

Planning an Interactive Presentation

12 Questions to help shape your work in the Community

Anthony Parce

Why questions? While serving in my job as a Community-Embedded Musician, I had lots of opportunities to reflect on my style and priorities. My job had me splitting my time between playing subscription, education, and family concerts in the viola section of the Houston Symphony, working in area schools from pre-k up to college, collaborating with social services, and presenting in hospitals and healthcare centers. This experience made me realize the value of asking the right questions while presenting. There are many things about music that can be taught with one right answer but my objective as a teaching artist is to help the community create personally relevant connections to music. Encouraging your audience to



The author (right) with a League City student as he narrates to an original group composition. The teacher said it was the most she had ever heard the student contribute in class before. Photo courtesy of the Houston Symphony.

have a moment of introspection and reflection about the music can only be done through asking questions that inspire discovery. When planning a presentation, the majority of my preparation is structured around which questions I will be asking, how they will provide opportunities for my audience to participate, and how I can encourage their curiosity. Good questions have no right answer, are not preferential, can be explored, and offer the audience the opportunity to express themselves.

Who is your audience? Having a good idea of who makes up the audience you will be working with will allow you to better target their interests, abilities, and expectations. If you aren't clear on what the cognitive differences are between, say, 3rd and 6th graders, visit the school beforehand or explore online resources such as edutopia.com where you can find video of real classroom activity. Seeing classrooms, rather than reading about them, is an invaluable experience. While there are many activities that I could use with both elementary students and adults, I cater to the ability level of

In the field (ITF): When working in hospitals, most in-patients are on their floor a fairly long time and have much less control over many of the regular details of their lives. When I plan my visits, I make sure to include as much personal choice into my activities as possible. This can be as simple as letting a bedside patient pick which piece I will play next out of the complete Bach cello suites, or letting a volunteer for a group session have a "magic remote" that controls our volume, speed, channel (style), and can even mute certain instruments as we play.

each group with how much modeling and scaffolding I need to use. Beyond activities, being able to play an example from Moana or Frozen might win the heart of a 7-year-old, while pointing out the use of ostinato in a song by Kendrick Lamar that is no longer popular with high-schoolers might lose your street cred.

Who are you? When working in the community, I often feel like I am portraying a character. I wouldn't recommend trying to act like anyone else (kids have a sixth sense for dishonesty); rather, I like to imagine a hyperbole of myself exactly as I want to be. Walking into the room with an instrument already pitches you close to super-hero status in many situations, so this can be an opportunity for you to do some reflection about the kind of presenter you want to be. While enthusiasm, energy, and a projecting voice are beneficial, don't feel that you need to be someone you aren't. I have a colleague who identifies as an introvert but in many situations plays up her insecurities and what she considers to be awkward about herself to create a dynamic, unique personality that quickly endears her to an audience and builds trust. Think about what you like about yourself, what you think are your greatest assets, and magnify them to create your presentational superpowers.

ITF: When working with a young patrons group of the symphony, I wanted to encourage them to be more comfortable talking about details of music at their events. Your average 35-year old is likely a foodie, or at least an Instagram food stylist, so I wanted to activate their authority in being able to pick out subtle flavors when tasting something (aesthetics!). By partnering with Houston's Karbach Brewery, I paired 4 pieces of chamber music with 4 custom beers that their brewmaster made for our event. The audience was encouraged to look for "synesthetic" commonalities between the music they were hearing and the beer they were drinking. After a while I challenged them to figure out why I chose the pair, guessing at similarities between flavors and musical features. It was fun to see them engage each other about how the pairings really made sense, but I loved the brave few who said "this one made complete sense, but that one I totally disagree with, Mendelssohn would go better with the saison!"

How is your audience an authority? No matter who you are working with, your audience can be an authority upon which you can draw inspiration. Each group will have a unique area of specialty, it could be fluency with theme songs of common superheroes, the experience of spending weeks living in a cancer ward, or the perspective of what it's like to be a high-schooler in 2018. When you engage your audience to share their informed opinions and use those opinions to reflect or manipulate some concept in the music you are presenting, the audience will feel like the music you are presenting is now something they are entitled to. Use your audience's contributions to inform how you should perform a piece and it becomes their piece too.

What excites you about the music? What will excite your audience? Where is the intersection? You might not always have the freedom to decide exactly what repertoire or concepts are the targets for your presentation, but an essential right of being a teaching artist is deciding what angle, approach, or focus suits you. It's your decision how to use your time and you should absolutely use it to play, talk, and explore music or a concept that is very exciting to you. Your excitement will be contagious! However, it's also important to consider the perspective of the audience. The intersection between what you find interesting and what excites your audience can lead to true collaboration.

