

## PERFORMING FROM MEMORY

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Musicians, especially vocalists and pianists, need to develop highly refined retention skills in order to perform in public. Although it is far more important to have students performing *with* music than not to performing at all, it is a long-standing tradition for pianists and vocalists to perform from memory for one very good reason. A memorized score frees the performer from the mental distraction of reading, and allows all the cognitive, physical, and emotional processes to merge and focus solely on the art of making music. As this conjunction matures, and if done correctly, the composition becomes an integral part of the performers psyche. Eventually, he or she takes complete ownership of the composition, which results in a performance that has balance, control, discipline, and a broad and sweeping sense of freedom.

This is far easier said than done. From the onset, the performer must connect what exists on the page to a specific physical gesture for which an *aural image* is created in the brain. The physical gestures, sequenced with the aural images, must be linked to one another, and rehearsed repeatedly until they are integrated into the nerves system and become an automatic response.

While performing the process is reversed. The performer replays the composition in his *aural imagination* and then *allows* his body to respond with those preprogrammed physical gestures. When the performer stops *allowing* his body to respond, either after making an insignificant mistake or because of fear, or distrust of his body's knowledge, and then gives into that very strong urge to *control* his gestures, the performance breaks down into what is referred to as a "memory slip." However, it is not a "slip of the memory" at all; the performer really does know the composition. He must simply learn to discipline his thinking and not allow extraneous thoughts to enter into his performance.

These "break downs" do not just happen out of thin air. They are actually learned as the student first begins the practice of the piece or song. In the course of his practice, he allows his thinking to follow one of those billions of thoughts that continuously plague the mind, which are daydreams, and thereby interrupt the recording to the cerebellum the chain of events that create the musical performance.

Daydreaming or *reverie* is a completely natural and sometimes necessary occurrence for the human mind. Mostly, daydreams serve to protect our minds from intellectual overflow--too much information coming in too quickly. When this happens, the mind picks up any of those billions of thoughts that are floating by and journeys off with them into dreamland. This is when the mind "changes the channel." Just think how often we use that famous clicker while watching TV. Human beings loose interest very easily and with the development of all the sophisticated and very rapid technology it will only get worse. Boredom is the ever-growing disease of our current culture, and without proper training, the human mind simply continues on its own undisciplined path, changing "channels" at will throughout most of its life.

Therefore, not only does the music performer need to learn the composition, he must also learn to *discipline his mind* so that it remains focused on listening to the aural memory play back the piece or song and determined to remain "out of the way" of the body's responses. This skill alone allows the truly talented musician to come to fruition, and why musicians are often found to be multi-talented individuals with a variety of skills and talents.

In order to develop this skill properly, students must be doing two things: practicing every piece they learn correctly, and working on at least one memorized piece or song on a regular basis. (go to Practice: Still the Number One Issue for Parents)

The practice method I have developed over the years is highly recommended since it too is designed to keep the mind focused on the task, and to learn physical patterning that is recalled by a series of *visual stimuli*. The memorization method takes it one-step further not only by teaching the mind to remain on task, but to create physical responses to a series of memorized *aural stimuli*. As the student learns the score from memory we use four sure fire exercises that have proven helpful to discipline the mind to remain focused on the task at hand while developing the aural and physical memory. The first two can be done at home and should be encouraged.

- 1. Play only at the landmarks.
  - Landmarks are several predestinated spots in the score that the performer knows well and can jump to at any time. If something goes wrong, the performer simply jumps to the next or previous landmark.
  - Each landmark should be marked in the score, and given a number. In order to ensure that the landmarks are well learned, the student should practice playing the first measures of each landmark in and out of sequence. To develop this skill further, the teacher or a friend can simply call out a number at random, as the student responds by playing the first several measures of each landmark.
  - This is an excellent exercise to do the day of the performance. Rather than play the piece repeatedly the student should ask someone to help him "jump the landmarks." This type of exercise clears the mind and calms the nervous system by providing a sense of security. Try not to give into the urge to play the piece through. It will do two things: 1) if successful the student gets nervous hoping that he can do it again, and 2) if unsuccessful the student gets nervous thinking they do not really know the piece. In any case playing it through simply over stimulates the nervous system.
  
- 2. Play the piece at a slower tempo.
  - Slow practice is an excellent way to insure good memory and *should be done on a daily basis, and most importantly on the day of the performance*. Slowing down the tempo forces the body to adjust its gestures through space allowing it to imbed itself deeper into the nervous system. It also forces time to pass even slower so that the brain can be further conditioned to remain focused and free of daydreaming. On the day of the performance, it allows the mind to settle into deep concentration on the piece of music rather than on the performance.
  - Often students want to play their memorized pieces fast because they have subconsciously learned that the faster one plays the less time one has to forget. Furthermore, they have also learned that when one plays fast it is easier to cover up the lack of physical and mental discipline. Fast playing does not equal good or even musical playing; but try telling that to the boys.
  
- 3. Play the piece hands alone.
  - Hands alone playing, although very difficult should be done often. It serves to develop the physical and aural memory even further. When playing with only one hand the imagination is challenged. The aural memory (often referred to as the inner ear) must remember the missing sound while the physical memory must provide an imagined response for the hand that is not playing.
  - One should begin developing this skill by first having the teacher or other capable individual sit beside the student and provide the music for the missing hand. Eventually, the teacher stops playing and then playing again as the student continues without interruption. Finally, the students are their own to perform the entire composition with one hand or the other.

- 4. Play *start and stop* with the teacher.

For this exercise, you need a second piano. The student begins the piece, and at an undermined moment, the teacher produces a vocal stimulus that signals the students to stop playing and allow the teacher to take up the piece on the other piano on the next beat. As the teacher is playing, the student is imagining himself performing. At the next signal, the student picks up the playing as the teacher stops. The exchange between teacher and student continues to the end of the composition.

This exercise is also good for teaching music sight-reading where the teacher and student alternate the performance of an unstudied and unrehearsed score. It is a lot of fun to do this with two students, one at each piano. The teacher provides the signal as the students trade off performing the piece. To further increase the enjoyment, one can add a metronome to the exercise and increase the tempo at each new performance.