

The Sick Soprano's High Note

Once upon a time, there was a soprano soloist who came down with the flu right before she was supposed to give a performance of a concert aria with orchestra. It was too late to get a replacement, she must sing; but she knew, no matter how well she did on the rest of the piece, there was no way she was going to hit the final high C of the piece—she was sure she would squawk, or crack, or some other ugly thing—so she decided to fake the audience out.

She struggled through the aria, cheeks glowing with fever, and when she came to the last note, she raised herself up, opened her mouth wide, pretended to sing, but made no sound whatsoever. The next day, the newspaper reviews came out, all praising her beautiful pianissimo high C. "It was so soft you could barely hear it!"

The point of this story is this: as performers, we're always giving subtle clues to the audience about what we're doing. The audience responds to these clues and fills in information based as much on what they expect to happen, as it is on what actually happens. A performer's physical attitude—posture, facial expression, movement, confidence level, etc.—all these things influence the way the listener perceives a performance, just as much as what he/she hears. Thus, the trouble I go to to train students to take the stage with confidence, to follow certain procedures placing the music, addressing the keyboard, taking the bow, and leaving the stage, etc.—these are all non-trivial issues, and add at least 20% to the overall positive effect of a performance, no matter how good or bad the playing is.