Good morning. My name is Alastair McKean and I’m the Head of Library Services at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in Australia, and it is a huge pleasure to be here with you today. I hope you’re all having a fabulous time and I do want to thank Inger and Sebastian for putting on such a stupendous conference. Apart from its obviously being wonderful to hang out with all of you, until now I had spent approximately fourteen hours of my life in Berlin, on an orchestra tour, with about 35 minutes available for sightseeing, so it’s been great to discover the city in greater detail than one can on a powerwalk from Checkpoint Charlie to the Brandenburg Gate and then back to the hall for a lazy nine-and-a-half-hour shift. So I’m talking today about public speaking, and I just want to clarify a few things about what I’m proposing to address. I’m really thinking here about speaking to a group of strangers, of whatever size, whether it be a pre-concert talk for 150 subscribers or half a dozen VIP donors having a tour of your Library. I’m not really thinking in terms of speaking up on something controversial in a staff meeting. I think you need Jane Cross’s seminar for that. I should also say that although I talk a lot about pre-concert talks, I think that there’s a lot that’s specific to those which is transferable to other public speaking. And I propose to bang on for say 50 minutes and then have some questions.

1. MY QUALIFICATIONS

But if I’m going to pontificate then I think I should start by giving you an idea of my qualifications to do so. I’ve been doing pre-concert talks since 2001 and as well as for the SSO I’ve done these for the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra in New Zealand, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, where I used to work, the Australian Chamber Orchestra and a few others. I’ve also, for the MSO, presented schools’ concerts and done Peter and the Wolf. I did Grandfather as a sort of Winston Churchill on acid and not that many of the children cried. I’ve actually been doing public speaking since Wangaratta High School, where I was on the debating team, and I’d just like to say that in the match against Wycheproof College in 1991 we were totally robbed. I also appeared in the school play every year, with one of the highlights of my thespian career being in eighth grade when the play, which was written by the drama teachers, was a superhero mashup which infringed copyright to an awesome degree. I played the part of Tarzan. Typecasting, obviously.

From which you must inevitably conclude that I am a gigantic extrovert and that you must be extroverted to do public speaking.

And neither of these things are true. Being extroverted helps – well, actually, I assume it helps. True confession, and please forgive me for speaking personally but although I am
aware that I come across as extroverted, I’m really not. I put on a good show. But I would describe myself without hesitation as an introvert. For instance there is very little I would rather avoid than meeting new people; given the choice between a dinner party where I don’t know anybody, and biting off my own legs, well … [demonstrate]. I should stress that I make a big exception for groups of orchestra librarians, groups of musicians, people with whom I already have something in common. The ice has already been broken, that ice I find extraordinarily difficult to break.

And at this point I have to recommend to you an exceptional book called *Quiet*, by a writer named Susan Cain. Its subtitle is ‘The Power of Introverts in a World that Can’t Stop Talking’, and I’d been a bit put off by this, as it makes the book sound like it comes from that sub-category of the airport-bookshop-psychology genre which deals with Finding Success by Unearthing Your Hidden Power. It’s not. Matt Dannan of the US Air Force Band recommended it to me, and I said, oh yes I’ve seen that but haven’t read it, and he said ‘No no it’s really good’, so I bought a copy and I’d got to about page 15 when I put it down and e-mailed Matt and said, this woman is writing about me, she has been following me around. I found the book absolutely revelatory and I suspect many of us here would do, and I recommend it unreservedly to you all.

One of the stories that Cain tells is about a professor of psychology called Brian Little. He is by her account a dazzling lecturer. She quotes a description of him as being like a cross between Albert Einstein and Robin Williams. His classes are oversubscribed, he was elected Favourite Professor by the graduating class at Harvard three years in a row, he’s done Ted talks, the whole thing. However, Cain says that ‘If you talk to Professor Little, he will tell you that despite his public persona … he’s a true blue, off-the-charts introvert.’

In 1979 he was invited to give a lecture at a college situated just upstream of Ottawa on the Richelieu River. And the lecture went very well, to the point where the head honchos invited him on the spot to come back and give it again the following year – and they also invited him to come to lunch. You know what it is like when you just need to stop and recharge. Well, Little had to give another lecture that afternoon so he really needed to stop and recharge, and he knew that making smalltalk over lunch for an hour and a half would just flatten him. But he realised obviously he couldn’t say that, so he thought very quickly and invented a passion for ship design, and apologised profusely by saying he had hoped to spend the lunch break looking at the ships on the river. And of course his hosts were very understanding and more than happy for him to indulge his hobby, and he came back every year and did the lectures and spent his lunch hours observing the marine traffic and presumably looking as ecstatic as possible. And that was fine until the college moved to new premises inland.

