

Communication in musical performance

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Introduction

Communication is a much-cited criterion for formal assessment and informal judgments of performers and performances. All examination boards have clear criteria to work from, and communication forms part of them. For example, the ABRSM distinction category for performance requires ‘vivid communication of character and style’, while a mark below a pass suggests ‘insufficient musical involvement’.

For the ARSM diploma, the overall performance mark (20%) has three categories, of which one is communication. For Trinity graded exams, there are three main categories for assessing pieces, and ‘Communication and Interpretation’ is one of them. To achieve the highest marks would mean ‘highly effective communication and interpretation’.

In this resource, we’re going to dig a little deeper into the notion of communication in music performance. Every audience member and performer – whether in a school concert, an examination, or a professional recital – understands the thrill of those magical moments where you can *feel* the atmosphere and relationships between performer and audience, between performer and their instrument/voice, or between performer and performer on stage (hopefully sometimes all three aspects!). However, relatively little research has been conducted into the ways in which communication skills can be, and are being, taught. In this resource, I’ll explore the definition of communication in music performance, and the way in which communication skills can be taught at all levels and applied in contexts such as ensemble performances and rehearsals, instrumental and vocal lessons, exam preparation, and informal and more formal music performances.

Defining communication

As a teacher and performer, I became curious about the definition of communication in a musical context; the way in which it could be interpreted by students, teachers and performers; and the contexts in which it could be taught. What impact does the communicative skill of a player have on their success in performance, or on their relationship with an audience? It’s clear from the examples at the start of this resource that communicative skills are an important factor in examination assessment. Although some students may be more natural performers and communicators, there are many ways in which teachers can use pedagogical techniques to ensure effective communication more widely.

The word ‘communication’ comes from the Latin *communicare*, meaning ‘to share’, and it’s defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings’. The idea of *sharing* one’s music making is a helpful one to convey to students before a concert, competition or exam. It immediately promotes the relationship between performer and audience, and has the advantage of (hopefully) making the performance feel less daunting and more communal than it might otherwise seem.

Furthermore, it’s widely agreed that the act of communication requires the involvement of more than simply the performer. Performing simply to ourselves somewhat misses the point: indeed, musician and educator Christopher Small coined the verb ‘musicking’ to include all the people involved in a music performance, encompassing the performer, the audience and the people enabling the event.

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What to communicate and how

What are we trying to communicate through our music? When it comes to interpreting a score for an audience, we may wish to communicate a myriad of aspects – among them:

- ▶ the composer's intentions as noted in the score.
- ▶ our own feelings about the emotion/story behind the music.
- ▶ the context, both biographical and historical, in which the piece was written.
- ▶ the musical structure.

There are undoubtedly other aspects, but with just these four, we already have a wide starting point.

Turning to look more deeply at the tangible elements that make up successful communication of music, there are many to be considered:

- ▶ Technical skill and physical freedom/connection to the instrument.
- ▶ Faithfulness to the score.
- ▶ A basic music analysis ability.
- ▶ A knowledge of different musical styles and performance traditions.

These four elements alone form a fundamental basis from which to explore the perhaps more intangible elements of communication.

Start with the score

Technical skill and physical freedom at the instrument/with the voice will allow students to fully commit to communicating the music. In addition, body language can contribute to the expression of musical gestures (we'll return to body language below).

However, I would consider the starting point for successful communication of a work to be the score itself. The score forms our biggest clue to the intentions of the composer for the piece. Until we understand what the markings mean, we're not able to fully communicate them. Several times, I've taught students who do not know what the expressive markings, often written in another language in the score, mean, despite having worked on a piece for several weeks. This knowledge should be fundamental as a student starts to explore an interpretation of a piece.

Curiosity about the composer's intentions needs to be nourished. With this in mind, students should always be encouraged to examine a piece away from their instrument/voice. Younger students may enjoy thinking about this as taking on the role of 'musical detective'. What can we learn about a piece before we play it? Here are some of the features you can encourage your younger students to look for:

- ▶ Dynamic markings
- ▶ Expressive markings
- ▶ Phrasing
- ▶ Articulation
- ▶ Any repeated passages
- ▶ Highest and lowest notes

Incidentally, this approach to learning a piece of music also contributes to improved sightreading. Being able to analyse patterns or harmonic structures before putting our hands to an instrument generally leads to a quicker reading ability once we start to play. The same goes for familiarity with the accompanying parts. In addition, the musical aspects listed below are also those that students are often encouraged to recognise during the aural test section of examinations.

More advanced students can go further and build on those features, also exploring:

- ▶ The harmonic structure
- ▶ More complex expressive markings
- ▶ The musical structure (e.g. sonata form, ABA) and how the composer has responded to that structure. For example, is there anything unexpected?
- ▶ Musical patterns, such as sequences or repeated phrases. What different meanings might these phrases have, depending on their position within the work?

