Memorizing Music: Beyond Brute Force and Repetition

Mark Shelton

Back in the seventh grade, my band director explained that memorizing our solo pieces for the upcoming festival was required. Performing with the sheet music would result in a lower rating from the judge. Determined to avoid the penalty, I began my foray into storing the strains of "She'll Be Flammin' 'Round The Mountain" into the hippocampus region of my junior high brain.

I was not a stranger to memorizing. Elementary school had included many assignments to learn poetry and prose for recitation in class and of course, the multiplication tables were stored in my gray matter by the fifth grade.

With these assignments came very little in the way of instruction on how to memorize. I just memorized with some sort of brute force and repetition.

That was the basic method that I employed for memorizing the aforementioned snare drum solo as well as several seasons of marching band music. (The tenor drum part to a high school cadence is forever etched in my limbic area.)

Studying a piece of music to the point that it is firmly embedded in your brain allows a performer to concentrate on things other than which string should be played next or if the upcoming phrase begins with a triplet. Without your head in the page, you can think more about subtle dynamic shadings or locking in your part with the rhythm guitar or (gasp) connecting with your audience. Having the freedom to look at your instrument instead of the paper can also boost your accuracy in a thorny passage.

In certain situations, a piece of music can be so lengthy and complex that using sheet music is necessary, but memorizing just certain portions can be beneficial. Many times in orchestral work, I have memorized a small section so that I could look away from the chart and focus on striking the correct bars on the xylophone or glockenspiel.

There are several methods that you can employ to memorize music and check your memory in order to perform confidently without being tied to the music stand.

That "brute force / repetition method" from my early years still works and is probably the primary memorization technique used by most of us. It functions best when the repetitions are accurate and consistent. Keep in mind that incorrect notes and rhythms are learned along with the right ones. Endeavor to implant only the information that you want to come out in the performance. In addition to hearing the music and seeing your hands playing, you are also developing muscle memory as you make those repetitions. Your hands and fingers are memorizing their movements. (Actually it is your brain that's storing those gestures.) Also known as kinesthetic memory, this type of retention has

come to my rescue many times when my hands just kept moving and found their way to the right notes as I succumbed to a momentary brain fog.

Work at memorizing in small chunks such as a four bar phrase or the B section of a fiddle tune or a single verse from a song. As you memorize the pitches and rhythms, try to also learn the dynamics, phrasing, and other nuances.

Analyzing the theory and form of the music can help in the memorization process. Does the tune remain in the same key? Are there accidentals in the melody? Is the second section of the melody the same as the first but at a different pitch level? Do the chord changes occur in a common progression? Is this piece in binary (fiddle tune) form or 32 bar song form? Gaining an understanding of how the music is assembled provides certain frameworks and boundaries that assist your memorization.

Once you can play the selection in a confident fashion, make an accurate recording and start listening. Put it on a loop or repeat mode and let it soak into your brain so that you have a definitive aural example locked in your mind. This process really helps me when I am trying to memorize the form of a song.

Try saying the note names in order in the correct rhythm. You will probably need to slow the tempo down a bit. You can do the same thing with the chord changes.

You can memorize away from your instrument. This forces you to imagine your instrument and see your hands playing the correct notes on that instrument. This gives your brain a workout AND you can get in some valuable memory training while waiting in line at the donut shop.

Study the printed score and memorize how the music looks on the paper. Look away and picture the notation in your mind. Attempt to get a mental image of each measure. You can reinforce (and test) this notation exercise by writing the music from memory. This can further ingrain the music and point up some foggy areas that require more study. These exercises can be valuable when memorizing form or chords.

In practice sessions, we often start playing in musically convenient places such as the beginning of a phrase or the start of a chorus. Our memory slips frequently occur between those convenient points. During a practice session, test your brain by skipping around to various sections and starting to play (from memory) in odd places.

In my grad school days, I read about the method of memorizing from the end back to the beginning. (My original source for this memory technique has ironically slipped from my memory!) The “end to the beginning system” has become a favorite of mine and I have shared it with many students. Instead of memorizing the opening section first and then adding subsequent sections, begin memorizing the final section of the material. After that is learned, move to the preceding section and add that to your memory. Continue in this direction memorizing segments until you reach the beginning. Always review the portions memorized in earlier sessions. In this way, the ending material is

known the best since it was memorized first and reviewed the most. As you play from the start to the finish, you know the material increasingly better as you progress through the composition. This works great. You can play with greater confidence the further you play into the piece.

Use the metronome to check your ability to recall and play at various tempos. You may find your memory tested a bit when that ballad tempo is increased dramatically or the lightning fast fiddle tune is taken at half speed.

When you feel that the memorized material is strongly imprinted in your noggin, strive to play through the music several times without interruption. Within seconds of sounding the last notes, dive back into the beginning. As the first performance of a solo piece approaches, I will sometimes try to play the selection from memory around 15-20 times.

A major trepidation with playing from memory is the fear of forgetting during performance and never recovering. That fear breeds lack of confidence. Bolster your confidence by building a system of memory backups. The techniques in this article (and others you may encounter) are those reinforcements. These “layers of learning” come in handy. When one layer fails, there are others ready to pick up the slack. Also, actively work on recovery. While practicing, use those momentary mental slips to deftly get back on track, maintain composure, and continue with assurance.

Investing practice time in a multipronged strategy to store music “between your ears” will foster your ability to perform from memory with greater confidence.

Mark Shelton Productions Percussion For Worship

Previously published in *Worship Musician!* www.christianmusician.com

and Dulcimer Players News