

MAKING YOUR MUSICAL PERFORMANCE THE BEST IT CAN BE

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This is a set of guidelines for my college level music students, and all others interested in performance, designed to help you achieve your best possible musical performance. How many of you have practiced seemingly endless hours and wondered why your experience on stage was not what you thought it would be? Do you come off stage and ask yourself, “Why didn’t it go better? I practiced so much and it was fine in the practice room”. Or maybe you don’t have those problems; maybe you are even labeled “talented”, and want to make sure that you don’t experience this particular type of disappointment. Still, there are some of you elated by the response of applause, or the ‘high’ of performing, and think that it went much better than it did; only to hear or view the tape later and find that it really wasn’t all that great. Time and feeling on stage are quite different than they are in life, and the point of this discussion is to help you feel *and* play better under the moment of pressure...not just one or the other, but in combination with each other. Feeling good and performing successfully encompasses many things, including your practice habits, your attitude towards the unfamiliar, your coping mechanisms, ability to meditate, focus and concentrate, and a myriad of physical and psychological factors.

This is not really a discussion on phrasing or practice methods; those are the focus of lessons. Nor is this a discussion on the main goal of performance, which is to communicate and connect with your listener. But the topic of practice, not practice methods, will necessarily be touched upon. What is considered “natural knowledge” to the born or experienced performer will be shared with those of you who are still trying to perfect your performance ability – and you have a lifetime to do it. Granted, many of the world’s greatest performers hit the stage from an early age, but there are still things that everyone can do to maximize the time you devote to practice. Topic. Previously, I

considered knowledge in this area to be common, but found that I repeated myself quite a bit lessons and coachings to my students of all ages, and all levels over the last 10 years of my teaching career. I have extracted those things that remain consistent regardless of the level of my student, or the relative interest in performing well, and put them into this paper.

Observation No. 1: Practicing without concentrating will not help you achieve your best performance!

Muscle memory alone will not hold up under pressure if your mind is “checked out” during practice. There is something about playing in front of an audience of hundreds that will force you to want to concentrate. If you don’t develop this skill, you will not reap the benefits of your practice. Playing through your pieces over and over without imagining what it will be like to perform in front of others will definitely create those brain lapses when you least want them. The trick is to focus during your practice in the way that you will want to when you are on stage.

2. Be honest about how much you are really practicing.

Many of you check into your practice rooms and spend more time eating and socializing than you do practicing. How then, do you expect to memorize your pieces over a ten week period as you prepare your degree recital? If you are having problems, check out the chart at the back of this paper and keep diligent records of how long you are practicing each piece. It is important to take breaks every 45 minutes, or every hour, but my recommendation is to take a break outside the practice room. You can walk around (but not into someone else's practice room!) There is always a shortage of practice rooms. If you would rather socialize, leave the room so that someone else can use it. In some environments, not necessarily ours, some people enjoy disrupting other people's practice time; it makes them feel that they have a psychological edge. That kind of behavior is for, some, conducive to feeling good about performance, but since she/he is not focused on their own practice, that is time wasted on nonsensical competitiveness . For the rest

us, practicing bad mental habits like that only destroys the performance experience. Learn how to politely tell your colleagues that you will need to work today, and schedule some time to hang out or talk later.

3. Don't be concerned with what others will think of your playing.

You have to please yourself, and you are your own worst critic. You don't have time to wonder if someone is going to think you are talented or not - you must just work. Focus on your skill and imparting something of worth to your listener, not on your ego and whether or not others will think you are great. When a student at Juilliard, I discovered a young man who was working on Rachmaninov's *Third Piano Concerto*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, and Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* all at the same time! I was so impressed. Well, one of my friends came to me and pointed out that the fellow only knew the first page of each of these pieces/movements and kept playing the cycle of the first pages over and over. Of course if you are walking past the room, and many others, frantically looking for a practice room, you may never have known that this was the case. The guy never gave a recital to the best of my knowledge (you need more than 10 minutes of performance material), and sadly came to be known as the "broken record".

