

TEACHING STUDENTS TO PERFORM FROM MEMORY - A CLARINETIST'S PERSPECTIVE

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Learning to perform from memory can be extremely beneficial for all musicians, even if it is done purely for educational purposes. Preparing students to perform well from memory is often based on the teacher's own experience as a performer, which for most includes both successes and failures. Growing up as a piano student and then switching to clarinet, I have had a number of experiences both as a performer and teacher which may be of interest in analyzing memorization skills. Fifteen years teaching clarinet and music theory at the college level also brings a certain perspective to this puzzle. My undergraduate research student, Samantha Tschida, interviewed the music faculty here at Montana State University-Bozeman so that their ideas could also be included in our study. For additional perspectives, we moderated a discussion session and conducted a survey at a recent Montana/Idaho Clarinet Festival in Pocatello, Idaho.

Proper preparation includes three types of memory: visual, aural and kinesthetic. Visual memory involves learning, as thoroughly as possible, the appearance of the music on the page. Aural memory is the ability to hear the music in one's head, and kinesthetic memory trains the fingers with the motor skills needed to perform the piece. Therefore, before going on stage to play a memorized concerto, my students must, 1) be able to write out every note they are about to play, 2) sing through the concerto, including orchestral interludes, and 3) finger through the piece without blowing. By doing so, they are better equipped to handle a situation in which one of the three methods fails, than if they are relying solely or predominantly on one type of memorization.

The clarinet, or any wind instrument, offers a challenge that pianists and string players are not faced with, namely being forced to look directly at the audience. Looking at the instrument while performing is not an option, and closing one's eyes usually looks like the audience is being intentionally shut out or the performer is being overly dramatic. The art of looking at an audience and not really seeing them is a necessity for complete concentration on the music one is performing.

The method of starting the memorization process varies among individuals, but most agree that starting well in advance of the performance instead of cramming, is important. There have been many studies on the optimum time for concentration and for memory work, and 20-30 minutes at a time seems optimal. Once the music is learned, playing from the music with the stand further and further away is one approach. Students are also encouraged to number the sections and memorize them, in order to better understand the form and always know where they are in the music. An example of an appropriate section size is the primary theme group in a traditional classical concerto form, before the transition to the dominant, or relative major. It's a good idea to play similar sections side by side to identify the differences, so as to avoid taking a wrong turn. Sometimes, for example, a one-note difference can lead the performer out of the recapitulation and back to the exposition, creating an unfortunate and interminable loop. Visualizing every note of a piece is certainly more difficult for some students than others, and for most pianists this probably is unrealistic, but I have found it extremely reassuring to know a piece visually, especially

when I'm standing on stage waiting for the end of the long opening orchestral exposition of the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto*. Some purists might scoff at playing with a recording, or with some of the latest technologies, but to experience what it sounds like with orchestra is crucial. Often one only gets a rehearsal or two with the orchestra in the few days preceding the gig. Aural memory of the accompaniment is an important, though sometimes neglected, part of preparation. An analysis of the form of the piece, as well as a harmonic analysis, is always a good idea because it gives one a deeper understanding of the music and allows one to think on a larger scale. An obvious and related challenge is keeping our minds focused on the music. Often we know the piece so well by the time we perform it from memory that it is possible for one's mind to wander while performing. This can be very problematic. Having talked to many seasoned woodwind performers immediately after their concertos, I am aware that even though it sounds ludicrous to be daydreaming during such a stressful situation, this is essentially what sometimes happens. To reassure myself that I can prevail despite both visual and aural distractions, I've even tried playing from memory while watching the news on television. This strategy is analogous to the methods used to train police horses. The animals are subjected to loud noises and bright lights while performing their routines, to ensure that they can competently perform under duress.

I was taught to read the music, and playing by ear was discouraged. Although I had very good teachers, the pedagogy that eschews playing by ear lacks an essential tool for building solid musical foundations. Classical pianists like Jon Kimura Parker, winner of the Leeds competition, who have solidly mastered the art of playing by ear, have a distinct advantage when performing from memory. This art not only reduces the number of memory slips, but allows the performer to recover more easily. To really shore up the memorization, students should also practice starting in the middle of a passage. If one can only start at the beginning, or the beginning of a section, it becomes very difficult to get back on track after making a mistake. In thinking about improving the teaching of memorization, one can never underestimate the power of positive reinforcement and the subsequent development of students' self-esteem. An example can be seen in young Suzuki violin students who have grown up with audience adoration, partly due to their youthfulness, which has contributed to an astounding lack of stage fright. They start out relying almost exclusively on aural memory. When encouraging students however, it is important not to place unreasonable expectations upon them, because negative experiences exacerbate their self-doubt.

Upon interviewing music faculty members about their experiences teaching students to perform from memory, an interesting idea came up. Our faculty pianist, Laurel Yost, mentioned that attaching emotional significance to every note heightens its importance and, therefore, increases the probability of it being remembered. One can understand the effectiveness of this technique merely by calling to mind a particularly poignant passage in a recently memorized piece, or by simply remembering the details of an emotionally important moment in one's life.

What about those who never intend to perform from memory? Well there are a number of secondary benefits linked to memorization, even if it just takes place in the practice room. It helps develop the ear, which is an obvious benefit to any musician. And this in turn, I've noticed, helps with transposition skills for clarinetists and horn players. It

also helps those instrumentalists who have to voice notes in different registers. Some of my best performances have been playing from the music after I have the piece memorized. Confidence goes way up in this situation, and often the following thought goes through my head while on stage: "What could possibly go wrong? I've got the music right in front of me." In learning difficult passages, I often tell students, "If you can't play it, memorize it! Then use the passage as a warm-up." For many woodwind players, memorization is optional, but I highly recommend it as an important component in every student's musical development, regardless of instrument. Whether one performs in public from memory is a personal choice, but as I get older, I feel that if I don't use it I'll probably lose it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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