

“OPEN SESAME”—LANGUAGE SECRETS FOR ENSEMBLE PLAYERS

by Ross Harbaugh, August 2016

One of the great joys of working in a small ensemble is simply: THERE IS NO CONDUCTOR. What a concept! Having no conductor can mean living in the best of all possible worlds—an on-going, spirited dialogue between intellectual equals, each owning the interpretation and feeling empowered. Joyful! The challenge, of course, is that THERE IS NO CONDUCTOR, and the ensemble members need to reach musical decisions by consensus. This means knowing how to talk to each other, make suggestions, criticize, and disagree, all without upsetting the balance of personalities that every ensemble must have in order to perform.

So, the goal of this article is:

To explore how to speak effectively and objectively about music using “language templates” to help passionate musicians work through disagreements in a positive and productive way.

The language templates revealed in this article are not theoretical. They are word combinations that have actually been used in real rehearsals over the past 30 years. Like any language, word combinations need to be studied and practiced. Certain words create certain effects!

Harry Potter went to Hogwarts School to learn magical words in order to make things transform, fly, freeze, and disappear! Ali Baba learned the power of saying “Open, Sesame!” after trying to open an enchanted door by using the wrong words. The right words can open doors of communication, keep them open, change the direction of a rehearsal, and sustain the life of an ensemble.

So, let’s get started. It’s important to remember there are subtle details to be observed in which words to use. Mark Twain once said, “the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between ‘Lightening, and Lightening Bug.’” If I say “You’re a Pig,” that usually ends the relationship. However, if I say **you’re acting like a pig,** it could mean I’m using “tough love.” I’m looking out for you.

However, if I say “you play like a pig,” that’s the end of the relationship. But if I say **“you’re playing like a pig”**...well, it could mean that today you aren’t listening, but it would have to be a very strong friendship for this to be taken in the right way.

So, how do I say, “You’re playing like a pig,” without using those exact words? Let’s try out some different words to see which doors they open.

If I say “*You’re slow!*” that has very little to do with music. It’s a personal attack. Even if I had intended to suggest a different tempo in the music, the person I accused of “being slow” will take away hurt feelings, and be looking for ways to hurt me back. Communication will have stopped. The door of progress has slammed shut.

But if I said instead, “**We’re in different tempos,**” this is an objective observation. There is very little to argue about here. Once the problem is laid out and agreed upon objectively, the discussion can be all about the music. Now, the participants in the ensemble can go about solving the problem without hurt feelings. No one can disagree that being in different tempos is a problem!

You’ll notice that in the following examples, the italicized statements are not objective. These italicized statements all have a negative, accusatory feel because they begin or emphasize the word “*You!*”—“*You always, you never, you do this, you don’t understand that.*” In each case, the suggested alternative statement has an objective, non-hurtful, and constructive feel. These statements begin with either “**I, We, or Let’s.**”

Example one: “*You’re flat!*” There is nothing more personal than one’s concept of intonation. Attacking someone’s intonation also attacks their education, their ear, their musicality. Using objective words would keep this topic objective:

1. **“Do we all have the same “A?” Let’s retune.”**
2. **“This passage needs more work on intonation.”**
3. **“Let’s get the unisons and octaves together first, and then talk about the 3rds and 7ths”**

Example two: “*You’re too loud!*” Again, this statement has a non-musical impact on the colleague I’m talking to. Of course you want your solo to be heard, but a phrase that I’ve found to be very effective, and at the same time always lightens the mood is, “**I feel over-supported.**”

Example three: “*Which part of “pp” don’t you understand?*” This statement is extremely aggressive, because it questions my intelligence, and makes me feel uneducated, insensitive, and thoughtless. If someone ever said this to me, I would start looking for another job. “**Are we all agreed we should be pp here?**” is much more objective and effective, and keeps everyone working together toward a common goal.

(A special cautionary word about sarcasm should be mentioned here. Sarcasm in general is a poor way of communicating. “I love the way you’re playing so loud.” “It’s so sensitive the way you’re accompanying my solo.” These are nice compliments until you realize that they are not meant to be compliments. Exactly the opposite. I suggest keeping the conversation and suggestions factual and objective).

