

The Mystery of Musical Expression

“Notes, like words, are mere utterances of symbols, and within themselves are totally lacking and incapable of expression. It is the human response, not the mechanical one that created the communication between the written symbol, the performer and the listener.”

—WILLIAM D. REVELLI

Leonard Bernstein conducts what the music communicates to him, and not something he has programmed. His profound statements, “*Music making begins in the mind and not the stick,*” and “*it is what you listen to just before it happens,*” are significant insights for our profession. His knowledge of the score lives inside his soul. He projects his love for shaping Mozart, Mahler, Brahms, or Beethoven through his conducting. This is not accomplished through prepared and prescribed conducting moves. Another *awakening statement* made by H. Robert Reynolds in a conducting symposium was, “*we learn a basic conducting pattern and hang all the music on that pattern.*”

We have all attended a rehearsal and heard the conductor say, *follow me, or I want all eyes looking at me.* Those statements have nothing to do with creating musical expression. If I follow you, I will be late as time is *now.* Time does not follow an event. Time *IS* the event! If you want me to look at you, what am I supposed to see? Does this mean my attention is now focused on you, and not the music being made? These certainly are troubling statements, focused on the eye and not the ear! There is nothing wrong with such statements if we are conducting paint-by-number exercises.

Programmed conducting is not artistic or expressive conducting. Once conducting is programmed, it no longer exists as creative artistic spontaneity. Artistic integrity and passion are what make the memorable and humble musical moments we experience when attending concerts. It is very easy to sense contrived expression or imitation.

The Beauty of Silence

*SILENCE! This is my space where I communicate
with my instrument . . .*

*just as an artist has canvas and a poet has paper. I experience my innermost
thoughts and feelings through sound
moving in and out of silence.*

*I carefully place my sound in this space of silence with a delicate touch of sound
and rhythmic stroke of color . . . This is my musical gift!*

Throughout my musical life as a conductor and educator, silence was critical to my artistic considerations when conducting or playing an instrument. Silence surrounds musical sounds. Music is sound moving in and out of silence! Silence is the gateway into the art of musical expression. As I share with the listener the expression of my musical thoughts, a beautiful melody results as my inner passion engages with the flow and sound of music moving in and out of silence.

An area that receives very little attention is rests (eighth, quarter, half, whole, etc.). The rest, or silence, usually indicates the release of a phrase or motif, the ending of a composition, or the end of one section transitioning into a new section of the composition. How a conductor responds to the silence of rests is an area that makes a huge difference in the musicality of the composition. If the silence of a rest is literally interpreted, we immediately fall into a sterile or mechanical response with little musical meaning. Consideration **MUST** be given to the resonance of the last note preceding the rest/silence. The conductor must consider the note preceding the silence of the rest to prepare for what will happen with the silence that precedes the next entrance. This is a massive “space” where musical decisions are made. I frequently state throughout my presentations that I’m not sure as to how large an eighth, quarter, half, or whole rest is if I am considering note resonance and decay. How I handle this decay determines the size of the rest.

Sound into Infinity

The concept, “*music is sound moving in and out of silence,*” is essential when teaching phrases and musicianship. The concept places the mind in a position with *what IS to occur* and *what happens AFTER it occurs!* This thoughtful action is created after an entrance and throughout the duration of a particular note, followed by how that note moves into silence. The concept directs the mind to focus on the horizontal flow of sound moving to the “right” side of a note. This is a powerful concept indicating a thoughtful-thinking energy moving to an approaching point that occurs simultaneously through musical decisions, not a series of separate events.

The *beginning of silence* concept provides artistic consideration for resonance and decay of notes moving into the space of silence indicated by a rest. Apply this concept where a *space of silence (rest or breath mark)* follows a phrase, fermata sign, end of a composition, or any similar point in music.

The musical results will elevate the ensemble’s performance. This is also a departure from the “score order release” so often being used today.

