

STAGE BEHAVIOUR GUIDELINES: THE WHYS & HOWS

Too frequently we find young contestants who don't look as good as they could on stage, so here are some guidelines to help you improve the impression you make on audiences and adjudication panels.

You may think that people should only be interested in how you sound, but the visual part of what you offer is part of the 'package' and is extremely important for how an audience reacts to you. Fortunately, if you improve the visual aspect, you will feel better and more comfortable being on stage and this will come across in your playing/singing.

It is important that the audience connects with you from the first moment you are on stage. This draws them in and gets them interested in you before you start playing. It also works in reverse, reminding you that you are there to communicate something to the audience.

1. THINGS TO PLAN BEFORE YOU GO ON STAGE

- **The music stand (non-pianists):** Make sure that your face can be seen by the audience. A good rule of thumb is that the top of the stand must be no higher than your shoulders, and lower if possible.
- **The music stand (pianists):** In preliminary rounds, don't bother removing the music stand from the piano – just lay the stand flat.
- **Wind players: NEVER** place anything on top of the piano. For small things, either use pockets or hide them inside the piano. Clarinetists using two clarinets need to bring a small stand so as to put one clarinet on the floor.
- **Should you take water on stage?** This is contentious, but here goes: Many adjudicators find it unnecessary, especially for short rounds, and your glass or bottle of water can't go on the piano, so you end up bending over to retrieve it from the floor. This is not elegant. Nevertheless, it is a reality that dry mouth affects wind players and singers badly. Many musicians can combat dry mouth by imagining that they are biting into a lemon. For most of us, the mere thought of lemon starts saliva flowing. You can stand on stage looking very elegant, and get the flow going any time you like, without relying on something that most adjudicators find either pretentious or physically awkward.

2. THE ACTUAL STAGE PRESENTATION

(Practise this in front of anyone who will help.)

- **Walking on stage – you need to connect with the audience from the first moment:** While waiting offstage, plan your path so you don't have to give undue attention to where you are walking. Learn to walk while looking straight at the audience. Pace yourself so you don't dawdle, but also don't look like you're running. Stand upright (not rigidly so), and don't shuffle your feet.
- **Smile** with teeth showing! It relaxes the audience and 'unfreezes' you.
- **NEVER turn your back on the audience:** Pianists who bow with one hand on the piano need to get to that position without doing backward circles. Pianists should also try not to pass behind the piano because they are blocked from the audience for part of their passage, which 'disconnects' them from the audience. It isn't always possible to avoid this, depending on where the entrance to the stage is but, if possible, walk in front of the

piano.

- **Bowing:** It is important that you bow before the audience stops applauding. If the applause starts to fade, don't be afraid to stop where you are, bow there, and go to centre stage after the bow. (However, when you do this, your accompanist doesn't always get to bow, especially if he or she is still moving behind the piano. If this happens, make doubly sure to acknowledge him or her at the end of the performance.) If you get to centre stage with the audience still applauding, bow before doing anything else. Audiences stop applauding if they think you don't plan to bow, and then your bow is awkward.
- **The bow itself:** This needs practise. Find something to do with your arms and hands so you don't look or feel stiff, then bend forward (not too shallowly) – for this part you can look at your feet. Finally, don't hurry – count to 3 (slowly) while at the bottom of the bow, then come up – **STILL SMILING!** (And look at the audience again.)
- **If you use a music stand,** step to the side of it in order to take a bow after finishing – you don't want to bow into the stand or lose visual contact with the audience.
- **Bowing when playing with an orchestra:** Bow as normal when you come onto the stage. At the end of the concerto, acknowledge the conductor and orchestra first by shaking the conductor's hand. Then shake the concertmaster's hand, and finally bow to the audience.

