

The Compassionate Interpreter

By Ewandro Magalhães

You most likely do not know him, although you probably should if you are a jazz fan. He is a virtuoso instrumentalist who has been playing since age six. He has visited over 60 countries and performed at nearly every major jazz festival on the planet. He has recorded with virtually every Brazilian pop singer plus some heavyweights on the international jazz scene. Blowing into his saxophone is the only thing Widor Santiago has ever done for a living. He completely masters his instrument and is at ease performing live before hundreds of thousands of spectators in large arenas or at Copacabana Beach during the now-traditional New Year's festivities in Rio.

Yet, despite his unquestionable experience and immaculate precision, Widor, now in his mid-fifties, still follows a rather strict ritual before stepping on stage. It includes introspection, concentration drills, and, quite surprisingly, prayers.

A Comparable Craft

Music is as complex a language as any other. It uses its own ancient notation method of dots, bars, and symbols, a part of which got transliterated and simplified in modern times using the first seven letters of the Roman alphabet to refer to the seven basic musical notes. As with any spoken language, music is susceptible to infinite variations in tone, pitch, intensity, and tempo. In their urge to communicate, skillful musicians and interpreters will deftly combine those elements just so to disclose or conceal, enrapture or aggravate, grieve or celebrate, reveal or withdraw.

Musicians can be compared to conference interpreters on many counts. The former deal in musical notes and melodic phrases, the latter in words and units of meaning. For everything

else, there are probably more similarities than there are differences. A musician, like an interpreter, will rely heavily on a sense of hearing while keeping all other sensory channels open to any ancillary elements of meaning that could be blended into a harmonious whole: the conductor's gestures, the symbols on the score, the vibration given off by one's instruments, the audience's reaction. Interpreters and musicians must be endowed with a fine notion of timing, intensive focus, and agility. They must be nimble and able to improvise at a moment's notice. They perform live in front of massive audiences, making endless instantaneous decisions as they give voice to other people's songs or tales. The risks inherent in such high-visibility, live-streaming performances can make stress a lifelong companion to musicians as well as interpreters.

Playing to Transform

At first glance, Widor's pre-show routine does not quite add up. After so many years on the road, you would expect an artist of his caliber to have overcome any performing anxiety or stage fright. Could he really have butterflies in his stomach at every new gig? I was determined to find out, driven by something other than mere curiosity. I sought an analogy that could produce actionable advice one could put to good use on stage as well as in the booth. Taking advantage of my proximity to him—I married his sister some 20 years ago—I decided to ask him straight. An enlightening conversation ensued.

"I like to take a minute to remind myself of the reasons I am there," Widor explained, pausing briefly before continuing. "Different people play for different reasons. Some of my colleagues play from a place of

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anger. They resent being discriminated against, socially, racially, or otherwise. They feel they have been dealt a bad hand and it makes them angry. They take that anger with them on stage and work extra hard to shine, if only to take it out on the world."

He went on to explain that other performers play for the reassurance that comes with applause. They enjoy the boost to their self-esteem and capitalize on their insecurity to play like never before and attract the recognition they crave. There are also those whose art is a form of avoidance. Their heart is no longer in it, but playing keeps them busy while providing a perfect excuse to procrastinate and stay away from something else they ought to be doing (but at which they secretly fear failing).

Widor's words totally and immediately resonated with the interpreter in me. In a profession as ego-driven as ours, it is easy to get misled. Breaking into the craft may at times involve a fair amount of elbowing, and the resulting anger can accompany a newcomer long after the initial friction. Also, simultaneous interpreting is still regarded as a superior skill, bordering on the magical, and the reassurance that comes from knowing one can do it and do it well may be uplifting and keep an interpreter elated for years on end. And there are many among us whose enthusiasm has faded, for whom playing has lost its luster. They feel jaded and yet unable to turn the table. Anxiety mounts.

"Anger can be as valid a driver as any other, provided the end result is

good music," Widor continued. "Still, in such circumstances, there will always be an underlying anxiety that is hard to push away," he warned.

