Alternative Styles

An Alternative Approach to the Traditional Recital

by David Wallace

I have a confession to make. To the best of my recollection, I have not played a "standard recital" in over ten years. I am not just speaking of repertoire; I am speaking of my entire approach to presenting music to an audience. Although there is nothing "wrong" with a traditional concert format, I have become convinced that most listeners benefit from active exploration of the artistic processes and aesthetics of the works I choose to perform.

As a musician whose solo repertoire ranges from classical to free jazz to traditional fiddling to heavy metal electric viola to avant-garde new music, I have discovered that as eager as listeners may be to embrace or understand the music I play, they may not have the tools to do so. Or as one audience member put it at my final traditional recital in December of 1997, "That was a great concert—except for that ***stinkin' Hindemith!"***

As violists, we face more obstacles than most musicians when it comes to sharing our repertoire. The vast majority of our music is from the twentieth century and beyond, so the language is not always readily understood by an uninitiated listener. Because our instrument is subtle, sophisticated, and less suited to mindless *Notenfresserisch* virtuosity, presenters and managers tend to gravitate more towards pianists and violinists; consequently, we even have to fight for our right to be on the solo stage.

These challenges make it all the more imperative that when we do have opportunities to perform as soloists, our presentation must communicate the music in a way that has a profound impact on our listeners. Good enough is just not good enough.

Inventing a New Approach: A Tale of Two *Elegies*

When I was a master's degree student, I once performed Igor Stravinsky's *Elegie* at a community center in Manhattan. Midway through the piece, someone started moaning. As Stravinsky's counterpoint became more dissonant, the moaning grew ever louder until it culminated in a cry of "I CAN'T STAND IT!!!" The moaner stood and exited as I distractedly tried to finish the fugato. At the end of the piece, applause was sparse. Based on people's facial expressions, it appeared that most listeners shared the sentiments of the woman who left.

The experience haunted me. As I reflected on what happened, I drew three conclusions:

- Much of the music I love is not readily understood or welcomed by the vast majority of the American public.
- Even if I play everything perfectly and expressively, there is no guarantee that the music shall speak for itself.
- In order to truly communicate the essence of a particular style or work, I must actively help my listeners to become successful hearers.

A few years later, I offered Stravinsky's *Elegie* to another uninitiated audience. This time, however, I preceded my performance with an in-concert mini-workshop.

I asked audience members to think of a time in their lives where they went through a grieving process. I provided a few reflective questions to help them recall and visualize the experience. We examined the thoughts that pass through the mind of a grieving person and shared some of the words and actions that sympathetic individuals might use to console the bereaved.

We brainstormed the physical manifestations of grief and tried embodying some of these qualities in our bodies and faces. Next, we explored how grief can affect one's vocal tone, and we tried out various sobs, whispers, and tremulous qualities. Before people knew what was happening, I segued into call-and-response singing of Stravinsky's *Lento* melody.

So far everything was going well, but if the *Elegie* performance was to be a success, I knew that I still needed the audience to be able to process the tension and release caused by the dissonance and resolution of Stravinsky's vertical intervals. I turned to the audience and announced, "In a moment, I'm going to be grieving with my viola, but I'm going to need your empathy." I gave the audience three instructions:[1]

1. Using the syllable "oh," everyone would sing a continuous middle C drone while I sustained other notes on my viola. (I also played the middle C to keep people on pitch.)
2. Using their fingers, everyone would rate the intensity of our combined notes on a scale of one to ten (one being fairly relaxed, ten being almost unbearably intense).
3. For true sympathy, I needed audience members to adjust their voices to reflect the timbres they were hearing from my viola. If I grew hushed, they should support me by responding in kind. If I grew angry or strained, they should adjust accordingly. Grief comes in waves, and I needed them to support me and my viola through the various waves of emotions.

As the audience combined their voices with my viola, the atmosphere of the room became charged. I noticed how various people evaluated the different intervals I performed. People began to develop a palpable sense of consonance and dissonance. By the time I tested a few of Stravinsky's intervals and resolution patterns, everyone was responding similarly, albeit individually.