Which raises the question, how does an introverted person manage to speak in public effectively? Brian Little has understandably given this a lot of thought, and his theory is that although people do have certain personality traits – such as introversion – it is possible to defy them in the service of something which you value highly. There is an element of acting here, and Cain recognises that for many of us this is difficult. We would prefer to be ourselves, and it feels inauthentic to put on a public face. But Little argues that we’re not being inauthentic. He would draw the distinction between, say, a venal and corrupt politician
pretending to be a good fellow, and a shy person pretending to be an outgoing one – if the shy person is doing so in the service of something they believe in.

All this is a circuitous way of saying that I’ve been speaking in public for a long time. And I’m confident about it because, like anything, it gets easier with practice. But there is always nervousness. Always. I’m always thinking, as I walk out on stage, ‘Geez I hope this goes well. I hope I’ve prepared this adequately. I hope I’m not about to reveal myself as an idiot’. So, you know, don’t think that nerves are unusual and don’t think that nerves are something to be ashamed of. They’re not. But we can get around them and there are a couple of things that I like to do for this.

★★★

2. SOME THINGS I DO THAT HELP

Ritual

A musician friend of mine is similarly introverted. And he told me once that he treats white tie as like his superhero costume. Once he puts on the tailcoat he’s transformed from a quiet bloke into Super-Violist. I’m sure we all have people in our orchestras who have these rituals. And I think that’s a great way to think about it. It is a performance, after all, and I think it helps to approach it like one.

And in fact doing the high school plays really helped here. You arrive well before the audience, you go into makeup – in my role as Tarzan this consisted of drawing a beard on my face – and chest hair – you do the cast warmup, the play starts, and you follow the rhythm of the play, until it’s time for your entry.

And I still do this. I still have my rituals. For a pre-concert talk I get to the Opera House an hour and fifteen minutes beforehand and do a soundcheck. Partly of course to make sure the gear works, but also – it is part of the ritual. Then I go and get changed into usually the same suit and tie. Then I hang out backstage with the colleagues. Then at six or seven minutes to showtime I climb up the back-of-house staircase to the Northern Foyer, which is where we do the talks. And that gives me four or five minutes to stand there and catch my breath. And at about fifteen seconds before start time, I open the door and walk out to the lectern. For a big performance like a pre-concert talk, I can’t arrive five minutes before. I have to put yourself into the zone.

The other thing I always do is have a few paragraphs at the start of the talk which are full of introductory guff which you don’t really need but which helps calm you down. This is the opening for my most recent talk:

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening, and welcome to tonight’s performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. My name is Alastair McKean and I run the Orchestra’s Library, where we look after all the scores and parts that the musicians use. Tonight we are opening the season with our fabulous Chief Conductor, Simone Young, and an
absolutely cracking program. We’re starting with a rarity by Mahler, a piece called *Blumine*, and following that the sensational young Australian soprano Siobhan Stagg sings *Ariettes oubliées*, a song-cycle by Debussy, orchestrated by the Australian composer Brett Dean. And then after interval, we play what is in my opinion is – I’m sorry. After interval we play what is, incontestably, the greatest first symphony by any composer, the first symphony of Gustav Mahler.

OK, so there’s nothing there that they can’t read in the program, other than the description of what I do, and obviously, the clarification that Mahler 1 is the best first symphony ever. So it’s not strictly necessary. But it helps calm me down so that I’m acclimatised when the talk proper begins. (You will recall that I began today by thanking Inger and Sebastian, telling a silly story about my first visit to Berlin, and giving a precis of what we were about to discuss.)

As well as calming the speaker down I might add it also helps calm the audience down – and you need it, you wild beasts. You have to think about your audience all the time – we’ll get back to this. But at the top of the talk they need to move from the chatter-and-prosecco mode into listening mode, and it’s helpful to have a bit of an ease-in rather than just ‘Good-evening. The symphonic-movement-now-known-as-Blumine-was-originally-a-movement-in-Mahler’s-music-for-the-epic-poem *The-Trumpeter-of-Säkkingen*. He later incorporated it into his first-symphony. He discarded it after the third performance of the symphony in Weimar on 3 June 1894’ – it’s like, wow, that’s a smack in the face. Again, it’s a performance thing. After all, in the concert they’re about to see, the lights will come down, the concertmaster comes out, everybody applauds, the orchestra tunes, the conductor comes out, everybody applauds, we quiet down – and then the performance begins.

