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10-minute Pres. Analysis
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Self-Analysis of Ten-Minute “Taboo” Presentation

Introduction

Last Tuesday I was among the first students in our Teaching Music History class to give a ten-minute presentation on an individual topic of choice. Prof. Hallmark made the selection of who would present based on degree program standing: The others who presented their topics were 2nd and 3rd year DMA students. Although I am not enrolled at New England Conservatory as a student (I am on Professional Staff), I guess Hallmark thought I could perform at a level equal to the DMA students.

The presentation requirements, as I understood them, were open-ended: Choose a piece to introduce to your classmates. Use a ‘straight lecture’ format. Use of Powerpoint presentations, hand-outs, audio or video recordings, etc. would be allowed; the only real requirement would be that each presentation must fall strictly within ten minutes. Following each presentation, the floor would be opened for questions or comments from the audience (our classmates). Comments from the audience could pertain either to the lecture style and presentation attributes, or to the content itself.

Some Context

Although I do not consider myself to be a presenter or lecturer by profession, I have had a lot of experience giving presentations, particularly in the last four years. My course work in 2003-‘04 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education heavily emphasized presentations; many of the students there were mid-career and were either classroom teachers, administrators, or researchers for whom public presentations were a norm of their work. I quickly learned the benefits (and taboos) of what an effective slide show could be, how to incorporate hand-outs, and had to practice projecting my voice, among other things. Recent work for the Music-In-Education National Consortium and with Larry Scripp (whom has masterful technique in giving presentations) has given me further experience: as part of my work with Larry, I am responsible for giving timed 15-minute lectures to public school administrators, district superintendents, college professors, heads of major arts organizations, and others whom have certainly intimidated me beyond my individual comfort level—and have thus ‘broken me in’ to the world of presenting.

Alongside the presentation and conducting of educational research, my musical career has blossomed, and some of its success I attribute to my musicological interest and fervent research and study. My principal area of interest has been the study of Exotica music, particularly identifying and investigating its progenitors, and how these influences have come together to make Exotica a music of its own. With my band WAITIKI, I have made frequent appearances at Exotica trade shows, music/cultural festivals, and am regularly called on as a guest for radio shows, pod casts, panel discussions, Q&A sessions; events small and large, public, private, face-to-face, and over the phone/Internet. Some recent appearances have

included two hour-long radio shows for National Public Radio affiliate stations, in which I was given the opportunity to suggest 90 minutes worth of recordings, and then tie each recording together with mini-lectures.

Pre-Presentation Thoughts, Worries, Anxieties, etc.

Like many others, pre-presentation anxiety is one of my faults. I think my biggest worry is getting up to present and either forgetting what I want to say, or trying to say it but not being articulate enough and thus getting a lot of blank stares. Ancillary worries are: rambling (in which main points and others get tangled, and so the audience doesn't know what the presentation's 'take-aways' are) and running out of time and having to leave off main or important points. I suppose I'm fortunate in the sense that technology problems don't really concern me, and that I don't care if someone takes issue with the content that I present: in fact, a bit of conflict can be fun sometimes!

I initially drafted outlines for two different presentations when Hallmark presented the assignment. I was torn between which song to present ("The Magic Islands," a love ballad made famous by Alfred Aholo Apaka, or "Taboo"). Each had its own merits and either could have easily been used as an entry point to introducing the Exotica genre. I decided to 'shop' my "Taboo" outline to Hallmark because I thought her comments would be applicable to either outline. I wasn't sure what she'd think of using the piece as an entrée to Exotica, but thought I'd give it a try anyway.

To my delight, Dr. Hallmark was indeed intrigued by my outline, and showed interest in one of the recordings I hoped to play: a Kronos Quartet recording arranged by Oswaldo Golijov, which I thought would show great contrast with some of the Exotica-era recordings by Arthur Lyman. My "Magic Islands" plan didn't have a similar contemporary recording, and so I went with the "Taboo" plan.

