are constantly suggesting ways for our students to practice. If you ask a student to practice in front of you for five minutes, as though you were not in the room, you'll likely be amazed at how many suggestions you can make. So that's one rule I do share with my students, and of which I remind myself constantly: when you practice, imagine that you have a very rational, practical musician listening to you. You will be amazed at how self-conscious you become, and how little time you waste.

Another test of how well you know your piece is if you can **remember** it. It is likely that all of us have better memories for music than we know. Certainly, none of us has to struggle to remember how *Happy Birthday* goes. Any music can become just as familiar with enough hearings and repetition, and knowing that you have the music in your head – even if you are using music in the concert – will go a long way toward instilling self-confidence and making you feel that you truly own the piece, that it is a part of you.

Finally, a real confidence-builder, if it's done early enough, is to **tape yourself** in a practice performance. These days I do it on my iPad or phone. I've gotten to know well enough how I sound that I won't be devastated if I hear myself just before a concert, so it's very helpful. If you get used to hearing yourself often, and teaching yourself by being critical and experimenting a lot, you can build an enormous amount of confidence.

Now we come to **approaching the concert** itself. There are as many ways to approach a concert as there are musicians. No one can tell you what is right for you, whether you should eat or fast, nap or exercise, meditate or play video games. Many musicians have ventured down the road of micro-managed control over their pre-concert routines. If you were the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz, you had to have not only your own piano flown in but also Dover sole to eat before, your hotel windows boarded up, and the concert had to be at 4pm. Otherwise, he felt he couldn't play.

As the comparatively normal and common musicians we all are, we are faced with myriad circumstances in our concerts. Pianists have to deal with whatever instrument is in the hall; cellists have to sit on a huge variety of chairs; wind players have to tolerate different altitudes, and we all are confronted by variable lighting, temperatures and acoustics. And the least

degree to which any of that affects our performance, all the better. The public doesn't know or care if you are hot or cold, whether you slept or not, whether you like the acoustics, or whether you had your Dover sole. All they want is what they paid for, which is for the works on the program played to the very best of your ability. I feel lucky that I was taught by my two most important teachers – my father and the great Russian cellist Rostropovich – that we need to learn to adapt if we are going to be happy, non-neurotic musicians, and if we hope to play well under any circumstances. So my advice is to be sensible with your pre-performance routines – switch them around, experiment, and don't become too dependent on any one element, like chocolates, naps, or even a quiet half hour before you go on stage. Literally anything can happen or go wrong, and it frequently does.

I think it makes sense to look into other fields to find proven pre-performance routines. Leaving aside the artistic aspect of playing, and concentrating on purely the physical, let's look at sports.

There are a few things that athletes do pretty much in common. One is to sleep well the night before an event, even some extra. Of course there are many athletic training rules that go back weeks and month before the event – you can try to live like that if you want. But at least the day before a concert, it's probably wise not to overdo it in any way, like eating, drinking, even exercising. The day of, the most common thing is to eat a carbohydrate meal 2 hours before – potatoes, spaghetti, etc. This will give you physical strength and endurance at the critical moment. The brain needs calories to burn in order to work correctly. And all athletes warm their muscles and stretch, usually in that order.

For me, an important aspect of visualizing the concert and feeling ready for it is knowing who my **audience** is. In this respect, I find little difference between playing the concert and going to a party. I either know most or all of the people in a party, or perhaps none of them, and I like taking stock of that before I arrive. How I greet people, how I present myself to them, all has to do with whether I know them, they know me, or we are total strangers. So when I'm playing a concert, for example, at Lincoln Center, I can walk on stage knowing that I'm a familiar performer, that people have likely heard me before, that I have met many of them, and I can enter the hall, the wings and finally with stage with a genuine feeling of "Hi, how are you, it's nice to see you again, how have you been?" On the other hand, on the 16th of last month, I walked on stage in Berlin for my first time as a recitalist, performing for an audience some of whom may have remembered me from my performances there with my quartet. (Even so – listeners tend not to recognize me in my other roles, and may say at most "you look familiar" after the concert.) So my greeting – naturally all done through body language and mental telepathy – was different, much more like "Hello, I'm David Finckel, thank you so much for coming to our concert, I'm thrilled to be playing here. I hope you enjoy it, and I look forward to meeting you afterwards, and now here's how I think these pieces should go."