Environment

Similar to this is what you can do to control the environment. Sometimes not much. At the Opera House, as I said, we have the talks in the Northern Foyer, which is behind a spectacular glass curtain:
And in matinée concerts, on a bright day the sun is right in your face and really all you can do is squint into it and gently broil.
What I do do though is make what I can control as helpful as possible. So, I don’t print the script straight off the default settings in Microsoft Word. I put it in a great big font so that I can read it without difficulty through my questionable multifocals. And I put it on a nice wide line spacing so it’s harder to lose my place. At the moment, 13 point Arial on 22 point line spacing. I dare say these will both get larger with the passage of time. When there are audio excerpts, or power-point slides, I print these in a big red box so they don’t come as a surprise. And the other thing I do is put a gigantic margin at the bottom of the page. That means that if it’s on a lectern then I only need to look at the top of the page, not all the way to the bottom, and that means that my eyes are as close as possible to the audience.

All of this is about making it as easy as possible for yourself when you’re actually out there talking. If there is anything that you can do in advance to make it easier, so that you’re not having to think about anything other than operating your mouth, do that.

And the other thing I do is I write everything down.

**Script**

When I started doing talks for the Australian Chamber Orchestra, they specifically asked that the talk not be read. I have lost the paperwork but I have a feeling it was even in the contract that the talk had to be delivered from notes, not from a script. Well, I tried this and I found it incredibly difficult. The key thing about an off-the-cuff talk is that you have to follow a
structure. You have to cover certain points and you have to do it in a certain time. And that’s fine if you’re talking for five minutes, and we’ll get to this in a moment, but to improvise off notes for half an hour – to stay on top of the points you need to make, while watching the clock – is very very difficult. Really you’re focusing on two different things simultaneously and that’s hard. My experience was that I’d have a few bullet points about the first piece on the program and after I’d explored that adequately I’d look at the watch and see we’d hit the fifteen-minute mark and panic a bit and the rest of the program got short shrift. Editing on the fly while speaking is not for the faint-hearted. So after I’d done a few like this, I reverted to my usual practice, which is to write the whole thing out. I figured that if anyone from the ACO complained I’d just say that the notes were unusually detailed.

Two great advantages of this. Firstly, of course, you can control what you’re going to say. I speak at about 146 words per minute. So for a thirty minute talk, 4,380 words less the amount of time for any music examples. And that means you can walk out there with the script and you know that you’ll cover what you want to say – because you’ve already written it down – and you know that it’ll land more or less on time. And really this is incredibly reassuring. So, you know, in my scripts, I write everything down. Every joke, every supposedly spontaneous aside – oh, and by the way, um … –

… that spontaneous aside was written down.

Everything gets written down. If it is something that can’t really be written down – a demonstration of biting off my own legs, for instance – I just write ‘demonstrate’.

The other great advantage of writing it down is that you can polish and polish and polish until the script says just what you want to say. Alfred Hitchcock supposedly said that ‘drama is life with the dull bits cut out’. I’m not suggesting that a talk on Mahler 1 should involve the audience being attacked by birds. But it should be as considered as possible and that’s less easy to do on the fly.

The disadvantage is that it can be a bit of an art to look like you’re making up a speech when in fact you’re reading it. Robert Menzies was the Prime Minister of Australia for about
a thousand years in the 1950s. He was an admirer and friend of Winston Churchill, and the first time he saw Churchill address the House of Commons, he was in awe at the great man’s oratory – but then he realised that Churchill was reading his speech off a script, and he was a bit shocked. Menzies wasn’t aware that that was the custom in the House in those days, whereas in the Australian Parliament, most speeches were then off the cuff (and, in his words, ‘not over-encumbered by notes’). And Menzies concluded that Churchill was ‘one of the very few who could read a speech as if he were thinking it out on the spot’.

And this comes from two things.

**Practice**

Once you’ve got the talk down, practice. Practice somewhere low-stakes. Practice in front of a mirror, or to your partner, or to your cat. Read the whole thing through in one go. Then read it through again. Practice making eye contact. If the partner isn’t available, and we know the cat won’t be interested, make eye contact with inanimate objects around the room and pretend they’re your audience.

When you’re doing the talk for real, it helps if the script, as much as possible, is not much more than an aide-mémoire. I’m not suggesting memorising it, but it is easier to read out something, and to make it look like you’re not, if you know the material really well. You can just glance down at the page to remind yourself where you are. It’s like our musicians, actually. Anyone who’s played Beethoven 5 150 times can probably do it without the part. Well, you haven’t given this speech 150 times, but you do have the advantage that you just wrote it, so it’s fresh in the mind. So when you’re practicing eye contact, what you’re really doing is practicing breaking away from the text, looking up, and going back to find your place.

