



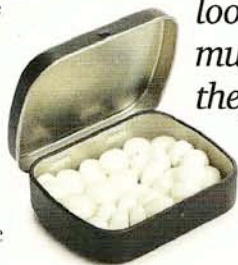
# Figurative Language: The Most Effective Gadget in a Music Teacher's Toolbox

The creative use of language can bring students to a whole new level of musical understanding.

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**DURING THE 2012 DEBATES**, Senator Paul Ryan poked fun at Vice-President Joe Biden's propensity for making gaffes. Ryan said, "I think the Vice-President very well knows that sometimes the words don't come out of your mouth the right way." Biden laughed, shook his finger, and said, "But I always say what I mean." Politicians live in a world where every word is scrutinized. Music educators might not have their discourse publicly posted, but they have students who are listening.

Music teachers must balance verbal and nonverbal instruction. The essence of music is nonverbal, but understanding it requires verbal instruction. Therefore, it is important for teachers to master both language and music. In their 1984 book *Principles and Processes of Music Education: New Perspectives*, music educators Malcolm Tait and Paul Haack said, "If we are genuine concerned with developing the quality of the musical, experience we need to explore the language connection ... language



*Those little mints don't look like much, but they pack a powerful punch.*

is the essential tool that allows us to conceptualize and think about, to analyze and teach about these vital musical matters that ultimately can take us beyond words."

So, is language an essential skill in our teaching toolbox?

I define "figurative language" broadly as any type of language or activity used with the intent to teach concepts creatively. This language includes the use of metaphors, analogies, short stories, drama, etc. Following are some examples.

**Concise:** "These 'staccato eighth notes are to be played lightly and quickly, like touching a hot iron."

**Analogy:** "This passage reminds listeners of a parent giving a child a goodnight kiss."

**Drama:** A band director put on a purple choir robe, crowned himself with a Burger King hat, and waved to an imaginary crowd as the band played. He wanted students to have a more

regal and stately sound. The band never played that piece quite the same way. This is figurative language at its best—when it changes the outcome of the performance.

## Uses of Figurative Language

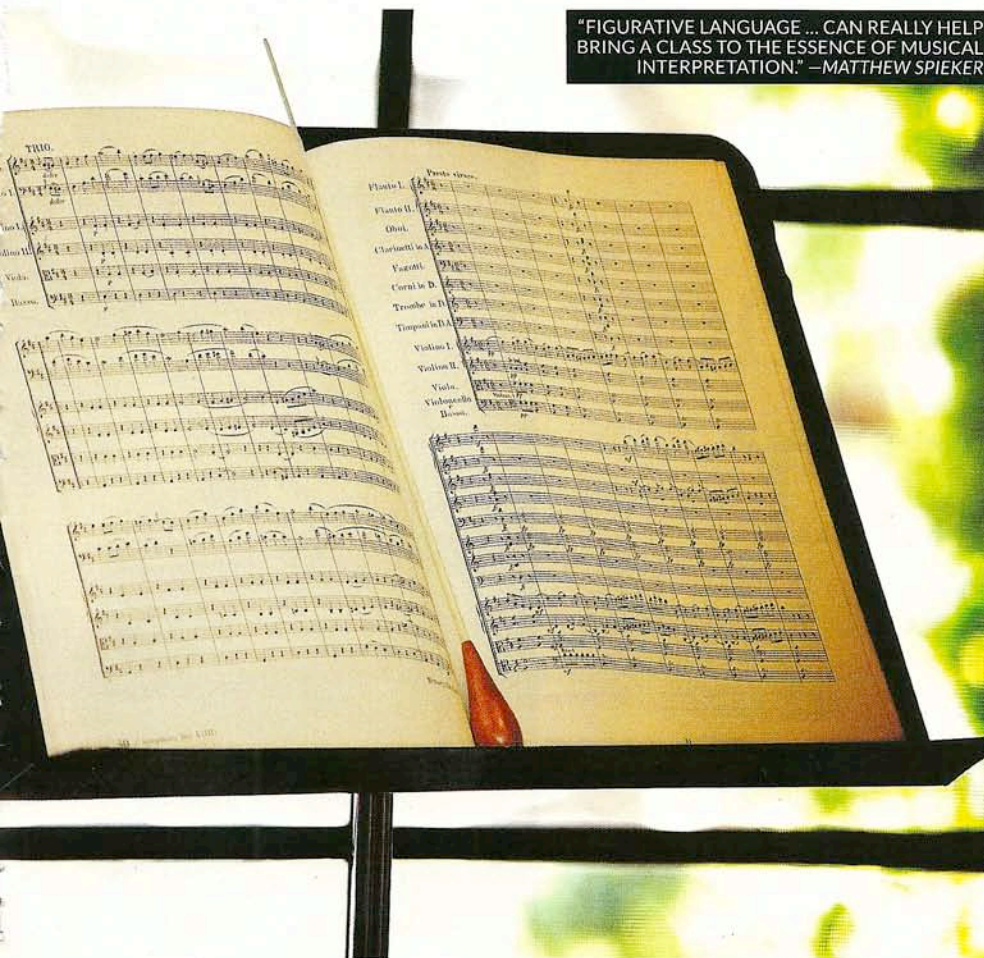
Many musical concepts are abstract and multilevel. After students master basic notation, there remain multiple layers to the concept, such as articulation, dynamics, and phrasings. Bennett Reimer said in his 2003 work *A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision* that music teachers "are expected to clarify what music is all about, by helping our students compose, perform, improvise, listen, more adequately and satisfyingly, and to understand what they are doing and why."

