The Troubadour Experience

Thoughts on how to sharpen up your acoustic performance
with Mark Dvorak

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Introduction

No single set of instructions could ever prepare anyone for the many circumstances a performer will encounter. Performing is a learn-as-you-go business. And when one chooses to take a longer view on their evolution as a performer, the terms “good” and “bad” as in “I nailed it,” or “I sucked,” become less important than the more over-arching concepts of what worked and what didn’t. And even more importantly, what *will* work and what might not.

A certain desire to be in front of people is required, as is an active devotion to craft. If what you are doing on stage works for the audience and works for you, it is pretty safe then to assume you’re on the right path. That said, what works for a new performer and open stage listeners is a very different circumstance than what is required of a polished, professional singer or instrumentalist, performing before the expectations of a paying audience.

Talent of course is mostly inherent. Developing ones talent is an ongoing and long-term endeavor and is what matters most. And that’s where the work comes in. Attending classes and taking lessons can help, but your private practice and rehearsal in the end, is what will get the goods. The long road to making progress and attaining a level of mastery takes time. In the shorter term though, there are areas on which one can focus to tighten up his or her presentation. And these are the areas on which our discussion are to be based.

Responsibility

In performing and in preparing to perform, the individual or ensemble has three responsibilities to consider:

- The performer has a responsibility to **the music.**
- The performer has a responsibility to **the audience**.
- The performer has a responsibility to **other cast members and crew**.

A responsible performer prepares for the show like an athletes prepares for the game. A responsible performer keeps their skills sharp through practice and rehearsal and believe it, a little rehearsal goes a long way. They keep their instruments in working condition and are able to focus on the work before them. Good performers make choices that put themselves in a place where natural authenticity can find its way into the music and flourish. Being yourself on stage is at

the core of being able to offer a listening audience what is musically yours alone to give.

Just as important are the people presenting the event, the sound guy, the lighting guy, the emcee and the folks running the merch table and selling refreshments. A responsible performer is respectful and patient with these folks, and courteous to and supportive of, others on the program. Further, a responsible performer moves the program forward.

Engagement

The comedian and banjo player Steve Martin once gave a performance workshop for aspiring standup comedians. There were about six other people in the circle and at one point Steve with a goofy grin on his face, raised his hand and asked the group, “Hey, how many of you have ever walked out on stage and began your set by asking, ‘Hey everybody, how you all doin’ tonight?’’

All six raised their hands. Then Steve said, “I’m sorry. You just BLEW the most potent moment of your show.”

And the opening moment of any show IS the most potent. Its the pivotal moment of lift off towards meaningful engagement between performer and audience.
The lights are dimmed, the emcee gives the introduction and all the work - the rehearsing, the setting up of equipment, the changing of clothes and the changing of strings - was done to focus the audience on the moment when they are the most ready to be engaged. It’s the moment when your energy and opening notes will be met with excitement and anticipation. It’s the emcee’s job to welcome the audience and ask how they are doing. It’s performers job to make the first musical splash.

I like to think “entertaining” is a word that audiences sometimes use when they are glad that they came to the show tonight. “Engaging” on the other hand, is what a responsible performers strives to be.

In the days of Vaudeville, up to ten acts were presented, sometimes more, on a given bill. And these revues of comedic skits, jugglers, dancers, singers and what all else took place in theaters all over the country. Typically the opening act was trotted out while people were still finding their seats. And typically the opener or the “dumb” act, was often inexperienced, or horrible on purpose. The tactic was to give the audience something to agree upon. A guy singing off key would get the house’s attention and the boos and calls for “the hook” could be heard as the crowd settled

in. The comedian Rodney Dangerfield built a career on playing this exact character. “I get no respect,” was one of his signature lines. And “My fan club broke up. The guy died.”

So the job of the opening act is to in one way or another, unite the audience. Vaudeville used a “dumb” act to tactically accomplish this feat. In more recent years record companies preferred to use the “opener” slot to showcase their up and coming talent. But often the results were similar.

But here’s the thing. The very nature of our common body of song respects a very different protocol than the money-making machine of the early twentieth-century Vaudeville circuit or the big-time record business. Our music avoids terms like “dumb” when referring to fellow cast members. We have by and large agreed that inclusion and respect for each other are the basic principles upon which our songs and performances are based. At the same time these values are universal and personal, and resonant in our songs.