Example four: “*Your solo is boring!*” Again, it’s very hard to imagine wanting to ever play again with the person who said this. It’s insulting and non-constructive. I’m hurt and still in the dark about what would be a good alternative solution. Every player has his/her own strengths and weaknesses. A phrase that is much more encouraging and has the potential of drawing out the best from a colleague is **“You sound uncomfortable.** **How would you play your solo if the rest of us weren’t here?”** This shows respect, and also brings the colleague back into the group discussion. How would a wider vibrato, more relaxed shifts, more variety in pacing or shaping affect the solo?

Example five: “*You’re coming in too late at letter B.*” This might be a factual statement, but it tends to throw all the responsibility on the person addressed. There might be a number of factors that are contributing to the downbeat not being together (a misunderstood group decision, a poor cue, a rallentando that isn’t subdivided. An equally factual and objective statement would be **“We’re arriving at Rehearsal 5 at different times.”**

The wrong word can change a good idea or valid concern into a cruel insult or perceived attack. To keep things objective, I like the “**IF-THEN**” sentence construction. **“If we keep the tempo moving into Rehearsal 5, then we’ll have less trouble keeping the line going into the Finale.**

Here’s an example of an objective argument:

- A. Hey guys, let’s take more time going into Rehearsal 5.
- B. Why?
 - A. I think it will set up the return to G Major.
 - B. If we take time into Rehearsal 5, I don’t think we’ll get the tempo back at the *A Tempo*.
 - A. Let’s try it both ways, and see which works better.

This is probably the most important thing I’ll say in this article: If there is a disagreement about how to play a passage, play it both ways before discussing it, or even talking much about it. If I had a vanity plate, it would read “PLAY IT FIRST.”

So often I’ve found myself madly in love with an idea, and getting very upset that my ensemble colleagues don’t like it. I can feel myself ready to fight long and hard for my vision of the music. But after the group tries my idea with open minds and as much enthusiasm as they can muster, and I do the same for the contrary idea, I quite often find myself liking the contrary idea much more than mine. What a waste of time and effort if we had

generated a lot of ill will by arguing over an idea that turned out to be forgettable!

Here is a list of templates—actual quotes from rehearsals-- of objective and effective language that can be plugged into a rehearsal setting. If you're not sure how to get your idea across, try one of these magical phrases:

DYNAMICS/BALANCE

1. **Maybe we could try...** the unison before Rehearsal 5 a little quieter.
2. **I was having trouble...**hearing the viola solo at Rehearsal 5.
3. **I feel like...**some people are playing *fortissimo* in the *forte* section.
4. **I'm imagining..**a more transparent sound at Rehearsal 5.
5. **Could we experiment? How about...**playing *pp* at the bridge, instead of at the fingerboard?
6. **I feel over-supported...**at Rehearsal 5 (instead of : “*you’re too loud*”).
7. **You know that section...**at the end of the scherzo where all eight of us are playing *pp* eighths? **Could we try** just tapping the string vertically, rather than making a horizontal stroke?
8. **I’m just hearing...**a lot of clarity from the violins.
9. **I’m imagining...**more of a whisper (more of a murmur)
10. **It would be really great...**to have a veiled sound at Rehearsal 5.
11. **Are we all agreed...**that we should be *pp* here?
12. **Could we just try it first,** and then we can discard it if we don’t like it.
13. **I wonder if...**you shouldn’t be a little more prominent there.
14. **Is it too “far out” to try...**a *subito p* and then crescendo going into the coda....
15. **Should that section...**be more of a contrast?
16. **My feeling is...**you should be more prominent at Rehearsal 5.

TEMPO/PACING

1. **Let’s...**concentrate on the pulse.
2. **Sometime I’d like to try...**freshening the tempo.
3. **I’m confused. Are the...**16ths leading the quarter notes at Rehearsal 5?
4. **I think...** we’re getting ahead of the 8^{ths} at Rehearsal 5.
5. **Let’s try...**counting in a big two, instead of 4.

