



Photo: Dame Shirley Bassey & Stuart Barr

Why Dame Shirley Bassey risked singing live at the Oscars and what you can learn about creating memorable experiences

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The Oscars celebrates the pinnacle of Hollywood's achievements. It's not surprising then that the producers want to put on the best show possible.

I talked to [Stuart Barr](#), musical director to Dame Shirley Bassey 2009-15, about creating unforgettable experiences. And why he insisted on risking playing live in front of a global audience to ensure they got a world-class performance.

His story is fascinating and refreshing. In a world where people are trying to automate and codify experiences, it is surprising to hear how jeopardy and spontaneity are the bedrock of creating unforgettable moments.

How did you get to be conducting Dame Shirley at the Oscars?

Being musical director to Dame Shirley Bassey meant I conducted her and the orchestra for all her appearances worldwide. She gets many, many invites to perform and picks and chooses. When the Academy Awards approached us to perform "Goldfinger" to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Bond franchise in 2013, it was a no-brainer to accept!

I was involved in discussions with the producer before Dame Shirley was even asked. He wanted us to pre-record the orchestra and have her mime, but it was my job to persuade him that he would have to change his plans to allow both orchestra and singer to perform live. My biggest bargaining chips were that she would deliver a far better performance because it was live; that she's passionate about the power of live performance; and would be unlikely to accept unless it was live!

So your role as the musical director is to ensure she gives her best possible performance?

Absolutely, the most important role of a musical director is to enable performers to perform at their best. Particularly with her, that means psychological as well as musical support.

She is a very classy, old-school musician. She gets a huge buzz from singing live with an orchestra. She also likes having a musical director close by her in performance: a psychologically-important soulmate.

A good musical director needs to understand what the artist needs, and then work back from there: crafting the performance together.

So how is the Oscars typically run from a music perspective?

Most of the performances at the 2013 Oscars were not 100% live: either the orchestra was pre-recorded, and/or the singer miming, and that includes some big names. The reason is that is the culture of Hollywood is to be apparently perfect. However, that is an utter misnomer in my book. Perfect in their eyes means accurate, but accurate does not a great performance make!

Can you expand on that a bit more – the Hollywood version of perfection?

OK, a classic example is that for the first 50-60 years of Hollywood musicals “ghost singers” were frequently used. For example, in ‘My Fair Lady’ you may have seen Audrey Hepburn act as Eliza Doolittle, but all her singing was overdubbed by Marni Nixon because although Hepburn's voice was good it wasn't deemed good enough.

Do you see what I mean? There is a veneer of perfection and accuracy there, but ultimately it is just piecing together things in a very filmic fashion. Thus, it wasn't surprising to discover that the Oscars has a similar veneer of authenticity. I was determined to change that.

So how does that differ from your view of perfection in terms of getting the best possible performance?

Brilliant question - I remember the Oscar's producer asking me “Why can't you at least pre-record the orchestra: she's sung it thousands of times before? Surely it's the same every

time?”

I said, “You couldn’t be further from the truth.” For example, when you get to “It’s the kiss of death... for Mr Goldfinger’ That pause on the word ‘death’ is different every time because she’s ‘in the moment’: emotions differ, the interpretation changes. And that’s where the conductor is following every little bit of body language and her breathing, to bring in the orchestra spot on for the word “Goldfinger”.

In the case of the live Oscars performance, she spontaneously paused on the word ‘death’ for longer than she’d ever done before. If we’d pre-recorded the orchestra, it would have been a musical mess: she would have been jolted out of performance flow, and the overall result would have been much poorer.

And what does that spontaneity give the performance?

It gives it a sense of danger. Ultimately, what she is doing is playing with the audience and with their expectations.

It’s a bit like ‘striptease’. Strip tease only works if someone removes their clothes slower than the audience wants them to remove their clothes. If they are removing their clothes at the same speed or faster there is no tease!

Exactly the same happens with music. The audience has a set of expectations. But when the performer denies those expectations and does something unexpected, the audience sense the danger and values the uniqueness.

So she has sung Goldfinger live hundreds of times before, and the audience has heard the recording countless times. But when they are listening to it live, by making small changes and withholding something, she is creating tension and breaking expectations?

Yes, and likewise when you listen to the last 20 seconds of the performance we get faster to the level I’ve never taken that song to before – we probably get about 20% faster by the normal tempo beat by the end.

We’d never done that before. We didn’t agree to do it in advance. But there was something in what she was doing that I was thinking you want to go faster, so I accelerated more than ever before and you will never hear another performance of Goldfinger quite like that.

Now that caused havoc for the Oscars live broadcast!

That jeopardy is the other reason they tried to insist on a pre-recorded version. Following Goldfinger was an advert break. As tv advertising is done on a state-by-state basis, each local station needs to know when to press ‘start on their adverts. They normally get a precise electronic count-down to the ‘junction’.

And that was the one time in the Oscars where they didn't know precisely where the junction was coming: they had to wing it. It was a jeopardy they weren't used to, but that's the human joy of being "live"!

So, what is the benefit of taking that type of risk when there is a clear downside?

I guess because of the performance you get out of her, get out of me and the Orchestra, is electric, exciting and that for me is the upside of risk. It's what makes the performance special. It's what makes the critics say "OMG, who is this woman in her late 70's? She was the best part of the Oscars!"

My favourite moment was when the producer came to me the next day and said "I have to hand it to you guys. You were the best thing on the show last night." So, I looked him straight in the eye and said: "Yes, that's what happens when you perform live..."

Is that why people value live performances? Do you see something unique and different and not just a reproduction?

Absolutely. When you see Adele I think part of her success is that she is rather gobby, and a (verbal) loose cannon. If you cleaned her language up and tied her to a script, it wouldn't feel as human. We love seeing humans with authenticity, so perhaps that is what many people like in Adele.

There's also something else – have you heard the term 'showstopper'? Its true meaning is when the show is physically stopped... by the audience.

I remember this vividly when we once performed with the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra. When she started singing one of her most famous and profound songs: "I am what I am. And what I am is no illusion..." the audience went bananas! I had to pause the orchestra for about 20 seconds until the ovation subsided.

That is what you call a showstopper: where the power that exists on stage in the hand of the artist and conductor has been relinquished to the audience to express their moment of immense excitement and enjoyment. And we just had to let them have it because we can't do anything until they give us the permission to carry on!

It's a glorious moment of spontaneity which could not exist in the recorded world: the ultimate interaction where the audience is giving something to the performer, and you are powerless to do anything other than relish it!

So, to create phenomenal experiences risk and jeopardy are essential?

Absolutely. My performance mantra is to 'take advantage of the opportunities and moments as they occur: that's how you make the audience feel special'. Otherwise, you carry on regardless and every show becomes the same: life is boring, and it's not going to persuade people to part with their money to pay you to perform! Risk-taking is the bedrock of live performance: other performers take note from one of the best performers of the past 60 years!

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Stuart Barr is a conductor and music entrepreneur. He was musical director to Dame Shirley Bassey for 6 years (including the Oscars, Queen's Diamond Jubilee concert and her final Abbey Road album). He guest conducts orchestras inc. the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and is Chairman of the London Youth Choir. Having just completed an MBA at Cambridge Judge Business School, Stuart is founding a Music Education AI startup. <http://www.stuartbarr.net>

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Loved the article ! You are so correct about the differences between live and recorded . A true musical artist loves the " push and pull " between the singer and the musicians . Even the energy of the audience plays a part in a performance.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say about a singer or band, I love ...see more

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