

“It Sounded Better at Home!” Student Notes
Some tips and resources for enhancing your performance
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Step 1: Know the music!

It seems obvious, but if you can't play a piece of music cleanly in the comfort of your own home, chances are there won't be a miraculous occurrence when you're on stage and you'll suddenly sail through the difficult passages. That's why practicing things like scales, etudes and tone exercises in addition to learning pieces is so important: it'll give you a good base level of skills, similar to the multitude of workouts and different exercises an athlete does in addition to his or her chosen sport. It's also extremely important to know your music more thoroughly than just being able to “read” it.

Five ways to learn/memorize music

- * Visual – have a picture reproduction of the sheet music in your mind
- * Aural – be able to “play it by ear”
- * Kinesthetic – get all the fingerings into muscle memory
- * Theory/structure – what are the main themes and where are they throughout the piece? What are the harmonic relationships throughout the piece? What key is it in? Does it change keys? What scales and arpeggios are used at specific points? How does your part relate with the piano or orchestra part – do you know what the other parts are doing at all times?
- * Solfege – be able to sing what you play

I think most musicians who perform a lot by memory use a synthesis of these. Personally, I find that when on stage, my primary method is to just trust in my kinesthetic sense and let the music take care of itself, but if there's a really tricky technical passage coming up, I'll briefly focus on a technical element to “ground” the passage so that I don't lose control but at the same time don't give up the feeling of spontaneity. And I always have a visual “back-up copy” of the music in my head.

Understand that performing is not the same as practicing!

Performing is an entirely different skill that, like practicing a difficult piece, gets easier the more you do it. Perform often, in low-pressure, positive environments before you jump into the big competition.

Play for your parents and grandparents, friends, in retirement homes, hospitals, or church – anywhere and for anyone who can give supportive feedback. You'll have great experiences and positive images of your performance to fall back on when you have something a bit more stressful like an audition or competition. As you perform more and gain confidence in your successes, you'll feel comfortable taking more artistic and emotional risks. You'll also be able to view an audition or competition as simply one more event in your life as a musician, not as the ultimate “make or break” scenario.

Just breathe

For some reason, this is the trickiest thing to do when you're nervous, but once you master being able to control your breathing, a lot of the other physical and mental distractions associated with performance anxiety seem to fall by the wayside. Deep breathing from your diaphragm physically gets you away from the “fight or flight” mentality of shallow breathing and muscle tension.

Here's a quick exercise to practice: Breathe in for 5 beats through your nose, hold for two beats, exhale for five beats through your mouth. Breathe from your gut, not your upper chest. Think of filling your lungs from the bottom up. Keep your shoulders down and relaxed.

“Ground” yourself by making sure your weight is evenly balanced on the balls and heels of your feet, your knees aren't locked, and your shoulders aren't tensed up.

Practice performing with an increased heart rate by doing sprints or climbing stairs and then playing. Get your heart rate up to simulate a performance situation, then focus yourself by deep breathing and by recalling your visualized performance.

Do relaxation exercises so you can learn how to release tension when it builds up in your body. An example of a good exercise is called “Progressive Relaxation Exercise.” There are many websites where you can download audio files of someone guiding you through various exercises.

Practice creative visualization

Again, this is something athletes do all the time as part of their normal training routine, and something we musicians should learn to incorporate as part of our training to go out on stage. Athletes visualize their ideal performance many days before their competition, and psychologists say it takes about 21 days to successfully break a habit and learn a new one – so if you can, start visualizing your concert or audition scenario three weeks before the event.

Some call creative visualization “the theater of the mind.” I think that’s a really neat idea: when you’re visualizing, the sky’s the limit: you can infuse musical passages with specific colors, fleeting images or scenes from your life, whatever emotion or thought jumps out at you when you think about a phrase...the goal of all this is not that the audience hears or “gets” all of this, but that you yourself are 100% invested in what you are portraying at a specific moment in time.

Here’s a short version of a visualization exercise. Close your eyes and get comfortable (like sitting in a comfy chair or lying in bed before you fall asleep at night). Breathe evenly and deeply.

Go through your performance with as much detail as possible: what does the hall look, feel and sound like? Who is in the audience? How will you enter the stage? What are you wearing? What do your instrument keys feel like under your fingers? How do you sound? How does your body feel as you breathe in and out? Most importantly, what emotions are you feeling as you play? What do you want to give to the audience? What feelings and ideas in the music do you want to portray? Tell yourself that if an audience member coughs or you have a slight memory slip or technical mishap, you will just acknowledge that and move on with what you want to present– in real life performance situations, distractions will happen, and the important thing is to keep your focus and simply turn them into any distraction into a small blip instead of a major earthquake.

Monitor self-talk, and use it to work for you instead of against you.

How many times during the day do you catch yourself silently berating yourself in your head? Thought patterns are powerful (that’s how mantras came into existence). If you catch yourself doing this on a regular basis, and the things you are saying are a consistent theme, write them down, sentence by sentence. Change each negative sentence into a sentence with a positive outcome. For example: “Jeez, I always suck on this phrase – I can never get enough air!” might become, “I play this phrase beautifully when I relax and simply fill up my lungs.”

Remember, we form pictures in our heads with our words: if you tell yourself not to do something, your brain will still form a mental image of the exact thing you don’t want to do, albeit with a big red psychological “x” slashed through it. It’s much more effective to tell yourself what you *do* want, rather than what you don’t want.

Change your relationship to your audience

Get rid of the “me vs. them” mentality, which is essentially your ego trying to protect itself. The more consumed we get with ourselves and what we’re going through, the more distance you put between you and your audience; you end up feeling more isolated and less able to share a musical experience with your audience, and your audience will be able to sense this.

“It’s not all about me.” Focus on the music, what you’re trying to say with the music, and what you can give to people. We learn skills like brushing our teeth and tying our shoes by practice and by trial and error. We forget the failures and learn from the successful attempts until it becomes a habit. We learn music by practice and through trial and error. We must suspend judgment of our “failures” so that we can fully learn from our successful attempts, and see our unsuccessful attempts as simply a piece of information in our learning curve.

Trust in yourself, and trust that the music will take care of itself. One of my favorite expressions is “Leap, and the net will appear.” There’s something delightfully freeing (and very ironic) about letting go and trusting that the habits you’ve worked hard to acquire will be there naturally, in this place and in this time. By purposefully ceding control, you have actually gained control, because you have made a choice to lay it all out there, as yourself, with your music, for your audience.

Find balance: When you’re in the practice room, you obviously do need to be detailed and picky with what you’re doing and analyze what’s wrong so you can correct it. If you do that during a performance, your performance will seem stifled and self-conscious. Don’t analyze when performing – just perform!

Most importantly: Cultivate a sense of gratitude that we’ve been given tremendous gifts as musicians, that we each have our own unique story to tell, and that everyone in the world has a story.