

Beyond the Notes: Authentic Expression

(Excerpt from *Horn Playing from the Inside Out* © 2012 by Eli Epstein)

*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

Emotional Memory

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 Symphony No. 7 first movement feels like a dance of all humankind; the opening to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 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.

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.

—Constantin Stanislavski

In this article, we will get in touch with our own basic feelings; learn about "fire energy" and "water energy" and how they help us identify emotions in the music; and learn a technique to convey genuine emotional energy through our sounds.

Getting in Touch with Our Basic Feelings

One strategy I use when I perform is 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*.

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

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

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

A time when you felt *quiet and peaceful*.

An episode in your life when you were *in love*.

Identifying the Emotions in the Music

Now let's look at how to categorize the emotions we hear in music. It's easier to identify the emotions in 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*, by James Oshinsky, © 2004, Music for People.

FIRE ENERGY includes two categories of strong, fiery feelings:

Yay! Energy, which covers feelings of extreme joy, excitement, or surprise, exemplified by Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from the *Messiah*, and

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

WATER ENERGY (also known as "oooo" energy) includes tender, warm, quiet, or wistful emotions. Imagine holding a baby and singing a lullaby. Good examples of "oooo" energy are "Silent Night" and Gershwin's "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*.

When we are working on a section of music, our job is first to decide if the music evokes 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:

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

Water, or "oooo," Energy Adjectives:

innocent
tender

despairing
heartbroken

solemn	naive
calm	seductive
tranquil	exhausted
content	open
nurturing	generous
warm	kind
caring	gentle
loving	melancholy
sad	prayerful
sacred	longing
sweet	quietly joyful
friendly	timid
mysterious	luminous
nostalgic	elegant
quiet	suspenseful
sentimental	awed
gracious	reverent
eerie	wistful
pensive	languid

Only from the heart can you touch the sky.

—Rumi

After you identify the feelings behind the notes, ask yourself, “At what time in my life did I feel this kind of energy or emotion?” *Music reflects life*. Sometimes life feels hard, tragic, and complicated. At other times, life is filled with beauty and simplicity. Sometimes life may feel very ambiguous and mysterious. We may need to act with boldness at times.

In every piece of music, the composer is telling a story through song and dance, metaphorically speaking. Our role as a musician is to *breathe life into the composer’s story with our own story*.

A few years ago, I was presenting a master class to high school students in Boston. One of the students, let’s call him Harry, was a pianist who had started studying at age fourteen. Now in his senior year, he was performing a Chopin Prelude. Harry played through the piece once, rather quickly and without much feeling. I asked him what kind of energy he sensed in this piece. Harry said, “Oooo energy.” Then I asked him which adjectives he would pick out from the list of “oooo” energy words. He chose “sad, painful, heartbroken.” I asked him if there was a specific time when he had experienced those feelings in his own life. Harry looked ashen and couldn’t talk. After a while, he told me his best friend had recently been killed in street violence in his neighborhood. I asked Harry, “Do you think it would be possible to hold on to those extremely difficult feelings and memories while you play this Prelude one more time?” He said, “I don’t know if I can do it.” But he did. This time, he played much more slowly. It was like a different piece altogether. I felt chills going through my body at the depth of feeling in Harry’s playing. I asked the class if they were getting chills too and everyone silently nodded their heads.

Here's an exercise that can help you tap into your emotional memory. Remember, there's no right or wrong in our response 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. Name the piece.

Now ask yourself, When I listen to this music, do I sense Water, or "oooo," Energy or Fire Energy?

How does my body feel when I hear this music?

As you listen more, describe the particular kind of water energy or fire energy you are experiencing. Write down a few descriptive words that express what you're hearing. If you wish, use the word lists above, or come up with your own.

Now try remembering a time in your life when you felt the same type of energy as above, or your body felt this way. When you think about that time, write down the images, feelings, and memories that come up. (Use words or draw a picture or both.):

When you play this music, you can think of 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.

Ah, music. A magic beyond all we do here!

—J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

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