

Features

22

Dr. Seuss and the Art of Interpretation

What is musicality, and how do we teach it? A computer can accurately generate the pitch, rhythm and dynamics of a piece of music, but it is doubtful that anyone would call the resulting performance satisfying.

by Hillary Herndon

28

Harp Forum

A Few Thoughts About Performing and Teaching

I come from a musical family. Indeed, I am a third-generation professional musician—even a third-generation harpist. To not yield to the pressure of playing has been a lifelong challenge.

by Deborah Fleisher

30

Practicing In Tune: Four Puzzlers for Four Concepts

Learning how to play in tune can seem like the neverending quest for the Holy Grail. The work in the practice room that accompanies that quest can be tedious and grueling.

by Susanna Klein

36

To Tilt or Not to Tilt

Regardless of the school of bowing technique—whether it is German, Franco-Belgian or Russian—all conceivable variables of the bow contribute to sound production and tone quality, and collectively make up the unique character of each player.

by Selim Giray

42

Bass Forum

The Block Approach: A System for Logical Arpeggio Fingerings on the Double Bass

Like many double bassists, I began my musical journey on the electric bass—the land of frets, rock and roll, and even (gasp!) tablature.

by Craig Butterfield

Dr. Seuss and the Art of Interpretation



by Hillary Herndon

What is musicality, and how do we teach it? A computer can accurately generate the pitch, rhythm, and dynamics of a piece of music, but it is doubtful that anyone would call the resulting performance satisfying. On the other hand, many of us have experienced performances that were moving even if the performer missed a note or two. Performers who stir emotion in the listener have the ability to interpret the notes on the page into music that is more than the sum of the concrete elements written in the score. For many music students, learning to think beyond the concrete is a major challenge. These students often become frustrated and feel that they are not "musical." As teachers, it is important for us to find ways to uncover the emotional creativity all students possess and foster the musicality that makes every student unique.

Using forms of presentation that students are already comfortable with can be helpful when introducing them to abstract ideas like musicality. For instance, as most children grow up using spoken languages, we can use speech itself to explore interpretations. From a young age, children are adept at understanding the implied meaning of spoken words. Consider, for example, the sentence "I like your shirt." With those four words, one can imply many different nuanced ideas, including:

- A) You like the shirt, in a simple and easy compliment;
- B) You love the shirt and immediately want to go buy one;
- C) You hate the shirt; and
- D) You are annoyed that someone is wearing the same shirt as you.

The energy in which we speak, the tone of our voice, the articulation of the words, which words we stress, as well as the pacing of our speech all influence perceived meaning. Similarly, choices in phrasing, tone color, rhythmic vitality, and articulation will greatly alter a musical interpretation.

In this article, we use excerpts from Dr. Seuss books to examine elements of expression that are common to both speech and music. Following each reading, we look at a musical example that requires similar expressive elements for an effective performance. Finally, suggestions are given for using "expressive reading performances" in the music studio.

Before we begin, it is important to realize that phrasing and musicality are highly individualistic--there are many ways of making a particular passage "work." This is what makes an individual's

performance interesting, and why audiences will return to hear performances of the same piece many times in their lifetime. Although a full explanation of all the possibilities presented for each excerpt is beyond the scope of this article, we use several suggestions as starting points for discussion and encourage your students to find their own interpretations.

Imagine reading the following excerpt aloud as a "performance" to a child.

If I Ran The Circus

by Dr. Seuss

The Circus McGurkus! The World's Greatest Show
On the face of the earth, or wherever you go!

The Circus McGurkus! The cream of the cream!
The Circus McGurkus! The Circus Supreme!
The Circus McGurkus! Colossal! Stupendous!
Astounding! Fantastic! Terrific! Tremendous!
I'll bring in my acrobats, jugglers and clowns
From a thousand and thirty-three faraway towns
To the place that you'll see 'em in, ladies and gents,
Right behind Sneelock's Store, in the Great McGurk
tents!¹

In order to make your "performance" reading as engaging as possible, you will first need to decide what the general character should be. Given the superlative exclamations in this passage, let's use an exultant, ecstatic character. Consider how this character will be portrayed through your voice. For instance, a normal conversational tone of voice will not contain enough joyfulness. Use a full, confident, and firm tone when reading this to your audience.

In an engaging performance, our enunciation also is affected. Strong articulations will add vigor to your reading. Read this section aloud in two separate ways. First, read it with an "everyday" style of voice, with smoother, less harsh consonant articulations. Second, contrast this with a full, confident voice that exaggerates the consonants and portrays energy in every syllable. Which of these performances conveys the ecstatic character best?

