



Bandstand Communication: *Using Music as a Language*

During my drum clinics and master classes, I use the analogy of music as a language. It accurately describes what musicians are trying to do to when they play, and it helps bring the focus back to one of the reasons we play an instrument in the first place: to express what's inside of us and get our message across to the listener.

When you play music, you're trying to communicate something to your audience and your fellow musicians. The instrument you play becomes a translator. It translates your ideas and emotions into an audio statement that other people can understand and enjoy. But when people study an instrument, they tend to focus on the instrument itself and not the process of sharing what's inside them. The music that's in your heart, mind and soul is silent unless it's "released" through your instrument; the better you are at playing that instrument, the more accurately your message is translated to the listener.

You've probably heard the phrase "music is

a language" more than once. It's a concise way to describe what music is: a form of communication similar to the way people use words. We can break the statement down so that it's not only a convenient four-word phrase but also something that musicians can use as a guidepost to help make their music sound more musical. If you think of music as being something like a book, a speech or a conversation, a number of comparisons can be drawn.

Before a language can be learned, some physical and cognitive skills are generally required. This depends on the type of communication skill that's being taught. For instance, can a person see so that they can read the printed page? Can they hear so that they can listen to what another person says to them? Can they speak so that they can respond verbally? Also, most importantly, can the person grasp what the overall concept is so that they understand and put all the parts together in a meaningful way? These are similar requirements to what musicians need in order to have enough physi-

cal and mental ability to perform.

The first requirement is to be able to make sounds that will mimic letters, then words. In music, the concept is pretty much identical. The student first learns physical techniques that will allow them to make the sounds that they need. It doesn't matter if it's a trumpet, violin or drum: To create certain sounds consistently requires that the student learn, and hopefully master, the various techniques of any particular instrument. Without this ability, the artist won't be able to convey anything meaningful. A person's musical style is based not only on what they can play, but also what they can't play.

Once the physical skills are in place, then it's time to use them to form the second basis of language skills: letters. To learn English, a student must first have a firm grasp of what makes up that language—26 letters. With music, a person similarly learns how to hear and play certain notes on their instrument. These will be the foundation to further one's

ability to play musical ideas and compositions. The better the person's ability to play the notes they hear, the clearer and more accurate they'll sound. Once these two building blocks are mastered, it's time to put them into use.

In spoken and written languages we learn words, which signify something and have a meaning. It's the same with music. Whether it's learning the scales on a piano or the rudiments on drums, these will eventually be parts of a larger puzzle that will allow the artist to move on to further self-expression.

Once a person learns enough words, the next step is to construct sentences that convey a more complete and advanced thought, feeling or description. Applying the rules of grammar allows the person to write or say more meaningful and grammatically correct words, phrases and sentences. This makes the writer's ideas come to life. Again, in music, a similar thing happens. Once you learn how to form phrases and melodies out of scales and rudiments, it's also a matter of how well you construct those phrases and melodies and how much emotion your playing conveys. That's what separates a good player from a great one and gives every player his or her individual style.

Finally, all these sentences will make enough sense and have enough development that they can be grouped together to form paragraphs. Paragraphs can then be strung together to form a book. With music, paragraphs can be compared to the parts of a song or composition. Certain musical thoughts or phrases are grouped together so that whether it's a song or a solo, the desired result is pretty much the same. The goal is to achieve a continuity that leads to a satisfying final wrap-up of all the separate parts. The final product can even result in being a great novel, a famous symphony or an incredible improvised solo—but it's all based on the fundamentals.

Many social skills come into play in making music. Take, for instance, the social fabric that makes up a band. Here, not only is it a matter of grammar, but of etiquette, ego, mutual interests and knowledge. Sometimes it even involves animal instinct and conquering one's fears to the point of survival of the fittest.

Let's take a four-person combo and compare that to four people having a verbal conversation. Here, different personalities can generate anything from provocative, stimulating and insightful idea-sharing to a fist fight. In music, it's not all that different. Both in society and in music, a balance is required between the needs of the individual and the needs of the whole ensemble. This balance can be tipped in a variety of ways with varying results.

Have you ever been in a situation where one person dominates an entire conversation and no one else can get a word in edgewise? That can happen on stage, too. There are players out there who play so many notes that they literally

don't leave any space for the other players. Also, sometimes players will continue to play on and on, as if they're the only person on stage. This is not fun.

What about the person who likes to talk loud all the time to get a point across? After a while, the others get annoyed and basically shut off their ears to this person. This is a classic case of trying to force your point down people's throats. Instead of this heavy-handed approach, using varying degrees of dynamics and intensity will usually convey one's point of view much more effectively. Also, the creative and dramatic use of space and silence can sometimes speak louder than words. By raising the volume on strong points and then backing off on normal subjects, the person gives the listener some breathing room and enhances their ability to get their point across. Variety, surprise and the use of drama enhance both speech and music.

What about someone who doesn't understand the subject but insists on talking anyway? In a conversation, mutual knowledge and respect are critical. If the subject is automobiles and everyone is interested or even knowledgeable about the subject, then that conversation can be informative and stimulating. However, if someone in that same conversation keeps interjecting things by insisting on talking about watermelons, the conversation can get diffused and unfulfilling.

When musicians get together, they can be of different backgrounds and styles, but respect and restraint are of paramount importance in knowing when to play and when to fall into the background. If you don't know the song or the style, lay back and wait for the right time to add something. If such an opportunity doesn't arise, continue to relax and enjoy what the others are playing. Don't force your agenda on the band because you feel the need to always play something. Hang back and listen. You might learn something.

One of my pet peeves at drum festivals is how there seems to be a need to impress people and a compulsion to play overly complex things when playing something simple and elegant would suffice. Similar to what happens when a person uses big, obscure words in an effort to show off their vocabulary, musicians sometimes commit a similar display of one-upmanship. In music, participants should care and have mutual respect for one another. **DB**

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