Elizabeth Sokolowski, in her new publication, *Making Musical Meaning*, had this to say: “*I had to perform at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. It was the most resonate and warmest hall I had ever performed in. At the conclusion of one of the pieces we played as the final chord sounded, I thought to myself that although the sound to our ears was no longer audible, the energy of the sound remained, floating, soaring, and living through the hall for an amount of time that I could not quantify. I could only perceive it as infinite. Moving away from the analytical, music moving both through and in time in regard to creative/expressive potential must be considered.*”

Elizabeth’s statement was the result of this significant musical experience dealing with artistic considerations I presented in a graduate class she attended. Basically, it was the concept of “*Music is sound moving in and out of silence.*” The ensemble that I was conducting simply took advantage of the resonance of the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. Very few consider this concept and its application when performing in such a beautiful hall. The beauty of this silence that “*remained, floating, soaring, and living through the hall,*” would not be possible if a conventional conductor cut-off was made for the ensemble to release the sound. This concept is simply an “artistic consideration” that receives very little discussion. You and your students will experience the same “feelings” by applying the sound into silence exercise I describe below in this chapter.

As musical sounds move in and out of silence, the mind must be sensitized to the beginning of sound (as it enters from silence) and the right side of sound (as it moves into silence). These are two critical points of an extended note, a phrase, or a rhythm pattern. The concept elevates and places the energy of thoughtful thinking into an extremely delicate position at the beginning of sound (entrance) followed by the right side (into silence) of the produced sound. Conventional rehearsal techniques too often consume musical thinking that is directed to entrances, with little thought to how notes end or move into silence resulting in the need for a conductor to cut-off or stop sound.

A term, which I never use in my rehearsals, is the word “cut-off.” The word has many implications, and I don’t believe it has any connection to artistic thought. However, this word permeates our profession, neglecting natural musical resonance. For me, the phrase “cut-off” implies my band members have no idea when to release a note and I must make a conducting action that will “cut the sound off.” Moreover, the word implies the students are not thinking and are not in control of what they are doing. The word does not recognize the natural resonance or decay of a note as the conductor abruptly “cuts off the sound.” I urge you to reconsider the phrase and its implications with musical thought.

I must add this very important consideration regarding the resonance and decay of notes. Consider the musical sounds produced by stringed instruments. When a string instrument plays *pizzicato*, or lifting the bow off the vibrating string, the body of the instrument continues to vibrate. It is impossible to stop this decaying sound. With wind instruments, we can stop the sound (sometimes with very unmusical results). This decaying string vibration is exactly what prompted this teaching technique that I now share with you. It simply was a beautiful way of playing phrases, endings, and many other musical considerations.

Playing orchestral transcriptions is perhaps the most important consideration for this rehearsal technique. I distinctly remember listening to clinicians speak about the difficulty bands had when playing orchestral transcriptions. My wind ensemble applied this technique with the many orchestral transcriptions I programmed. The musical results impressed many of our guest conductors.

A musical performance should not be similar to a picture ‘painted by numbers’ by sacrificing personal expression in fear of *spilling over* the indicated lines (or what an adjudicator may say). *If an artist is able to control the beauty and color of a brush stroke being lifted off the white canvas surface, or the color disappearing into the white canvas of silence . . . shouldn’t the musician have similar control of sound moving into the white of silence (a rest or the end of a composition)?*

The next musical exercise will allow the ensemble and director to experience the beautiful sounds that exist beyond the line or boundaries of musical notation . . . *a new dimension in playing phrases and musical considerations dealing with artistic responses.* Note that the following musical example does not have a time signature or bar lines. Although the process does imply 4/4, 3/4, and 2/4 time followed by a whole note with a fermata sign.

The exercise is as follows:

- *Step 1.* The students are to count the exercise in the following manner with a quarter = 60 or less pulse:



- *Step 2.* Play the exercise through several keys using major chords while silently counting in the normal or traditional way (use the Circle of 4ths) while being certain to have a quarter rest after each note.

- *Step 3.* After playing the above example in the usual conducted way eliminate the counting of the quarter rest on beats 4, 3, and 2, as described below.
- Consider the next two statements very carefully to gain the musical benefits with this departure from any conventional approach.
 - * The beat-number syllable before the rest is now extended and tapers into the rest.
 - * The rest is IMPLIED and ‘felt’ in tempo, but not counted by the beat number.