Rhythmic pacing also is important in this excerpt. The opening repeats "Circus McGurkus!" several times, followed by

numerous adjectives to describe just how wonderful the show is. It would be dull to repeat the lines immediately and the same way for each time. Instead, make slight variations to keep the attention of your listener. For example, read lines three through six and in all four lines, keep a strong voice with crisp consonants. Pace line three evenly, allowing for clear punctuation between the two sentences. In line four, lower your voice to a slightly lower register, as if sharing a secret with the audience. Slightly draw out

the “The Circus Supreme!” sentence in a deliberate, slower pace. Finally, bring your speaking register back to its origin in line five and pace the words forward in anticipation of the final adjective of “Tremendous” in line six. Notice how this rhythmic organization allows for more vitality in your reading.

Let’s consider similar elements of interpretation in music. Weber’s *Andante and Rondo Ungarese* is a favorite character piece of violists and bassoonists alike.

Example 1. Carl Maria von Weber, *Andante e Rondo Ungarese*, op. 35.

This excerpt illustrates the importance of determining characters in a musical performance. While instrumentalists do not usually have a “text” to help form a musical interpretation, we can still infer the composer’s intent from the clues they left behind. In this example, looking up the translation and imagery associated with a Rondo and *Allegretto Ungarese* would be a great start. What characteristics are typical of a Rondo? What does a “Hungarian” style bring to mind? What do you make of the offbeat accents in the piano part? Other clues might be the articulation marked in the melody, the use of grace notes, dotted rhythms, and the artificial harmonic in the second line.

Taking these items into consideration, let’s look at similar elements of performance that we explored in “If I Ran The Circus.” What is the character of this excerpt? What tone of voice or sound color will you employ? How will articulation reinforce the character you are portraying? In this exercise, let’s aim for a lively, rustic, playful, and sassy character. Use a full-bodied sound with crisp articulations, starting every new bow stroke with a consonant sound (no vowel-initiations in our lively presentation!). If you find thinking of notes with letter sounds difficult, write your own words and sing them aloud. Enunciate clearly, just as you did in the Dr. Seuss performance. Return to the Weber excerpt and perform it as written, while attempting to convey the same articulation clarity as your singing version.

Next, let’s consider pacing. The *Circus* reading and the Weber excerpt both have phrases that begin with the same statement and end differently each time. In Dr. Seuss, we found that varying our tone of voice and rhythmic organization through the repeated statements gave extra excitement to our performance.

Perform the opening of the Rondo with similar variance in the following way: Exaggerate the playfulness of the character by elongating stressed notes slightly. In the first four bars, slightly elongate the first note, allowing the subsequent eighth note Cs to move toward the downbeat of bar two. Stress the grace note D and its resolution C at bar two, and deliberately hold the remainder of the bar steady so as to exaggerate the arrival of the high G in measure three, which is stressed with an elongated grace note F#. Allow bar four to relax the tension in the sound and naturally “fall” toward the end of the four-bar phrase. The opening two bars are repeated again, but continue to a longer eight-bar phrase. Notice that at this point the jaunty piano part is replaced by a more simplified version, helping our forward progression.

Character determination, sound quality, articulation, and rhythmic organization are vital to all musical interpretations. Our next Dr. Seuss reading will examine elements of tone color and dynamics.

Horton Hears A Who

by Dr. Seuss

Through the high jungle tree tops, the news quickly spread:

"He talks to a dust speck! He's out of his head!
Just look at him walk with that speck on that flower!"
And Horton walked, worrying, almost an hour.
"Should I put this speck down? . . ." Horton thought
with alarm.

"If I do, these small persons may come to great harm.
I can't put it down. And I won't! After all
A person's a person. No matter how small."

Then Horton stopped walking.
The speck-voice was talking!
The voice was so faint he could just barely hear it.
"Speak up, please," said Horton. He put his ear near it.

"My friend," came the voice, "you're a very fine friend.
You've helped all us folks on this dust speck no end.
You've saved all our houses, our ceilings and floors.
You've saved all our churches and grocery stores."²

Imagine that you are performing this reading to a classroom of young students. How will your voice change between Horton's worrying and the wee voice of the "speck-voice?" If you drop your dynamic too much, the students in the back row might not be able to understand what you are saying. Experiment with changing the quality of your voice—raise the register of your voice, or make your voice less solid to sound project the idea of a whisper to the students.

