

Practicing to Perform - RMPA Weekend of Percussion 2005

Starting to Learn a Piece: “How do you eat an elephant?One bite at a time!”

- Don't be intimidated by the length of a piece or the number of notes.
- Break it down into segments you can handle. (See: Ways to Practice and Memorize a Piece)
- Read through the whole piece a few times to get a feel for it, even if it's a struggle. This will help your sight-reading and will make you aware of what challenges you may encounter as you learn the piece.
- Remember: “That which does not kill us only makes us stronger.” You only become better by trying to tackle the piece. Don't let it get the best of you!

Practicing and Memorizing a Piece:

- **Practice time:**
 - At least 45 minutes to 1hr a day
 - Don't “cram”. Practicing a little every day is better than trying to stuff a bunch of information into your brain the day or hour before rehearsal. Allow your brain some time to absorb the information.
 - If you get frustrated, take a break or go on to something else in the piece.
- **Muscle Memory: Successful practice and performance is all about muscle memory.**
 - “Practice Makes Permanent”
 - “Perfect Practice Makes Perfect”
 - Practice with good posture
 - Practice as slow as you can play perfectly with all of the right notes, rhythms, dynamics, accents, style and technique, then increase the tempo. Keep working towards playing the correct tempo. Practicing is like lifting weights. Don't try to lift 500lbs in the first try. Work up to it!
 - If you are doing physical movement as you play in a performance, make sure to incorporate it into your individual practice. For example, mark time while practicing if you are playing a batterie instrument. If there is choreography in your show, spend some time playing and doing the choreography together.
- **Practice and Memorize Bar By Bar**
 - Practice the first *bar* (or measure) of a section.
 - Practice the second *bar*.
 - Put bar 1 and 2 together.
 - Continue the same with *bars* 3 and 4
 - Put those 4 *bars* together making a *phrase*

- ***Practice and Memorize Phrase by Phrase.***
 - Especially helpful when putting music with drill.
 - Same process as practicing bar by bar, but you are putting 4 or 8 bar ***phrases*** (give or take some bars, depending on the phrasing) together to make a ***section***, usually from ***rehearsal mark*** to ***rehearsal mark***.
- ***Practice and Memorize Rehearsal Mark to Rehearsal Mark.***
 - Same process as above, except you'll be going from to ***rehearsal mark*** A to B, or 9 to 25, etc.
- ***Practice transitions:***
 - Sometimes, when we practice from rehearsal mark to rehearsal mark, etc. we get in the habit of stopping at the same places every time. This is where your brain will tend to associate a ***rehearsal mark*** with a break.
 - In order to avoid this, start a ***phrase*** or ***bar*** before a ***rehearsal mark*** and go past the next ***rehearsal mark*** by one ***phrase*** or ***bar***, making the connection in your brain that you still have to play THROUGH transition points.
- ***Practice and Memorize from the Back of a Section.***
 - This is the same process as above, but you start with the ***last bar***, or ***last phrase***.
- ***Practicing and Memorizing Note by Note vs. Harmonic Structure and Phrases.***
 - Many beginners and, unfortunately, more experienced players tend to learn pieces one note at a time. The downfalls of this method are:
 - Very slow and painful learning process, much like tearing off a band-aid really slowly.
 - The performance keeps the note-by-note quality, never becoming musical.
 - The best way is to start looking at pieces ***harmonically*** and by ***phrase structure, motifs, ostinato***, etc. When I memorize, I think about what parts of ***chords*** and ***scales*** the notes belong to and where the ***phrases*** end and begin and the direction of those ***phrases***.
 - In order to do this, you'll need a better understanding ***music theory***. Ask your teachers to explain the ***music theory*** behind the piece on which you are working.

