The 10,000-Hour Threshold: Interviews with Successful Percussionists

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THE 10,000-HOUR THRESHOLD:  
INTERVIEWS WITH SUCCESSFUL PERCUSSIONISTS 

VOLUME ONE 

__________________________________________________________

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in the College of Fine Arts at the University of Kentucky.

By 
Colin Jeffrey Hill 

Lexington, Kentucky 

Director: James B. Campbell, Professor of Music 

Lexington, Kentucky 

2013 

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE 10,000-HOUR THRESHOLD: INTERVIEWS WITH SUCCESSFUL PERCUSSIONISTS

Musicians are universally reliant on practice to improve and perfect their craft and there is substantial evidence that suggests mastery can only be achieved after 10,000 hours of practice early in life. This dissertation explores the validity of this theory as it pertains to master percussionists and examines their discoveries and recommendations as to how those 10,000 hours should best be spent. Research sources include selected published literature and personal interviews with thirty-six percussionists, conducted between 2010-2013. The research is summarized in the following six sections: the 10,000-hour threshold; planning a practice session; warming up; learning new music; problem spots; and performance preparation. The primary goal of this dissertation is to detail the specific practice methods currently implemented by many of today’s most successful percussionists. This research should reveal the various ways success can be achieved in the practice room and help aspiring and accomplished professionals alike explore and integrate new practice methods and philosophies into their own careers and the careers of their students.

KEYWORDS: Percussion, Practice, Performance, Methods, 10,000 Hours.

__________________________
Colin Hill
Student

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September 20, 2013
Date
THE 10,000-HOUR THRESHOLD:
INTERVIEWS WITH SUCCESSFUL PERCUSSIONISTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank the thirty-six percussionists who participated in this dissertation. These interviews served as the primary research for my dissertation and their willingness to participate made my research possible. Their remarkable proficiency and wisdom provided incredible insight into the practice habits of successful percussionists and the pursuit of mastery.

I would like to thank my wife, Mallory, for her continuous love and encouragement. At times, completing this dissertation was probably harder on her than it was on me, and I am incredibly grateful for her unwavering patience and support. In addition, Mallory has financially supported our family the past five years, allowing me to pursue and complete two graduate degrees. Without her hard work and sacrifice, this dissertation truly would not have been possible. I am so lucky to have such a smart and beautiful wife who is supportive of everything I do. She is the most important person in my life and I am proud that we completed this degree together.

I would also like to thank my professor and mentor James Campbell. He has taught me so much about what it means to be a great educator, colleague, and friend. It is incredible how much he genuinely cares for his students and I am forever grateful to have had the opportunity to study with him. He has undoubtedly made me a better musician and teacher, but more importantly a better person, husband, and father. His impact on my life has been immeasurable and goes far beyond my education in percussion.
Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Marlene and Todd. Everything I have been able to achieve to this point in my life is because of them. I feel so fortunate to have been raised in a household that emphasized such strong family values. They taught my sister and I the importance of compassion, education, hard work, and humility, all by example. My parents are remarkable people whose success in both their careers and personal lives is something I will always strive to achieve. I hope that someday my children will feel as fortunate and privileged as I, when reflecting on their childhood experiences and family relationships.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Throughout the history of music, there have emerged masterful musicians. Every era, culture, and genre of music has given rise to virtuosos who left an indelible mark in their field. And although there are various forms of music mastery and the judge of mastery is subjectively evaluated by particular cultural aesthetics, in all cases, a master is one who achieves at a level beyond their peers. Some virtuosos become legendary and are widely studied for generations, while others manage little notoriety outside their field of expertise.

Attainment of mastery in music, just as it is in most fields of endeavor, is typically attributed to two root sources. Some argue that mastery is predominantly a consequence of innate talent. Advocates of this argument believe that achievement of true virtuosity is only possible to those born with extraordinary physical and mental characteristics that cannot otherwise be learned or developed.

On the other side of that debate are those who believe mastery is only possible as a result of a relentless drive to achieve, manifested by countless hours of hard work and determination.

The music world is continuously amazed and inspired by the incredible ability and innovation displayed by the world’s top percussionists. But how have these individuals
achieved such mastery? Were they each born with an extraordinary level of innate talent or has their achievement primarily been a result of tenacious practice and perseverance? While there must be compelling arguments supporting both schools of thought, perhaps all would agree that if one of these is the primary influence, the other is a significant counterpart.

This dissertation is not an investigation into that debate, but simply a study of practice habits, which certainly falls into the category of hard work and determination. For anyone pursuing mastery in his or her field of choice, there is obviously nothing they can do about their innate talent. In the future, there may come a time when it might be manipulated, but until then, talent is nature’s roll of the dice; and for those among the living, that die is cast. So the most that anyone can do to advance their own pursuit of mastery is to master hard work and determination.

Calvin Coolidge, for one, weighed in on this side, and while he was talking more about mankind’s collective mastery than as individuals, his words bear repeating:

_Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan ‘press on’ has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race._

In the field of music, all performers, from beginners to world-renowned, share the common path of devotion to practice. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines practice

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as “to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient.”² Musicians, like so many other professionals, rely on practice to perfect their skills and progress within their craft. While practice would not seem to be coupled with innate talent, the methods one chooses from among the countless options available to practice and learn music is certainly a reflection of their individuality, if not innate talent. As a result, the study of practice methods may provide some insight into both origins of mastery.

While a variety of practice methods and philosophies are commonly documented in method books and periodicals, there are very few sources available that compare outcomes between the multiplicity of practice methods and philosophies. Further, there are no known sources that compare the practice methods, philosophies, and personal habits of today’s most successful percussionists. Doing so would help connect theory with practice by identifying the methods and philosophies currently implemented and which, if any of them, seem to be shared by a majority of those most successful in the field. How do the current masters practice? How much time do they dedicate to practice? What practice habits and methods do they credit most for their success? I decided that asking the masters themselves was the best way to try to answer these questions.

Gratefully, over the last three years I’ve had the opportunity to interview thirty-six highly successful percussionists who are widely hailed as among the best performers and educators in their field. I chose musicians who were at various stages of their careers and with diverse areas of expertise, but who had all achieved mastery on their instrument. The

group ranged from seasoned orchestral players to in-demand soloists, and from young virtuosos to legendary hall-of-famers. By including a wide range of classical percussionists, I hoped to reveal those practice methods and philosophies shared by all great percussionists.

The thirty-six percussionists interviewed are listed below, in alphabetical order:

1. Joakim Anterot - Professor of Percussion at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, percussionist with the Royal Stockholm Opera, and percussionist with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra.
2. Jason Baker - Director of Percussion Studies and Assistant Professor of Music at Mississippi State University, Principal Timpanist of the Tupelo Symphony Orchestra, and Principal Percussionist of the Starkville Symphony Orchestra.
3. Kevin Bobo - Associate Percussion Professor at the Indiana University.
4. Michael Burritt - Professor of Percussion and Head of the Department at the Eastman School of Music.
5. Thomas Burritt - Associate Professor of Music at the University of Texas at Austin.
6. James Campbell - Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Kentucky, Principal Percussionist of the Lexington Philharmonic, past President of the Percussive Arts Society, DCI Hall of Fame, and BOA Hall of Fame.
7. Omar Carmenates – Assistant Professor of Percussion at Furman University, member of the Nief-Norf chamber ensemble, and Percussion Arranger for the Sprit of Atlanta Drum & Bugle Corps.
8. Gary Cook - Retired Professor Emeritus and Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Arizona, retired Timpanist and Principal Percussionist with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra, and past President of the Percussive Arts Society.
9. Christopher Deane - Associate Professor in Percussion at the University of North Texas and retired Principal Timpanist of the Greensboro Symphony.
10. Bret Dietz - Associate Professor of Percussion at the Louisiana State University School of Music.
11. Matthew Duvall - Percussionist with Eighth Blackbird chamber ensemble.
12. I-Jen Fang - Percussion faculty at the McIntire Department of Music at the University of Virginia and Principal Timpanist and Percussionist of the
Charlottesville Symphony Orchestra.

13. Mark Ford - Coordinator of Percussion Activities at the University of North Texas and past President of the Percussive Arts Society.

14. Andy Harnsberger - Assistant Professor of Music and Percussion Coordinator at Lee University.

15. Anders Holdar - Co-founder of world-renowned Kroumata Percussion Ensemble and Professor of Percussion at the University College of Music Education in Stockholm.

16. John Lane - Director of Percussion Studies and Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University.

17. Julie Licata - Assistant Professor of Music at the State University of New York College at Oneonta.

18. Frederic Macarez - Principal Timpanist of the Orchestre de Paris and Director of the Percussion Studies at the Conservatoire National de Région de Paris.

19. Payton MacDonald - Associate Professor of Music at William Paterson University and founding member of Alarm Will Sound and Super Marimba.

20. Brian Mason - Associate Professor of Percussion at Morehead State University and Percussionist with the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra.

21. William Moersch - Chair of the Percussion Division at the University of Illinois, Principal Timpanist/Percussionist of Sinfonia da Camera, and Artistic Director of New Music Marimba.

22. Jason Nicholson - Assistant Professor of Percussion at Utah State University.

23. Brian Nozny - percussion faculty at Troy University.

24. John Parks - Associate Professor of Percussion at Florida State University and faculty member at the Eastern Music Festival

25. Paul Rennick - Percussion faculty at the University of North Texas and Percussion Caption Head of the Santa Clara Vanguard Drum & Bugle Corps.

26. Emil Richards - Long-time studio musician and freelance percussionist and member of the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame.

27. Steven Schick - Professor of Music at the University of California and Consulting Artist in Percussion at the Manhattan School of Music.

28. Robert Schietroma - Retired Regents professor at the University of North Texas and past President of the Percussive Arts Society.

29. Josh Smith - Assistant Professor of Music at Bethel College.

30. Gordon Stout - Professor of Percussion at Ithaca College and member of the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame.

31. John Tafoya - Chairman of the Percussion Department and Professor of Percussion at Indiana University and retired timpanist of the National Symphony Orchestra.

32. Blake Tyson - Associate Professor of Percussion at the University of Central
Arkansas.

33. Michael Udow - Retired Professor Emeritus of Percussion at University of Michigan and retired Principal Percussionist of the Santa Fe Opera.

34. Ben Wahlund - Director of Percussion at Naperville Central High School and Adjunct Faculty at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

35. Eric Willie - Assistant Professor of Percussion at Tennessee Tech University and member of the Nief-Norf chamber ensemble.

36. Brian Zator - Director of Percussion at Texas A&M University - Commerce and Principal Timpanist and Percussionist with the Northeast Texas Symphony.

Each percussionist was asked ten questions about their personal practice habits. These questions were formulated to explore all aspects of the practice process including warming up, learning new music, practicing problem spots, referencing existing recordings, memorization, self-critiquing, performance preparation, and the amount of time spent practicing during different periods of their life.

The ten questions asked are listed below:

1. If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

2. How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

3. When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

4. When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

5. How do you practice problem spots?

6. How often do you record yourself?

7. Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?
8. Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

9. How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

10. Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

Initially, I planned to conduct these interviews via email, but after receiving very few initial responses, it was apparent that ‘in person’ interviews would be necessary. The first few were conducted at times and places of their choosing, but reaching out to all of them that way would have required a cost prohibitive amount of travel. So I had to find a more creative means to sit with each of them.

The Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) provided the ideal venue. PASIC is the largest and most widely attended percussion event in the world and is held annually in a U.S. city. Over the course of the past three conferences, I have been able to interview most of my desired subjects while they were attending the conference. I used a digital recorder to capture the interviews, which on average took about thirty minutes. Later I transcribed each of the thirty-six interviews to written form.

Throughout this process, I have come to appreciate several advantages of face-to-face interviews compared to email. First, I was able to immediately ask clarifying questions if an interviewee’s answer was unclear, had drifted off topic, or had touched on a related
subject of interest. Doing that unearthed a great deal of subtle material that helped enrich their explanations. Second, I found that people naturally elaborate much more when speaking face-to-face, compared to writing. Third, and most importantly, people were much more enthusiastic about participating in this study when our interactions were to be face-to-face, rather than email. And while it took mutual persistence to complete every interview, eventually the targeted artists did participate.

Naturally, each of the individuals interviewed possess different personalities, learning styles, innate talents, and musical backgrounds, and it was almost immediately apparent that there would be no single practice method or philosophy that proved universally successful. Further, the influence of the various instruments, musical styles, and mentors inherently favor some methods and philosophies over others. For those reasons and others, each individual’s practice habits turn out to be as distinctive as their playing style. Not only did there seem to be an unlimited number of methods and philosophies, but also many of their habits and preferences were in direct contradiction with each other’s. However, one commonality found among all thirty-six interviewees was an extreme devotion of both time and thought to practice. This discovery is consistent with other studies done on the topic of high achievement, which will be discussed in chapter two. These studies are not limited to music or to any specific field, but were collected under the umbrella topic of *success*.

As is argued in chapter two, in order to be a successful percussionist, one must commit to significant practice time. Statistics strongly indicate that there is no substitute for putting
in at least 10,000 hours of practice early in life. However, *how* these hours should be best spent is much less certain.

The goal of this dissertation is to create a resource that documents how these thirty-six percussionists spent their 10,000 hours in the practice room. The wide variety of practice methods and philosophies of these current masters should be very useful to players, helping them acquire methods and techniques that may otherwise take a lifetime to develop or discover.

Due to the sheer number of methods presented in this document, I have included a brief survey at the end of each chapter to help guide the reader in choosing the methods that are most compatible with their needs and learning style. While the survey recommends particular methods based on the reader’s ‘practice personality,’ all of these methods and philosophies have led to successful careers and should be explored. Developing an ideal practice method is a highly personalized process that requires years of fine-tuning. Every individual learns and functions differently so finding that unique combination of methods and philosophies that is ideal for an individual may take years. One may feel certain that the system they currently utilize is ideal, but until other preferred, proven techniques are investigated, that belief is almost certainly self-limiting.

The magnitude of the data collected from the thirty-six interviews was simply too much to incorporate in narrative form so I have included the complete transcriptions of all thirty-six interviews in a second volume. If the reader finds they are continuously
intrigued by a particular individual’s practice methods and philosophies, they are strongly encourage to take the time to read that individual’s entire interview.

This dissertation accurately documents how the world’s most successful percussionists practice. The methods and philosophies presented are not theoretical suggestions from a single author’s perspective. They are the proven practice systems of true masters. This document will expose readers to the endless possibilities in the practice room, aiding in the discovery of methods that are most effective for themselves, as well as their students.

Chapter 2 examines the number of hours it takes to master a musical instrument, according to statistics. As mentioned, some believe that mastery is mostly attributable to innate talent, while others say it can only be achieved through hard work and determination. Malcolm Gladwell’s research indicates that mastery is only achieved after 10,000 hours of practice. Of the thirty-six people interviewed, 100% of them practiced obsessively at one (or more) stage(s) of their lives. And although the interviewees experienced a wide variety of initial starting ages, quality of instruction, and innate talent, the one consistent characteristic in all cases was hard work and determination in the practice room. The data collected from the musicians interviewed is summarized in this chapter and compared with Gladwell’s theory.

Chapter 3 of this thesis focuses on the importance of planning practice sessions. For nearly all musicians, practice time is a very scarce commodity. The ongoing balancing act between music, school, work, and personal relationships is very challenging for most.
It seems that all musicians have enjoyed periods in their lives when they were able to dedicate considerable time to mastering their instrument, but this luxury usually vanishes long before they are ready. The ability to take full advantage of any available practice time is an essential skill that must be developed and perfected. Every musician has experienced practice sessions that were unproductive and disconnected. Through thoughtful and tactical planning, both efficiency and productivity can be maximized in each and every practice session. There are many different ways to plan a practice session and the method that works best depends on the goals and personal learning styles of each individual.

*Chapter 4* discusses warming up. Every musician understands the importance of injury prevention through proper warm-ups, but many struggle to consistently commit their scarce time to this portion of the practice activity. Many of the musicians interviewed shared clever ways to warm up without sacrificing productivity. While warm-ups are usually associated with warming up the body, many of the percussionists interviewed use this time to improve particular techniques and fundamentals as well as develop mental focus. This chapter discusses how musicians approach warming-up and describes their various routines.

*Chapter 5* covers the different methods used to learn new music. There are many published resources on this topic, but these interviews highlighted the methods most commonly used among successful percussionists and exposed new methods that were truly unique. Some methods emphasize the importance of mental visualization while
others stress the need for kinesthetic repetition. There are also a wide variety of ideas concerning the order in which a piece should be learned. The popular debate of listening to pre-existing recordings when learning a new piece is also explored. With the growing presence of YouTube as a backdrop, the responses were very contrasting and highly opinionated. This chapter also explores the intangible process of memorization, sharing the amazing techniques of individuals who seem to memorize music effortlessly, as well as those who inherently struggle with it. There are also those who prefer not to memorize their music and their rationale and perceived advantages are explored and discussed. For the majority of performers who do memorize, this chapter also examines how the masters try to avoid memory slips on stage.

Chapter 6 investigates methods used to work on problem spots. The first step to correcting a problem spot is to accurately identify the precise moment of difficulty, which is not always as easy as it sounds. Once this has been established, there are numerous methods and philosophies that can be used to rectify the problem. Some musicians choose to focus on mental aspects, while others rely purely on kinesthetic repetition. Although different types of problems certainly require different approaches, the variety of methods used by those interviewed was staggering.

Chapter 7 discusses how to best prepare for performances. While most believe that mastery is achieved in the practice room, all understand that the pursuit of mastery can quickly turn to misery on stage. Anxiety stems from the mental restrictions individuals place on themselves, as well as deficiencies in the mindset needed to execute a successful
performance. And while some performance challenges are related to environment, more often they seem to be associated with inner conflicts between success and failure. This chapter compares various methods used to prepare for a performance. This includes the change in practice habits the weeks and days leading up to a performance, performance day rituals and routines, and other mental and physical preparations used by successful musicians to counteract the debilitating affect of performance anxiety. Some routines and rituals are highly idiosyncratic, while others purposely avoid diverging from normal routines. Performance anxiety is something all musicians deal with on a regular basis. This chapter discusses the multitude of mental and physical methods that can be used to help reduce these incapacitating effects.
CHAPTER 2: The 10,000-Hour Threshold

When looking at the data collected from the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, one trend emerged with regard to practice hours. Question nine asked each percussionist to give their best estimate as to the number of hours per day they spent practicing during various time periods of their lives, from middle school to the present time. Every percussionist interviewed exhibited surprisingly similar habits with regard to practice hours over the course of their career, beginning with the age they first learned to play percussion.

In all thirty-six cases, the numbers were amazingly high, and in a few cases, the numbers were astonishing. The data collected from this question is consistent with other studies that have been done on the topic of high achievement. These studies are not limited to music, or to any specific field but were collected under the umbrella topic of success. As is evident from the biographies of all of the percussionists interviewed, all thirty-six have been highly successful in their field.

~ 10,000 Hours ~

Success is typically attributed to the combination of both talent and hard work. In Malcolm Gladwell’s book, The Outliers, Gladwell studied the practice trends of highly successful people. The closer he studied the habits of the most gifted and successful, “the
smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger the role preparation seems to play.”

This premise is also supported by a series of studies done in the early 1990’s by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson and two of his colleagues, Ralf Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Römer. Ericsson’s team studied the violinists at the Music Academy in West Berlin (Hochschule der Kuenste), which had an “international reputation for its training program for violinists.” With the help of the Academy’s professors, all of the violinists were divided into three groups. The first group was comprised of the Academy’s “best violinists.” According to the professors, these students were most likely to become world-class soloists. The second group was made up of the “good violinists,” and the third group, titled “music teachers,” consisted of violinists from the music education department of the academy. This department had “lower admission standards,” and the level of playing was significantly lower. Ericsson and his team then asked each player to “estimate how many hours per week they had practiced alone with the violin for each year since they had started to practice.”

The violinists in all three groups started playing at approximately the same age, five years old and during the first few years of playing, the practice hours between the three groups were very similar, about two or three hours per week. When the students got to be around age eight, a difference began to emerge. The group of students who would eventually

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become the ‘best violinists’ started practicing much more than everyone else: six hours a week by age nine, eight hours a week by age twelve, sixteen hours a week by age fourteen, and this trend continued until they reached the age of twenty, at which time they were putting in thirty hours per week. When all of the hours were added up for each player, the ‘best violinists’ had on average totaled 10,000 hours by the age of twenty, while the ‘good violinists’ averaged 8,000 hours and the ‘music teachers’ averaged 4,000 hours by this same age.

Ericsson and his colleagues conducted a similar study, this time comparing the practice hours of amateur pianists with professional pianists. The average age of all the subjects was 24.3 years and the professional pianists were trained at the Music Academy in West Berlin while the amateur pianists were “recruited through newspaper and campus ads.” The results (See Figure 4) were very similar to the study with the violinists. When the total hours were analyzed for this data, the results were again remarkably similar to the violinists’ data. The amateurs on average totaled 2,000 hours by age twenty and the professionals, like the violinists, reached 10,000 hours by approximately age twenty.

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Figure 1: Ericsson’s graph of the average practice hours/week for expert and amateur pianists.⁶

~ Prodigies ~

Probably the most interesting finding of Ericsson’s studies was that among violinists and pianists, there were no ‘naturals,’ as defined by “musicians who floated effortlessly to the top while practicing a fraction of the time their peers did.” Similarly, Ericsson and his colleagues didn’t find any ‘grinds,’ “people who worked harder than everyone else yet just didn’t have what it takes to break the top ranks.”⁷

This finding is intriguing, as the existence of ‘natural talent’ seems so obviously apparent in child prodigies. To explore this idea further, consider the most famous child prodigy in music history, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Psychologist Michael Howe believes that Mozart was really no different than the violinists and pianists in Ericsson’s study. While Mozart started composing music at the age of six and was widely considered a childhood genius, Howe argues that these claims are exaggerated. In his book, *Genius Explained*, Howe points out that “by the standards of mature composers, Mozart’s early works are not outstanding. The earliest pieces were all probably written down by his father, and perhaps improved in the process.” Further, Howe claims that Mozart’s first seven concertos for piano and orchestra were “largely arrangements of works by other composers.” Howe believes that Mozart’s first true masterwork, containing purely original music, was “No. 9, K. 271, [which] was not composed until he was twenty-one: by that time Mozart had already been composing concertos for ten years.” Based on this argument, Gladwell is convinced that not even prodigies are exempt from putting in the necessary practice hours. “Even Mozart - the greatest musical prodigy of all time - couldn’t hit his stride until he had his 10,000 hours,” said Gladwell. “The thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That’s it.”

George Leonard, in his book titled *Mastery*, states that:

> [People] tend to assume that [mastery] requires a special ticket available only to those born with exceptional abilities. But mastery isn’t reserved for the super talented or even for those who are fortunate enough to have

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gotten an early start. It’s available to anyone who is willing to get on the path and stay on it - regardless of age, sex, or previous experience.”

The correlation between achieving musical success and practicing 10,000 hours doesn’t only apply to music. The benchmark of 10,000 hours has been a consistent trend among highly successful people in all fields. Neurologist Daniel Levitin has done extensive research on the habits of ‘world-class experts.’ In his book, This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession, he too revealed a reoccurring pattern of 10,000 hours.

The emerging picture from such studies is that 10,000 hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert - in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. Of course, this doesn’t address why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do. But no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery.

~ Percussionists Interviewed ~

So how do the percussionists interviewed compare? Does the 10,000 hours rule seem to apply to this field of study as well? To answer this question, some other details regarding their background and specific habits must be explored.

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11 Daniel J. Levitin, This is your brain on music: the science of a human Obsession, (New York, NY: Dutton, 2006), 197.
The average starting age of the percussionists interviewed was 9.4 years old. This is much older than the average starting age of the violinists in Ericsson’s study, who on average started at age five. This may be explained by the fact that for many of the percussionists interviewed, percussion was their second instrument. Most started on piano or a string instrument in elementary school and switched to percussion in middle school.

Data was not collected for the percussionists interviewed between the ages of nine and eleven because according to Ericsson’s studies, during the first three years of study, “everyone practiced roughly the same amount, about two or three hours a week.” It wasn’t until the fourth year of study that “real differences started to emerge.”

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Figure 2: The graph above shows the practice hours of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of 12-14.

While most of the percussionists interviewed practiced between zero and three hours per day, at this stage of their early lives, Paul Rennick is the obvious outlier at six hours per day. The average practice time for the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of twelve and fourteen was 1.6 hours of practice per day.
Figure 3: The graph above shows the practice hours of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of 15-18.

The outliers in the group include Paul Rennick, Gary Cook, and Joakim Anterot, who practiced an average of six, seven, and seven hours per day respectively. The average of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed during this age, fifteen to eighteen, was 2.3 hours of practice per day.
The average daily practice time of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed was 4.8 hours per day at this age, nineteen to twenty-two. According to Ericsson, Levitin, and Gladwell, the thirty-six ‘successful’ percussionists interviewed should have reached a total of 10,000 by around the age of twenty. To find the average sum of the percussionists interviewed, a few things must be assumed. As previously mentioned, the percussionists interviewed were not asked how many hours per day they practiced during the first three years of study because according Ericsson, during this time, “everyone practiced roughly...
the same amount, about two or three hours a week.” Therefore, for this study it was assumed that the percussionists interviewed averaged 2.5 hours per week, which equates to about twenty minutes per day, for their first three years of study, ages nine to eleven.

![Average Hours Per Day (Ages 9-22)](image)

Figure 5: The graph above shows the average practice hours per day of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of 9-11.

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While each person gave their best guess as to the average number of hours they practiced per day, it would be unreasonable to assume each percussionist practiced 365 days per year, as a result of vacation, illness, etc. For this reason, it will be assumed that each player practiced six days per week, which equates to 313 total days of practice annually.

**Figure 6:** The graph above shows the average practice hours per year of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of 9-22, taking into account this assumption.
Based on the annual practice hours, the total accumulated practice up to the age of twenty-two can be graphed, which will show if and when the percussionists reached 10,000 hours.

![Graph showing total accumulated practice hours vs age]

**Figure 7**: The graph above shows, on average, the total accumulated practice hours of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed between the ages of 9-22.

This graph shows that the percussionists interviewed, on average, achieved 10,000 total hours of practice by the age of 21.5 years old. As expected, this is a little later than the
violinists and pianists in Ericsson’s study due to the fact that they started playing their instrument, on average, four years later.

~ Environmental Limitations ~

One very interesting trend with the 10,000-hour milestone is that it typically is achieved around twenty years of age. As a child and young adult, that is an enormous amount of time to dedicate to a single activity. For this reason, Gladwell believes that not everybody is capable of achieving those 10,000 hours. “You have to have parents who would encourage and support you” because it is “all but impossible to reach that number all by yourself.”

In addition to requiring family support, “most people can reach that number only if they get into some kind of special program . . . where they get some kind of extraordinary opportunity that gives them a chance to put in those hours.” This was the case with Mozart as well. In his “earliest years,” Mozart received “special preparation” and “unusual opportunities” that encouraged the “acquisition of skills and knowledge” that could then be built upon. In the case of the percussionists interviewed, all thirty-six of them majored in music and many participated in honor youth ensembles, which helped them achieve 10,000 hours.

Many of the percussionists interviewed also attended graduate school to get their master’s

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degrees, which is an even more specialized program than their undergraduate degrees. This correlation between specialized programs and practice hours held true, and in all instances, the average hours per day increased significantly.

![Average Hours Per Day](image)

**Figure 8**: Above is a graph comparing the average practice hours per day of the percussionists interviewed that continued on to do their master’s degree. The statistics for the undergraduate degree are shown as a means of comparison.

Sixteen of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed continued on to get their doctoral
degrees, and during this time, the average practice hours dropped back down equal to the average time spent during their undergraduate degree. This was typically attributed to their increased teaching responsibilities, changes in personal lives, and an increased emphasis on research for their dissertation.

Figure 9: The graph above shows the average practice hours per day of the percussionists interviewed that continued on to a doctorate. The statistics for the undergraduate degrees and master’s degrees are shown as a means of comparison.
Once the interviewed percussionists completed their education and started their formal careers, regardless whether they had completed their undergraduate, master’s, or doctoral degree, they all experienced a tremendous drop off in practice hours. This is attributed to their increased teaching responsibilities and family obligations, which prevented them from dedicating as much time to practicing. Gladwell believes that once a musician starts working, their progress toward 10,000 hours is halted. In fact, for this reason Gladwell argues that underprivileged students who “have to hold down a part-time job at a young age . . . to help make ends meet,” will not make it to 10,000 hours because there simply “won’t be time left in the day to practice enough.”

~ Conclusion ~

It can be reasonably concluded that if 10,000 hours aren’t achieved before starting a career, it will likely never be reached because the player won’t have sufficient time to practice. This was even supported by the percussionists interviewed who all indicated that once they finished their educations and started their careers, practicing became an activity of maintenance, not improvement. The quantity of time they were able to spend in the practice rooms was only enough to sufficiently prevent them from getting worse. They were no longer getting better at their instrument, simply maintaining the skills they had acquired through college. This can be seen by the immense drop off in practice hours when comparing the average practice hours while in college to current practice hours.

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Figure 10: The graph above shows the average practice hours per day that the thirty-six percussionists interviewed currently practice. Statistics for the undergraduate degree, master’s degree, and doctoral degree are shown as a means of comparison.

When compared to their pre-career averages, the results are astonishing. To put in perspective the severity of that drop off, the percussionists interviewed currently practice less per day than they did when they were in middle school.
It is a common misconception among musicians that they have their whole lives to get better. The truth is that the player likely reaches their greatest potential when they complete their education. Once careers are underway, most are fortunate to simply avoid a slow decline in their playing skills. College students often take the attitude that ‘I’ll practice it later’ or ‘after I graduate I’ll learn to do that.’ The harsh reality is, they won’t. College is the time to practice and the time to get better. Once that time has passed, it is forever too late.

The irony of this realization is that many of the percussionists interviewed confessed that they did not discover how to most efficiently practice until later in their careers, when time was truly at a premium. While finally mastering the art of practice is a tremendous accomplishment, the window in which this skill would have proven most beneficial had long expired.

*Practice isn’t the thing you do once you’re good. It’s the thing you do that makes you good.*

17 - Malcolm Gladwell

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### Figure 11: The following table enables the reader to track their practice hours.

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**Sum of Grade School + Middle School**

**Sum of High School + College Undergrad**

**Notes:**
1. All numbers above assume 6 practice days per week (not 7).
2. Included only 3.5 years (not 4) of College Undergrad years in totals above since the target age for 10,000 hours is 21.5 years.
CHAPTER 3: PLANNING A PRACTICE SESSION

To do a great and important work, two things are necessary — a definite plan, and not quite enough time. — Leonard Bernstein

As musicians, our job is to practice. Much like the way a professional athlete must lift weights, perform cardiovascular workouts, and monitor their diet, musicians also have a long list of practice duties they must perform on a daily basis to maintain and improve their musical skills. That ‘to-do’ list is coupled with a persistent shortage of time, making it extremely important to carefully plan and schedule every session. Doing so not only ensures that all required practice elements are addressed, but also prioritizes time according to what is most pertinent to the current goals.

Busy daily schedules usually limit the time available to practice, increasing the importance of maximized efficiency. Deadlines are a constant looming presence and organization is key to ensure those deadlines are met. In music, as in other areas of learning, procrastination compensated by short-term cramming is typically ineffective. When large deadlines are distant in the future, planning becomes even more important to maintain steady progress and guarantee the performance will be prepared on time.

Music is a highly creative and enjoyable activity, and while this should be embraced, the majority of the time spent in the practice room should be much more rigorous and

18 Lloyd Cory, Quote Unquote, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977) 373.
disciplined if the player wants to make maximum progress. Even if adequate time is spent in the practice room, success isn’t guaranteed. How the time is spent is equally as important since natural human tendencies usually steer them down the wrong path. Instinctually, most are drawn to the easiest and most enjoyable tasks, but unfortunately, in the practice room the opposite mentality must be enforced. While performing, genuine confidence and truly inspired interpretation is only possible after a piece is absolutely mastered. This usually means practicing the things that cause the player the most trouble or discomfort. For most, this takes discipline. For a few, this comes naturally, but that doesn’t mean they are exempt from the planning process. For these people planning is still essential because it is very easy to get fixated on a problem and delay progress in other areas.

Every musician can benefit from planning his or her practice sessions and typically, doing so results in a more enjoyable experience because a sense of progress is more readily realized. There are many different ways to plan a practice session and there isn’t a single method that can be deemed the ‘best.’ The multitude of possibilities depends on the learning style and personality of the player as well as the requirements and limitations of the player’s practice schedule.

~ Practice Environment ~

The first aspect of planning a practice session requires determining where the practicing is going to take place. Practice spaces are sometimes limited, but when given a choice as
to the location, certain environments are more ideal than others. Michael Udow said his practice environment philosophy was heavily influenced by workshops given by Michael Colgrass.

*He (Colgrass) would pass out gold-colored rope that was large enough to make a circle on the floor. Then he’d have the participants step into the circle . . . [and explain that] ‘it’s your golden sphere and when you step into this world, it’s your special world to accomplish your goals.*

This idea that the player needs to create their own space in which they can be most productive had a large impact on Udow. “When I go down to my studio, that’s my special world without distractions. It’s a place that I can get lost in. You are almost a child again and can explore and get lost in making music.” Spending time finding an environment in which the player feels most productive and engaged is hugely important. Udow believes that “setting up the principles” of where and how he is going to play music, is “germane”\(^1\) to his approach.

Ben Wahlund also takes special consideration in determining his practice environment, and believes it’s crucial to his productivity and efficiency. He tries to find a location “where interruptions and distractions are minimized.” He advises to “clear clutter [and] turn off your cell phone.” If this space is at home, “family members should be encouraged not to disturb you during practice time.”\(^2\) If the practice environment is limited to a more public environment, the time of day when the fewest people are around should be considered. Noa Kageyama, author of *Nine Sources of Frustration in the*

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\(^1\) Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
*Practice Room*, also believes in a distraction-free practice environment. “Make your practice area a place where your brain is not tempted by irrelevant stimuli.”

In Barry Green’s book, *The Mastery of Music*, he states that practicing in “isolated and sometimes barren environments” allows the player to “focus on the music, tune out distractions, and connect both with their own soul and with the spirit of their music.” A good practice environment doesn’t only depend on the location or time, but depends on the player’s state of mind. “Take care of things outside of the practice room so that they don’t cloud your judgment in the practice room,” advised Wahlund. While practicing, it is imperative that the player is “hyper-observant . . . listening carefully and watching carefully will reveal new, more helpful goals.” This guides the practice session in the most efficient direction. If the player does not have a clear mind and is thinking about other issues outside of the practice room, they are likely to be unsuccessful. In addition, Kageyama advises that “If you are too tired to concentrate and practice effectively, don’t [practice] . . . Sloppy, careless, mindless, mediocre practice will lead to sloppy, careless, mediocre results and only creates more work for yourself in the future when you try to erase the bad habits you have created.”

Joakim Anterot has found that the best way to clear his mind of issues outside of the practice room, is to do a “mantra.” Taking the time to clear one’s mind “makes you feel

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like you are a percussionist” and enables “you [to] feel good . . . Even if bad or sad things happen in the day,” time spent practicing with a clear and focused mind can make for “a good day.”

Blake Tyson finds that using a metronome during his practice session keeps his mind focused and clear of other thoughts. “I find the metronome gives me some kind of focus that I can’t achieve on my own,” said Tyson. “There are so many things that run through your brain, but the metronome for some reason is a calming influence that focuses me in.”

Creating an ideal of state of mind in the practice room also requires the player to have a positive attitude. “Don’t beat yourself up. It is tempting to do, but it’s useless to spend energy yelling at yourself. Always see to it that your job as a musician is to give rise to the joy of making music,” said Wahlund.

When these requirements are all met and the practice environment is ideal, Matthew Duvall finds that he slips into a new “mental space.”

There is a lot of information out there about this concept of flow. It is this educational phenomenon that educators have observed and psychiatrists and neuroscientists have studied. It is a documented phenomenon, particular seen in children, when they become so engaged in activity that they truly lose their perception of everything going on around them and you really can’t interrupt them. You don’t have to get them to do this and they can’t help themselves from doing it.

26 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Duvall explained that during his undergraduate and masters degrees he commonly fell into this mental state without “even really trying.” As he has gotten older, he has found it harder to trigger this state of mind because of the constant distractions of daily life, but on occasion, he does return to this extremely focused and almost trance like mentality. This is when Duvall feels he is able to reach maximum productivity “and the hours just disappear.”

~ Planning Methods ~

Mapped Out Schedule

Given the busy schedules most musicians face with their career and family, it is important to establish routines. The world works on a system of schedules and predicting when there will be time to practice is usually feasible. Although daily schedules are always subject to change, establishing a standard weekly practice schedule will help maintain consistency and will promote other events on the calendar to work around the player’s practice schedule versus the practice schedule yielding to everything else. This also ensures that the player gets practice time every day. Even if unforeseen conflicts interfere with a practice session, typically all is not lost, and at least a portion of the scheduled time can be utilized. Ben Wahlund believes that “Twenty minutes a day every day is much better than 1 hour a day but only twice a week.”