The biggest problem I encountered while practicing my "Taboo" presentation was staying on track, and thus on time, when improvising my speech. I practiced with a stopwatch and a audio recorder. Most of the time I was able to stay within 12 minutes, but it was difficult to get consistently under 10 minutes while improvising (even with an outline). So I decided to script it. Having a script would mean the following: that I could accurately time my presentation; that I could ensure having little or no unnecessary vocalizations (e.g. 'um', 'uh', 'so on and so forth', 'such as', and other things that I have the tendency of making when nervous or improvising); that the cadences of my presentation fit with the transitions between slides and recordings; and that I could make sure my main points and subsidiary points fit into the peaks and valleys necessary for my peers to understand what is of most importance.

The Presentation... How I Thought It Went (pre-viewing of videotape)

With the exception of a minor technology foible—the stereo unit wasn't set properly for computer input—I think the presentation went pretty well. The script definitely accomplished what I set it out to do. I made the points I wanted to make; I was able to make transitions

between slides and recordings smoothly; I didn't wander nor get off-topic; I didn't make unnecessary vocalizations; and I stayed strictly within the time limit (even with the tech error mentioned above, I clocked in at 10 minutes 20 seconds). However, the script took a toll as I knew it would. There are differences in tone, projection, speed, and articulation between my narrative voice and my conversational voice. I also take some different approaches towards eye contact and hand gesture. These inconsistencies were picked up on by my peers, and the result was that my audience felt distanced from me, though they were equally intrigued by the subject matter.

I was pleased with the feedback from Dr. Hallmark and my peers, particularly in regard to how "polished" my Powerpoint slides/handouts were and the way I organized my presentation into manageable chunks.

Comments Transcribed from Videotape with Reflection:

From student peers:

- "I thought it was a very, very good presentation. You gave us just enough information on this [handout] for us to know what we're looking at. You put the melody here so that we can glance down and use it as reference. The volume you spoke at was very good. We got all the essential information, the recordings were well chosen, and you even told us why you did it. I thought you went over everything you needed to for a great presentation."
- "Two points to bring up: The issue of how much we read and the issue of how much we take points for speaking. Just occasionally, I felt there was a disconnect between your reading and not-reading. Your tone of voice changes a little bit. That was one thing I picked up on. Of course reading also helps so much because your thoughts are organized. And in terms of the last slide, I wanted to hear your band's performance of this piece. Otherwise I felt this last slide was a little bit gratuitous, which is fine, but if you're giving an academic lecture, it might be inappropriate."

Unfortunately I did not pass out a handout with a list of references or sources for further listening. I had planned to use such a document but decided against it because I was worried about bombarding my audience with too many things. In retrospect I think I should have done it anyway because it would have added credibility to my presentation, and would have been the academically prudent thing to do.

I had also considered a handout of 'guided inquiry questions' that would help my peers further investigate Exotica should they be interested, and perhaps bring to light other ideas that I wouldn't have time to explore within the allotted time. I decided against that also though, because I thought it might stretch the scope of my presentation too far.

I did consider playing a clip of my group as part of that last slide, but because I don't have a recording of us performing "Taboo", I thought it would be unclear to the audience as to why they were hearing a different piece. The last slide may have been gratuitous in this context, but not overtly so.

From the instructor:

- “Very polished. Very masterful. Full of good information. [Your experience] doesn’t take away from the quality of the presentation.”
- “The whole question of reading and speaking extemporaneously is a big one. The question of experience—if you’re aware of that, and the issue of it, and the likelihood that it will change how you encounter it ... there’s a whole different sense of interaction. It doesn’t mean that you can’t read, or have copious notes in front of you, and when you are trying to do a whole lot in a short amount of time, that is certainly the most effective way to do it. There’s no question about that. But there is more of a barrier between you and the people whom you are teaching.”

