

2020-01

# Beyond rehearsal: before and after

---

Terry Everson. 2020. "Beyond Rehearsal: Before and After." ITG Journal, Volume 44, Issue 2, pp. 66 - 67.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/40912>

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

## **BEYOND REHEARSAL: BEFORE AND AFTER**

In my 20 years of coaching brass chamber music at Boston University, I have noticed two aspects of students' approach that often lag behind their rehearsal techniques: what happens **before** rehearsing, and what happens **after!** In this article, I'll share the ideas I've found to be important in these two relatively overlooked areas.

### **BEFORE**

In order to reach any destination efficiently, advance planning is key! When we know where we're going, we can figure out the final leg of the journey, then the one that gets us to the final leg, and so on until we know our first step. Accordingly, I can break the pre-rehearsal category down into yet four more subcategories (in reverse order): learning the score, learning one's part, fundamentals of technique, and fundamentals of musicianship. I'll address these in the preferred chronological order below.

Regrettably, most students entering university-level study aren't fluent in the language of music, which encompasses solid reading and listening skills. This may sound harsh, but rather than dwelling on the indictment (with which I suspect many of my colleagues will concur), I'd prefer to focus on the cure! I encourage young musicians to take every possible opportunity to **first** play by ear, **then** ascertain how each aural gesture appears in musical notation. This is analogous to how we learn our spoken language: first by imitation, and only then by reading (most of us spoke the word "no" [**many** times!] before we knew how it looked in print). In my opinion, this is most effectively done on one's own, according to interest, with correction and further guidance coming from the teacher after the fact. I played along with many recordings without ever seeing scores when I was in junior high and high school, building a more organic connection between my ear and my playing, which in turn helped my reading take on a lively quality rather than the comparatively sterile renditions of exercises, etudes and solos I've often heard.

I place fundamentals of technique **after** fundamentals of musicianship, because technique should always be placed in the service of music, not vice-versa. That being said, our results-oriented culture often pushes us to aim for **goals** rather than the **tools** that make those goals attainable! Physical fundamentals were aspects I often bypassed along the way, preferring rather to just repeat playing through my pieces over and over with limited progress (all the while reinforcing my poor playing habits). Consistent work on efficiency, soft playing, flow, *soft playing*, flexibility, **soft playing**, articulation, **SOFT PLAYING**, scales/arpeggios, etc. pays huge dividends in both the short and long run. A scientific analogy may compare physical fundamentals to a wormhole in space, allowing us to reach a distant destination (a piece we're preparing) in a fraction of the time; the short-term hard work creates a long-term shortcut! [Side note: if we work enough at the repeated terms a few sentences above, we may even find ourselves invited to do some **mixed** chamber music, rather than just brass...]

As we continue to refine our musical and physical fundamentals, it's time to turn to our music. There is no worse feeling for a coach than dealing with under-preparation of individual parts; it's like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle with pieces the dog tried to eat, and things just won't fit together. The same holds true for the colleagues of someone who hasn't learned their music, though they may often be too polite to call out the offender in rehearsal! The best chamber music colleague is someone who has worked through every detail on the page - notes, dynamics, rhythms, *dynamics*, tempi, **dynamics**, articulations, **DYNAMICS**, phrasing, etc. - and has considered how to perform not only accurately, but with an opinion about how the music

should be expressed. Though I have highlighted dynamics in the previous sentence as something that often goes lacking in individual (and therefore ensemble) playing, I would assert that rhythm and meter are perhaps the most vital components in any non-conducted group, since it's difficult to impossible to coordinate with someone who doesn't outwardly express a solid internal clock. Practice with metronomes, practice with drum machine grooves, practice with videos of drummers laying down various styles and tempi (there are quite a few on YouTube); every different type of rhythmic practice will deepen your own personal groove and rhythmic stability, and make you the player with whom everyone wants to collaborate!

Finally (though it need not wait for all of the above to be perfected), it is **critically** important for every member of an ensemble to know the full score. One of the most notable coachings I gave in the absence of a score was on the Prologue from Jack Gale's quintet arrangement of *West Side Story*. After the opening gesture, the group correctly played the eighth note upbeat in the high brass, followed by the low brass downbeat; every subsequent iteration was played by everyone together! Without access to the score, everyone assumed that they'd made a mistake to play separately on the first try, and all adjusted to line everything up afterward, not realizing it should always have been pickups and downbeats. Most deficiencies in chamber ensembles aren't so obvious; many times it's more a matter of staying out of the way of a melody, or knowing what harmony is being expressed (and therefore one's function in said harmony) at a given moment, or knowing what's happening in others' parts during a rest in order to coordinate one's next gesture. The aforementioned best chamber music colleague is the one who takes time **before** the first rehearsal to mark cues in their parts; again, taking time in the short term to save it in the long term!

