

How to Sell It: Techniques for Elevated Stage Presence and Audience Engagement

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I. Introduction

Most would agree that in concert music, the performer's primary focus should be on sound, but it is no secret that other senses play a significant role in the audience experience. This has only become more apparent in recent history, as many modern popular music performances create unmatched multisensory productions involving dancing, lights, electronics, and audience interaction. While the spectacle of a Super Bowl halftime show cannot be reproduced on the concert stage, performers may still create effective multisensory experiences through physical subtleties and attention to detail. One's effort to improve even small elements of a performance can significantly impact how an audience perceives the performance. The following outlines visual and physical elements to consider within a performance of concert music, along with suggestions for pedagogical implementation of these ideas.

II. Before the Performance

1. Concert Space

- a. What does the stage setup look like?
 - i. Are the instruments, chairs, music stands, etc., centered or otherwise logically arranged so that sound projects properly to the audience and they can clearly see the performance without obstruction?
- b. Is the stage organized?
 - i. Excess chairs and stands kept out of audience sight.
 - ii. For large instruments or setups that must stay on stage:
 1. Set up other pieces so that excess equipment does not draw away attention.
 2. Store off to the side in an organized, professional way.
- c. What type of lighting will be used?
 - i. The best lighting draws attention to only what is necessary. This may change for different pieces or between solo and ensemble works.
 - ii. Don't be afraid of creativity with darkness, stand lights, or other ideas!

2. What do YOU look like?

- a. Appropriate professional/concert dress.
 - i. Clothing looks good but doesn't distract from the music.
 - ii. Consider repertoire and type of performance.
 1. All black is always a good bet, especially for ensembles.
 2. Bright and flashy may work for a concerto, but not as much for a chamber concert or accompanist gig.
- b. Clothing is flattering, appropriate, and in good condition.
 - i. Comfort is most important, but excessively loose clothing can be distracting or get in the way.
 - ii. If you prefer to roll sleeves up, plan and practice with the outfit in advance.

1. Roll/fold enough times to shorten the sleeve, or keep them in place with a button or safety pin.
- iii. Clothing requiring constant attention should be avoided.
 1. This could include ties (for percussionists), certain dresses, uncomfortable shoes, etc.
 2. Consider accessories such as tie clips or wristbands to prevent issues.
- iv. The audience notices everything regarding your appearance.
 1. Does your outfit look how you intend or is your effort clear?
 2. Are your shoes and belt of appropriate style and color?
 3. Do your socks match and are they long enough?
- c. Personal Grooming
 - i. Look however you feel comfortable, but it should be *intentional*.
 1. Hair and facial hair should not inhibit or distract from performance.
 2. This doesn't mean you can't have long hair or a huge beard, but the audience needs to see you care about each aspect of the experience.
 - ii. For solo performances, consider contacts instead of glasses, if able.
 1. Glasses may inhibit the communication of facial expression and other emotional subtleties.
 2. If glasses need to be worn, consider using (inconspicuous) string or elastic to keep them in place, if necessary. Being able to see is most important!

III. During the Performance

1. Before/after the piece

Walking out to applause

- a. Walk at a moderate pace to the space where you will play.
- b. Focus on your destination, not the audience.
- c. Walk with confidence and good posture: back straight, eyes on the horizon.
- d. Upon arrival at the performance area, turn to greet the audience.

The bow

- a. Make eye contact and show nonverbal gratitude for around 2-3 seconds:
 - i. Eyes open and not squinted (so visible from audience)
 - ii. Appropriate facial expression.
- b. Bow with one hand on a large instrument, or while comfortably holding a smaller instrument, baton, or sticks/mallets.
 - i. Feet together and body facing the audience directly.
 - ii. Lean forward from the waist, eyes going to the floor (not the audience- this is a sign of respect).
 - iii. Free hand/hands should be close to the side and slide down as you bow.
 - iv. Stay down for around 2 seconds before rising back up. ("These are my feet!")
- c. Following the bow, 2-3 seconds of eye contact like before.
- d. If applicable, acknowledge and bow with accompanist or other performers. Plan this in advance!

Leaving stage

- a. After bowing, turn and exit stage in the same manner you entered.
 - i. Following the end of a concert or completion of a large work, be prepared to re-enter stage for additional bows, if applause persists.
- b. For concerts with many shorter pieces (like percussion or voice recitals), it is not always necessary to leave stage after every piece.
 - i. Pieces could be grouped into sets of 2 or more.
 - ii. Stage exits could be planned around set changes.
 - iii. If you remain on stage following applause, bow as normal, then travel directly to your next task/instrument. The audience will get the idea if you move with intention.

2. Playing the Music

Before you begin

- a. Consider the piece starting at least 5 seconds before the first note and ending at least 5 seconds after the final note has decayed.
 - i. Before playing/conducting the first note, leave some silence to allow the audience and yourself to digest the mood.
 - ii. A dark or sad piece, for instance, may have a longer wait time before the first note, with a solemn facial expression and a long, drawn-out breath before the first note.
 - iii. Posture, body language, facial expression, and pacing all make an impression on the audience before the music even begins.
- b. Avoid unnecessary movement or twitching before playing.
 - i. Move gracefully and deliberately to begin the performance.
 - ii. Sudden twitching and adjusting before beginning can be a distraction.

