

TIPS ON PREPARING FOR A PERFORMANCE

(Written by Paul Owens from Sydney Technical High School)

Performance, like all areas of music, offers almost endless possibilities. It is not always easy to find the answer or an easy answer to the problem of playing your pieces more musically. There are, however, several things you can do over time that will make a difference.

In short, try to:

1. immerse yourself in the world of performance - the people, environment, standards, behaviour, equipment, attitudes, creativity, routines. Work with your friends, peers, community groups and observe others performing wherever and whenever possible.
2. be an active rather than passive student of performance. You are a vitally important part of the teaching process and therefore will continually learn from personal and self-observations. To make the experience outlined in point (i) worthwhile, you must be prepared to question, analyse, dissect and investigate at all times.
3. experiment with and incorporate features from the lessons that you have learned. Share your ideas and findings with teachers, fellow performers etc.

The three points above are interrelated. One without the other is of limited value. It is too easy in music to simply enjoy a performance, but learn little from it. That is, experience by itself is not enough. Ask questions such as:

- How were those passages so beautifully phrased?
- Why were there minor tempo changes in that section?
- Where were the articulations longer or more emphasised?
- When were particular performance techniques employed?
- Who directed performance changes or played the dominant role?

Take notes, pose questions, argue and debate with others; simply, get involved!

GETTING 'INVOLVED'

Find recordings and listen to live performances

Find recordings and listen to live performances of artists playing your instrument type. You will observe and absorb the attributes and subtleties of performance, e.g. phrasing, tone, articulation etc. Make observations/notes and deliberately incorporate these findings into your performance practice.

Listen to experts

Listen to experts performing on all instruments. Important understanding of interpretation and performance practice is not exclusive to any one instrument. Become familiar with the best performance standards. You have a far greater capacity to learn by modelling and imitation than you probably imagine. You will absorb many performance nuances and also learn a great deal about style by listening (and watching) the best performers.

Collect other versions

Where possible, collect two or more versions of the same piece (if possible, the repertoire your performing). A comparative analysis will quickly prove that performance is more than decoding notes; it is a highly individual and interpretative art.

Observe rehearsals

Observe rehearsals whenever possible. Concert performance provides a product; rehearsal will help provide the processes behind that product.

Work with your teacher

Work with, not simply for, your teacher(s). Be prepared to generate discussion and bring your own findings/thoughts to the lesson.

Vary the perspective

If possible, organise occasional lessons with different teachers, including those of different instruments (violin teachers may offer the trumpet student many valuable insights and vice versa). All teachers have different strengths and perspectives from which they instruct and you can provide the means of connecting valuable pieces of advice.

Bring other musical knowledge into your performance

Relate other learning experiences to performance. For example, composing requires you to think of how a phrase would best sound, i.e. how it could be best performed to maximise its impact.

Apply the insights you gain as a composer to the way you play your repertoire.

Prior knowledge is vital when constructing new understanding. Be prepared to build skills gradually and research background information either through listening or accessing other sources such as texts, experts or multimedia.

PERFORMANCE TIPS

Articulation

Give close attention to the attack and release of notes, in particular, those at the beginning and end of phrases. The decay of a sound is often given little attention. Whether a note should taper or immediately cease with a definite or indefinite (evaporate) close are important interpretative decisions.

Phrasing

Plan and mark the preferred phrasing on the music. Remember that under the stress of concert performance, it is very easy to phrase by convenience rather than artistry (especially if a wind player running short of air).

Dynamics

Marked dynamics are often an average volume that permits minor personal shifts within the phrase, providing the structural shape and interpretive quality required.

Performance practice

Make yourself familiar with style-specific performance practice. Much of how music is interpreted was and is left unwritten, whether in a Baroque sonata or jazz. It is not difficult to source information (electronic, text, teachers, performers) regarding stylistic conventions, authentic practices etc. Try to be as faithful to stylistic requirements as possible.

Communication

All music is communication. You need to know what messages your piece imparts and what messages you wish to convey. Otherwise it is like speaking a language in which none of the words are understood (even if clearly pronounced). Technical control or even brilliance is not an end in itself. It serves the intent of the composer to construct a meaningful musical moment in which you are the translator adding the appropriate nuance and inflection (no different to adding facial expression and changing intonation when reading literature).