**Write from speech**

The other thing – and this is something peculiar to me, so it may not work for you – when I’m writing a talk, I read it out loud while I’m writing it. Fortunately, I live on my own. I think this is important. Spoken language is slightly different to written language, and if we’re writing down something to be spoken, we really want to capture that spontaneity that you only get when you’re talking off the top of your head. If I ask you, you know, what would you say to someone hearing Mahler 1 for the first time, you might say: well, um, it starts with this, this high A, it’s incredible, across five octaves, I think, and then, ah, then there’s all these brass fanfares, and Mahler was into brass fanfares, and, and, it’s sort of, it’s sort of nature music, and it’s sort of forest music, and there’s this whole thing about the Czech countryside where he grew up – or, you know, whatever.

Interestingly after I’d been doing this for years I learned that it’s actually how Churchill worked. Let Menzies take up the story:

> There sat the stenographer with her silent typewriter. Here stood, or wandered, Winston. The rules soon became clear. While he was playing around with what might be called the ‘first draft’ of a sentence, trying each word for weight and simplicity, he spoke in a low
voice, almost a whisper. When he arrived at the final version, he spoke up, and down went the sentence into type. Thus (and I do not profess to be accurate about the words), I would just hear ‘And so the struggle will continue, continue? until victory – has been achieved … no, no –’ and then out it came: ‘And so we will fight on until the day has come!’

Well, I don’t have a stenographer, so it’s ‘Um-well-ah-it-starts-with-this-this-high-A …’ – type-type-type-type-type – ‘and-then-oh-yeah-there’s-these-brass-fanfares …’ – type-type-type-type-type. Once you’ve got the words down, then you can edit them. And then I read out the edited version, and I keep adjusting that. I think when preparing a talk it’s important to speak out loud. If your writing process is about identifying those thoughts off the top of your head, and clarifying them, you’re going to end up with something that conforms to the Hitchcock ideal – a sort of polished, heightened version of speaking from the heart.

The other thing about this method is that when the talk is done, and ready to print, you’ve actually already read it out countless times in the process of writing it down. You’ve read out every sentence and you’ve got the rhythm of every sentence in your head. And that means that you’re not actually practicing it for the first time when you get to the stage of telling your cat about Mahler 1.

**Structure**

All of these individual sentences that we’ve just extracted from our brains are very well, but the most important thing about any talk – or a written piece, for that matter – is putting them into a coherent structure. I cannot overstate how important that is. All this information has to go into an overarching narrative. And I use the word ‘narrative’ because any public speaking is telling a story.

How you do this – some people prefer to have a skeleton of bullet points and flesh it out. Other people are happy to just sit down and start writing, and see what happens. Either way, you need to have an idea of what points you want to make. The structure is the order in which you make them. And that order needs to be logical. Each main point must flow from the preceding main point, and must lead to the succeeding one. Each paragraph must flow from the preceding paragraph. Each sentence must flow from the preceding sentence.

Personally I prefer to write from a set of bullet points, because I’d rather do my large-scale manipulation before I do the writing. Spoiler alert. Here’s the structure for this talk.
AJM MOLA talk vi/23
Intro [powerwalk]

1. My quals
- talks/debating/WHS plays
- extroverted? no
- Quiet (riverboats bloke)
- Belief in yourself = truth
- Nerves? Yes but ...

2. Helpful suggestions
- Ritual (incl opening)
- Script printing [legibility]
- Script: write it all down.
- Because:
  - control [146 wpm]
  - polish [life w/o dull bits]
  - off-the-cuff illusion
- Practice
- Write from speaking style
- Structure
  - demo, library talk:
  - go from unstructured to structured
  - narrative
  - [you can do this too, w/same structure]
  - Content: cut out dull
  - Always think of punters
  - - control [146 wpm]
  - - polish [life w/o dull bits]
  - - off-the-cuff illusion
  - - Practice
  - - Write from speaking style
  - - Structure
  - - demo, library talk:
  - - go from unstructured to structured
  - - narrative
  - - [you can do this too, w/same structure]
  - - Content: cut out dull
  - - Always think of punters

3. Connecting with punters
- clarity [CP Scott rule]
- humour
  - punctuation/contrast
- speaking speed
- eye contact
- tech: audio & power-point
- audience is on your side
  - conversation but non-verbal responses

4. Self-mgt [? title]
- practice practice practice
- you have the knowledge!

This is where we get away from a very carefully prepared talk to an impromptu one. Because structure is the key to both of them. Let's say you are talking to a small group of VIP donors visiting the Library. And let's assume that they don't know anything about what the Library does. OK, so at the SSO Library, here's some interesting things we could show them:

Some Interesting Things in the SSO Library
1. The shelf where we keep music for forthcoming concerts
2. The compactus and the music collection
3. The folders the music goes into on the stage
4. Bowings and errata
5. An example of an Urtext vs non-Urtext edition
6. The music from last week's concert [just back from the Opera House]
7. A particularly interesting set of parts
8. The electric eraser cos it's cool

That's all a bit random. Let's see if we can't think of some overarching narrative here.