Michael Udow agrees that creating a weekly practice schedule is the best way to guarantee consistent practice time. If players don’t make a schedule, when “push comes to shove, and they are feeling pressed for time, they might eliminate practice sessions because they’re running out of time in their day.” Given that practicing is the “major objective incurred” with regards to a musician’s “career aspirations,” placing priorities on other issues should be discouraged and avoided. For this reason, a weekly practice schedule is imperative to the success of musicians. When creating this schedule, Udow believes it is important to take into account what time of day the player is most productive. “I think it is important for each person to understand when they work the fastest.” Everybody has a time of day in which they find it easiest to stay “mentally engaged” and in the “zone.” “For me, that time was in the morning.” Practicing earlier in the day allows him to fully focus “before any distractions come up.”

Kageyama agrees with Udow and states, “you’ll find that there are certain periods during the day when you are naturally more alert, attentive, and able to concentrate . . . Don’t waste these periods of time on tasks that don’t require your full attention. Treat these portions of the day as being more valuable, and use these for tasks that are higher priorities.”

Paul Rennick organizes his practice sessions using a series of self-imposed deadlines. “Much like everything in this world, it’s deadline related. Just like your dissertation, or

30 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
just like a performance or recital, it's a deadline.”32 Creating imaginary deadlines can be an effective motivational tool, constantly encouraging progress. More commonly, practice deadlines are externally created. When Brian Zator was studying with Keiko Abe in Japan for 8 months, he was practicing “five or six hours a day” to learn “a piece a week”33 for his lessons with Abe.

Other times, these external deadlines are set by the player themselves. Brian Mason warns that scheduling a recital or committing to a gig requires the player to “have good self-awareness.” To effectively “manage and juggle”34 practice with a busy schedule, there needs to be an understanding of what is possible and practical within a given timeframe. According to Gerald Klickstein’s book, The Musician’s Way, “an effective schedule enables you to achieve your musical goals without becoming exhausted.”35

John Tafoya has discovered that he works best when he “starts early,” well in advance of his performance date.

*I remember practicing in December for a concert I was doing in March. That way I can really live with the piece for a while. It probably was a little overkill but there is a level of comfort every time you go through it. So I like to do that. I like to anti-procrastinate a lot. When familiar, it’s amazing how fast you can get up to performance tempo.*36

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32 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
33 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
34 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
36 John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
As previously mentioned, when learning a piece that has a distant deadline, it is very important to plan a schedule. Otherwise, it is hard to gauge and maintain progress that guarantees the piece will be prepared in time. When Omar Carmenates first receives a piece, he “plan(s) it out from day one.”\(^{37}\) When doing this, the first question that must be asked is “how long do you have?”\(^{38}\) said Joakim Anterot. Once the exact deadline is determined, Jason Baker creates “a timeline of what [he] want(s) learned and when.”\(^{39}\) To create an accurate timeline that is practical and achievable, Anterot always asks himself “What is the reason for practicing [and learning this piece?]”\(^{38}\)

The type of piece and its performance context has a large impact on the level at which it needs to be prepared and how long it should be worked on. If it is a world premiere programed for a solo concert, it will need much more preparation time than an orchestral ensemble part. Jason Baker also points out that it is important “to look through a piece first and see how long it’s going to take.”\(^{39}\) In addition to the length, pieces pose various challenges in terms of technique, musicality, and logistics that may be initially overlooked if not examined closely.

Once all of these factors are determined and a time frame has been determined for learning the piece, Omar Carmenates finds if helpful to form “sub goals.” This divides the piece into more manageable chunks and provides day-to-day goals. “So from the day I started learning it to the day I performed it, I had a program,”\(^{37}\) said Carmenates.

\(^{37}\) Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.


\(^{39}\) Jason Baker, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
Without breaking it up into sub goals, it can be difficult to stay on track. The end deadline provides plenty of motivation, but when that deadline is months away, it is easy to rationalize other priorities and fall behind schedule. For this reason, Paul Rennick creates “deadlines without there really being a deadline.” For these self-imposed deadlines to be effective, they must be treated with the same importance as the final deadline. Rennick finds that if he can “treat it that way . . . it keeps [me] on task.”

As Brian Mason mentioned previously, the player must “have a good self-awareness” so that they can determine how much time is needed at the end to prepare for the performance. Jason Baker said this is one of the largest considerations when he is constructing his timeline. “I make sure I have a good amount of time left to get comfortable with the whole process.”

The amount of time that should be allotted depends on the individual. Andy Harnsberger looks at it this way:

*If I am six weeks out from the performance, I need to be at like 60% tempo. The next week I need to be at 70% tempo. I gauge it so that I’ve got about a two-week buffer zone. So three weeks before the performance I’ve got everything up to tempo and it’s perfect at 90%. By the next week it’s perfect at 100%, and now I have two weeks to get used to the performance of it.*

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40 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
41 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
43 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Planning out a piece long term obviously takes a lot of detail and information. If the player is preparing for a recital and there are five or six pieces that must be learned, these plans get complicated quickly. For this reason, Julie Licata uses calendars with “grids and matrices to [show] how [she’s] going to run things . . . I can’t practice every piece every day and I can’t even practice all of one piece every day,” said Licata, so her system facilitates the organized rotation of pieces.

Since it is impossible to accurately predict one’s precise progress, it is important to maintain an adaptable schedule. Getting consistently behind can cause major problems with a steadfast deadline, so Michael Burritt keeps “track of these arches” of preparation so that if he gets too far behind schedule, he can “reassess how you are going to accomplish your goals.” The way to avoid falling behind schedule is “to have an idea of how you are going to organize your week,” said Burritt. “On Monday I’m going to do this and on Tuesday I’m going to do that. Everyday I’m going to work on this but every other day I am going to work on that.” This takes time to systemize, so “it’s good to write your plan out.”

Julie Licata’s system of grids and matrices is extremely useful for keeping all of this information organized. She is very detailed in her schedule and not only determines what pieces she is practicing, but plans it down to specific sections. “I’m going to work A-D on Monday. I’m going to work D-F on Tuesday. I’m going to work F-I on Wednesday and then make a three day rotation of those three.” If that wasn’t detailed enough, she

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44 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
also likes to work on the “hard technical spots every single day” and marks those in her calendar as well. “I write this on my chart too, A-D on Monday and then run technical spot on page one and technical spot on page two.”

This type of detailed planning also works very well when preparing for an orchestral audition with a large excerpt list. Eric Willie uses this method and divides the days up by instrument types. “Monday was soft snare drum, bass drum, and glockenspiel. The next day was mallets, snare drum, triangle, tambourine, and crash cymbals.” He refers to this scheduling method as “micromanaging” and finds that mapping it out gives you “so much more time for each.” When trying to get through a lot of material, Willie uses a Zen approach. “Only do something for a fixed amount of time and then leave it. If you didn’t make your goal, then you know what to add for the next day. I think that this way of doing things is the most beneficial.”

When making elaborate schedules, especially when dealing with large periods of time, it is important to allow for flexibility. Things may take longer than anticipated and it is OK to adjust the schedule accordingly. By the same token, if a task is accomplished ahead of schedule, move to the next thing so these adjustments are balanced out.

Elaborate and highly detailed schedules for extended periods of time are not for everybody. For some people, the thought of utilizing such detailed methods causes anxiety. Many people just prefer to plan on a daily basis, and not worry so much about

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46 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
tomorrow, next week, or next month. Although this short-term only planning has risks, if this method is done correctly, it will still result in long and “detailed lists,” says Barry Green in his book *The Inner Game of Music*.

“You need to have an idea of how you are going to organize . . . your day,” said Michael Burritt. “If you just walk into it saying, ‘Ok, I’m going to practice, here we go,’ you can get overwhelmed with how much there is to do. Instead, say ‘today I am going to do this and here are my goals.’ This helps take the stress out of it.”

Ben Wahlund agrees with Burritt and thinks that the best way to relieve stress and be productive is to “be methodical in your work.” Having a method creates routine, and routines create order, giving the player a plan of attack. This can be calming when tackling a large list of to-do’s and the player doesn’t know where to start. Matthew Duvall always uses the same methodical process when practicing a new piece.

> Once I’ve broken things down into micro sections, phrases, or cells, then my practice is pretty systematic . . . No matter how easy it is I’ll do it ten times and I keep track with hash marks. That ten times thing is not just to be redundant for the sake of being redundant, but I found when I practice that way, it eliminates the, “What should I do next?” question and it eliminates getting distracted or wandering between things without really having focused on something.

Duvall is very consistent about keeping track with “hash marks on a page.” He does it all the time and believes this focus technique is “a big part” of the process. “[I] write

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everything down . . . on a piece of scratch pad [so that] I know I’m spending enough time on material and not wandering through my practice session.”  

He does this faithfully and has even kept all his practice journals from college.

Another good planning technique is to make a detailed schedule of the upcoming session. “Take five minutes before you start and decide on what you are going to work on for the day. Look at the time you have to practice, and divide it up based on specific time increments,” said Michael Burritt.

How this time is divided is up depends on what needs to be worked on. In Ben Wahlund’s case, he uses a standard formula. Regardless how long Wahlund has to practice, he divides his session into five categories: warm-up, improvise/experiment, technique, goal material, and warm down. Below is a table showing how he would plan thirty-minute practice session.

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| 2.5 Minutes | Warm Up Routine! |
| 5 Minutes | Improvise/Experiment | Nice to ask “What if?” |
| 10 Minutes | Technique | Review Old, Reinforce Current, Explore New |
| 10 Minutes | Goal Material | In small chunks “Rule of 9/10” |
| 2.5 Minutes | Warm Down | Blow Off Steam/Explore |

Figure 12: Ben Wahlund’s thirty-minute practice session breakdown.⁵³

Obviously most practice sessions exceed thirty minutes, but the proportions and categories would remain the same for a longer practice periods.

Joakim Anterot also strongly believes in making a detailed schedule of his practice session but uniquely includes scheduled breaks. The mind can only maintain focus for so long and at a certain point, productivity starts to decline. For this reason, it is important “to know when to take your breaks,”⁵⁴ said Anterot.

Organizing a practice session using a mapped out schedule is extremely effective. It is a great way to ensure that the player will be prepared for upcoming deadlines and shows

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progress towards their final goal. In addition, writing this schedule out on paper enforces productivity since every minute of the practice session is given a specific assignment. This also has a powerful affect on the player’s confidence because they are able to see their accomplishments and hard work documented.

**Timer**

Long to-do lists can overwhelm some people. The idea of planning an entire practice session from beginning to end is daunting, not to mention trying to plan out the entire week or an entire month. For people that prefer not to think that far in advance, the timer method might be the best way to plan their practice session.

This method was only used by one of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, but this in no way diminishes its usefulness. Christopher Deane’s method of using a kitchen timer to plan a practice session is based on a simple premise. Only plan the next ten minutes and don’t worry about what is going to be done after that. “Pick a small section and put the timer on.” It’s as simple as that. When the time expires ten minutes later, choose another practice spot and repeat the process. This method encourages short but intense bursts of focus on a very specific section of music. The section of music chosen should be relatively short and the player is limited to only that section of music for the entire ten minutes, keeping them “honest,” said Deane.

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55 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
“Personal and musical goals [can] become so overwhelming that they inhibit our ability to perform or concentrate,”\textsuperscript{56} said Barry Green in his book, \textit{The Mastery of Music}. For this reason, practicing with a short-term mentality eliminates anxiety caused by long to-do lists and allows the player to focus purely on what they are playing. When using this method, the allotted time frames should be kept to fifteen minutes or less. Once fifteen minutes is exceeded, the urgency of the ticking timer loses its affect.

This method promotes diligent work on a specific problem spot and eliminates the all too common scenario of glossing through various sections of music without really practicing anything. This method of planning a practice session is successful due to its simplicity and can work well for people with short or fragmented practice times throughout the day.

\textbf{Priority List}

“You should practice what you are not good at,” said John Lane. This summarizes the next method for planning a practice session, priority lists. Priority lists are very simple to construct. They are a list of all of the sections of music that would cause the performer anxiety if the concert was tomorrow. Planning a practice session using the priority list method enforces practicing the weakest material. This is usually not enjoyable and takes tremendous discipline. “You can’t worry about what Joe Smith is going to think standing outside when you are messing this up because you are doing the right things,” said John Lane. “That is where your practicing should be and you can’t be concerned about what

you sound like in the practice room . . . sometimes have to put your pride in your pocket and work on the things you are not good at.” “If you just practice the things you are good at, you are going to continue to get better on those things, but you are also going to have big gaping holes in your abilities.” Practicing the worst spots and the things that are difficult “is the only way you are going to grow as a musician.”

When using this method, the player must first find all of their worst spots. John Parks uses priority lists to plan his practice session and labels all of these spots using “Post-it Notes of different colors . . . Greens are ‘I don’t need to practice this, I can do it.’ Yellows are, ‘I need to touch it a little and then it will be OK’, and Reds are, ‘I need to spend a lot of work there.’

This idea is not unique to Parks. He was first introduced to it while reading Don Greene’s book, Audition Success. In Greene’s book, the labels are one, two, and three instead of green, yellow, and red, but the methodology is the same. “Ones are ‘Very Confident’, twos are ‘In Progress,’ and threes are ‘Challenging,’” Greene’s idea is to prioritize one’s practice sessions around the reds / 3’s until they become yellows / 2’s. “I don’t practice the things I’m already good at, [I] just play the challenging ones,” said Brian, a thirty five year old horn player who took part in Greene’s study. This method gives the player a defined structure for practicing their problem spots.

57 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
58 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Andy Harnsberger also uses this method for determining his priority spots and finds it especially useful because the Post-it Notes help monitor his progress. “Over a couple of weeks, the goal is to get the red sections up to yellow and then move all the yellows up to green.”

Structuring each practice session around the concept of only practicing the worst spots takes tremendous discipline. As Lane pointed out, the player must put aside all expectations of always sounding good in the practice room because when practicing the most difficult spots, that isn’t attainable. However, this method does guarantee constant improvement and a clear direction to go in the practice room.

**Goal-oriented**

Some of the percussionists interviewed prefer to plan their practice session around goals they want to achieve rather than using a mapped out schedule. This method places more emphasis on completing the task at hand than meeting a specific time requirement. The major advantage to this method is that the player is rewarded for accomplishing goals. Instead of practicing a certain section for a designated amount of time, they only practice that section until they meet whatever goal they had set for the day.

This type of planning is incentive based and places importance on doing it correctly. In theory, somebody who adheres to a mapped out schedule, could practice their assigned

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61 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
section for the designated amount time, say twenty minutes, but not make any improvement. This is unlikely, but possible. If instead, that same person was using a goal-oriented planning method, after those same twenty minutes of practicing, if no progress was made, they would be no closer to completion than when they started. Incentive creates tremendous motivation, and for some people, is the most effective method for planning a practice session.

While Julie Licata was referenced repeatedly in the mapped out schedule section, most of the detailed schedules she creates are not based on times of the day, but rather chunks of material at certain tempos. Although her schedule is incredibly detailed and planned out, there is an understood flexibility as to when she can move on to the next schedule item.

*I always have a plan but allow myself flexibility. I accomplished that so I can move on to something else. If I didn’t accomplish it, I have to do it over and over again until I do. For this reason, I have to allow myself the flexibility in the schedule . . . I don’t have time blocks, generally it’s goal-oriented.62*

The other advantage to this method is that everything that is being practiced has a goal. For this reason, Don Greene, in his book *Performance Success*, recommends “that each goal makes sense as a part of a step-by-step path that logically leads you from wherever you are to reaching your [final goal].”63 This results in a clear understanding of what should be practiced.

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Two or three weeks before the performance I’m at point where I know where my problem spots are. There are always four or five things that need technical runs or whatever. I’ve got seven days during the week and I’m practicing three hours a day on marimba, so I divide that evenly.62

- Julie Licata

Since all of her practice spots are assigned attainable goals, her scheduled material is constantly changing. As she gets closer to the concert, she might be revising her schedule “almost every week”62 so that it corresponds to the progress she is making.

When using this method to plan practice sessions, it is important to choose goals that can be accomplished in “a small amount of time,”64 explained Michael Udow. The idea is based on the premise that once the goal is accomplished, the player is done with that portion of the practice session. If the goals are unrealistic within the scope of the available time, there will be little or no apparent progress made. Wahlund advises to break larger tasks “into easily accomplished small bits”65 and Michael Burritt always tries to set goals “depending on the amount of time”66 he has to practice.

In Barry Green’s book, The Inner Game of Music, he states, “the motivation for continual change can only come from experiencing the improvement in your music that occurs when you set realistic goals and trust the musician within you.”67

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64 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
The goal-oriented method of planning a practice session can be extremely motivating and give players extra incentive to focus on the matter at hand. However, this method can’t be used in all situations. If the player has small fragmented blocks of time throughout the day to practice, this method may not be very successful because the sessions may expire before their goals can be completed. This method works best when there is an excess of practice time with little restrictions on when the session must conclude.

**Consequence-oriented**

Another way to plan a practice session is using the consequence-oriented method. This method, like the goal-oriented method, rewards the player for their hard work. The premise behind this method places importance on quality, not quantity. When practicing, it is easy to mentally check out and do careless run-throughs. Some people treat practicing like a job. They check in, mark the time sheet, and ‘put in their hours.’ This type of practice is not as productive, since the focus is usually on what time they can leave rather than actually getting better. Similar to the goal-oriented method of planning a practice session, this method does not use time as the primary measurement. Instead, practice time is determined by how many correct repetitions the player can do. There are many variations of this method, but all emphasize perfection.

The first variation of this method focuses on consistent accuracy over a designated period of time. This can be done with any exercise, scale, or excerpt capable of being looped continuously. The goal is to play for a designated amount of time with no mistakes. Once
this is accomplished the player is free to move on to another aspect of their practice session. Brian Nozny learned this method while studying with Andy Harnsberger. Harnsberger assigned him exercises from George Hamilton Green’s *Instruction Course for Xylophone* that read, “play for three minutes straight without stopping, at a steady tempo, with no wrong notes,” said Nozny.

*I started the clock and started playing with the metronome. Everything was going fine and then all of a sudden, at about two minutes and forty seconds, I started to get nervous. Am I going to make it? Am I going to make it? And sure enough, I missed one note right at the very end.*

This meant he had to do it all over again. This style of practice is extremely beneficial because it “enforces perfection,”\(^{68}\) said Nozny.

Eric Willie and William Moersch use a different variation of the consequence-oriented method. Willie refers to it as “the penny trick.” This variation uses coins to count correct repetitions, and the player is not done until they have played the passage correctly as many times as there are coins. “Reach in your pocket, pull out all of your pocket change, and put it on one side [of the music stand]. Each time you play it correctly, move one coin over to the other side. When all the coins are gone from one side, you can move on,”\(^{69}\) explained Moersch. Eric Willie adds a condition to this method to make it even more difficult. When the passage is played worse than usual, the “pennies come back”\(^{70}\) to the original pile. This method is especially useful when working on excerpts or other styles of music that require incredible note accuracy.

\(^{68}\) Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
\(^{69}\) William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
\(^{70}\) Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
James Campbell also uses this method but his variation does not include pennies. He takes a short passage of music and loops it under tempo until it’s played “three to five times correctly.” After this is accomplished, he increases the tempo and repeats the process. “If I play it twice correctly and then make an error, I have to go back to three again,” explained Campbell.

With all of these methods, the player can make the rules as strict or as forgiving as they desire. There can be negative consequences for every incorrect repetition or the player can require that all the correct repetitions happen consecutively. Regardless of how the method is structured, the concept remains the same. The player is rewarded for correct repetitions and penalized for incorrect repetitions and they are not done practicing until they have completed the designated requirements. This creates a sense of competitiveness with one’s self and according to Barry Green’s book, The Mastery of Music, “competition can inspire hard work and great performances . . . [and] works best when it serves as an incentive for learning, performance, and concentration.”

Planning a practice session using the consequence-oriented method can be extremely powerful because it best mimics the pressures of a performance. The pressure felt during Nozny’s last twenty seconds or Willie’s last penny, almost perfectly mimics the pressure of a performance situation. This urgency and emphasis on doing it correctly is often neglected in the practice room, which inadequately prepares the player for performances.

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When using this method, the player always ends the practice session on a high note because they accomplished their goal. Michael Udow believes that it is extremely important to end a practice session “on a positive note . . . When I’m leaving the practice room on a positive note, I’m feeling good about how the session wound up. As a result, the next time I go back into the practice room I will be excited to be there.”

~ Conclusion ~

With busy schedules and never ending deadlines to meet, it is crucial to use practice time to its greatest potential. As chapter three discussed, practice hours towards the achievement of mastery are limited and should not be wasted. Careful planning of each practice session is that best way to ensure that maximum efficiency is reached in each and every practice period. While there are many different ways of doing this, and the player’s learning style and practice schedule heavily influences which method or methods are best for each individual, methods that enforce progress and accountability are generally most effective. Regardless which methods are chosen, the player must dedicate time and thought to how they are going to utilize their practice session. In doing this, the player’s practice session will result in maximum productivity and a greater sense of accomplishment.

73 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
**Figure 13: Survey - Planning A Practice Session**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Practice Environment</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do people commonly interrupt your practice sessions?</td>
<td>A1, A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you routinely tired or absent minded while practicing?</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you find yourself thinking about non-related issues while practicing?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly feel unproductive during practice sessions?</td>
<td>A2, A3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Mapped Out Schedule</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is it hard for you to find time to practice on a daily basis?</td>
<td>B1, B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your designated practice time often get replaced by more pressing issues?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly get behind in your preparation or feel unprepared to perform?</td>
<td>B2, B3, B4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you describe yourself as a very organized person?</td>
<td>B1, B3, B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time getting through all your practice material?</td>
<td>B5, B6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you neglect practicing certain instruments for long periods of time?</td>
<td>B6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have problems staying on task while practicing?</td>
<td>B1, B4, B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you work best when working towards a specific goal?</td>
<td>B2, B4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Short Term Planning</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a very methodical person?</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your schedule change on a weekly or daily basis?</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a detail-oriented person?</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do long to-do lists overwhelm you?</td>
<td>C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time staying focused?</td>
<td>C2, C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically rely on muscle memory when performing?</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your practice sessions lack structure?</td>
<td>C1, C2, C3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Priority List</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly fear specific spots during performances?</td>
<td>D1, D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your improvement plateau as you get closer to the performance?</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your practice sessions resort to primarily run-throughs as the performance draws closer?</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you sometimes peak early?</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E. Goals-Oriented</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly get bored in the practice room?</td>
<td>E2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have large blocks of time to practice?</td>
<td>E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you motivated most when trying to accomplish a goal?</td>
<td>E2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you easily discouraged in the practice room?</td>
<td>E2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F. Consequence-Oriented</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you find yourself doing mindless repetitions?</td>
<td>F2, F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you struggle with mental focus while performing?</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically under perform when it counts the most?</td>
<td>F2, F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly make silly mistakes during performances?</td>
<td>F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a competitive person?</td>
<td>F1, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you stop and start a lot when you get nervous?</td>
<td>F2, F3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Figure 14: Outline - Planning A Practice Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Pages</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Practice Environment</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. Location&lt;br&gt;2. Time of Day&lt;br&gt;3. Eliminate Distractions</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Short-Term Planning</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. Ten Repetitions&lt;br&gt;2. Detailed Schedule of Each Session&lt;br&gt;3. Timer</td>
<td>46-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Priority List</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. Worst Spots&lt;br&gt;2. Post-it Notes</td>
<td>50-52</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E. Goal-Oriented</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. Flexible Goal Schedule&lt;br&gt;2. Attainable Goal-Setting</td>
<td>52-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F. Consequence-Oriented</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. Timed Accuracy&lt;br&gt;2. Penny Trick&lt;br&gt;3. Correct Repetitions</td>
<td>55-58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
~ Reasons for Warming Up ~

What is the best way to warm-up and is it really necessary? The term ‘warm-up’ can encompass a wide variety of activities and serve a multitude of purposes. Regardless how individuals choose to organize their practice sessions, the warm-up always marks its beginning. Whether preparing for a major performance or a first read of a new piece, the warm-up should be very carefully considered and used most efficiently.

**Warm-up the Body**

William Moersch believes that warming up is crucial to avoiding injury. “I think the worst thing that we could possibly do is just walk up to the instrument and start playing without any kind of preparation.”¹ “The muscles wouldn’t be ready for that amount of movement. You can hurt yourself pretty badly if you aren’t properly warmed up,”² said Paula Robison in *The Mastery of Music*, by Barry Green.

When he was younger in his career, Moersch rarely warmed up. While this didn’t cause any problems for a number of years, the absence of a warm-up routine eventually led to

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¹ William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.

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“a very serious tendonitis injury,” which kept him out of commission for a year.” It happened “in the 80’s . . . when I was about to premiere a new version of a Steve Reich piece,” explained Moersch. He is convinced that its root cause was his failure to properly warm-up.

Christopher Deane has also dealt with injury and believes that warming up is essential to keeping his body healthy. Deane’s injury was less severe than Moersch’s, having only been out “for a month and a half,” but it may well have been avoided if he had warmed up on a regular basis. Now, Deane always warms up and believes the key to an effective warm-up is “slow and continuous motion without stopping.”

**Warm-up the Brain**

Six of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed mentioned their belief that warming up is not just for the body, but is also for the brain. For instance, Anders Holdar said, “I think it is important to warm-up your mind.”

For most people, their days do not typically begin with practice. Instead, practice usually takes place during a break or at the end of a long and busy workday. For this reason, Michael Burritt uses warming up to mentally “transition from whatever [he] was doing prior to practicing.”

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4 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
As Anders Holdar has gotten older, he has found it progressively harder to transition from his daily routine to practicing. “When I was younger, I had a much easier time going into performance mode, but growing older, things are in your mind. More things about your daily life than about being a musician.” As a result, “it is important to have some sort of warm-up that reminds your mind what it is about to do.”

Brian Nozny finds that mentally focusing the brain “can take five minutes or sometimes it can take ten minutes.” It takes time to clear the mind of other responsibilities and issues outside the practice room, and if Nozny doesn’t “have that clear mental head space, the practice session will be a wash.” To help clear his head, Nozny obsessively focuses on something. For instance, “I'm going to play C major chords, and I'm not going to move on until they are the world's most perfect C major chords. Everything is balanced. I'm moving exactly the same way and I'm not having any flams.”

“The muscles we use in playing . . . need to go through a period of movement before they respond fluently and quickly to signals from the brain,” said Barry Green in his book The Mastery of Music. Gary Cook agrees and finds that he has to “warm up both the physical muscles and the neural pathways.” He believes this is best accomplished by fully engaging the brain in mentally challenging exercises. For this same reason, William Moersch avoids warm-ups that use “dumb repetition” because it usually results in him zoning out. “I try to come up with various little warm-up exercises that involve some

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8 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
10 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
aspect of transposition.”¹¹ This engages the brain and forces the player to be conscious of what is currently being played and what is about to be played. Additionally, the exercise must be continuously analyzed to make the correct transpositions.

Michael Burritt said he also believes in the importance of finding mentally challenging warm-ups. “I try to find things that make me concentrate.” For this reason, he prefers warming up with Bach chorales because it forces him to think “about the voices” and challenges his ability to play various “voicings.”¹²

**Diagnose the Body**

It is clear that warming up is not only important for the body, but it is also important for the mind. Physically, the muscles must be warmed up to avoid injury and the brain must have time to transition from previous activities and gain focus. Unfortunately, the body and mind don’t always automatically respond to these warm-ups in the desired way. Muscles may be sore or tight from a previous practice session or other unrelated activity, and the brain might lack focus due to sleep deprivation or overstimulation. When this is the case, Robert Schietroma doesn’t fight it. Instead, he embraces the current state of his body and mind and adjusts his practice session accordingly. “Regardless of the instrument I have certain exercises [that are] diagnostic,” said Schietroma. These exercises let him know how his body is functioning that day. If his body is feeling poor, it

¹¹ William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
doesn’t make sense to work on a virtuosic marimba solo. Instead, he may choose to “sit down in an easy chair and learn notes [mentally].”

Using the warm-up to diagnose how one can be most efficient that day is a unique and powerful idea. Why practice the same way every day if the human body and mind are in constant flux? Adjusting one’s practice schedule to accommodate how the body and mind are functioning will result in a more efficient and pleasurable practice experience.

~ Four Warm-up Categories ~

Warming up can be divided into four categories: kinesthetic warm-ups, technique and accuracy-based warm-ups, music-based warm-ups, and improvisation and theory-based warm-ups. Each category has a different emphasis and the most appropriate method depends on the player’s personality and individual goals. Warm-up routines don’t have to fall into a single category, in fact, an ideal warm-up should incorporate multiple categories.

~ I. Kinesthetic Warm-ups ~

Kinesthetic warm-ups focus on warming up and preparing the body. They are typically paired with one of the other three warm-up categories and are more akin to a pre-warm-up. “No matter what instrument I’m going to be working on, the first thing you have to

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do is get good blood circulation,”\textsuperscript{14} said Robert Schietroma. Percussion is a highly physical activity and requires many different muscle groups, large and small. For muscles to function properly and at their highest capacity, good blood flow is crucial.

For this same reason, Anders Holdar never starts his warm-up with sticks. He prefers to do kinesthetic movements, unrelated to percussion, until his “body wakes up.” Once the blood flow in his arms and torso are pumping and his body starts to get warm, he goes to the next step, which is “technical practicing.”\textsuperscript{15}

Michael Udow’s kinesthetic warm-up is very similar to Holdar’s in that he is not “thinking percussion at this point, but just loosening up.” He does “slow, very easy” movements of the upper body with increasing rotation of his torso and shoulders. He learned this technique from Japanese drummers while doing “Kodo workshops in Japan . . . They take participants through slow and easy rotations of the torso to warm up the body,”\textsuperscript{16} explained Udow.

As with any athletic activity, once the blood is flowing and the muscles warm up, the body should be stretched. “Even two minutes of stretching works wonders by circulating blood and oxygen to thirsty issues throughout the body,” said Madeline Bruser in her book, \textit{The Art of Practicing}. “When fresh blood and oxygen aren’t pumping freely through the body tissues, the muscles get tired and don’t function well.”\textsuperscript{17} James

\textsuperscript{14} Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{15} Anders Holdar, personal interview, 28 Oct. 2011.
\textsuperscript{16} Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{17} Madeline Bruser, \textit{The Art of Practicing} (New York, NY: Bell Tower, 1997) 30.
Campbell has a series of stretches that he does before playing. His first stretch focuses on the “extensor and flexor muscles” in his forearms. His second stretch targets the muscles in his hands. “I tuck my thumbs into my fists and straighten my arms to stretch the muscle between my thumb and wrist.” Campbell does each stretch three times with periods of relaxation in between.

William Moersch warms up his body in a much more unorthodox manner. He believes it’s important to warm up all “the muscles and the tendons involved,” and does this by submerging his arms “in fairly hot water for three to five minutes . . . I’ll fill a sink with hot water that is not scalding but as hot as you could tolerate. I try to find a fairly deep sink so I can sink my elbows, forearms, and hands without contracting my wrists in any way.” Then he uses Nivea Hand Cream and “gently massages it into the skin . . . [I] move through a range of motions in my forearms, down to my wrists, and then down to my fingers.”

There are many ways to warm-up and prepare the body to play. All bodies are a little different and require different forms of preparation. It is important for every player to figure out what their body needs most and take the necessary precautions to ensure their body is ready to play. This type of kinesthetic warm-up is not intended to be the sole form of preparation. It should be combined with at least one of the other three categories.

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19 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
~ II. Technique and Accuracy-based Warm-ups ~

Of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, twenty-four of them use technique and accuracy-based warm-ups, making it the most common type of warm-up. While not all twenty-four of these percussionists used technique and accuracy-based warm-ups on every instrument, the majority did when warming up on mallet instruments. This may be attributed to the fact that playing mallets requires incredible accuracy due to the size of the bars and instruments. This category of warming up focuses on building and reinforcing fundamental skills and techniques. Many of the percussionists interviewed use technique and accuracy-based exercises as part of their daily warm-up routine and attribute much of their technical proficiency to warming up in this manner.

For younger or less experienced players, technique and accuracy warm-ups are essential to their development. For older more mature musicians, it’s a way to maintain their technical skills. “I have to go through these motions if I really want to play the way I want to,” said Thomas Burritt. “[When warming up], I’m reviewing my whole approach to playing which includes stroke, stance, and how I move.”

Mark Ford believes that every young player needs to spend a significant amount of time working on technique and accuracy exercises in order to develop his or her skills as a musician. “When I was really young, I was doing technique a minimum of forty-five minutes to an hour a day because I needed to get my hands to work right.”

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20 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
21 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
John Lane agrees with Mark Ford and believes that everybody “needs to devote a percentage of [their] time to technical practice.” Lane encourages less experienced players to spend “sixty percent” of their practice time on technique.

Having this type of “discipline gives the musician freedom,” stated Janos Starker in Barry Green’s book, *The Mastery of Music*. “It is mastery of your instrument and technique that leaves you free to serve the composer and the piece.”

Blake Tyson also attributes his current technical abilities to the warm-up exercises he did when he was younger. “I used to have a regular warm-up routine that consisted of linear scale stickings, arpeggios, and all sorts of exercises from *Method of Movement* that I would do everyday. I think that really helped my technique a lot. It gave me a solid grounding in technique.” *Method of Movement*, by Leigh Howard Stevens, is considered to be the first technique book to clearly explain and develop the four-mallet grip known as ‘Steven’s grip.’ The exercises in his book were widely used by the percussionists interviewed.

Brain Zator has found that having great technique not only allows the player to execute at the highest level, but it “makes the music much easier to learn.” Once the player has reached a high level of technical proficiency, learning music progresses much faster.

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22 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
24 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
because execution does not have to be practiced. For this reason, Zator’s warm-up is intended to raise his “technique to a higher level.”

When doing technique and accuracy-based exercises, it is important to treat them like a warm-up. Technical exercises can be very demanding physically so early in the warm-up, they must be approached carefully.

Joshua Smith starts by warming up his “Big muscles first . . . I took a weight lifting class in my undergrad and that was the concept. Big muscles and then work down to small muscles because you need to be warm or you’ll tear your small muscles.”

Andy Harnsberger takes this same approach when warming up on the marimba. He starts with “warming up the big muscles first” by doing “double vertical strokes and block chords.” After those muscles get warmed up, he moves to the smaller muscle groups, focusing on “single independent strokes . . . single alternating strokes . . . permutations . . . and one handed rolls.” Of the percussionists interviewed, this concept was generally applied to warm-ups on all instruments, not just marimba.

Gary Cook also uses this same method when warming up on snare drum. Similar to Smith and Harnsberger, Cook’s warm-up moves from “large muscles down to smaller muscle groups.”

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26 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
27 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
28 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.

Technique and accuracy-based exercises should be applied to all instruments. Although the exercises themselves may vary due to the differences in instrumental techniques, the concept should remain the same – develop and maintain fundamental technique on the instrument so that execution is not hindered by poor technical skill.

**Warm-ups on Mallet Instruments**

On mallet instruments, most of the percussionists interviewed used technique and accuracy-based warm-ups structured around stroke types and music theory fundamentals.

Kevin Bobo warms up with “very basic *Method of Movement* type exercises.” His warm-up is the exact same every day, consisting of seven exercises, “very slow and in the key of C but never with a metronome.” The first four exercises consist of scales and arpeggios using both one and two hands. Bobo refers to exercises five and six as “fast patterns.” Fast patterns are double laterals that “start at the bottom of the keyboard and move up the keyboard slowly and chromatically until you get to the top.”

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30 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
final warm-up consists of a series of one-handed roll exercises. It usually takes him about twenty-five minutes to complete the entire warm-up.

Brett Dietz likes to do a couple warm-up exercises for each stroke type. First he works on double verticals, using various “interval shifting” exercises. Then he moves to exercises that utilize single independent, single alternating, and triple vertical strokes.

Similarly, Gordon Stout starts by doing double vertical strokes to get his “muscles limbered up and to get balance, coordination, and relaxation going . . . Then I will go into single alternating strokes and sequential sticking patterns (triple laterals) and sometimes even interval-changing exercises if I need to get my fingers more limber.”

It should be noted that all three percussionists above utilize the same progression of stroke types. They all start with double verticals, which utilize the largest muscle groups and simplest motions and finish with triple laterals, which use smaller muscles and quicker more complex motions. This concept of dividing the warm-up by stroke types and muscle groups is most likely attributed to the format of Steven’s book, which was commonly used by the percussionists interviewed.