This mental exercise may seem excessive, but I can promise you that doing it is easy, and, in my experience, steadies me and makes me feel more comfortable when I walk on stage or even as I approach the concert hall. The concert is largely a human interaction, after all, and we might as well engage in an appropriate, anticipatory mental dialogue with the people who have come to hear us.

The second question about an audience is: how much do they know about music in general, and about the music you are playing? And should this affect your performance?

Going back to the pianist Horowitz, he once told an interviewer that in his early days touring in America, he used to exaggerate his interpretations because the audiences didn't know the music. Think about that for a moment. Is that what we should be doing if we feel our audience doesn't know music? And what did he really mean by exaggerating his interpretation?

I could make a case for going about the opposite way: the more an audience already knows the piece, the more we have to intensify the interpretation to make it sound fresh. Think about that for a moment: a *subito forte* in a work of Beethoven therefore would have to be made more shocking now than it was before people knew it was coming.

I think you can see that this discussion is like a dog chasing its tail. He's never going to catch it. What we can be sure of is that we come to the stage as representatives of the composer. We need to get their messages across to the public. And for that, we need to rely on our human instincts that tell us whether people are listening to us and understanding what we are saying. We may emphasize something in the composer's message if we feel the need, but we have no right – and there is no long-term gain – to changing the content and meaning of what the composers have left us.

The idea that performers represent composers brings me to my next topic: **nervousness** and how to deal with it.

There are many different kinds of nervousness. Most of them can be dealt with but the methods are different.

The worst kind of nervousness comes from being unprepared to play, and that's totally justifiable. There's not much one can do about that except to hope – as is usually true – that the listeners tend not to pick up as much of what's going on as you think, and that it probably is not going to sound as bad as you think it is. In the end, you have a choice between looking genuinely miserable and terrified as you are, or faking it and looking happy and comfortable. And which is better? The second option, of course, even though it's unprincipled. And why? Because your first obligation is to the composer, your second is to your audience, and if you can satisfy both to some degree then you are doing your job, even if you are only pretending. With the alternative, no one benefits.

Another kind of nervousness is just the generic I-have-to-play-a-concert fear that likely grips all of us, to varying degree, from performance to performance. The first weapon against this nervousness is to fully expect it, like a visit the dentist that's been scheduled for months. You can even try to get yourself nervous the day before and maybe you'll use it all up. All I can say is that this kind of heightened state is so common, and is probably good for your performance in some way.

I can't say enough for the practice of mental preparation, of visualization of the entire concert. Don't feel silly, for example, if at home you get dressed up in your concert clothes, shine some

lights in your face, bow to no one, and play through your piece. Any prior familiarity with how it's going to actually feel can be very helpful.

It's not uncommon for athletes to visualize themselves performing well. This is not self-deception, or brain-washing, but simply using the brain's capacity to map out an experience and then execute it. Think of the way a cat will jump from the floor perfectly up on to a table. Or even that split second subliminal calculation we make as we throw a ball of paper into a trash can. There's no harm in mentally going straight through your performance, and having it sound as great as you want it.

I also recommend remembering a few simple facts when you approach the stage:

1. You are coming to represent the composer.
2. You are about to teach the audience the music.
3. The audience really wants you to do well and lose yourself in the music. They don't want you to be concerned about other things and would rather hear a few wrong notes than a whole performance that is constricted by fear.
4. You can look forward to this performance as a way of finding out what you have to work on for your next. How exciting and wonderful! We are never done improving our performances, and every one of them is simply another stepping stone in our musical lives.
5. No matter how much goes wrong – even if you stop playing, or commit the worst offense you could possibly imagine on stage – at the end of your performance, you and everyone else in the hall is still alive. Just imagine you were an airline pilot or a brain surgeon, and then feel very lucky to be a musician when you make a terrible mistake.