Some Interesting Things in the SSO Library

Where the music comes from
2. The compactus and the music collection
5. An example of an Urtext vs non-Urtext edition
7. A particularly interesting set of parts

Life cycle of the music
1. The shelf where we keep music for forthcoming concerts
4. Bowings and errata
6. The music from last week's concert [just back from the Opera House]

Cool Stuff
8. The electric eraser cos it's cool
3. The folders the music goes into on the stage
This is the same points – but they’re now in a structure. And it moves logically, from, where the music comes from, to what we do with the music when we’ve got it, to the cool stuff that every library has.

But I think we could improve it by swapping the first two big points:

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**Some Interesting Things in the SSO Library**

**Life cycle of the music**
1. The shelf where we keep music for forthcoming concerts
4. Bowings and errata
6. The music from last week’s concert (just back from the Opera House)

**Where the music comes from**
2. The compactus and the music collection
5. An example of an Urtext vs non-Urtext edition
7. A particularly interesting set of parts

**Cool Stuff**
8. The electric eraser cos it’s cool
3. The folders the music goes into on the stage

My gut feeling is that it’s a stronger start to begin with the music we’re actually using right now, rather than the stuff that’s locked away in the compactus.

And that makes me think – you know, we could start the life-cycle of the music, it’s a cycle, we could start it anywhere. And I reckon that it’s even stronger to begin in media res, with the living music, fresh off the stage, which the orchestra played only last week.

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**Some Interesting Things in the SSO Library**

**Life cycle of the music**
6. The music from last week’s concert (just back from the Opera House)
1. The shelf where we keep music for forthcoming concerts
4. Bowings and errata
3. The folders the music goes into on the stage

**Where the music comes from**
2. The compactus and the music collection
5. An example of an Urtext vs non-Urtext edition
7. A particularly interesting set of parts

**Cool Stuff**
8. The electric eraser cos it’s cool

Our VIPs probably saw it being played from. That’s interesting! And with the SSO at least we can have a bit of theatre. Our Library is about a 15-minute walk from the Opera House, and so the music goes into some brightly-coloured and slightly battered roadcases which our
production team takes back and forth. So, you know, if we’ve got a stack of them sitting there, that is cool.

The other thing here is that as I said the main points move logically from one to the other. But the internal points do as well. So we start with (6) the music from last week, and then we say, OK, what happens next? Well, we usually have about a month’s worth of music down at the Opera House so it’s all there, but here in the Library, (1) we have the weeks after that. And what sort of thing do we do to prepare the music? Well, let’s explain about (4) errata lists and bowing. And once the parts are all prepped, we put them in these folders (3). And the whole thing begins again. But, where does the music come from? So here we talk about rental agencies and we talk about (2) our own collection. And we talk about (5) how we’re constantly rejuvenating the collection. And we talk about (7) some of the treasures in the compactus. And then we say, oh! oh! oh! I nearly forgot! I have to show you this, it’s awesome! (8) And then you ask if there are any questions, and deal with the inevitable one about why we’re not all on i-pads.

This is why structure is important. It is the difference between telling our audience unrelated facts, and telling them a story. And a good story starts with an arresting beginning and finishes with a memorable conclusion. Well, we start out by showing them something that relates directly to how they know to the orchestra, that is, as people who love concerts and love the orchestra. That is memorable. And we finish with the electric eraser and that is cool.

Here’s the thing. That structure, every single one of you could take that structure and give a ten-minute talk absolutely no worries. If I say, ‘Tell me about your collection’ you can say, ‘Well we store it in this kind of cardboard box, and our oldest set is such-and-such, and our newest set is so-and-so …’. That doesn’t need to be written down. As long as you know the information, you can make that up on the spot. But the difference is that the order in which you’re presenting the information – the structure.