4. Recognize that you will be nervous before a performance.

This is natural! In fact, if you aren't nervous, there is less of a chance that you might actually have a real epiphany or achieve something extraordinary in the moment of pressure. A safe amount of spontaneity is actually welcome. Of course, don't expect the adrenalin to do all the work for you, because less practice means that there could be too much spontaneity that may invariably make you 'derail' during a performance. If someone asks you the inappropriate question, "are you nervous?", you can respond with something that you have already prepared in advance. Some examples can be, "not really" or, "not anymore than I should be". My staple response to virtually any question asked of me, is "no, how about you?" I learned this as student at the Peabody. On our way for afternoon coffee, we always ran into a homeless woman who asked us for a

quarter. One day she came with her hair beautifully coiffed and still asked us for a quarter. Since we had spent many of our quarters on Pac Man and other video games while waiting for daily practice sign up, my friend responded by answering, "I don't have a quarter, do you?", to which she scoffed and walked away. She never asked us again. If you have *any* experience as a performer, refrain from asking your colleagues such an inane question. You just have to learn live with those nerves. The more you experience you gain by performing, or simulating performance, the more you will get used to it.

5. Practice Running Through Your Pieces for a Friend

Do not expect to go directly from the practice room to the stage and have a successful performance. Running through a piece, or set of pieces for a trusted friend is a great way to test your memory and bank some really good "practice" time towards your performance. Of course you will play for your professor in lessons. But it seems that many of you tend to run behind in the schedule of memorizing your pieces, or that the process of memorizing is not connected with phrasing, and there is just never enough time to do it all in one hour. Take your score to a friend and have them mark where you might have had some problems and go back to your practice room, isolate those problems and work on them so that it doesn't happen over and over. Because so much of our time is spent practicing alone, it is really beneficial to have someone help bring things into focus by playing for a friend ***once a piece has achieved a certain stage in memorization or fluidity***. Don't ask your friends to listen to you if you are in the sightreading stages of your piece; everyone's time is precious. Also, if you ask someone to listen to you, you should be willing to reciprocate at some point. Do not try to give each other lessons, the point is to test memory and encourage each other. Once faced with problem spots marked in the score, hit those spots right after the run through, whether it was for a friend, a dress rehearsal, or yourself in the practice room (see no. 6), in order to avoid having those "slips" programmed in. In any event, running a piece through for a friend is practice not only of the piece, but practice of concentration while someone is listening to you. It actually more closely resembles or imitates the performance situation, which is helpful in gathering experience.

6. Make the distinction between *practice* and *run through*.

This is really important! You don't want to practice stopping in your little "devil's triangles". If you don't have any friends to play for, and when you are in the practice room, alone, and need to test your ability to get through a piece for memory, remember that your main goal is to get through the piece without stopping. Thus, running through a piece, and practicing a piece should be **two different things**. When you decide to run through a piece, there may be a spot where you may lose your place or make a mistake. It is important to go beyond that point, get back on track, and *then* you can stop and go back and try to fix the spot. This kind of practice helps avoid the "stop dead in your tracks" performance, even if it may not be perfect. To keep moving forward, without having to start over from the beginning, is the key to making a performance a performance, and not a grueling session for your friend as you sit and practice in front of her/him. If you are making up large portions of a piece in order to get through it, then you have more ground work to do before you try running through your piece for yourself, or for another person. Otherwise, analyze, within a timely manner, what happened, and set out to correct it as quickly as possible. This is the key to avoiding the little traps we inadvertently set up for ourselves.

7. Know what you want to do with every single note that you are playing.

I could write another set of guidelines on this. Whether right or wrong, you should know exactly how you want to phrase, intonate, or inflect every single note. Phrasing and timing are of utmost importance in one's playing. Without this, technique stands alone and has no larger purpose. Muscle memory becomes without aim or direction, and it is much harder to keep track of what is going on with the muscles and technique if they are not "hooked" in some way to a larger musical aim. The notes comprise motives, motives comprise phrases, phrases comprise sections, and sections comprise the whole of the piece and you should be focused on the delivery of your larger scale form (for instance a cyclic piece or set of pieces) with the appropriate attention to informed stylistic approach.