Now you are onstage, **presenting yourself to the public.**

First, I'm going to ask about clothes. These are kind of dumb but good questions:

First, what are you wearing? Are you wearing what people would like to see you wear? What do you think they want you to wear? If you're wearing something they don't expect will they like it anyway? What do you want to wear and does that even matter? Is there anything about your outfit that either distracts or enhances your performance?

Every one of you should ask and answer these questions for yourself. But since I'm giving this course, I'm going to tell you my own answers to these questions and you are free to take them or leave them.

I know that one very simple rule is true for me: I am more comfortable looking my best than I am looking my worst.

If how I look affects the way I feel, and how I feel affects how I sound, then I'd rather look better and feel better as a result.

What I'm getting to is a very simple linking of three realities: how you look, how you feel, and how you sound.

What I can say – and this sounds simplistic to the point of being laughable – is that if I look good, I feel good. And if I feel good, I sound good.

And it works just as well in reverse order: If I sound good, I feel good, and if I feel good, I look good (I first heard this very simple mantra from Pinchas Zukerman).

That's one point. The other point that I believe is true is that people come to concerts in order to upgrade their lives. They like to go to beautiful concert halls, to see beautiful lighting, hear great music, and leave their normal lives behind them for a few hours. I believe that's true, in some way, of almost every concert-goer, and so I believe that how the performers look can be part of that upgrade. So when I dress for a concert, I try to dress a level or two above what I think people in the audience will be wearing. I believe that after paying who-knows-how much to get in, or having dealt with public transportation or parking and rushing to a concert after a long day, they don't **want** me to look like them, or like someone they just saw on the subway. They want something better. And I can give them that if I take the care to do it, which doesn't, by the way, always mean wearing traditional concert attire. And I'll leave it there.

The next thing to think about as we leave the wings and **emerge onto the stage** is a very simple fact: that all eyes in the hall are on you, and that literally everything you do is observed, analyzed, and affects the way the public feels and reacts. This reality pins an enormous responsibility on the performer. You are in a theater production whether you like it or not.

It's true that what you do, the audience will do too. They can't help it. If you smile at them, they will smile back. If you scowl, they will scowl. If you stare at the ceiling, or a spot on the floor, they will look there too.

So we need to be conscious of that and respectful of it. How we behave on stage – especially when we are not playing – can truly hinder or help our performance by affecting the mind frame of our entire audience.

One easy way to know how to walk on stage is to think about the opening of the piece you are about to play. Is it speedy and exuberant? Dark and mysterious? Very slow or very soft? You see what I'm getting at: the spirit in which you approach your performance spot can, and I believe should be, in sync with the music you are about to play. Think of your whole approach to your performance spot like a giant upbeat – a good conductor will always give the upbeat in the character of the music to follow.

Next, you've arrived at your performance spot. You've given this large upbeat as you've entered the stage. Now what follows should be music. But sadly, this rarely happens, especially, for some reason, in chamber music.

The other day I saw a cellist come out to play a sonata and for some reason I started counting the things she did, after she was seated, to get ready to play. I think I started counting at about six items, which had consisted of carefully positioning, and then adjusting her music on the

stand; moving the stand; moving the chair; moving the chair again; something with her hair; making an ear on the first page; fooling with her skirt; tightening or loosening the bow; adjusting the chair again, and it went on and on like this until I thought she was maybe never going to play. I counted to 22. She could have played all three of Webern's Op. 11 cello pieces in the time it took her to get ready, and I won't even go into what the tuning routine was like.

So I guess you may realize that this doesn't make me happy as an audience member, and I have to assume that, like me, there just isn't anyone sitting there watching a show like this and really enjoying it or learning something from it.