The other type of technique and accuracy-based warm-ups are structured around the fundamental elements of music theory, such as scales and arpeggios. While many of the stroke types are used in these exercises, the focus switches from developing textbook

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31 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
32 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
stroke types to building accuracy and proficiency on the instrument. Among the percussionists interviewed, this was most commonly done using scales and arpeggios.

Michael Udow likes to “warm up with fluid and relaxed scales.” He uses this to build accuracy in his playing, not only with reference to the notes themselves, but also to the specific playing spot on each bar. “I think about where my mallets are coming in contact with the bars,” said Udow. Correct playing spots are important for achieving optimal tone quality and are determined by “listening for the tone in each marimba bar.” This forces Udow to play the scales at a moderate tempo so that he can focus on this subtle detail.

In contrast, other percussionists interviewed, such as Andy Harnsberger and Eric Willie, work on developing note accuracy at maximum tempos. For this purpose, using exercises from George Hamilton Green’s Instruction Course for Xylophone was the most popular choice.

While Green’s book is extremely useful, the scales and exercises are derived from the ragtime era, making some of the patterns and harmonic language outdated. For this reason, Payton MacDonald prefers to use exercises from Nicolas Slonimsky’s book, Thesaurus Of Scales And Melodic Patterns. This book uses harmonies and scalar patterns not typical of Western tonality and is generally used to develop a jazz vocabulary. MacDonald finds these exercises more interesting and does “different kinds of artificial scales from the Slonimsky book.” Learning arpeggios and scales in “all kinds of

33 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
modes”\textsuperscript{34} has led to a more creative and interesting warm-up routine for MacDonald and has also inspired him to create original exercises that expand and explore various combinations.

Brian Zator also finds technique and accuracy-based warm-ups boring at times, so he finds ways to make them more interesting as well. Zator wrote play-along tracks for his five basic exercises. He has three or four tracks, each at different tempos, which utilize both two and four mallets techniques. Instead of having a “Dr. Beat blaring through the speakers, I have a rock tune or African music. I have an African 12/8 groove for my double stroke exercises and a jazz thing for my blues scales.”\textsuperscript{35}

**Warm-ups on Snare Drum**

Similar to warming up on mallet instruments, technique and accuracy-based warm-ups on the snare drum are typically structured by stroke type and rudiments, with rudiments being the drumming equivalent of scales and arpeggios.

Most of the percussionists interviewed use exercises from George Lawrence Stones’s book, *Stick Control*. Similar to *Method of Movement*, *Stick Control* is considered to be the definitive source for developing the basic snare drum stroke.

\textsuperscript{34} Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.

\textsuperscript{35} Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Jason Baker’s daily routine includes playing through page five of *Stick Control*, which was common among the percussionists interviewed. Eric Willie does this same thing, but plays “both full and tap heights . . . about one-hundred beats per minute for the half note . . . [It] gets my hands moving,”[^36] said Willie.

While this book primarily focuses on fluid legato strokes, George Lawrence Stone has another book titled *Accents and Rebounds* that incorporates down and up strokes. These added stroke types use smaller muscle groups and are typically done after playing *Stick Control*. Many of the percussionists interviewed, including Eric Willie, adhere to this progression. “Whenever I’m through [with *Stick Control*], [I do] a couple of variations of *Accents and Rebounds*.” Similar to *Stick Control*, Willie only does the first page of exercises, page four, and does it at the same tempo. He only has to do it for “five minutes [to get his] blood flowing.”[^36]

John Lane also starts his snare drum warm-up with *Stick Control*, but then moves to another commonly used book, *Wrist Twisters* by Buster Bailey, to work on his “shaping.” He finds that this book is great for working on “subtle changes of velocity and dynamics.” Next, Lane moves to exercises that incorporate smaller muscle groups. “I will work on rolls, both soft and loud, and then connect them together. Then I will work on ornaments.”[^37]

[^37]: John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Ornaments are a type of rudiment and are saved for the end of Lane’s warm-up because they require the smallest muscle groups. Rudiments are the fundamental building blocks of snare drum vocabulary, much like scales and arpeggios are for mallets. If all the rudiments are perfected, the player will be able to learn music more quickly because most snare drum pieces are simply lines of rudiments linked together. For this reason, Brett Dietz always incorporates rudiments into his snare drum warm-up routine as well. “Pretty much on a daily basis, I play all my rudiments slow to fast to slow.”

Similar to the trend seen in the mallet warm-ups, many of the percussionists interviewed prescribe to only a few standard snare drum books. Michael Udow, however, is different from the rest in that he uses “a compilation of etudes from a variety of different method books . . . In a way, it is kind of my personal mini-course pack,” said Udow. This adds interest to the warm-up experience and allows Udow to select his favorite exercises for each stroke type or rudiment.

Brian Zator believes that having a diverse warm-up routine provides the best and most enjoyable warm-up. For this reason, he uses Jeff Queen’s Ten Minute Warmup. “It’s literally ten minutes and goes through all the basic stroke types. It includes grid exercises, flams, drags, and concludes with some triplet exercises.” In addition, it includes a ten minute play-along track that keeps the player on task and entertained. Queen’s Ten Minute Warmup was the inspiration behind Zator’s play-along tracks that he created for his mallet exercises.

38 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
40 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Warm-ups on Timpani

Among the percussionists interviewed, timpani warm-up routines were very similar to snare drum warm-up routines. Following the trend established by both mallet and snare drum warm-ups, timpani routines were typically structured according to stroke types and technical elements such as tuning, rolling, and muffling.

Christopher Deane, James Campbell, and Michael Udow all use timpani warm-ups that are extremely similar to their snare drum warm-ups. Deane said that his timpani warm-up is “virtually the same” as what he does “on a practice pad for snare drum . . . Of late, I’ve been using the Accents and Rebounds patterns at the bottom of the pages.”41 Likewise, Campbell said his timpani warm-up routine was basically “the same” as his snare drum warm-up. He does “wrist-relaxed eighths” and other “floppy movements [that use] big muscle groups.”42 Similarly, Udow warms-up with “flowing sixteenth notes” and other exercises that use motions that “aren’t mechanical but fluid.”43 All of these methods focus on a loose and relaxed stroke that uses large muscle groups.

John Tafoya’s timpani warm-up, although not always the same from day to day, focuses more on technical elements and incorporates some of the smaller muscle groups. He typically does “short etudes or exercises”44 from Saul Goodman’s Modern Method for

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41 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
43 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
44 John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
Tympani, or creates his own exercises that isolate specific techniques such as rolling or muffling.

One of the challenges of doing technical exercises on timpani is the inconsistent set-up. Timpani are typically shared in a communal practice room and since each drum can be moved independently from the rest, the positioning of the drums may be slightly different each time they are played. For this reason, Julie Licata spends a portion of her timpani warm-up time “to figure out where the instruments are [and] reacquaint”\textsuperscript{45} herself with the set-up.

Technique and accuracy-based warm-ups are an important part of every player’s development and although they may not forever remain part of their daily routine, it is essential that every player spends a period of their life using this method. Mastery of an instrument is impossible without dedicating quality time perfecting fundamental strokes and techniques. These skills allow for better execution and enable the player to fully express him or herself without being hindered by technical deficiencies.

\textbf{~ III. Music-based Warm-ups ~}

The benefits of technique and accuracy-based warm-ups are clear, especially for players who are earlier in their development. While some people genuinely enjoy the methodical routine of technique and accuracy-based warm-ups, for others, the monotony of repetition can be painfully boring. Brian Zator’s play-along tracks are one solution for dealing with

\textsuperscript{45} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
this issue, however, many others would rather abandon technique and accuracy-based exercises all together. For that reason, eleven of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed use warm-up routines that are based on musical material. It should be noted, that all eleven percussionists were quick to admit that they had previously spent large periods of their life warming-up using technique and accuracy-based exercises, and in fact, many of them still do a combination of both.

Andy Harnsberger’s warm-up routine is largely technique and accuracy-based but he always saves time at the end for a music-based exercises. “Always at the end of my routine I have five or ten minutes where I focus on one particular technique from a piece that I’m working on. It might be giving me problems or just something I want to isolate for that period of time,”46 said Harnsberger. Mark Ford also dedicates the end of his warm-up sessions to music-based exercises. He spends the first portion of his warm-up improvising, but then moves to technical exercises “based on pieces that [he’s] preparing at the time.”47 When doing technique and accuracy-based warm-ups that aren’t related to the music, it can feel as though valuable practice time is being wasted. Although fundamental technique is extremely important, there comes a point in the player’s development when that does not need to be worked on every day.

Music-based warm-ups are categorized as any type of routine that involves elements of a piece of music. The line between technique based warm-ups and music-based warm-ups is often blurred due to the fact that many of the stroke types practiced during technique

46 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
47 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
and accuracy-based warm-ups are naturally occurring in the compositional language. This often results in a warm-up routine that straddles both categories. For example, exercises containing buzz rolls are often a part of technique and accuracy-based warm-ups but buzz rolls are widely used in the snare drum repertoire. Jason Baker described such a situation. “If I’m doing something that uses a lot of buzz rolls and stuff, I have my own buzz roll exercise that I use.”

Often times, while working on a piece of music, technical deficiencies are revealed. Warming up with deficient techniques from a piece of music is a great way to fill in the player’s ‘technical holes’ while maximizing productivity. For this reason, Brian Nozny always spends time during his warm-up session looking at whatever he is “learning or playing” to find spots that give him technical troubles. Then he creates his warm-up around those technical issues. For instance, when Nozny was working on Merlin by Andrew Thomas, he spent a lot of time warming up with “scales and octaves.”

Omar Carmenates varies from Nozny and others in that he likes to create exercises based on “certain licks” from the piece. Instead of practicing the technique independent of the music using standard exercises, Carmenates creates an exercise from the lick itself. For example, when working on Chameleon by Eric Sammut, Omar discovered that there was a “2-1-2-3-4-3 sextuplet run” that he couldn’t do at tempo so he incorporated it into his daily routine. “I would warm-up with that permutation every time.”

49 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
50 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Similarly, Matthew Duvall takes whatever musical passage is giving him trouble at the time and “turns it into an exercise.” In addition to being incredibly efficient, this method creates a much more interesting and engaging warm-up. It forces the player to compose or arrange exercises based on the musical material, thus improving their creativity and compositional skills. “I’m warming up my brain at the same time as I’m warming up my hands, and also addressing some of the techniques that are maybe specific to those pieces,” said Jason Baker, who also uses this method.

Six of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed use music-based warm-ups in a totally different way. They eliminate exercises altogether and warm-up by playing the music as written but at a much slower tempo. John Parks is one who uses this method and describes it as “really slow practice of whatever it is that I’m working on.” Even though Parks is playing the music down tempo, he tries to maintain all of the musical elements.

> If I’m playing Bach, I actually warm up by playing through Bach really slow, but with everything in place. All the lines that I want to bring out and everything sounds the way I want it to sound. The only difference between that and actually being on stage is the tempo.

Parks admits that since discovering this way of warming up he doesn’t do “real warm-ups anymore . . . I mostly just warm-up by playing the music that I play.” He finds that this method maximizes his practice time because his warm-up becomes practicing the music.

When using this method, the player must be careful that they don’t transition into the ‘practicing’ portion too quickly. Since the only distinction between warm-up material and

practice material is tempo, it can be very easy to make the transition prematurely. “I’m physically making sure that my muscles are doing what they need to do in order not to hurt myself and to do what I need to do with some consistency,” said Parks.

Matthew Duvall also advocated warming-up in this manner but warns that the player must do “things really slowly and thoughtfully [and not] just charge in playing [the] loudest and fastest stuff.” While Duvall and Parks use this method on a regular basis, Michael Udow only uses it if “there is a crunch.” When Udow lacks time, he goes straight to his repertoire and “play(s) under tempo fluidly.” Gordon Stout agrees, as long as it is done “very, very slowly,” it can be extremely productive when the player has “less time.”

Blake Tyson said his practice time is much more limited than it used to be and he doesn’t have time to warm-up the same way he did as a student. He strongly believes in warming up, but has found the most productive use of his time is playing the things he “need(s) to learn.” Omar Carmenates also likes to learn a new piece of music while warming up. When using this method, Carmenates advised playing “licks really slow” so that they still function as a warm-up. Carmenates’ process for learning a new piece of music is extremely slow and methodical anyway, so using this as his warm-up routine fits him quite naturally.

53 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
55 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
56 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
57 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
58 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Michael Burritt also uses music-based warm-ups, but he doesn’t always play what he’s working on.

*I like to play something musical to warm-up. Maybe a Bach chorale, an adagio from one of the Bach sonatas, or one of my pieces like “The Offering.” Something simple but something that makes me think musically. Along with trying to get my hands moving, I’m trying to get myself into the sound of the instrument and thinking musically.*

Warming up with a familiar piece of music can be extremely enjoyable. Unfortunately, musicians seldom have the time to play music purely for enjoyment without thinking about how to make it better or how soon it has to be performed. For this reason, warming up with a familiar piece can positively affect the emotional environment of the entire practice session. Playing a piece that the player knows and loves, builds confidence in their technical and musical abilities and can energize their entire practice session.

Another great music-based warm-up is sight-reading. This method, which is regularly utilized by three of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, automatically incorporates this much-needed task (sight-reading) into one’s daily routine. Payton MacDonald sight-reads “Bach for a good fifteen to twenty minutes . . . every day” and finds it to be extremely productive, yet enjoyable.

Michael Udow also “likes to read as a warm-up” but does it on snare drum. He typically uses Morris Goldenberg’s book, *Modern School for Snare Drum*, and reads the simple

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60 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
duets. “I’ll play the top line with my right hand and the bottom one with my left hand.” Besides being a good reading challenge, he finds that it focuses “on the stroke types in terms of downs, ups, taps, and fulls.”

~ IV. Improvisation and Theory-based Warm-ups ~

It is important to have fun in the practice room, but most of the time, circumstances don’t allow for these feelings. If practicing correctly, there should be very little down time, and most of the time should be spent doing focused and diligent work. In Geoffrey Colvin’s book, Talent is Overrated, he states, “practice is not inherently enjoyable. If it seems a bit depressing that the most important thing you can do to improve performance is no fun, take consolation in this fact.”

According to Eric Willie, during a lesson with Christopher Deane, Deane compared practicing to being in prison.

> When I walk into the practice room, I imagine I’m in prison. I’m here for two hours. I can do nothing else. But hey, look, I’ve got a snare drum in front of me, and I’ve got some sticks, and I’ve got this book and I’ve got a metronome. So I could sit here and stare at the wall for two hours or I could practice. So I might as well practice.

Technique and accuracy-based warm-ups as well as some music-based warm-ups can feel monotonous and boring and even conjure up feelings of imprisonment. For this reason, it

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61 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
63 Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
is easy to mentally check out and resort to autopilot. When this happens, the muscles may still get warmed up, but the brain does not and productivity stagnates.

For those reasons, some musicians prefer improvisation and theory-based warm-ups, which require the brain to be engaged the entire time, resulting in a more intellectually challenging and stimulating warm-up.

“I like to be inventive and sort of improvise too because it’s more fun that way,” 64 said Gary Cook when describing his warm-up routine. Cook’s routine is fairly normal in that he does technique and accuracy-based exercises, but he is unique in that he does not have a set of standard exercises. He finds it more fun to improvise his own based on a particular stroke type. This accomplishes the same goals as technique and accuracy-based warm-ups but promotes creativity and keeps his mind engaged, making the warm-up experience much more enjoyable.

Mark Ford also improvises, but does it in a much freer manner. Every day, his warm-up “starts off with improvisation” and may continue for “ten minutes or thirty minutes.” 65 Unlike Cook, Ford does not base his improvisations around technical exercises. Instead, it is a free improvisation that has no restrictions or limitations. This allows for total freedom of expression and works on his improvisational skills.

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64 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
65 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
As classical musicians, the opportunities to improvise can feel few and far between, and as a result, many players lack both experience and confidence. Warming up with improvisation is a great way to experiment and practice this often-neglected skill.

Of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, five regularly utilize improvisation and theory-based warm-ups and it should be noted that nearly all are internationally recognized composers. This speaks to the skills that are developed when doing improvisation on a daily basis. Just like anything, the only way to improve is by practicing. “Everyone has some ability to discover music inside himself. Even if you’ve never done so before, you might like to explore the composer with you,” says Barry Green in his book, *The Inner Game of Music*. “When I improvise, I strengthen my connection with my own musicality and can bring an increased spontaneity and freshness to my performances.”

Gordon Stout frequently improvises during his warm-ups and credits this time as the source of many of his compositional ideas. Unlike Ford, Stout doesn’t treat this time as a free improvisation. He always starts with technique and accuracy-based exercises, but that “often leads to improvising and coming up with ideas for pieces.” Usually this departure from technical exercises occurs while doing “double vertical strokes in both hands.” Like Cook, he doesn’t have pre-determined exercises, so when he starts

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working on double verticals, he is free to “explore different kinds of harmonies and structures . . . That’s not often my specific intent, it just kind of happens sometimes.”  

While improvising over harmonic progressions can develop compositional ideas, it can also be used to improve the player’s fluency with music theory. This can be achieved simply by transposing pre-existing technique and accuracy-based exercises. For example, Brian Nozny plays block chords in root position and cycles them through the inversions until he returns to root position an octave up. Then he transposes it chromatically and goes through all twelve keys.  

William Moersch also likes to transpose his warm-up exercises through all twelve keys. He has a “mode exercise” which he transposes through “all twelve keys in a continuous stream.” In addition to improving the player’s music theory and improvisational skills, improvisation and theory-based warm-ups are a great way to engage the brain and keep the player constantly thinking ahead. Whether processing the next transposition or trying to think of a new thematic idea, this type of warm-up not only readies the body and mind, but improves the player’s musical knowledge.

~ Warm-up Length ~

There are many different ways to warm-up and each method serves various purposes. While the ultimate goal is to prepare the body and mind to play, there are many other

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67 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
68 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
69 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
skills that can be acquired during this time. With so many benefits, how long should these warm-ups last?

Warm-up time is often proportional to the overall length of time allotted to practice. Michael Burritt’s warm-up is dictated by the specific “day and the amount of time to practice.” Others have fixed length warm-ups, and there is a wide range among the many examples mentioned here. For instance, Mark Ford used to do “technique a minimum of forty-five minutes to an hour a day,” while Kevin Bobo always uses the same “twenty-five minute” routine, and Brain Zator currently warms-up for “ten minutes.”

Others interviewed said they have multiple warm-up routines, which are selected based on the situation. For instance, Ben Wahlund has “two types of warm ups . . . a short one for short to medium practice sessions and a long one for extensive practice sessions.” Sometimes warm-ups have to be incredibly short due to outside factors. Brian Zator for instance, has “a couple of exercises” that gets him ready to go “in about three minutes.”

**Little or No Warm-up**

A warm-up of just three-minutes might seem too short to be effective, but for some people, their body does not require as much time as most. John Lane said his body

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71 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
72 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
73 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
“doesn’t need to warm up too much . . . [He] can play a little stick control [and be] ready to go.”\textsuperscript{75} Brian Mason has similar sentiments, particularly when schedules don’t allow time for it, saying, “In most cases, through limited practice time, I jump right in.”\textsuperscript{76}

Sometimes the need and length of warm-ups depend on the instrument. Frederic Macarez said he rarely “warms-up before anything” because he feels that “it’s not really necessary on the timpani.”\textsuperscript{77}

When preparing for orchestral auditions, some players purposely omit their warm-up routines. John Tafoya has found that at orchestral auditions, there is usually not an “opportunity to do a warm-up routine.”\textsuperscript{78} So to best prepare for this scenario, Tafoya will eliminate his warm-up routine from his audition preparation.

\textit{~ Conclusion ~}

The primary function of warming up is to prepare the body and mind to play. While all four categories are significantly different in their approach and focus, each one of them has unique benefits. Each category can be used independently, but many of the categories are most effective when overlapped or used in tandem. Each player should explore and test all of the different types of warm-ups to discover which methods work best for them.

\textsuperscript{75} John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\textsuperscript{76} Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
\textsuperscript{77} Frederic Macarez, personal interview, 27 Oct. 2012.
\textsuperscript{78} John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
For younger players, technique and accuracy-based warm-ups are essential for their development and progress and should be taken extremely seriously. For more advanced players, especially those who struggle to find enough hours in the day to practice, music-based warm-ups are ideal for maximizing time. Improvisation and theory-based warm-ups seem to be utilized the least by classical percussionists. While these skills are arguably less important for the performing classical percussionist, for this reason, many percussionists have severe deficiencies in these areas. The ability to improvise proficiently is a crucial skill that most upper echelon players possess. Contrastingly, this is an apparent weakness for many amateur level musicians. Having the technical facility and theoretical understanding to improvise on one’s instrument is a fundamental skill that all musicians should possess. For this reason, improvisation and theory-based warm-ups should be a part of every percussionist’s warm-up vocabulary.

Regardless of which method or methods are chosen, it is important to properly prepare the body and mind to avoid injury and maximize productivity. While this should remain the priority, warm-up time should not be wasted. Warm-ups are a time to develop and polish a variety of fundamental skills and should not be neglected.
### Figure 15: Survey – Warming-Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Kinesthetic Warm-Ups</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are your feet and hands usually colder than the rest of your body?</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a history of percussion related injuries?</td>
<td>A2, A3, A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it take you a long time to feel warmed up?</td>
<td>A1, A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you experience muscle soreness after a long practice session?</td>
<td>A2, A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you experience a lot of stiffness in your wrists?</td>
<td>A1, A2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Technique and Accuracy-based Warm-Ups: Mallets</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a beginner or intermediate level player?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could your technique use some improvement?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy music theory?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you interested in jazz and improvising?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you primarily play two-mallet repertoire?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you primarily play four-mallet repertoire?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Technique and Accuracy-based Warm-Ups: Snare</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a beginner?</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you get bored easily?</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you primarily play rudimental repertoire?</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you wish you could play faster?</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Technique and Accuracy-based Warm-Ups: Timpani</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a beginner or intermediate level player?</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you struggle with intonation?</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time producing consistent sounds?</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel comfortable sight-reading on timpani?</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E. Music-Based Warm-Ups</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is your practice time limited?</td>
<td>E1, E2, E3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you unable to execute certain technical passages in your current repertoire?</td>
<td>E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any auditions approaching?</td>
<td>E5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly select repertoire that pushes your technical abilities?</td>
<td>E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time transitioning from your daily activities to practice mode?</td>
<td>E4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dislike warming-up?</td>
<td>E3, E4, E5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you currently learning a new piece of music?</td>
<td>E2, E3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F. Improvisation and Theory-Based Warm-Ups</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you inexperienced at improvising?</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy music theory?</td>
<td>F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you an experienced composer?</td>
<td>F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like jazz?</td>
<td>F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you work best with clear and detailed instructions and goals?</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dislike following directions?</td>
<td>F2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 16: Outline – Warming-Up**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Kinesthetic Warm-Ups</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stretch Muscles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Warm Water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Muscle Message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Technique and Accuracy-Based Warm-Ups: Mallets</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Strokes Types</td>
<td>68-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Scales and Arpeggios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Technique and Accuracy-Based Warm-Ups: Snare</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Stone Exercises</td>
<td>74-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rudiments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Technique and Accuracy-Based Warm-Ups: Timpani</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Stroke Types</td>
<td>77-78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Short Etudes and Exercises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E. Music-Based Warm-Ups</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Technical Exercise Based on Musical Material</td>
<td>78-84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Down-Tempo Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learn New Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Set-Piece</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sight-Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Improvisation and Theory-Based Warm-Ups</strong></td>
<td>84-87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Improvisation Based on Stroke Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Free Improvisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Improvisation Based on Harmonic Progressions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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CHAPTER 5: LEARNING NEW MUSIC

~ Overview of the Piece ~

Receiving a new piece of music to learn and play typically evokes a wide variety of emotions in musicians. There may be excitement over the opportunity to learn a long-anticipated piece of music or anxiety about the challenge of something unfamiliar and daunting. The time available to learn a new piece can vary greatly, and almost always impacts reactions. For instance, is the piece to be played tomorrow, next week, or in six months? The function of the piece is also a factor. Is it for a solo recital or an orchestra concert? Is it part of the standard repertoire or a world premiere? The genre of music and the instrumentation both add additional considerations, challenges, and expectations. All of these circumstances combined affect the way one goes about learning a new piece of music.

Each of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed have developed their own general approaches to learning new music. Their specific methods may be altered depending on the particular circumstances, but most of their individual philosophies remain consistent regardless of the piece, time available, function, genre, and instrument.
Nearly all percussionists interviewed agreed that the first step to learning a new piece of music is to gain a general understanding and overview and identify areas of greatest importance. Blake Tyson believes that understanding the big picture is necessary to determine where he “wants to go with the piece,”1 while Payton MacDonald finds that revealing the general architecture makes it easier for him to “hone in on the important details.”2

It is always the job of the performer to present the audience with their finest interpretation of a given composition and a thorough understanding is essential when presenting it in a musically informed manner. In Garald Klickstein’s book The Musician’s Way, he describes it as being a “storyteller, you lead an audience through the narrative of a piece.”3 According to William Moersch, this requires presenting the audience with a “hierarchy” of musical material, in essence telling them “this is the important stuff. Hang on to this. This is transition. This is not so important. Uncovering the important details on the surface provides a clearer idea of the more subtle elements disguised beneath.”4 John Lane believes that this makes it possible to bring out the more “creative and abstract ideas”5 that would otherwise be lost.

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1 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
2 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
4 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
5 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
This initial overview of new music can be done in three distinct ways:

1. Sight-Reading on the Instrument
2. Studying the Score Away from the Instrument
3. Listening to a Recording of the Piece.

Sight-Reading on the Instrument

Sight-reading on the instrument is the preferred method to learn new music for twelve of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed. The most obvious challenge with this method is the difficulty of sight-reading more advanced literature. Few musicians possess the ability to sight-read a piece for the first time accurately and at tempo. As a result, most initially read it at a much slower tempo. James Campbell usually reads through pieces at half tempo, and sometimes even slower, since his initial goal is to “play the whole thing with correct rhythms, dynamics, and good tone quality.” In extreme cases, sometimes the first read-through must be broken down beat-by-beat or measure-by-measure. For instance, that was the method used by Payton MacDonald when he first learned commissioned works by both Stuart Saunders Smith and Charles Wuorinen.

Some percussionists interviewed described even more unusual sight-reading methods they utilize when learning extremely complex music. Gordon Stout said he resorts to sight-reading new percussion pieces on the piano, as he finds it easier to use “ten fingers instead of four mallets.” In contrast, Brian Mason simply abandons the pursuit of

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7 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
8 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
perfection. He refers to his first sight-reading as a “slop-through,“ reading it as close to
tempo as possible with little emphasis on accuracy. He finds that method helps him
uncover all the trouble spots in the music, which aren’t always initially identifiable when
the music is played at a much slower tempo.

Studying Away from the Instrument

Frederic Macarez also stresses the importance of reading through the piece to understand
every aspect of the music and identify complicated sections, but he studies the score
away from the instrument before playing it. Another who subscribes to this method is
Ben Wahlund, who stated, “I will do a substantial amount of score study, including
‘mental practice’ in a particularly vivid mindset, [before] spending adequate time at the
instrument.”

Macarez and Wahlund aren’t alone in their thinking, as eighteen of the thirty-six
percussionists interviewed utilize similar first steps when learning new music. This seems
to validate the benefits of a score study but also raises the question, what exactly
constitutes a score study? Is it a harmonic analysis? Is it a formal analysis? Is it a
technical breakdown of stroke types or is it an identification of phrase structures? The list
of possibilities is endless.

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9 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
Robert Schietroma suggests that the important thematic ideas in the score be identified first, followed by locating cadential points. Ideally, this should provide a rough idea of the general phrase structure and formal sections. Brian Nozny said he starts his score study, whenever the piece allows, with a rough harmonic analysis to identify key centers. He finds this information especially useful when memorizing the piece later because the harmonic labels provide another level of association, giving logical groupings to an otherwise random collection of notes. Thomas Burritt takes Schietroma’s and Nozny’s approaches a step further. He undertakes a full formal analysis to try and understand how each phrase and section fits into the larger formal context. William Moersch also completes a formal analysis, but in a very unusual way:

*The first thing I would generally do is un-bind or copy it so I can spread all the pages out on the floor. This enables me to see the entire piece in one glance. I actually sit in a chair and look at it and really try to study the overall piece as carefully as possible. I try to gain an understanding of the structure of the piece and how it works and how it’s put together . . . I’m really conscious about the structure of the piece and I try to understand that fully before going into the details too much further.*

Once Moersch believes he fully understands the composition from a formal perspective, he gradually zooms in until he “understands every single detail.” At this point, he believes “you are halfway into the process.” Now it is necessary to “extract yourself and come back out again to the surface level because that’s what you’re presenting to the audience.” Moersch explains that the final step of his process is to orchestrate each passage, based on its formal function and character:

*I would orchestrate just about everything in a solo marimba piece. I’d say, ‘Now if this was the orchestra, which instruments are playing and how are
they playing? Is this pizzicato strings with a solo oboe? Is this a cello section? I was constantly thinking about the orchestral color and how something would be orchestrated. Then I turn back around and say, ‘This is what that sounds like. How can I get that sound out of the marimba? How can I make it sound like the pizzicato cello? How can I make it sound like an oboe?’

Listening to Recordings

The third method of gaining an initial understanding and overview of a piece is by listening to a recording of it. This method can be combined with the second method by following along with the score as you listen. Thomas Burritt believes this method is the best way to gauge the difficulty of a piece. Further, there are times when a video recording of the piece has clear advantages over audio recordings. For instance, most composers are not percussionists and certain phrases of music may be awkward or non-idiomatic. What may look easy on the page or sound easy in an audio recording may in fact prove to be very difficult or awkward to play, especially at the written tempo. Listening carefully to a recording may shed light on these difficult passages, but watching a video is often a better indicator.

Of the percussionists interviewed, the length of time spent familiarizing themselves with the general form and structure of the piece varied greatly. Some spend only their first practice session reviewing the piece as a whole, and others spend significantly more time. While Brian Mason does a quick ‘slop through’ of a piece, people like William Moersch may spend days analyzing it.

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11 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
~ Scheduling Goals ~

Musicians and students alike typically feel the pressure of externally imposed deadlines. To best deal with these deadlines, many of the percussionists interviewed have developed personal routines to effectively learn new music in a limited time frame.

The most commonly used method involves creating a calendar or timeline to ensure steady progress. I-Jen Fang takes a very pragmatic approach and plans every day from the moment she begins learning the piece until it’s first performed. She assigns days to each page or section of the music and keeps track of her progress on a separate piece of paper. For instance, she’ll learn two pages per day for the first two or three days, reserving the fourth for assessment. She uses this method to give herself “some time to learn it, some time to review it.”

Jason Baker utilizes a similar process by mapping out a timeline of what he needs to learn and by when. He is also very careful to leave “a good amount of time [at the end] to get comfortable” with the piece. This method of planning is highly effective, says Don Greene in his book, Performance Success, because “the human brain is a goal-seeking mechanism. It functions best with a progression of clearly envisioned targets.” Planning a learning schedule doesn’t necessarily have to encompass the entire process from day one to the day of performance. Michael Burritt,

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12 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
for instance, sets short-term objectives. “Depending on the amount of time I have, I’ll set
a goal for what I want to learn in that day’s session.”

When learning new music, retention can be fragile. As deadlines approach, there is
usually a tendency to memorize as much music as possible. Taking a few days off while
learning a piece is typically detrimental to the learning process, as it often results in
regression. Omar Carmenates finds this especially true in his own playing and has found
that “frequency is more important than time” spent. He would much rather spend an
hour each day than eight hours once a week. According to Gerald Klickstein’s book, The
Musician’s Way, “your artistic evolution is best served by steady, judicious practice.”
This seems like common sense, but busy and inconsistent schedules often lead down
other paths. Carmenates stresses the importance of this simple concept to his students
every semester through an annual experiment:

I have a freshman percussion class, so every year I take a Ford Etude or a
Goldenberg Etude and split the class in half. I say, ‘OK, Group A, you
have one three hour practice session to learn it.’ For Group B, I’ll split
the week up and say, ‘You have forty-five minutes every day to learn it
before class next week, starting tomorrow.’ And invariably it always
works out that the group that did forty-five minutes every day instead of
three hours in one day learns it better. Even though they’ve done it in the
same amount of time. You either use it or lose it.

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16 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
17 Gerald Klickstein, The Musician’s Way: A Guide to Practice, Performance, and Wellness, (New York,
NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.
Music unfolds chronologically in a performance, and the order in which the composer places various musical elements like themes, cadences, and dynamics play a vital role in the development and flow of the piece. Although the performer would never dare stray from the prescribed order of events in a performance, he does have complete freedom in the practice rooms to learn the piece in any order.

It might be assumed that the most logical and efficient place to start would be the beginning, but less than a third of the percussionists interviewed learn music in this manner. Instead, some learn music back to front, starting at the end of the piece and working their way back to the beginning. Others take a preemptive approach by starting with the hardest material first. One of those interviewed had a totally unique method. He approached it from a purely analytical perspective, learning music based on the formal structure.

**Learning Beginning to End**

Learning a piece of music from beginning to end is the most traditional method. In many ways, it seems the most natural since most things in everyday life are also chronologically organized. Further, whenever a piece of music is performed, listened to, or studied, it is typically done in this order. For these reasons, learning music chronologically seems to make perfect sense.
Steven Schick uses this method because he finds that “by learning a piece in order, the natural dramatic flow of the music from beginning to end can be experienced in very slow motion during the learning process.” Learning material in the correct order emphasizes the occurrence of events and helps develop an understanding of how the composition unfolds thematically. Unlike many of the musicians interviewed, Schick does not “gloss over the whole piece and then go back and work it up again . . . [He never even] sight-reads ahead to see what things will sound like.”\(^{18}\) Instead, he simply starts at the beginning and learns one bar at a time from beginning to end. Payton MacDonald also uses this method, but cautions that after learning each bar in isolation, putting them together can present difficulties. “It is a new rewiring of the brain when you put them together and it must be slowed down again.”\(^{19}\)

A regular process should be used to piece together small sections of learned material. Michael Burritt always goes back a “passage or a phrase or two before the new material and [tries] to add that to the stuff previously learned.” Burritt uses this system of contextual review throughout the practice session, as well at the beginning and end of each day. “At the end of the session, I’ll go back and go to the beginning of the piece . . . and make sure that I can [bring the new stuff I’ve learned] into the mix. At the beginning of every successive session, I go back [and play all the way through] to build continuity.”\(^{20}\)


\(^{19}\) Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.

Returning to the beginning of the piece and playing through all of the material learned up to that point ensures that the music learned yesterday or last week is retained and applied contextually. This repetition establishes a level of continuity, which results in a “weird phenomenon . . . the piece becomes smaller.” In the beginning, the piece seems long and intricate with hundreds of contrasting ideas and subtle nuances. However, at some point, it starts to shrink in size. Suddenly it is perceived as a much shorter and simpler composition. Burritt views this “as a sign that you are getting close.” This change in perception indicates a better grasp and understanding of the piece and a transition from simply recalling a string of pieced together sections to one continuous stream of thought.

**Learning End to Beginning**

If musicians are asked to choose one measure in a piece that they know the best and feel most comfortable playing, many would choose bar number one. Why is that? Is it because it’s been known the longest? Is it because it was the starting point for most practice sessions? Or is it how we aurally identify the composition? Most likely all three are contributing factors. This simple example often represents the musician’s attitude of the piece as a whole. The beginning is usually strong, comfortable, and familiar. But typically, the musician’s accuracy, confidence, and comfort gradually diminish as the piece progresses. Is that how the performance should end? Shouldn’t the last thing played be the most confident and memorable?

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Learning a piece from the end and working backwards towards the beginning can help solve these problems and often fixes other unrelated issues. Paul Rennick is a big proponent of this method. He uses it in his own playing as well as with the ensembles he directs. He believes this method is successful due to the simple fact that “you are always approaching more familiar music.” Learning music from beginning to end, you are “constantly departing music that you have prepared more, [moving] into the unknown and the less familiar.” Rennick points out that this typically occurs because “you start at the first measure and go until you make a mistake, then you go back to the first measure [and do it again].” Another benefit to this method is that it results in “a more natural direction” of the music. Every time a new section or phrase is learned, the player understands where it is leading and how it will be resolved. This enables the player to make informed musical decisions from the start.

Eric Willie uses a similar method in his own playing and with his percussion ensembles. Willie adds a slight variation by starting at the hardest section, working to the end, and then working backwards to the beginning. Coincidentally, this usually results in starting near the end anyway, since it is common for compositions to gradually gain complexity and difficulty towards the end as themes are developed and expanded upon. Willie has found that when this method is correctly implemented, his endings are “always strong.”

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22 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
This method of starting at the end and working backwards doesn’t always have to be applied to the piece as a whole. Robert Schietroma “practice[s] phrases from the end to the beginning”\(^\text{24}\) and believes it establishes increased security as he progresses through the piece.

