

# THE ART OF PERFORMANCE DEVELOPING A COMMANDING STAGE PRESENCE

by Sara Blake

This chapter consists of excerpts from an article of the same name appearing in *American Recorder*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3 (May 1998). The author is a trained dancer living in Toronto.

In addition to dancing classical ballet and Baroque dance, she plays recorder and viol.

The Art of Performing is taught in dance and theatre schools but is rarely a part of music instruction. Often a musician's stage presence detracts from the music rather than enhancing it. Good stage presence is a skill that can be learned by anyone, even by musicians. No one is too old to learn a few new tricks.

## **The eyes have it**

The most important feature of stage presence is the behavior of the performer's eyes. Eyes that are dull and lifeless look boring to the audience. Eyes that sparkle appear interesting and thus engage the viewer. Some musicians, when playing from memory, have unfocused eyes, believing it to express intense emotion or concentration; others do it to avoid being distracted by anything that might catch their eye. However, this is the cause of the boring, dull look we have often seen. Remember, it is not what you feel inside that matters so much as what you can convey to the audience. And, to convey any message to the audience, your eyes must be in focus at all times. This is simply a matter of always seeing what you are looking at.

Many amateur musicians do not have time to memorize music well enough to be able to perform confidently without reliance on the printed page. Also, stage nerves may obliterate memory, resulting in a disastrous performance. Some music, such as the fantasia, is never performed from memory. The presence of printed music may be essential to a successful performance. It is possible to put on a good show with printed music before you.

It is not the purpose of music stands to hide the performers from the audience's view. Position them so that the audience can see your faces and instruments. All stands should be uniformly arranged and of the same style. If you cannot see well enough to read music three feet away, you should obtain music-reading glasses.

## **Look at your musical partners.**

Your performance is supposed to be a group experience. Sadly, some amateur groups look like they were brought together grudgingly and are no longer on speaking terms. They fix their eyes rigidly on their music, never looking at each other. If you want the audience to enjoy your concert, you must appear to be having fun together, even if you are not.

Consort teachers instruct their students to look at one another for cues at cadences and at the start of a new section. However, in practice, these actions often resemble furtive sideways glances rather than conversational exchanges or knowing looks. When looking at your partners in music, turn your head to face them. If you turn only your eyes while keeping your face directed at your music, you will look like you are sneaking a peak. Try to memorize the beginnings and ends of sections so that you can look freely at your fellow musicians. When reading music, try to learn to take in a short phrase of music at a glance, so as to be able to divert your eyes for the duration of the phrase.

Consort music at its best is a form of communication. Musical ideas are exchanged. The consort divides into duets and trios for more intimate conversation but then comes together for the finale.

Your body language can emphasize this “conversation.” Your eyes, especially, should participate in the musical exchange and be engaged by your colleagues’ eyes. When two of you play a passage together, try to look at one another. With eye contact, you will alert the audience to the fact that you are doing something together. This is a helpful clue for the musically less-sophisticated members of your audience.

### **Keeping time**

In a rock band, stomping feet and bopping heads may be appropriate but these effects may spoil a Renaissance fantasia. Gentle movement, which, together with the eyes, assists in communicating the music, is good performance practice.

### **You are always performing**

Suppose your program includes a duet by two of your colleagues. The role of the on-stage bystander is to focus the audience’s attention on the performers. Non-performing musicians often regard this as an opportunity to scratch that itch, adjust their clothing, take a sip of water, fiddle with their instrument, or study their next piece. If you do any of these things, most of the audience will watch *you* instead of the performers. Your conduct is not appropriate in a supporting member of the cast because it is distracting.

The most effective way to focus audience attention on the performers is simply to watch them. This means focusing your eyes, ears, and mind on the performance. Sit comfortably and observe them with interest, as if you were an attentive member of the audience. If your colleagues play a toe-tapping tune, you may noiselessly wiggle your foot or nod your head in time with the music but not so obtrusively as to draw the audience’s attention away from the performers. When the duet ends, smile at the performers, even if they made a mess of it. Most of the audience will not have noticed the mistakes and will assume that, if you are smiling, your colleagues must have played well.

Remember that the performance is not over until it's over. So long as you are on stage, you are performing, even when you are not playing music.

### **Speech is communication, too**

We musicians often remark that music is a form of communication. However, an hour on stage before an audience without saying a word is neither natural nor sociable. Natural communication includes speech. Tell your audience about the music and the instruments you are playing. Talk about the composer, but do not give a life history, just a few interesting tidbits. Talk about the music. If it is dance music, you might demonstrate the basic dance step if you can. Or describe the social context in which the music was typically played in its day. However, the audience has come to hear a concert, not a lecture. A few sentences before each sonata or set of pieces will do. If, with a few words, you can help your audience to appreciate the music, they will enjoy it all the more.

