

"I've Practiced That Spot a Hundred Times

But when I play for somebody, I still mess it up."

By Douglas Niedt

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How many times have you heard or said that? If there isn't a problem with memorization, here is what the problem could be.

There are two basic types of practicing. One is the type of practicing where you don't really play through the song or even a phrase—lots of times not even a whole measure! In this type of practicing you are working on chord changes or working on a shift, for example. Or you might be trying to get rid of a buzz, get a bar chord clearer, work on a stretch, practice a fast scale passage, etc. This is where you work on a difficult spot literally a hundred times.

The other type of practice is where you play a piece from beginning to end, absolutely nonstop. You start the piece (without taking two or three cracks at it) and play to the end no matter what happens. You don't stop, you don't fix something, you don't hit a chord twice if it didn't come out clearly the first time. You pretend you are playing a formal concert, or that you're on a television show, or a live broadcast radio program.

You cannot practice the first way and expect to immediately be able to play a piece flawlessly beginning to end. You actually have to practice not stopping. It takes discipline and focus to keep going when you make a mistake and not stop to correct it. In the first type of practice, if done correctly, the hands DO learn the correct movements to execute a difficult spot flawlessly. If practice carefully, you should be able to play the spot flawlessly several times in a row. But that is an entirely different thing to your neuromuscular system from playing a whole piece through beginning to end and playing everything flawlessly. Elements of focus, concentration, and cumulative muscle fatigue can easily undo the lessons your hands learned from playing that difficult spot by itself a hundred times.

Therefore, a substantial amount of time must be devoted to playing a piece from beginning to end for your neuromuscular system to assimilate the lessons learned from the first type of practice and channel those learned responses into a finished, complete performance.

For example, say that in your stage one practice of playing a chord change over and over, you determine that to be successful, your left hand fourth finger needs to be over the 2nd string and that your left elbow needs to be winged out a bit. When you play that change over and over, those two elements fall into place—you're in a groove. But in the long haul of a complete performance, as you play, you must anticipate that spot coming and must prepare the 4th finger over the second string and wing out the left elbow ahead of time. Otherwise, that spot you practiced hundreds of times still won't work.

So you must first do the spot practice to figure out what you must do to execute the problem passage correctly. But then, you must incorporate that information into your total performance—you and your neuromuscular system must remember what to do in context. The only way to learn that, once again, is to start the piece (no false starts) and play absolutely nonstop to the end. This usually needs to be done at least once a day for thirty days prior to a performance. Plus, continue to do spot practice to reinforce and review the details of execution of problematic passages.

If you are going to give a performance of several pieces or a full-length concert, you must use the same strategy. Practice from the beginning to the end, nonstop for all the same reasons. Mental and muscular fatigue can become an issue in a full concert. The only way to get around it (or I should say in shape for it) is to rehearse the ENTIRE program over and over as a whole—and I can't emphasize or repeat the word enough—nonstop.