

Preparing for Performance

“The throwing of oranges at performers seems to have been a more or less recognized means of expressing disappointment in the eighteenth century”

Percy A. Scholes

Sample Only: Chapter 12

Sections indicated in RED below are included in this sample.

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The Practice Revolution: Chapter 12

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12. Preparing for Performance

12.1 Defining the task

Most teachers seem to have higher blood pressure as student recitals draw closer – and with good reason. As they look over the audience of pupils, each waiting their turn to play, they will see some students who know their pieces, but tend to fall apart on stage, sitting side by side with those who never really knew their pieces in the first place. And those rare students who know their piece and are comfortable on stage...well, they're *supposed* to play well, so we don't have much to gain there, and plenty to lose if things do go wrong.

You have to be *very* careful with the type of practice you recommend in the days leading up to a recital. It's a time in which the wrong kind of practice can actually sabotage what may otherwise have been a fine performance. But it's also a time in which some positive practice sessions can make a tremendous difference, lifting a student beyond any expectations you may have had for them previously.

This chapter is dedicated to the End Game – those final couple of weeks that culminate in the performance itself. The piece has been polished until it shines...there's only one thing left to get right.

The mental state of the student.

12.2 - 12.4 not included in this sample

12.5 Getting comfortable with starting

For many students, the most difficult thing about performing can be delivering the first few notes. That's when they tend to be most conscious that they are actually on stage, it's when they have to establish the tempo, it's when they need to develop a feel for acoustics in the room, and it's when they are trying to establish atmosphere and stamp their authority on the performance ahead. And somewhere in there, they are

also trying to play the right notes.

Given that all of this co-occurs awkwardly with the moment in which they are probably feeling most nervous, it's no surprise that the opening can be overwhelming, resulting in the performance "feeling its way" for the first few phrases, until it eventually settles.

Worse still, sometimes the performance *doesn't* settle, as the stumbling opening saps their confidence and sets the pattern for what is to follow. We've all been present at performances where a bad opening for the first piece set the tone for the entire recital, and the whole process becomes like watching a ship slowly take water.

If students want their performance to seize audiences, adjudicators and examiners alike from the very first note, then they are going to have to become accustomed to coping with starting. And like anything else they want to become accustomed to, they'll have to practice it.

12.5.1 How this technique works

Because there are so many things to take care of in the first few phrases, before they practice starting it's worth the student spending some time *building a checklist of what they want the opening to achieve*. For example, they might want to use the opening to set just the right tempo— fast enough to allow the phrasing to flow naturally, but not so fast that the tricky bit on page two will come crashing down. They need to remember that although the opening is marked *pp*, they will have to ensure that the sound projects to the back of the hall. They also might need to remember that they should spend a second checking their posture, because that slouch which has been developing recently is starting to become a distraction for anyone who watches them play. And they might also need to remind themselves how much better they play when they focus on making their dynamics just as interesting as they can.

Armed with the list of Things To Do in those opening bars, it's time to practice delivering them— but when the session begins, the student should focus on these items *one at a time*. Partly to raise their awareness of them as individual issues, rather than having some get lost in the group like a quiet child in a big class. But mostly so they can experience for themselves the successful delivery of each of these issues right at the start a performance. In other words, it is helping them to realize that a successful start is not a pipe-dream, it is achievable, and moreover has already been achieved by

them many times in the past.

So they begin by nominating *one* thing that they want this opening to achieve. It might be establishing a workable tempo for the rest of the performance. They then leave the room, instrument in hand, and come back in as though they are walking on stage at the concert itself. Having bowed elegantly to the imaginary audience, they then pause for a moment, and remind themselves of the job at hand...to establish a workable tempo.

Because the focus is entirely on the start, once they are underway with the piece, they should stop after a few phrases. That will be enough information for them to assess how successful or otherwise they were with their stated goal (in this case establishing an appropriate tempo), but is a short enough passage that they could practice starting many, many times in the course of fifteen minutes. The degree of experience in starting gained in half an hour would have taken a couple of years to acquire had they simply waited for performances to give them the practice they need.

Before they start the piece for the second time, they should just take a moment to reflect on how successful they were with their stated goal in the first play through. Did they establish the tempo satisfactorily, it was it clearly too fast or too slow? If there were any problems, they should start the piece again (complete with the stage walk-on) and try to correct what went wrong last time. If everything was fine, then they would simply choose a new goal for this next beginning. Switching goals like this based on outcomes ensures that they spend time on the concepts that need it, while moving quickly on from those goals that they can already deliver.

12.5.2 Combining the elements

Once the student has successfully made starts with each of the stated tasks, it's time to start *combining them* into pairs. So this time when they start, they might be establishing an appropriate tempo AND setting the scene dynamically for the dramatic entry of the main theme in bar twelve. The only change at their end is that they will probably need an extra few seconds before starting each time to process the extra goals.

By the end of the session, the aim is to have successfully combined *all* the elements into one start. The student now not only has a list of expectations for the beginning of the performance, they also know how to manage all those demands simultaneously to create a successful opening to their performance.

The audience will never know that such careful work has gone into this. All they will feel is the sense that the performance carries an air of authority right from the outset. Adjudicators, panels and examiners will notice it too, meaning that whatever first impressions actually count for, your student has just got maximum points.

...End of sample

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