

The Guitarist's Studio (BCGS Newsletter)

"Practicing Efficiently: Repertoire" by J. Scott Matejicka

Ah, precious time. We all want to be as efficient as we can in so many aspects of our lives. If your goal is to play an entire piece of music and enjoy it, then you must avoid wasting time. Through these four steps (scanning, dissecting, reassembling and performance practice), you will find yourself moving through new repertoire quickly and enjoying the process.

Scanning

During the scanning process, your goal is to get the "lay of the land." This stage is similar to sight-reading with one exception, pausing to take notes. As you read through the piece, various things may need clarification. Make notes about left and right hand fingering, string designation and left hand position. Trust your initial instinct during this stage. You can always change your mind later. Keep in mind, this time is NOT for repetitious practice. Make notes as things occur to you and then you move on. As you become more comfortable with the process, you will find yourself indicating more detailed information. For example, dynamic contouring, rubato, articulation and right hand shifts may become all a part of this preliminary read-through. Once you have reached the end of the piece, it's time to do a little triage. Locate the moments in the music that you view as most difficult or time consuming to develop. Begin your dissection of the piece there.

Dissecting

Your attitude now is to "divide and conquer." The triage approach will help you in deciding what to extract and work on first. Many musicians feel compelled to start practicing a piece of music from the first measure. This can use up a lot of valuable time. Avoid spending time with sections that are easy for you. You could be using that time to allow more challenging sections to develop. Within the musical fragment you've extracted, pinpoint precise moments that require clarification both musically and in physical gesture. Some clarifications may be quick fixes. Others may require some creative thinking and patience. Create exercises highlighting the specific movement that needs to be developed in your playing. The wonderful thing about this kind of approach is that you can easily commit the exercises to memory. You could even (and should) visit them during small mental breaks when working on other pieces. These new exercises should ultimately be added to your daily workout.

As you work on these moments, think about the character the composer is attempting to develop. You will ultimately rely on this aspect to pull together all of the elements of the gesture. In performance, remember to be in the moment and present that character. Over time, it will all fall into place.

Reassembling

As these challenging moments become more comfortable for you, insert them back into the piece. A difficult moment will be ready to reincorporate into the piece once you have achieved a relaxed execution of the gesture. Your focus should be on the moments of transition in and out of the music you've just reinserted. Starting one beat before and ending one beat after the reinserted music will be the best use of your time.

Allow yourself to stop and think just before you make the transition. Then make your move. Without mental clarity of the task at hand, the reliability of your fingers is diminished.

Once the initial transition in and out of the difficult spot has been improved, increase the amount of music on either side. Move on to smoothing out the measure, then the then phrase, then the section and finally the entire piece. As you move up from moment to measure to phrase, make sure to continue to hold on to that relaxed movement you originally cultivated.

When working on music, tempo is always on your side. If a gesture doesn't go as planned, there is either a mental or physical reason why. In either case, SLOW DOWN the tempo. Your mind needs time to think about the new information you've just incorporated. Your muscles also need time to recognize what you are asking of them.

Performance Practice

When it comes time to run the entire work, you are going to want to develop the ability to control all that you've mapped out. Through the stages of running a measure to running the entire piece, never lose sight of all the nuances of movement. Ultimately, the five or six elements of your musical gesture will converge into one idea...one character. Keep on top of the gestures in the initial stages. This will guarantee a secure execution when you finally think of them as one fluid, musical movement.

When running a piece, it is important to make mental notes of moments that do not work out as planned. Don't stop. Now that you are in performance mode, you want to promote the ability to keep going. You will find moments that need to be extracted again. These moments may need further clarification or simply more time to simmer. In cases like these, continue to allow your performance to develop in other areas of the piece. You will be sharpening your skills of mental control through these sections while the extracted moments are simmering.

Over time, you will come to discover what works best for you. You will be able to step back and have a broader view of your music and your playing in general. What we refer to as mistakes are turned into something positive. They show us aspects of our musical ability that need just a little more time or clarity. By adopting this attitude, your performance and more importantly your time spent with the guitar will be increasingly more and more enjoyable!