**Learning Hardest Sections First**

All musicians have experienced moments before or during a performance when they ask themselves, ‘I wonder how that spot is going to go today?’ Every piece of music has certain licks or passages that are significantly more difficult than the rest of the work. Whether these challenges are for technical or musical reasons, they are usually evident early on in the learning process.

According to Christopher Deane, “these spots aren’t hard, they are just time consuming.”\(^\text{25}\) Preparation is always a race against time, which is why so many of the percussionists interviewed start learning the hardest material first. Brian Mason compares this process to cooking a meal. “Whatever is going to take the longest to cook, I start first. So at the end, everything is hot at the same time.”\(^\text{26}\)

Joshua Smith often finds that he spends eighty percent of his time working on a few isolated sections and the remaining twenty percent of his time on the rest of the piece. Therefore he always learns the “hard stuff first, knowing that [he’ll] get the easy stuff

\(^{24}\) Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\(^{25}\) Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
\(^{26}\) Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
later on.” By front-loading the hardest material, “I’m not taxing myself at the end when it gets down to the eleventh hour and I have to perform it,” said Smith.

Andy Harnsberger also learns music in this fashion but is much more systematic in his approach. After examining the shape and form of the piece, Harnsberger divides the piece into sections according to difficulty. He then labels these various sections using red, yellow, and green Post-it Notes. “Red sections are the ones that I have to start working on now because it is going to take me six weeks to get it. Yellow is stuff that isn’t going to take me as long, and green is stuff that I can already play and don’t need to work on”28 This simple labeling process prioritizes the material and provides a clear approach to learning the piece. It can be difficult to stay disciplined and avoid gravitating towards the easier material, however, this method provides clear visual reminders of what should be worked on and is a rewarding way to track progress.

Since this method requires learning the piece out of order, it’s sometimes easy to neglect practicing the transitions between sections. Brian Zator uses a “macro-micro-macro approach”29 to address this issue. Starting on the macro level, Zator first identifies all of the hardest ‘red’ spots. He then jumps down to the micro level and proceeds to learn all the difficult passages. He then moves back to the macro level, learning all the transitions into and out of the ‘red’ passages. This process is then repeated using the ‘yellow’ sections. If this method is done properly, by the time the ‘green’ sections are incorporated, the entire piece, including transitions, should be learned.

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27 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
28 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
29 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Matthew Duvall also learns music starting with the hardest material first. However, he does it for entirely different reasons. “Often I’m working on material that is pretty new and so I am looking at the part to find problematic material that I need to go back to the composer to work out.”

**Learning Based on Form**

One percussionist interviewed, Thomas Burritt, learns new music based on the formal construction of the piece. His explanation of this process and reasoning behind it is compelling and it’s surprising that not more of the musicians interviewed use this method.

As discussed previously, understanding the formal structure of a piece can prove extremely helpful when first learning it. Understanding the form and function of the notes results in a much more clear and purposeful portrayal of the composition. For this reason, a formal analysis is Thomas Burritt’s first step when learning a new piece of music. This “really helps your interpretation . . . because you understand the work from a very general standpoint.” It also provides a “bird’s eye view of what’s going to be difficult or less difficult.” Instead of just learning notes on a page, this method highlights how the notes fit into the larger context. The human brain learns better when it can recognize patterns. Edwin Gordon supports this in his book, *Learning Sequences in Music*. “Patterns, not

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31 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
isolated sounds, are the compelling font of content and context in music.” Much like how “in language, letters are grouped to form words . . . [to give] linguistic syntax . . . individual pitches are grouped into tonal patterns [to] provide the basis for context.”

According to Thomas Burritt, understanding how thematic material is transposed, developed, and altered results in the quickest absorption. Burritt explained that when learning *Night Rhapsody* by John Serry, his formal analysis revealed a sonata form. As a result, he learned the development section last to aid in his understanding of how the themes and tonal areas were being manipulated and developed.

When learning a new piece of music, there are few things more helpful than the discovery of repetition. Learning a piece according to its formal elements provides the earliest detection of such patterns and may show relationships between seemingly dissimilar material.

As stated above, there are many different approaches to learning new music and each has its benefits. The learning style of the individual combined with the challenges unique to each piece, may influence which method should be chosen. Each person interviewed believed strongly in his/her method for very specific reasons and this diversity provides musicians with plenty of options to explore.

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Learn Correctly

The order in which a new piece of music is learned is only one aspect of the learning process. The musicians interviewed had widely varying philosophies, idiosyncrasies, and approaches, and did not have as many commonalities as might be expected. However, one trend that did emerge in nearly every interview was the strong inclination to learn the material correctly the first time.

Music is a form of emotional expression that provides musicians an opportunity to make each performance a one-of-a-kind experience. Achieving a unique voice is the result of thousands of decisions made primarily during the preparation leading up to the performance. Some of those decisions can be made spontaneously during the performance, but most are pre-meditated and carefully considered beforehand.

With percussion instruments, decisions concerning stickings are routinely made. Sticking choices are very carefully considered and are influenced by musical elements such as articulation and style and physical elements such as technique and set-ups.

When playing a piece that requires multiple percussion instruments, most set-ups are not fixed or pre-determined. Rather, there is usually complete freedom in the way the
instruments are arranged. Matthew Duvall said he finds it crucial to determine his set-up early in the process, so his stickings can be selected and solidified from day one.

Like fingerings on a woodwind, brass or string instrument, stickings play a huge role in the muscle memory of a passage. For this reason, it is so important to pick the ‘right’ sticking the first time the piece is learned, so it does not have to be un-learned later. When learning a new piece, Julie Licata always spends a significant amount of time determining the best stickings. Choosing the right sticking the first time allows her to do it “the same way every time,” building “regular muscle memory . . . from the very first steps of learning the music.”

Omar Carmenates said he believes that “with marimba, muscle memory is super important.” Muscle memory on the marimba may determine accuracy more than with any other percussion instrument. As a result, it is extremely important “to inform those neuron pathways the right way the first time. Otherwise it’s harder to undo.”

William Moersch believes that simply training the body to play the piece correctly the first time is not enough. The player must train their body to do it correctly every time. Musicians should “play everything within all of the musical parameters from the very first day, except for the tempo, and keep drilling the idea of always playing it correctly.” Moersch’s concept of mistake free practice is purely dependent upon tempo and the performer might not even “play at a performance tempo until the performance,” explains Moersch. Moersch believes that if the player always strives to play it perfectly, with zero

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33 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
34 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
mistakes, the body becomes trained to only play it one way, the correct way. Mistakes in performances are unlikely because the body doesn’t know how to play it any differently.

When the time comes to finally play the performance, there must be hundreds of correct versions of the piece already filed away in the performer’s physical and mental self. And there should only be one version there, in the file, in the system, and that’s the one that’s going to happen. And the only question is, “How fast would you like it?”

Barry Green, author of *The Mastery of Music*, agrees with Moersch stating that “if you play a passage with the same mistake five times, then once with the mistake corrected, you’ve just practiced your error five times and the correct version once,” leaving the body confused as which version is correct. Paul Rennick has a similar philosophy called the "perfect practice method.” He describes it as altering the tempo so that you “allow yourself to sound good all the time.”

*Given a slow enough tempo, you can learn some really difficult music, and if you give yourself enough time to process in your brain, you can play some really complicated stuff accurately. Then you just become more efficient about your thinking between the notes.*

Both of these methods emphasize doing correct repetitions one hundred percent of the time. In order to achieve this, the tempo must be altered drastically, at least in the beginning. It takes tremendous discipline and patience to stick with this method and see it through to the end but Andy Harnsberger constantly reminds his students that “slower is

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35 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
37 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
faster . . . Take it slower and learn it right the first time so that six weeks from now you
don’t have to unlearn something that you’ve been playing wrong for a long time.”

When using this ‘perfect practice method,’ how should the tempo be determined? John
Tafoya challenges himself to take passages “ten times slower than they need be.” He
believes that “once you’ve done it five-hundred times slow, you can do it at almost any
tempo.” Omar Carmenates’ rule is that it must be slow enough to successfully play “ten
times [in a row.]” Practicing at tremendously slow tempos can be extremely difficult
because most people’s natural tendency is to speed up once they have played it correctly
a few times. Payton MacDonald has found that using a metronome keeps him honest.

My tendency, which I find is true for everyone else, is that I always want
to go too fast. I can hear what it is supposed to sound like but my ears and
my mind and body are not all in alignment for it to happen. I don’t use the
metronome for time sake but to keep me slow. It is hard, slow and
painstaking work.

Practicing slow enough to never make mistakes, results in slower progress than most
people are use to and it can feel as if little or no progress is being made. To help alleviate
this frustration Michael Burritt keeps careful records of his metronome markings. This
enables him to look back and say “Ok, I was doing this on this date,” giving him a
tangible proof of his progress.

38 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
40 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
41 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Rather than using a metronome to track his progress, Matthew Duvall uses hash marks. His system is based on pure repetition. “No matter how easy it is, I’ll do it ten times and I keep track with hash marks.” In addition to engraining the correct muscle memory, Duvall has discovered that this method accomplishes other tasks. Repeating every passage ten times “eliminates the ‘what should I do next?’ question,” keeping him extremely focused, and often revealing small details that would have otherwise been overlooked.

Redundancy gives your mind a chance to focus on a lot of different aspects of that moment, not just the notes. Usually, we play it and say, “These are the right notes” and then move on. But once you have the right notes, that is just the jumping off point for, “Oh, now that I’ve got the right notes I don’t need to pay attention to it and now I can pay attention to the sound. Or I can start paying attention to my sticking. Does it make sense for what is coming up next?

If a section is only played three or four times, any potential issues don’t have “a chance to sink in or expose themselves.”

Although these extremely slow and high volume methods of learning a new piece of music guarantee incredible accuracy, they can also result in some negative characteristics. These methods place nearly one hundred percent of the emphasis on note accuracy, but don’t always account for performance elements such as phrasing, dynamics, timbre, movement, etc. For this reason, James Campbell has taken this same concept and added the element of performance.

I’m moving physically the same way at half tempo as I would at real tempo. So I’m trying to make the same gestures, mallet changes, and

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counting the rests. I’m trying to perform it even if it is half tempo. I’m physically and mentally always in performance mode. I’m not really thinking of it as practice but as performing at half tempo.44

Practicing extremely slowly, while also combining all of the elements of performance, makes a seamless journey from the first practice session to the performance possible. John Parks compares this process to opening a combination lock: “The first time you open up a lock, you are really slow and careful about it to make sure you do it right. As you continue to do it, you get faster and faster, and eventually get to a point where you don’t even think about it. You just go up, do it, and it opens.”45

According to Don Greene in his book, *Performance Success*, developing a passage of music to this same degree, where it can executed effortlessly “using kinesthetic abilities and muscle memory [will] dramatically [increase your] ability to focus in performances.”46 Repetition is an extremely powerful practice tool and if done correctly, has long lasting effects. Using Parks’ analogy, everyone experiences moments in everyday life where the ‘lock combination’ is momentarily forgotten. Then suddenly, without a conscious thought, muscle memory kicks in and it all comes back. Muscle memory like this is incredibly useful in countless ways, but can be equally debilitating if the engrained material is incorrect. Correct input is essential.

Forcing oneself to learn new music at an extremely slow tempo takes tremendous patience, and having the discipline to remain at that tempo to ensure correct repetitions

45 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
every time is even more demanding. Despite that, many percussionists interviewed swear by this process. Jason Baker is among them, saying, “I really believe in learning the entire piece slow first and then bringing the overall tempo up.”

While many heavily praise this method, not all those interviewed learn music in this fashion. “I try to get it to tempo as quickly as I can,” said Mark Ford. While he cautions that this is not always possible when faced with extremely difficult passages, in all other circumstances, Ford believes that getting up to tempo as fast as possible is essential to understanding how to play the piece. You must “get it in the style,” said Ford. His contrasting approach also affects how the piece progresses. With an extremely slow ‘perfect practice method,’ the entire piece is worked up simultaneously. This means that along the way, a performance-quality run-through could theoretically be done, but at a reduced tempo. Mark Ford’s approach is entirely different.

_I like to grab a small chunk of music because my time is limited. I take the premise that if I can learn eight bars, in a manner that if the concert was tonight, I could play those eight bars. I'm going to try and make that first phrase at the right tempo, articulation, dynamics, and sticking. I try to fix everything. It might take thirty minutes, or longer, but the point is I don't have time to rough out a piece and then go back and do those things again. I do them right from the beginning. For me, I feel like I learn the piece quicker that way because I'm dealing with it artistically right from the start, but with small amounts of material: one phrase, four bars, eight bars, or sometimes one bar if it's a really crazy piece. It depends on the music._

48 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
Brian Zator also avoids learning pieces extremely slowly. He tries to play it the first time “as close to tempo” as possible because he feels he can learn the piece quicker that way. Emil Richards completes the ‘tempo spectrum’ by always learning music at tempo. “I try not to slow anything down. I like to play everything where it’s supposed to be, otherwise it takes too long to get there.” Despite that, Emil Richards is widely viewed as one of the most accurate mallet players in history. As a ‘first call’ in the Hollywood film industry, Richards has performed on hundreds of movie sound tracks, commercials, and albums. Obviously, his ability to read through new music at tempo takes a tremendous skill set that most musicians have not yet achieved. The origin of his unique learning method may be a result of his career path, explained Richards: “We don’t see music before we get to a session. At 9am the downbeat comes and we’re playing (recording). So you have to be right on top of it. Trying to slow down and go thru that whole process would slow you down like crazy.”

Eliminate Certain Musical Elements

As with most philosophies and schools of thought, there are contrasting views and methods that are equally compelling and insightful. Christopher Deane’s method, “divide and conquer,” is in direct contrast to the ‘perfect practice methods’ described above. Rather than simplifying the music by means of tempo adjustment, Deane’s process breaks the passage down through the separation of musical elements. Deane recalled a time when he was working on a “wicked piece by Boulez.” He started by first

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49 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
50 Emil Richards, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
playing only “the pitches pictured on the page.” By completely ignoring all the rhythms, he was able to get a “sense of the combinations and the colors.” After conquering that single aspect of the divided material, Deane turned his focus to the rhythms, which he described as “rhythmically strange in a wonderfully way.” Learning the rhythms on a practice pad, absent from the notes, allowed him to master it much quicker than learning them in tandem with a pitch. Next, Deane combined the pitches with the rhythms. Each rhythm was assigned to a specific note and vice versa in a chronological matching of the first note and first rhythm through the last note and last rhythm. As a last step, the dynamics and phrasing were added.51 Barry Green shares a similar philosophy in his book, The Mastery of Music, stating that when learning new music, it’s best to “focus in on one aspect of the music at a time - and practice just that one aspect.”52

Gordon Stout also uses this process of “ignoring musical elements” when learning a new piece of music. Stout refers to this method as the “Vida Chenoweth system of practice,” whose attitude was “if you can’t play the notes perfectly, why are you worrying about dynamics.” Like Deane, Stout starts by separating the notes from rhythms and then adds the dynamics last. Stout gave the following example by describing how he learned Autumn Island by Roger Reynolds: “I first learned just pitches with no rhythm whatsoever. Just note, note, note, . . . one note at a time. And then I learned the rhythms away from the marimba with no pitch, and then gradually put them back together.” Although Stout always ignores the “dynamics and phrasing from the beginning,” the degree to which he separates the notes from the rhythms depends on the complexity of

51 Christopher Deane, personal interview. 12 Nov. 2010.
the piece. “I break things down as far as I need to, to be able to deal with it and then put them back together.”

Kevin Bobo also believes in breaking down and separating the musical elements when learning a piece. However he does it entirely differently than the others mentioned. Instead of separating notes, rhythms, and dynamics, he separates his left hand from his right hand. Essentially it is the same principle, separating the music into individual components and then adding them back together once they are individually mastered. Bobo’s learning process occurs in three steps: learn the left hand from beginning to end; learn the right hand from beginning to end; then add both hands together from beginning to end.

~ Memorization ~

Depending on the individual, music can be learned in many different ways, each with its own benefits. Once a piece is perfected and ready to be played, whether alone in a studio or in front of thousands on a concert stage, one decision still remains. Will it be played from memory?

The topic of memorization raises many other questions. Does it really matter one way or the other? Shouldn’t the performer do whatever he or she is most comfortable with or

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53 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
54 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
does it affect how the audience perceives the performance? Does it affect how the performer interprets the music?

To answer these questions, the instrument itself must be considered. “Percussion is such a visual instrument,”55 points out Brian Nozny. Unlike other instruments, every single note played can be seen visually. Regardless of the instrument, an implement must be used to create the sound and the velocity and distance from which the instrument is struck is proportionally related. As a result, a percussionist’s movements are directly related to the sound created. This distinctive characteristic makes percussion performances uniquely visual.

Paul Rennick’s experience with the production Blast! helps illustrate this characteristic. For a number of years, Rennick wrote the show’s music and rehearsed the percussion section. He found it amazing how little time they spent working on musical elements such as “phrasing, shape, and direction.” Instead, almost all of the rehearsal time focused on “performance, stage presence, and engaging the audience.”56

Seeing a live performance is much different than listening to an audio recording. The audience is there to experience it first-hand. In the words of Anders Holdar, they want to “see the interaction” between the performers and the music. “They are not there for you to play the right notes. They are there to see you and how you bring out your character.”57

55 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
56 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
In that way, the music is secondary to the experience. The visual aspects of performance largely influence the audience’s experience and perception.

For this exact reason, John Parks is a strong believer in performing from memory. He “very, very rarely” performs with the music in front of him because he believes it creates a visual “barrier between the audience” and himself. Eric Willie agrees with Parks and believes that by removing the visual element of the music stand, you are better able to communicate with the audience.

There are times when memorization is not possible due to time constraints, length of the piece, or other difficulties. When this is the case, the presence of the music can be minimized to lessen this sense of a barrier. John Lane admits that he is not a great memorizer, but does everything he can to “deemphasize the music” and avoid “a giant poster board” confronting the audience. He finds “subtle ways of putting the music here or there” by reducing the score size and not always using a music stand.

In addition to the advantages memorization has from the audience’s perspective, memorizing a piece of music has benefits for the performer. Christopher Deane believes that when a piece is performed from memory, it “becomes part of your soul.” The process of storing data into the brain ensures that the “music makes sense” and that the player fully “understands each note.”

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58 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
59 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
60 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
connected,” letting the music “come out” of him “instead of the extra process of taking it in and then spitting it back out.”

When reading music, the player must direct some of their attention to technically converting what is on the page to their instrument. Eric Willie feels that playing from memory “allows you to focus on the music.” When one is totally focused on the music, and not worried about anything else, the results are typically favorable. Joshua Smith finds that “the stuff that I’ve memorized, I’ve always performed consistently better than the stuff I’m reading off the music.” Matthew Duvall also finds this to be true and uses memorization as a “way of raising the caliber.” However, playing at the highest level doesn’t always require memorization. As mentioned before, Emil Richards is the anomaly in that his career has been built around playing ‘studio perfect’ run-throughs, yet he very rarely memorizes music because “it’s very difficult” for him to do. “I’ve let my memory skills go, for just knowing that it’s in front of me and I can do it easily.”

Memorization doesn’t just help in performance situations. Frederica Macarez believes that it makes him a better teacher as well. When he is listening to a student play through an etude that he has memorized, he doesn’t have to read along with them. Instead he can just focus on listening. By already knowing “everything that is written, accents, dynamic, etc.,” it is much easier for him to hear their subtle mistakes.

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61 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
63 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
64 Matthew Duvall, personal interview, 1 Mar. 2013.
65 Emil Richards, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Playing from memory doesn’t always imply that the performer plays without the music. Frederic Macarez rarely performs without the music, “but of course it’s memorized . . . and I could play without it.”\textsuperscript{66} He uses the part for support since there are a lot of things to manage during a performance. Not having to rely on memory gives him one less thing to focus on. Steven Schick also performs with a score, on occasion, even though “the music is memorized.” Unlike Macarez, he does not use it for support, but rather for artistic inspiration. Schick explained that having the “document” and being able to refer to “that look on the page” gives him something “to respond to”\textsuperscript{67} during his performance.

While some musicians like Schick memorize all the music they play, most pick and choose what they memorize based on the instrument. For instance, most of the percussionists interviewed typically play mallet music from memory, due to the fact that it requires extreme accuracy. It is much more difficult to hit the right notes if your eyes are not looking directly at the instrument. Steel pan is the same way. Not only does the steel pan have small targets, but the unique arrangement of notes requires an extreme level of familiarity. When it comes to single surface instruments, like snare drum and timpani, the targets are much larger, providing a much greater margin for error.

**Partial Memorization**

Memorization of a piece is not necessarily all or nothing. Most of the time musicians decide what parts or passages they will memorize based on context or difficulty of the

\textsuperscript{66} Frederic Macarez, personal interview, 27 Oct. 2012.  
\textsuperscript{67} Steven Schick, personal interview, 31 Oct. 2012.
music. Jason Nicholson is one who said he uses partial memorization for harder passages that require extreme accuracy. For example, when playing cans in a multi-percussion piece, he memorizes that section to ensure he strikes “the cans in a certain area to get the right timbre.”

Playing in an ensemble also creates challenges that frequently require memorization of sections of a piece. Joakim Anterot for example, always memorizes the places where he must “look at the conductor” for cues or tempo changes. If you “get stuck in your part,” playing or attacking with the ensemble becomes extremely difficult. When playing only parts of a piece from memory, it is crucial to keep track where the reading starts and stops to avoid getting lost when moving ones eyes from the page to the conductor or instrument. Anterot makes sure he knows exactly which parts he is going to play from memory so that he doesn’t “hesitate [or] blank out.” He tries to always keep “one eye in the music” so that he doesn’t get lost.

To help with this, these spots can be either marked in the music or the parts can be altered. Matthew Duvall always creates “reductions of the parts.” He either creates “skeletal hand written versions . . . [or] cuts and pastes parts to eliminate sections that are memorized.”

There are also times when memorization should be avoided altogether. Paul Rennick is opposed to memorizing music in ensemble situations because there is “more risk there
that somebody else will have a memory slip” and if you aren’t looking at the music when it happens, it’s difficult to recover. The “more people that are involved, the more variables,” and if something goes wrong, “you can reference the music to get out of that situation.”

~ Memorization Methods ~

When memorization is preferred or required, what is the best to go about it? Kevin Bobo has found that sometimes you don’t have to even try, it will “happen naturally.” James Campbell echoed that thought, saying, “the nature of playing it over and over again” leads to memorization. While Matthew Duvall finds the same thing to be true, but warns that sometimes you have to work at “putting all those small, memorized chunks together into a memorized completed whole.” Andy Harnsberger is another who finds that continuously reading a piece at the instrument results in organic memorization. The act of seeing the music over and over on the page eventually results in it being completely memorized, while also reinforcing his reading skills.

In contrast to these ‘organic’ methods, Steven Schick will “never play a piece from the score and then gradually convert it to memory . . . My process involves memorizing as the very first step in the learning process.” Although Schick takes a rather simple approach to memorizing a piece, “I memorize the first bar, then the second and third and

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71 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
72 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
74 Matthew Duvall, personal interview, 1 Mar. 2013.
so on until I have memorized the entire piece,” he has a very systematic and regimented method for committing material to memory. Below is Schick’s memorization method as described in his book, *The Percussionist’s Art*.

1. Play passage at the instrument while looking at the music.
2. Sing the passage in one breath with eyes closed.
3. Visualize the passage as vividly as possible while standing away from the instrument.
4. Play the passage at the instrument from memory.
5. Proceed to the next phrase, using the same process, then add them together.
6. Combine multiple memorized bars to form a ‘chunk.’
7. Combine multiple chunks to form a ‘memory packet.’ Memory packets should be one or two musical phrases, depending on the difficulty of the piece.

**Figure 17: Steven Schick’s method for learning and memorizing a new piece of music.**

In steps six and seven, Schick uses the terms ‘chunks’ and ‘memory packets.’ Schick defines ‘chunks’ as “complex material [that has been] broken down and bundled into manageable units.” ‘Chunks’ allow the player “to store a few seconds worth of information in a very short-term memory.” The lengths of the ‘chunks’ vary depending on the individual and the difficulty of the material. ‘Memory packets’ are simply ‘multiple chunks’ combined together, usually lasting a few bars in length. Linking multiple ‘chunks’ together is done through a process called triggering. Triggers are mental cues that are initiated at the end of one packet designed to cue the beginning of the next, essentially forming a series of mental transitions between ‘chunks.’

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Schick finds that the hardest aspect of learning a new piece of music is “juggling passages at different stages of development.” As soon as a memory packet is learned and tested, the learning of a new memory packet begins and the first memory packet begins to decay. He tries to solve this problem by distributing the intake, rehearsal, and testing cycle over a four to six day rotation. This day-to-day routine for learning a new piece of music uses the seven step process, discussed previously, and is based on a three step cycle: intake, rehearsal, and testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Intake</td>
<td>Memory Packet A: Rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet A: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet B: Intake</td>
<td>Memory Packet B: Rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet B: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet B: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet C: Intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Testing</td>
<td>Memory Packet A: Testing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet B: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet D: Rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet D: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet C: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet D: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet D: Intake</td>
<td>Memory Packet A-C: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet D: Rehearsal</td>
<td>Memory Packet D: Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet A: Testing</td>
<td>Memory Packet E: Intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet B: Testing</td>
<td>Memory Packet E: Rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Packet C: Testing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18: Steven Schick’s intake/rehearsal/testing practice schedule.
When committing a lot of data to memory, it’s easy to get memory packets or chunks mixed up, or forget their order altogether. This becomes increasingly difficult as more information is added but creating a mental timeline can be an effective tool.

**Identify Structure to Help Memorization**

“In general I trust my bodily memory, especially if the physical reflexes of memory are well supported by appropriate mental structures.”

– Steven Schick

One method for remembering the order of memory packets is to perform a theoretical analysis so that the formal function of each section is fully understood. The realization of how each memory packet fits into the larger context creates another layer of memorization.

In Geoffrey Colvin’s book, *Talent is Overrated*, he compares this idea to knowing the “difference between letters and words.”

*Imagine that you knew all the letters of the alphabet but had no idea that they could be assembled into words. Then suppose you are shown for five seconds in arrangement of the letters - let's say 'lexicographer' - and were asked to remember the letters in the correct order. Since you would see just a bunch of letters, you'd have a hard time remembering more than the first seven or so. But in reality you recognize those letters as a word you're familiar with - and a thirteen letter word at that - so you can easily remember all those letters in the correct order.*

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Joshua Smith uses this technique and feels that when you “zoom out and get the big picture,” it simplifies the memorization process.

Sometimes pieces don’t lend themselves well to a harmonic or formal analysis, so other associations must be used to create a framework. Payton MacDonald tries to build “a house” in his head based on the piece. He explains the “architecture might be partly analytical, but sometimes it is partly poetic. So a certain section will remind me of beautiful woman or a sunset or something. It might be corny but it is something you can’t even put into words.”

Barry Green describes a similar technique in his book, *The Inner Game of Music*, which he calls “using visualization to create your own movie.” He advises making up “imaginary movies in your head. You can do this by creating a story or simply by allowing yourself to ‘see’ images, colors, or scenes that the music suggests to you.”

Omar Carmenates also organizes his ‘chunks’ based on seemingly unrelated ideas. Instead of using the house as an architectural metaphor, Carmenates applies this idea more literally. He created this method after seeing a television show about a man who had the ability to remember fifty strangers’ names. This man’s method involved creating a chronological story from the unique characteristics of each of the fifty strangers.

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77 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
78 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Forming an association between people’s characteristics and a narrative enabled him to remember and recall all fifty names.

Carmenates uses this same concept but assigns sections of music to parts of his house or places that he knows well. “All you have to do is create a story in your head. I’m in my kitchen, then I go to my driveway, then I go to my garage,” said Carmenates. Using this method, he claims that you can “play the piece backwards, you can play the piece sideways, you can jump around because all you have to do is think of that trigger and that triggers that whole section.”

Creating associations to “knowledge that is already well established in the memory” is called “deep encoding.” According to Principles of Neural Science, by Eric Kandel, ‘deep encoding’ is the strongest form of memory. Geoff Colvin also heavily supports this concept. He states that many studies have confirmed “apparently average people can achieve extraordinary memory ability by developing their own retrieval structures.”

Creating word and rhyme associations can also aid in memorization. Christopher Deane has used rhymes to memorize passages of music. “Russell Peck likes it when I play on the drums, when I play the Peck, boogie down, ‘till I get my check playing timpani.” After creating this little rhyme, Deane could instantly remember it and is still able to

80 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
82 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
remember, years later, a 16th note passage from Russell Peck’s *Timpani Concerto*. Deane compares this process to that of linguistic phonetics used in Indian music.

~ Mental Techniques ~

“All of this [body] is a puppet to your brain,” said Robert Schietroma. The process of memorization doesn’t have to always occur at the instrument or even after a piece has been learned. In fact, it is possible to learn and memorize an entire piece without even touching the instrument. When a certain level of musicianship is achieved, it is rare to encounter totally new material. Almost everything played is simply a different permutation or combination of the same notes and rhythms played previously. Technically, musicians are simply trying to achieve a certain level of facility that allows them to express any idea effortlessly through their instrument.

Taking these two realities into consideration, learning a new piece of music is merely a matter of understanding how familiar musical elements are pieced together. If the musician’s technique is capable of physically translating what their brain deciphers, learning a piece away from their instrument is more than feasible.

There are three different ways to learn and memorize music away from the instrument:

1. Visualize the score – create a mental image of how the notes look on the staff.
2. Visualize the instrument – envision the physical action of striking the instrument.

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83 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
3. Memorize the sound – create aural memory (audiation)

The method that works best for each individual is largely dependent on their learning style at the instrument.

Shakti Gawain explains in her book, *Creative Visualization*, that when using visualization, everybody does it differently.

> Some people say they see very clear, sharp images when they close their eyes and imagine something. Others don’t really ‘see’ anything; they sense or feel it, or they just sort of ‘think about’ it. That’s perfectly fine. Some people are more visually oriented, some are auditory, others are more kinesthetic. We all use our imaginations constantly - it’s impossible not to, so whatever process you find yourself doing when you imagine is fine.\(^{84}\)

Regardless of which method is used, the ability to memorize away from the instrument is incredibly powerful. The ability to eliminate the kinesthetic element is very difficult for those who rely too heavily on muscle memory. Frederic Macarez, for one, believes that “if you just move on the instruments without any connection, you will not memorize.”\(^{85}\) Additionally, muscle memory usually dissipates quicker than mental memory. Robert Schietroma agrees, saying, “you want to have the mind take a picture of the piece. If the hands take a picture of the piece, you lose it, it doesn’t stay with you forever.”\(^{86}\)

By taking a mental picture, when the same piece is to be played again a few months or years later, the piece does not have to be re-learned “because it’s in your mind, and it’s in

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\(^{86}\) Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
your head,” explained Macarez. As an orchestral player, Macarez plays a lot of the same repertoire. “Next week we play Rite of Spring and of course I did practice that twenty or twenty-five years ago, but right now I won’t practice it. I will just read the music a couple of times just to remind myself what happens here and there. I know the piece.”

Another advantage to developing this technique is that one can practice almost anywhere and anytime. This is very helpful for people who don’t have regular access to an instrument or spend a lot of time traveling. Keiko Abe is known for having an amazing ability to learn pieces away from the instrument. When Michael Udow was working with Pablo Casals and Keiko Abe a number of years ago, he witnessed her using this method.

> They both seemed to learn the repertoire first away from the instrument before they actually practiced it. I would see Keiko looking at the score and the music. Let’s say we were just getting some music and she didn’t have chance to practice it yet. She wouldn’t go straight to the instrument, but she would just study the music. I heard that is also what Pablo Casals did throughout his career.

This technique is not easy for everybody to develop and definitely has a steep learning curve. But once developed, it can prove to be extremely useful. Not only will the player be able to practice anywhere and have a deeper understanding of the piece, but it will promote mental toughness. Joshua Smith finds that when he spends a lot of time memorizing music away from the instrument his “memory gets better.”

Learning a piece away from the instrument requires extreme concentration and must be done in a focused environment. Steven Schick believes that learning music in an
environment with constant interruptions results in chronic memory slips and hesitations during performances because the information was not inputted smoothly and cohesively. “Distraction at the moment of remembering tends to retard the conversion process, and the resulting long-term memory is pockmarked with moments of fallibility.”89

For this reason, it is important for musicians to discover which environments promote their most focused state. Robert Schietroma learns best while either sitting in a chair and being “very, very comfortable” or while walking around the room. He theorizes that most percussionists are most concentrated while walking around or being physically active because as percussionists, they are naturally attracted to motion. “That’s why we selected the instrument . . . motion helps us learn the notes.”90

**Visualize the Score**

The first method of memorizing a piece away from the instrument involves trying to take a mental picture of the score. Gordon Stout uses this method and describes it as “writing the piece out from memory in my mind. I visualize the notes on the staff, not on the marimba.”91 I-Jen Fang uses this same method and describes it as “picturing the note that is coming.”92

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90 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
91 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
92 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
Rather than visualizing the notes in sequence on the page as they happen, Robert Schietroma tries to visualize the entire page as one image. He compares it to looking at somebody’s face. “I’m not doing left to right, I’m looking just like I look at you. I see your hair, your eyes, your ears, and your nose. I’m not going to concentrate on your ears, because that would be useless. Unfortunately, that’s how some people learn music.” He feels that it is important to view the music as one entity, rather than individual elements; otherwise one gets lost in the density of the music. Your eyes have to “pick out the clusters, and the more you pick out the clusters, the more you realize it’s a box piece of music.”

Allowing the eyes to focus on the important details keeps the brain from becoming overwhelmed. With the amount of data on each page, trying to see every single detail will slow down one’s ability to recall information in real time. This same concept is why Gordon Stout likes to learn pieces away from the instrument. When performing, he would rather visualize the notes on the staff than see every note on the instrument. Although he is relying on mental memory versus kinesthetic memory, he describes it as a kinesthetic experience because his body has been trained to kinesthetically transfer what he sees in his head to the instrument.

_I write them out from memory in my mind, because I don’t want to see too many of the notes on the instrument while I’m playing. That’s not my style. I actually try to see as few as the notes as possible. It’s all kinesthetic in other words. That’s a large part of the way I play. So I don’t want to see too many notes on the keyboard because then I get confused._
Visualize the Instrument

The second method for memorizing music away from the instrument also involves reading the score but instead of visualizing the notes on the staff, the player visualizes him or herself kinesthetically striking the instrument. The memorization becomes a visual playback of what the player experiences while standing at the instrument and playing. Payton MacDonald described his use of this method: “I will attempt to play it through in my head, but what I will actually see in my head is the keyboard [and how I would be] moving around the keyboard.”

When using this method, the first step is to take a passage and “slow the tempo way down” until you can “see it note by note,” explained Jason Baker. Do this for every passage until you can visualize yourself “hitting every note of the entire piece.” Once this is attainable, begin increasing the tempo. In doing this, the visualization will change from seeing each individual note to seeing groups of notes. James Campbell describes it as “seeing the shape of the pattern on the instruments.”

This kind of visualization is a hard skill to develop and can be extremely taxing in the beginning. If this process proves too troublesome, another method involves visualizing while physically standing at the instrument. This is done with eyes open and uses the actual instrument as the mental template.

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93 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Andy Harnsberger uses a three-step process to teach his students how to visualize. “Look at the keyboard and visualize your mallets across the keyboard. Then put your hands behind your back and look at the notes. Then you can do it totally away from the keyboard.”96

When She-e Wu teaches visualization to her students, she provides her students an 11x17 picture of a marimba to use as their mental template. Many people find it easier to visualize if they can actually see a marimba. Developing the ability to practice mentally facilitates learning and practicing anywhere and at anytime. Joshua Smith for example, does practice run-throughs in his bed before he falls asleep. “Sometimes it kept me up a lot longer and I couldn’t fall asleep because I realized, ‘Oh goodness, I don’t know where that is.’ It would bother me until I could get back to the instrument the next morning or the next day.”97

**Aural Recognition and Memorization**

The third and final way of memorizing a piece of music away from the instrument is to memorize how the piece sounds, essentially creating an aural playback. In the words of Gary Cook, learn to “hear it in your head.”98 This type of aural recall is referred to as audiation.

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96 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
97 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
98 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
The term *audiation* is described as the auditory equivalent of imagination, which we typically associate with visual images. Edwin Gordon, who first coined this term, provides a definition in his book, *Preparatory Audiation, Audiation, and Music Learning Theory.*

*Audiation is the ability to hear and to understand music for which the sound is not physically present or may never have been physically present.*

There are many ways of transferring the score to aural memory. Payton MacDonald tries to hear the music in his head, while Joshua Smith sings the piece back to himself. “A lot of people do it with solfège,” said Michael Udow, while Anders Holdar simply sits at his desk, reading it over and over and trying to “imagine how it sounds.”

