

Phi Beta Mu ~ Theta Chapter South Carolina

Crossing the Threshold from the Components of Playing to Communicating Musically

by Scott Rush

Much of how we spend our rehearsal time involves perfecting the *Components of Playing*. After all, bad tone quality supersedes much, if not all, of the components ... you can't tune a bad sound. The hard work required to hone skills such as timing, tuning, balance and blend are noble undertakings and should be passionately pursued. The fundamentals time slated at the beginning of each rehearsal should be devised to address the various components as part of the normal warm-up process. However, it is imperative that our teaching curriculum not stop there. So the question seems to be ... once we've addressed the various components, then what?

For the sake of providing a systematic process to this musical journey, I would like to suggest the following exercise. Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of the page. On the left side of the paper, write the following *Components of Playing* list, leaving several spaces between each word. This is essentially *what* you are responsible for teaching in terms of fundamentals. On the right side, start listing *how* you teach the various components. Fill as much of the right side as you can by listing teaching strategies, method books, worksheets, and any other means that you use to teach the component. When you're done, you should have a blueprint for your daily, weekly, and quarterly fundamentals curriculum. You should be able to visibly see your teaching process in action. Here is a template for your work:

The Components of Playing

What to Teach

1. Tone
2. Timing
3. Tuning
4. Dynamics
5. Phrasing
6. Articulations (staccato, marcato, legato, slurred, various accents)
7. Rhythm
8. Balance
9. Blend
10. Attacks
11. Releases
12. Duration of notes
13. Range
14. Endurance
15. Technique
16. Tone Color (intensity, color spectrum, sonority)
17. Consistency / Accuracy

How to Teach It?

Doing this exercise will make tremendous headway toward getting your students from point A to point B. It establishes a rehearsal dialogue, provides a blueprint for teaching fundamentals, and allows for transfer from the components to music making. Where all of the above-named components are critical, it shouldn't stop here. Another way of stating this process is *equipping the musical toolbox*. It's not, in and of itself, a way of communicating musically. However, these components must certainly be tenaciously perfected to have a chance at musical communication.

It's All A Means to an End ... Music Making

Once the musical toolbox has been filled, then what? Well, we must cross the threshold from the *Components of Playing* to communicating something musically.

Musicianship (beauty, shape, interpretation, emotion, style, mood, artistry)

These words represent the ability to express something through the artistry of the music-making process. The following is a different type of dialogue, which should be used when students are mature enough musically to accomplish the nuance or concept.

Musical Tips

- Long notes should have direction—they should intensify or decrescendo.
- Phrases should have peaks and valleys, arrival points, and weighted notes (agogic).
- You should carry over (connect) phrases and make sure you don't breathe at inappropriate places.
- If a line is repeated, do something different with it the second time.
- Find tension and release points.
- Musical moments usually take longer to build than they do to pull away.
- In many styles, short notes lead to long notes.

Extramusical Stimuli

- It's what's NOT on the page that makes the music.
- Use "mood" words to establish style and ambiance.
- Assign words to entire musical phrases to help establish meaning and purpose.
- Persichetti said, "Music is either dancing or singing."
- It's what happens between the notes that makes the music come alive.
- The music will tell you what to do; the intuitive response causes you to create more than what's on the page.

Philosophical Prompts

- Trust your soul to feel and express the music—be musical! Tell a musical story with passion and conviction.
- The conductor's blood must drip with musical conviction, both to the players and the audience.
- Try to discover music in every phrase.
- Unlike a painting or sculpture, music can be re-created again and again, with new meaning and understanding.
- The paper and ink don't make the music; instruments make no sounds on their own—the soul creates the music.
- Music must be interpreted to the point that the performance is said to be *artistic* and the performers, *artists*.

These bullets are not comprehensive, but are designed to establish a vocabulary and a culture for music making. These musical truths are different from the *Components* list in that they cause the performer to feel and interpret the notes and ink on the page. It's a different mindset than being "in tune," playing "in time" or executing the correct articulation. It's a form of musical communication, a language in and of itself. This list can be used as part of your daily teaching during fundamentals time. However, the students must be at the point in their musical development where you're not talking over their heads. Our rehearsal halls should be filled with this type of dialogue. Try making a list of "musical truths" that you use within the rehearsal setting.

Music Making Exercise

In a practical, real-world application, what does communicating through the language of music sound like? Here is an exercise to help explain the process.

Ask three students to create a musical conversation using the first five notes of a scale. The first time I did this, I chose my principal alto saxophonist to be student one and then added a flutist and a percussionist on marimba. I asked them to use the first five notes of the Ab concert scale and to use only quarters, half notes, and whole notes for their rhythmic choices. I then asked student one to begin and end the conversation on tonic "do." I also asked them to pick a slow tempo and to genuinely try to express something to one another and the other students in the room. Their segments were limited to no more than eight measures in length. Student one began the conversation

and played an eloquent four-bar phrase. The flute player instinctively picked up the line and developed the conversation. The student on marimba used four-mallet technique to create a beautiful combination of rolls and melodic line, which was a continuation of what had already been established. The conversation lasted for about two minutes and then student one produced a wonderful cadence and ended on “do.” The room was first quiet because everyone was simply stunned. These students had created and crafted beautiful music from their hearts. Softly, someone began to shuffle on the floor and then a person clapped and the room burst forth with energy. Everyone who heard or participated in the experience felt something meaningful and the concept of communicating through music became real and magical. I've used this exercise many times since, and the ensemble always seems to play with more musical conviction after doing the exercise.

Through this type process, students will learn to interpret music and have an intuitive response to music. This allows them to become artists and is a worthwhile, fulfilling experience. George Szell once stated:

"When you start going into every phrase and search for the maximum content that can be conveyed without distortion or gratuitous underlining, you are probing further into the heart of the music and touching the composer himself."