The entire ensemble carefully speaks the process as follows:

- 1 - 2 - threeeee ... the 'eeeeee' tapers/decays into the 'felt' 4th beat into silence.
- 1 - twooooo ... the 'ooooo' tapers/decays into the 'felt' 3rd beat into silence.
- 1 - onemnnnnn ... the 'nnnn' tapers/decays into the 'felt' 2nd beat into silence. Holdllllllldddd ... the 'llldddd' tapers/decay into silence (unmeasured duration).

The illustration below will further clarify the counting process and the tapering of the beat:

(4) Implied (3) Implied (2) Implied
1 - 2 - threeeeeeeeeee.....1 - twooooooooccc.....Onemnnnnnnnn.....Holdddddd

This teaching process gains control of the *right side* of the note as it decays into silence. The ensemble should practice counting the sequence several times in tempo. The word 'hold' is extended and provides a natural duration and taper for the whole note into silence (as in the ending of a composition). *After the 'hold', the students breathe and sense together the next natural entrance of the sequence.* Emphasize the importance of implying the 'felt' beat of the rest. You can extend or abbreviate the decay of sound as it moves into the silence of the rest. The rest will be larger if less decay is needed and more decayed if the rest is smaller. Musical interpretation is the priority when applying this technique to literature.

It is important to emphasize to students that this timed spoken feeling and thinking energy is the same response (mind-body connection) that must be projected through the instrument to achieve the musical result! Applying this process to literature establishes a unified ensemble interpretation of phrase releases and controlled decay of sound. You have complete control of a note duration as it diminishes into the silence of a rest!

Play the exercise and continue through the *Circle of 4ths* using major chords. To start the ensemble, the director must count aloud (quarter = 60) the process as indicated above, with the extended decay of the number and hold; then take a preparatory breath, in tempo, with the students to

indicate their entrance for the exercise. Once students become comfortable with the concept and process, *do not conduct. Trust the timed 'ensemble thought' and they will naturally breathe together.* The results will be flawless.

The image shows musical notation for a four-group exercise. It is divided into two sections: F major and Bb major. Each section has four staves labeled Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, and Group 4. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Text annotations indicate 'Breathe and move to the next key.' between the two staves.

As students become comfortable with the exercise, repeat and have the students close their eyes while playing. The musical results improve significantly by using imagery. Playing with their eyes closed will intensify their thinking and remove any visual distractions that inadvertently may shift, or change focused concentration. The only preparatory action needed for the beginning of this exercise is that you "inhale" deeply so students will hear this inhale in tempo, similar to a preparatory beat with a baton. Instruct students to inhale deeply between each key change using the *Circle of 4ths*. The precision of the entire process (key to key) is based on internal ensemble pulse. You will be surprised as to the precise entrances and the duration of the decay into silence.

The success of this counting and thinking process is determined by *how the sound of counting the extended beat (before the rest) tapers or diminishes into the quarter rest of silence in order to control the musical result.* This same feeling and response is projected through the instrument! I understand the concern this will create with any traditional response to rests and our need to be specific and accurate with notation. *Understand, the time and pulse are still in place!* This rehearsal technique allows you to control the length of decay for tonal sonority and resonance similar to the wood body of a stringed instrument. This is a natural characteristic of all musical sounds.

Many traditional techniques dealing with articulation or conducting often disturb or clip the natural resonance, or decay of sound. This concept

and exercise takes you beyond such unmusical reactions (and beyond the “paint by number” approach). This is another area where the beauty of expression is hidden within a musical performance. This process is similar to the analogy presented earlier . . . *an artist is able to control the beauty and color of a brush stroke being lifted off and disappearing into the white canvas of silence. Musicians are NOW able to control the beauty of sound moving in and out of silence!*

This process should become a part of your rehearsal when shaping an artistic response to the natural decay of notes, chords, phrases, fermatas, or endings. I re-emphasize the controlling factor again, and that it is the energy of thought moving with sound into silence and ‘feeling’ this spoken decayed beat into silence. This does not require a ‘cutoff’ and should not be conducted. The ensemble becomes unified through timed thinking. This is the key to precision and accuracy. It is important to understand that the exercises are a natural occurrence with all musical sounds (unless the composer indicates the note should be abruptly cut off). Anything you do to change such a natural occurrence will be detrimental to the quality of your musical performance.