Tension and release

Music operates around moments of building tension and its release. Look within each phrase for the moment(s) of greatest tension and how they may resolve. Build this structural understanding into your performance through changes of dynamics, articulation, tempo, tone colour etc.

Technical considerations

Never neglect fundamental technical elements, e.g. pedalling, developing range or shifting hand positions. They are not important in themselves, but good phrasing and interpretation are impossible without securing these elements.

The whole

Understand the whole work. The performance of the soloist's part, or for that matter any part, is dependent on an understanding of the relationship between all parts. For example, the dovetailing of a soloist's phrase to allow an accompanying instrument to be heard as part of an answer or phrase transition.

The musical concepts

Look for direction in the foundations of the piece, i.e. the concepts. A harmonic understanding of a work will often suggest critical phrases or even pivotal points within a phrase that soloists should consider in the interpretation of their line. An overall structural familiarity will help emphasise contrasts and maintain interpretative consistency.

Expressive markings

Find concrete ways of translating abstract thoughts or directions. It is easy to ask someone to play "majestically" and to think majestically whilst playing the passage, but what does this really mean in terms of actually performing the music?

For example, should notes be generally longer, tempo a little slower, volume somewhat louder, bass levels rebalanced, each note more sharply sounded? Views will differ about exact meaning, but at least have a tangible translation of these expressive markings to work by.

Plan your rehearsal

Plan your rehearsals and practice time. Playing, repetitively and/or without purpose, may improve your standard to a certain level, after which gains are minimal. Deliberate and well-planned practice that incorporates shorter and longer term goals will more likely lead to continual and sustainable improvement.

Write your goals down and modify if necessary. The crucial point is to commit to those actions that will bring maximum improvement.

Each practice should have breadth, depth and variety. Cover a range of material from technical work, studies, light reading of new works to the intense practice of major pieces. Try to keep practice balanced and enjoyable.

Keep in mind some basic principles of learning when organising practice sessions:

- try to master *successive sub-parts* which will lead to a successful final product
- repetition should be based on *meaningful learning* (a purpose), not simply rote learning alone
- *distributing* practice over a number of sessions (even twice a day at times) is more effective than practising the same material in longer and fewer sessions
- practice sections both in total and in *smaller* parts; both aid learning in different ways
- it is highly beneficial to learn some material to the point where it is *automatic* and conscious thought is no longer required (scales etc). In this way, your mind is free to handle other interpretative aspects rather than the mundane requirements of producing notes
- *change the starting point* at which you practice particular sections and passages to avoid an over reliance of the memory on a specific sequence of notes or sections. Memory is also more effective at the beginning and end of a passage when trying to learn something new
- *expertise is developed over time*; it is not an accident of birth. Experts have built up a far greater and richer network of concepts in memory and have a developed understanding of the procedures to analyse and reproduce high performance levels.

Playing from memory

Occasionally memorise performance pieces and then concentrate on listening to your performance, making adjustments where necessary. Freedom from written notation gives another perspective to what you play as long as memorising does not produce robotic or cloned performance.

Evaluate

Evaluate your performance. Have others listen and constructively comment and regularly record your performance. Get as much feedback as possible. Perception of our own performance may vary greatly from that of others. You are the final judge and of course do not have to accept all suggestions, but equally, you will benefit from carefully considering all advice.

Know your instrument

Know the idiosyncrasies of your instrument. What notes are naturally sharp/flat, where does the tone colour tend to change and in what keys is the performance more flexible/facile, what is the natural projection in different registers etc? Intonation is a problem peculiar to most instruments and its correction needs gradual training, attention to its effects and a sound knowledge of the instrument.

Learn from your mistakes

Welcome mistakes and then fix them. So much of learning arises from the errors we all make. It is important to remain receptive and positive to mistakes as markers for future improvement. Healthy evaluation stimulates progress, while excessive self-criticism raises anxiety and creates unrealistic expectations.

Near enough is not good enough

Aim for perfection. Most performers practice a piece until it is 70%-80% right. We usually do not analyse it in this way, nor do we readily recognise the imperfections that exist. But, for examination purposes try, over

time, to get as close to 100% as possible. This may mean your expectations and definition of 100% may also need to develop/change.

Tempo

Practice slowly at first and gradually build tempos to performance markings. Do not be obsessed with speed; clarity at a slower tempo is superior to a blemished and garbled performance at the marked tempo.

