

Get Your Head Out Of the Music

By Paul Baron

The meaning of this title is not literally get your head out of the music so that you aren't thinking about the music, but that as soon as you can broaden your focus the better. When you have your book learned, and ideally mostly memorized, then you can really open your ears up to the other parts around you and hear the interaction of parts, the lyrics (if you're accompanying singers), and look around to see what else is going on in the pit or on stage. As a show musician, watching the conductor is very important on a number of levels. He or she is responsible for watching what happens with the dancers and singers on stage and to make sure the orchestra and stage are in synch. Sometimes that means "manipulating, stretching, or massaging" tempos in order to make sure things stay together. This might not seem like the most musical thing to do, but ultimately the most important thing that's happening is to make the performer on stage look good, and sometimes moving the time a bit is necessary. Watching the conductor and giving him/her your attention is also a sign of respect and gives the conductor the confidence to know that if something happens on stage that needs the music to be "manipulated", the conductor will know the orchestra will follow. Positioning yourself on stage or the pit in order to see the conductor is very important as well for the music and the respect I just mentioned. The notes on the page are really just that, notes, but where the real music happens is off the page. Music is an expression and a communication so as soon as you can look away from the music and interact with the musicians, conductor, cast, and singers, the sooner you are really communicating.

Not only is getting your head out of the printed music important for the reasons above, but particularly important when you are improvising. When you really know the tune and changes and have them totally internalized, you can more freely express yourself and communicate with the other musicians and audience.

When I learn a show or any music for that matter, I try to memorize the music as fast as possible. I play little games with myself to try and memorize one phrase at a time. When I feel confident with that phrase, I'll read that one as it goes by and memorize the next one. When I've got a few consecutive phrases memorized, I play them all from memory. It doesn't take long before a whole tune is memorized. I have to be careful to not get over confident because the accuracy of playing the show has to come first and the memorization next. I find when I've memorized the majority of the book that I can really listen for the other things going on around me. I can really listen to the rhythm section to better lock in with the groove. When I'm playing an accompanying role I can open my ears more to the melodies others are playing to be able to phrase better with them and make sure that I'm balancing underneath.

When you really get your head out of the printed music and your eyes off the page, you can more fully immerse yourself in the music and have a greater musical experience. This will also translate to a more musical experience for the audience as well.