

# BEYOND THE NOTES: AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

*“Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s a boundary line to music. **But man, there’s no boundary line to art.**” --Charlie Parker*

We have to ask ourselves why we go through all the work, searching, and discipline to develop our technique, become our own best teacher, and manage performance anxiety. For me it’s about replacing old limits with a freedom to express our feelings, our stories, and ourselves with our audience. Now that we have the tools, we can fashion a work of art that connects our hearts to the hearts of the listeners.

*“Craftsmanship teaches the actor how to walk on stage and play. But true art must teach him how to awaken consciously his subconscious creative self...”--Stanislavski*

All musical inspiration starts out as a feeling, or group of emotions, or a story the composer wishes to convey. Mendelssohn’s “Nocturne” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a love song; Beethoven’s *Seventh Symphony* feels to me like a dance of all humankind; the opening to Tchaikovsky’s *Fourth Symphony* is a tragic and serious fanfare. Some music makes us want to stand up and march, while other music makes us feel that we’re witnessing great beauty.

***The keys to authentic musical expression are being able to (1) identify the feelings behind the notes, and (2) draw from our imagination and our own personal experience to convey those feelings.***

In this chapter we will:

- Get in touch with our own basic feelings.
- Learn about Fire and Water energies and how they help us identify emotions in the music.
- Learn specific techniques to convey genuine emotional energy through our sounds, such as:
  - Emotional Memory
  - Physical/Emotional Body Visualization
  - Scene Visualization
  - Story Writing
  - The Magic “IF”

## GETTING IN TOUCH WITH OUR BASIC FEELINGS

It helps me to think of experiences in my life that I can pour into the music I play. So, to begin, let’s think about some basic feelings.

Describe a time in your life when you felt **excited and happy**:

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Now, write about an experience in your life when you felt very **sad**:

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A time when you felt very **strong and powerful**:

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A situation in your life when you felt **angry**:

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A time when you felt **quiet and peaceful**:

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## IDENTIFYING THE EMOTIONS IN MUSIC

It's easier to identify the emotions in the music if we divide all music into either **FIRE ENERGY** or **WATER ENERGY**.

(These concepts are presented in "Return to Child, Music for People's Guide to Improvising Music and Authentic Group Leadership," written and compiled by James Oshinsky, 2004.)

**FIRE ENERGY** includes two categories of strong fiery feelings.

**"YAY! Energy"** covers feelings of extreme joy, excitement or surprise, exemplified by Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah*.

**"HEY! Energy"** covers feelings of power, anger, and assertion, as illustrated by "Darth Vader's Theme" by John Williams from *Star Wars*.

**WATER ENERGY** (also known as "oooo" energy) includes tender, warm, quiet emotions. Imagine holding a baby and singing a lullaby. Remember how you've felt after a long, hard cry. Imagine talking quietly to your girlfriend or boyfriend late at night. Good examples of "oooo" energy are *Silent Night* and Gershwin's "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*.

Our job as musicians, when we are working on a section of music, is first to decide, is this fire energy or water energy? Then we need to identify **what kind** of fire energy or water energy we're dealing with. Is this exuberant fire energy (Yay!) or indignant, powerful, ominous fire energy (Hey!)?

Here are some adjectives that can help you out:

**Fire energy adjectives:**

**Water (or "oooo") energy adjectives:**

Yay!:

triumphant  
joyous  
exuberant  
excited  
surprising  
delighted  
noble  
majestic  
happy  
celebrating  
forthright  
bright  
rejoicing  
exalting  
mischievous  
buoyant  
frolicking  
vigorous  
glorious

Hey!:

alarming  
conflicted  
angry  
assertive  
powerful  
passionate  
lusty  
tormented  
fierce  
stormy  
frenzied  
agitated  
raging  
furious  
sarcastic  
violent  
anguished  
ominous  
rigorous

innocent  
tender  
solemn  
calm  
tranquil  
content  
nurturing  
warm  
caring  
loving  
sad  
sacred  
sweet  
friendly  
mysterious  
nostalgic  
quiet  
sentimental  
gracious  
eerie  
pensive

despairing  
heartbroken  
naive  
seductive  
exhausted  
open  
generous  
kind  
gentle  
melancholy  
prayerful  
longing  
quietly joyful  
timid  
luminous  
elegant  
suspenseful  
awed  
reverent  
wistful  
languid

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## SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES TO CONVEY EMOTIONS

Now that we've defined the mood(s) of the music we're working on, we need to use a few simple techniques to really get into the character. How do we convey genuine feeling through our sounds?

Here are five techniques that are distinct from each other yet sometimes overlapping. We can use them separately and also as complements to each other. Choose the technique(s) to which you are drawn. Choose the ones that inspire you.

### I. EMOTIONAL MEMORY:

*"Only from the heart can you touch the sky." --Rumi*

After we identify the feelings behind the notes, we need to explore, "When was there a time in my life when I felt this kind of energy or emotion?"

**Music reflects life.** Sometimes life feels hard, tragic, and complicated. Other times things seem filled with beauty and simplicity. At times, life may feel very ambiguous and mysterious. We may be put into situations where we need to act with great boldness. When things work out, we feel that all is right with the world; we feel wonderful. In every piece, the composer is telling a story through song and dance. Our role as a musician is to **breathe life into the composer's story with our story.**

Here's an exercise that can help us tap into our emotional memory. Let's have fun with this...remember, there's no right or wrong to how each of us responds to music or any art form. It's deeply personal and individual.

### CREATIVE EXERCISE

Choose a piece that you're preparing to perform, or one you like.

