
BASICS

Belief: living the music

‘Belief’ is a term used in the theatre, and is to do with using genuine personal emotion to become one with the role an actor is playing.

When the music is happy, I am happy

My first encounter with belief came as a student after hearing the Bulgarian Vanya Milanova playing each week in Yfrah Neuman’s masterclasses at the Guildhall School of Music in London.

Vanya was an incredibly good violinist and could play the most difficult pieces with complete ease, mastery and delight. Every note was in tune and clean, but at the same time played with grace and style and every conceivable colour and emotion. I wondered what it felt like to be able to play like that. One day I asked her: “What do you think about when you are playing?” Her English at the time was rudimentary, so in a thick Bulgarian accent she replied: “When the music is happy, I am happy...when the music is sad, I am sad...”

She also said that sometimes she might see herself standing on top of a mountain, looking out at fabulous scenery stretching out for miles below, or whatever picture was appropriate to the music. Later I discovered that in those few words she had expressed the essence not only of musical performance but also of acting.

The musician as actor

Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), regarded as the father of modern theatre, divided acting into three categories: Mechanical Acting, Representative Acting, and Belief. The same principles that exist in acting apply equally to playing an instrument, as we strive to get away from ‘playing the violin’ and lose ourselves in the music instead.

Mechanical acting

In mechanical acting you do not feel the character or the emotion of the drama at all. When you are playing Romeo, you remain yourself and merely say Romeo’s words and try to make appropriate gestures and expressions. There is a lot of acting like this in the original silent, black-and-white movies, where the characters replaced words by making all their actions and expressions larger-than-life: if they wanted to appear happy or sad, they made clown-size gestures.

In playing the violin, mechanical playing means that there is no emotional involvement. You hold the bow between your fingers and learn how to pull and push it in a straight line. You learn how to raise and drop the left fingers, how to vibrate or change position, and so on. You know that this note here should be loud, so you play it loudly; that note there needs more vibrato so you vibrate wider and faster; and so on. All the time, you remain ‘in your head’ rather than ‘playing from the heart’: the controlling ‘you’, which is somewhere behind your eyes and between your ears, issues commands to the hands and fingers.

Representative acting

In representative acting you start off with genuine feeling of the character or the drama. Imagine that you are on your own rehearsing your lines. You are enjoying yourself, and feel inspired by the character you are acting. You speak and act with feeling and conviction. You notice that as you said a certain word you made a particular gesture with your hand, and at the same time made a particular expression in your face.

The gestures, and the expression, seem particularly good and fitting. After all, they happened naturally and spontaneously. So you repeat the passage a few times, each time making the same gesture and facial expression, memorising how to do it. Then the next day, when it comes to the performance, you reproduce again all the gestures and the expressions that you have rehearsed beforehand.

Although these expressions and gestures started in a moment when you had ‘become the character’, later on when they were mechanically reproduced they were no longer real. They easily come out stiltedly or unnaturally because now they are being reproduced coldly and deliberately. But at least they were genuine at first.

We do the same thing practising the violin. You are enjoying playing, and notice, say, how the bow seemed to sink into the string on a particular expressive note, and how your vibrato widened and quickened, producing a warm expressive colour. So you go over it several times, doing the same thing with the bow and the vibrato, memorising how to do it again so that you can reproduce, or represent, the ‘expressive colour’.

The basis of the Stanislavsky System (known as ‘the method’), is that the most important thing is for an actor to be believed rather than only recognized or understood.

To get to this ‘belief’ Stanislavsky used ‘emotional memory’. To act a role that involves happiness, the actor must remember a time when they felt happy; to act a role that involves fear, the actor must remember something frightening; and then live the role in the play while re-living the emotional energy that they had once felt.

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Of course, by the time you are up on stage playing the piece, and playing bow strokes and vibratos that you have practised in order to represent what you had once felt in the past, the aliveness and spark in the playing is now lost.

Belief

When an expert actor is acting Romeo he does not remain himself, merely saying Romeo's words and trying to make Romeo's gestures: instead, he draws on his own emotional history and identifies with Romeo's situation so completely that he *becomes* Romeo, and thinks and feels as Romeo does.

Playing music in this way means that you go off into a dream-like state where the music simply pours out of you.

Mesto: put yourself in a mood of sadness

This twentieth century idea of Belief in the theatre is identical to eighteenth century ideas about expression in music. In 1751 Geminiani wrote:

I would besides advise, as well the Composer as the Performer, who is ambitious to inspire his Audience, to be first inspired himself; which he cannot fail to be if he chuses a Work of Genius, if he makes himself thoroughly acquainted with all its Beauties; and if while his Imagination is warm and glowing he pours the same exalted Spirit into his own Performance.

In Leopold Mozart's *Violin School*, published in 1756, he includes a short dictionary of Common Italian Terms. Defining the word 'mesto', Leopold does not say only that it means 'sad':

Mesto: sad. This word serves to remind us that we must imagine ourselves in a mood of sadness, in order to arouse in the listeners the melancholy which the composer has sought to express in the piece.

At the end of the section Leopold Mozart finishes by saying:

From all these...terms is to be seen, as clear as sunlight, that every effort must be made to put the player in the mood which reigns in the piece itself; in order thereby to penetrate the souls of the listeners and to excite their emotions.²

Twenty years after Mozart, C. P. E. Bach published in 1778 a 'Treatise on Keyboard Playing'. He included a section about performance:

A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved. He must of necessity feel all of the affects that he hopes to arouse in his audience, for the revealing of his own humor will stimulate a like humor in the listener. In languishing, sad passages, the performer must languish and grow sad. Thus will the expression of the piece be more clearly perceived by the audience...Similarly, in lively, joyous passages, the executant must again put himself into the appropriate mood. And so, constantly varying the passions, he will barely quiet one before he rouses another.¹

Playing with inspiration

I often think of a telephone conversation I had with Dorothy DeLay around the time when I had first discovered these quotes from C. P. E. Bach and Leopold Mozart. 'Becoming one with the music' had become my favourite theme in both playing and teaching, so over the phone I read to her the passages quoted above.

I asked her what she thought of it all. Of course she liked it very much.

"But you know, everything you have said there is all in eighteenth-century language," she said. "Today, in the late twentieth century, the equivalent is to say of somebody that he or she plays 'with inspiration!'"

Before you can inspire with emotion, you must be swamped with it yourself. Before you can move their tears, your own must flow. To convince them, you must yourself believe.

Winston Churchill
(1874-1965, British statesman, Prime Minister)