### **Look at your audience**

In an effort to control nervousness, some amateur performers pretend that the audience isn't really there, but an ignored audience is an insulted or unappreciated audience. Music is a form of communication and effective communication requires eye contact. Make eye contact with one audience member and then another. That way, you communicate on an individual level with each audience member. If your audience fills two or more rows of seats, look often to the back row. By looking as far as the back row, you enable every member of the audience to see the liveliness and enthusiasm in your eyes. If you focus for too long on the front row, your eyes will look dull to those at the back.

### **The grand entrance**

Imagine this scene: a child meekly enters the room with eyes cast down and mumbles, "I broke it." This is how some amateur musicians look like when they come on stage, with eyes cast down, apologizing for being there. Your audience has taken the trouble to come to your recital. Show them that you are glad to see them! Your face should say, "I'm so glad you've come! I know you will enjoy our concert." Then take a bow before taking your seats and letting the concert begin.

### **Taking a bow**

While the final chord still resounds, some amateur musicians jump up, make a perfunctory bow, and then run from the audience as if in terror. Instead, linger a little longer to permit the audience to show its appreciation. After the final note has died, smile at your colleagues, and then stand up, not too hastily or wearily, but naturally. Face the audience with your biggest smile, gaze for a moment at two or three persons in the audience, and then bow. If the applause continues, repeat. Listen to whether the applause is merely polite or truly

enthusiastic to determine how long you should acknowledge it. Then exit, walking normally.

Your bow should be both gracious and graceful, a demonstration of your appreciation of their applause. Here's how to bow: stand comfortably, weight evenly balanced on two feet or on one foot with the other foot relaxed and placed slightly forward. Keeping your back fairly straight, bend forward to an angle of 5-30 degrees from vertical. While bowing, very slightly tilt your head to one side and lift it so that the audience can still see your face while you bow. Do not be stiff. Practice your bow before a mirror until it looks and feels natural and graceful. And smile your most brilliant smile and let your eyes sparkle.

### **Smile**

Smiles are *obligato* every time you take a bow and an expected ornament at the end of every piece. Many people think they are smiling when, actually, they have only parted their lips. Smile so wide that the audience members in the back row can see your gleaming top teeth. Even though you do not feel a smile inside, if you show a bright smile on the outside, the audience will believe that your expression is genuine.

At the conclusion of your performance, you may feel too exhausted to smile. Save the washed-out look until you are safely backstage and out of sight. Put one last burst of energy into a great big smile as you take your bow.

We know that all those black notes are scary and require intense concentration. While practicing a difficult passage, look at a mirror and observe your facial expression, even if this causes you to stumble over the notes. Deep furrows on your brow? Are you gritting your teeth? If you relax the unnecessary tension, you will be surprised to discover how much more easily the notes play. If you relax, your audience will relax with you and will marvel at how easily you toss off difficult music. When a performer is tense, the audience cannot enjoy the music because they are worried that the performer may not survive the performance.

### **Attire**

Any outfit, from period costume to the latest fashion, is acceptable provided it is special. Never perform in your everyday clothing, since "dressing down" looks common and unprofessional. Instead, dress so that you are a pleasure to watch or interesting to observe in a style that ornaments your music. Look professional, even if you are not!

Under bright stage lights, some fabrics may be see-through. An unlined skirt requires a slip underneath and a thin shirt requires an undershirt. If your stage places you above your audience, a short skirt is not advisable. Choose clothing that will stay in place for the duration of the performance. When you adjust your clothing on stage, the audience will watch you. If perspiration is a

problem, wear colors that disguise tell-tale wet spots. An unattractive physical appearance unsettles the audience. So, look your best and your music will sound even better.

### **Practice makes perfect**

Rehearse your stage behavior. Write notes in your music about where to look and what to do. Your on-stage behavior is as important as the music itself and deserves as much rehearsal. Practice in front of a mirror and then before your friends and family. Performing for those with whom you are comfortable will eventually make you more relaxed and confident before strangers.

### **Be confident**

On stage, beam with confidence. Whether you feel confident is irrelevant. All that matters is what you communicate to your listeners. If you unwittingly reveal emotions that do not enhance the music, your audience may feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps you think that any attempt to follow the suggestions in this article will feel “fake.” You want to be yourself, to be natural. Well, you can be yourself, but on stage, you must be your best self, the part of you that is friendly, smiling, relaxed, and happy. Hide the miserable, nervous, tense part from the audience. After all, you play music because of the pleasure it gives you. Then show it!