Michael Udow is a strong believer in audiation and his preferred method is to sing it out loud. In addition to singing the music away from the instrument when memorizing, Udow uses singing to determine phrasing and articulation. Even after returning to the instrument, he continues to “sing or scat out loud . . . I’m getting to understand it at the level of a singer. When and how to breathe to get the musical gesture across that I’m after. I will also sing for slurs and articulations and thinking about what kind of punch will help emulate that articulation that I can sing.”

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100 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.

Singing will also help uncover poor choices that are sometimes made due to technical deficiencies. By removing the challenges of playing the particular instrument and focusing simply on how it should sound, it can be much easier to determine one’s artistic goals.

For performers who lack aural skills, this can be a very challenging method. Robert Schietroma, however, does not have much sympathy for those who struggle with this method. He believes that audiation is a necessary skill for all musicians. “I’m sorry, but if you can’t hear what you’re looking at, then you can go out and dig ditches. You need to get another profession because all you’re doing is target practice, [and] that’s very bad.”^102 Edwin Gordon agrees with Schietroma and believes that “all learning begins with the ear, not the eye.” When music is learned using the ear as opposed to the eye, “students can genuinely learn music rather than simply be trained to put on performances.”^103

**Plan Logistics**

Using mental techniques can also be used to sort out logistical issues. When Gary Gook gets a new piece, he “spends as much time as possible”^104 figuring out set-ups and logistical issues. This is especially the case when learning a new timpani solo or excerpt and tuning schemes and changes must be well thought out. This process can be done away from the instrument and as Anders Holdar points out, will “go quicker if you plan

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^102 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
^104 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
before you move to the instrument.” In addition, percussionists spend a good percentage of their practice time setting up and tearing down instruments. Learning a new piece of music mentally eliminates this wasted time, maximizing the player’s precious practice time.

Most musicians seem to agree that there are not enough hours in the day, especially to practice. Memorizing music away from the instrument helps maximize time by creating productive learning hours during time that would otherwise be wasted like when sitting on an airplane or train. Over half of the percussionists interviewed mentioned using one of the three methods, with many claiming it “essential” to their practice habits. Further, there seems to be a consensus that learning a piece mentally solidifies it in memory better than muscle memory learning, which should also result in longer retention. Although this is a skill that must be practiced and does not come easy at first, many musicians that use these methods find that it strengthens their mental psyche, both in performance and in other aspects of their life.

~ Avoiding Memory Slips ~

It’s apparent that there are many advantages to performing and learning a piece of music by memory from both the audience’s and the performer’s perspectives. Playing from memory usually means that the player knows the piece better and allows them to express

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106 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
it more naturally. This seems ideal and for most musical situations, except for one major
detail all to familiar to performing musicians - memory slips.

When it typically counts the most and a performer is ready to share their hard work and
skill with the world, they suddenly forget parts of the music. Every percussionist
interviewed has faced this terrifying experience and it is likely that most musicians have
experienced this terrible reality of live performance. Many times these memory slips are
in unpredictable places and at unpredictable moments. So why do they happen? How can
one avoid them? Are they caused by a flawed practice method or simply an unavoidable
performance side effect? Unfortunately, there are not simple answers for these questions,
and memory slips can occur for many reasons. All of the percussionists interviewed have
their own ways of dealing with this issue and expressed various theories as to why they
happen.

**Slow Practice**

When performing in front of an audience, nervousness often changes the way our bodies
function. Heart rates increase and adrenaline is released, which can cause muscles to
tense up or tremble. These physical characteristics are very different than those
experienced in the comfort of a practice room, where the piece was learned and practiced.
As a result, most performances feel significantly different on a physical level.
If the music was memorized using muscle memory, when it comes time to perform, there may be a problem. Brian Nozny described it this way: “When you are relying on muscle memory you are relying on your muscles. But what’s the first thing to freak out when you get nervous … your muscles.” How can muscle memory be replicated when the muscles feel drastically different? Further, muscle memory is usually developed at certain tempos or has been continuously adjusted to work at a specific range of tempos. When performers are nervous, there is a tendency to play faster. If the increased tempo exceeds the range of the rehearsed muscle memory, the muscles become confused and are unable to recall their kinesthetic memory.

Michael Burritt believes that if performers can wean themselves from muscle memory dependence and instead learn music mentally, memory slips caused by muscle confusion can be avoided. Burritt believes that the best way to solve this problem is by practicing extremely slow. Slow practice breaks down the “kinesthetic patterns which are ingrained at the performance tempo” and test if the notes are really known. “If I go slower, I have to concentrate more," said Burritt. If the player is unable to do this, it means they are relying too much on muscle memory, putting him or herself at a high risk for memory slips.

Brian Nozny also uses this same method of slow practice and feels that it gives his brain “time to absorb everything that’s going on.” Then if his muscle memory starts to fail him,

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107 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
he can rely on his brain to realize “this is the part where we do this . . . and here we go.”\textsuperscript{107}

Another way to reinforce mental memory and eliminate dependence on muscle memory is to practice away from the instrument. Of the percussionists interviewed, nearly half of them said this was their preferred way of avoiding memory slips. As mentioned previously, this can be done in three ways: visualizing the notes on the page, visualizing the striking of the instrument, and through aural recall. All three if these methods are a tremendous way of ensuring that the notes are truly known, versus relying on muscle memory.

Both Andy Harnsberger and Michael Udow test their mental ability to visualize the score by writing every single note out on staff paper. Brian Mason also checks himself on how well he knows a piece, but instead of writing the notes out, he does mental run-throughs, trying to visualize himself striking each note. If at any point “I get tense and it goes blank . . . then I know it isn’t truly memorized and there is a trouble spot . . . If I were to perform at that time I would be relying on muscle memory to get through that moment.”\textsuperscript{109}

Julie Licata goes the extra mile and uses two forms of visualization. “[I have] a photographic picture of the music in my head [and a] photographic picture of the shapes that my hands make on the instrument,”\textsuperscript{110} said Licata. If her muscle memory and one

\textsuperscript{109} Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
\textsuperscript{110} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
form of visual memory fail her, she has a third option. This level of preparation is remarkable and obviously takes a great deal of discipline and concentration.

In Sandra Blakeslee’s book on brain mapping, *The Body has a Mind of Its Own*, she describes an experiment conducted to demonstrate the benefits of mental practice. A group of seventy-five volunteers who had never played darts before were divided into five groups. Each participant threw one round of darts and their baseline score was recorded. For the next eight weeks, each of the five groups were given different practice assignments. Group one was instructed to never play darts. Group two was instructed to throw fifty darts for thirty minutes per day, five days a week. Groups three, four, and five were told to alternate between mental training and physical practice. They were to spend one day throwing the fifty darts for thirty minutes and the next day listening to training tapes for thirty minutes without physically throwing any darts. After eight weeks, all five groups took a post-test, throwing fifty darts. Group one showed no improvement. Group two improved on average by sixty-seven points, and Groups three, four, and five improved on average by 111, 141, and 165 points.  

This simple study demonstrates the impact of visualization, and validates its importance in all aspects of life, not just music.

**Muscle Memory**

Although there are clear dangers of relying solely on muscle memory, our mind can fail us too. Frederic Macarez finds that sometimes the ability to rely on muscle memory

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prevents a memory slip. For instance, random occurrences and spontaneous problems such as “a problem with a pedal” sometimes take place during a performance, temporarily requiring the player’s attention. In this case, the mind’s consciousness must be momentarily diverted to fix the problem, leaving the player dependent on their muscle memory to keep playing. Macarez also points out that when playing a concerto, “you have twenty or twenty-five minutes of music without really a rest.”\cite{FredericMacarez2012} In these situations, the player doesn’t always have time to think, resulting in mental exhaustion or over-stimulation. When this occurs, having strong muscle memory can help avoid memory slips caused by mental breakdowns.

In Howard Gardner’s book, *Frames of Mind*, Gardner argues that mental memory requires constant feedback and may break down at quicker tempos.

> When execution is being dictated by the brain rather than from muscle memory, these voluntary movements require perpetual comparison of intended actions with the effects actually achieved: there is a continuous feedback of signals from the performance of movements, and this feedback is compared with the visual or the linguistic image that is directing the activity.”

As a result, when “lengthy sequences of movement [occur] at so rapid a clip that feedback from perceptual or kinesthetic systems cannot be used,” muscle memory is the only way to execute “such highly programmed sequences.”\cite{HowardGardner1983}

Triple Channel Learning

It is apparent that there are advantages to relying on both muscle and mental memory, so why not use them both? Barry Green, author of *The Mastery of Music*, believes that the when he can “switch comfortably between an automatic, or muscle memory, mode and a very focused, conscious mode,” he has reached the “optimal state.”

*I need to be at this master panel and flip the switch back and forth as need dictates. When technicalities don’t require my direct awareness, I prefer to lose myself in the music; that’s when it’s good to get into the automatic mode. Muscle memory can be a powerful tool as long as it’s backed up by a strong conscious awareness in preparation. That’s why a controlled blend of the conscious and automatic is so important.*

Combining multiple ways of learning, “multi-sensory learning,” as Gary Cook describes it, is another way of avoiding memory slips. Five of the percussionists interviewed believe that this is the best way to avoid memory slips. Gary Cook thinks “triple channel learning,” a combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses, is the best preparation in avoiding memory slips. Interestingly, he recommends that these not be initially combined, but rather “separate [them] as much as you can and then blend it all together.”

James Campbell also uses this method, especially to check the status of his memorization. “I’m usually also trying to triple channel. If I’ve got it memorized, I know I can sing it, and I can feel it, and I can see it.”

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115 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Correct Input

Memory slips can also be caused by a natural confusion of the body and mind. When performing on stage, musicians attempt to recall their most accurate version of the piece. This is a very specific version and there have probably been many less desirable renditions played along the way. In The Mastery of Music, Barry Green states, “science tells us . . . [that] the mind remembers each of our mistakes as well as our eventual successful phrasings.” So how is the best and most accurate version recalled? Many of the percussionists interviewed believe that the very first time it is played ultimately determines one’s ability to recall the correct version later. Gary Cook refers to it as “input, storage, and recall.” He theorizes that if “it goes in correctly . . . you can recall it correctly.” Paul Rennick agrees, saying “the first time you learn it is clearly the most important.” By doing it correctly the first time, the “lack of changes cement the memory a little better.”

Eric Willie takes the idea of correct input to the extreme. He tries to figure out where he stands in relation to the instrument for each musical passage so that he can always replicate his exact positioning at the instrument. “I go through and mark my body. In this passage, I would write ‘f g’, so my body would be between the ‘f’ and the ‘g.’” Once the information has been inputted correctly, pure repetition can decrease the chances of memory slips. Paul Rennick believes that when something is known well enough,

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118 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
119 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
120 Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
memory slips will not occur, regardless of how nerve-racking the situation. For example, if a person is asked to recite their name in front of thousands of people, they are able, without fail, no matter how nervous they may be. “Everybody wants to know how to think about it and all these deep psychological things,” explains Rennick, but he finds that “the basic principle of repetition”\(^{121}\) eliminates his memory slips.

**Concentration**

Performance is a game of concentration. The performer has played the piece hundreds if not thousands of times by the time it’s taken to the stage, so clearly it’s adequately learned. Doing another run-through on stage shouldn’t be any different, but for many reasons, it is. Performers are sometimes mentally distracted during a performance. Suddenly, for no good reason, the person in the front row with red shoes catches their attention, or perhaps it’s a hoarse cough or loud sneeze from the audience. These are obviously the wrong things to be thinking about while performing and may cause problems, explained Payton MacDonald. “You are playing and suddenly you think about this and boom, you’re lost.”\(^{122}\) What’s even worse, is when random thoughts are replaced by a single distracting thought, like ‘don’t mess up!’ Inevitably, when a re-occurring thought takes hold, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. “When I start worrying about memory slips is when I make a memory slip,”\(^{123}\) said Jason Nicholson. So how does one turn this counterproductive chatter off?

\(^{121}\) Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\(^{122}\) Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\(^{123}\) Jason Nicholson, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Andreas Connirae, author of *Heart of the Mind*, believes that instead of turning the chatter off, it is better to redirect positively. “When people think about what they don't want, or what they want to avoid, they often produce that in their lives, because that is where their minds are focused. Changing your thinking to what you do want is a simple shift that can make a tremendous difference.”\(^{124}\) Others find that eliminating these thoughts takes practice room preparation and have devised particular methods as they approach the performance. Brian Nozny said “I literally need to train myself that when I’m practicing, I’m making the investment that for the next four minutes I’m playing this piece and my mind will not think of anything else. That’s where I will be.”\(^{125}\)

So how does one train the brain? Jason Nicholson has given this topic extensive thought and uses aspects of Zen philosophy to overcome mental distractions. “I work on exercises to eliminate the left brain ego side; that’s that chatter in your head, ‘you’re going to mess up’ [or] ‘that’s difficult.’ Practicing meditation can develop the ability to turn that chatter off.”\(^{126}\)

In Eugen Herrigel’s book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, she believes the ideal “state of unconsciousness is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill.”\(^{127}\) Developing these techniques takes time and discipline and may be difficult for some people to develop. For this reason, some resort to distracting the mind versus attempting to eliminate distracting thoughts. Jason

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\(^{125}\) Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.

\(^{126}\) Jason Nicholson, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.

Nicholson distracts his brain by singing. “If I’m singing inaudibly while I’m playing, that really helps me because I’m connected to the music. It helps distract the chatter.”¹²⁶ Most people do this subconsciously when practicing alone, especially when they are in ‘the zone.’ Improved focus is a natural reaction to heightened emotional involvement in the music. Consciously deciding to sing inaudibly while playing can help trigger this focused state.

In *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Timothy Gallwey agrees that being engaged is the key to maintaining focus.

> It is not trying to force focus, nor does it mean thinking hard about something. Natural focus occurs when the mind is interested. When this occurs, the mind is drawn irresistibly toward the object (or subject) of interest. It is effortless and relaxed, not tense and overly controlled.¹²⁸

The most difficult time to prevent disruptive thoughts from invading one’s consciousness is usually during parts perceived as problem spots. As Jason Nicholson explains, “When I’m getting to a point in the music that routinely triggers negative chatter, I’ll focus on the phrasing only or the technique only or try to have one particular thing to distract this brain when I know it’s going to come up.”¹²⁹ Focusing the brain on certain thoughts during a particular passage is a great way to preoccupy it. If the player is still unable to turn the chatter off, Nicholson advises that the anticipated memory slip be embraced, as well as a good recovery plan. “When you’ve practiced thinking about recovering you’re not as worried about the mistake. As a result, you make less mistakes. There is going to be a slip somewhere, it’s about recovery. That relaxes me.”¹²⁹

An emphasis on recovery was shared by many of the percussionists interviewed. As expected, there were many different ways of going about it. Omar Carmenates believes that the best way to recover from a memory slip is to learn how to “improvise in the style” of the piece. By learning to improvise “you are actually learning the language . . . you learn the language harmonically, rhythmically, and idiomatically of the composer.” When Carmenates has memory slips during performances, he is “able to improvise like the piece and get back in two or three beats later.”

Blake Tyson also thinks that it’s important to be able to improvise in the style of the piece. If a memory slip does occur “in a concert, you have to work your way out of it.” To do this, the first step is to “understand the theory of how it’s written.” If you “understand how it works, the language you are speaking, then you can pull your way out of it.” Edwin Gordon agrees with Tyson and states in his book, Learning Sequences in Music, that “in creativity and improvisation, the absence of imitation emphasizes difference, and so rich vocabularies of patterns are necessary of students are to make good choices.”

Thomas Burritt also believes that it is important to understand the theory behind the piece, but doesn’t use it improvise his way out of a memory slip. Instead, he does a full “formal analysis” to create another level of understanding. If the player understands

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130 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
131 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
133 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
how each phrase fits into the whole, they are less likely to forget what happens next. Rather than doing a complete analysis, Michael Udow just analyzes the solfege of each note. “Knowing how it all fits together within the key signature, modulations, and so on” is enough to help Udow understand the function of each phrase.

While understanding the theoretical structure can help one avoid memory slips, it can also aid in recovery once the memory slip has occurred, explains Brian Nozny. “If something does go wrong, I can go, ‘this is where I'm going to G minor right now.’” Associating the music to a larger theoretical structure is a natural tendency of the mind and body. In Edwin Gordon’s book, *Learning Sequences in Music*, he points out that this is done at a very early age.

> When children hear their first words, they naturally associate them with objects, and it is by naming objects- actually using language to communicate- they develop readiness for further language learning. When children first hear tonal patterns and rhythm patterns in lullabies or simple folk songs their parents sing to them, it is the text of these songs, not the music itself, they find compelling, because they are already disposed to learning language. Thus, sequential music learning cannot take place as naturally in music as it does in language. Such differences are accounted for in music learning theory.

Matthew Duvall also does a formal analysis of the piece, but instead of focusing on the harmonic structure, he does it purely based on phrase lengths. “I break my parts up into small sections and then I number all the measures of phrases . . . but it is not like I’m counting measure numbers, because I start each new phrase with one.” Then as Duvall plays through the piece, he counts the measure numbers of each phrase in his head,

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134 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
135 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
memorizing the phase lengths “like a telephone number.” He finds that as long as he keeps counting, “even if you trip notes and get messed up, mentally you don’t get lost in the course of navigation in the architecture of the piece.” Memory slips can occur during repeated phrases or parallel sections. If the player temporarily loses concentration it’s easy to forget which repetition is currently being played. Matthew Duvall solves this problem by changing the stickings so that the two sections are no longer identical, “preventing that confusion.” He does caution to choose stickings that don’t negatively alter the phrasing.

Create Triggers

While understanding the formal construction of the piece typically helps reduce memory slips, not all pieces lend themselves to analysis. In these cases, analysis can be substituted by a system of triggers. Using this method, it is not necessary to remember each note or understand how it fits into the whole. Instead, simply identify the moments in the piece that stand out most and use them as reminders for what happens next. Matthew Duvall explains, “I remember the location of those landmarks in the course of the piece and so you start the piece and that is trigger note number one. In my brain I don’t remember every note but I do remember those trigger landmarks. I play from one landmark to another.”

Steven Schick also uses a trigger system to avoid memory slips. His ‘memory packets’ are “loaded with kinetic information, each consisting of trained and reliable physical

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reflexes that are initiated by a mental cue.” While playing, Schick’s brain delegates the memory packets to the body in chronological order through trigger mechanisms. The goal of this process is to keep the brain calm while the body is recalling the kinesthetic movements. “I do not have to think every note. The body is subservient to the dictates of the brain and fills in the rest of the packet as a kinetic response.”

Stop and Start Anywhere

The process of creating triggers aids in getting from one section to the next, but if a memory slip occurs between sections, it may be hard to recover. Five of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed emphasized practicing the ability to stop and start anywhere. This is something that must be practiced and likely will not come naturally because music is typically learned and memorized in sections. For instance, Steven Schick explained, “I really think that the strategy for dealing with memory errors doesn’t take place on stage, it really takes place in the practice room. So you learn in such a way that you can restart at any given point.”

I-Jen Fang practice this by simply saying to herself, “‘I’m going to start right here,’ and then go ahead and do it.” If the player can learn to do this, when a memory slip occurs,

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they are able to simply skip the rest of that section and jump in at the next phrase. As long as you don’t hesitate and go for it, “nobody will know.”

Kevin Bobo takes this idea to the extreme. When practicing marimba, he stops and starts in random places while actively keeping track of the perceived playback. In other words, when his hands stop, he continues singing along in his head so that when he begins playing again, he has accounted for the time passed. It’s as if he was temporarily muted rather than eliminating sections of music. Bobo then takes this concept a step further by stopping only one hand at a time, while continuing to play his other hand. This is incredibly difficult and his ability to execute this demanding exercise is probably related to the manner in which he learns music, one hand at a time.

Bobo also has a unique theory as to why memory slips occur. He believes that memory slips take place when the musician looks in an unusual place. When learning a piece of music, the musician subconsciously establishes a set routine of where the eyes look. This is typically dictated by difficult or important phrases of an individual hand. Bobo believes that sometimes, for no apparent reason, the eyes choose to look somewhere different, temporarily throwing off the player’s visual memorization.

Bobo prepares for this by training himself to look in different places. He will do an entire run-through while only staring at his left hand, followed by an entire run-through while only staring at his right hand. Bobo says that the key to this process is that while staring

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140 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
at one hand, the player must envision, in their minds eye, what the other hand is doing. This is crucial to the process and helps create complete vision independence. This method has its obvious challenges and is not easily executed, however, Bobo is confident that this is the best way to solve memory slips.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Anxiety Induced Memory Slips}

Performance anxiety is something all musicians experience, regardless of their status or age. Although it can cause a variety of problems, such as increased tempo or decreased expression, the most threatening symptom is undoubtedly memory relapse. Performances that fall short of one’s personal standards are disappointing, but endurable. Stopping in the middle of a performance or having to end prematurely is perceived as a complete failure.

As a result, it is easy to become obsessed with strategies that aim to eliminate this possibility. However, this fixation can go too far and Steven Schick cautions that placing too much emphasis on not forgetting may result in other deficiencies.

\textit{People forget to practice lines, phrasing and the overall shape of the piece. They forget everything else except the goal of not forgetting and it becomes this incredible thing. When you put that much effort in to something, and say you don’t forget, is that a successful performance? It might be a horrible performance. You succeeded in not forgetting but you failed at everything else. So I think the last days before performance should be spent on things that you actually really care about.}\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{141} Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
\textsuperscript{142} Steven Schick, personal interview, 31 Oct. 2012.
When learning new music, it’s very likely the piece has been performed before. Occasionally there are opportunities to premiere new music, but more commonly, previous recordings exist and are available if desired. The question of whether or not to listen to another player’s performance, while learning the piece, is highly debated within the musical community. The percussionists interviewed were no different, as they were divided on this issue. It should be pointed out that opinions differ depending on the genre of music. Although there were some people who always listen to recordings and some people who never listen to recordings regardless of the genre, most had differing opinions based on whether the piece was solo, chamber, or for large ensemble. Therefore, it is important to differentiate which genre of music is in question.

**Solo Music: Negatives of Listening to Recordings**

When playing solo music, eight of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed never listen to available pre-existing recordings and believe that doing so will have a detrimental effect on their performance.

Eric Willie believes that “the worst thing we can do is copy something that’s already been done.”143 Michael Udow agreed saying, “our job as a performer is to interpret the composer’s intentions without being influenced by how other people interpreted the

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143 Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
composer’s intentions.”\textsuperscript{144} Frederic Macarez also agrees, adding, “if you listen to another interpretation first, you will start to practice with an idea that is not your idea. It is the idea of someone else.”\textsuperscript{145}

As an audience member, what is the value of hearing a performance modeled after someone else’s performance. “Burritt’s already played that, I can listen to that recording,”\textsuperscript{143} said Eric Willie. Live performance should create a truly unique experience for the audience, and Blake Tyson stated, “since that recording already exists, there is no point in me imitating it.”\textsuperscript{146}

John Parks believes that ignoring existing recordings is not only important for creating a truly original performance but it is also crucial to the player’s development as a musician. “For students, I really don’t want them to hear it first because then they start mimicking. While that’s not a bad thing, I’d rather them start to develop their own trust in their instincts.”\textsuperscript{147} Even if after listening to a recording, a performer chooses to do it ‘their own way,’ Steven Schick believes that the damage has already been done. By listening to an example, you have already “narrow[ed] the range of possibilities pretty dramatically”\textsuperscript{148} because you have heard it in a particular context.

Blake Tyson agrees with Schick, and adds that no matter how hard one tries to play their own original version, it is impossible not to “adopt idiosyncrasies of that recording.”\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{144} Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{145} Frederic Macarez, personal interview, 27 Oct. 2012.
\textsuperscript{146} Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{147} John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\textsuperscript{148} Steven Schick, personal interview, 31 Oct. 2012.
In Geoffrey Colvin’s book, *Talent is Overrated*, he argues that the better something is known, the harder it is to escape its influence. “Too much experience within a field may restrict creativity because you know so well how things should be done that you are unable to escape to come up with new ideas.”

Several percussionists interviewed agree with this philosophy, but listen to recordings anyway. Rather than listening to recordings when they first start learning the piece, they purposely wait until after they have formed their “own ideas,” said I-Jen Fang. Julie Licata does the same thing, but waits until “a couple of weeks” before the performance. She does this to “get new fresh ideas.” Sometimes I “get burned out after learning something for a couple of months and then need some fresh inspiration,” said Licata.

James Campbell also listens to recordings at the end of his preparation process but doesn’t do it for interpretation inspiration. Instead, he does it to ensure he doesn’t “miss anything the first time through.” Kevin Bobo takes a similar approach, “I only listen to them for one reason, after I have initially learned it to make sure I have learned it correctly. I listen for note accuracy. I don't listen to recordings [early in the process] because I don't want to take somebody else's phrasing ideas until I've determined my own.”

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150 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
151 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
153 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
Solo Music: Advantages to Listening to Recordings

As mentioned previously, there are many differing opinions when it comes to listening to pre-existing recordings. Eight of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed believe that listening to recordings is an important step in finding their own unique interpretation. Listening to existing recordings exposes interpretations that otherwise may never have been considered, thus leading to a wider range of possibilities.

Christopher Deane believes that “people who don’t do this are missing the opportunity to expand musically because recordings are a documentation of a musician’s thought process on that piece of music.”\textsuperscript{154} Michael Burritt agrees with Deane and points out that studying recordings is very similar to studying with a private teacher.

\begin{quote}
“Like anything else, initially you sound a lot like the person you study with, then I think you begin to grow into your own person. Elements of that teacher will always be part of your playing but you find your own way.”
\end{quote}

The way a piece is interpreted initially, may be a combination of multiple recordings, but “eventually as you play it more, it becomes you own version,”\textsuperscript{155} said Burritt. Christopher Deane added that after a period of time, personal opinions are formed and “I may disagree with [the recording’s interpretation] but at least I know that I disagree with it.”\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{154} Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.  
\textsuperscript{155} Michael Burritt, personal interview, 20 Jan. 2013.
Matthew Duvall is another who feels the same way. “I don’t think there is any harm in being as informed as you possibly can . . . I feel like I learn an incredible amount from other players, both their oversights and their failings save me an enormous amount of time. The goal is to do the job as well as it can be done.”156

The ability to take in numerous examples, sort through them, and determine an original interpretation is a sign of musical maturity. Brian Mason is another who thinks this way: “I feel like I can make my own decisions even after I’ve heard someone play it.” Regardless of how many different recordings he hears, Mason stated that he can always “decide whether I want to do it that way or not.”157 Likewise, Joakim Anterot said he always starts by gathering as many examples as possible and then formulates his own version. “I already collected what you guys do, now I do my version. Then I never go back again because I’ve made my choice.”158 As long as the version that is formulated after hearing numerous examples is based on the individual’s artistic expression and “not just because that’s the way I’ve heard it,”159 said Omar Carmenates, then listening to recordings can be extremely beneficial.

What happens when the listener deems the recording to be flawless, musically and artistically? Matthew Duvall believes that in these rare occurrences, “there is nothing wrong with imitating another person’s performance.”156 Payton MacDonald agrees with Duvall saying, “I don’t always feel a need to reinvent the wheel. If someone has

157 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
159 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
interpreted a piece and come up with ideas, approaches, mallet choices, and mechanical things that work . . . [and] realizes the intent of the composer, then I’m fine to just go with that.”160 Although some musicians may view this as artistic plagiarism, lacking individual expression, Duvall argues otherwise.

[This is] what teachers in classical studios have been teaching their students for generations. This is the way we play Beethoven, we phrase it this way in this school . . . and this is how we interpret Schumann and Chopin, so this is how you are going to play it. Sometimes it is almost like a doctrine.156

Solo Music: Recordings Aid in Learning Process

Listening to recordings can be used for other purposes as well. Instead of listening to the performer’s artistic interpretation, recordings can be used to simply hear the piece for the first time and “decide whether or not I actually want to play the piece,”161 said Julie Licata. William Moersch has a similar approach, saying that he uses recordings to help him “choose from the stacks of material.”162 Listening to recordings also aids in getting to know and understand the piece better. Jason Nicholson listens to recordings “with the score as much as possible,” allowing him to “learn and understand the piece at a much faster rate.” Nicholson attributes this to the fact that he is “an aural learner.”163

Gordon Stout believes that regardless of your learning style, “it’s always easier to learn a piece if you have heard it a thousand times.” He makes all of his “students listen to a

160 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
161 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
162 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
piece many times before they are allowed to start learning it.”¹⁶⁴ Another benefit, pointed out by Joakim Anterot, is that listening to recordings allows him to “practice in the air, on the bus, or on the train.”¹⁶⁵

Repetitive listening develops a better understanding of the piece, eventually creating “an auditory road map or aerial view,” said Gary Cook. But, he also warns that repetitive listening of a sub par recording “can be somewhat dangerous.” As mentioned earlier, Cook believes that correct input is key in avoiding memory slips and listening to inaccurate recordings will affect the “programming, storage and recall [process] . . . If you get garbage in, you get garbage out.”¹⁶⁶

Good recordings can also be used as an effective practice tool. Jason Baker listens “to recordings if I’m stuck on something or if I’m not sure how something is done.”¹⁶⁷ Brian Mason added that if he finds a good recording, “it becomes part of my practice routine . . . [and] I’ll play along with it.” By using programs such as the Amazing Slow Downer, the recording can be slowed down or looped, creating a play-along track. Mason feels that this “makes my time spent more efficient” because he is able to “play in the context [and] mimic their style.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
¹⁶⁶ Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
¹⁶⁸ Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
Solo Music: Use Recordings to Learn Style

Using recordings to learn the style of the piece is not unique to Brian Mason. When Gordon Stout learns a new piece, he uses recordings to learn “general stylistic characteristics.” If he was learning a choro, Stout said:

I would get four CDs of choro music. I just listen to them over a period of time, six months or whatever, to internalize lots of different things about the style of the choro. I may not have ever listened to the actual music of the choro that I was learning, because maybe there wasn’t one, but I still immerse myself in it and the style.169

While learning the style of a piece is beneficial, not all pieces fit easily into a specific genre. When this is the case, it may be better to study the compositional style of the composer. Blake Tyson believes “learning more about the composer or trying to get into other pieces the composer has written”170 helps him interpret the piece more accurately. He does this by listening to as many works by that composer as he can. This is especially useful when there are no existing recordings of the piece that is being played. In those cases, studying the composer’s other works is the next best option. Robert Schietroma echoed this same principal, but has been able to do it on an even more personal level. “I’ve been blessed with staying in these people’s homes and understanding them gives me understanding of their music and their culture.”171

169 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
170 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
171 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Ensemble Music

Listening to recordings when learning chamber or large ensemble works is universally accepted and in the case of orchestral repertoire, a standard performance practice. All thirty-six percussionists interviewed believe it is important to listen to recordings when learning pieces that include other musicians.

Listening to recordings enables the player to better understand how their part fits into the ensemble setting and texture. James Campbell listens to pre-existing recordings to determine if his part is “blended in the texture [or] a solo part.” He also uses recordings to determine how his parts line up with others. “Do I have to match my rhythm with other players?”

Brian Mason finds that when he is playing orchestral music, there are many more factors that influence his musical decisions. When preparing for an orchestral rehearsal, it’s important to find a reliable recording that that he can “listen along, and write things in my parts.” Most professional orchestras have limited rehearsal time so it is the responsibility of the players to learn and prepare their parts on their own. Michael Udow uses recordings to give himself “a sense of how my parts are going to fit in before the first rehearsal.”

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When listening to recordings, Frederic Macarez doesn’t “listen to what I have to play” instead, he listens for “what happens in the orchestra.” Similarly, John Tafoya finds that marking in instrumental cues is helpful “so if I miscount or if I get distracted, I know exactly when I’m coming in.”

When preparing for an orchestral audition, the focus should shift from the ensemble parts to the individual’s parts. Audition excerpts require very specific performance practice details that have been established over generations. To learn these subtle nuances, one must diligently study how reputable percussionists perform that excerpt. “You have to listen to recordings. You need to listen to multiple ones, not just one,” explained John Lane.

Listening to recordings to prepare for orchestral rehearsals and auditions is widely accepted and encouraged due to its many benefits. John Tafoya however, pointed out that “sometimes listening to recordings is dangerous because you get used to how the tempo is going to be.” After the first rehearsal, “I would never go back and listen to a recording again. It would inevitably be different than what the orchestra is doing,” said Tafoya.

This same principal holds true when preparing for an audition. After an interpretation and tempo has been decided upon, subtle tempo and phrasing inconsistencies of a recording may have negative affects on the player’s interpretation.

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176 John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
177 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Learning a new piece of music is a challenging and complicated process that can utilize many different approaches and philosophies. Regardless which methods are chosen, the general process should be well thought out and planned, according to the individual’s learning style and musical objectives. This element of practicing, maybe more so than any other component, is determined by one’s learning style. For this reason, careful consideration should be given to which method is used. The ‘correct’ method will not only allow the player to learn the music quicker, but will result in superior final product. Therefore, it is recommended that the reader try each and every method shared in this chapter to ensure their ideal procedure is realized. The sheer number of approaches, many of which are in opposition to one another, demonstrates that there are many possible ways to achieve the same goal.
Figure 19: Survey – Learning New Music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. General Overview of Piece</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you good at sight-reading?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically play very advanced keyboard repertoire?</td>
<td>A2, A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a weak at sight-reading</td>
<td>A1, A4, A5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a ‘big picture’ type of person?</td>
<td>A3, A5, A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a background on the piano?</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you routinely learn pieces incorrectly?</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a visual learner?</td>
<td>A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you an aural learner?</td>
<td>A5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy music theory?</td>
<td>A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dread learning a new piece of music?</td>
<td>A3, A5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Scheduling Goals</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you an extremely organized person?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you get overwhelmed easily?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you live by your weekly planner?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a strict performance deadline?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have an inconsistent practice schedule?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Order of Learning</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you struggle with remembering the chronology of events?</td>
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**G. Listening to Existing Recordings**

If yes, try method...

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| Do you struggle with being creative? | G1, G2 |
| Do others easily influence you? | G1 |
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### Figure 20: Outline – Learning New Music

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CHAPTER 6: PROBLEM SPOTS

Once a piece of music has been learned, it is typically far from being performance ready. Depending on which method was used to learn the piece, issues such as tempo, dynamics, and phrasing may need to be addressed or polished. As these elements are integrated, and a sense of continuity is established, certain passages begin to emerge, passages that seem to be more difficult than others. These passages refuse to improve at the same rate as the rest of the material and are commonly referred to as problem spots.

Problem spots can occur for three reasons:

1. Incorrect Muscle Memory
2. Imbalance Between Kinesthetic and Mental Retention
3. Technical Deficiencies

Problem spots caused by incorrect muscle memory occur when the body’s kinesthetic actions have been engrained incorrectly. This can happen for a few reasons, assuming the player is not constantly switching instruments or set-ups. If the passage was initially learned incorrectly, even after deliberately fixing the problem and engraining new kinesthetic movements, the initial incorrect muscle memory may still bear influence. Incorrect muscle memory can also develop if the player, over an extended period of time, has allowed repetitive inconsistencies or inaccuracies to the point that the body becomes kinesthetically confused as to which version is correct. This may be a by-product of premature tempo increases or a general lack of discipline.
Problem spots caused by an imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention usually reflect back upon the method used to learn the piece. Depending on the learning style of the player, the piece may have been learned mentally away from the instrument, kinesthetically at the instrument, or a combination of the two. All three scenarios are perfectly acceptable and do not necessarily determine whether or not problem spots will occur. However, a severe imbalance between the mental and kinesthetic approaches may result in problem spots.

Assuming the piece is adequately learned and understood, an imbalance containing too much kinesthetic retention and a lack of mental retention is revealed when the player can physically play the passage at the appropriate tempo, but is unable to name the notes out-loud or write them down on a staff, without the aid of the instrument. The player relies mostly on muscle memory and kinesthetic retention and does not sufficiently understand or retain the notes or rhythms on a mental level.

An imbalance in the opposite direction, containing too much mental retention and not enough kinesthetic retention, is revealed when the player fully comprehends all of the notes and the rhythms but has a difficult time playing at a tempo faster than they have rehearsed, even if well within their technical abilities. Another indication is when the player is unable to do mindless repetitions while thinking about or talking about something totally unrelated.
While an imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention, as described above, can be successfully overcome during isolated time frames, this will only occur as long as the playing conditions and environment are ideal. Once they are confronted with mental or physical adversity of any type or magnitude, the imbalance does not allow the player to counteract or fill the void of the temporarily suspended dominant method.

This raises the question: If both kinesthetic and mental methods are used equally in the learning process, will this eliminate all problems spots attributed to an imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Steven Schick, who uses both kinesthetic and mental techniques in a very balanced and systematic method, stated that environment has a large impact on the presence of problem spots. He has found that problem spots belonging to this category “are caused when the learning process on the day that you memorized it was somehow slogged because of being distracted or sick.”¹ An environment in which the player is not able to totally focus, whether for personal reasons or exterior factors, can cause ‘glitches’ in the storage of data. For these reasons, Schick strongly advocates that the environment in which one learns the material is conducive to correct input.

