

Perfection as a Barrier to True Music Making

Eric Berlin



In addition to my career as a performer and teacher, I serve in other capacities which sometimes demand that I speak publicly. At times these are rather high pressure situations. As with my playing, I spend an incredible amount of time and energy preparing for these occasions and am often fraught with anxiety leading up to the moment of truth. What I have observed, however, is that when it comes time to deliver, I am usually able to let go and feel very much like a conduit for something to speak through me. In these moments I feel like an observer listening to the words coming out, often in a surprisingly effective manner.

I was recently called upon to speak on camera about something that means a lot to me - music. I was asked what makes the greatest musical performances and I observed the following statement come out of my mouth:

"The purest connection of minds free from any obstruction."

My body was absolutely relaxed and confident in the way we hope to be as performers on our instruments. Somehow, I was able to let go and trust my knowledge and preparation to get the job done well and found myself in "the zone". From this "zone" I was able to put together a series of words which I had never uttered before, but yet expressed perfectly what I meant.

The interviewer commented on the effectiveness and ease of my delivery, and I was able to observe and understand what happens to me in these moments with clarity.

"If I tried to say it 'right', I could never do this."

This again was an insight I had never had before about my speaking, but it was the absolute truth. If I had written a script and thought through every word to deliver in precisely the right order, my priority would have been "getting it right" instead of communicating my message. With perfection as the focus, the connection between us would have become muddled at best and completely severed at worst. Letting go and trusting the knowledge you possess to speak through you can yield some remarkably effective communication.

Since these words came out of my mouth, I began to really reflect on what makes that "purest connection of minds free from any

obstruction" in a speech and try to relate it to musical performance. I began to look at some of the most powerful speeches in history. Here in the US, there have been incredible presidential acceptance speeches and inspiring words from political conventions in recent years. Thinking back in history, landmark speeches by JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. also come to mind. Each of these speeches has an element of improvisation and interaction with the crowd receiving the message. I took the opportunity to watch John F. Kennedy's 1963 speech in Berlin as a fine example of how to convey a powerful message. (I encourage you to do so as well. It can be found on YouTube.)

Notice that he is not glued to a pre-written speech, but only has a series of note cards



President John F. Kennedy delivering a speech.

to which he refers occasionally. Notice that his eyes connect with the people of West Berlin who eagerly consume each utterance. There is a conversation even though he is the only one speaking. There is also an element of improvisation as he interacts with the energy of the crowd. He owns the message he is delivering and is unfettered by the written page. It seems to me that the message is speaking through him.

Could he possibly have written down the exact words, seconds of pause between, which words to repeat etc and got the same response? I can't imagine it. Nobody trying to replicate that speech will ever do as well.

How does this relate to music?

The one thing that no computer or recording will ever replace is the live

performance. The experience of listening to a great orchestra, jazz combo or chamber music group perform is a singular one with no two performances ever the same. By the very nature of so many minds constantly reacting to a music director and each other, an orchestra must be removed from that single static idea of "perfection". Yes, we are all reading pages of notes, but any orchestra member will tell you that the majority of our attention is spent watching, listening and constantly adjusting how we play what we see on the page to fit within the ever evolving collective effort.

Reflecting on recent Boston Philharmonic Beethoven 9 concerts in Symphony Hall, I was able to realize the magnitude of the shared experience. When considering all of the minds involved in this conversation, we see the connections grow exponentially. We begin with deaf Beethoven creating music in his imagination with so much more clarity than he could ever hear in the "real world". This incredible picture of such vastness is deciphered from the graphic representation of the score left by the composer and processed through the mind of

the music director (in this case Benjamin Zander) and executed through further interpretation of 100 members of an orchestra, four soloists and a chorus. This message was then received by 2,800 audience members who fed the conversation with their own energy.

At a recent masterclass the great Håkan Hardenberger made one statement which stood out as the finest way I have ever heard to describe a great performance. He said: "We want to feel as if the music is being invented before our eyes."



Håkan Hardenberger delivering a lecture.

Perhaps now we can understand why HE is Håkan Hardenberger!

This conversation, when an audience is open to receive and the musicians are highly trained enough to execute the music and comfortable enough to let go and let the music speak through them, is what creates magic. This produces the same collective elation that draws an audience to its feet and to roar with cheers and applause in a concert hall as the citizens of Berlin reacted to the honesty and sincerity of JFK's message. The musical experience, however, is so much more powerful and visceral as there is no language to decode and nothing is lost in translation.

How does this relate to auditions?

As a result of this line of thinking I have re-examined my audition preparation process and returned to the words of my musical mentor and former Principal Trumpet of the Boston Symphony, Charles Schlueter. Charlie is a wealth of priceless concepts about music making and life. One of the principles he constantly drilled into his students was “never play it the same way twice”. This is key to communication through music.

I teach the concepts delivered by sports psychologist Dr. Bob Rotella in his books “Golf is not a Game of Perfect” and “Life is not a Game of Perfect”. I have always

benefited from his concepts as they applied to auditions and the physical act of playing the trumpet. Dr. Rotella's concepts of training your swing on the driving range and trusting it on the course resonate well with me as a trumpeter. Thinking of technique while trying to hit a golf ball or playing the trumpet yields less than optimal results.

A quote from one of his books: “Before playing any shot, a golfer must lock his eyes and mind onto the smallest possible target” has been a mantra for me over the years. My translation of this to music is to have the clearest aural picture of exactly what I wanted to sound like. Many of us work really hard to come up with that one perfect rendition of Petrouchka or Pines etc. Upon reflection, in this I believe that I have missed an important part of the golf-music correlation.

In golf, you never play the same shot more than once! Picturing a golf shot is a response to a unique set of circumstances at a single moment in time. This is the same with music!

So, yet again the wisdom of Charlie's teaching reveals itself to me in a new light. Practicing excerpts as most of us do is the equivalent of repeatedly reading a paragraph off the page exactly the same way. Instead of that, Charlie encouraged us to practice etudes and generally polish our ability to get the ideas in our head out

in a variety of ways and only peripherally approach the excerpts. This process not only prevents undue anxiety building up around these small chunks of music, but allows one to “own” the material (how to play the trumpet) and be more responsive in the moment. Be sure that your preparation allows you to be responsive to the unique circumstances of the moment. Feel the energy of the committee, the resonance of the room and who YOU are in that moment. Make it a conversation.

Among the many books about the psychology of sports and musical performance on my shelf, “Effortless Mastery” by Kenny Werner is one of the most powerful. The book and the accompanying meditations are a wonderful study on getting out of one's own way and tapping into the music that is flowing through all of us. I recommend this to every performer as an invaluable tool for achieving true and direct communication through music.

The goal for all of us is to use our printed page, chord changes and whatever else we use to serve only as note cards that allow us to channel what we already know and feel deep inside us. Get rid of the obstructions of needing to be “perfect” and allow yourself to communicate. Proper investment in practice and preparation helps you to own your message so that you can let go and invent the music before your audience's eyes. Eric Berlin