

Ask Mike!

Stressed about an upcoming gig? Work got you singing the blues? Columnist Michael Goode can help!



BY MICHAEL I. GOODE,
LOCAL 47 MEMBER

In my last column, in March, we talked about changing a stage demeanor you don't like, and why legal things matter. Today we are going to talk about getting your students to play with more expression, playing while sick, and keeping your emotions from going out of control on the job.

Q: I am a professor of trumpet and I am trying to get my students to tell a musical story, to play with more expression. Do you have any suggestions on how to get them to do this?

A: Certainly. What we don't realize sometimes as musicians is that we really are musical actors; that is, what we really are trying to do if we are trying to make art is tell a musical story of some kind, whether it be jazz, rock, pop, hip-hop, classical or whatever style or field we are playing. The audience connects most of all to emotion, and the emotion can only come through the notes by telling some kind of story, some kind of universal experience that we all have as human beings on this planet while

we are playing. This can seem to be a little hard to grasp for a young student, but you can approach it much more easily by explaining to him that all great musicians are also great "musical actors"; that is, when they get "into the zone" what they are really doing is getting into character, just like an actor does. Having done a little professional acting in film and on TV, I can appreciate why this works in playing. What happens as an actor is that you are forced to become the character you are portraying, and when that happens, your entire being is conveying the full emotional story of who that character is to the audience.

Tell your student to put him or herself in the role of a character in a play based on what the story behind the piece of music might be. If there is no clear storyline, then tell your student to pick an emotion, and describe that emotion to you while they are playing. Start with a simple piece that does not have any complicated phrases and when you are satisfied that they are getting the concept, you can have them try this on more technically advanced pieces. The student will forget how hard the piece is and focus on telling either the emotion or a storyline, and everything will get easier and the playing will improve dramatically!

Q: What do I do when I have to play a job and I am sick and have to play anyway?

A: Sometimes the show must go on. If you have to play while sick, the best thing to do is a version of "acting as if"; that is, you will have to act as if you are feeling well when you are playing the gig even though you feel unwell. Remember a time and hear in your head when you played the best you've ever played. If you can't remember a

time when you played your best, imagine you are playing like one of your musical heroes. We all have them. This will set your nervous system up to play your best in spite of the circumstances. My teacher, Arnold Jacobs, told the story of how when he had a terrible case of the flu he was able to use this technique to play great in spite of the fact of how he was feeling at the time to great effect. Also, writing an anger letter about being sick – something like, "I am angry that I am sick and have to play..." and finish the sentence – will help you focus before you get to the gig. For more details on writing an anger letter, see my answer to the next question.

Q: Gee, Mike, I am losing patience over everything, getting upset when I practice, when I play on the job, just generally starting to feel unsettled. I am afraid that I am going to come unglued soon and don't want this to happen on a gig. Help!

A: Sometimes, we go through periods in life where things pile up emotionally for various reasons and we begin to not be able to cope anymore. Do not think that you can tough this one out. I am glad that you wrote me. You need to contact a mental health professional, someone that you can talk to immediately and start talking. There are probably things in your life that are coming to the surface that need to be addressed emotionally and your unsettled feeling is a way that your mind and your body are telling you that something is wrong. If you don't know who to contact, talk to your doctor and get a referral. Also, go to your doctor to get checked out to make sure that there is nothing physically wrong with you as well.

It will also help if you write one of the anger letters that I have suggested in

the past. This will help you focus in on what it is that may be bothering you emotionally and you will have much more productive sessions with both your doctor and whomever you choose to help you with the emotional part from your doctor's referral. Begin the letter with a line such as: "I am angry that..." and finish the sentence with whatever is on your mind. The letter should be private, uncensored, and should be torn up when done. Use pen and ink to write it if at all possible. You will feel three possible outcomes when finished with the letter: relief; you may think of something else that you are angry about, in which case keep writing until you get relief; and the last possibility is that you may feel numb, which means you are hitting on a large issue. If you do feel numb and cannot think of anything to write about, write the following sentence: "I am angry that I feel numb and have no reference point." Immediately you will be reminded of whatever it is that you are angry about, and start writing until you get relief and tear the letter up when you are done. You will be able to go in to counseling with a much clearer picture of what is bothering you and get control back over your life and prevent an impending emotional issue from getting out of control. You will get back into balance and no longer have to worry about losing your cool on a gig!

Send your questions to: Ask Mike!, Trumpetworks Press, P.O. Box 11574, Marina del Rey, CA 90295 or you can check out my website at www.trumpetworkspress.com and see information on my book, "Stage Fright in Music Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious." All names are confidential and will not be published.

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