It's very easy to miss the features of a piece we're learning when we're focused on the notes. Building in this detective work from the beginning (and away from the instrument) will potentially speed up the learning process, as well as encouraging an awareness of the composer's intentions. An ability to analyse the musical structure of a work you're playing is crucial if you want to be able to communicate to the audience the musical journey of your piece. Similarly, an awareness of harmonic structure enables a player to emphasise those moments in which the musical tension is heightened and released. An understanding of the historical context of the work is also important – as a rule, a diminished 7th is more dramatic/dissonant in a work of the Classical era than it might be in a 21st-century work, for example.

Communicating emotion

Many would consider emotion to be the heart of communication of music from player to audience. This involves, perhaps, the feeling that something shifts from how one feels at the beginning of the performance to how one feels at the end.

There are several approaches to accessing the emotional heart of a work. For a younger student, simply the title of a piece often suggests a communicable emotion or story. For more advanced players, understanding the biographical and historical context might help to make sense of a piece of music. If a student knows the biographical story of the composer, perhaps they can feel this reflected in the music they're playing. If we encourage students to communicate their own feelings about the music, the results may change from week to week, or month to month. I always like to challenge my students to play their pieces in several different ways, in order to explore different types of communication and interpretation of the music.

There's a fascinating balance, then, for performers in conveying the structure and markings of a piece, trying to recreate the composer's intentions, and interpreting a work according to their own feelings about it. Music is a key that can unlock creative expression, and encouraging children (and adults) to explore their emotional reactions to a work, or to create their own story about a piece, allows this potential to be fulfilled.

Improvisation and ensemble playing

So far, we've discussed what we might communicate in our music making, considering the composer's intentions as drawn from the score; the context of the works, both biographical and historical; and our emotional responses to the music. Generally, as we create our interpretations with our students, we probably end up with a mixture of all these things, but to break them down makes for an interesting and informed approach. We'll now explore further ways in which we might incorporate communication into our teaching.

Starting improvisation from early on in a students' musical journey encourages them to engage their creativity and focus on communicating their own musical voice. Setting simple parameters, such as three notes to play around with while the teacher provides an accompaniment, is a good starting point. Could they play these three notes in a happy way, or a sad way? Can they vary the articulation to correspond to the mood or story they wish to create?

Playing with other musicians is also a wonderful method of developing communicative gestures and feeling. Ensemble playing can improve an understanding of body language, breath and pulse, among many other things. This can be done with other students, or with the teacher, and it doesn't always need to be done at the instrument. Learning to clap together or maintain a rhythm while listening to someone else tap a different rhythm is a useful ensemble exercise, for example.

Many private instrumental teachers and schools hold concerts, to give students an opportunity to share their music making. Perhaps there are also more informal contexts in which students can play for one another, or where adults can be invited to watch at the end of a lesson.

Body language

We'll now move on to explore body language in more depth. Many writers agree regarding the impact of body language as a communicative tool (see the further reading suggestions at the end of this resource). Although it's important that body language always feels natural and authentic, there are ways in which we can encourage effective communication of musical ideas through examining the ways in which a player's body language supports those ideas.

For example, let's think about a piece that ends with a long, quiet note or chord. If the player's hands are whipped away at the end of this note it produces a very different communicative effect from holding oneself still for a moment to allow the atmosphere to remain for longer in the room. This is something we can teach from very early on – the way in which a player approaches the first note of a phrase, or shows the ending of a phrase, in their body language can impact the musical intent.

Different communicative styles suit certain musicians, particular musical works, and various performance environments and audiences, and there are many different ways to communicate music successfully in performance. Some students will be more confident in expressing themselves physically and emotionally in their playing, while others may be shyer. Communicating successfully is not about being extrovert, but instead about connecting the aspects we've discussed so far, to create a complete performance, and one that corresponds with your musical intentions. This is something worth making time for during lessons and practice.

One technique to help those students who feel less confident is to ask them to try to exaggerate everything they are doing. If something is marked *forte*, push your student to try it ten per cent or even 20 per cent louder than they're doing. The things they're doing well can also be highlighted – they may play beautifully when playing quietly and be able to draw the audience in, but now they can expand their range of sound to progress even further.

The listener's role

So far, a great deal of this resource's emphasis has been on the role of the performer to communicate with the listener. But what of the listener's role in this relationship? We've established that the audience plays a vital role in the act of performance – whether they're examiners, parents, fellow students and so on. Therefore, in order to communicate their own music better, it's important that we teach our students to be good listeners. To this end, it's helpful to create opportunities for your students to listen to other people perform. They can also consider what they've enjoyed about a performance, and why. For students who have less access to live performance, share favourite performances from YouTube with them. It's important to guide any online viewing, however: there are very many performances available of very varying quality.