ITF: How can your love of Beethoven's motivic economy in his 5th symphony be exciting to 5th graders? Perhaps it's time to let the class explore the chorus of Luis Fonsi's Despacito (very hot right now for 5th graders), exploring the rhythmic motif that gets repeated. After gaining fluency drumming and singing the motif, have students listen to Despacito to try to describe how Fonsi uses the motif to stitch together the melody of his chorus. After this activity, my students were willing to throw themselves into the Beethoven to see how a composer did the exact same thing 200 years ago.

How are you pushing yourself? Whenever a musician comes to present for an audience it is a special occasion. Unfortunately, if this is the 15th time you have given this presentation, being able to keep your material fresh will be a substantial challenge that most audiences (especially children) pick up on it. We can combat

this challenge by always including elements in your presentation that will challenge you as a performer. I try to always have at least one piece that pushes my technical limits. Striving for quality with something at the peak of your ability is easy to appreciate and will make the audience feel valued. Another way to foster fresh challenge is to include ways for the audience to substantially alter what you have prepared. Performing the Stamitz concerto is hard, but trying to interpret it five different ways based emotion or style suggestions from the audience will challenge you to your utmost. No matter how strange the suggestion is, throw yourself into trying to make it work. In many ways, the best possible outcome in this situation is for you to fall apart or make mistakes; positively acknowledging screw-ups with an audience shows them you are willing to be vulnerable in front of them, which will go a long way to encourage their own participation later in the presentation.

How specific can you be? I had a teacher at the New England Conservatory who said her least favorite term papers had titles like “The Viola in Baroque French Music,” a subject that would be almost impossible to do justice to without a 300-page dissertation. She advocated for a more detailed, narrowed approach that would allow you to zoom out only as much as is relevant to your topic, such as “The Evolution of Tonal Complexity in Byrd’s *In Nomine* Settings for Viola da Gamba Consort.” When you focus on the essential nugget of what you think is important about a piece, you give yourself the time to thoroughly explore it with enough depth. Your audience will appreciate and feel mastery over it.

ITF: Most audiences will be overwhelmed by a prompt to “notice the really cool orchestration choices in a performance of Rapsodie espagnole,” but would be excited to trace a single melodic line as in courses through 5 instrument groups. After a demonstration of just that line, they would likely be willing to reflect on how the character of the line changes depending on what instrument plays it and a subsequent listening of the movement might be an invitation to the possibility of finding other such lines, sneaking up on Ravel’s orchestrational genius by zooming out.

Where is the peak of your presentation? It can be difficult to be able to estimate how much material is enough or how long a particular group will want to take with an activity. Over-planning helps me sleep a lot better the night before a presentation. When I over-plan, I know that I can fast-forward through an activity that is not landing as strongly as I had hoped while still having quality material in reserve. With this in mind, I always make sure that the strongest or most essential activity of my presentation falls midway through. This way, I know that even if I run out of time to do everything I had planned (which is the norm), I will have still covered the most important part of the experience. In concert planning, we always like to end with the exciting finale but interactive presentations are less scripted, so it’s better to have the most essential activities midway through in case time runs short.

How are you using a variety of learning modes in your presentation? If you’ve never explored the science behind how different people learn, there is an amazing amount of fascinating research about the different modes (styles) that effective presenters utilize to get maximum impact from their teaching. There are a variety of labels for them, but a pretty standard set is: visual, aural, verbal, physical, logical, interpersonal (working with others), and intrapersonal (looking within yourself). The goal need not be to use every mode in a given presentation, but knowing which modes you are using in one part of your presentation can inform what modes you could seek to incorporate later. If, for example, your presentation has used a dance moves (physical) to coincide with an



An interactive concert with a mixed ensemble of Community Embedded Musicians. Photo courtesy of the Houston Symphony.

ITF: *While working with middle-schoolers on how melody and accompaniment can play together to create style, I will avoid using substitution words such as tune, theme, hauptstimme, etc. for melody (or ostinato, groove, background, backup for accompaniment). The concepts that I want the students to have command over are melody, accompaniment, and style. Each time I specifically use that word I offer another opportunity for that student to grasp the concept without confusion.*

important theme and marking a diagram with where in the context of the piece that theme takes place (visual), perhaps it's time to turn to a neighbor and interview them about how else they think it could be fun to express the theme (interpersonal). Many activities use multiple modes—and that's great! It can also be very helpful for variety's sake to have a healthy mix between the moderator speaking, the ensemble performing, the audience reflecting/speaking, the audience participating, and examples explored. Even changes in the tone or volume of your voice can refocus an active audience.

