

PERFORMING AT YOUR BEST

Music Magazine; By Michael Colgrass

What's the best way for a musician to prepare for performance? How do we learn fastest and memorize best? Each performer is unique and we have no pat answers to these questions, but I have found that the most solid performers not only hear and feel the music deeply, they also use imagery to improve their performance. For example, string players strive to develop a big tone, but simply practicing longer and louder will only fatigue the fingers. Violist Emanuel Vardi is known for the gigantic size and beauty of his tone, even though he uses a small viola. I once asked him how he accomplished this richness of sound and he told me he had spent long periods of time practicing while looking at mountains and projecting his sound to the uppermost peaks. He would actually see the sound floating to the mountain tops. His fingers instinctively made all the adjustments necessary to accommodate this image, and when he got to the concert hall he could project effortlessly to the last row of the balcony.

French Horn player Joseph Eger solved the age-old problem of "cracking" on an entrance by making a visual image of a target and imagining the note he was about to play as the bull's eye. Not only did he avoid cracking, but he improved his intonation as well, because he hit the note dead center. Mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani used imagery to guarantee a high level of performance. I once asked her how she managed to sing at her highest standard when performing with an inferior orchestra, which all great performers are occasionally obligated to do. "Oh, that's easy, she said, "I just imagine the ideal orchestra and conductor for the music I'm singing. If it's Mahler, I see Karajan on the podium and hear the Berlin Philharmonic."

I've used mental pictures to get me past a snag in composing. Sometimes when I'm stuck and can't seem to figure out what should come next in a piece I'm writing, I imagine the performers on stage playing my finished composition and listen to them play right through the obstacle. If there's a conductor, I'll imagine his physical gestures at that critical juncture, which will often show me what the most natural next step should be for the music.

Memorizing concertos is mandatory for soloists, and those who do it best usually learn to visualize the music. Pianist Lorin Hollander can see in his mind's eye the notes of a piece he's learned, almost as if the music were on a music stand in front of him. He can also sing the music from memory (not like an opera star perhaps but in his own rough voice), and he has both an emotional memory of the music and touch memory of the piano keys for each bar of the composition. I call this combined seeing-hearing-feeling of the music "triple-channel learning," and it's almost infallible for memorization. When I asked Hollander if he'd ever had a memory slip, he laughed and brushed the thought away with his hand and said, "Never!"

Although the visual sense is dormant in many musicians, it can be developed with practice. I recently encountered a talented but ill-trained young pianist from a major conservatory who complained that her arms felt increasingly heavy and constricted when performing. She played a concerto movement for me and, although she played well, it seemed to be hard work for her. In one or two of the hardest passages her fingers seemed to freeze up and the notes weren't clean. I wanted her to experience the feeling of playing effortlessly, so I suggested she play the music again but, this time, not touch the keys. So she played "on the air," so to speak, but stopped after three or four seconds, then resumed, stopped again, looked puzzled and said, "I can't remember it." I asked her to sing the music and she said she couldn't, that she'd "never

been asked to do that." When I asked if she could see the music in her head, she looked at me blankly.

Her problem was not that uncommon among musicians. Unlike Hollander, she had learned her music on only one channel, so to speak - the kinesthetic, or feeling, channel. She had to touch the keys to remember the music. Therefore, when she got nervous she experienced "interference" on the only channel on which she knew the piece, and fighting this "flak" naturally fatigued her. It was only a matter of time before she would have a breakdown in performance, and perhaps a nervous breakdown as well. I showed her a simple exercise for memorizing visually: when learning a new piece don't touch the piano; instead, tape the music up on the wall and visualize it bar by bar, then turning away from the printed page and singing it off the remembered image on her mental screen. This seeing and hearing of the notes in her mind gave her not only a richer understanding of the music, but also provided her with two reserve memory channels to switch into - the visual and auditory - if she became tired in performances. In one sitting she was able to expand her learning in this way and her arms stopped bothering her.

In my experience, the majority of performers' so-called stage fright is really improper learning of the music and lack of preparation. Somewhere deep inside they know they are not ready and their body starts going haywire. Ironically, many musicians try to fight off these warnings of impending danger, which can be a misunderstanding of how the human mind works. I think everything in a person is there to help him or her. If an inner voice (and often it is a voice) says: "You don't have the energy to get through this concerto," perhaps it's telling you that you need more rest or exercise, or more practice on your octaves. I find that performers who take these "inner judges" seriously and follow their recommendations benefit musically and their confidence grows. As one youngster put it, "I consider myself lucky to get free advice from the friend who knows me best - myself!"

An exercise all performers love is the Circle of Excellence. You simply mark a circle on the floor and step into it. The idea is, inside the Circle is your own personal excellence, what makes you unique. If even for a split second you feel less than your best, you step out of the Circle, quickly do what's necessary to regain your optimal state, and step back in again. The Circle is like an impenetrable force-field made of your own energy. You can visualize the Circle anywhere you need it - on stage, in the practice room, at auditions - and it's always with you because you carry it in your head. Performers claim they feel an almost electrical power in their Circle of Excellence, a feeling very like their peak performance state.

I've learned many of these techniques from performers. I'm inspired by musicians who use their minds in new and imaginative ways. I find such people are productive not only artistically, but they also enjoy their work and get more out of life. They seem to be able to create choices for themselves and they develop a broader view, not just of music but of their place in society and their function as human beings. To me, that's being prepared in the highest sense of the word, and perhaps for the highest kind of performance.