Speaking in the Spotlight

THE REQUIRED PRESENTATION AND ORAL PRACTICE COURSE TURNS EXCEPTIONAL MUSICIANS INTO EXCEPTIONAL PUBLIC SPEAKERS.

BY JEFFREY STINGERSTEIN

According to Gallup polls, there is only one thing people fear more than public speaking.

Snakes.

While we cannot do much to help students overcome ophidiophobia—aside from teaching prospective snake charmers how to play the *pungi*—we can, and Curtis does, provide students with the essential skills and experience needed to become excellent public speakers. Beginning two years ago, every student in the Bachelor of Music program has been required to take Presentation and Oral Practice before graduation, and I’ve witnessed firsthand the tremendous impact this course has had on students as both presenters and listeners. Every semester several exceptional Curtis musicians become exceptional speakers, every bit as present and professional in oration as they are during concert performances.

The first speech is never easy. It is a one-minute “Speech of Introduction,” in which the students inform the class about two to three important facts concerning themselves. It is nerve-wracking. Words and ideas get garbled. Palms sweat. Hands shake, amplified by the sheet of paper on which the student’s notes are typed. And, usually, most pauses are filled with “ums” and “uhs,” “likes,” and “y’knows.” However, for merely braving this
first speaking experience, each student earns an A for the assignment. No one critiques
this speech. Everyone applauds. And then the audience is required to ask a few questions.
It’s the experience, here, that matters. We learn by doing.

This course is about effectively communicating messages to an audience, and we
focus on three areas: organization, content, and delivery. While there are only six graded
speeches throughout the semester—a Speech of Introduction, a Special Occasion Speech,
a Classmate Advocacy Speech, a Group Presentation, an Informative Speech, and a
Persuasive Speech—students are required to speak during every class, even if to simply
answer questions. These small speaking moments are every bit as important as the graded
assignments, since they provide additional opportunities to put communication theory into
practice and allow students to experience additional modes of delivery. While students may
use a manuscript for the first couple of speeches, and they use a speaking outline for the
rest of the assignments, these “Q & A” moments provide students with impromptu speaking
experience, which will be ever so important throughout their careers.

CRITICAL LISTENING
In addition to learning by doing, the students learn through the process of feedback—
sometimes as the receiver, and other times as the source. Listening is every bit as important
as speaking. After all, there is no point in delivering a speech if there is no audience to
receive it, and it is only through the audience’s feedback that a speaker knows whether
her or his message has been received and understood. Being required to give specific and
concrete feedback also forces students to analyze aspects of a speech that might otherwise
be overlooked. A comment such as “that was great” may boost a speaker’s confidence,
but in the long run it is not nearly as helpful as a concrete statement about the effectiveness
of a particular gesture in reinforcing a speaker’s claim. To carry this process further, the
class watches and critiques the speeches of others, including several TED talks.

After getting over their initial nervousness, students focus more on presenting evidence-
based arguments. For the last two speeches of the semester, each student formulates a public
policy question, such as: Should the City of Philadelphia institute a soda tax in order to
combat obesity? They then research the topic thoroughly using Curtis library resources,
inform the audience about the problem such a policy is designed to address (the Informative
Speech), and advocate for or against implementing the policy (the Persuasive Speech) in a
well-organized argument backed by expert testimony, statistics, and other such evidence.

Witnessing the students’ growth throughout the semester is both exciting and inspiring.
I think of a young violinist I taught during her first year at Curtis. Her dedication was
apparent on day one, and so were her nerves. When first taking attendance, I ask the students
to stand, state their names, what instruments they play, and what they hope to gain from
the class. The violinist stood hesitantly, trembling, and introduced herself in a barely audible,
quivering voice—and then quickly sat back down. She already knew a few of her classmates
well, but now she was in the spotlight, outside her comfort zone, performing—in a way—
without her violin, and there was no place to hide.

By the end of the semester, she had transformed. No longer did she shake, physically
or vocally. Instead, she stood before us, confident and in charge. An expert on her topic,
she convinced us, in a clearly audible voice and with deliberate movements and gestures,
to support her policy. Any doubts that she had command of the facts were easily dispelled
by her PowerPoint slides, which included graphs, photos, and quotes that further built
her credibility. She connected with each member of the audience, and showed great
presence—one of the most difficult qualities to master.

So while students may still fear snakes, when they graduate from Curtis and head into
the world, they need not fear public speaking. Rather, they are ready to embrace such
speaking opportunities wherever they arise—whether in a concert, through teaching,
or while advocating for the arts.

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