Sight reading

Develop sight reading skills, it will provide you with quick access to a wide range of new music and consequently new musical understanding.

Music is not a static art form

Recognise that music is an active, not a static art form. Its perception is related to time and how sound is organised in relation to it. Mature players use time to their advantage in a number of ways, e.g. altering tempos to emphasize structural contrasts; allowing the pulse to be elastic and shape phrases; treating note subdivisions less strictly mathematically and more as expressive opportunities.

Repertoire choice

Select the type of piece carefully. Perform a piece that displays your skills to the greatest degree. You may like a particular piece very much, but that does not mean it is the best example for the purpose of examination. Also, your piece should be suitable or translate well for your instrument, not simply something you like or have conveniently found.

Technology

You control the technology (not vice versa). Be sure that it enhances a performance, not screens or interferes with the essential communication or focus of the performance. Double check it is working and preset.

Projection

Project your intentions through your music and demeanour. Your presentation should contain energy, commitment, enjoyment, excitement, atmosphere etc. If you look bored, you can be sure the audience will react accordingly. Similarly, don't react negatively if things don't quite go according to plan. Mistakes (often very inconsequential) may be amplified by your actions but otherwise little noticed by the examiners. Errors become far more obvious when you sigh, look anguished, temperamentally turn your music or shriek in the middle of the performance!

The performance space

Think more of a concert hall than your bedroom when preparing for performance. Practice in large spaces frequently (or at least similar to the area in which you will be examined) and adjust the volume, setting, stage presentation to suit.

Warm up

Always fully warm up before performing. Playing an instrument is as much a physical as intellectual/emotional experience. Do the right thing by your muscles, which are unlikely to fully cooperate unless prepared for performance.

The performance order

Consider performance order of repertoire carefully. Factors such as fatigue, accessibility of pieces, stylistic and expressive balance, logistical changes etc will potentially change the best sequence of pieces.

Control the total performance

It is in your best interests to control the total performance. Listen to, or record your ensemble performances and ensure that all players are working towards the best result. You will be the only one given a mark, but there is little chance of creating the best result if other performers do not complement or enhance your efforts. Always be in control and don't allow others/friends to dictate how the performance should sound. Working with an ensemble or accompanist also takes considerable practice. You have to develop a rapport and understanding beyond simply interpreting the notation.

Tune before you start

Tuning and intonation are vital components of any performance. You start at a disadvantage if, for example, your guitar is out of tune or trumpet not in tune with the piano.

OVERCOMING NERVES

No matter how you perform in practice, for some people all the effort is undermined once they are placed in an examination or concert situation. Understanding anxiety and the nervous response will help ensure it does not negatively affect you.

Prepare thoroughly

The knowledge that things are not quite right will quickly translate into a flawed performance. Concern begets concern and one fault can quickly spread errors to other facets of the performance.

Perform frequently

New situations generate anxiety while familiarity with positive experiences allows us to remain calm and anticipate problems. Therefore, perform, perform, perform, for anyone who will listen. Take every possible opportunity (for family, friends, school assemblies/functions) to make performance a familiar and knowing experience.

Practise difficult passages

Correctly practise any difficult passage, not once, but many times. The probability that you will reproduce the correct version in concert will then remain in your favour.

Remain mentally focused

Any lapse or allowing for other thoughts in your mind will potentially result in distraction and cause problems. This skill takes practice and concentration. You must have an overwhelming image of the outcome you're trying to produce and the desire not to be diverted from the end result.

Cultivate mental toughness

Make sure you know what you want and how to get it. Forget illusions such as "I shouldn't have made a mistake" and accept genuine criticism as an opportunity to improve and bring you closer to your goals. Have faith in your ability and the standards established in rehearsal. After all, it is your performance and nothing is going to stop you from doing well!

Select the level of piece carefully

The piece you select has to be of a standard that can be attained and will remain secure under the rigours of examination. Continuity of performance is vitally important. Music only makes sense over time. Performances continually disrupted by minor breaks and blemishes will not create a desirable result.

Maintain your composure

Don't approach your performance in a hurried or flustered fashion, e.g. playing the first sound on the keyboard whilst still adjusting the stool. Take your time and construct a 'frame' in which you are mentally and physically ready and the performance will be appropriately received.

Deal with stress

General fitness, rest and a healthy diet help negate the effects of stress.