**Filling the structure**

Getting those bones down is the most important thing, but the flesh on the bones of course is not unimportant. Now of course you have this knowledge, and it sounds stupidly obvious but you need to select the knowledge that is going to be most interesting for the audience. We’ve all been at parties where someone asks what you do for a living. And if you say ‘Well, I look after the sheet music for the orchestra, and we store it in cardboard boxes, and we have one size which fits smaller sets of parts, say your Mozart piano concerto, and we have another size which fits slightly bigger sets of parts, so a Beethoven symphony for example, and then the biggest size fits large Romantic works. Sometimes the set is too big to fit in one box and so we use a small size box to put the scores in …’ Well, if you want that person to suddenly develop an empty glass and to avoid you for the rest of the night, that’s a great way to do it. But if you want to keep talking with them, you’ll tell an entertaining anecdote about the chief conductor.

I find smalltalk at parties terribly difficult and I usually panic and end up telling people about cardboard boxes. But when you’re doing a talk you’re not being ambushed. And we get back
to preparation and scripting and practice. Again, when you’re preparing, cut the dull bits out.
To judge which are the dull bits, think of the audience. And obviously you can't anticipate the
exact people who are going to be in your audience, so think of a real person who typifies the
level of foreknowledge and intelligence at which you’re aiming, and pitch it as if speaking to
them. Someone who works in marketing, say, who's not musical but who is curious: what’s
going to be the most interesting facts you can tell them? And even here the cardboard boxes
are not irredeemable. If you tell them that you have to have them especially manufactured
because sheet music doesn’t come in regular paper sizes – that will blow their mind.

Let’s talk about how we actually do make that connection when talking.

★★★

3. CONNECTING WITH THE AUDIENCE

Clarity

One brief but very important point is that any technical information needs to be made
comprehensible. To get back to the idea of having an ideal audience member in mind, when
I’m talking or writing about music I’m always thinking of my mother. She loves music but has
never learned an instrument or learned to read music. So I try and aim at the level that she’s
able to understand.

The golden rule was posited by C.P. Scott, the long-time editor and owner of the Guardian
newspaper, who said: ‘Never underestimate the intelligence of the reader, but never
overestimate his information’. So it’s not that you can’t use technical language. You can – you
just have to explain it, and you have to explain it in a way that an uninitiated audience will
understand. If you were at the tech fair the other day, Philip Rothman did this really well – the
panel was discussing file standards like SMuFL and XML and OMR and JFK and whatnot and
he gently explained to the ignorant [hand up] what all these acronyms meant. Of course there
were plenty of people in the room who knew this already, but you can’t assume that. If you’re
doing a pre-concert talk, there will always be one person who has never heard the piece, and
there will always be one person who knows it very well. We have to make it interesting for the
second person while making it understandable for the first one.

Humour

Obviously I think humour is important. I use it all the time. I think the only time I have given a
pre-concert talk without a single joke was for Britten’s War Requiem, because it really would
have been in unacceptably poor taste.

Humour can be slightly tricky because it’s so individual. And of course the big caveat with
humour is that if you don’t feel it is authentic for you, don’t do it. Authenticity is much more
important. The other thing is that humour should always help to illuminate a point; it shouldn’t
be there for its own sake. Believe it or not, but I don’t actually think the idea is to do a comedy
routine.
Humour is useful though for a few reasons. It can be helpful to humanise the speaker. From time to time I do a talk and illustrate musical points using the piano. You will note that I did not say that I illustrate musical points by playing the piano because that is not a verb that can be applied to what I do to the instrument. I play the piano like a dog. I tell you, I reckon Rin Tin Tin would give a better account of the Hammerklavier Sonata than I would give of Three Blind Mice, and Rin Tin Tin has been dead since 1932. So really I get very nervous doing this, and inevitably I’ll muck up something really complicated like, you know, a scale of C major, and when I do this I apologise to the audience and tell them that I was incontestably Mrs Gregory’s worst ever piano student, and if she had known I was playing the piano in public in the Sydney Opera House she’d be one part very proud and nine parts absolutely appalled. And the punters laugh and I play it properly and I get away with it.

But on a more calculating level, humour can break up what could perhaps be a relentless narrative. Let me give you an example. For this talk on Mahler 1, I thought, I’d like to talk about how he uses the interval of a fourth in so many of the main tunes throughout the piece. Well, like we said before, it’s a non-specialist audience so you need to define an interval, and you need to define a fourth. So we start by talking about intervals in general, and I demonstrate a second, a third, a fourth and so on. Which is fine, but it’s pretty dry. So then I say, well, if you’re teaching children about intervals, each interval is attached to a song, so a sixth is ‘My bonnie lies over the ocean’ and a seventh is ‘Bali h’ai’, and an augmented fourth is ‘Maria’. It does depend on the sophistication of the kids.

This is what I mean about being calculated. The vaudeville is entertaining. But you need to think about where to deploy it. Here, it reinforces a serious point: there is a thing in music called an interval; it is the distance in pitch between two notes; it can be defined. And then you go on and talk about the particular interval, the fourth, and how Mahler uses that in his first symphony.