Now, if the jitters are no longer a problem for Widor, then why all the introspection and praying before each of his performances? He settled the issue quite surprisingly. "I know that on any given day, in any crowd, there is at least one individual ready to be touched by a single note I play. I pray that she or he is there and leaves changed." He concluded the conversation with a powerful statement: "I play to transform."

In Search of Compassion

Regardless of what we do, we are all moving along a continuum spanning the full spectrum of human feelings. And while any emotion can technically carry us forward and help us shine, some will definitely leave a lingering, better aftertaste. The higher we move up the emotional scale, the closer we are to excellence and bliss. Learning to progress from mediocre to awesome and from miserable to great involves discovering loftier emotions from which to operate.

At the end of the day, anything worth doing is worth doing right. Interpreting should be no exception. It is a beautiful craft, ultimately anchored in the notion of service. It is also a stressful, taxing activity that can leave us mentally and physically drained, so we might as well do it for the right reasons. Why desecrate it with emotions unworthy of the ➤

effort? Why tie its expression to our need for reassurance or, worse yet, retribution? Why not make it meaningful by making it about someone else? Could we possibly transit from anger to vanity to detachment and, like Widor, eventually play from a place of compassion? It will likely be a gradual process, and the first step, of course, is determining where we find ourselves now. Looking for our underlying motives takes full precedence.

So, trying to translate into actionable advice some of what I learned from my friend that day, here are some suggestions and questions to help interpreters keep the reasons for their actions in check and evolving:

- Make it a habit to reflect on why it is that you do the things you do.
- More specifically, try to drill down on what makes you tick as an interpreter. Be honest!
- Challenge your motives by asking what is next on the scale.

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- What could make you *want* to perform better? What emotion could keep you going *forever*?
- For whom are you playing? Whom are you hoping to touch?
- What could take you to a more compassionate mode?
- How would that affect your anxiety?

These are hard questions, and the answers will likely elude you for a while. Yet asking them and acting on the ensuing hunches is the only way forward. In the meantime, you would do well to emulate part of Widor's concentration routine. Taking a minute to

remind yourself of the true reasons you are there will make you a more conscientious interpreter. You do not need to pray, if you are not spiritually inclined, but a little introspection before opening the mike is easy enough to do and well worth your time.

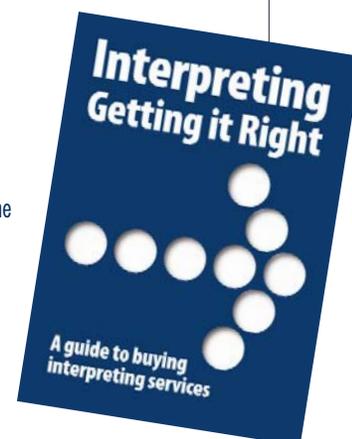
Beyond the booth or across the stage are discoveries waiting to be made, insights dying to materialize, myths one push away from collapse. And in any crowd, on any given day, there is at least one life longing to be transformed. All it takes is one note played right, one word uttered compassionately, by someone no longer interested in proving a point.

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Carmen Cross has over nine years of experience translating medical and legal documents from Arabic and German into U.S./U.K. English. She specializes in translating all types of legal and clinical trial documentation, including patents, contracts, medical reports, clinical trial protocols, research articles, and start-up documentation. She is a member of

ATA's Medical Division. Contact: carmensuecross@yahoo.com.



Ewandro Magalhães is an experienced conference interpreter and trainer of interpreters. He has a master's degree in conference interpreting from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He is the chief interpreter at the International Telecommunication Union in Geneva, Switzerland. He is the author of *Sua Majestade, o Intérprete - o*

fascinante mundo da tradução simultânea. You can find his blog, *Field Notes*, at www.ewandro.com. Contact: ewandro@gmail.com.



Corinne McKay is an ATA director and an ATA-certified French>English translator in Boulder, Colorado. She translates in the areas of international development, corporate communications, and law, and is the author of two books for freelance translators: *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator* (over 6,000 copies in print) and *Thoughts on*

Translation. Contact: corinne.mckay@gmail.com.

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