There are two reasons I think it's bad to do avoidable non-musical things on stage. First, there's that interruption of flow from your entrance, where you have the audience in the palm of your hand, and are you really going to hold them there with tuning? No. So tune off stage – always – never tune on stage. The second reason it's bad to monkey around with your logistical concerns is that, as I said before, the audience is imitating you, and as they were about to throw themselves into an immersive musical experience, all of a sudden they will be fidgeting too, checking their mobile phones, fooling with their programs, or clothes, or whispering. And even if they don't, they are still seeing what should be your private concern that has absolutely nothing to do with the music. Believe me, if you are cellist and have to spend a minute looking for the right hole to put your pin in, your audience will be mighty worried the whole concert that your pin will slip out. So my advice is: spare your audience that distraction of your private concerns. If you have to move the chair, move the stand, fix your page, or even check your tuning, do it only once, and do it all as quickly and efficiently as possible.

During your performance, many things are very important.

Remember that the music alone will put the audience in a certain mood. It's important that visually you don't distract from that mood. They are watching you. So like an actor in the middle of a scene with other characters on stage, like a chamber music setting, it's important that when you are not playing you don't go out of character. If you do, you will likely take a good many listeners with you.

The interpretation of music is another whole year's worth of talks, but I'll just say here that it is important, when we perform, to be conscious of the fact that we are playing for a number of people, sometimes many of them – some far, some near, some up or down and off to the sides. A good orator will direct the voice- sometimes dividing sentences or ideas – to different areas of the room, so that all members of the audience feel included. Instrumentalists, as opposed to singers, may have less physical flexibility to do that, yet even your intention to share your message with the entire room can have a significant effect.

It's vitally important to reserve a portion of your hearing for your own sound. If you have practiced hard by yourself, you know how you'd like it to be. But everything sounds different in a hall, you may have other colleagues playing with you, and your mechanism for self-assessment, that was so active in the practice room, needs to be re-set for the hall.

Finally, if you are in a chamber situation or appearing as soloist with orchestra, you should appear to be reachable. Not staring at your music, or eyes closed all the time, or gazing off into remote, dark areas of the hall, however comforting that might be. Your colleagues, and your audience, needs to know that you are reachable, that you are truly there in front of them and not somewhere else.

Most importantly, you need to be feeling the music deeply, remembering why you love it, conjuring up all the imagery or memories you associate with it. The audience deserves that part of your performance, it's what makes your performance different, special, and worth hearing. Most of the music we play can be heard quite easily either in concert, online or via other media. But you and your relationship to any piece you play is unique – that's why classical music continues to thrive. Every performance, no matter how many times the work has been played before, is a new production, filled with possibilities for both performer and listener.

Usually, **after your performance is over**, it's easier to be more natural on stage. Most of us will wind up smiling, or at least looking relieved, because we simply are. The audience is clapping and that feels good. It's good to show that you like that, because the more you like it, the more they will clap. Bow graciously (the rule is: eyes go down first and everything follows in sequence.) Don't hurry. Bask in it. Keep it simple and dignified. Feel good, and you'll look good.

Backstage, thank the production people for a good show. They always get the short end of the stick – no one claps for them. They are your friends and you need them, so support them and be a colleague.

When people compliment your performance, look them in the eye and say thank you. It sounds simple but it works and not everybody does it.

And before much time goes by, perhaps within 24 hours of your performance, remember what went right and what did not. Remember what surprised you. If something didn't work, calculate a new approach for next time. Do your own, super-honest evaluation of your concert. If you do, it matters little what a review might say. You will be the owner of the most truthful, and useful review that will be written of your performance. And from there, you simply keep moving forward, eyeing those stepping stones, and looking forward to your next encounter with the same work, when you will bring to your performance everything you learned from the last, and all the growing you've done as an artist in the meantime.

© ArtistLed 2019