I repeated the activity, but this time I added a subtle change: I put a mute on my viola and asked people to close their mouths and hum middle C instead of singing it. We reflected on the difference in emotional quality and discussed why a composer might want to employ this subdued tone to express grief.

Finally, I introduced the piece:

> Elegie, *by Igor Stravinsky, is a musical depiction of a grieving process. In this piece, I play two distinct musical lines that represent two voices grieving together in sympathy. Occasionally, you may hear one voice by itself, but usually, I'll be playing both voices simultaneously. Listen to how these voices interact throughout this grieving process, and see if you notice any parallels to the experiences we've shared today.*

During this performance, everyone listened with rapt attention, and I received a lengthy ovation. People were eager to share what they heard in the music and many made connections to life experiences. After the concert, a woman in her forties quietly told me, "Your performance described exactly what I went through when I lost my two-year-old daughter. There is such a truth to this piece. Thank you."

Six Principles for Interactive Performance

In both of these *Elegie* performances, the music was identical. However, the experience the audience and I had of the music could not have been more contrasting. With the second performance, I took the risk of actively engaging my listeners, and they joined me. As we invested ourselves in a serious exploration of our experiences and Stravinsky's musical language, we became prepared to immerse ourselves fully in his masterpiece.

While not every audience interaction needs to be as complex or sophisticated as this particular plan, effective audience interaction relies on the following six principles: give the audience an entry point, engage the audience with hands-on experience, tap competence, use multiple intelligences, reflect, and project your personality in your performance.

Give the Audience an Entry Point:

Every work of art has specific elements that are essential to understanding and perceiving it. With *Elegie*, I concluded that successful listeners must be

able to hear contrapuntally, not just harmonically. I also believed that they must allow Stravinsky's modern musical language to connect to their own experiences and preconceptions of grief. By pairing the musical entry point of counterpoint with the emotional entry point of grief, I framed my exercises around an inquiry: *How does the two-part counterpoint in Stravinsky's* Elegie *depict a grieving process?* As I studied the score with this question in mind, I began to form ideas and activities that would invite listeners to explore *Elegie* through this question.

There is no one right answer when it comes to choosing an entry point. However, I've found that it is best to choose an entry point that is exciting to the performer, relevant and interesting to the specific audience, and central to the musical work. While it may be possible to combine multiple entry points within one presentation, it's generally best to focus on an in-depth experience of one entry point rather than try to share every possible hook in hopes that something will catch the audience's interest.

Engage the Audience with Hands-On Experience:

In order for the audience members to really "get" an entry point, they need to experience it. Talking about an entry point—or anything else, for that matter—may not do anything for anyone's ears. I could have defined the terms "elegy" or "fugato"; I could have talked about how Stravinsky's piece was written in memory of Alphonse Onnou of the Pro Arte Quartet and premiered by fellow quartet member Germain Prévost; I could share what the piece personally means to me or talk about my own experiences with grief; I could even provide arcane details of how the Library of Congress has Stravinsky's draft of a two-viola version of *Elegie*, which would have solved the confounding challenges of trying to perform his two contrapuntal voices on one viola. However, none of these typical ways of introducing

a piece or an entry point would have a deep impact on listeners' perceptions and emotions. True interaction must give the audience the opportunity to perform, create, and reflect in ways that enhance their musical perceptions.

Tap Competence:

In order to engage through hands-on experience, we must tap the competence of our audiences. The Stravinsky presentation drew upon the audience's ability to do the following:

- Reflect on an experience of grief or loss
- Share personal experiences and empathize
- Do the "actor's studio work" of embodying emotions physically
- Observe one another's facial expressions
- Sing, hum, and sustain one pitch as a group
- Subjectively rate the consonance or dissonance between two notes
- Musically adjust one's performance in response to my viola
- Keep a specific focus in mind while listening to a performance

Each of these capacities is relatively simple, but each provides a direct experience that connects to my chosen entry points for *Elegie*. The activities awoke exactly the innate artistic skills necessary to be successful for entering into the piece.

