



HARP

Eight Layers of Performing

by Saul Davis Zlatkovsky

I have identified the following eight steps in my process of performing recitals. I hold solo recitals to be the most essential form of music performing: one person, one instrument, the audience (and maybe a piano). I have long felt there was more to it than simply standing there and playing. I think it has spiritual dimensions, and artists reach far deeper in their act of performance, consciously or not. I believe these steps are necessary to perform at the best of one's ability. Though one must be flexible in actual situations, if the process becomes second nature, then it may take no time at all. I am sure it differs slightly for stage performers of different types, but I am equally sure they have parallel experiences. It may sound more complicated than it actually is. It may in the end only require a moment of acknowledgement of these steps. And the preparation of these steps can take place well in advance of waiting in the green room.

1. Preparation

You have to thoroughly learn what you will perform.

2. Transformation & Divination

Divine inspiration, a sense of the divine, needs to ultimately result from your preparation and be part of your intention in performing. The act of transformation from the mundane to the exceptional, from ordinary to rare, the sense of specialness is essential to performing. Nobody pays to see a stranger walk on to a stage and play as though it is just an everyday, ordinary past-time occupation (even though famous performers are sometimes seen to do this). They are coming to have an experience, to meet a persona, not unlike the star quality of movie stars. We have to accept that there are roots in ancient ritual in performing, and we fulfill the role of performer as priest or priestess. Stage performers have their costumes and make-up to don, which aids greatly in transformation, especially if they also have a character to become. For musicians, we must become the piece. Each piece is a new role for us to play. For male

musicians, the absence of make-up can interfere with this process. We can either apply a subtle layer of powder or some such, or look in the mirror to create the thought of transformation, of disguise. It would probably not hurt for men to wear basic stage makeup, a foundation and base and powder, depending on the lighting.

Now, after changing, you have concentrated yourself, stripped down to your essence, cleared your mind, and thought about not just how you want to play, but the kind of experience you want the audience to have: thoughtful, inspiring, healing, restful, recreational, pleasurable, sensual, spiritual, and so on. These intentions are what will encase the performance and flavor it, as well as the state of your soul. You are laid bare as a performer, and if you are feeling despicable, the audience may well pick up on that. Anger and other negative emotions come across badly and register strangely, no matter how fine the playing.

3. Presentation & Intention

As you enter the stage you are beginning your presentation. How you comport yourself on stage, what your intentions are, are all projected to the audience. Therefore, your movements are economical, to the point, as elegant as possible, all contributing to the stage-picture. It doesn't hurt to rehearse your walk, your bow. You place yourself in center-stage front for balanced view. If you must talk to the audience before playing, bear in mind that the performance has begun, therefore your speaking should be on a comparable level of preparation as the music playing. You must be clear, audible and pleasant to hear, erudite, and in no way apologetic about what you will play. It is best to say nothing at all. How will you transition from speaking to playing? You have put the wrong flavor in the expectant ears. It relaxes the audience, perhaps, and might release stress, but it also deflates the expectation and excitement. There are exceptions, for instance, if you are playing for friends, or there is a relevant anecdote to share.

4. Origination & Destination

Before you begin playing the first note, you must begin. Begin the beginning. The true beginning is when you focus, formulate the moment of starting, picking up your instrument and raising your bow, that upbeat before the downbeat, your inhalation, that moment you establish your tempo and mood. Before you have begun the first note you have begun the action leading to it—that is the beginning of the performance. In that moment you are or must be finding the place in yourself where this particular music or performance resides. It must originate from there and find its destination in the audience. I find it difficult to do this for media such as radio with no present audience, and have not yet found a solution. This process is repeated for each individual piece. It is especially important for a singer to find a different sense of character, a vocal coloration, a manner for each song. I have listened to perfect performances of say, 20 Irish songs, and without the individualization of each song, they all blended into each other and became like wallpaper. Victoria de los Angeles, the soprano, one of the finest interpretive artists ever, was a master of this. When you listen to her sing a group of songs, each one is distinct, and each group is distinct.

5. Continuity & Specification

You must have continuity throughout the performance, through every note and detail, a continuousness of thought and flow of energy, feeling, expression. You must be specific in every detail, no glossing over small notes or seemingly inconsequential figures. They are all essential threads in the tapestry you are weaving, without which it begins to leak its essence.

6. Expression

As you play, you must express something, something from the divine, a universal mood, sensation, an essence, a cloud, a softness without which strength is merely hardness. Notice that this is not "self-expression," playing how you feel the music. There is

an element of that, but you are hopefully striving to realize the composer's vision, and your individuality will come across while doing that. To experience an expressive artist, I suggest watching ballerinas like Alicia Markova and Margot Fonteyn. For line, Joan Sutherland and Bidu Sayao. For color, expression, individuation, de los Angeles.

7. Ideation

Now that you are in the piece, you are creating its form and concept, and communicating that to the audience. You are finding and stating its importance, giving it life and breath, creating the living art that is performing. As you find its core and essence, you are recreating the idea that is manifested as the piece. As a composer, I find each piece begins with an impulse that grows and grows through the refinement into its final form, all of which is somehow contained in that initial impulse. Without a sense of idea, your performance will be lacking in depth. It takes time and experi-

ence to develop this. What are you creating then, if you are recreating an idea? You are creating the performance itself, and you are creating the audience's experience of this idea through your artistry, as if a prism. Some people like to call performing an interpretive art, a recreative art, but they miss the essential point that you are creating the magical experience of the performance itself.

8. Completion & Return

As you finish, you return from these layers to the presentation layer. Here you must pay attention to the audience as you relax and breathe, and honor them as they honor you by bowing, exiting and returning, re-greeting them with your joy each time you re-enter, reveling in their attention and encouraging their appreciation. If you have built your program well, it shall have inspired them and come to a climactic end, and perhaps you shall enjoy a standing ovation. How you conduct yourself here creates

the sense of completion of the program, and how you relate to the audience determines the result. Finally, after it is all over, you hopefully begin to experience some personal reward as you return home to your well-earned rest.

Saul Davis Zlatkovsky, composer-harpist, studied harp at MacPhail, Macalester College, Tanglewood, Manhattan School of Music and the Salzedo Summer Harp Colony. After a long residency in New York City, he is living in Philadelphia. He has coached harp students at the Curtis Institute of Music. His compositions have been performed at the American Harp Society Conference and are published by Da Costa Music House and Harpiana Publications. He has performed many recitals at Macalester College and performed at the St. Paul Jewish Community Center, and Mayflower Church. Saul also serves as Harp Forum editor for the American String Teacher magazine. †