I also think that if you are using humour then when you stop, the contrast can be very powerful. You remember at the start of that talk I said,

… after interval, we play what is in my opinion is – I’m sorry. After interval we play what is, incontestably, the greatest first symphony by any composer, the first symphony of Gustav Mahler.

And that’s fine, ha ha, but at the end of the talk I said:

This symphony is the greatest first symphony ever, in part, because it contains the germ of the symphonies that follow it, and that is a body of work that is one of the supreme achievements of the human mind. Mahler is music that consoles; it is music that uplifts; it is music that is unbearably exciting; it is music that opens the gates of heaven; it is music which for me expresses like very little else the great sadness and sorrow but also the great joy and the great exhilaration of simply being alive. And it all starts with this piece.

And I really do think that in that talk, that there had been the comedy routine meant that that landed with more power than it otherwise might.
Speaking speed

Two things here. Firstly, try to force yourself to slow down. The speed at which one has a conversation is faster than the speed at which a large group can easily understand you. The audience can pick up and understand faster speaking, it's just that it doesn't take too long before it becomes difficult to follow and it eventually becomes impossible. It doesn't actually need to be that much – I mean, it's not like you're on Mogadon. The paradox is that to the person on stage, it can feel like you're swimming through treacle. But in the audience, it sounds quite normal.

The other thing about speaking speed is that sometimes a judicious pause can be very important. You need a pause at the end of every paragraph, but when you've made a big or important point, just have the confidence to let the audience sit there and think for a couple of seconds.

And to get briefly back to humour, don't forget to give people time to laugh. Here I take as my authority the 38th President of the United States, Gerald R. Ford. I read an interview with Bob Orben, a comedy writer who became head speechwriter for President Ford, and Orben said:

People ask me if you have to have a special bent for humor. I don't know that Ford had a natural bent for humor, but he liked it and he had the courage to get the words out, and then wait for the laughter. That doesn't sound like much, but I tell you from a lifetime of experience, it's a lot.

Eye contact

Avoiding eye contact with the audience is not the mark of a compelling speaker. One of the tricks of the trade is that if you make eye contact with one person in the room, everybody feels like you're making eye contact with them. I don't know why. Do vary the person with whom you make eye contact, though, because otherwise it looks like you're chatting someone up. Unless of course you have seen someone in the audience with whom you'd like to grab a drink afterwards, in which case you have my blessing.

The other thing is that if it is a large room, try to make sure that you eyeball people in all corners. In the Northern Foyer of the Opera House (see picture on page 5) the speaker is surrounded by 180° of audience, and also if it's a busy night they'll be standing on the top of the stairs, so you have to throw your head around a bit. Don't worry about this – it's another one of those things that feels weird but looks normal.

Technology – audio

So, tech. Overriding things with tech are that it's an enhancement, not the main game, and it works best when it's simplest. If you're doing a talk with audio excerpts, do the selection and editing of the musical excerpts without wearing headphones. Do it using the nastiest, tiniest speakers you can. Because the musical points that you want to make, have to be audible at
the back of the room. And if you can only hear them on a thousand-dollar pair of Bose noise-cancelling phones, it's likely the point will be too subtle to be heard.

Technology – power-point

Similarly, with power-point, avoid slides that are too detailed to be read at the back of the room.

We've all seen them! The other point is that a power-point slide is very helpful when it reinforces what you’re saying, but it’s pointless when it is duplicating what you’re saying. There’s nothing more tedious than listening to someone read out a slide that you can read perfectly adequately yourself. – Well, actually that's not true. There are several things that are more tedious than listening to someone read out a slide that you can read perfectly adequately yourself. A selection of these things is as follows.

A selection of things that are more tedious than listening to someone read out a slide that you can read perfectly adequately yourself

- Separating 9mm binding combs from 8mm binding combs and 10mm binding combs.
- Sorting and counting intermingled bulldog clips.
- Tabulating the results from the West Wyalong Livestock Sales from 1975 to the present.
- Cleaning a car with a toothbrush.
- Washing and drying ball bearings.
- Listening to the music of Ludovico Einaudi.

An audience reading this will hit the punchline while the speaker is still in West Wyalong.