- When I listen to this music, I sense “oooo” energy or Fire energy (circle one).
- My body feels like \_\_\_\_\_ when I hear this music.
- As I listen more, I can describe the particular kind of “oooo” energy or Fire energy I’m experiencing. Here are a few descriptive words that express what I’m hearing. (If you wish, use the word lists above, or come up with your own.)

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- I’m remembering a time in my life when I felt this way, or my body felt this way. When I think about that time, these are the images, feelings, memories that come up for me: (Use words or draw a picture or both.)

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- When you play this music, you can think on these memories, close your eyes, and project those images onto the screen of your imagination to be right there in the moment when you felt those feelings. This activates unconscious inspiration. This is performing with emotional memory.

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“Ah, music. A magic beyond all we do here!”  
--J.K.Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

## II. PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL BODY VISUALIZATION

Let’s keep going! Let’s continue thinking about the piece you used in the above exercise. **Let’s create a person or character that is singing the music in your imagination (or you can imagine what you yourself look like singing the music).**

- People project their moods and feelings through their body language. Look around your classroom and see if you can tell the mood of your friends by observing how they hold themselves. Do they look alert, or tired, or confident, or content, or afraid? **How would your body language look if you were in the character of the music you were performing?**

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- Facial expression is always a big clue about how people are feeling from moment to moment. **What would your face genuinely look like if you were intensely feeling the emotions in the passage you were playing or singing?**

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- People’s body language and facial expression change from moment to moment. So as you perform, have a clear projection in your mind’s eye of **your changing demeanor** as the music progresses.
- Sometimes writing a detailed biography of our character helps us get a clearer picture of how he/she would look and express him/herself. How does knowing your character impact how you visualize him/her physically?

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### III. COSTUME AND SCENE VISUALIZATION

You may think of this as an extension of “Physical/Emotional Body Visualization.” Ask yourself the following questions.

- What is your character wearing? Describe your appearance in great detail of color, texture, and style. What does this say about your character?

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- What would the setting or environment for this movement or passage look like? You can create any movie set or landscape in your imagination. Are you inside or outside? Describe every detail of what it all looks like, smells like, feels like.

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- If indoors, what kind of room are you in? What is the lighting like? Is the room palatial or modest? What colors do you see? Are there drapes or curtains? What textures and fabrics are there? How does the room feel? Warm? Rich? Dark? Cold?

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- What time of day is it? Is it dawn, dusk, high noon, midnight, 3 a.m.? What season of the year is it?

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- Go deeply into the history of the setting. What ghosts live in the people’s minds? What’s the general vibe? What’s the story of this place?

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As you prepare to perform, take a few minutes to get comfortable, close your eyes and imagine yourself as the character in the setting that you've put so much detail in creating.

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## IV. STORY WRITING

Now that you have the character and setting clearly defined, make up a story about this piece of music. Infuse as much detail as possible; use all the senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and temperature. Use as much feeling as you can in writing your story. Use measure numbers in your description. Here's a portion of an example written by one of my college students:

“The camera slowly lowers down on a man in medieval dress walking through the forest. The camera starts very far away in the sky and as it gets lower, the man and his surroundings come into focus. This happens in bars 1-5 of Claude Debussy's *Premiere Arabesque*. Just before bar 6, the music slows for a ritardando. At this moment, the man stops abruptly in his tracks; an exotic pink flower catches his eye. He begins to remember the only woman he ever loved. Flashes of memories they had together appear in his mind, flowing continuously from one to the next (measures 6-13). In bar 13, his heart begins to beat faster and faster as he thinks about her more: this is characterized by an acceleration in the music. The ritardando just before bar 17 shows the man taking a slow, deep breath to calm himself. He returns to thinking about her, in bar 17, and at bar 19, his thoughts suddenly turn darker...”

Many students have reported that when they have a clearly defined storyline, and follow it as they perform, they get into the music more deeply, and it becomes more enjoyable to share with people.

Please use separate sheets of paper for your story.

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## V. STANISLAVSKI'S MAGIC "IF"

If we don't have emotional memory or a frame of reference about a certain piece we're going to perform, we need to go into the realm of imagination. For example, if we're performing a piece by Shostakovich and he's portraying a brutal dictator like Stalin in his music, then we might need to use the magic "IF." IF I were a brutal dictator, totally self-absorbed, ruthless, paranoid, without conscience, how would I feel? How would I look? How would I hold myself physically? What would my general attitude be? How would I open a door? How would I walk into a room? When we use the Magic "IF" we can get into characters and roles that are not in our true nature. It can be fun to play an evil person.

Before you start to perform, relax your body and mind; get into character; imagine as many details about what it might be like to be that person. Then, begin.

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## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Experiment with each of these techniques:

- Emotional Memory
- Physical/Emotional Body Visualization
- Costume and Scene Visualization
- Story Writing
- Magic "IF"

One technique or a combination of techniques might work best for you. Choose whichever one(s) you are drawn to. Or, you may find a particular technique might work best for a particular piece you're performing.

You may want to **ask for feedback** from your family or friends in the audience. See which methods of conveying genuine expression work best for you.

When we use these techniques and go deep within ourselves, the music we perform becomes personal and spontaneous. Each performance is infused with creative emotional expression that moves listeners on the heart level.

When we express ourselves on the heart level, an amazing and spontaneous connection happens between the composer, the performer and the audience. It's almost like the composer and performers are saying to the audience, "I know you very well... you are just like me." And, when they applaud, the audience may be saying to the performers and composer, "Thank you so much for understanding me."

Have fun with this!

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