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Nonverbal Communication in the Music Classroom

By

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Abstract

In this literature review, I examine the importance of using nonverbal communication in the music classroom. I first offer insights from the general literature on communication, which has highlighted how nonverbal skills help people to connect and communicate more effectively with others. I then make connections to music education, where we regularly implement nonverbal communication through various means, such as conducting gestures and facial expressions in ensemble contexts. I discuss the importance of finding an optimal balance between verbal and nonverbal instruction to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of musical rehearsals—particularly within culturally diverse populations in which linguistic differences may complicate traditional verbal communication efforts. I conclude by offering possibilities for further research that might provide greater insight into these findings.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, gestures, conducting, music education, classroom, behavior

An essential element of effective teaching is the instructor's mastery of nonverbal communication, particularly that which effectively communicates musical expression, establishes rapport with students, and fosters a constructive learning environment. In music education, effective nonverbal communication is arguably even more critical as it becomes blended with conducting—particularly because music-making in the classroom often depends on the intricacy and effectiveness of the teacher's conducting gesture, which should communicate a wide range of musical ideas. Beyond education, research on communication has revealed important insights into the human nature of social interaction. One observation that is consistent across the literature on communication is the often-unacknowledged importance of nonverbal cues and how much they reveal their thoughts and intentions. Nonverbal cues, or gestures, are physical movements of the body used to communicate ideas, intentions, or feelings (Knapp & Hall, 2002). We study such behaviors in a wide variety of contexts, from intimate relationships to large social functions. In no small degree, we express nonverbal cues in involuntary ways. Students learn many of these nonverbal skills in the classroom, where much of a child's learning takes place from interacting with and observing their peers as well as their teachers. As discussed ahead, there is an abundance of literature examining how nonverbal communication skills are essential to good teaching and how they can impact the classroom environment. It is possible, after all, that teachers who consciously adapt their physical movements and facial expressions to cultivate a positive and effective classroom environment will develop a more meaningful relationship with their students. Therefore, in this article, I will examine the impact of nonverbal communication in music education.

Children naturally demonstrate nonverbal cues from a very early age, most developing meaningful gestures even before they master verbal skills (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). Children

with higher levels of social intelligence often exhibit an aptitude for recognizing gestures. For instance, children in preschool and elementary school who scored higher at decoding face, posture, gesture, or voice tonality also scored higher on measures of popularity and social competence (Knapp & Hall, 2002). This trend also carries into adulthood, with more socially competent adults having more social influence. Adults who learn to recognize their nonverbal behavior and use it to establish rapport often have more success in social groups and relationships (*ibid*). Indeed, we often assume that nonverbal signals are more spontaneous, harder to fake, less likely to be manipulated, and, hence, more believable (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Therefore, they tend to be perceived as more genuine by others. Furthermore, the degree to which someone likes someone else appears to be 55% conveyed through kinesic expression (nonverbal communication), 38% through tone of voice, and only 7% through words (Mehrabian, 1972). Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals who have mastered nonverbal skills believe that they have more considerable social influence (Knapp & Hall).

Regardless of our self-awareness, nonverbal cues can reveal thoughts and intentions that we likely would not verbalize to others. For example, when a social setting forces people into close quarters with others not well known to them, people tend to increase their distance psychologically (e.g., less eye contact, body tenseness, silence, nervous laughter and/or humor) in order to eschew feelings of intimacy (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Furthermore, it is common for specific nonverbal cues to involuntarily slip past our attention and be registered by others around us—likely because reactions to our surroundings occur more quickly than our conscious mind can register. If something is interpreted as repulsive to the senses—whether an unpleasant image, scent, taste, sound, or feeling—a person’s face will often scrunch into a grimace without their conscious intent. It is important to be mindful of these unconscious nonverbal displays of

emotion and intention in order to be more in control of our reactions to our surroundings. For example, students can read through disingenuous comments of praise when a music teacher's facial expressions communicate otherwise. Similar to any other personal relationship, teachers are engaged continuously in fragile relationships with their students that are vulnerable to negative nonverbal cues. Only when proactively considered, nonverbal cues can serve rather than inhibit a teacher's ability to establish rapport with their students.