What ties it all together? Teaching artists use many terms such as *learning objectives, targets, entry points*, and *lines of inquiry*. All of these relate the process of naming what will be the central focus of your presentation. In any case, I suggest keeping it simple, specific, and easy to explore. When trying to figure out what will be the essential nugget of learning I want my audiences to get, I always start from the music. What is common between many examples? Why do I like playing them? What is challenging about them? How do they work? How do the composers/techniques/styles/origins relate to each other? It can be helpful to start with a “brain dump” where you just get all of your ideas on a page and see which ones stand out the most. Once you have arrived at your concept, be consistent with your language and repeat the essential terms or concepts *with the exact same wording* as much as you can.

Where are you scaffolding learning? The key to audience participation is breaking down a complex activity into easy to manage steps that build sequentially. So much is possible if you can structure scaffolds whereby each new step is within reach but adds enough challenge or complexity that is also exciting. As an exercise, it can be fun to imagine the peak of what you would like your audience to accomplish and then see how many ways you can break down that skill or activity into components. You might find steps within steps—the more the merrier. Look back at the accumulation of steps you could take to build a skill, then construct a path through the most interesting steps that is both challenging and accessible.

ITF: *For one presentation, I wanted middle school students to be able to explore how musical style relates to the kinds of accompaniments a composer uses. I had them analyze what kind of instruments and figures were used to accompany rap, ranchero, pop, country, etc. Once we identified them, the class turned a melody by Dvořák into that style by recreating the components of the style with their classroom instruments while I played the Dvořák into the texture. I then compared the Dvořák melody to style in a fashion, likening it to a white button-down shirt. We looked at ten different pictures of fashion icons wearing button down shirts and argued about what effect the other clothing the model was wearing had on the white button down shirt. I assigned small groups to come up with musical equivalents to the other clothes in a given picture to construct a new accompaniment for me to play the Dvořák. These activities took place over two classes with a concert of Dvořák 8 in the middle. Each activity had at least 5 or 6 steps scaffolded in, such as: Step 4. “Once you've found your group of 3 or 4, have a quick discussion with them about which model looks like they could be the most interesting accompaniment. What ideas are starting to formulate about how you would turn that shiny belt buckle into a musical gesture?”*

How can your topic be creative? We would always like our presentation topics to be exciting and novel, but sometimes we need to balance this desire against what the group most needs to learn or work on. In situations like this, I strive to find a way of teaching the topic that inspires creativity and fun in the learning process. If you need to teach a specific technical skill, is it possible to have the first implementation of the skill be part of some artistic decision making? Finding ways to use skills to inspire from the very beginning will encourage the creative student musician to take pride in her aesthetic decisions while practicing the basics.

***ITF:** I was asked by a teacher at a partner school to work on sound production and tone with their high school orchestra students for a One- hour workshop. We started by having them challenge me to sound like any other instrument aside from the viola. By exploring the fun and different colors (timbres) the viola is capable of, I started identifying bow speed, weight, and contact point as the variables I am manipulating to make those colors. I encouraged the students to plot where each color would land on the graph we created of speed vs. weight with symbols for contact. I then played three examples of viola rep with consistent bow strokes. While I played, I had a volunteer try to paint a free association picture reflecting how I sounded (think VERY abstract art). I skewed the results a bit by having the volunteer paint with watercolors for Debussy, oil paints for Brahms, and a paint marker for Hindemith. I had half of the class paying attention to what the volunteer painted and the other half noticing how the volunteer used their arm, wrist, and fingers. After we graphed the stroke, the students reflected on what they observed, and I connected their observations of body movement to bow exercises that developed flexibility and control of each joint. The students were very excited by the whole process, I have enjoyed being able to reference these concepts in subsequent clinics with their orchestra, and the paintings they created are still up on their wall!*

How can you learn more? (Bonus Question!) Learning to be a community-embedded musician has been a long process for me, one that started well before I got the job. I have gained so much from working with amazing teaching artist trainers such as Eric Booth, Hilary Easton, Andrew Roitstein, David Wallace, and Tanya Maggi. A lot of what I have said here is directly influenced by their wisdom (decent artists copy, great artists steal). If you are looking for a first step, Booth's book *The Teaching Artist's Bible* and *Reaching Out* by David Wallace are incredible resources. The teaching artist community is made up of wonderful spirits who love to share. Learn as much as you can by watching good (and not so good) presentations, always considering how you would make that concept fit your personal style. Finally, there is no replacement for real world experiences; I have gotten so far in life by answering the question, "Can you/have you ever/would you be willing to try _____," with an enthusiastic "Sure!"

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