6. **Am I**...rushing at Rehearsal 5? I feel...I'm getting ahead of everyone.
7. **How would it be if we**....take more time into Rehearsal 5?
8. **Does it sound**...slow to anyone?
9. **Do you think we could**...not slow down right at Rehearsal 5?
10. **I was thinking**, at Rehearsal 5, we should broaden the tempo.
11. **Do you think**...I'm too slow at Rehearsal 5 (vs. "*you're too fast at Rehearsal 5*)

ENSEMBLE

12. **Do you think we**...lose our lilt at Rehearsal 5?
13. **I need**...a bigger cue at Rehearsal 5.
14. **I think we could just**..."go into it" at Rehearsal 5.
15. It's a little rocky after the development. **I feel** you two are on slightly different wave lengths.
16. **We're not quite**...together at Rehearsal 5.
17. **What do people need** in the way of a cue at Rehearsal 5? Two 8ths, or a quarter?

ARTICULATION

18. **Ross, may I suggest for your playing pleasure**, longer 8ths at Rehearsal 5
19. **Maybe we're**...giving too much of a bite on our sforzandos
20. **Perhaps a little more... staccato...is in order**
21. **I still feel**...your notes under his melody sound too short. Would you try a brushier stroke?
22. The bow stroke **seems**...too long **to me**. Would you try a sharper attack with a more vertical *spiccato*?
23. **Have you ever tried** playing smoother at Rehearsal 5?
24. **What would happen if**...we crescendo later in the phrase at Rehearsal 5?

PHRASING/MUSICAL SHAPING

25. **Does it sound**...too normal?

26. **Could you guys...**give more direction to those runs down? They sound kind of directionless to me.
27. **Could we continue...**the excitement until Rehearsal 5?
28. **Would you** sing your idea?
29. **Let's let the phrase breathe** (instead of “you're slow.”)
30. **Would you try...**a wider vibrato (...more audible shifts, ...taking more time) instead of “*play it more romantically*,” “*Play more expressively*.”
31. **I'm imagining...**the piece sweeping forward here (instead of, “*does it have to drag here?*”)
32. **I don't know what it will sound like, but could we try...**grouping the notes in pairs at Rehearsal 5?”
33. **Here's the gesture of my phrase concept** (arm sweep).
34. **I'm missing...**ecstasy in this climax.
35. **Is it conceivable that your...**vibrato is too intense at Rehearsal 5?
36. **Have you ever considered...**a narrower vibrato at Rehearsal 5?

MISCELLANEOUS/COURTESY

37. **I love it. I want you to love it as much as I do.**
38. **Could we...**start at Rehearsal 5?
39. **Let's...**begin the movement again. **Thank you** (never to be said sarcastically).
40. **Is there a way we could...**move it at Rehearsal 5? or (play more on the string at Rehearsal 5?)
41. **Maybe we could try...**
42. **What I'm noticing is...**
43. **I still don't feel comfortable...**at Rehearsal 5
44. **What I'm hearing you say is...**
45. **Correct me if I'm wrong...**
46. **Ross, can I induce you to try...?**
47. **What I'm hoping for...**in this opening is
48. **What I'm looking for after Rehearsal 5 is....**
49. **My vision for this movement is...**
50. **Just for the record, I...**don't agree with that, but let's try it at the performance tonight.
51. **Hey Kathy. Let's try...**

52.Could I ask...

53.We could do more..... in.....

54.I have a question. Are we going to...play the *fp* like a diminuendo?

55.Would anyone mind if...we played Rehearsal 5 again?

56.To give me another chance, could we...play Rehearsal 5 again?

57.My very small request...could we...?

58.Just one thing. If you could...drive the eighths into Rehearsal 5, I think it would be more powerful.

59.You have no idea how powerful that sounds!

60.Are you buying or selling? Haha.

61.Do you have...a *forte* at Rehearsal 5?

62.I guess that's better, isn't it?

63.I don't know, but could we...

64.Is it possible to be...more delicate at Rehearsal 5?

So, clearly, the take-away of this article is that Rehearsal 5 is big trouble, but I also hope another take-away is to be thoughtful of others, and to use language to keep the rehearsal's focus on the objective tools of interpreting music—time management and volume control. Musicians who love chamber music have strong opinions about music. But sometimes fear of having our ideas rejected, or concern over whether we will offend a colleague keeps us from expressing these opinions effectively. My hope is that the language templates contained in this article will give all ensemble players some useful tools to be able to speak up and express themselves.
“Open, Sesame!”