Types of Nonverbal Communication

There are three general nonverbal communication areas: paralanguage, proxemics, and kinesics (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). *Paralanguage* includes extraverbal elements such as tone of voice, volume, and hesitations in speech. For example, an angry teacher may raise their voice or have a harsh tone. *Proxemics* is the study of ways that individuals use space in their environment. For instance, proxemics would deal with how someone may arrange objects in their room or the space in which they feel comfortable interacting with others. In a music classroom, this might look like having chairs arranged in a circle rather than rows to facilitate a more welcoming and cooperative environment. Finally, *kinesics* is the study of patterns of body movement in interaction, which people most immediately think of regarding nonverbal communication. For example, a conductor may demonstrate the growth and decay of a phrase using their hands. Nonetheless, all three elements are essential to one's ability to communicate nonverbally effectively.

Additionally, there are three categories of instructional motions: conducting, acting, and wielding (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). *Conducting*, which is distinct from the musical term, includes actions such as clapping a rhythm to be repeated, turning lights on and off, and indicating the class to quiet down using the "shh" motion. *Acting* occurs when teachers use their

bodies to clarify what they are trying to say, such as using hand gestures to communicate an instruction or idea. Finally, *wielding* occurs when a person interacts with objects or materials in their environment. Each is an essential element of effective nonverbal technique. It is often quicker and more efficient than trying to communicate everything through verbal means—especially to younger students who have a shorter attention span.

Nonverbal Communication in Teaching and Music Education

Nonverbal mastery is an important quality among effective teachers. Teachers exhibit such mastery for multiple reasons, most notably that nonverbal communication tends to be a more efficient mode of communication simply. As Battersby and Bolton (2013) stated, "a teacher's modeling through a nonverbal example rather than a verbal one is sometimes a more effective way to be understood and a quicker way of emphasizing the point" (p. 61). However, it is deceptively easy for teachers to develop a poor habit of engaging in too much "teacher talk"—a behavior in which teachers spend an excessive amount of time verbally communicating ideas that are usually demonstrated by nonverbal cues (Nápoles, 2016).

A challenge that every teacher will inevitably encounter throughout their careers is the need to respond to cultural differences in the classroom, which should inform how they choose to communicate with their students (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). Given that linguistic differences will inevitably arise within such culturally diverse contexts, it is important to keep in mind that all communication is contextual. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that nonverbal communication could help make communication more efficient in culturally diverse contexts (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). This is particularly important to consider as classrooms continue to diversify in the future. The Pew Research Center estimated that nearly 1 in 5 Americans will be an immigrant in 2050, compared to 1 in 8 in 2005. By 2025, we believe that 1 in 4 students in

public schools will be limited in English proficiency (Battersby & Bolton, 2013). Therefore, the integration of nonverbal communication should be a primary focus for all educators because they help to break barriers for students who are not as proficient with the English language. As Battersby and Bolton (2013) stated, "If everyone gets the gestures, then we are all speaking the same language" (p. 61).

However, we cannot guarantee that all students will understand nonverbal cues, as we have found no speech-independent gestures that are made the same and have the same meaning in every culture (Knapp & Hall, 2002). For instance, certain hand gestures that are understood to communicate one thing can in the United States might mean something completely different elsewhere.

Music ensembles are already imbued with nonverbal communication, whether explicitly or implicitly, as music teachers naturally communicate many ideas through their conducting gestures. Indeed, conducting gestures can be an efficient way to convey musical elements such as tempo, articulation, and dynamics in a nonverbal manner, especially in performance settings, when verbal methods are not an option (Nápoles, 2013). However, there is also a risk that gestures may not yield the intended response. Therefore, the balance of verbal and nonverbal instruction used by the conductor is dependent upon the responses of their students to either instruction, as well as the teaching style used by the conductor. This balance will be different for every teacher, as some will be more skilled with verbal rather than nonverbal instruction, and vice versa. However, research points to the ineffectiveness of using too much verbal instruction, and the effectiveness of clear visual instruction. For instance, Nápoles (2016) identified that successful teachers spent between 35% and 45% of instructional time engaged in teacher talk. In

a 50-minute class period, this amounts to 18–23 minutes of talking that one might otherwise spend rehearsing.

