

Communication Through Music

By Jeremy Polmear

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It was at a masterclass I was giving a few years ago. Things were proceeding quite normally, and this girl was playing the first movement of the Poulenc sonata. She was about half-way through, making quite a good job of it, and I was busy trying to work out something to say — wanting to give value for money, as it were — when I became conscious of this feeling, a sort of gentle tightness, across my chest. At first I thought it was the hurried fish and chips I'd had before the session, but I soon realized what it was — emotion. This girl had broken through my selfish preoccupations about being a good teacher, and was communicating pain and loss through the music. I asked her a bit about what the music meant to her, and she wasn't very forthcoming, but when I asked her what other emotions were involved in loss she said Anger; that went in too, and the performance became yet more powerful.

That girl may not have been the best player at the masterclass, but she's the one I remember. And isn't this, ultimately, what we all want to do when we play the oboe — to have this kind of effect on our teachers, our colleagues, our friends, our audiences? The purpose of this article is to look at how we can enhance our ability to convey emotion through our performances.

But before we do that, perhaps we better consider the relation between the communication aspects of our playing and the technical ones. Perhaps if we get really good at communication we could bypass all those hours spent on reeds, scales, control, tuning, etc? I'm afraid not. The technical side remains important; the pressures to "get it right" remain, and without a sufficiently good technical set-up we can't communicate anything except our own difficulties. But the danger is that in the process of mastering the many practical aspects involved, the communication side can get lost; and we've all heard players like that, who sound nice and get everything right, but just leave us cold.

The process of communicating in music is the same as in the rest of life: firstly, think of something to say — a message — and secondly, say it. In practice I've never come across people having problems with the second part; if they get the message right, then incorporating it into their playing occurs naturally. So if things are not working, then it's probably the message itself that is inappropriate.

So what are these "messages"? Music is, after all, an abstract art, and pretty vague and generalized in its emotional content. I don't want to get too philosophical, but whatever it is that touches you when you listen to music, you can re-create and send it on when you play it. Actors are used to projecting a variety of emotions in their performances, but musicians often find the idea strange. However, we can sometimes use surprisingly ordinary techniques for communication, such as story-telling. Now everybody knows that music can't tell stories, but a knowledge of the fables on which the Britten *Metamorphoses* are based makes all the difference in performing them. When I play operatic fantasias I make up stories or situations from Italian opera, or I become one of the characters, such as the fat lady singing about the loss of her lover. The point is not that the audience should be able to guess what my internal "story" is, but that it helps me to create a flow, a thread, through the music as it progresses. Perhaps it also gives the performance that "once upon a time" feeling — a narrative that makes us want to keep listening.

A surprising number of pieces have a dramatic, story-like quality about them — Schumann's *Romances* come to mind, particularly the middle one — but often something else is called for. Another approach is to focus on a picture, an image, that expresses a piece. For the outer movements of the Mozart oboe quartet, where it's so important not to be over-reverent in the face of such famous music, I use the image of bubbles rising in a champagne, or helium-filled balloons floating up to the ceiling. The details don't matter; what counts is that the natural direction for the bubbles/balloons is up. I find this image so much more useful than continually telling myself to play lighter. I just play the picture.

Such an image may be useful to get the general mood of a piece, but we may also need more specific ideas to help us with an interpretation. Take the first movement of the Poulenc, for instance; what do the first two bars mean? and the next four bars? and the next two? and the next two? Well, we can listen to other performances and see how they speak to us, or we can ask teachers or colleagues. If you asked me I would say those four phrases are: the soul of the loved one in heaven; the sense of numbness and loss; the beginnings of grief; and the realization of nothingness. But that's just my opinion; ultimately your view of these phrases has to come from yourself. We are, all of us, qualified to know about them, just by being human. Everybody has experienced what Poulenc is expressing so powerfully in that sonata, even if it is just by being snubbed by one's best friend at school.

And this is the silver lining in the cloud of life's difficult experiences. Every painful thing that happens to us is at least furnishing us with material that can be used later. It's not necessary to consciously make a list of such things; as long as the experience isn't pushed away, as long as we don't pretend it never happened, it will be filed away automatically, and is potentially available for future use.

The way this happens is the same as the way other memories come to us — they just pop up, often apparently spontaneously, or sometimes triggered by something else. In this case, the trigger is the music itself, and the method is what the psychologists call "free association" — just play the music, let the imagination wander, and see what picture, mood, or experience appears. If it helps to make more sense of the music, use it.

I've rather implied that most of the emotional

states associated with music are difficult ones. And indeed many of them are — this is why music can touch us deeply. But as I write, the first whiff of spring is in the air. The bulbs are pushing up through the bare earth, the cats are beginning to laze in the sun, the long dismal months are nearly over and there is a sense of renewal, of new possibilities. Now all I need is a piece of music to put that into ... ❖



About the Author ...

Jeremy Polmear can be heard with the Ambache Chamber Orchestra and Ensemble on the May 1996 Cover CD of the BBC Music Magazine (in the Clara Schumann Konzertsatz and the Grandval Trio for oboe, cello and piano), and on two CDs to be released by Carlton Classics later in the year: Beethoven chamber music (including the piano and wind Quintet) and Mozart chamber music (including the oboe Quartet and cor anglais Adagio).