



Composer as Actor: Part One

Activity by Daniel Felsenfeld, New York Philharmonic Teaching Artist



Today: an acting lesson!

Let's begin with a simple, very common texts:

I LOVE YOU

These words are featured in countless songs, opera arias, and poems. However, something so common, so cliché, can help us understand what every actor needs to understand: **delivery**. How *emphasis* can explain the *subtext* — the words, intentions, and thoughts *behind* the words. And as composers, we get a thrilling chance to be both actor and director!

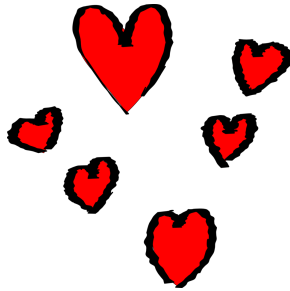
Returning to the text — I LOVE YOU — think about the very different meanings of a performance where each individual syllable is emphasized.

Please say these aloud as an actor might...

I LOVE YOU
(I, and not another, love you)

I LOVE YOU
(I perhaps felt another way once before, but now I do in fact love you)

I LOVE YOU
(Once I loved another, but now it is you I now love)



Again, same words, but placing a stress on a different word tells three different stories. And something fun emerges: we also get a sense of each word's *opposite* simply by lending it a little weight.

Now let's try this with a more complicated text, a line written by the great poet, Langston Hughes:

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN

Before we think of the emphasis, please read it out loud several times. And then read it again, stressing each word and considering how it changes the deeper meaning (or *subtext*) of the text. If we lay the emphasis on the first word...

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN
(Perhaps a loud direction, almost a protest: up until now, it has not been so, but now we are ordering you to allow it)

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN
(America, not somewhere else)

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN
(While this is a tiny word, it packs a huge punch in this line: the very idea of being, or allowing to exist, or striving to become. All of this present in these two letters)

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN
(This is a tricky one because it is a repetition of an earlier word, but the emphasis here might give weight not to America as a country but as a concept — a concept that is has not been allowed to be)

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN
(It was a certain way before. Can it return back to that way again?)

How, you may ask, does this help me as a composer?

Composers set words, in songs, lieder, opera, choral pieces, masses, cantatas, musicals, and even films. As composers, when using text, we make choices on where and how we can place emphasis on certain words and sounds to help communicate the text's intent or meaning. Thing first about how you might "act out" the poem or text! This will help provide more insight as you begin to make important musical decisions for your text.

