

Performing With Energy, Passion, and Excitement: It's All About Communication

What do Yo-Yo Ma, Christina Aguilera, and The Pussycat Dolls have in common?

By Douglas Niedt

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I have been very fortunate the past few weeks to have had the opportunity to attend several fabulous concerts and master classes. In Kansas City, we are treated to the best of the best by several arts organizations including the Kansas City Symphony, Friends of Chamber Music, Harriman-Jewell Series, University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance, Carlsen Center Series, and of course the venerable Kansas City Guitar Society.

This month alone, I have attended master classes by Yo Yo Ma and the Miro String Quartet, the live-via-satellite high-definition broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera stage of Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*, and a concert by the brilliant young pianist Yuja Wang. And just a few nights ago, I attended the triple-bill performance of Christina Aguilera, Danity Kane, and The Pussycat Dolls. Yes, you read that last sentence correctly. But watching and listening to such a diverse group of performers brought me to a shocking realization.

For this month's article, I want to focus on three of the performers I heard:

The Pussycat Dolls



To the guys out there, I am NOT giving you a link to their website because you won't read the rest of my article--in fact you wouldn't get to the next paragraph!

Christina Aguilera



Yo-Yo Ma



Believe it or not, there is an important artistic similarity between the three in their live performances! The common thread they share is actually rather simple: **they have a clear, powerful vision of what they are trying to communicate.** I witnessed it vividly in all their performances. Because all three have a clear vision of what they are about, they give no-holds-barred performances filled with intensity, commitment, believability and intoxicating energy. They have attitude.

In his three-hour master class, Yo-Yo Ma spoke about these qualities at length and emphasized their importance over and over again. One of his earliest statements in the class was, “Your primary responsibility is to translate what is in your head to someone else’s head.” That is huge. Artistic performance is about communication. But Yo-Yo goes beyond just trying to get the audience to enjoy or appreciate the music. He strives to transfer what is in his head directly into the heads of his listeners. That is also what top-notch pop entertainers do. Christina Aguilera succeeds extraordinarily well at making her listeners feel the lyrics she sings. Great performers of any type of music make us feel things as strongly as they feel them. Even more powerful is when they make us feel things we haven’t felt before, which tends to happen more in art music than popular music. There were many moments in the *Eugene Onegin* opera where I felt things at a level and intensity I had never felt before. It was profound. And to think it translated from another time, another culture, another country, and even another language so clearly and so powerfully--what a tribute to the genius of Tchaikovsky as well as to the skills of the singers.

But let's get back to Yo-Yo's master class. Repeatedly, he asked each student to give him an adjective, just one word, to describe what they were playing. "When this word is in your head, it makes a difference." He wanted them to have a distinct focus on how the piece made them feel or what they were seeing in their minds as they played it. It didn't matter if Ma agreed with the adjective or not. What mattered was that the word was constantly present. Yo-Yo said, "If you are playing, and you suddenly stop, the audience should know what you are doing—what you are communicating or feeling." He told the students when they practice, to stop at any moment and ask yourself, "What is happening *here*?" He said, "When you have noticed something about the music that is important to you, stay with it through the entire piece. Maintaining that thread will make a huge difference in your playing."

Along the same line, he was very adamant about everything having a "character." "What is the character of this piece? What is the character of this phrase? What is the character of this section?" As he conducted a lesson, Yo-Yo didn't say, "Let's hear the 'B' theme." He said, "Let's hear the 'second character'." A performer such as Christina Aguilera is expert at communicating characters in the lyrics or the character of a phrase. You *believe* her.

I was also happy to hear Yo-Yo say that he often looked at a piece as a story or a journey filled with interesting characters and events. I have used that technique for many years but rarely mentioned it, thinking it was "corny," or that it wasn't a serious enough approach for classical works. To know that someone of Ma's stature and success uses this technique was very reassuring to me personally. Singers have an advantage in that many times the song lyrics explicitly spell out what the journey or story is. As instrumentalists however, we must come up with the narrative ourselves, often with no clear-cut indication as to what it might be. But, as Ma stated, it doesn't matter if we are "right." What matters is that we believe in our narrative, story, or character. If it is meaningful to us, if we are sincere, our listeners will be moved.

Ma gave great latitude to how the story or journey can unfold. The performer can have a personal story he communicates through the music. He can be the narrator telling a story about someone else. Or he can be a group—perhaps an oppressed people pouring out their souls and trials through the music. He can even be a swath of land with the music being the description of that land.

He told us that the performer himself must be a character. He (Yo-Yo) is not Yo-Yo Ma when he performs. For each piece he is a different character following a different story or narrative. He adopts an attitude. And yes folks, The Pussycat Dolls also have attitude. Attitude to the max. That is one of the commonalities that results in both being such effective performers. However, one of the many differences between them, is that The Pussycat Dolls only have one or two attitudes whereas Yo-Yo Ma has dozens.

All of these techniques help the performer “get into” the music. When the performer makes his music viscerally meaningful to himself and can no longer contain it, a sizzling infectious energy is created that transfers directly from his mind and soul to the audience.

It is important to realize that the magic, passion, and energy of great performers in any field come from similar sources. Developing attitude and character, and having a clear, sincere vision of what you want to communicate, is crucial to a stirring performance. Sometimes classical musicians look down on pop performers. The bottom line however, is that for all performers, whether classical or pop, the goal is to stir emotions, arouse passions, and create excitement. Personally, I can learn from Yo-Yo Ma *and* The Pussycat Dolls. *Vive la difference!*