



Speaking About Your Music

The Big Picture

Throughout your career, you will be called upon to communicate the value of your work to audiences, collaborators, funders, and a host of other constituencies. Public speaking is a skill that can help you achieve a wide variety of goals, including building strong working relationships with other musicians, raising money for a project, enhancing visibility for your music or ensemble, and creating understanding, among others. We often think of public speaking in narrow terms: standing in front of a large audience, delivering a speech or presentation. But public speaking, at its core, is about effective communication. It's about delivering your message clearly, engaging your listener, and in many cases, making a compelling call to action. This skill can serve you in so many musical contexts—rehearsals, one-on-one meetings, auditions, interviews, pre-concert talks, post-concert receptions, lessons, and more.

For many musicians, the appeal of performing in public is the ability to communicate complex emotions and ideas without the use of words. But just as you pay close attention to musical dynamics, phrasings, and gestures—so too can you treat language, with its many nuances and colors. Like musical interpretation, effective communication is a highly subjective and personal matter. What engages one listener might bore another. A technique that works for one speaker might feel strained to another. With this in mind, we have outlined a set of ideas and techniques in this handout to help jumpstart your thinking (and speaking). Ultimately, you will need to find an approach that fits your personality and strengths as well as your audience.

What's the Goal?

In order to effectively deliver your message, you must first get clear on your goals, or what you hope to achieve with your presentation. Do you want to convince someone of your perspective? Do you want to introduce someone to a new subject or idea? Do you want to raise money? Do you want to sell something? Do you want to build advocacy? Do you want to forge a new working relationship? The goal of your presentation should inform the style, technique and structure you employ. Getting clear on the goal of your presentation will also help focus your message. When preparing for a presentation or important conversation, it's helpful to decide what you want your listener to take away and then craft a speech that delivers those points clearly and memorably. This backward design strategy can help to organize your thoughts and ensure that all of the information you share supports your main message(s).

Techniques

There are many techniques and approaches that can be used to deliver an effective and engaging presentation. Depending on the content and context of your presentation, some of the concepts listed below may be more or less relevant.

- *Your Voice.* We have all suffered through presentations delivered by monotone speakers. Using the full range and color of your voice can help bring your presentation to life. Think about playing with volume, color, notes, intonation and emphasis to underscore important points and keep the energy in your presentation high.

- *Use of Notes.* Consider whether the use of notes will enhance or detract from the quality of your presentation. Having note cards can help you stay organized and on point. Having note cards can also make it hard to deliver your presentation with passion and spontaneity. Even if you decide that note cards are a must, push yourself to deliver the speech without notes at least once—you might come upon interesting moments or phrases that you'll want to repeat when you're working from notes.
- *Use of Technology or Media.* Depending on the content and length of your presentation, you may want to consider using technology or media to enhance your message or demonstrate a point. For example, if you are speaking about a piece of music, playing a short excerpt or recording can help orient your listeners. If you are delivering a long presentation, packed with a lot of information, you may want to create a power point presentation to help your audience track the information visually. Use of technology or media should be tied to your goals, not simply for style.
- *Use of Handouts.* Depending on the topic or context of your presentation, it may make sense to provide a handout for listeners to follow. There are many different kinds of learners and listeners—some do best with oral presentations, others visual, still others written. If you are trying to transmit a lot of detail or complex concepts—more than a person could be expected to remember at first listen—it might make sense to prepare a handout that outlines the content you are delivering. You can a handout to help your listeners follow along, or after, to give them a document they can refer to later.
- *Body Language.* Giving a speech can be very nerve-wracking. If you aren't mindful of your body language, the way you carry yourself, walk, or use your hands can convey just how nervous you're really feeling. Nerves can become embodied in all sorts of ways: staring at feet or over heads, fidgeting, slouching, pacing, flipping hair, etc. Everyone has a nervous tick or two – the trick is to be aware of your body language and make sure that those nervous ticks don't distract your listener. The best way to step out of your own body and see what your listener sees is to record yourself as you deliver your pitch. It can be excruciating to watch yourself speak in a video, but it is also incredibly eye opening. Beyond taming nerves, you can be proactive and creative with your body language. You can incorporate physical cues that will help underscore or demonstrate a point. You can fill the space that's given to you by walking around, or changing your location for different parts of the presentation. Making direct eye contact with different members of your audience can help keep them engaged and make them feel that their presence is appreciated. When you rehearse a speech, don't only practice delivering the words, practice delivering it with your *whole body*.
- *Dress.* Your presentation begins the moment you enter a room and the way you are dressed can give social cues and set the tone of your presentation. For example, if you're wearing a suit, that might communicate a certain formality, which depending on the circumstance could be desirable. Your audience will be looking *at you*, and your dress can be a source of distraction or a point of interest. Give some attention to this element and decide what message you want to broadcast to your audience (casual, formal, professional, student, adventurous, quirky, earthy, etc.)
- *Repetition.* Repeating a phrase or an idea can be an effective way of driving a point home. Sometimes repeating a word or phrase in succession can build tension or add weight. Repeating an idea or phrase at the end of a presentation can be a nice way to close the loop and end your remarks. Think about how you can use repetition to highlight, reinforce or add a dramatic touch to your words.
- *Memorable Phrases.* Much like repetition, coining a memorable phrase and using it as an anchor for your presentation can help you leave a lasting impression. All the best speech writers use this tactic—think for example about President Obama's 2008 campaign slogan, "Yes We Can." These phrases can last well beyond the scope of a speech and come to represent a person, idea or cause.

