

Practice Techniques & Performance Preparation

By Steve Hearn

Special attention should be placed on personal and student practice techniques. The **quality** and **process** of practice time is of up-most importance; productivity during the time is greater than the amount of time. One hour of well structured and productive practice is greater than three hours without planning and total concentration. Learning a specific amount of material each practice session is more productive than a daily practice session set to a specific time limit. Set reasonable daily goals and spend as much time as needed to reach them. By setting daily goals and dividing longer pieces into sections, an overwhelming project is learned efficiently and productively.

***How you learn a work directly effects how well you have memorized, know, and perform the piece!!!**

1. STUDY SCORE MENTALLY before playing

- a) Structure and form analysis
 1. Global scale; total direction and climax
 2. Local scale; break into sections and phrases
- b) Conduct score while singing the music
 1. Internalize tempos, style and phrasing without the worry of correct technique and notes
 2. Conduct and sing with a metronome, then without

2. NOTE LEARNING at the instrument

- a) Think horizontal (linear) rather than vertical
- b) Use **BOWINGS**
 1. Groups of notes flowing in a motion rather than note by note
 2. Similar to a violinist
 - a) Violinist's up-bow = energy starts less and grows
 - b) Violinist's down-bow = energy starts strong and diminishes
 3. Learn dynamics, accents, phrasing and notes simultaneously
 4. Example from Toshimitsu Tanaka's *Two Movements for Marimba*:

Allegro ♩=132
Suono *8^{va}*

f

Bowing #1 Bowing #2 Bowing #3 Bowing #4

The image shows a musical score for marimba in 8/8 time, marked Allegro with a tempo of 132 beats per minute. The score is in treble clef and features a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). It is divided into four sections, each labeled with a bowing technique: Bowing #1, Bowing #2, Bowing #3, and Bowing #4. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks such as accents and slurs. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

5. Build bowing by bowing
 - a) Learn first bowing-STOP
 - b) Learn second bowing-STOP
 - c) Combine first and second bowings-STOP
 - d) Learn third bowing-STOP
 - e) Combine first, second and third bowings-STOP
 - f) Add each new bowing until longer phrases are created
 - g) Stopping between each bowing allows the brain to catch up to the muscle memory or vice versa

3. THE PRACTICING PROCESS

- a) Conduct and sing out loud without playing
- b) Visualize conductor and sing out loud without playing
- c) Sing out loud and play
- d) Play and silently sing (hear) music in your head
- e) Practice three tempos-slow, medium, at tempo
- f) If needed, start slow and gradually increase speed

4. VISUALIZE, especially on mallet instruments

- a) Without playing, visualize each note while singing music in your head
- b) Accompany visualization with slight body air movements

5. SLOW PRACTICE

- a) Very, very, very slowly – play through entire piece
 1. This takes a lot of concentration and focus, which will help develop a solid memory foundation

6. SLOW, MEDIUM, & AT TEMPO PRACTICE

- a) Play the work three times – slow, medium, then at tempo
- b) If notes are missed, start slower
- c) Experiment and find what works best for you

7. POLLISHING PRACTICE-RECORD YOURSELF

- a) **Perform** entire piece or section of piece, up to tempo
- b) During tape playback, **mark** in pencil, with parentheses or brackets, the 4 to 6 worst spots
- c) **Practice** only those spots, begin slowly and increase speed
- d) **Practice transitions** in and out of worst spots
- e) **Repeat** a-d

These practice techniques will rapidly increase learning, memorization, and performance confidence by allowing the performer to truly "know" the music. They will help establish the learning process to "hear" the music before it happens-virtually eliminating memory slips. Similarly, the true nature of the music will be deeply internalized and more readily communicated to the audience.