How do music teachers make the ineffable understandable? I have had student teachers who were competent musicians and understood music, yet their communication skills often lacked figurative language. Universities and cooperating teachers can help future music educators use figurative language at the early stages of their careers.





"FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE ... CAN REALLY HELP BRING A CLASS TO THE ESSENCE OF MUSICAL INTERPRETATION." —MATTHEW SPIEKER



New teachers usually talk a lot and use mostly uninspiring, analytical language. Talking less is best, however, some spoken language is required. The ability to incorporate figurative language successfully can make a point in an economical fashion. Eric Jensen, an education expert in brain-based research, wrote in his 1998 book *Super Teaching: Master Strategies for Building Student Success*, "Analogy is one of the most useful of all communication tools. It can be the perfect vehicle by which your students understand in 10 seconds something which might ordinarily take 60 seconds or even 60 minutes."

In February of 2007, I conducted an honor orchestra in Beijing, China. I explained to the ensemble that I wanted them to have a powerful sound, even though they were young and small. I wanted them to be just like a strong mint. "Those little mints don't look like much, but they pack a powerful

punch." After this, there were smiles and a focused determination to create a potent sound.

Figurative language, described here as "likeness statements," can really help bring a class to the essence of musical interpretation. A teacher can invite students to consider an idea such as a gentle mountain stream as it curves around rocks and trees. A steady pulse can magically be performed when students envision a precise, marching army stepping alongside them.

## Getting Started

Watch an old video of yourself teaching and count the number of times you used figurative language and the number of times you used analytical language. You might be shocked how little the former was used.

Have the goal of including at least three figurative language moments in

each class. For instance, try using a phrase beginning with "It's like ...". Consider figurative language when talking about rhythms, phrasings, articulations, or even technical issues such as embouchure, bowings, playing posture, breathing, etc. Take a few moments to memorize what you want to say, and then eventually trust yourself to improvise figurative language on the spot. Tape a note to your stand stating, "It's like ..."

Think of a story for a piece of music. Sometimes the work is programmatic and the story was written by the composer. If it wasn't, make one up. Ask your students to help you. Take time to have the class listen to Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. Ask students "How did the instruments play to convey their characters?"

Take an hour with your ensemble to create a drama. Take a look at Phyllis Young's *Playing the String Game* and *The String Play*. These books are for string ensembles, but their ideas can be adapted for other music classes.

## Personal Satisfaction of Figurative Language

Using language as a creative outlet can be nearly as much fun as creating music. Enter each rehearsal with the expectation that you are about to have a rewarding experience, because you know something creative will flow out, not only in music, but in language as well. It is simply improvisation with language.

Helping students to achieve musical understanding is a goal for every music teacher, and doing this effectively and economically is the mark of a master teacher. Become that master teacher who has a collection of word pictures into which you regularly invite your students. Be the curator of this amazing place, and use it to open up new worlds of understanding for budding musicians. ■