Problem spots caused by technical deficiencies occur when the kinesthetic actions required to execute a passage are unable to be performed by the player. There are a multitude of technical skills that may be the source of the deficiency, but in all scenarios, these problem spots are independent of the specific passage of music and are a general deficiency of the player’s technical abilities. Problem spots caused by technical

deficiencies are unique from the other two categories, incorrect muscle memory and an imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention, in that typically, the passage has never, or only very rarely, been played correctly at tempo by the player.

~ Identify the Problem Spot ~

The first step to fixing a problem spot is to identify it. “If you can identify the problem, you can identify and implement a solution which will help you focus, concentrate, and facilitate a much more productive practice session,” stated Noa Kageyama in his article *Nine Sources of Frustration in the Practice Room*. This may sound easy, but as Payton MacDonald explains, it sometimes requires “sophisticated analysis . . . If I’m not thinking about it carefully . . . sometimes [the problem] is not always what I might think it is.”

Initially, it is easy to assume the problem is located where the mistake is being made. However Steven Schick points out that, “sometimes the problem is actually not where you’re making the mistake, sometimes the problem is someway that you’re setting yourself up in the moments just before.”

Identifying the precise problem spot is crucial to understanding both how to fix the issue and diagnose the player’s potential shortcomings. While it is possible for a problem spot to be a combination of all three categories, typically the root of the problem is grounded in just one category. Each category has it’s own challenges and require a different set of

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3 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
solutions and practice techniques. Although some practice methods work universally to solve all three types, most target a specific category.

“We are practicing not to play the right notes, but practicing to be comfortable playing the right notes,”5 said Christopher Deane. Once a problem spot is fixed, it must be engrained until the player feels totally comfortable. Fixing a problem spot is initially no more than a temporary patch. The player must first learn what they were doing incorrectly and then figure out what corrections need to be made. Next, the new version must be engrained until it is completely comfortable. According to Deane’s concept, a potential problem spot may be diagnosed before it is recognized, if the player’s comfort level is carefully analyzed. Although a passage may not be a problem spot at the moment, when a player feels discomfort, there’s a high probability that passage will later become an issue. If the problem can be caught early, initial bad habits can be avoided and broken before they are formed.

Problem spots can also be detected by using a recording device. Many times, especially early on in the process of learning a piece, there is much to think about and it’s easy to quickly dismiss or gloss over potential or developing problem spots. For this reason, recording a practice run-through may shed light on problem spots. Andy Harnsberger prefers to use “video too, not just audio” because it allows the player to see “what you are doing physically rather than just listening to it.”6 Younger players may recognize that certain spots sound bad or incorrect, but are unable to diagnose the precise problem.

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5 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
6 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Watching video footage usually reveals bad performance habits and points to the specific reasons why it sounds bad. Some issues like stroke type, body positioning, and playing spots are easily identified on video, but may be difficult to diagnose when listening to an audio recording.

In addition, sometimes problem spots go undetected for long periods of time because they are simply unheard or missed by the performer. As Blake Tyson explains it, “your brain fills in a lot of holes. Your brain wants it to sound a certain way and it sort of lies to you.”\(^7\) For this reason, the performer may not be aware of subtle issues until somebody else points them out. Sometimes, problem spots suddenly become apparent late in the process because of an increased level of execution. At this point, it is extremely difficult to fix since the incorrect version has been engrained for so long. For this reason, Don Green advises, in his book, *Performance Success*, to “make an audio or video tape [early in the process], to establish a benchmark of your current level of performance abilities. It will serve as the ‘before’ picture that will demonstrate your progress over the coming weeks.”\(^8\)

“So if I were you, I would have that Zoom recorder out all the time,” advised John Parks. This doesn’t imply that every second of every practice session needs to be recorded, but do record “when you run the whole thing [to] see how it comes across.”\(^9\) Once all of the problem spots are identified using the various techniques described above, it is important

\(^7\) Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\(^9\) John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
to label these passages so that they are not forgotten and progress can be monitored. As mentioned in Chapter 3, John Parks labels his problem spots using Greene’s method of Post-it Notes. “Greens are ‘I don’t need to practice this, I can do it.’ Yellows are, ‘I need to touch it a little and then it will be OK’, and Reds are, ‘I need to spend a lot of work there.’” This method gives the player a defined structure for practicing their problem spots and is also a great way of monitoring progress. Eventually, all of the reds / 3’s will turn to yellows / 2’s, and all of the yellows / 2’s will turn to greens / 1’s, indicating the player is ready for performance.

Greene also uses Post-it Notes for another method, which he calls “process cueing.” This method was first introduced in his book, *Performance Success*. Process cues are short phrases such as “smooth bowing [or] stay with it” that are used to trigger a certain thought process. When working on a problem spot, a particular adjustment is eventually made that fixes the problem. This usually takes a significant amount of time and effort to discover, so it would be unfortunate to forget. Process cues may be as simple as “warm, thin air stream [or] clean and easy,” but these cues are extremely useful and remind the player exactly what they need to do or think to fix the problem. Greene suggests that by writing the process cue on a Post-it Note and placing it in the music, the performer will be much more successful in remembering how to fix the problem. As the player becomes more familiar with the process cues, the Post-it Notes may be removed, since by this point, the cues should be engrained mentally and forever associated with that spot, “as if it were attached.”

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In Mildred Chase’s book, *Just Being at the Piano*, he emphasizes the importance of taking notes during practice sessions.

*When I discovered a new awareness or as an insight came to me, I would make a brief notation. Before I began to keep a journal at the piano, awakenings would come over me [then] be forgotten . . . I finally brought a writing pad to the piano and whenever an idea took hold, I made a note. This helped me to remember the experience of a particular moment.***

After the problem spots have all been identified, they now must be diagnosed so that a proper solution can be prescribed. Joakim Anterot starts by asking himself the question, “is it a technical problem that my muscles can’t do or is it that my brain can’t make it?”

Gary Cook will “analyze it a little bit and figure out . . . if it’s mental, physical, or both?” He usually finds that most of his problem spots are both mental and physical.

If it is a physical problem, which category does it fall into? Is it an issue of incorrect muscle memory, unfamiliar kinesththetic movements, or a technical deficiency? When trying to diagnose physical problem spots in his own playing, Eric Willie finds it helpful to ask himself the following questions, “Is the problem a bad sound? Is the problem bad notes? Is it bad rhythm? Or is it just inconsistent note accuracy?”

If it is a mental problem, does it stem from a lack of knowledge of the notes or piece? Is the information being recalled too slowly or with hesitancies or are there frequent moments that lack focus? Once the problem spots are clearly identified, a proposed solution or plan of attack

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13 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
can be implemented. There are many different ways of going about fixing problem spots, but depending on the type of problem, certain methods work better than others.

~ Incorrect Muscle Memory ~

As mentioned previously, problem spots caused by incorrect muscle memory occur when the body’s kinesthetic actions have been engrained incorrectly. This can happen because incorrect muscle memory was initially inputted or because the body has been kinesthetically confused by inconsistent and inaccurate repetitions. The only way to fix problem spots that have occurred for these reasons is to re-train or re-program the body with the correct muscle memory. First, the pre-existing muscle memory must be eliminated. The only way to do this is to play the passage so extremely slowly, that familiar muscle memory is no longer being used. This usually requires playing the passage at quarter tempo or slower. If the player has an imbalance in their kinesthetic and mental retention, this will become suddenly apparent, as they will not be able to remember the notes at this extremely slow tempo. They have been so reliant on muscle memory, that taking it at a tempo in which there is no familiar muscle memory, will expose zero or very little mental retention.

After finding a tempo which uses no previously trained muscle memory, the new muscle memory can then be developed. To do this, the tempo must remain extremely slow. As John Lane explained, “creating the connection between the brain and the hands of where
the notes are . . . has to be done slowly.”

Joshua Smith is another who recommended slow input, saying, “I can’t get it in physically if I do it fast.”

In addition to teaching the body exactly how it should feel to play it correctly, playing it slowly allows Jason Nicholson to “figure out technically what [he] need(s) to do from a movement and kinesthetic standpoint.” So how slow is slow? It is hard to determine exactly how slow one should play below the threshold of escaping all previous muscle memory. Ben Wahlund advised that the tempo should be “slow enough to play everything perfectly every time.” Once this starting tempo has been established, the training of new muscle memory can begin. This takes extreme patience and discipline, especially when the player already knows the notes and knows how it sounds at tempo. For this reason, Blake Tyson believes that the “best way to practice those rough spots is with the metronome.”

The key to retraining or learning correct muscle memory lies in the process of repetition. In Daniel Coyle’s book, The Talent Code, he explains that physiologically, retention of correct muscle memory is attributed to a “neural insulator called myelin.”

*When we fire our circuits in the right way - when we practice swinging a bat or playing that note - our myelin responds by wrapping layers of insulation around the neural circuit, each new layer adding a bit more skill and speed. The thicker the myelin gets, the better it insulates, and the faster and more accurate our movements and thoughts become.*

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15 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
16 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
19 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
The process for doing this varies from person to person, but all the percussionists interviewed shared one commonality, extremely high repetitions that increase in tempo at a very slow rate.

Omar Carmenates and Matthew Duvall both use a rule of ten repetitions before increasing the tempo. The only difference between their methods is that Carmenates increases his tempo by two beats per minute after completing ten successful repetitions, while Duvall only increases his tempo by one beat per minute. “[If] I’m working on quarter notes equals eight (bpm) . . . I’ll do it ten times. [If] that looks pretty good, now quarter note equals nine (bpm) and do that ten more times,” explained Duvall.

James Campbell uses a system called “looping.” He explained that looping is “where you take a shorter segment, set the metronome slower, and do it a hundred times in a row.” Campbell places a lot emphasis on doing correct repetitions every time so he remains at the same tempo until he has done three to five correct repetitions. “So if I play twice correctly and then make an error, I have to go back to three again,” explained Campbell. This method of looping allows him to make the most of his practice time, while enforcing and rewarding correct repetitions.

Jason Nicholson’s method utilizes a much higher number of repetitions than Carmenates, Duvall, and Campbell, but compensates by increasing his tempo at a quicker rate.

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Nicholson is “very methodical about doing it twenty times . . . [before] speeding it up ten metronome clicks and doing the same thing.” He finds by doing this slow and methodical practice, “in ten minutes, you have something worked out as opposed to just practicing it for two hours, running it over and over again.”

While all of these methods have a set process of repetition and tempo adjustments, Ben Wahlund’s method varies based on “how much time [he has] to practice a given problem spot . . . [He] “gauge(s) how meticulous” he can be in the “given amount of time . . . and gradually increases tempos at a rate that is fitting for the time allowed.” Hans Jensen believes that this type of “repetition is used to convince yourself that what you’re doing is correct, and to establish everything as part of a sequence of motions. In that way, repetition allows you to merge a process into a single thought,” said Jensen in his article, *The Case for Active Practicing*.

This method, in all its variations, of slowing down a passage and gradually working up to tempo is a proven and effective practice technique. All of the percussionists interviewed, except one, use this method to fix problem spots. The lone exception is Emil Richards, who said, “To try and slow down and go thru that whole process would slow you down like crazy.” Richards’ philosophy likely stems from his career in the recording industry, where time is money. Although he was alone in this regard, a few of the percussionists interviewed also mentioned drawbacks to working on a problem spot from slow to fast.

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26 Emil Richards, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Stickings can be a concern when starting at extremely slow tempos. Sometimes when the stickings used at a slow tempo are tried “at tempo, it won’t work,” explained Jason Nicholson. To check for this problem and avoid learning something that won’t eventually work, Nicholson said that he will “jump up [in tempo], after I’ve gotten it down a little bit, to make sure everything’s ok.”

Instead of practicing problem spots extremely slowly, Thomas Burritt simply relies on pure repetition. “I’m just going to play it over and over and over until it’s there.” He feels that sometimes, when a piece is slowed down too much, “you cease to play it musically.”

_I think we are really guilty of that sometimes. That motion you might use in slowing it down is probably not helpful in a musical situation. That’s why I like to push through those things sometimes and not force myself to use a different motion than I’m going to at tempo or in a real musical situation. I want to play musically every time I make a sound._

Brian Nozny agrees with Burritt, but has learned that by “exaggerating everything, exaggerated movements and exaggerated dynamics,” musical gestures and movements at slow tempos can be maintained. Once a “ridiculously wide” spectrum is developed, when the tempo is increased, these elements can be minimized to fit the context.

Unrelated to sticking and musicality issues, some problem spots don’t lend themselves well to practicing at a slower tempo due to stoke types. When practicing slowly, a certain stroke type is used, but sometimes it is a different stroke type than what is used at tempo.

28 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
29 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
Due to this stroke type change, the muscle memory created at a slower tempo will be incorrect. For example, when playing a one handed roll on the marimba at a slow tempo, it turns into single alternating strokes, which is a completely different stroke type and feel than a one-handed roll. This is also true when playing at extremely fast tempos. The motions are initiated from a completely different part of the body. On the marimba when playing slow, the motion comes from the elbow, forearm, and wrist. At extremely fast tempos, there is usually just one initial movement from the elbow, minimal wrist motion, and a lot of finger motion. For these situations, Brian Nozny and John Lane use an additive practice method. This method fragments the passage into very small chunks, often times only one note. After correctly playing the first fragment at tempo, the second fragment is added. After playing both the first and second fragments together successfully at tempo, the third fragment is added and this process is repeated until the entire passage has been added, all at performance tempo.

John Lane uses this same additive process, which he initially learned from Kenny Warner, a jazz pianist. Lane uses this additive process when practicing “fast passages.” Similar to Nozny, Lane starts with “the first note of the lick” and continuously adds one note at a time until the passage is complete. This method can be abbreviated by increasing the size of the first fragment to include the material leading up to the problem spot while maintaining the short chunks of the subsequent fragments. The second fragment would therefore begin on the note most commonly missed. By repeatedly releasing the phrase on this note, the correct muscle memory is continuously reinforced.

30 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Regardless of how slow or fast the problem spot is played, the most important factor in building correct muscle memory is a high volume of correct repetitions. Although slowing down the tempo enables most people to achieve that, creating correct muscle memory is ultimately determined by engraining correct repetitions. Paul Rennick believes that all this goes back to Christopher Deane’s point about being comfortable.

*Every drummer can play a rock groove; think about how comfortable it is. If I asked you to stand up in the audience and play two and four on a drum-set, rarely would somebody get nervous. They would simply do it and it would be comfortable. Well that's because the comfort level of that is related to the repetition of it. How many times have you done that? A million times? So that makes you feel comfortable. You have to try to get to that point with everything else you play. The more comfortable you are, the less your mind will race, and the more stable you'll be when you perform.*  

**Isolate and Surround**

*Running stuff from the front to the back and just playing stuff over and over again only reinforces mistakes.*

- Jason Nicholson

Practicing in the manner Nicholson describes is incredibly inefficient and commonly leads to problem spots caused by incorrect muscle memory. Reinforcing mistakes leads to kinesthetic confusion, making it nearly impossible to play the right version during a performance. Noa Kageyama, author of, *How to Care More Without Putting Too Much Pressure On Yourself*, states that this type of inaccurate practice “strengthens undesirable habits and errors . . . adding to the amount of future practice time you will need in order

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31 Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
to eliminate these bad habits and tendencies.”

The opposite method of this approach is to isolate and surround. As Michael Burritt described it, “My best method is I attack it and then I surround it . . . circle the wagon.”

When Christopher Deane is isolating a spot, he takes the mentality that “every measure is an etude . . . I feel it is better to work for three minutes on one measure than three hours on one page and not have anything to show for it.” John Parks agrees with Deane and always tries to “excerpt the excerpts.” Although this may seem tedious and time consuming, in actuality, it is quicker, as Omar Carmenates points out. “I try to be really smart about identifying only the problem spots [because] . . . that’s all you need to practice.” If the precise moment within the passage that is causing the problem can be identified and isolated, “one rep of that takes about half a second. You can get fifteen reps of that in twenty seconds, with a few beats in between.”

Having the discipline to focus and practice one isolated spot can be difficult, so Deane uses a method that he calls “putting your piece in Stone,” which refers to the one bar exercises in George Lawrence Stone’s books, *Stick Control* and *Accents and Rebounds*. “Take Post-It Notes and isolate one bar. The eye likes to wander, but this won’t let you go farther than one bar. Putting Post-It Notes on that one page [and] limiting it to that one brief period . . . keeps me honest.”

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35 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
36 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
37 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Deane also added that it helps to practice this method with a timer to regulate how long each section is practiced. Deane is “a big believer of the timer,”35 and like Post-it Notes, it doesn’t allow the player to pre-maturely progress onto the next section. The timer promotes short, but extremely focused pockets of practice. Andy Harnsberger believes that this is the only productive way to practice because “your brain will only allow you to focus intensely for a short period of time . . . If you try to isolate a problem spot for several hours you aren’t going to get as much done as if you take it five minutes at a time here and there. For me, that’s been really effective, short bursts of really pounding it for five minutes.”38

After practicing the issue in isolation, Gary Cook believes it’s important to practice “the transition into and out of it . . . A lot of people don’t do that. They just practice the spot and then it’s still a spot rather than connect and make the transitions.”39 Michael Burritt agrees with Gary Cook and adds that the transitions are usually what make the passage difficult. “I can fix the issue if I’m playing just that spot, but more often, it’s what happens before it, or sometimes after it, that causes me to be uncomfortable with it.”40

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38 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
39 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Brian Mason has a standard process for isolating and surrounding a problem spot.

"I’ll literally go to that place where I made that mistake and I’ll go to the one beat before it and one beat after it, and I’ll play that until I have it down. Then I’ll back up a beat and add a beat, and over the course of time, I’m ironing out the wrinkles. I’m getting lots of reps on whatever the problem is and being able to get into it and get out of it with confidence."\(^{41}\)

Joshua Smith uses a very similar method. He starts at the “point of destruction” and works outwards, keeping it “equal on either side.”\(^{42}\)

\~ Imbalance of Kinesthetic and Mental Retention ~

When problem spots are attributed to mental breakdowns, they are usually caused by an imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention. Although physical problems can also be categorized as an imbalance, mental problems are much more common to this category. The most common situation occurs when the player relies too heavily on their muscle memory and lacks mental retention. When this is the case, if the muscle memory is temporarily lost or suspended, the player does not have the safety net of mental retention to fill the void.

Most mental problem spots occur during transitions. This is because music is typically practiced, learned, and rehearsed in sections. This results in weaker muscle memory during the transitions. If the player isn’t familiar with the form of the piece or has a hard

\(^{41}\) Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.  
\(^{42}\) Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
time remembering the order of sections, they will be unable to recover when their muscle memory fails.

To strengthen mental retention and gain a better understanding of how the transitions fit together, Brett Dietz believes it is “very important . . . to think more about the music than to practice it . . . I’m thinking about the piece and thinking about how it goes. I’m going through it in my mind or while I’m studying the score and finding things out about the score that I didn’t know before I start learning it.”

Emil Richards agrees that practicing away from the instrument is key to building mental retention. He likes to “stay in bed for an hour” in the morning and “practice mentally” while his “mind is bright and alert . . . I visualize the music and I visualize playing on that instrument,” explained Richards, enabling him to rely completely on mental retention if desired.

Mental practice can be a difficult skill to develop. In Don Greene’s book, *Performance Success*, he describes that mental practice of a problem spot should be done in a repetitive manner.

*If you imagine missing a shift, hit a stop button on your mental VCR immediately. Rewind to a place before the mistake. Start from that point, moving slowly forward at a speed you can control. Repeat this process several times, just as you would in real practice, until you can perform it well in your mind in real time.*

43 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
44 Emil Richards, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
When problem spots can be played correctly in isolation, but rarely go well during run-throughs or in the context of a larger section, this may be the result of two unrelated issues. The first issue may be that the player does not mentally focus on the correct thing. As discussed earlier, when a physically related problem is fixed, the solution must be remembered and applied thereafter. If the performer forgets to trigger their ‘process cue’ during a run-through, the problem is now attributed to a lack of mental retention, not a breakdown in muscle memory or technique. In Hans Jensen’s article, *The Case for Active Practicing*, he explains that although the “mental pathways you . . . created [aren’t retrieving properly] this doesn’t mean that your practice was lost: in fact, it probably means that your subconscious is [still] processing it.”

The second reason why some problem spots may be easy in isolation but difficult in context can be attributed to a mental block or fear associated with the passage. When this is the case, Michael Burritt tries to remind himself to “relax and do the best [he] can.” These problem spots “mostly come from stress or anxiety . . . and we hurry too much in our problem spot or do not concentrate through it . . . [Tell] yourself to relax and lay back in the problem spot and hopefully in doing that, you’ll get through it ok.”

When Thomas Burritt is faced with this same type of issue, he finds that “most of the time, it’s just willing it to happen.” When this still does not work, Burritt has found that “just letting it go” can sometimes fix it. “There’s evidence that suggests our brain learns

when we sleep. So sometimes I’ll take a day or two and leave it and when I come back, it’s better. I don’t know why this happens but I’ve experienced it numerous times.”

Blake Tyson has experienced this same phenomenon. “Sometimes the best way to practice problem spots is to quit practicing them. Sometimes it is best to sleep on it for a few days.” If the passage is fully understood, “let your brain figure it out.” Besides, dwelling on a problem spot caused by mental issues, can be a waste of practice time. Tyson suggests, “Say ‘forget it’ and practice the stuff you can play. You can make progress on the piece and come back to [the problem spot] in a few days.” The brain is extremely powerful and mental blocks can sometimes be solved just as easily as they can be formed. Anders Holdar uses this same approach and believes it’s important to know when “to leave the problem and not be stuck in the problem.” There comes a point when “you are spoiling your time because you cannot fill your brain with more . . . you must leave it and sleep. Relax and do other things.” If relentless practice is continued, not only is it a waste of time, but it “can build up a fear . . . [of] the difficult place.”

In Don Gorrie’s book, *Performing in the Zone*, he advises to “be patient . . . It is not unusual to experience these internal blocks or mental barriers in your journey . . . give yourself the time you need to take further steps in the right direction.” This concept of setting aside a problem and coming back to it later has influenced Frederic Macarez’s teaching style. He has found that this same principle can be applied to the preparation of

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48 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
49 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
51 Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 176.
an entire work. Instead of learning a piece of music, performing it, and then moving on to
the next piece, Macarez has his students learn a piece, move on to “something else and
then after two or three months . . . get back to the first one and play it again.” He finds
that this results in a more comfortable and successful performance of the piece.

When a certain level of musicianship is achieved in one’s career, technical deficiencies
should rarely be the cause of problem spots. Having played large amounts of repertoire,
there should be an in depth understanding of the instrument and technique. When this is
achieved, playing the instrument becomes mostly mental. Once music is understood and
absorbed mentally, proficient technique allows the player to express it on their instrument
with ease. Emil Richards is a perfect example of this level of mastery. His technique and
familiarity with the instruments allow him to express whatever he can understand with
his mind. This enables him to do much of his practicing mentally. “I practice in my head
a lot more than I do on an instrument,” said Richards. “I’m so used to practicing for so
many years that it’s engrained. Now, I can really do it mentally and get as much
accomplished.”

Frederic Macarez has also reached this level of mastery, but some of that was developed
from necessity. “When you travel or when you are busy you cannot practice on the
instruments, just read.” Through thinking and visualization, “ninety-nine percent” of the
work can be done “without the instrument.” When Macarez was younger he practiced a
lot, but now he practices much less because he has learned to practice with his mind.

53 Emil Richards, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Problem spots caused by technical deficiencies are generally the most common type of problem spot. When the kinesthetic actions required to execute a passage are unable to be performed by the player, the first step to fixing it is diagnosing it. According to Matthew Duvall, all technical deficiencies belong to one of three categories. They can be either, “something technical that needs to be fixed, something technical that needs to be adapted, or something that is never going to work [because] . . . [it] is idiomatically inappropriate for the instrument.”

If the problem lies in the first category, something technical that needs to be fixed, it is a general deficiency of the player and should be practiced independently of the specific passage or piece. When this is the case, Ben Wahlund “embrace(s) them as an opportunity to grow, not a shortcoming on my part or a stressful affectation of the composer.” If the problem lies in the second category, something technical that needs to be adapted, an exercise should be created from elements of the piece or in the same style of the piece. If the problem lies in the third category, something idiomatically inappropriate for the instrument, Brian Nozny suggests checking out “two or three recordings to see how [other] people handled it. Did they all do the exact same thing?”. If there aren’t any existing recordings or reasonable solutions, it’s probably “always going to be a problem,” said Duvall.

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56 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
Technical deficiencies, belonging to the first two categories can be solved in a number of ways. Seven of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed prefer to create technical exercises that isolate and develop the technical deficiency.

For instance, Jason Baker’s practice of problem spots revolves around creating “little exercises” that work on all of the technically challenging elements of the piece. Once the exercises are created, he spends more of his practice time on the “techniques needed to perform the piece,” than the piece itself. “If you can do the techniques and you know the theory behind it, the piece is just a combination of those two things.” Baker also finds that he “can practice longer and not get burned out or hit a wall” because he’s not practicing the piece. In the grand scheme of things, developing the skills to play the piece is more important than being able to play that specific piece. “I’m just using the piece as a way to come up with exercises”\(^{57}\) and improve as a player, said Baker. In essence, individual pieces are merely small stepping-stones in the development of one’s musical abilities.

Unfortunately, technical abilities aren’t something that can be developed once and retained forever. Gordon Stout and Payton MacDonald both create technical exercises not to learn or develop a new technique, but to “build some muscle” for passages that require more “chops,”\(^{58}\) explained MacDonald. Many chop exercises, as well as most technical exercises, can be played away from the instrument. Robert Schietroma does “a lot of

\(^{57}\) Jason Baker, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.

\(^{58}\) Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
floor practicing . . . I just sit on the floor and lean up against a couch or something comfortable and just play. I watch the news every night and I practice all my marimba exercises.” Also, floor exercises are great for building chops because, as Schietroma pointed out, it is easy to watch television or do other activities to distract the brain from the uncomfortable muscle burn required to build better chops.

Mark Ford is another advocate of floor exercises and his article titled Marimba Floor Exercises points out the many advantages of practicing away from the instrument. Practicing away from the instrument allows the player to develop confidence and coordination without worrying about hitting the right notes. They improve comfort with the grip, strokes, and permutations such as sequences, patterns, and combinations. Floor exercises allow players who don’t have access to an instrument, to practice anywhere, maximizing practice time efficiency.

The second category of technical deficiencies, something technical that needs to be adapted, occur when the technical deficiency is not the technique itself, but caused by an awkward or unconventional application of the technique unique to that piece. Payton MacDonald views these kind of problem spots as opportunities to “build coordination.” While the techniques are familiar and can be performed out of context, in the context of the piece, they challenge the performer to move in an orthodox manner or create original hybrid techniques through the combining of two contrasting, yet familiar techniques.

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59 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
60 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
When this is the case, Brian Zator creates exercises that specifically use “those ideas in music.” This usually results in an exercise that sounds very similar to the piece, almost in an improvisatory style. For example, when Zator is working on a choral with difficult and large shifts between chords, he will play the choral using “quadruple stops with thirty-second note or sixteenth note triplets” instead of a normal roll. “Then I split it up so you are playing thirty-second note sextuplets, so I’m getting that shifting, but trying to make the line as smooth as possible.” When doing this exercise, he focuses on creating “a smooth vertical motion but a very fast and precise horizontal motion.”

Many of the percussionists interviewed, integrate their technical deficiency exercises into their warm-up routine. Andy Harnsberger always dedicates “the last five or ten minutes of [his] warm up routine to . . . problem areas.” Similarly, Brian Nozny incorporates technique exercises from the pieces that he’s working on into “into [his] warm-up in some way.”

**Hands Separate**

In rare instances, the player may be unsure what exactly in the passage is causing the technical difficulties. Sometimes when difficult passage analyzed, the utilized techniques don’t reveal any deficiencies.

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61 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
62 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
63 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
A good way to reveal a hidden deficiency is to play the hands separately. It is sometimes difficult to see what each hand is doing individually when they are being played together, but playing each hand in isolation will typically unveil the technical difficulty. Kevin Bobo uses this technique in other aspects of his practicing, but finds that when one hand can be focused on individually, it results in a better comprehension of the technical challenges and usually leads to a quicker solution of the problem spot. Bobo often finds that technical difficulties are related to where his eyes must look while playing.64 Throughout the learning process of any piece, the brain subconsciously determines where to look to ensure the most accurate outcome. Sometimes however, both hands require visual assistance. This can be hard to discover without doing hands separate.

Brian Zator also points out that by playing hands separately, it is easier to analyze the “stroke type.”65 One hand might be doing an unnatural stroke type, which may be causing a technical problem. I-Jen Fang also practices problem spots hands separately because. “If you can do just one hand at a time, that means you really know it,” said Fang. She learned this technique from her piano studies, “I was a pianist and we always started with one hand at a time.”66

Julie Licata also practices hands separately because it helps her with “coordination issue(s) . . . No matter what instrument it’s on, I will find the right hand notes and play

64 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
65 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
those in the rhythm.” After she has worked up one hand at a time, she begins “trying to slowly put them back together.” 67

While playing hands separately may expose technical difficulties, sometimes playing one hand without the other is difficult to do. For this reason, learning how to play hands separately may actually be more challenging than the problem itself. John Park’s philosophy emphasizes practicing technical deficiencies by simplifying the passage to make it easier. Once this is mastered, he slowly adds the parameters back in. John Parks believes that it is important to “always feel good about what you are doing . . . [make] the best use of the time that you have, [and] also feel good about what you are accomplishing.” For example, when Parks practices Lieutenant Kijé by Sergei Prokofiev, he makes “it easy first” by playing it “loud and slow . . . Do that over and over and over again so that you feel good about what you are doing and really the only difference is the tempo and the dynamic.” Once this feels totally comfortable, start increasing the tempo and “for every click that you get closer to the tempo, take it down dynamically.” 68

**Tempo**

Fixing a technical deficiency can also be done by playing “it very slowly” so that the player can figure out exactly needs to be done from “a movement and kinesthetic

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68 John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
standpoint,” said Jason Nicholson. Sometimes a simple shifting of body positioning or raising an elbow can make a huge difference in the technical execution of a passage.

In contrast, sometimes practicing technical deficiencies at a slow tempo “doesn’t always work,” said Frederic Macarez. He instead recommends practicing them “in tempo . . . just to have a physical idea of what is possible or not.” Stickings and stroke types are usually the two the most common issue regarding tempo, but once they have been tested at tempo, “you can practice slowly and increase the tempo.” After slowing it down and working back up to performance tempo, Brian Nozny tries to go “eight or twelve clicks beyond that.” Once going “beyond the ceiling,” Nozny finds it much easier to play it at tempo because it no longer feels like maximum tempo.

~ Conclusion ~

Problem spots occur for three reasons: incorrect muscle memory, imbalance between kinesthetic and mental retention, and technical deficiencies. Each of these causes have very different practice methods and solutions, which is why it is important to first diagnose the problem spot accurately before attempting to fix it. Overcoming bad habits, increasing mental retention, and correcting technical shortcomings are all difficult and tedious undertakings that require time and perseverance.

71 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
The old saying that ‘practice makes perfect’ is only true in one scenario, when the player practices perfectly. While this saying delivers a positive message and can be extremely powerful idea, ‘practice makes permanent’ is a much more accurate statement. Often times, problem spots are self-inflicted, created by the player’s poor practice habits. Whether the tempo is increased too quickly, incorrect repetitions are allowed and reiterated, or there is a simple failure to notice details, problem spots are not always a product of deficiency.

For this reason, every problem spot has its own set of challenges and lessons to be learned, but through the process of fixing it, invaluable skills and lessons will be acquired. After all, that is how musicians learn and eventually master their instruments. Thus, each problem spot should be approached and valued as an opportunity to improve.
Figure 21: Survey – Problem Spots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Identify Problems Spot</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are your problem spots inconsistent?</td>
<td>A1, A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dislike working on problem spots?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time determining your problem spots?</td>
<td>A1, A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time making yourself work on problems spots?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are some of your problem spots related to sound quality?</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you motivated most by goal setting?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Incorrect Muscle Memory</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do some of your problem spots appear later in your preparation?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you playing a piece that uses rubato?</td>
<td>B3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you often fix problem spots only for them to reoccur during the run through?</td>
<td>B4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are your problem spots usually tempo related?</td>
<td>B3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you learn the part wrong initially?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the problem spot feel physically awkward?</td>
<td>B1, B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your problem spots occur sporadically?</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Imbalance of Kinesthetic and Mental Retention</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do transitions give you the most troubles?</td>
<td>C1, C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you able to play the problem spot in isolation but not in context?</td>
<td>C3, C4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you fear your problem spots in a performance?</td>
<td>C4, C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you practiced a problem spot repeatedly with little success?</td>
<td>C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically stop and start during your problem spots?</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Technical Deficiencies</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you get tired of practicing the same problem spots?</td>
<td>D1, D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you not have enough practice time to work on all your problem spots?</td>
<td>D3, D4, D9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have similar problem spots in different pieces of music?</td>
<td>D1, D4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the problem spot appear easy but for some reason gives you a lot of trouble?</td>
<td>D5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your problem spot related to dynamic difficulty?</td>
<td>D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your problem spot tempo related?</td>
<td>D7, D8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your problem spot due to awkward stickings or shifts?</td>
<td>D9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your problem spot extremely complex musically?</td>
<td>D6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 22: Outline – Problem Spots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Identify Problem Spot</td>
<td>170-175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Assess Comfort Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Recording Device</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Post-it Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Determine Cause – Mental / Physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Incorrect Muscle Memory</td>
<td>178-187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Slow Practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. High Repetition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Additive Method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Isolate and Surround</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Imbalance of Kinesthetic and Mental Retention</td>
<td>187-192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Score Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mental Practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Process Cues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Break Down Mental Block</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Take a Break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Technical Deficiencies</td>
<td>192-198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Practice Technique Independent from Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Create Exercise from Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Floor Exercises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Incorporate into Warm-up Routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hands Separate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Simplify Passage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Diagnosis at Slow Tempo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Play Faster than Written Tempo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Examine Pre-existing Recordings</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Musicians express their musical talent and hard work through performance. It can take place in many different venues and contexts and serve a variety of purposes. For the audience, it is a time to be entertained, educated, and challenged, but for the performer, it is the ultimate test of their preparation and poise. With expectations high all around, a performance can be extremely stressful for the performer and result in an experience ranging from exhilarating to heartbreaking. The preparation for these monumental moments varies greatly from one performer to the next, and may be altered depending on the situation. Similar to most professionals in the modern world, performers face a never-ending battle between time and preparation, as they struggle to continuously meet a series of deadlines.

~ Preparation Time Table ~

*If you don’t know it by a certain point, you’re not going to cram it in the night before or the week before. So if I have a performance coming up, I try and figure out a schedule to pace myself.*\(^1\) - Gary Cook

Performance preparation has a very ambiguous nature to it. When is one done preparing for a performance? Is there a definitive sign that shows completion? Is over preparation possible? Is the performance itself an accurate critique of the preparation? Predictably,

\(^1\) Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
the answers to these and many other performance preparation questions vary greatly depending on the performer.

Performance preparation is not marked by the completion of learning the music. Once the music has been learned, time is needed to review and polish the material to establish a certain level of comfort and self-expression. How much time is needed to complete this last step of the process depends primarily on the person.

Brian Nozny stated, “a month out, ideally I’ve got the piece learned” while Steven Schick sets a goal of being able to run through the piece only “ten days before the performance.” James Campbell wants to be able to do a run-through at tempo “five days before the performance,” while Eric Willie desires a little more buffer time, saying, “no matter what it is, an orchestral audition, performance, recital, etc.,” I should be able “to run the entire piece at tempo” at least two weeks prior to the performance.

Julie Licata tries to have a piece polished and “ready to play” for performance two weeks prior, while Steven Schick tries to time his preparation perfectly so that he peaks “right at the performance with a sort of punctual run through level.”

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2 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
5 Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
6 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
At the far end of that spectrum is Matthew Duvall, who believes that “if you are not prepared for your recital about six months in advance, then you really aren’t going to be ready.” Instead of using the next six months to do run-throughs and practice, Duvall tries to “learn the repertoire early enough in the process so that you can put it away for six weeks, and then bring it back. That is when you really learn it.”

~ Practice Habits Leading up to Performance ~

Habits Don’t Change

Most of the percussionists interviewed change their practice habits in a variety ways as the performance draws nearer. In contrast, seven of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed indicated that they do not change any of their practices habits as they get closer to performance.

Frederic Macarez, for instance, views “the performance as just one more practice session,” and doesn’t alter his routine. As long as he stays on schedule, the performance should be a natural continuation of the practice process. Emil Richards doesn’t alter his practice habits either as he approaches a performance. “I don’t build up to anything. I go right for where it’s supposed to be. I’ve been doing that my whole life. It’s my process.”