It’s very important then to assume you *are* you’re own opening act. Consider then that your opening number should err on the side of being bright, unifying and up lifting. If you’re doing a whole evening at the Two Way Street, this is an important consideration that helps you set the table for yourself. If you’ve signed up for a two-song open mic, it’s okay then to play off of, and shift the energy away from, what the last performer en

For our purposes then, one can prepare to *engage* an audience by:

- **Lighting and framing.** Choose to stand in a place where the spotlights are in your eyes. At first this may be unsettling and seem unnatural. Directed front lighting will make a performers’ eyes shine. Your listeners will be able to better focus on what it is you have come to express, and believe it or not, you will be able to better focus on what it is you have come to deliver.

  Also, set the stage the way you want it. Take the time to place the microphones properly. Take the time to place your other instruments on the stage in a place where they are accessible. Move peripheral equipment like music stands, tables and other things to the side, out of your way, so you can concentrate on what you have come to do.

- **Preparedness**. Some of the differences between practice and rehearsal are these. Practice involves improving your skills. Practice means doing exercises that

strengthen your hands and sharpen your sense of pitch. Practice means studying chords, melodies and theory. Practicing also involves working on your songs, or more specifically creating *arrangements* of your songs.

Rehearsing on the other hand involves getting yourself and your stuff ready to perform. Newer performers will visualize themselves behind the microphone at the cafe where they are scheduled to appear. They will visualize themselves singing to their device on a live stream performance. They will visualize themselves absolutely nailing the passages and arrangements he or she spent time rehearsing.

More experienced performers visualize too, but perhaps they have a deeper backlog of successes and flops to draw upon. Before a performance large or small, I will imagine back to a time when things went pretty well; when I found myself relaxed and in tune and in command of the moment. It reminds me that “pretty well” is still a very real possibility and I work to prepare myself so that “pretty well” will become the reality of a given performance.

When I find myself uptight and nervous while warming up before a show, I will lay the guitar down and try to get quiet. I remind myself to breathe. And this really works. There are other times I have I found myself before an audience, in the middle of a song and things are starting to get wobbly and on the brink of hurtling out of control. I begin biting at the words. I begin flailing at the strings and have lost focus. Rest assured the audience saw this coming way before I did. They are the ones watching and listening. These days I work as hard as I am able beforehand to avoid that sort of predicament.

- **Applause**. In a way, applause means one musical moment is now ended and another about to begin. Applause functions something like the frames around the paintings at the art museum. It supplies a certain definition to the work. Use this to your advantage.

  A basic workable strategy is to begin the next song while the applause from the last song is still fading. The contrasting strategy is to let the applause dwindle to silence and then let that silent moment sit for a short time, a very short time. This sets up a song that needs an introduction or some special context. This sets up the time for social commentary or a funny story. One of these a set is good. Maybe two. Start by finding the best place in your set to do this once.

Song choices
Keep an “active list” of your arrangements that are ready to go. If you have an active repertoire of fifty to sixty songs, consider yourself ready for anything. If you have thirty titles on your active list, that’s pretty good too. If you have ten good, performance-ready songs, you can go a long way on in the open mic world.

However long your active list might be, check to make sure you’ve got some variety in there. Have a waltz. Have some uptempo songs. Have something reflective and intimate. Try adding a bluesy number, or a spiritual. Country rhythms are loose and fun. Include some cover songs that you love. Your cover choices say a lot about who you are as a performer to listeners who haven’t heard you before.

In an open mic environment, a good plan includes choosing an upbeat song and something else with a different rhythm or feel to it than the performer before you ended with. If the performer before you ends on a slow, reflective ballad, you may wish to follow that with something more uptempo and familiar. If the performer before you finishes uptempo, maybe it’s time to try that love song to a waltz tempo. Like that. If the performer before you knocks it out of the park, pick your strongest arrangement, play an introduction before singing and begin.

Since 1981 Mark Dvorak has given around ten thousand performances. He has appeared in nearly all of the United States and has made visits to Finland, Canada and Ireland. To date he has released twenty albums including 2020’s *Let Love Go On* and 2024’s *Live & Alone.*

For thirty-one years Dvorak was an integral member of the faculty at Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music. He began teaching as an avocation but his interest in working with students deepened and evolved into a way of life and a livelihood of “helping people teach themselves.” Since 1986 thousands of music students have passed through his classes. He was helped many a beginner get through their first chords and strums, and has hosted a catalogue of master classes and workshops on a range of subjects from old-time banjo picking to the legacy of the great Lead Belly, to just about every other topic related to the study of the American folk song.
Stay in touch at **www.markdvorak.com.**