3. BETWEEN PIECES IN A RECITAL

- **At the end of the piece** make sure that your visual message to the audience is that you are done. Some pieces have endings that are not really obvious. Body language is the key here.
- **More applause – more bowing:** You **MUST** acknowledge applause, unless you are between movements of a single piece. Think of it this way: applause is an audience's way of saying 'thank you'. In verbal language, if someone says 'thank you', you respond with 'you're welcome', 'pleasure', or something similar to acknowledge their thanks. Saying nothing comes across as rude and arrogant, so not acknowledging applause looks the same. You might not want to make your fullest bow in between pieces - it's up to you - but at least do a partial bow or give a visible nod of the head, and not too fast or shallow, or else it looks flippant.
- **Don't dive into the next piece too quickly:** You need time to think ahead and get into the mood of the next piece, and the audience needs time to absorb the last piece fully. This brings us to the concept of flow: good flow means small pauses between movements, bigger pauses between whole pieces, and no pause big enough to break the continuity of your presentation. Wind players who have to deal with water in the instrument need to do it as quickly and quietly as possible so the continuity isn't broken.

4. AT THE END OF YOUR PRESENTATION

Don't walk off as if you are in a hurry to go home. Look **at** the audience, **SMILE!** make your deepest bow (count to 3), and come upright. Then acknowledge the accompanist (or orchestra if you have one), and bow again. Now you can walk off in a relaxed way.

5. IF SOMETHING WENT WRONG IN YOUR PRESENTATION

SMILE! Part of professionalism is getting past the problems and carrying on undisturbed. In any case, many of the smaller problems aren't even noticeable to the average

audience, so pulling faces or showing dissatisfaction in any way tells them something went wrong. Just SMILE and bow as normal.

FINALLY, REMEMBER THAT YOU WANT TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF RELAXATION, WARMTH, FRIENDLINESS, OPENNESS, THAT YOU ARE GLAD TO BE THERE, READY TO COMMUNICATE AND GIVE THE AUDIENCE YOUR ARTISTRY, AND THAT YOU ARE GENUINELY GRATEFUL FOR THE APPLAUSE THAT THANKS YOU FOR YOUR PERFORMANCE. YOU WILL BE SURPRISED HOW MUCH WORKING TOWARD GIVING THAT IMPRESSION ACTUALLY HELPS YOU FEEL THAT WAY INSIDE. THIS CAN ONLY HELP YOUR PERFORMANCE.



STAGE DRESS: THE WHYS & HOWS

Styles change from year to year depending on what's in fashion, but there are general guidelines for looking good and professional while being comfortable so that you aren't distracted by something that hampers your movement or breathing.

Keep the audience focused on the aural, not the visual. Lurid colours (including nail varnish), overly fussy styles, etc. distract. Slightly understated is always better.

Stages are hot areas, and we warm up as we do physical work, so plan for this in your dress.

1. PRELIMINARY ROUNDS

Stick to smart casual dress; whatever you wear must be neat.

- **Jeans:** No. Some adjudicators find jeans sloppy no matter how new or pressed. With any other pants, make sure you aren't walking on the hems.
- **Shoes:** Definitely no tackies, beach sandals, or slip slops. Go for clean, neat, and comfortable. Brand new shoes are frequently uncomfortable so break them in first.
- **School uniform?** The blazers are warm under stage lights, and let's face it – school uniforms aren't exactly 'smart'. You'll be more comfortable in something else.
- **Hair:** Whatever style, it looks bad to constantly fuss with hair or move it off your face. You should come up from your bow without having to readjust anything.

Men

- **Ties or no ties?** For wind players and singers ties can feel very restrictive around the throat. If you are uncomfortable wearing one, don't bother. If you like the appearance, tie it slightly looser, but still snug enough to look neat from the audience's perspective.
- **Shirts in or out?** There are advantages to having the shirt out – you can do without the belt, and have a bit more breathing room. If the shirt is smart and very neat (i.e. pressed), this can look fine. Just don't roll up the sleeves.

Ladies

- **Dress length:** Long dresses are better for finals, so choose a smart casual style in knee- or mid-calf length. Mini-skirts are out for any type of performance.
- **Pants:** Fine as long as they are dressy. No low-slung pants, and no bare midriff.
- **Necklines:** Keep it conservative. You need to bow without exposing too much of your body.
- **General tone:** Vocalists need to be aware of context: the more sombre the subject, the more sombre the tone of the dress.