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Practice More

Maintaining a disciplined practice routine that allows the performance to be a natural step in the process sounds sensible and even ideal. However, for a variety of reasons, most people don’t follow this methodical approach and end up intensifying their effort as their deadline approaches. This usually results in an increased amount of practice time leading up to the performance. Ben Wahlund admitted that “while in principle I feel a person should allocate an equal amount of time for every day of practice as he or she approaches a performance, I normally end of ‘cramming’ for performances.”\textsuperscript{10} Cramming works surprisingly well for some people and isn’t synonymous with mediocrity.

Not all people who practice more leading up to a performance do it as a last resort or wish they had followed a more regimented plan. Some individuals operate best when their practice hours leading up to the performance steadily increase. For them, the added hours help develop an increased level of familiarity with the material, providing a new level of focus and confidence. Paul Rennick, for instance, intentionally increases his practice hours leading up to the performance and views it as an organic process. “Naturally, you just focus more time,” explained Rennick. “It’s a build up to this moment in time when you are performing.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Ben Wahlund, email interview, 31 Oct. 2012.
\textsuperscript{11} Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Practice Less

Among those interviewed who do not intensify their preparation as the performance approaches is Omar Carmenates, who said, “when you are running, the week before a race is called a taper. [This is] where you start pulling back the miles so that you are stronger the day of your run. I actually taper before my performance,” said Omar Carmenates. This is a very different approach than gradually increasing practice hours, and “only works if the process took place from day one,” explained Carmenates. This method is dependent on being prepared well before the performance date and knowing which parts need to be practiced. He has found that “pulling back the hours” leading up to the performance helps eliminate nervousness and anxiety. “I try not to make it a crescendo, because that just makes you more nervous about it. I try to make it a de-crescendo.”12 I-Jen Fang also practices less the “week before” a performance. “I try to run through it and if I feel good, I just leave it . . . I don’t practice too much.” If during the run through, “there are problem spots, I only work on the problem spots and then at the end of the session, I run through it again and that’s it.”13 Practicing less leading up to a performance may seem counterintuitive to some, but what Brett Dietz does is even more unexpected. He stops playing altogether “for a couple of days.” He has discovered that when he takes “a break from a piece two or three days before the performance or concert, it is better when I go back to it.”14

12 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
13 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
14 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
Mental Practice

Julie Licata also cuts back her practice hours the “two or three weeks” leading up to the performance. “I don’t want to burn myself out physically and musically . . . by playing it too much and over express or overstate things that I feel in the music.” To ensure a fresh performance, Licata devotes “Fifty percent of my practice time” to mental practice away from the instrument. “I do three different types of visualizations: visualizing the physical playing, my physical relation to the instrument (air play the piece), and also the visual relation to the actual music, like sheet music.” Developing the ability and discipline to visualize a piece using three different forms of visualization is remarkable, not to mention time consuming. “A ten minute marimba solo would take me thirty minutes to visualize,” explained Licata. After developing this level of concentration, doing a normal run-through on the instrument goes “by really fast,”15 said Licata. In Gerald Klickstein’s book, The Musician's Way, he believes that when one can visualize a piece, “your awareness of your material will anchor your control and set your creativity free.”16

Gordon Stout and Gary Cook also use mental practice when preparing for a performance, but unlike Licata, their habits were initially developed out of necessity.

*Early in my professional career, which was also early in my college career, practicing would suffer over preparing for teaching, because I was getting paid to teach – not to practice. So I’d go, ‘holy crap, I’ve got to fly to so and so tomorrow, and I haven’t played in weeks.’ So I learned how to mentally practice on the plane.*17 - Gordon Stout

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15 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
17 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
I went on a ski trip with my brother for a week and had to come back and play two or three rags with the orchestra a day later. So I had a copy of the rags in my ski coat and we’d go up the chair lift and I’d visually play through it and kind of air drum it; air xylophone it, I guess you’d call it. And if I’d get to a point where I wasn’t sure of a note or something I’d pull out the old wrinkly copy and look at it. So I did that for a week, I didn’t touch an instrument.\textsuperscript{18} - Gary Cook

According to Noa Kageyama in his article, \textit{Does Mental Practice Work?} “mental practice activates the same brain regions as physical practice, and may even lead to the same changes in neural structure and synaptic connectivity.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Change Focus}

On stage, the performer’s musical goals are to convey certain moods, emotions, and ideas to the audience. Those goals are not likely the same as they were during the weeks and months of preparation in the practice room. For this reason, there comes a point in the preparation when the emphasis switches from small and focused details to big picture concepts. Also, as the piece becomes more polished, problem spots are more subtle and progress is made in much smaller increments. As a result, practice habits are adjusted to accommodate the goals of performance. Nine of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed described how they change their practice room focus as they approach their performance.

Preparing a piece for performance usually takes a great deal of time. Eventually the piece becomes more polished and there are fewer errors to correct. When this happens,

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\textsuperscript{18} Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012. \\
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progress slows down and further gains are less evident, which can be frustrating. Omar Carmenates put it in perspective, saying, “as you get closer, you have to relish in the fact that you are getting better at less.” Problem spots that need to be fixed at this point have been problem spots for a long time, usually for a good reason, and are naturally much more difficult to fix. “Three weeks before you perform you may be working out one two-beat lick . . . but two months prior I was learning two pages a day,” explained Carmenates. This is part of the process when reaching “optimum performance.” As the performance draws nearer, “the scope is going to get smaller and smaller, and you have to relish in those really small victories,”20 said Carmenates. Brian Nozny uses a similar approach, moving from “very, very big picture to very, very small picture”21 as the performance approaches.

Although narrowing the focus is necessary for most to elevate a piece to performance quality, as Mark Ford gets closer to a performance, he abandons the focus on fixing the small problem spots and instead focuses on “expressive content . . . I try to think more about the expressive elements towards the end of the preparation because if the audience is only getting technical things out of my playing, then they're really missing the boat.”22 Expressive elements include things like phrasing, pacing, and dynamics, as well as, in Brian Zator’s words, “performance presence.” As Zator gets closer to a performance he changes his practice focus from notes, rhythms, and even aspects of musicality to the visual elements of performance. “What do I look like before I step up to the marimba . . . what are my hands doing and feet doing, in a phrase, in a transition, before I start the

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20 Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
21 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
22 Mark Ford, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
piece, and after I end the piece?” Zator believes that this is an important final step to ensure that the audience gets to “see the whole package.” This idea of presenting the whole package to the audience affects Zator’s practice methods in other ways as well. As he gets closer to the performance he goes “back to the macro ideas so I can get the bigger picture of things . . . All of the little bitty things that I was doing before, I’m putting together to make the whole complete performance.”

Joshua Smith follows a similar approach, and describes his focus as “an hourglass.” If Smith has eight weeks to learn and prepare a piece:

The first week I’m doing big runs of stuff, getting an overview. By the fourth week, I’m hitting trouble spots. By the fifth week, I’m starting to expand it. By the seventh week, I’m doing more full runs and listening to recordings again. And then by the performance, I’m doing full runs.”

The routine of doing more full run-throughs as the performance draws closer was shared by ten of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed. At a certain point in the process, it becomes apparent that the piece is no longer significantly improving so practice time is better spent playing the piece from beginning to end. A week before the performance, for instance, James Campbell focuses his practice time on “just doing run-throughs.” At this point, he’s “not really practicing it,” instead he’s trying to get repetitions “performing it.”

23 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
24 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
Run-throughs help establish continuity and confidence and help the player prepare for mistakes that they might encounter during the performance. Brian Zator embraces mistakes during run-throughs because it teaches him “how to get out of it.”23 Eric Willie views mistakes made during run-throughs a little differently. He views them as a sign that he’s not prepared to perform. “Two weeks before, I’m trying to get those three, five, or ten reps in a row without making a mistake. [At this point] you should have the piece nailed, so there’s no excuse. You’re looking for consistency.”26

Doing run-throughs can help with performance preparation in a variety of other ways, including revealing challenges that practicing individual sections may not otherwise uncover. John Lane does more run-throughs at the end to “get the pacing down.”27 Brian Mason does run-throughs to build “endurance mentally and physically.”28 Christopher Deane believes that if you can do fifty solid reps the week of the performance, “you are in good shape.”29 Endurance can be of particular concern when preparing for a solo recital. To best prepare, Joshua Smith tries to “walk through everything,” doing a full run-through of the entire recital, including the movement “from instrument to instrument.”30

Run-throughs are also very helpful to anticipate how one will deal with adversity. For instance, sufficient practice and warm-up time is not always possible before a

27 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
28 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
29 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
30 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
performance, so Michael Burritt practices doing “dry runs of pieces.” This prepares him for what it might feel like, both mentally and physically, if it happens at the performance.

Four of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed approached run-throughs leading up to the performance in a very distinctive way. Instead of trying to mimic the performance conditions, people like Jason Nicholson, play the piece, “in its entirety, way under tempo.” Gary Cook finds that slowing it down significantly helps “vitalize the programming of the piece,” while Brian Mason has found that it allows him to play it as “correct as possible so I understand the material in context and the only variable is tempo.”

Surprisingly, three of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed take the complete opposite approach. As they get closer to the performance, instead of doing more run-throughs, they purposely try to do fewer run-throughs. Julie Licata explains her thinking:

*If I was doing runs everyday before the performance, I would get tired of the piece. I would expend all my emotion before I get to the performance and/or I would make mistakes and then worry that I’m going to make those mistakes again. So I try to avoid that by not running the piece too much.*

The fact that Julie Licata doesn’t want to “expend” all of her emotion before the performance may be a direct result of her performance philosophy. “[I want] each performance to be very unique, so my phrasing changes from day to day.” She advocates that music is a form of self-expression and since she doesn’t “feel the same every day,”

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33 Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
it’s not logical to “prescribe for myself exactly how I’m supposed to feel on the day of my performance.” Steven Schick agrees with Licata’s philosophy and strives to do the same.

It’s a pretty boring life as a concert musician if the only thing you do on stage is to retrieve, repeat the things that are in the practice room. It is absolutely essential to practice in such a way that you prepare yourself to do a whole bunch of things on stage, not just one thing . . . my practicing is not limiting but offers a range of abilities.

To help accomplish this goal, Schick quits doing run-throughs the week before the performance, turning his focus to something else besides “just getting through the piece from top to bottom.”

~ Simulate Performance ~

Performing for an audience always feels drastically different than doing a run-through in the practice room. This is attributed to the many changes that occur within the physical and mental self of the performer as well as with the environment of the venue. Many people combat the inevitable physical and mental changes of performance by simulating performance conditions in the practice room. That way, “by the time your real performance day comes, you know the routine. You’ve done it all before - many times,” said Jon Gorrie in his book Performing in the Zone.

34 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
36 Jon Gorrie, Performing in the Zone, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 107.
Six of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed described their efforts to replicate performance scenarios in the practice room. John Tafoya believes that it is important to practice in performance attire and go through the entire routine of entering and existing the stage.

_Play a portion of the program, but when you do it, wear the same shoes you are going to wear for the show, maybe even the same clothes. You actually walk up to the instrument and you bow. You do all the things that you would normally do at the recital but your doing it in your late practice sessions._

Although the mind knows that it’s a drill, Tafoya finds that “there is something about the mechanics of it, physical and emotional, of doing everything that you are going to do at the show that really helps” When it comes time to perform, it will “feel like the twenty-fifth time you’ve done it because you’ve gone through everything all the way to the bow. The sensations are all very similar.”[^37] Robert Caldwell, author of _The Performer Prepares_, believes that this type of preparation “creates a map of the overall dimensions of your performance . . . like a blueprint, it provides an overview of your entire performance.”[^38]

Eric Willie also tries to simulate the physical aspects of performance in the practice room. Like Tafoya, he practices entering the stage, walking up to the marimba, and bowing, but Willie also expressed the importance of practicing how to start. “How are you going to count yourself off? Are you going to think of the first phrase and then play

[^37]: John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
[^38]: Robert Caldwell, _The Performer Prepares_, (Dallas, TX: Caldwell Pub Co., 1990), 137.
the first note, or are you going to do like one, two, three, breathe?” Willie believes it is important to plan this out and do “the same routine every time.”

Simulating the characteristics or routine of performance is not always easy to do, especially in the case of an audition. For instance, the order of events may be determined real time by a panel or committee. This type of uncertainty makes it difficult to simulate in the practice room. A good way to prepare for these situations is to create randomness within the practice routine so that unpredictability becomes the actual routine. For example, when Michael Udow prepares for an orchestral audition, he recommends “making flash cards for each piece and then shuffling them so that you are constantly changing the order in which you play your excerpts.”

Incorporating elements of the performance environment into one’s practice routine is extremely powerful and creates a sense of familiarity on stage. Unfortunately, during a performance the physical surroundings are subject to change as well. Everything from the type of instrument to how the hall resonates can deeply impact the comfort of the performer. To help prepare himself for the environmental changes, Payton MacDonald moves his music stand from its usual location “in front of the marimba [to] another part of the room” so that he can get use to the “openness and more direct conduit with the audience.” Joshua Smith uses a similar technique, but instead of the music stand, he likes to “re-orient the keyboard to a different wall in the room . . . that will throw me off”

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40 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
41 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
enough to give me those performance jitters. This is new and fresh, how’s my body going to handle it?”

Like Smith, James Campbell tries to create practice situations outside of his “comfort zone” to test how he will respond in a performance. Rather than moving his instrument, Campbell tries playing on “another instrument in a different room . . . try to play it on another keyboard or with different kinds of mallets to make sure that I don’t just sound good in my basement but that I can do it outside of my practice world.”

When possible, an even better alternative is to practice in the hall where the performance is scheduled to occur. Joshua Smith said, “I like to get into the hall and run through stuff just to hear things. I try to do that at least a couple of days before the performance. Not the day of, but leading up to the performance.”

**Play for People**

Simulating the routine and playing environment is a great way to become familiar with the logistical issues of performance, but that does not address the physical affects of anxiety. The physiological and psychological changes caused by anxiety and adrenaline when performing are conditions that are harder to simulate, especially in the comfort of a practice room. While many performers try to suppress the effects of anxiety, three of the

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42 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
44 Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
percussionists interviewed instead try to purposely re-create the physical symptoms of anxiety so that they can practice dealing with it.

Jason Baker is one who prefers to “practice the anxiety” rather than try to “alleviate anxiety.” He does this by simulating the physical characteristics experienced during a performance, such as increased heart rate and heavy breathing. “I’ll do jumping jacks, I’ll do pushups, I’ll do anything to get my brain out of order and get my body out of order. Then get up and suddenly do [a run-through].” In doing this, Baker is preparing himself for the physical symptoms he may encounter on stage.

"I’m trying to alleviate any unknown that I’m not experiencing in the practice room that I’m going to have to experience on stage . . . You practice the physical and psychological stuff as much, if not more, than you practice the music stuff. That, as we all know, is the real crux. It’s not the piece that’s hard, it’s the circumstances that are different on stage. I guess a lot of people try to do the opposite. They’ll work on breathing or meditation, and that’s cool, that may work best for them. But for me, I’ve always felt that if I can just get comfortable with the anxiety part of it, I’ll be most successful."  

Omar Carmenates shares a similar philosophy and does “a lap around the building” to get his “heart rate up” before doing a practice run-through. Joshua Smith also subscribes to this method and finds that doing run-throughs with “an accelerated heart rate” exposes his performance tendencies. In Don Greene’s book, Performance Success, he advises the reader to do the same thing, however, “after you have your heart rate up, pause outside
the room and quickly center down.”\textsuperscript{48} This extra step is much more accurate of what the player would do before an actual performance if their heart rate was accelerated.

Simulating the physical characteristics of performance is a great way to prepare for anxiety, but six of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed found that these physical characteristics were even more accurately replicated when playing for somebody. Performing is always a totally different mental and physical experience than practicing, so it is important to practice performing in addition to doing run-throughs.

One of the biggest differences between being alone in the practice room and being on stage performing is the number of mental distractions. When performing, there are countless things that can grab the performer’s attention. Blocking them out takes mental practice. Michael Burritt practices run-throughs for people for this very reason.

\textit{When you have someone else listening, or you’re feeling pressured or slightly nervous . . . It’s another thing in the room vying for my concentration . . . Someone is sitting there and I’m thinking about that now. I’ve got to think about what I’m doing. I’ve got to stay calm and I’ve got to play . . . I have to work on strengthening or remembering how that feels.}

Playing for one person is obviously different than giving a concert, but “it’s a good position to put myself in, in terms of just getting myself ready for how its going to feel when I play in front of forty or fifty or a hundred people,”\textsuperscript{49} said Burritt. William


\textsuperscript{49} Michael Burritt, personal interview, 20 Jan. 2013.
Moersch agrees with Burritt and believes “once you’ve learned the material, then you actually have to practice giving the performance, which is a completely separate issue.”

Matthew Duvall notices that “many students in academia prepare a recital, do it once, and move on the next thing.” While many view this as the end of the process, Duvall thinks it’s just the beginning. “That is just your etude, that’s just your dress rehearsal.” He believes that it’s not until after “three performances, [that] you start to better understand what you need to work on.” Similarly, Kevin Bobo uses practice performances to help diagnose his problem spots. “I do run-throughs in front of somebody and then I take notes after every piece. That determines what I practice the next day before the second run through.”

If during a practice performance “[you can] learn or discover only one thing about yourself, improve only one aspect of your performance, or make even a slight improvement in the appropriateness of your performance arousal level, you have gone in the right direction towards optimal performance,” says Jon Gorrie in his book, Playing in the Zone.

With each repetition, new problem spots are exposed, and fixed. As a result, Duvall finds that it’s not until after “ten performances, [that] you start to feel like you know it.”

Playing for other people, especially when it’s not required, takes self-discipline, because

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50 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
52 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
53 Jon Gorrie, Performing in the Zone, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 24.
most people would rather not put themselves in an uncomfortable situation. These practice performances are most effective when they evoke the same anxiety of a performance. For this reason, it is important to choose audience members that stir up these same physical and emotional reactions for the performer. Michael Burritt likes to do practice run-throughs for his students because they make him nervous. “I’ll ask students to come in and listen to me play. Students make me nervous because they expect me to play well.”

After performing for a number of years as a free-lance musician, William Moersch found that playing for only one or two people no longer triggered anxiety equal to that of a performance, so he resorted to scheduling “mock recitals . . . [I’ve] invited a dozen people over, set up a row of chairs. – this is when I had a loft in New York - and came out and actually played the whole recital as if were the real deal.”

Moersch is a strong believer in mock recitals and tries to replicate as many much of the performance scenario as possible.

\[I’m \text{ going to eat my usual meal before a concert, I’m going to get into my concert dress, I’m going to walk to my instrument, and I’m going to play the concert. I’m really trying to recreate, as much as possible, all the psychological elements.}\]

After continuously doing mock recitals, Moersch “discovered that being on stage had become just another room in my house where I was living.” Moersch’s routine of doing mock recitals is heavily influenced by the ideas of Michael Colgrass. In Colgrass’ book,

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{54} Michael Burritt, personal interview, 20 Jan. 2013.
  \item \footnote{55} William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
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My Lessons with Kumi, he describes how one of the characters, Matt Bernstein, was “more nervous for the performances in his living room than he was in Carnegie Hall . . . because he believed it and acted out the living room performances as if it were the real time.”

Self-Recordings

Not everyone has audience members and small performance spaces at their disposal, making it difficult to host mock recitals. Even when friends or family are willing to listen, their support can tire quickly or be unavailable when needed most. In those cases, audio or video recordings can be used to help simulate performance anxiety.

Payton MacDonald finds that recording himself “is like playing in front of people.” It makes him “uncomfortable” and puts “pressure” on him. Michael Burritt also experiences these same feeling when recording himself. “I put the recording on and it makes me feel nervous. I like that because it makes me deal with the nerves and forces me to step up my concentration.” In Performance Success, Don Greene agrees that “the live recording process . . . simulate(s) the conditions of moderate performance pressure.”

57 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Self-recordings are a very effective practice room tool and can be used in many. John Tafoya actually records himself for the opposite reason, to reduce anxiety. When he listens to a recording of himself, and it sounds good, it reduces his anxiety for the performance. “I think a lot of times when we perform we get worked up because we are not sure what it sounds like on the other side. If [you] flat out know what it sounds like, that is a big confidence boost.” With today’s smart phones, free computer programs, and affordable hand held digital recorders, self-recording is very easy, even for the most technically challenged. While higher quality devices and programs provide more detailed feedback, lower level devices are still extremely useful and can help in a variety of ways.

Matthew Duvall said he does not record himself very often, but when he does, it teaches him more about his playing than “months of work in the practice room.” His infrequent recording is not a reflection of its value, but rather “a discipline issue.” When on a tight schedule and desperate for practice time, he finds it extremely hard to stop what he is doing to record himself, even though he knows it’s “extraordinarily productive.”

John Tafoya, on the other hand, makes self-recording a top priority. When he was preparing for orchestral auditions early in his career, Tafoya recorded all of his practice sessions. “If I was practicing for four hours that meant I went home and listened for another four hours. Then I would make notes about what was going on in terms of either balance or tempos, where it was rushing or where it was dragging.” While Tafoya’s self-recording habits are inspiring, they were atypical among the percussionists.

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60 John Tafoya, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
interviewed. Although many do use self-recording as part of their regular routine, its frequency of use varies widely. For example, John Lane records himself at the end of each practice session, recording a run-through of “whatever [he] was working on.” Brian Zator records himself “once every other practice session” while I-Jen Fang records herself much less frequently. She only records sections that are at a level that she “will appreciate.” Similarly, Eric Willie only records himself two weeks before the performance to “listen for inconsistencies.”

Questions that might reasonably be asked of musicians who self-record are, ‘Why do you need to record yourself to hear your inconsistencies? Can’t you hear them as you play?’ As stated previously in Chapter 6, Blake Tyson argues that the player’s perception is not always accurate.

_Our brain fills in a lot of holes. Your brain wants it to sound a certain way and it sort of lies to you . . . It is like hearing your own voice. Your voice sounds different when you hear it. You’re saying that’s not me . . . I found by recording myself a lot, my voice now sounds to me exactly like it sounds in the recording._

The human brain compensates by adding in ‘needed’ sensory information. Sometimes this is the addition of an entirely missing element while other times it’s in inaccurate representation of a subtle nuance. For this reason, Julie Licata uses recordings to hear “whether things are musically coming out.” William Moersch believes that the player

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63 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
64 Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
65 I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
67 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
68 Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
must remove himself or herself from the situation to determine if “those little nuances that I think I’m doing [are] really registering.” Barry Green, in his book *The Inner Game of Music*, agrees and advises that musicians should practice with a “tape recorder to help you analyze your playing and control inaccuracies.”

Similar to how Kevin Bobo uses practice run-throughs to determine problem spots, Eric Willie uses recordings of his percussion ensemble to find rehearsal spots. “I record every percussion ensemble [rehearsal] and then I make a to-do list for the next rehearsal. I post it in Dropbox so the kids have it and know what to work on for next rehearsal. That’s helped a lot.”

Self-recordings are constructive because they allow the player to listen to him or herself from a third person perspective. Ideally, objective listening would occur in real time while playing, but this is a hard skill to develop. Regardless of the difficulty, John Lane believes that “we should strive to listen to ourselves as we play, as if we were listening to a recording.” Lane believes that listening to numerous practice session recordings can develop this. Eventually the player will learn to hear the discrepancies between their aural memory and what was actually played. “When I was much younger I would play it back and say, ‘Oh man!’ [But now] I will play it back and say, ‘Yep, that is what is sounds

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69 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
71 Eric Willie, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
like.” Learning to listen accurately while playing is not easy. This skill “grows over time . . . [and] takes a long time to develop,” explained Lane.

Developing this ability is especially important for professional musicians because it enables them to make adjustments during the performance. The acoustics of performance halls are unpredictable and greatly impact elements such as articulation, dynamics, and tempos. Blake Tyson believes that developing the ability to listen from a third person perspective gives the performer “feedback instantly” so that they are able to make “those adjustments” during the performance. What does this feel like when done correctly? Michael Udow shared his experiences with this concept.

*I’m always listening to the music that I’m making but it is almost as if it is an out of body type of perspective . . . I know what the desired outcome is, and so my hands and my feet are working to produce that but I’m listening to the sound that I just produced and am constantly getting feedback so that my brain can evaluate the outcome.*

This skill is not easy to develop and Michael Udow suggests that this is because hearing is a “very passive” sense. “We can choose to close our eyes and not see, but we don’t have ear lids so we are constantly being bombarded by sound.” As a result, it is much more natural for us to ignore the sounds we hear if we are not intently focused on listening.

As John Lane stated previously, this skill takes time to develop and is best learned by comparing recordings to the aural memory of the performer. Brian Zator agrees, but

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72 John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
73 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
74 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
believes that when listening to the recording, it is important to follow along in the score. Otherwise, since the listener is naturally biased, it may be easy to dismiss small mistakes and "start modifying it to fit your interpretation . . . Am I doing the things that are said or that the composer is requesting or have I just gone so right field that it’s nowhere near what they were looking for?"\textsuperscript{75}

While listening to recorded practice sessions is certainly beneficial for self-critiquing, watching video recordings is often even more revealing. As Michael Udow explains, video recordings make it much easier to "understand the out-of-body experience." Not only are mistakes noticeable aurally, but the problem can usually be seen as well. With audio recordings, if the quality isn’t great, many of the more subtle issues of tone quality will be missed. With videos, even if the audio quality is poor, the ability to "watch your strokes in real time"\textsuperscript{76} can often lead to an accurate diagnosis. In addition, there are times when mistakes don’t occur but should have occurred and will probably occur in a future performance. Sometimes problem spots go well during a run-through even if they are not solid on a regular basis. In these cases, the audio recording has no way of indicating those spots. Gary Cook has found that when watching a video, "you can see a player going in and out of levels of absorption." Body language is a huge indicator of comfort level, and these problem spots or areas of lesser familiarity, are very obvious visually. "Video is very strong that way [and] very powerful."\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.  
\textsuperscript{76} Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.  
\textsuperscript{77} Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Mistakes and problem spots can also occur because of unnatural or unnecessary physical movements, which can’t be detected from audio recordings. Brett Dietz has learned that by watching videos of himself, he can quickly diagnose these spots. “[Sometimes I] look at my playing and go wow, I didn’t know I was doing that there or realize I have this weird habit.”78 Weird habits may not always cause problems musically, but as previously discussed, percussion is a very visual instrument and the physical movements have a large impact on the audience’s perception. For this reason, Blake Tyson finds videos to be a great way to “see what you look like when you play so you can make sure you aren’t doing something stupid that distracts from the music.”79 Looking stupid on stage is something no performer wants to do, and videos are often the best representation of an overall performance. Websites like YouTube and Facebook have made posting performances incredibly easy. Unfortunately, this also means looking stupid has become incredibly easy as well. Brett Dietz uses this as motivation. “I do a lot of YouTube recordings and it forces me to learn to play a piece as well as I can.”80 Jason Baker also uses social media as a form of motivation. “I’ll use that sometimes as a goal. ‘OK, this week I want to come up with something that I can put on Facebook.’ It’s not so much for comments, although it’s nice if someone gives me a suggestion and it’s constructive, but it’s more of creating some of that pressure.”81

Self-critiquing is always more difficult than critiquing the work of others. Listening to recordings and watching videos of one’s self exposes and helps solve issues that may

78 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
79 Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
80 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
otherwise go undetected. Self-awareness is a key trait among successful musicians and Michael Udow believes that listening to recordings and watching videos are the “way I can be my own best teacher.”

Although the benefits of listening to and watching recordings were widely acknowledged, four of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed, purposely don’t record themselves in the practice room. Each partially attributed this to their ability to hear themselves from a third person perspective, but there were also other reasons for not recording themselves. Steven Schick never records himself because he believes that “feel” is the best gauge of how well he is playing a piece. “I know when I’m in the right spot with a new piece by how it feels to me. If it feels right, if you resonate with it, it’s probably going to feel right to the people.”

Anders Holdar is another who puts a lot of emphasis on feel and believes it is extremely important to “rely on yourself.” He finds that when he stops relying on himself and starts relying on recordings for feedback, he gets “stressed.” When a musician is at a “certain [ability] level, you need to hear everything,” explained Holdar, but once the player reaches a higher level of musical maturity, hearing all the little mistakes can do more harm than good. “If the feeling is good for me, I like to stay that way. If I start to listen, maybe it won’t be.”

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82 Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.
Steven Schick finds that people who record themselves all the time, become fixated on “listening for accuracy” and “adherence to the score.” While there is definitely a time and a place for this type of focus, other aspects of performance must not be neglected. If not careful, it’s easy to “find yourself just concentrating on [one] aspect of performing.”

Frederic Macarez stressed the importance of being able to “listen and control what you do, when you play.” He acknowledged that “as a younger performer you don’t have the experience to do that,” but as a more advanced player, “you should always listen and you should always have an idea of what you’ve done.” He believes that getting used to listening and critiquing after the fact hinders one’s ability to do it in the moment. “If you listen right now, when you are playing, you can correct the changes. I think that is the best.” Robert Schietroma agrees with Macarez and feels that “if you don’t hear it [while playing], you’re [never] going to be able to.”

~ Performance Day Rituals (Physical/Psychological) ~

*I use to wear the same shirt until I had a bad recital and then that shirt would be forbidden.* - Kevin Bobo

Like Kevin Bobo, many musicians have unusual rituals or routines they adhere to on the day of a performance. Some people’s rituals focus on ensuring that their body is feeling and operating most effectively, while others focus more of their attention on their psychological preparation. Many of the methods shared by the percussionists interviewed

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87 Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
88 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
were very logical and understandable, while others were more intriguing and superstitious. Regardless of which category they fell into, it’s clear that rituals and routines play a large part of many players’ performance preparation.

~ Physical Rituals ~

Performance day rituals can essentially be divided into two categories, physical and psychological. While many of the percussionists interviewed do a combination of the two, nineteen of the thirty-six have rituals that focus on physical preparation. Most of the physical rituals or routines of the percussionists interviewed included, exercise, or diet. As Gary Cook explained, “[you must] rest, eat well, and have the energy to get through it. It’s a stamina issue and mental fatigue is the biggest concern.”89 Steven Schick agrees, saying, “my ability to focus is tied to how well I treat myself - eating, sleeping, and exercising.” He believes that these habits should be part of a daily routine, not just on the day of a performance.

*It’s important to be a complete human being when you walk on stage, not just a guy who knows how to play that piece. I think its also relaxing to me to realize, ‘oh yes, there are other things involved in the world than just this fourteen minute long piece that I’m all worried about.’ So if I exercise, and especially if I eat and sleep well, I think that makes it a lot easier.*90

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89 Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Sleep and Rest

Nine of the percussionists interviewed expressed the importance of being well rested. This comes as no surprise and is certainly not unique to music. In almost all human endeavors, a good night sleep promotes favorable outcomes, both physically and mentally, and should be a top priority leading up to a performance. Don Greene suggests in his book, *Performance Success*, that the amount of sleep the player gets two nights before the performance has “more of an impact on your performance than the sleep you get [the night before].”

Three of the percussionists interviewed, Brian Nozny, Thomas Burritt, and Michael Burritt, all prefer to take naps prior to performances. “I take a fifteen to twenty minute power nap,” said Thomas Burritt. His nap is not normally intended to make-up for a bad night’s sleep, but rather to promote focus and “calm down” the brain.

Payton MacDonald prefers to sit and rest before performing. “I just go backstage and rest. I will try to rest for forty minutes or so before I go in.” Brian Nozny also likes to sit and relax before playing, however, he prefers to “find a practice room and read a book.”

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92 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
93 Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
94 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
Exercise

Exercising on the day of a performance is also a fairly common routine among musicians. In addition to the obvious physical affects, “it has been well documented that exercise can have strong benefits for the mind,” stated Jon Gorrie, author of Performing in the Zone.

*When we exercises, engage in deep breathing, meditation, or laugh, our bodies produce chemicals called endorphins, as well as a recently discovered chemical called phenylethylamine. These chemicals appear to produce noticeable benefits on the mind, including reduction in stress, reduction in anxiety, reduced depression, improved capacity for cognition, improved mood, and relaxation.*

Seven of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed have an exercise ritual the day of a performance, but as expected, the type of exercise and thinking behind it varies greatly among them. For instance, Anders Holdar takes a walk “to relax.” This helps guide his “concentration and focus on the concert.” John Lane also uses exercise to help him focus on the performance. He does Tai Chi before going on stage and finds that it helps clear his mind.

In contrast, Michael Burritt uses exercise as “a stress relief . . . [Running] takes out some of my extra energy and helps me feel good inside . . . it’s my own little special drug.”

Thomas Burritt practices a less strenuous form of exercise, “full body stretching.” This prepares his body for the physical aspects of performing, and was adopted from his Tai

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95 Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 182.
98 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
Kwon Do training. Brain Mason also exercises right before going on stage, doing “quick physical things like push-ups or physically jogging in place.” Most performers try to lessen their physical symptoms of anxiety, but Mason does the opposite. He gets his heart rate up to increase blood flow. He believes that the “adrenaline rush when you start performing sends chemicals out and your fine motor skills essentially go away.” If he can get his blood pumping before the adrenaline rush occurs, he feels that his body “adjust(s) more quickly” to the loss of his fine motor skills, rather than “being debilitated.”

Mason’s method aligns with the theories of Walter Bradford Cannon. Cannon was an American physiologist and professor at Harvard University who did significant research on adrenaline. In his book, *The Wisdom of the Body*, Cannon states, “even in slight muscular movements the sympathico-adrenal system is brought into action.” Mason’s pre-performance exercises work because his increased muscle movements cause adrenaline to be released earlier. This gives his fine motor skills more time to adjust to the increased adrenaline prior to going on stage.

Brett Dietz also does pre-performance exercises to raise his heart rate, but for different reasons. Dietz is a believer in the fight-or-flight response, which coincidentally, was a theory also developed by Walter Bradford Cannon in his book *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage*. Cannon’s theory suggests that when humans, or any other animal are put in a fearful situation, their natural reaction is to either fight or flight, depending on the circumstances. The distinction between fight and flight is well...
summarized in MIT’s *Foundations in Social Neuroscience* textbook. “If the organism sizes up a threat or predator and determines that it has a realistic chance of overcoming it, then attack is likely. In circumstances in which the threat is perceived to be more formidable, flight is more probable.”  

When Brett Dietz experiences performance anxiety, his natural reaction is ‘flight.’ He has discovered though, that if he gets his heart rate up by doing “push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks” before going on stage, he can trigger his ‘fight’ response. “If I get my heart rate up I don’t feel it. I don’t feel nervous as much,” explained Dietz.

“The cornering of an animal when in the headlong flight of fear may suddenly turn the fear to fury and the flight to a fighting in which all the strength of desperation is displayed,” explained Cannon. In Dietz’s case, this same change is triggered by the physical exertion of push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks, which according to Cannon, makes biological sense. The sudden feeling of fight or flight is caused when oxygen is released into the blood to “oxidize the metabolites of muscular contraction.” This is followed by a reaction in which carbon dioxide is quickly released from the blood stream, causing increased respiratory contractions. These forced respirations helps eliminate the carbon dioxide from the blood more quickly, in an attempt to return the body to normal.

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102 Brett Dietz, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2012.
According to Douglas and Haldane in their article *The Capacity of the Air Passages and the Percentage of Carbon Dioxide in the Alveolar Air During Rest*, moderately forced breathing for three minutes prior to the initial release of oxygen, greatly diminishes the subsequent respiratory distress, helping to restore the normal conditions quicker.\(^{104}\) Cannon has also found that after the reaction has subsided, the “heart beats less rapidly” and “returns more quickly from its increased rate to normal.”\(^{103}\) This explains why Dietz’s physical exercise help decrease his flight urge. The increased breathing caused by his exercises helps the carbon-dioxide exit his blood stream faster, which helps his body return to a normal state quicker, marked by slower heart rate and breathing.

John Lane and Joshua Smith also feel the need to have their bodies warmed up before going on stage, but go about it in a completely different way. Smith likes to warm up his hands by running “them under hot water.”\(^{105}\) Lane, on the other hand, just needs to make sure that his body is “physically warm,”\(^{106}\) which he can accomplish with the appropriate clothing. Gary Gook mentioned an even more unusual way of preparing his body for performance:

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[I \ do] \text{ certain exercises and things before playing, to stimulate my vestibular, which is the inner part of the ear. The vestibular has a lot to do with being balanced and affects both your physical and mental states when you’re playing.}^{107}\]


\(^{105}\) Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.

\(^{106}\) John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.