I admit that I broke this rule earlier when we were discussing structure. But most of the time you just don’t need all that information up on the screen, and for that matter, lists of things are
generally not mesmerising public speaking. Find a more interesting way to present the information. Churchill, after all, did not present this to the House of Commons:¹

**Places we shall fight**
- France
- Seas, incl. oceans
- The air
- Beaches
- Landing grounds
- Fields and streets
- Hills

**Things we shall not do**
- Surrender

Perhaps all this seems a bit artificial, and I guess to an extent that it is. But the paradox here is that there is a lot of artistry and a lot of thinking that goes into creating the illusion of a friendly fireside chat. I suppose the overriding thing here – and I guess the mindset that all these technical things should support – is that we don’t want to come across like we’re speaking at the audience, we want to come across like we are conversing with them.

I was going to say, that this conversation just happens to be a one-way conversation, but it’s actually not. It’s just that the audience’s answers are all non-verbal. You can tell when the audience is engaged – another reason for eye contact. You can also tell when they’re not, when they’re looking at their phones or talking to each other. When I get that, I just ignore those individuals and keep eyeballing the ones who are paying attention. Sometimes of course you do get a night where the entire audience sits there totally inanimate and you walk off thinking, well, that went fabulously. But on a good night the phones are all away and they laugh at all the jokes and you think, this is great. And you also think, we’ve educated them a bit, and that’s a good thing.

But even having said that, the last thing that you have to remember about the audience is that it is on your side. We are not politicians arguing a case to a hostile crowd. For us, for the contexts in which we are speaking, the audience is going to be there voluntarily. In fact they’ve probably paid money to be there. And they want to hear the things that you know. Things that we think are totally quotidian – bowings, for heaven’s sake – a lay audience will think that bowings are absolutely fascinating. They’re on your side.

★★★★

¹. And by the way, if he had (pace the common mis-remembering of the speech) he would not have had the heading ‘Whom we shall fight’ and the bullet point ‘Them’.
4. YOU

The subtitle for this talk is ‘Sharing Our Knowledge Without Fear of Death’ and the thing I haven’t really discussed at all is fear. Susan Cain talks about fear of public speaking as an evolutionary thing. If you’re on the savannah then you don’t want to stand up, you’ll attract the attention of a lion and get yourself eaten. This is why I think the introversion thing is worth talking about and why Cain’s book is well worth reading. Because you might be thinking, I’m introverted, I’m shy, my fear of speaking in public is insurmountable. But you shouldn’t think that. If you have something you want to communicate, don’t tell yourself ‘Oh I can’t do this’. Codswallop. You are permitted to say ‘This is scary and difficult’, and that’s fine. Many worthwhile things are scary and difficult. Telling people about what we do is worthwhile.

I know I’ve talked a lot about doing big scripted talks, but I really can’t stress enough that the skills for doing that ten-minute presentation in the Library are basically the same as doing the thirty-minute presentation for a concert audience. It’s just that the thirty-minute presentation needs more prep time. But the more practice you have doing a big talk, the easier a small one becomes.

And I really think that practice is the key. I mean as I say the more talks you do, the easier they get, but also in the sense of practicing for a specific talk. If Philanthropy wants you to take a group through the Library, work up the talk, grab a friend, take them through it. Then do it again. If you really want to challenge yourself, go and do a pre-concert talk. If you don’t feel comfortable approaching your own organisation, find an amateur group in town and ask them if they’d like someone to do a talk. And then, again, grab a friend, read it to them. And then do it again. And then do it again. And then go to the pub. Because you’ll need to. I’m not going to lie, the first few times it’s pretty draining. But I’m also not going to lie when I say, you do get used to it, and it does get easier.

The last thing is that at the risk of sounding like a self-help book, you should believe in yourself. Believe in your expertise. You know things. Every single one of you, if I said ‘Please give me a talk on Mahler’s Blumine, Brett Dean’s arrangement of Debussy’s Ariettes oubliées, and Mahler 1’, every single one of you has knowledge about that music – OK, possibly not the Debussy, but that’s a bit out there. Talking to the public is about getting what you know out of your head and into theirs. And every single one of you knows how to research what you don’t know, write out bullet points about that repertoire, arrange them in a logical sequence, flesh them out, stand up, and tell that story. And it is also worth saying again, every single one of you, in this room, could take those bullet points about the SSO Library and give exactly the same talk about your own one. And people love this. I was reading an interview with Tom Hanks the other day where he said ‘I don’t think there’s anything more fascinating than hearing anybody talk about what they do for a living, what their passion is, and how they ended up doing that’. Practice it, do it, spread the good word.

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Select bibliography


Lynn, Jonathan. *Comedy Rules: From the Cambridge Footlights to Yes Prime Minister* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012)


Alert readers will observe that I have not mentioned Jonathan Lynn’s wonderful book in the text above, but it is worth reading for its many penetrating insights into how audience behave, and how to relate to them, and also because it’s hilarious.