“Cleaning”: *Getting ready for a perfect performance.*

- ***YOU WILL MAKE MISTAKES! The important thing is how you deal with them.***
 - Do a “Run Through” of the piece. As I get close to a performance, I like to do a run at the beginning of my practice session as well as at the end. This will help you work on continuity and will help you find the places you don’t know as well as you’d like.
 - If you make a mistake, don’t acknowledge it. ***KEEP GOING!*** You can go back and work on it later. As I like to say, “Mistakes are like rabbits, they like to breed and multiply!” Don’t let one mistake cause more.
- Go through the piece, circle places you need to work on and assign numbers of practice priority to them. I use 3 levels of priority:
 - 3: Sections I know well. I don’t need to circle these and I only need to play through them in practice and when I do a run.
 - 2: Sections I know, but are not up to the level of my #3 sections.
 - 1: Sections that I don’t know well enough and I’ll probably break or fall apart on that section. These are the segments I spend the most time on.
- As you practice, some of your priority 3 sections may become priority 2, priority 1 may become priority 2 or even 3. Keep working so that the entire piece is a priority 3 and you can play it with ease and enjoy it!
- ***One last thought on cleaning . . .***
 - Don’t wait for your teacher or instructor to “water” a part or make it easier. Sometimes, when dealing with custom arrangements, this has to be done because the writing just does work the way it should. However, marching band, drum corps and indoor drumline/percussion ensemble are the only activities in music that really do this, many times just to get a better score. ***Don’t dumb down! Pull yourself above the bar!*** You may “win” because the parts are easier but you won’t become a better musician without a challenge. Always remember, ***winning is relative to what you achieve.*** If you are achieving on a lower level than you are capable of, then you are not winning or gaining any skills.

Use A Metronome: Practice playing in sync WITH the metronome, don't just have it on!

- Practice “Masking” the sound.
- Turn the metronome on without sound, keep a steady pulse, look away from the met. Look back at the light. Are you still on with it?
- Practice with the metronome at a lower level. Too often, we practice with the met blaring through a Long Ranger or sound system. You should only hear the metronome when:
 - There is a rest.
 - The subdivision you're playing is different than the subdivision of the metronome. For example, when the metronome is on 8th notes and you're playing triplets. (Know what that sounds like when it's correct, by the way)
- Practice being on the front side, back side and middle of the beat.
- When you practice with a metronome at the correct tempo, you are increasing the ensemble's practice time by however long each individual practices with the metronome.

Practice individually to be prepared for rehearsals.

- **REHEARSAL IS NOT YOUR PERSONAL PRACTICE TIME!** This only wastes your time, the instructors' time and the time of the other members. Individual practice is for you to prepare for a successful rehearsal!

Rehearse to put all of the individual practice in context.

- The rehearsal is time for you to put what you've achieved in your individual practice together with the other people in the group so you can, ultimately, have a spectacular performance together and have a great musical experience as an ensemble.

Important Skills that will Make Learning and Memorization Faster:

- ***Melodic Sight Reading***
 - *Music Speed Reading* by David Hickman
 - *Rhythmical Articulation* by Pasqual Bona
 - *Selected Duets for Flute, vols. 1&2* by Voxman
 - *Instruction Course for Xylophone* by G.H. Green
- ***Rhythmic Sight Reading***
 - *Syncopation for the Modern Drummer* by Ted Reed
 - *Stick Control* by George Lawrence Stone
 - *Master Studies* by Joe Morello

- *Modern Reading Text* by Louis Bellson
- *Portraits in Rhythm* by Anthony Cirone
- *Musical Studies for the Intermediate Snare Drummer* by Garwood Whaley
- *12 Studies for Snare Drum* by Jacques Delecluse
- **Self analysis**
 - Many students wait until a teacher tells them how to get better instead of using the skills they are taught. Utilizing the skills you are given is what the whole concept of Box 5 and, ultimately, Box 6 is about in RMPA and WGI.
 - **Listen to what you are playing.** Be critical about the quality of sound, timing, technique, etc.
 - **Are you playing notes or music?** There's a big difference.
 - **Record your practice sessions.** Listen back to it and see what you need to improve the next time.
 - **Listen to professionals on your instrument** so you know what your playing should sound like. If you need suggestions, ask your band director, private teacher or percussion instructor.

My teaching philosophy is based on this proverb by the 12th century philosopher, Maimonides: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Your teachers' ultimate goal is to make themselves obsolete, in other words, **to teach you to become your own teacher!**

! ALWAYS REMEMBER: "SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE!"

- These methods may seem like they take a bit of time, but you will be more prepared in the long run to have a successful performance.
- Do keep in mind that you have a deadline when you need to be ready to perform. Pace yourself so you are ready to perform your best! (By the way, don't let your teachers have to remind you of this. **YOU** be in control of **YOUR** destiny by having a sense of urgency!)