## **AFTER**

So, your group is all musically rehearsed and coached, and the performance approaches; time to simply walk on stage and deliver, right? Would that it were so! Once our musical product has been refined, there's the matter of **effectively** presenting it to the public, in the manner that best suits them (not necessarily us). Among the constellation of amazing brass chamber ensembles over the years, one could note the New York Brass Quintet, American Brass Quintet, Empire Brass, Canadian Brass, New York Cornet and Sacbut Ensemble, New York Trumpet Ensemble, Boston Brass, the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, German Brass, Seraph Brass, Spanish Brass, Proteus 7, Italian Wonderbrass, Summit Brass, and many, many others; each has had a distinct aim and image, and was successful in ways that others on the list could not have been. Deciding on this aim/image is obviously something that should be accomplished in the rehearsal or pre-rehearsal stage, but thinking through how a group's presentation aligns with their vision should inform what happens between the rehearsal hall and the concert stage, and is another multi-faceted process.

Most importantly, know your audience and connect with them in the most engaging manner possible. I have been involved with a few chamber music series that request a level of formality that precludes speaking with the audience; these are, I believe, becoming rarer (for which I am thankful!), but it is incumbent upon your ensemble to determine such from a presenter, as it is a presenter's responsibility to know their audience. As much as it is allowed, any performer needs to connect with their audience in extra-musical ways, the most effective of which is: **TALK TO THEM!** For an introvert like myself, this can be extremely daunting; if my colleagues in the Chestnut Brass Company hadn't insisted from my very first concert that I take my turn speaking, I would have **gladly** sat silently and just played, and my first attempts were, frankly, dismally dull, as I recited biographical information on John McCabe that I had hastily memorized a few

days previously. To be effective, I had to start considering more than just why *I* liked the pieces about which I'd talk, but why **the audience** should, and this could differ a great deal from one performance for a large music school to another in a rural setting. Practice your speaking on your own, then in front of others, in order to find flow and timing, and accept feedback about what works and what falls flat. Believe me, your listeners know whether or not you've taken this component seriously!

Continuing on the topic of communicating, don't assume your audience knows much about what you're doing on stage, nor that it is composed simply of the ignorant masses! Be an ambassador for our art that respects your listeners for their personal life experience and knowledge, but also realizes that they may need a roadmap of sorts for Henze's *Fragments from a Show*, or an explanation of why we use so many different trumpets or mutes, or why Bernstein was an important musical figure, and provide a connection without condescension. When you show a willingness to meet them where **they** are, they'll be open to who **you** are and what you're presenting!

During your playing, find ways to "invite the audience in" as appropriate. Don't simply connect with your colleagues and ignore the people who have taken the time, effort and expense to come hear you. Remember why music is so valuable in the first place; how it touches and heals people, how it opens us all to experiences and emotions we may never have otherwise. I appreciate how my friend Rodney Marsalis urges those who perform with him to not be buried in the music stand, but to really play to the audience, who wants to know us as more than just brass players, even when the instrument is in contact with the face!

Finally, remember that the audience sees **EVERYTHING**, from the moment you walk on stage until you leave! While still in the wings, empty the condensation from your instrument; this should never be seen before you've played a note! Enter the performance space briskly with positive energy, grateful that you get to make music for people who are predisposed to enjoy what you have to offer (as mentioned, they already made the decision to come to your concert). Be sure to bow gracefully to acknowledge applause before anything else, such as setting music on your stand or putting mutes down. When a piece is finished, get up and take your bow(s) with a positive demeanor, again without any intervening activity, no matter how you think the performance went. After another brisk walk off stage, you can gauge the necessity (or lack thereof!) of a return bow or encore.

Remember that your non-musical interactions with your audience and presenters can have as much or more influence than your playing when it comes to being asked back in the future! Respond to all post-concert praise with grateful acceptance; under no circumstances should you **ever** highlight performance flaws - allow your listeners to bask in their fond memories of your presentation! Save your critiques for the flight/drive to the next gig, or for the next rehearsal, and enjoy having had the privilege of making a connection with your colleagues and audience through music!