



Top left: Anastasiia Sidorova presents a Persuasive Speech on teenage driving to her classmates.

Bottom left: Zubin Hathi receives feedback after presenting a Persuasive Speech.

Above: Jeffrey Stingerstein in class

PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

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

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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. ♦

Playwright and director Jeffrey Stingerstein joined the Curtis faculty in 2014. In addition to Presentation and Oral Practice, he teaches Drama Workshop.

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