Once you've found a quality of voice that works for the

"speck," you will still need to provide direction within the speck's speech. Each of the speck's words is not equally important. We need to organize our reading around the main points to help the reader clearly understand what we are trying to express.

In order to understand the importance of direction, read the excerpt with equal importance on each word. Make an effort to keep the articulation, pacing, and dynamic quality of your voice the same for each word. Did you find that it becomes difficult to follow your sentences?

Now, let's organize the speech a bit. Decide what the main point is for each sentence. Which word will get the most dynamic stress? Build a slight "crescendo" with your voice toward that word in the sentence and then back away again slightly as you retreat from the important point. Perhaps you might find more than one important word per sentence. Are they equally important? Also consider which points are most important within the entire paragraph, in other words . . . the stressed words are not all equally important.

It is important to realize that there is not one correct "answer" to these questions. You could choose to emphasize the words "saved" and "helped" in each sentence, or you could emphasize the things Horton has saved—folks, houses, churches and grocery stores. You could even choose one of each. Start by emphasizing "helped" then move to the "homes" and "grocery stores" of the following sentences. The point is to make sure that your reading provides this organization. Your exact choices make up your individual interpretation.

Musicians will encounter similar challenges of dynamic projection and phrase direction. Consider the opening of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto:

Example 2. Felix Mendelssohn, Violin Concerto, op. 64.

Allegro molto appassionato.

Why did Mendelssohn write a *piano* dynamic marking for the soloist when a full orchestra is accompanying? If the soloist were to actually play at a *piano* dynamic, they would not be heard! Here it helps to think of the *piano* character and play with a full sound.

What is this *piano* character? What elements of sound can we use to portray that *piano* character? For this article, let us opt

for a tender, yearning melancholy sound. The articulation will therefore be on the gentle side. Begin the bow strokes with soft consonants and allow the dot articulation above the second note to be gentle. Vibrato is an expressive technique we have not discussed yet. Would a tender vibrato be fast, slow, wide or narrow? Also consider sound quality. Should it be thick and heavy or light and more gentle?

Consider the phrase direction next. In our *Horton* reading, we looked at the important point of each sentence. Where are the sentences, or phrases, in this musical excerpt? Within each phrase, which notes are stressed the most? Build a dynamic arc around these notes. In some instances, the arcs will be fairly straightforward. In the first phrase, for example, you could build toward the F# in measure five and then back away evenly. Other arcs might be a little more complex. Measures seven through 10 could have a two part arc: one emphasizing the C in measure seven, then backing away until a second upward arc to the D# in measure 10.

Next, look at how the character will develop as this excerpt continues through the crescendo in the third line. Perhaps the tenderness of the melancholy line is becoming replaced with more urgency. How will this affect your tone color, direction, and articulation? Try to find many different ways that you could make this statement effective.

For our final reading, we will look at more immediate changes of voice in a segment that has dialog between multiple characters in "The Cat in the Hat."

How many characters are in this excerpt? What is the perspective of the narrator, the cat and the fish? Can you interpret emotions that each character might express in this situation? How will your voice change to indicate the different voices, show the punctuation, and demonstrate each emotional perspective? Consider the pacing of your phrases as we did in the *Horton* reading. Which words in each sentence, stanza, or paragraph are most important? Will the pacing change with each voice?

Perhaps the cat's voice is a light, playful tone that is slightly mischievous with words that are pronounced gently. Contrast this to an agitated, demanding voice for the fish that will use a forceful articulation. To further convey the fish's agitation, speed up the pacing through his commentary.

Experiment with the pacing of punctuation marks such as the comma, question mark, and period. Find a timing that leaves room for the listener to comprehend what you have said, but not so much that there is an unnatural "hole" in your speaking. Notice that rhythmic pacing of punctuation will add value to your performance.

Read the passage aloud in a performance that utilizes the various elements of expression we have examined: character, tone of voice, articulation, pacing, rhythmic vitality, and variety. Realize how much more involved you are as a performer when you make these interpretive decisions.

Solo string literature also will feature contrasting voices and elements similar to that of punctuation in speech. Consider the Gigue from Bach's third Cello Suite:

The Cat in the Hat

by Dr. Seuss

"I know some new tricks,"
Said the Cat in the Hat.
"A lot of good tricks.
I will show them to you.
Your mother
Will not mind at all if I do."

Then Sally and I
Did not know what to say.
Our mother was out of the house
For the day.

But our fish said, "No! No!
Make that cat go away!
Tell that Cat in the Hat
You do NOT want to play.
He should not be here.
He should not be about.
He should not be here
When your mother is out!"