While Playing

- a. Posture, motions, and body language should reflect the music, when possible.
 - i. Physical gestures can subtly enhance phrasing and tone quality.
 1. For example: “pulling sound out of the instrument” with one’s marimba mallets can imply longer sustain. (This is a whole area of study itself.)
 - ii. Schutz and Manning (cited below): Well-written article describing the effects and benefits of extramusical gesture in marimba playing.
 - iii. Wanderly et al. (cited below): Similar article but discussing clarinet performance.
- b. Confidence is key!
 - i. Mistakes and memory slips are inevitable, but the audience doesn’t need to know!
 - ii. Show that every note you play is exactly as intended, regardless of what may go wrong.

After the piece

- a. Upon completion, hold still, or move such that you continue the character of the work’s ending.

- b. After several seconds of silence, resuming normal motion or “breaking character” will make it clear to the audience that it is time to applaud.
 - i. As a rule of thumb, wait slightly longer than you think you should.
 - ii. Within a multi-movement work, avoid eye contact with the audience once character is broken; simply begin preparing for the next movement.
 - iii. “Eyes, Hands, Feet” Rule (see Section IV-4).
- c. Bow

IV. Implementations in Pedagogy

1. “Perform” in lessons and in the practice room.
 - a. Have students treat their lesson “performance” like they are really on stage.
 - b. Comment on body language, posture, and physical expression.
 - i. As the teacher, feel free to micromanage physical gesture at first, like you would with musical phrasing for a younger student. This can help build one’s “palate” of expressive options.
 - c. Encourage the same physical gestures and expressive movements during slow, segmented practice as would happen during an actual performance.
 - i. You want to practice the *exact* thing you plan to perform!
 - ii. This may involve standing instead of sitting, if that’s how one plans to perform, or taking the extra time to set up instrument stands, extra music stands, etc.
2. Build good on-stage habits.
 - a. Work on not reacting to/acknowledging mistakes during practice “run-throughs”
 - b. Plan instrument and music stand placement, and practice with those conditions.
 - c. Discuss stage setup, concert dress, programs, and program order well in advance of a recital.
 - d. Plan and practice walking on and off stage, bows, and in what order everything will happen, especially if dealing with a chamber ensemble.
3. Perform as often as possible. More performances = more comfort and less anxiety.
 - a. Encourage students to perform for each other regularly either casually or in “studio class,” convocations, etc.
 - i. Consider having students perform on short notice or while slightly underprepared.
 - b. Regular sightreading practice in lessons, in front of class, etc.
 - c. Bring an additional listener into private lessons, such as another applied faculty member, grad student, or guest artist.
4. Instill effective performing techniques early on.
 - a. “Eyes, Hands, Feet” Rule to let the audience know when to clap.
 - i. Eyes disengage from music and communicate with audience.
 - ii. Hands disengage and go to a point of rest appropriate for the instrument.
 - iii. Feet step back from the performance area, or performer changes posture, if sitting.
 1. The combination of these three elements make it clear a performance has ended.

2. For multi-movement works, keep eyes engaged between movements to avoid undesired clapping or confusion.
 - b. The performance starts before the first actual note and ends well after the last.
 - i. There should be a time when adjustments and fidgeting stop, and each physical motion now serves to support the music. Criticize this in private lessons!
 - c. Performers should develop a clear concept of how they want to be perceived.
 - i. Understand how certain gestures and body language are interpreted.
 1. Navarro, *What Every BODY is Saying* (cited below) is a great resource for understanding and imitating subconscious behaviors.
 - ii. What does one's choice of clothing imply about the performer or the music, and which choices will help achieve one's artistic goal?
 - iii. Regularly watch practice videos for self-critique. This helps understand the perspective of the audience.
5. Discuss the music's programmatic elements and/or personal meaning.
- a. How does it make you feel and how does it make the audience feel?
 - b. What extramusical details can be utilized to help convey these feelings?
 - c. How can one arrange the concert program to best harness the emotional elements?

V. Closing

Conducting oneself with professionalism and rigorous attention to detail has a profoundly positive effect on the audience's perception of a performance. As all human senses are connected, positive sounds and positive sights will work harmoniously to improve one's experience in the concert hall. In essence, looking good helps you sound good!

VI. Additional Reading

Hagberg, Karen. *Stage Presence from Head to Toe*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003.

Navarro, Joe. *What Every BODY is Saying*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2008.

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Schutz, Michael and Fiona Manning. "Looking Beyond the Score: The Musical Role of Percussionists' Ancillary Gestures." *Music Theory Online*, Volume 18, Number 1, April 2012.
http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.1/mto.12.18.1.schutz_manning.php.

Wanderly, Marcelo, Bradley Vines, Neil Middleton, Cory McKay and Wesley Hatch. "The Musical Significance of Clarinetists' Ancillary Gestures: An Exploration of the Field." *Journal of New Music Research* 34(1) (2005): 97-113.