Use Multiple Intelligences:

In his book *Frames of Mind*, Harvard professor Howard Gardner identified seven distinct "intelligences," with which people process the world.[2] In theory, we all possess each of these intelligences to a greater or lesser degree, but people have definite strengths and preferences.

Because every audience member has unique ways of perceiving and processing information, it is important that our interactions engage the different intelligences and skills. Verbal individuals may respond well to spoken interaction, but a visual learner may not find explanations as helpful. To provide more audience members with a way into the *Elegie*, I designed activities that included all but one of Gardner's intelligences.[3]

While it may not be necessary to address more than two or three of Gardner's intelligences when preparing an audience to hear a particular piece, within the span of an interactive concert, it is helpful to address each intelligence at least once. It is important to note that musical intelligence is a distinct capacity in itself, and we want to make sure that this part of our listeners' minds is awake. Within our concerts, we want to involve listeners in simple music-making in a way that is interesting and challenging without being scary.

Reflect:

In his landmark book, *Art as Experience*, educational philosopher John Dewey asserts that if we are not reflecting, we are not learning. Reflection deepens perception. In crafting the *Elegie* presentation, I planted reflective opportunities at all stages of the workshop because grieving in itself is profoundly expressive and contemplative. It is worth noting that the audience members

- reflected from their own personal experiences;
- used their bodies and voices to express elements of their observations;
- actively reflected by evaluating their subjective experience of interval intensity;
- grappled with a reflective assignment as they listened to *Elegie*;
- had the opportunity to share and extend their observations after the piece was performed.

Most importantly, the audience's perceptions and experiences impacted me as a performer. The audience input I received heightened my own sensitivity to the piece, deepened my understanding, and inspired me to be a more engaged performer. At its best, reflection is not just an internal one-way process.

Project Your Personality in Your Performance:

The music we present and the way we choose to present it depends to a large extent on who we are as individuals. As you interact with your audiences, let your passions about the music be known. Suit your interactions to your personality and your comfort zone. Use any presentational strengths you bring into the room, be it singing, improvising, dancing, communicating a com-

plex analysis in layperson's terms, composing and developing a twelve-tone row with your audience, or something completely unique to yourself. Often audience members respond to us as individual personalities before they respond to us as musicians. Being yourself helps to establish rapport with your listeners and also can increase comfort with the performance situation.

Reaching Out:

SHAMELESS PLUG WARNING!!! ONLY READ THE FOLLOWING IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT INTERACTIVE PERFORMANCE.

My experience performing and designing interactive performances for many organizations and ensembles over the years led me to write a book: *Reaching Out: A Musician's Guide to Interactive Performance.* In it, I expound on the above six principles in greater depth, describe the interactive performance planning process, share about some of the foibles and challenges I have encountered in the field, and include five transcripts of actual interactive performances, including solo, chamber, and orchestral events.

I am also pleased to announce that in January of 2009, Oxford University Press shall publish my educational mentor Eric Booth's fantastic resource, *The Teaching Artist's Bible*. Eric's book contains invaluable information about communicating and interacting with audiences, as well as helpful anecdotes from numerous leading violists in the field.

Dr. David Wallace is a faculty member of the Juilliard School and a Senior Teaching Artist for the New York Philharmonic. He has scripted interactive concerts for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, Young Audiences, Inc., and has recently been spotted using his approach to create a viola-centric universe in elementary schools in Tokyo and New York.

Notes

[1] In concert, I incrementally built this activity one instruction at a time, and we practiced in order to be successful. It's important not to overwhelm an audience with too many directions or instructions at once.

[2] As first articulated by Gardner, the intelligences are visual / spatial, verbal / linguistic, logical / mathematical, bodily / kinesthetic, musical / rhythmic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. For a complete understanding, consult one of Gardner's many books on the subject.

[3] As a challenge, see if you can identify the missing intelligence, and think of a way you might incorporate it in this presentation!

Bibliography:

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