"Now! Now! Have no fear.
Have no fear!" said the cat.
"My tricks are not bad,"
Said the Cat in the Hat.
"Why, we can have
Lots of good fun,
If you wish,
With a game that I call
UP-UP-UP with a fish!"

"Put me down!" said the fish.
"This is no fun at all!
Put me down!" said the fish.
"I do NOT wish to fall!"³



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Example 3. Johann Sebastian Bach, Cello Suite #3, Gigue.

GIGUE.
Allegro.

A clear example of different voices occurs between measures 10 and 11 and 14 and 15. Bach's utilization of inverted scalar passages in separate registers provides a great opportunity to exaggerate the musical dialog. First, consider what general character you would like to present. What sound quality, articulation, and pacing will you use? How will you vary these characteristics through the dialog? Given the sudden jump to the low register in measure 11, try making the lower statement a gruffer voice that is more adamantly articulated than the opening.

While there is not punctuation, per se, in music, we do have musical elements that help serve the same function. Articulation, phrasing, and rhythmic organization are elements of musical punctuation that we've already examined. Another element is that of beat hierarchy. Not all beats are created equal within a bar. Generally, beat one is most important in all time signatures. In this three/eight, we also will need to create a sense of motion and energy from beat three to one. Therefore, beat three will crescendo slightly into the next measure. Bring this out in the Bach Gigue.

Notice that occasionally you will feel a beat three does not belong to the next measure, such as in measure five. Here, we could organize the whole measure as "falling" from beat one. Stress the first beat and back away evenly through the rest of the bar. Another slight change from the typical beat hierarchy is in measure 10. Here, allow beats two and three to move toward downbeat of measure 11.

With this concept, we are beginning to examine elements of style that are appropriate to each composer and time period. These are elements of interpretation that are honed after years of exposure and study, yet they can be related back to organization in speech. Performance of dramatic readings can be useful in introducing these advanced concepts to students.

Studio Use

You don't have to use Dr. Seuss books for dramatic reading work. Ask your students to pick any excerpt of their choice that contains a definite character. They should be prepared to perform the excerpt in class.

In class, ask each student to introduce their work and perform it in a dramatic reading. Students will often be shy at first—it might help if the teacher also prepares a reading and begins the class. Keep the atmosphere fun and engaging and allow yourself to sound silly and exaggerated.

Use the following questions to help spark a dialog with each student and hone their reading into an engaging performance.

- What is the general mood or character of the passage?
- Does the character stay the same, or is there some development of the character throughout the excerpt?
- Is there dialog in this excerpt? If so, how do you change your tone of voice?
- Is your articulation helping your character?
- Are you projecting your character to the back of the hall?
- What is the most important idea in a passage? Are you phrasing to help make this clear?
- What is the rhythmic pacing of the passage? Notice how the author's punctuation might influence your ideas.

You will find that students will have similar issues in their musical and spoken performances. Students who fail to provide space at the end of a musical idea, for example, typically barrel through punctuation in a reading. Students who perform all dynamics, as if for a practice room-sized hall, often will speak very quietly in their readings. Therefore, after working to make their dramatic reading more effective, have the student bring the same interpretive elements to life in a musical performance.

By exploring interpretation and performance of spoken literature, we can extrapolate universal concepts into the wordless medium of music. We must begin with forming an opinion of what we want to communicate to the audience. Elements such as color, articulation, and pacing are means to the ultimate goal of communication. As our students learn to include these non-concrete elements into their performance, they will begin to communicate with their audience more effectively and improve their musicality. In doing so, they will begin to master what Wordsworth described as "the universal language of music."

Endnotes

¹ Geisel, Theodor Seuss. *If I ran the circus*. New York: Random House, 1956.

² Geisel, Theodor Seuss. *Horton hears a who!* New York: Random House, 1954.

³ Geisel, Theodor Seuss. *The cat in the hat*. New York: Random House, 1957.



Violist Hillary Herndon has earned a national reputation for her brilliant playing, insightful teaching, and creative programming. She has been heard on NPR and PBS and has collaborated with some of the world's foremost musicians, including Carol Wincenc, James VanDemark and Itzhak Perlman. Herndon teaches at the University of Tennessee, Montecito Music Festival, and the Viola Intensive Workshops. She has recently been elected to serve on the American Viola Society Executive Board and has published teaching articles in the *American String Teacher* and the *Journal of the American Viola Society*. Herndon holds degrees from Eastman and Juilliard. For more information, visit www.hillaryherndon.com.