Additionally, one study showed little engagement by students during periods of teacher talk in high school choruses (*ibid*). This finding is not especially surprising, as students can easily lose focus when a teacher spends too much time circulating an idea rather than getting to the point. Students rely on clear, concise, and unambiguous information and thrive on specific feedback instead of general comments (Manfredo, 1973). A series of short, consecutive segments of teacher talk and student performance can lead to poor pacing and student frustration (*ibid*). As writer/researcher Bloomquist (1973) observed, “an overly talkative director is easy to ignore” (pp. 78-79). Therefore, it is extraordinarily useful to take advantage of nonverbal communication in music ensembles, especially in one’s conducting gesture. As Battersby & Bolton (2013) stated, “gesturing is integral in daily music classes that require routines, rehearsals, and performances” (p. 59).

It takes discipline and focus to form gestural habits that can help foster desired behaviors from the class. In one study, a group of high school choral students performed a piece while watching a video recording of a conductor and reading verbal instructions. More experienced teachers perceived more staccato and word stress in performances when verbal instructions and conducting gestures were congruent (Nápoles, 2013). In another similar study, Nápoles (2014) examined the relationship between conducting gesture, piano accompaniment, and verbal instruction in the rehearsal setting, and how they impact student engagement and performance. Unsurprisingly, one of the most compelling findings was that when congruent messages between the three are delivered, desired dynamics are most accurately performed. However, when we tell singers to follow an instruction, but the conducting gesture indicates a different instruction, they

may choose not to follow the instruction or may only follow it half-heartedly (Nápoles, 2014). It is easy to underestimate the impact of nonverbal communication in the classroom, especially for conductors who are being watched very closely by students. On the other hand, it is more challenging to align one's verbal instruction with their nonverbal instruction properly. Nevertheless, the most desired results occur when these two are congruent (ibid).

To be clear, nonverbal communication in one's gesture does not just refer only to hand movement; it also includes what the conductor does with their facial expressions. Facial expressions do not occur in isolation, but rather accompany and supplement verbal expressions such as sentence markers, idea enforcers, and contradictions (Key, 1976). In the music rehearsal, the face is often colloquially said to be the "gateway to the soul." A strong conductor will use facial communication to connect with individual students and communicate the music's emotions. Indeed, as Decker and Herford (1973) discussed, "while thinking of pattern and phrasing necessary to interpret a selection, you can communicate the rise and fall of intensity through eyes and facial muscles" (p. 49). One could argue that facial expressions are, in fact, more crucial to one's conducting gesture than their hands and arms. Leonard Bernstein demonstrated this compellingly when he conducted Haydn's *Symphony No. 88* entirely through facial expressions (Krulwich, 2010). It may seem counterintuitive to consider a conductor neglecting to utilize their arms (which one could consider their most valuable asset). However, the lesson is nevertheless clear: conductors who fail to develop the nuances of their facial expressions might ultimately struggle to communicate their creative goals or elicit their desired results.

Furthermore, there is a link to a lack of teacher eye contact with off-task behavior among music students (Yarbrough & Price, 1981). As Knapp & Hall (2002) stated, "an instructor's eye

gaze can be used to inhibit communication as well as facilitate it" (p. 61). It is, therefore important for any conductor to develop their facial communication abilities in addition to their physical gestures, as the absence of this know-how can ultimately inhibit the overall efficiency and engagement of the ensemble.

Conclusion

How people communicate nonverbally with one another is highly relevant to the field of music education and has accordingly received considerable attention in previous research. However, there are still important questions in the field of music education that one might explore through further inquiry. First, it would be worth further exploring the role of culture in nonverbal communication. For example, are any forms of nonverbal communication that might be considered “universal” to all students, or gestures that might truly communicate the same idea across all cultures? More fundamentally, perhaps, we ought to better explore how educators can continue to refine their communication skills to adapt to highly diverse groups of students.

Additionally, researchers should continue to focus on the psychology of effective nonverbal communication skills in teachers. For instance, it would be beneficial to explore whether there is a correlation between social competence and nonverbal communication skills in music education. Such insights could provide implications for the psychological nature of highly effective teachers and how they nurture good communication. In music education specifically, researchers might further explore how conducting gestures impact students’ musicianship, and what gestures might reinforce better singing and playing. As a choral musician, I have worked with many conductors. Some of them used gestures that reinforced great vocal technique, and some of them used gestures that inhibited my technique. Only further research can provide viable insights into the nature of conducting and its impact on musical technique.

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