

How to Never Ever Forget a Piece of Music Again

By Douglas Niedt

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A Wonderful Story

There is a wonderful but probably apocryphal story about the famous nineteenth century pianist, Leopold Godowsky, who was scheduled to perform Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the Philadelphia Orchestra. As he was boarding the train in New York, a messenger ran up to him with an envelope. In the envelope was a note from the symphony conductor saying that the program had been changed. Instead of the Beethoven concerto that had been originally scheduled, Godowsky was to play a concerto by a local Philadelphia composer, the score of which was also enclosed in the envelope. Godowsky had never played or even heard the piece before. After muttering some choice words to himself about the conductor, he boarded the train, shut himself in a private compartment, and proceeded to study the music, imagining himself playing all the notes as he heard them in his mind, memorizing the work as he studied. After a few hours the train rolled into Philadelphia and Godowsky went directly to the symphony hall and performed the concerto flawlessly from memory--without ever having played it physically on the piano before the performance!

This story has been told countless times about many famous musicians with appropriate changes of details. But it makes a strong point for a very important kind of musical practice, as important as any you may do with the guitar. It is called mental practice--practicing a piece away from the guitar hearing the sound, seeing your fingers on the fingerboard, and feeling all their movements.

Does this sound familiar?

If you have ever found yourself backstage minutes before your recital is to begin (or warming up to play for family or friends), frantically going over passages you are not certain are thoroughly memorized; if you have ever found yourself playing a piece in public and begun thinking, "Does my second or third finger start this phrase" or "How does the next section begin"; or if you have ever had memory slips or doubts of any kind about your memory, then read on--there is a cure.

"But I had it memorized perfectly at home."

In my own teaching I have found that when my students perform publicly, 95% of the mistakes they make are due to memory slips and insecurities, not to a lack of technical ability. They often tell me in lessons or after a performance, "But I had it memorized perfectly at home." This is probably true, but the problem is that the type of memory they have relied upon is very shallow. They have been working with a type of reflex or chain-reaction memory where if A happens B follows, if B happens C follows, etc. But if something goes wrong with C they get flustered and make a technical error or in bad cases forget where they are in the piece altogether. As soon as they get on a stage or in a pressured situation they suddenly become very self-conscious. They become acutely aware of everything that is happening. They suddenly see, hear, and feel things they were never aware of at home. This sudden consciousness unnerves them and they suddenly begin doubting themselves:

"Does this finger go here? Does the next chord start at this fret or at that fret?" This intense self-awareness has made them lose the reflex-like habit of their finger movements so their reflex memory has fallen apart. The chain has been broken.

The Cure

To combat this frightening event, it is necessary for the performer to know every intimate detail of his music. Mental practice is the answer. The famous piano pedagogue, Theodor Leschetizky said a student must:

"Study every composition so thoroughly that he knows every detail in it accurately, beginning at any point, and that he can visualize the whole without music--that is, see in his mind what is written, without either notes or instrument. If after a work has been studied not only the melody but the entire composition in detail cannot be seen and heard by the mind's eye and ear, it has never been thoroughly and accurately learnt. A lack of exactitude in this respect is the reason why so many people who can play quite well when they are alone are absolutely stranded before an audience. The presence of other people compels them to concentrate their attention on what they are doing, and they find they do not actually know what that is. When alone, so long as the fingers can go well worn ways unconscious of what they do, without hindrance of thought, they will be fairly safe. But if for any reason they become self-conscious, losing their instinct, they fail instantly. The learner must therefore thread his way so carefully through the network of complications which a musical composition presents, that he emerges familiar with every detail.."

How To Do It

Once again, the goal is to be able to close one's eyes and perform the piece; hearing, seeing, and feeling everything as it happens. Unfortunately, it is not easy to do. In fact it is terribly draining and will require a terrific amount of concentration. A good place to

start is with a simple two octave C major scale as fingered by Segovia. Hold the guitar in your lap and play the starting pitch. Then close your eyes and play the scale in your mind. Do not physically move any fingers. Feel your second finger pressing down the fifth string at the third fret hearing the pitch as “I” plays the C rest stroke. Feel the “m” finger pluck the fifth string rest stroke as the left hand fourth finger presses on D and the second finger lifts away from the C. And so forth. If you can successfully do a two-octave scale, try a three-octave pattern.

Then try a song that you already play well. Again, play the first note or chord on the guitar to get the starting pitch in your mind. As soon as you hit a snag, if you lose the pitch, cannot see the fingerboard in your mind, cannot feel which finger is playing (right hand or left hand), stop and look at the music. If you still cannot figure it out, pick up the guitar and physically play the passage to clear up the problem. Then work over that part mentally a few times until you have it and continue. If you hit another snag, stop and go through the same process.

Of course at first, you will have to go very slowly with quite a bit of hesitation. But eventually you will be able to "play" the piece up to tempo seeing, hearing, and feeling everything in your mind. And be certain you are honest about it! Don't gloss over an uncertainty. If your mental image is the least bit fuzzy about a pitch, seeing the fingers' shape on the fingerboard, or the feel of a chord, stop and bring it into focus. If you don't, you can be certain that when you play the piece under pressure, you will make an error in that very spot.

If you find it exceedingly difficult to get past the first measure, try going through the piece in your mind with the music in front of you but still mentally hearing it, seeing it on the fingerboard, and feeling your fingers' movements. After practicing this a few times try it without the music.

I recommend that a student begin daily mental practice as soon as a piece is playable at a moderate tempo. It will actually speed up the process of learning the piece technically as well as aiding memorization. One can often get as much done in one hour by mental practice as with two hours of physical guitar practice. Mental practice need not be done in one time block each day. It can be done a few minutes at a time almost anywhere--and when you get to the point of not needing the music or the guitar, you can even mentally practice in the shower, while waiting for a bus, while eating, etc.

You Will Be Rewarded

Keep in mind that although it is agonizing at first to do mental practice, it gets easier with time. It is well worth the effort. The mental security will leave you free to think of musical interpretation and emotive playing instead of notes. You will no longer have to worry about "what comes next." The music will literally flow from your soul as if you were composing it on the spot. You will be free to put all your energy into playing with expressiveness and musicality. It is a wonderful feeling. And not only that, but not having to worry about notes and memory will free you of a large part of your stage fright.

And the next time a conductor pulls the old "change the concerto at the last minute" routine; well, you'll be ready!