- *Use of Silence.* Umm...like...you know. These pesky words pop up in our speech more than we'd like to admit. They fill the silence between thoughts and give us a few desperately needed seconds to regroup and launch into the next idea. As a musician, you shouldn't be afraid of silence; you understand how silence can be effectively used to communicate an idea or to build tension. You encounter silence in music all of the time, but somehow, when it comes to speaking in public, silence becomes something to fear. Everyone uses filler words from time to time. But, if you use these words excessively it can start to distract your listeners and undermine their confidence in your message. So again, record yourself! Evaluate how often you are using these words and experiment with the use of silence – maybe pausing for a few seconds will give your pitch a nice arc.
- *Humor.* People like to laugh. People are drawn to people who make them laugh. Use of humor can be a powerful way to build rapport with your audience. You don't have to do a stand-up routine, but think about ways that you might be able to lighten the mood and draw your audience in. Try being a little self-deprecating, make a humorous observation about something people in the room all know about, you can even tell a joke. If getting laughs is not your thing, that's okay too. But if you do enjoy making people laugh, and you're good at it, use this to your advantage!
- *Knowing Your Audience.* Building rapport with your audience is an important step in creating understanding, advocacy, or a new relationship. One way you can accomplish this is by getting to know who is in your audience. If you can, do a little research about who you'll be talking to. If you can draw someone in your audience out with a specific detail about their life or experience, it will show that you are engaged and interested in the people you are addressing. If the group is small enough, and there is time, consider actually getting to know your audience during the presentation by doing a quick go around or a show-of-hands activity.
- *Audience Participation.* If the setting and context permits, think about creating moments for your audience to interact with you and one another. This can be achieved through movement, an activity, small break-out groups, inviting volunteers to demonstrate concepts, etc. This type of active participation can go a long way in keeping your listeners engaged. Know too that it might not always work. Depending on the level of flexibility, openness and rapport that the group you are working with has, these moments of interactivity can be more or less effective.
- *Storytelling.* Some people find that beginning a presentation with an interesting story can be an effective way of introducing your subject and building rapport with your audience. If you decide to open with a story, you will want to make sure that the details of the story actually support your core message. You will also want to be careful that the story itself doesn't become the subject of the presentation—keeping it short and transitioning smoothly to the body of your presentation are key!
- *Structure.* As we have outlined above, there are many different techniques and approaches you can use to structure any kind of public presentation. If you are new to public speaking, or if you need to give a formal verbal presentation, you can use this basic structure as a jumping off point:
 - Introduction – introduce yourself and the occasion of your presentation
 - Announce Subject(s) – explain what the content of your speech will be
 - Explain Subject(s) – explain the concepts or ideas that you have announced
 - Recapitulation – provide a brief summary of the points you have covered
 - Conclusion – wrap up the presentation with a call to action, next steps, or a simple thank you

This is a very logical progression and one that will help your listener easily follow the flow of your presentation.

- *Timing.* It is rare for people to complain that a presentation or speech was too short. Keep this principle in mind when you are preparing a presentation and think critically about what information is

necessary and impactful. If you are working with a strict time limit, make sure to time yourself giving the speech several times (and record!) to ensure that you are within your limit.

Specific Pointers for Pre-Concert or Performance Related Presentations

Below are a few concepts and prompts to jumpstart your thinking about speaking within the context of a performance, whether it is educational, formal or informal, small or large. As with all public speaking, there is no formula, no one approach that will work in every situation. Delivering a sense of your passion for the music you are performing, giving the audience a window into your creative process, or just offering a personal anecdote can do a lot to draw your audience in and make the performance more meaningful for everyone involved.

- Describe why you love playing a piece (in terms that anyone can understand). Describe something you find fascinating/compelling/engaging in the music.
- Describe the first time you heard/played this piece, or the circumstances under which you composed it. Give a personal framing to the music they are about to hear.
- Illuminate some interesting musical aspects, again in terms any audience member can understand. *No inside baseball*—avoid overly technical terms or concepts. Instead do your best to describe and provide live examples of what they will hear during the course of the piece.
- Explain programmatic issues or non-musical inspiration for the work.
- Put the work in context: describe the historical/social events of the period in which the piece was composed or relate the work to other art of the period. If you go this route, try to find the right balance of detail, and employ storytelling when possible.
- Speak about the composer and your connection to his/her work.

Additional Resources

Public speaking is a complex skill that requires a great deal of practice and experimentation. We encourage you to utilize some of the following resources to continue your exploration:

- www.Toastmasters.org - Toastmasters is an organization that offers free practice and instruction in public speaking. Toastmasters has clubs around the country and if there isn't currently one where you are living, you can start one!
- www.YouTube.com – search the name of a favorite politician, actor or public figure, plus the word “speeches” and try to figure out what makes their speeches so unforgettable.
- www.ted.com – a wealth of riveting talks from artists, scientists, business leaders, and technology mavens.
- www.Americanrhetoric.com: American Rhetoric is a growing database of 5000+ full text, audio and video versions of public speeches, sermons, legal proceedings, lectures, debates, interviews, and other recorded media events.