Location of Expressive Conducting

Does the mystery of music exist in this space of silence? I believe there are only three areas where the mystery of music can be found. The first is in the silence between beats. This is something very few speak about. It is where the conductor’s musical direction and decisions are made, where the energy of musical thought is at its summit or peak, totally immersed in the *now of music making*. What musical decisions are happening between the spaces of silence between beats 1, 2, 3, or 4? If the mind is only consumed with the beats and notation, then music does not exist. It is simply an exercise, void of musical expression. Silence is where the mystery of music can be found. Isaac Stern states, “*Technique is not music . . . Music is the*

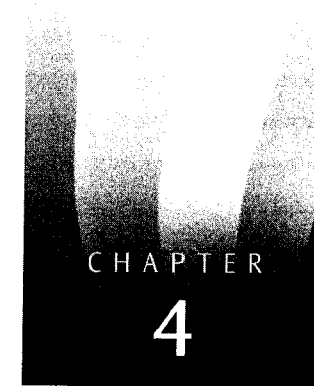
thousandth of a millisecond between one note and another, how you get from one to the other - that’s where the music is.”

The second area where the mystery of music is found is in the space between the conductor’s eyes, face, body, and hands and the musicians seated before him/her. As I wrote in my last publication, the *energy of musical thought* passes through this space before the musicians and beyond the conductor. A conductor must project this energy of musical thought to communicate with freedom and unrestricted body language. Facial expressions complement all body movements in conveying intent and meaning. The nuance and inflection of musical phrases are a mind-body-soul connection with felt meaning and passion, projected through the sound of an instrument or the conductor’s baton. Conducting movements must convey a similar meaning through the subtle nuance and inflection of face, body, and hands. This silent passionate movement of arms, hands, and fingers, coupled with facial expression, is the conductor’s musical instrument. The thoughtful interpretation of written music, cradled within artistic feeling, guides conductors’ physical movements as they project interpretation expressively through the silence of space before them, connecting to the musician’s mind and response.

The third and final space is what goes on internally within the conductor’s mind. A conductor is confronted with tremendous musical demands. Beyond the musical notation found in the score, the conductor is surrounded with sounds being created by the ensemble. He must balance countless musical details with the overall musical presentation. If the mind is consumed with analytical details, the music will not *live* or fulfill its purpose. The analysis lives during rehearsals and not in a performance. To create the musical entirety of the composer’s intent, a conductor must be mentally elevated into a state of immersion. Such an immersed state removes all extraneous thoughts, including notation. We create the music! The music is not found in the score and the instruments have no intelligence! What we do with these tools is what brings music to life. The only thing remaining in the conductor’s mind is the *whole* of musical sounds in the *now of time* (to be in the moment).

This state of mind is why we do what we do with music. This is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi speaks about in his publication, *Flow*. Flow is an optimal experience when we become so involved in what we are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; we stop being aware of ourselves as separate from the actions we are performing. Csikszentmihalyi goes on further and states, “*Flow requires a highly disciplined mental activity. It does not happen without the application of skilled performance. Any lapse in concentration will erase it.*”

Can this state of mind be taught? One must experience such a *state* before it is possible to place into an instructional setting. This mindset is something that jazz musicians have complete command of. As they play beautiful ballads, or other styles, they are totally immersed in the moment and have no other thoughts but to project their feeling of soul and passion. Notation is not a consideration. Charlie Parker states it best, “*If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s a boundary line to music. But man, there’s no boundary line to art.*”



Master Orchestral Conductors

“A conductor has two ways of communicating—facial expression and gesture, but the look in his eyes is often more important than the motion of a baton or the position of a hand.”

—CHARLES MUNCH

Carl St. Clair, conductor of the Pacific Symphony stated, “*How do you make notes into music? You must be able to look beyond the obvious. What are the clues?*” He goes on further to say, “*If you conduct musical moments as they happen, then you are directing the flow of music . . . it’s not the notation; it’s the music.*” Throughout my travels, I frequently state to directors, “*glide or soar over the top of the ensemble. Don’t intrude upon the flow and energy of what is being produced. Don’t conduct by imposition.*” Of course, this is easy to say, but doing is impossible if you have not conditioned or rehearsed the ensemble. A unified perception of ensemble tone quality, time, tempo, dynamics, and the motion and energy of musical thought are essential basic elements. The musicians are responsible for the musical product that you, the conductor must shape.