

On Memorization and the Guitar

By Simon Salz

" I thought I'd offer some personal ideas I have for preparing my memory for a performance. The goal is to know the piece in every part of your brain-left, right, Tactile, Visual, Aural etc, using multiple systems to experience music with every aspect of your being. If you can get through the following obstacle course then you know your music pretty well and will not have any memory problems in a concert situation.

1) Play the piece all the way through with your eyes closed or in total darkness. If a mistake is made then muscle memory has not been ingrained enough or perhaps specific spots have been learned with an insecurity in terms of movement or technique. (Remember Hubert Kappell in Toronto playing Bach in total darkness and not missing a note?)

2) Sing or hum the melody or main voice of your piece all the way through without using an instrument. If you can't remember it, then it hasn't yet been committed to your musical or aural memory. Listen repeatedly to recordings of others or yourself to ingrain this aspect of the music.

3) Sing or hum the bass-line and any counter lines of your piece. Initially play one part on your guitar while humming the other.

4) Away from your instrument notate from memory the entire piece. If your memory fails then your visual memory is incomplete. Check the score and persevere.

5) Name every chord, and it's inversion in the entire piece. Don't forget to identify suspensions, anticipations and pedal points. If you don't know what I'm talking about then a theory course is in order.

6) Know the function of every chord in the piece in terms of key center. For example I. iv V7 etc. Don't forget secondary dominants, modulations etc. Again, if you don't know these terms, study music theory. Know how each melody note relates to the underlying harmony. Is it a chord tone, passing tone-diatonic or chromatic? Also know how the melody relates to the overall key with a system like the fixed do solfeggio system.

7) Can you stop and then continue your piece from any point? Make a copy of your music. Using a scissors cut it up into individual measures. Now randomly pick pieces of paper from hat. Or have a friend periodically say "freeze" and then you must pick up from where you left off.

8) Know the form of your piece.

What's the theme? Where are the main cadences? Is there an A,B or C section? Is there a development section, transitions, recapitulation, stretto? If you don't know these terms then study form and analysis. If you always know where you are, how can you get lost?

9) Know the meaning of all the descriptive words-

like "ossia" and "subito piano". Know the meaning of every symbol on the page. fermatas, tenuto etc. Keep foreign language/english dictionaries handy or use Babelfish.com. The more the music has meaning to you ,the easier it is to remember,

10) Know the style and historical background of your piece.

Is it a dance piece? What type of feeling is it meant to invoke? Each aspect of the music that is learned is like a handle that makes the music that much more secure.

11) Practice performing your piece while a friend tries to distract you by making funny faces.

12) Play your piece while carrying on a conversation with someone.

13) Try and recreate intimidating situations:

Play for a tape recorder or video camera .Play for your mother (if she's like mine-ha!) or the best musician you know -like a pianist or conductor. Lack of self-confidence or self-esteem can undermine the best prepared performances

14) Play your piece in slow motion

-perhaps less than half of your goal tempo. This immediately by-passes muscle-memory-or "auto-pilot syndrome" and forces true musical memory to take over. I know many concert players who use this technique even on the day before a performance.

15) Play the piece through in your mind,

visualizing and audiating (internally hearing) every note and every RH and LH fingering. (Sharon Isbin among others is a proponent of this method)

If while attempting these preceding exercises you make errors then be grateful. A goof is a gift. It tells you what you need to practice. I realize its possible to skip many of the above items and still play well from memory. If you are having trouble remembering your piece though, consider which aspect of your intelligence is not being utilized. "

Simon Salz - 09/1998