From the moment a performer walks onto a stage, they create a relationship with the audience. Research has shown that listeners' opinions about the musical quality of a performance can be influenced by a performer's physical appearance. Perhaps the feeling that the performer has made an effort to wear something they wouldn't normally wear in everyday life immediately communicates the value they place on the occasion. Children at my daughter's school were recently encouraged to return for the evening concert wearing their smartest ironed uniform, and having brushed their hair, for example. It's a small thing, perhaps, but they took pride in this, and it set the scene for the performance being treated as a special occasion.

From her experience of performing in different contexts, pianist Susan Tomes reflected on the quality of relationship between performer and audience, and the way in which this can open new channels of communication, and of reception of the music (see further reading below). Learning how to talk verbally to an audience is an important skill, even if it's not always employed in every event. Even from a young age, however, students can learn to bow when the audience applauds, as an acknowledgement. Building on our discussion of body language, they can also learn to wait for a moment before they begin a piece, and to hold themselves in the atmosphere of a piece at the end of the performance.

In addition, most students will perform with an accompanist, and they can be taught how to manage this communication successfully. Leading with breath or gesture, acknowledging the accompanist at the end of the performance, and communicating during rehearsals are all important skills to develop. As an accompanist myself, the most relaxing rehearsals are those where an instrumentalist or singer can tell me if the speed is not quite right, or the moments where they'd like to take more time. This takes confidence and encouragement, but it also leads to a much more successful relationship and musical outcome.

Conclusion

It's ambitious to attempt to pinpoint exactly why some musicians appear to communicate more successfully, and on a deeper level, with an audience than others, and that's perhaps partly what makes the experience magical. Nevertheless, there are practical ways of teaching and learning communication skills. This resource is really just a starting point, and teachers will almost certainly have many of their own ideas to add. Technology, for example, is one aspect of communication that's changed the way in which music is consumed immeasurably, and continues to do so. However, whether working with beginner or advanced students, as soloists or in a group setting, the incorporation of communication skills into teaching practice contributes to a holistic music education and the development of well-rounded musicians – things for which we all strive.

Further reading

These books and articles offer suggestions for further reading into some of the communication skills we've explored in this article:

- ▶ Alessandro Antonietti, Daniela Cocomazzi and Paolo Iannello: 'Looking at the Audience Improves Music Appreciation', *Journal of Nonverbal Behaviour* (2009)
- ▶ Mary Broughton and Catherine Joanna Stevens: 'Music, movement and marimba: an investigation of the role of movement and gesture in communicating musical expression to an audience', *Psychology of Music* (2009)
- ▶ Sergio Canazza, Gioanni De Poli and Alvisé Vidolin, 'An Abstract Control Space for Communication of Sensory Expressive Intentions in Music Performance', *Journal of New Music Research* (2003)
- ▶ Eric F Clarke: 'Expression and communication in musical performance' in *Music, Language, Speech and Brain* (1991)
- ▶ Sofia Dahl and Anders Friberg: 'Visual Perception of Expressiveness in Musicians' Body Movements' in *Music Perception* (2007)
- ▶ Alf Gabrielsson and Patrik N Juslin: 'Emotional Expression in Music Performance: Between the Performer's Intention and the Listener's Experience', *Psychology of Music* (1996)
- ▶ Michele L Henry and Laurel E Zeiss: 'Musicians as Authors: Teaching the Art of Writing Programme Notes', *College Music Symposium* (2004)
- ▶ PN Johnson-Laird: 'Introduction: What is Communication?' in *Ways of Communicating* (1990)
- ▶ Patrik N Juslin: 'From mimesis to catharsis: expression, perception, and induction of emotion in music', *Musical Communication* (2005)
- ▶ Patrik N Juslin and Renee Timmers: 'Expression and Communication of Emotion in Musical Performance' in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (2010)
- ▶ Roger A Kendall and Edward C Caeterette: 'The Communication of Musical Expression', *Music Perception* (1990)
- ▶ Elaine King: 'Supporting Gestures: Breathing in Piano Performance' in *Music and Gesture* (2006)
- ▶ Andreas C Lehmann, John A Sloboda and Robert H Woody: *Psychology for Musicians: Understanding and Acquiring the Skills* (2007)
- ▶ Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald and DJ Hargreaves: *Musical Communication* (2005)
- ▶ Paul Roberts: 'Creating and Communicating: a rationale for piano studies in the conservatoire' in *The Reflective Conservatoire: Studies in Music Education* (2005)
- ▶ Anthony Rooley: *Performance: Revealing the Orpheus Within* (1990)
- ▶ Christopher Small: *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998)
- ▶ Susan Tomes: *Beyond the Notes: Journeys with Chamber Music* (2004)
- ▶ Bradley W Vines et al: 'Cross-modal interactions in the perception of musical performance' in *Cognition* (2006)