I chose to script my presentation for the reasons I mentioned above. When listening back to the comments, I noticed that no one said anything about the context of who the audience is—I wonder if I can take that to mean that my presentation would have worked okay with an audience not as musically informed as my classmates?

Analysis of Videotape & Goals for the Semester

The same thoughts I had post-presentation (pre-viewing) applied when I watched the tape. Although the tape does not show the audience while I was presenting, my guess is that if it did, there would be body language from the audience that shows them being ‘turned off’ by my reading from the script vs. me presenting in an organic way.



The videotape also reveals how my body language plays into the way I suspect my audience interprets the tone and formality of my lecture. For much of the video, I am leaning on my hands, slanted diagonally towards the lectern/computer, and the eye contact I make is in short spurts—not for long periods, neither with audience members nor with the projected slides. This coupled with my script reading was surely a turn-off and disengaged my audience.

My main goal for this semester is to feel comfortable giving lectures, short and long, without the crutch of a script or extensive notes. I have long felt comfortable internalizing subject matter and leading discussions on it and buttressing these conversations with audio-visual material. But giving straight lectures is a different animal, and it's a skill I must master if I continue public speaking in any context.

James Wilkinson, author of the "Varieties of Teaching" essay in The Art and Craft of Teaching (Margaret Gullette, Editor), refers to the varying skills a successful teacher needs:

A good lecturer may experience problems leading a successful discussion; the discussion leader skilled in asking questions may feel ill at ease when conducting a monologue from the lecture podium. But it should be a teacher's goal to master the full scale of teaching styles, and to know the strengths and drawbacks of each (Gullette, 1984).

This straight-lecture format was definitely good practice for me, because as much as the topic and content is put front and center, so are my methods of organizing and presenting that material. I suppose another crutch I have is to put the student at the center of the conversation; after all, there is a huge push for education these days to be learner-centric rather than topic-centric, and my own philosophy and background in education is from that standpoint (learner-centric) as well. So, this was all a good exercise.

Further Thoughts

As an aside, I think that this course (like other education-focused courses at New England Conservatory) is an important parallel to the school's performance-based curriculum; particularly because it encourages budding teachers to freely and openly explore and develop each's own personal teaching style. So often teachers-to-be (also known as *pre-professional* teachers) are thrown into classrooms with little preparation or minimal chance to practice teaching.

While at NEC, I spent many hours practicing pieces in small motifs, and then slowly linking those motifs together to create longer phrases. Those phrases then had to be linked to each other, and so any transition that occurred between phrases would have to be carefully planned and executed, in accordance with accompanying parts, harmonic structure, rhythm, and form. In other words, it would all have to make sense. I have since come to understand the art of presenting and teaching to be no different. As is stated by Wilkinson, part of the trickiness of lecturing is in the way that one must analyze the subject matter and present it in a logical, flowing, way:

How to argue a point and not simply present data; how to link arguments in a logical chain; how to sum up with a sure sense of what is essential and what is merely extrinsic to your case are skills that require coaching and practice. Students need to be helped to present their ideas with grace and to strive for the control, confidence, and economy of means that help make what Alfred North Whitehead once termed a "sense of style." (Ibid.)

I have already spent many nights working on this from the standpoint of the written word, and have slowly begun spinning this experience out, into other forms of teaching that I am comfortable with: double bass & music reading lessons; ensemble coaching; and informal lecturing on Exotica music and the Hawaiian culture. However, what I need more practice with is working in more formal venues, with a larger and/or mixed audience, and in extended time periods. Thus, I am excited to conduct the 50-minute classes that are part of the assignments for this course, and hope to further develop the “sense of style” that Wilkinson, Whitehead, and others often refer to as being a crucial characteristic of effective teaching (Ibid).

Video and summary of this reflection/analysis posted at the CMIE NewsBlog:
<http://centerformie.org/blog>

Work Cited:

Wilkinson, J. (1984). Varieties of Teaching. In M. Gullette (Ed.), The Art and Craft of Teaching (p. 4). Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.