In one of his better-known quotations, composer Claude Debussy observes that “music takes over at the point where words become powerless.” Most musicians would concur with this quotation—they would rather immerse themselves in the expressive world of music than dedicate time to developing their abilities in public speaking. Nevertheless, many music students do work to acquire better speaking skills as they prepare to enter the profession because they begin to recognize the impact that speaking will have on their careers and their working environment.

The ability to speak confidently and clearly determines the success of most music professionals early in their careers. More than just getting through a job interview, verbal communication skills can help a young musician in the social and public settings where they want to work. In rehearsals and recitals, school board meetings and churches, teaching studios and recording studios, the ability to present oneself well as a speaker can make the difference between success and failure. This fact alone justifies the effort required for a music student to improve their speaking ability.

Effective public speaking influences more than just the career success of individuals, however, for the music industry needs advocates who can help the public to value the art form enough to support the performers and institutions that keep musical culture alive in our generation. The music profession is perennially in need of talented persuasive speakers who can mediate artistic concerns to the public and assist others in the appreciation of contemporary musical culture. This task should not be reserved for music critics and administrators. Every musician needs to know how to speak convincingly for their art.

Speaking skills for a music student are mostly the same as for students of other majors. Planning and outlining a speech, preparing support materials and practicing your verbal delivery are all proven methods for developing a good verbal presentation. When speaking about a musical topic, one should apply special consideration to the background of the intended audience. Many musicians learn musical terminology so young that they can sometimes forget that a less-experienced audience may not know standard musical terms. For this reason, it can be especially...
important for music professionals to know their audience well when they prepare a speech.

Musicians gain a little extra credibility as speakers when they perform their musical examples live as part of their presentation. All audiences like to hear examples performed live—as long as the performer keeps the examples relevant. They should not be used as opportunities for grandstanding. Audio and visual examples are valuable, but there is a special respect given to a musician performing live.

Musicians sometimes prepare addresses to present at musical societies and academic conferences. To develop topics for these occasions and to learn how to formulate and document a persuasive argument in the music profession, familiarity with relevant journals and experience hearing successful speakers is indispensible. Ask your studio teacher or advisor about which journals are most important in your field and start reading them. Notice how their authors make and defend their opinions in print to help you learn how to make and defend your own opinions in your profession. Seek opportunities to hear successful speakers from your field. The music world is an aggregate of specializations and it is your job to learn how to address those professionals who will be your colleagues.

Perhaps Debussy is a good example of how a musician, in this case a composer, can use verbal acuity to advance their own career. Debussy was reputed to be a quick-witted and very persuasive speaker who believed enough in the power of words that he spent considerable time writing musical criticism for the press (using a pen name). Many of his pronouncements about music still ring true today. His critical essays are still in print over a century later. Although he is remembered primarily for his genius as a composer, Debussy’s advice and musical opinions were widely respected in Paris and helped him to find success in his field. Learning to speak well is a worthwhile pursuit—even for Debussy.