2. FINALS, CONCERTO ROUNDS (with orchestra) AND EVENING CONCERTS, FORMAL

Men

- **Tux or DJ?** Like a jacket in daytime rounds, the issue here is heat and shoulder room. You can look very dressy without a jacket, if you follow some simple guidelines:
 - Pants:** Smart pants only. Black is basic, it's a musician's 'uniform' anyway, so this will be a good investment.
 - Shirt:** This has to be dressy – nothing else will do. Make sure that you have good arm room. Never roll up the sleeves, and if you are going to go with it unbuttoned, only unbutton the first button.
- **Alternatives to jackets:** A dressy waistcoat (not a knitted daytime one) or a cummerbund (with a bow tie) can give you a dressy look without the jacket. Also, there are shirts that are dressy enough to stand alone. The Madiba-style shirt, not in the wilder prints but in slightly more understated tones, can look good without a waistcoat or cummerbund, and the high-collar ones aren't worn with a tie.

Ladies (necklines and nail varnish as for the preliminaries):

- **Hemlines:** Long dresses are best, but you need to make sure you aren't going to trip on the hem, so it shouldn't drag on the stage. Pianists need to make sure the skirt hem won't interfere with their pedalling. Just at the top of the shoe should be fine.
- **Shoes:** Unless you are certain you can play properly while balanced on stilettos, don't even try them. (Anyway, a physiotherapist or chiropractor will tell you that high heels require so much extra muscle power for balancing that your back muscles can't help as much with fine motor coordination, i.e. fingers.) A heel does look dressier, but keep it 5cm or less. **If you insist on the high ones, practise in them.**

3. PAGE TURNERS

You must dress to be inconspicuous. If the adjudicators' eyes are constantly drawn to the page turner their attention is not on the performer. For all rounds, wear black pants or a long skirt, black conservative top or shirt – no mini-skirts or low-cut tops.

4. WARDROBE MALFUNCTIONS

Always 'test drive' the outfit so as to avoid problems.

- **Pianists:** Many dressy styles have quite large and loose sleeves. Pianists who have to do hand crossings may find the sleeves getting in the way. This can slow you down and be very off-putting. If you have any crossings at all, choose a narrow sleeve.

- **Spaghetti straps:** This type of dress, if you can carry it off (upper arm flesh can flap with a lot of movement), has lots of advantages: absolute freedom of movement in the shoulder and arm areas, and if you are bothered by overheating, this style can be ideal. However, make sure the straps are double-stitched for strength. You don't want a strap snapping, especially if the bodice of the dress has no other structural support.
- **Strapless dresses:** These also offer absolute freedom of movement in the shoulder and arm areas, but some fabrics won't withstand the constant arm movement of pianists and string players without sliding down. Constantly grabbing the edge of the fabric and hoisting it up again looks tacky, though the alternative is worse. Even if the sliding never gets to a critical stage, you will worry about it, which diverts concentration from your performance. Unless you have 'test driven' the dress and know with absolute certainty that you can make 30+ minutes of arm movements without fabric movement, wear something with straps.
- **Always do a basic last-minute check before going on stage:** Ties straight, zips closed.

5. MORE FOR THE LADIES

- **Thinking of velvet?** Think carefully: velvet can look fantastic, but it is also warm. It can work very well in a skirt with a lighter material for the bodice. Unfortunately, pianists or cellists (who sit) can get a 'crushed velvet' look – and on the rear of the skirt at that!
- **Golds and silvers:** Sometimes these don't look the same under stage lights as in the shop where you bought them. For example, some silvers look like grey, which is really dull.
- **Your wardrobe doesn't have to cost a small fortune:** Black is standard concert wear and it looks good with just about any colour, so start with one dressy pair of black pants, and one black, dressy evening long skirt. This is a good investment, since you will need these things as a working musician. Then get a few blouses and evening tops: white, bright colours (from a distance, solid colours or simple designs are more striking than busy prints), gold and silver metallic fabrics, all look good in combination with black.
- **If you can only afford one pair of shoes** make it a dressy black pair with a relatively low heel that will look good with both the smart casual pants and the evening skirt.

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