\(^{107}\) Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Cook does these exercises backstage prior to performance and was introduced to them by Michael Colgrass. In *My Lessons with Kumi*, by Michael Colgrass, he defines “the vestibular organ is an apparatus in your inner ear that accounts for your sense of balance, space, and distance. All your senses focus through it.” When it is functioning properly, the human senses operate at capacity. However, when the liquid in the inner ear is disturbed by either alcohol, or spinning around, even walking can be difficult. Since music is based on “balancing sound, hearing the relationship between pitches, [and] the degree of space between them,” the vestibular organ is considered essential to performance. In Colgrass’ article, “*Taming the Demons of Creativity,*” he further explains Gary Cook’s exercises. When preparing for a performance, exercises that incorporate balance are ideal because they “fine tune the vestibular system.” When the vestibular is tuned correctly, the five senses function at optimal levels, giving “greater access to all the capabilities the senses can contribute to the creative process.”

**Diet**

Diet is the third category of physical rituals or routines commonly mentioned by the percussionists interviewed. Fourteen of the thirty-six percussionists described specific dietary habits the day of the performance, and while most revolved around a healthy diet and controlled portions, a few had more intriguing rituals. Simply eating ‘healthy’ was the most common dietary ritual among the percussionists interviewed.

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In Jon Gorrie’s book, *Performing in the Zone*, he emphasizes the importance of eating healthy on the day of a performance. “Certain substances directly affect the chemicals in your body and your brain, and can in turn affect your mood, as well as the way you think, feel, perceive, experience, and react in performing.” He specifically acknowledges “consuming an excess of alcohol, refined sugar, and caffeine can cause an artificial activation of your Sympathetic Nervous System. This can quite simply lead to increased levels of both chronic and acute anxiety, nervousness, and over-excitement.”

Ben Wahlund, always tries to “eat a healthy breakfast,” regardless of his performance time. He believes a healthy breakfast is key to how the body functions the rest of the day. Steven Schick also eats a healthy breakfast and tries to eat healthy all day long as well. In addition, Schick believes it’s important to eat “regularly” throughout the day. Gordon Stout’s pre-performance meal of choice is sushi. “I love to eat sushi.” He prefers sushi because it is “very light” and “good for you . . . It’s brain food, right? It puts your body and your brain in a good position.” William Moersch has similar tastes, and “there was one period in New York when I always had Sushi for a meal before the concert.”

Michael Burritt and Paul Rennick both named bananas as their pre-performance food of choice, and for good reason. Bananas are known to naturally decrease anxiety and, as many athletes can attest, they help sustain muscle function. Michael Burritt explains, “I

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110 Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 178.
113 Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
114 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
like to eat bananas because they relax me. They have a natural beta-blocker. They’re also good for your muscles, containing high amounts of potassium.” Jon Gorrie recommends eating foods such as sushi and bananas, that are free of preservatives and additives. He warns that artificial chemicals in foods, such as “artificial flavorings, colorings, sweeteners, preservatives, and certain ‘E-numbers’ . . . can affect our mood.”

Brian Zator and John Lane are both light eaters before a performance because they find they have more energy and focus when they eat lightly before a performance. Christopher Deane is another who has found this to be true. In fact, he spent significant time testing this theory to determine its validity.

*Years ago I did a personal study where I had a series of symphony concerts every night for two weeks - give or take one or two on the weekends - on a mountain tour. It was the same show and the same book. I would eat heartily one night and go play, and the next night I would only scavenge a few nuts and berries. I consistently found that I played so much better when I wasn’t eating a lot of food. When I was just a little bit hungry, it made me more focused and it made me more desirous. I had more drive.*

Although for years, this was Deane’s ritual, as he has gotten older this has changed. “Maybe it’s biology that has shifted, but I find that I have to eat now. If I don’t, I will have a little hypoglycemic sort of thing where I lose focus. So it’s changed.” Thomas Burritt also finds that he can’t play hungry. “I hate playing hungry. So I’ll have a sensible

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116 Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 179.
117 Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
meal.” In contrast, Robert Schietroma does not eat anything before a performance, and only consumes water. In terms of biology, water is more important than food, and staying hydrated the day of a performance is key for the body to operate at its greatest potential. Michael Burritt drinks a lot of water the day of the performance because it helps bring down his stress levels and helps keep him calm. Andy Harnsberger drinks “a gallon of water every day leading up to the performance.” Staying hydrated “helps your muscle memory and keeps you more alert when you are on stage.”

Harnsberger also finds that “a fifty mg dose of caffeine” before playing really “helps [him] focus.” Too much caffeine can magnify the physical symptoms of anxiety, but Harnsberger finds that a fifty mg dose is the perfect amount to give him an extra level of focus. For some people, dietary rituals have nothing to do with focus, muscle memory, or nutrition. Instead, the ritual itself creates a feeling of comfort and familiarity. One such example of this is Kevin Bobo’s retired ritual of eating a “Philly cheesesteak sandwich from Subway” before every performance. The sandwich had no other purpose but to create a familiar routine that brought comfort and predictability to his performance preparation.

~ Psychological Rituals ~

Comfort and familiarity are powerful emotions that can have a major impact on the results of a performance. Performing is much more psychological than it is physical and

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118 Thomas Burritt, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
119 Andy Harnsberger, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
120 Kevin Bobo, personal interview, 13 Nov. 2010.
many percussionists interviewed have rituals intended to establish focus and mental preparation, but in all likelihood are probably effective because of the comfort and control created by the routine.

**Performance Day Routines**

Ben Wahlund for instance, “sets out performance clothes well beforehand.”\(^{121}\) This is not for time-management purposes or because his performance apparel requires extra planning. It is simply a habit that creates comfort because he knows his wardrobe is one less thing to think about the morning of his performance. Many of the percussionists interviewed have similar rituals revolving around their performance day schedule. Being able to predict when, where, and how events occur throughout the day can be empowering, as it provides the performer with an added sense of command over the outcome of the events that day.

When John Parks was younger, he would try to clear his schedule the day of a performance. “I’d take the day off . . . sleep in . . . take a long shower, and get cleaned up.”\(^{122}\) This enabled Parks to arrive at the performance hall with a clear mind and whenever he desired. Like Parks, Brian Nozny likes to clear his schedule the day of a performance. However, Nozny prefers to spend the day at the venue rather than at home. “I try to be there as early as humanly possible.” He is “most comfortable” when he can arrive six hours before the performance. Ideally, he can move all the equipment and play

\(^{121}\) Ben Wahlund, email interview, 31 Oct. 2012.

\(^{122}\) John Parks, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
through things, and still have “two hours left.”"\textsuperscript{123} William Moersch also likes to have control of his time of arrival at the venue, but on a tighter schedule, preferring to arrive at the hall no “less than an hour before show time.”\textsuperscript{124}

In stark contrast, Gordon Stout feels best when he is “totally busy until five minutes before” the performance. That way he can “just walk out and play” without thinking about it too much. His mindset is that, by that point, there is nothing more that can be done to “make it any different.” He doesn’t adhere to any strict routines and believes it’s best not to “make a big deal out of a performance day . . . My ritual is just to have a normal day. Some people can get very neurotic before performances . . . I don’t make a big deal out of it.”\textsuperscript{125} Frederic Macarez takes the same philosophy and believes that “it is not necessary to spend one full day to think about it.” He spends ten to fifteen minutes the morning of the performance thinking about what he has to do, but like Stout, Macarez feels that the work is already done at that point and already “know what will happen.”\textsuperscript{126}

While many are exacting about their performance day schedule, a primary focus of others is how much practice time they want the day of a performance. For instance, when Julie Licata has an afternoon or evening performance, she likes to do a run-through early in the day, hit a few technical spots, and then not play “the rest of the day.” Regardless what instrument she is playing, her run-through of the piece is at “half tempo with no dynamics and no feeling . . . I don’t want to freak myself out,” said Licata, and playing at a “very,

\textsuperscript{123} Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{124} William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
\textsuperscript{125} Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{126} Frederic Macarez, personal interview, 27 Oct. 2012.
very, slow tempo” ensures that her best run of the day will be saved for the show.\textsuperscript{127} Paul Rennick finds that his best run of the day is usually his third repetition, so he always does “two reps” before going on stage so that “the third one is the performance.”\textsuperscript{128}

Contrastingly, Frederic Macarez believes people who do too many run-throughs before performing, “are just tired [for the performance] because they’ve spent too much energy.” He suggests that the best way to maintain your energy and concentration is to spend time singing through the piece. “I don’t really practice, it is too late,” said Macarez. Instead, he spends time thinking through the piece as if it were a “movie in your head.” He believes that if the music is well prepared, extensive warm-ups or run-throughs are not necessary.\textsuperscript{129} I-Jen Fang also has a ritual of mentally reviewing her piece before performing. “I look at my score, but I’m not really playing it. I just look through it.”\textsuperscript{130} If she hasn’t played all day, then she will do a run-through of the piece at the instrument, but if her hands feel good, she would rather just mentally run-through the piece.

Pre-performance mental routines are not limited to backstage. Mark Ford and Brian Nozny both spend a few seconds, while on stage, looking at the instrument and visualizing the first few bars. “I’ll see the first notes I’m about to hit, I hear them in my head, then I approach the drum, put the hands up, deep breath, hear it again, and then

\textsuperscript{127} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.  
\textsuperscript{128} Paul Rennick, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.  
\textsuperscript{129} Frederic Macarez, personal interview, 27 Oct. 2012.  
\textsuperscript{130} I-Jen Fang, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
go,“ said Nozny. This helps to mentally prepare for what is about to happen and is also a way to solidify tempos.

This method of visualizing the first few bars before playing is much more beneficial than going through mental reminders says Timothy Gallwey in his book, *The Inner Game of Golf*.

*Telling yourself in words that you want the ball to go into the hole is much less effective than actually picturing the ball doing so . . . offering an image of the results you want is very different from demanding them, and affects the success of the technique as well as your general state.*

Rituals Prior to Performance

Psychological preparation is very important to ensure a successful performance. Achieving the right mental state makes a tremendous difference and many of the percussionists interviewed have their own pre-performance rituals to ensure they are focused and in the right frame of mind.

A common preference among the percussionists interviewed was the need for some time alone before the performance. William Moersch stated that he wants “absolute private individual time in a quiet place, for at least fifteen or twenty minutes . . . Having that quiet private time to really focus exactly on what it was that I was going to do,” allowed him to “enter the proper mental state” before going on stage to perform. Brian Mason

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131 Brian Nozny, personal interview, 30 May 2012.
133 William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
has a similar ritual, but wants “at least a good thirty minutes of quiet time.” This happens after he is set up and ready to go for the performance to avoid being “distracted by anything.” During these thirty minutes, Mason focuses on putting the “negative thoughts” to rest and just tries to relax.\textsuperscript{134} Julie Licata wants even more alone time, preferring an hour. “I don’t want to talk to anybody so I’ll just put my headphones on and find my own space.” Listening to music “is really soothing” and she always listens to the same couple of songs. Each songs “means something” to Licata and are carefully chosen.

\begin{quote}
There’s a piece of music, a Pat Metheny tune called Travels, that I listened to before my senior recital, at Capitol in 2002, and that was the first performance I ever had that I felt like I had expressed what I wanted to express and I wasn’t angry at myself for missing notes, even though I did. That was a really pivotal moment for me so I always listen to that piece of music right before I play.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, Licata indicated she never listens to percussion music or to the piece she is about to play because she doesn’t want to think about it too much. Michael Burritt takes the same approach and tries not to think about his piece too much. “Right before a performance, I try not to think too much about it because that can kind of psych me out.” He finds that once he starts thinking about the piece, it turns into “a dumb game [of] how does that go? How does this go? . . . I just have to trust myself and trust my instincts. I just have to relax . . . and be peaceful.” Burritt always tries to avoid being “too active or too busy” and finds a quiet place where he can sit and be alone for ten or fifteen minutes. When is he able to do this, his performances are much more successful because he feels “centered.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{134} Brian Mason, personal interview, 10 Mar. 2013.
\textsuperscript{135} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\textsuperscript{136} Michael Burritt, personal interview, 20 Jan. 2013.
John Gorrie, author of *Performing in the Zone*, believes that the secret to staying relaxed before a performance is “accepting that you do not know what will happen in the future, and completely and utterly letting go of control by accepting this state of not knowing.”\(^{137}\)

John Lane finds that the best way to center himself before a performance is through meditation. “I found if I just spend ten minutes being still and doing a little meditation before I go on, that helps to calm the nerves and get focused for the performance.”\(^{138}\)

Two of the percussionists interviewed had a fascinating way of calming their nerves. Omar Carmenates and Julie Licata both use mantras to reduce their performance anxiety. “The repetition of a mantra focuses the mind and has a steadying, peace-giving affect,”\(^{139}\) says Barry Green in his book, *The Mastery of Music*. Carmenates uses a method described in Donald Greene’s book, *Performance Success*, called process cueing, which was discussed in Chapter 6. These cues can be used for a multitude of situations and depending on the cue, can be used to calm nerves,\(^{140}\) switch from left brain to right brain thinking,\(^{141}\) stay focused on the present,\(^{142}\) generate excitement,\(^{143}\) or to get out of an emergency situation.\(^{144}\) Carmenates uses process cues mostly for calming his nerves.

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\(^{137}\) Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 89.
\(^{138}\) John Lane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
You just repeat those words, take deep breaths, and focus on your abdomen. What happens is, all those jitters that you feel, the fire you feel in your arms, and your adrenalin, all goes here (abdomen). It calms everything down. It’s basically just channeling your nerves instead of trying to get rid of them.\textsuperscript{145}

Julie Licata always uses the single phrase, “I am ready, I do have something to say, and it doesn’t really matter anyway.” Licata calls this her “mantra” and says that repeating this a few times before walking on stage, really helps calm her nerves.\textsuperscript{146} Contrastingly, Brian Zator eases his performance anxiety through spiritual means.

\begin{quote}
I’m a Christian, and I pray before I play . . . It brings me comfort to know that no matter what happens, it’s going to be ok. This is a small part of what I do in the grand scheme of the world, but if I can do just a little bit, I know that God is going to support me and he’s going to be there. He gave me this ability to deliver my message and that brings me a lot comfort. I don’t get as nervous when I do that because I know that I’ve done the work and he’s going to be there to help me get through it.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

Among those interviewed, the most unusual method to help calm pre-performance nerves was probably Gary Cook, who suggested juggling.

\begin{quote}
I know a lot of string players that will juggle to deal with their performance anxiety because you can’t be thinking about anything else but juggling and paying attention to the balls in the air. There’s a physical warm-up there and you can’t be thinking about getting nervous or about playing because otherwise, you’ll drop the balls.\textsuperscript{148}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{145} Omar Carmenates, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\textsuperscript{146} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
\textsuperscript{147} Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{148} Gary Cook, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.
Matthew Duvall also takes an unorthodox approach, as he likes to “play video games” before his performances. He appreciates the fact that as “percussionists, our instruments are on stage” because if they were backstage, he may be tempted to play through his material. Instead, he believes “you should save it for the stage.”

All of the rituals described above are used to prepare the player either physically or mentally for their performance. Consistently following the same routine helps the body and mind prepare itself for the task ahead and creates a sense of familiarity, comfort, and control.

**No Ritual**

In contrast, seven of the percussionists interviewed, dislike the idea of a performance day ritual and would rather treat performance days like any other day. Jason Nicholson, for example, does not have a performance day ritual because he feels that it would make him “more nervous . . . I like to stick to the routine and not build it up in my head that there’s a performance, that way I just feel like I’m playing on a different day.” By suddenly doing something different on the day of a performance, Nicholson feels it would accentuate the “pressure of a performance.” In a sense, he also has a performance day routine, but that routine is the same as his daily practice routine. That way, when “you go up there and you play, it’s just like it’s any other performance in a practice room.”

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Jason Baker has the same philosophy. “I find that I get more nervous if I have some special thing that I do [on the day of a performance]. I don’t want it to be different. I want when I get up on stage . . . to be as close to what I do every day as possible.” For this reason, as Baker gets closer to a performance, he creates a very specific daily practice routine that he uses each day leading up to the performance.

*When I was getting ready for PASIC, I came up with a routine that I would do every morning before I ran my piece. I’d start with the first column of page one of the “Stick Control” book. Then I had some single hand exercises that I developed to work on some of the problems in [the piece]. I had certain tempos I would do and the number of times I would do it. I had certain sections that I would hit so many times and then do a run-through of the piece.*

Baker did this routine every day so that “when it was time to perform, performing on stage was only a certain percentage of that routine.” The body, both physically and psychologically “adapts to that pattern” so “it’s not just about going up and trying to run your piece, the piece becomes a smaller part of that whole routine.” In doing this, the day of the performance “will seem less like a big deal” because it just like any other practice session. “If you practice every day, if you do the right things every day, the recital is just the next day.” Like Nicholson, Baker does follow a performance day routine, but it is “not specific to that one day.” It is a ritual he does everyday in the practice room as the performance approaches.151

Michael Udow does not utilize a performance day ritual or routine because “when you are on tour, things are constantly changing . . . You can’t count on your plane arriving on time or being picked up and getting to the hall on time.” For him, flexibility is most

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important and trying to maintain a ritual would likely add more stress because, “chances are, your ritual is going to be broken.”\(^{152}\)

\[\text{~ Performance Mentality ~}\]

Performances are universally stressful and regardless of the performer’s background, experience, or personal rituals, anxiety can still be an issue. Many of the percussionists interviewed expressed that the only way to truly deal with anxiety is to adopt a new performance mentality.

\[\text{Audience Expectations}\]

First, the expectations of the audience must be considered. In Gordon Stout’s words, “your audience doesn’t necessarily know when you make a mistake and I don’t think they really care most of the time anyway.” The audience isn’t there to count missed notes or mistakes, “they go to enjoy and to feel something.” If the music is played well and the audience gets what they were seeking from the performance experience, “they will forgive mistakes . . . if they even hear the mistakes to begin with.”\(^{153}\)

Robert Schietroma also believes that the audience’s primary concern is not focused on perfection. He describes his job as a musician similar to that of a pilot. “It’s like getting into a cockpit. Let’s go! Where do you want to go? I’ll take you wherever you want to

\[^{152}\text{Michael Udow, phone interview, 16 Nov. 2012.}\]
\[^{153}\text{Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.}\]
go.” In the grand scheme of things, the passengers don’t really care much about the color of the seats, the peanuts, or even the in-flight movie. They are mostly concerned with traveling somewhere extraordinary that creates a memorable experience.\footnote{Robert Schietroma, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.}

Brian Zator is also a strong believer in this mentality and makes it the primary focus of his performances.

> I want to perform really well, but I don’t necessarily want it to be about me. I want it to be about the music . . . [and] emote and deliver the best message possible . . . I want [the audience] to have an experience and remember it. If it’s because something I did, great, but if it’s something with the music . . . that brings me comfort too.\footnote{Brian Zator, personal interview, 2 Nov. 2012.}

To fully feel this connection with the audience, Payton MacDonald prioritizes “listening to the room and what is happening.”\footnote{Payton MacDonald, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.} This gives him a better connection to the audience so that he can cater to their needs. Realizing and accepting that the audience doesn’t care about mistakes, but instead cares about the musical experience, is the first step to adopting a successful performance mentality.

**Personal Expectations**

> One thing I’ve learned is it’s ok to strive for perfection, but it’s just unreasonable to expect it of yourself. I just like to walk out and play and I’m at peace with whatever happens. As long as I do the best that I’m capable of, I don’t really care otherwise.\footnote{Gordon Stout, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.} - Gordon Stout
Accepting that a performance is not going to be perfect takes a lot of pressure off the performer. Wrong notes are going to happen, it is inevitable. The performer must understand this and come to terms with it. This is an easy concept to understand and sounds simple to embrace, but maintaining that attitude while on stage can be extremely difficult.

Noa Kageyama explains in his article, How to Care More Without Putting Too Much Pressure On Yourself, that “the answer is not to care less, but to care more . . . just about different things . . . Making yourself happy with your performances, and being less concerned with trying to gauge what others may or may not think.”\(^{158}\) When performing, it can feel as if all eyes and ears are intently focused on every note played, and even worse, on every mistake made. When multiple mistakes are made in succession, it’s easy for the performer to lose confidence and motivation, due to an overwhelming sense of failure. This suddenly makes that ‘easy concept’ of accepting mistakes, nearly impossible.

William Moersch rationalizes this situation from a different perspective that has helped him accept, or at the very least, forget about his mistakes and maintain an optimistic attitude during the performance.

immediate past . . . The performer has to be almost exactly the opposite. The performer has to have a small amount of consciousness in the present and pretty much nothing of the past . . . you’ve played something and it is over and done with. Don’t even think about it, whether it went great, whether it went bad . . . most of the attention, I find, has to really be on the future. What’s coming next? What do I have to be conscious of next?\textsuperscript{159}

Blake Tyson has also learned to accept his performance mistakes and attributes this mentality to a conversation he had with Michael Burritt. Burritt told him “if people want to hear all my right notes, they should buy my CD. But if they want to hear me play, they shouldn’t expect all right notes.” This had a huge impact on Tyson and he said he now tends to be “pretty calm and accepting about what is happening . . . I really don’t get this nervous sweat and nervous energy before a performance [anymore].”\textsuperscript{160} Julie Licata has found the same thing to be true in her playing. “I try not to take myself too seriously. Who really cares if I miss a note, really? It’s not going to ruin my life and it doesn’t define me as a human being.” She acknowledged that this mentality takes a while to sink in, but once it does, “you really believe it.”\textsuperscript{161} Timothy Gallwey agrees with Licata, saying in his book, \textit{The Inner Game of Stress}, that it’s important to make “the distinction between who we are and what we do.”

\textit{We play many roles in life - parent, spouse, golfer, executive - but the outer reality is not who we truly are . . . [It is important to] make that distinction, and then to allow ourselves to shine through without the impediment of concepts and expectations that are not in line with our purpose. Once we do, we can be free of stress and play at our best.}\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{159} William Moersch, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
\textsuperscript{160} Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
\textsuperscript{161} Julie Licata, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2011.
Mathew Duvall also believes this philosophy, but makes a clear distinction between his performance mentality and his approach in the practice room. When in the practice room, “go for accuracy” and when in a performance, “go for gesture,” said Duvall. Duvall strongly believes that “playing something technically correct is not worth compromising the gesture and performance.” Michael Burritt agrees and adds that if accuracy is the top priority during a performance, “we get too obsessed with that [and] we’ll forget about the music.”

Lesley McAllister echoes these same concerns in her book, *The Balanced Musician*, stating that “overemphasizing ‘correctness’ may actually lead to performances that sound uninspired, hesitant, and even dull.” She believes that “musicians who make the most impact on their audiences are often the ones who seem the most open and therefore the most human.” This is sometimes best achieved through “unplanned events, mistakes, or even memory slips” because these human mistakes show “precious vulnerability that establishes a connection between the audience and the performer.”

**Positive Reinforcement**

No longer worrying about hitting the right notes may reduce anxiety, but if truly taken to heart, might result in a sloppier performance. So it’s also helpful for the player to maintain positive thoughts about the performance and genuinely believe they will do

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well. In Timothy Gallwey’s book, *The Inner Game of Stress*, he says that thinking positively may be easier than most people think. “Many participants say they didn’t realize they had so many inherent and positive capabilities, but, in fact, humans are hardwired to prefer stability, clarity, and peace to stress, fear, and frustration.”¹⁶⁶

Jason Nicholson repeats phrases like “You’re going to play well! This is going to be nice. People are going to enjoy it.” This type of positive reinforcement always has a much better outcome than thinking negatively. Thoughts like “This is going to suck! [or] I’m not going to play well” are reinforced in the brain and often “become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”¹⁶⁷ Putting a positive spin on everything, most of the time results in favorable outcomes. Whenever Blake Tyson feels nervous, he tries to “channel [it] into excitement.”¹⁶⁸ By simply changing his mindset, he finds that nerves can actually work to his advantage.

According to Jon Gorrie’s book, *Performing in the Zone*, “performance anxiety and excitement are two different manifestations of performance arousal.”¹⁶⁹ By channeling anxiety into excitement, Tyson is able to harness the “right amount of positive performance arousal (excitement) . . . to achieve an optimal level of performance.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Blake Tyson, personal interview, 3 Nov. 2012.
¹⁶⁹ Jon Gorrie, *Performing in the Zone*, (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace/Amazon, 2009), 12.
Personal Tendencies

Thinking positively increases confidence, and knowing that the audience cares more about musicality than accuracy, decreases anxiety. Another performance mentality commonly mentioned is to recognize and counteract personal performance tendencies.

The most common performance tendency is playing too fast. When the body releases adrenaline under performance conditions, normal tempos suddenly seem slow and it is awfully easy to begin too quickly or speed up. Michael Burritt has found that when he takes a quicker performance tempo, his kinesthetic memory breaks down. This is because his “hands have learned a certain pace”\(^\text{170}\) and at a quicker tempo, suddenly the muscle memory can’t be accessed.

Joshua Smith counteracts this natural tendency by deciding on specific tempos prior to the performance and checking them with a metronome before starting. Using this method, his performances are much “more consistent.” Before he started routinely checking tempos, he constantly felt as if the material he’d worked on in the practice room was suddenly lost during the performance. In the practice room, he’d learned to feel phrasing and physical gestures a certain way, but during performances, the hastened tempos made everything feel completely different. When Smith exactly duplicates his practice tempos on stage, the performances feel “true to what it was like in the practice room.”\(^\text{171}\)


\(^{171}\) Joshua Smith, personal interview, 11 Nov. 2011.
A second common performance tendency among the percussionists interviewed was failing to maintain the necessary mental focus during a performance. For whatever reason, many musicians catch themselves thinking about totally unrelated topics during a performance. At worst, this can cause a performance train wreck, but usually just results in a slight break or hesitation.

To avoid letting the mind wander, Barry Green suggests in his book, *The Inner Game of Music*, that “focusing our awareness on one element of the present moment is a simple way to direct our concentration, cope with mental and other distractions, and bring us closer to the music.”

When maximum concentration is achieved during performance, Timothy Gallwey referred to this as “relaxed concentration,” in his book, *The Inner Game of Golf*.

> Everyone has experienced the state of relaxed concentration at one time or another during moments of peak performance or experience. In those spontaneous but all too elusive moments of heightened alertness and perception, actions seem artlessly excellent and life seems simple and whole. Even in complicate, demanding situations, the effort needed is clear and actions flow out of us that are uncannily appropriate.

Most of Christopher Deane’s performance “screw ups” occur when he is “not thinking the same thoughts” that he did in the practice room. To develop the ability to stay mentally focused during the performance, “you have to think the same thoughts when

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you practice it as when you perform it.”¹⁷⁴ Re-creating the practice experience on stage is hard to do, but when accomplished, performances feel grounded and in control.

Steven Schick also believes the best way to keep the mind focused on the piece is “to recreate the feeling of being in a practice room on stage.”¹⁷⁵ He tries to create a focused or surrounded feeling on stage and when he feels like he is alone, and playing for himself, his memory and focus is much better.

Unfortunately, there is not a simple solution to this problem. Timothy Gallwey, in his book, The Inner Game Of Golf, says that the only way to keep the mind in the present is through practice. “There is no other way. Every time your mind starts to leak away, simply bring it gently back.” When the player develops “the capacity to focus totally” on stage and channel their “commitment, abilities, and attention . . . in a single direction” they will be “truly conscious and free of fear, doubt, and confusion” during performance.¹⁷³

All the methods described above - performance day rituals, successful performance mentality, and counteracting personal tendencies - revolve around what to do before or during the performance. Ben Wahlund also believes it is important to think about what to do after the performance. “I try to schedule hang time with friends and colleagues after performances whenever possible.”¹⁷⁶ Performances are not possible without an audience, which many times are comprised of the performer’s biggest supporters. So it is important

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Deane, personal interview, 12 Nov. 2010.
to carve out some time after the performance to visit and give thanks to those who were in attendance.

\[\text{~ Conclusion ~}\]

Performing can feel like a gratifying validation of hard work and talent, or an embarrassing display of failure. Unfortunately, these two highly contrasting outcomes are not as closely related to preparation as one might expect. Performances take place in real time and before a live audience, and a split second of mental or physical relapse can quickly alter the course of events. The way in which players prepare for their performances is shockingly divergent and distinctive, but each method has a time and place. The only way to find the right combination of techniques is to become familiar with the multitude of proven options and begin testing them.

Every musician is different and will eventually develop a distinctive formula to best prepare for performances. That being said, the best way to prepare one’s self for a performance is to practice performing. Many musicians spend obsessive amounts of time practicing their music but only a fraction of their time practicing the performance of that same music. It is a common understanding that if one does not practice their music, the performance of that music will not go very well. Performance is no different, yet many players neglect this aspect of their preparation. It is crucial to practice performing, whether that be for a camera, friend, or an entire room of people. Successful performances are nearly impossible if performing has never been practiced.
Figure 23: Survey – Performance Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Practice Habits</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a strict daily practice routine?</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a procrastinator?</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you typically prepared weeks in advance?</td>
<td>A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you peak early on occasion?</td>
<td>A3, A6, A9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your performances sometimes lack expression or excitement?</td>
<td>A3, A4, A5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your progress typically plateau the few weeks before the performance?</td>
<td>A6, A9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time mentally preparing for a performance?</td>
<td>A8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time recovering from mistakes?</td>
<td>A5, A7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Simulate Performance</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your performance attire sometimes affect your performances?</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel awkward on stage?</td>
<td>B2, B3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time adjusting to changes in routine?</td>
<td>B4, B6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the sound of the performance hall throw you off sometimes?</td>
<td>B2, B9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you preparing for an audition?</td>
<td>B4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a very observant person?</td>
<td>B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you always practice in the same room and on the same instruments?</td>
<td>B2, B5, B6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have bad performance anxiety?</td>
<td>B6, B7, B8, B9, B10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dread performances?</td>
<td>D7, D9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Performance Day Rituals - Physical</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time concentrating during performance?</td>
<td>C1, C2, C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your performances sometimes lack expression or excitement?</td>
<td>C1, C4, C6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time getting excited for performances?</td>
<td>C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your performances usually start poorly?</td>
<td>C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your muscles shake when you get nervous?</td>
<td>C4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you experience severe anxiety before walking on stage?</td>
<td>C5, C8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you experience drowsiness after large meals?</td>
<td>C6, C7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time concentrating while performing?</td>
<td>C6, C8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Performance Day Rituals – Psychological</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time getting into performance mode?</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you overhype for performances?</td>
<td>D2, D8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you dread performing?</td>
<td>D2, D8, D9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it take you a long time to get warmed up?</td>
<td>D3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your performances sometimes lack energy and excitement?</td>
<td>D4, D5, D6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically start performances poorly?</td>
<td>D4, D7, D8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a hard time focusing while performing?</td>
<td>D4, D7, D8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you typically rush during performances?</td>
<td>D5, D7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E. Performance Mentality</th>
<th>If yes, try method…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have bad performance anxiety?</td>
<td>E1, E2, E4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you get discouraged easily?</td>
<td>E2, E3, E4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you commonly make similar errors during performances?</td>
<td>E5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do bad performances tend to snowball?</td>
<td>E2, E4, E6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the audience easily distract you during performance?</td>
<td>E6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your mood generally have a major impact on your performance?</td>
<td>E2, E4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Figure 24: Outline – Performance Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Practice Habits</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Don’t Change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Practice More</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fewer Run-Throughs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Taper Hours</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. More Mental Practice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Change Focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. More Run-Throughs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Cold Run-Throughs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Down Tempo Run-Throughs</td>
<td>204-213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Simulate Performance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Performance Attire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performance Hall and Instruments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Entrance / Exit Routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Audition Procedures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alter Practice Environment and Set-Up</td>
<td>213-229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Challenge Comfort Zone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Play for People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Simulate Physical Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Mock Recitals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Self Recordings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Performance Day Rituals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Good Night Sleep</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nap Before Performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Alone Time Before Performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Exercise Morning of Performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Physical Exercises Prior to Performance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Healthy Diet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Light Meals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Supplements</td>
<td>229-239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Performance Day Rituals – Psychological</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cancel Obligations Prior to Performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Maintain Daily Schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Morning Practice Session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mental Run-Throughs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The previous six chapters unmistakably demonstrate the great diversity that exists in the practice habits of successful percussionists. Clearly, there is not a single best way to practice, and in fact many of their habits and philosophies were in direct contradiction with each other’s. As a result the combination of methods used to achieve success is uniquely individual. While some of the percussionists interviewed do share commonalities in certain areas, no two have identical overall regimens. Where similarities do exist, they seem to more accurately reflect like personalities and learning styles rather than evidence of a preeminent method.

However, this outcome does suggest that there is most likely a ‘best’ practice method for each musician, but discovering and developing this individualized formula can be a great challenge. As is evident through the investigation of these thirty-six percussionists, there are an infinite number of permutations one can use to create their ‘perfect’ practice routine. Finding the unique combination of methods and philosophies that guarantees the greatest chance for success may take years. One may easily assume that the system they currently utilize is ideal, but until other preferred techniques are investigated, they can’t be certain.

A frequent sentiment expressed throughout these interviews was the idea that practice habits are in constant evolution and development. As lifelong learners, all the
percussionists interviewed are continuously seeking improvement, regardless of their status or age. For this reason, every serious player would be best served to try and experiment with as many methods as possible. After all, every method and philosophy documented in this dissertation has been validated by the implementation and willful testimonial of at least one successful percussionist.

This process is obviously time consuming and likely never-ending, which is in essence, a fundamental trait of musical mastery - the extreme devotion of *time* to practice. There have always been differing opinions as to the relative significance of talent vs. hard work in the roots of mastery. The percussionists interviewed were no different than the world-class experts studied in many other fields, in that they achieved mastery only after reaching the apparent benchmark of 10,000 practice hours during the first twenty years or so of their lives. While gifted individuals are often credited with having ‘natural talent,’ the statistics of this research, as well as numerous other studies, clearly show that success and mastery in any field are primarily attributed to hard work.

So if practicing is the key to success, why is it such a secretive and private activity? Most people suddenly change their practice habits as soon as somebody walks in the room or pauses outside the door to listen. Ironically, the single element that is most closely associated with success is rarely shared with others. How does one know if they are practicing correctly? Have they ever been taught how to practice or critiqued on their practice habits? For most individuals the answer is no.
Learning how to practice should be no different than learning any other musical skill. The teacher should explain the general concept and mechanics involved, demonstrating when appropriate. The student will be given a few exercises or assignments and then sent home to practice. The student will return the following lesson for demonstration, at which time they will be given constructive criticism. Why should practicing be any different? Especially when it is the determining factor of success.

As teachers and students, talking about practicing isn’t enough. It needs to be done in front of others and discussed openly to ensure it is executed ‘correctly’ and efficiently. Like playing a snare drum roll, developing great practice habits takes time. It will not be done impeccably the first time and only through sharing, discussing, and critiquing will practice habits be perfected.

~ Further Research ~

None of the thirty-six percussionists interviewed were given the ten questions in advance. There were pros and cons to presenting the questions prior to the interviews, but I decided in favor of spontaneity, and as mentioned previously, the interviewed were wonderfully open and revealing. However, that spontaneity also likely implies that some answers were not as thorough or clear as intended and some ideas or concepts may have been omitted altogether. As a result, additional details and valuable ideas could be obtained if each of the percussionist’s transcripts were submitted to him or her with the invitation to read, edit, and add further content as they see fit.
This research was based solely on the practice habits of percussionists who focus primarily on classical and contemporary literature. This study could be further expanded to include percussionists who specialize in improvisatory music, such as jazz and other world music genres. It would be very interesting to learn which practice habits are similar or different between the two groups.

Practicing improvisation requires the player to perfect a wide range of vocabulary that can be spontaneously selected depending on the style or tempo of the given musical situation. These decisions are inspired and influenced by the musical ideas of the other musicians, the structure of the composition, and the playing environment. This is very different than repetitively rehearsing a specific and pre-determined musical structure, and some correlations between specific methods and musical styles would seem likely.

On a broader level, this research could also be replicated to include the practice habits of other instrumentalists. Again, it would be quite interesting to investigate how the practice methods and philosophies compare between groups. Although many of the specific methods are obviously unique to the designated instrument, are the practice philosophies and approaches as wide reaching and diverse in other instrumental areas? Do other instrumentalists share methods and philosophies with the thirty-six percussionists interviewed?
This dissertation is unique in that it explores the personal practice habits of many highly successful and well-known percussionists. For this reason alone, it should be especially interesting to aspiring percussionists and could be re-formatted and condensed to a more user-friendly *method book* on practice. Less experienced percussionists typically have a limited number of practice tools and this resource would enable them to sample and explore new, proven methods and apply them to their own practice habits. This method book would also be useful for educators, giving them multiple approaches and methods to try with their students. Frequently, when less experienced musicians struggle, it is rarely a reflection of their abilities but rather stems from the way they learn and how they practice. Having a variety of viable alternatives to try when facing obstacles may make a significant difference in one’s outlook and ultimate success.

Another way to maximize the educational benefits of this research is to actively share these findings in conference or seminar settings. I have already presented these findings at several workshops, conferences, and educational institutions, at both the high school and college level, and I plan to continue sharing this research with as many people as possible. I hope that the proven practice habits of these thirty-six successful percussionists can be explored and adapted by students, educators, and performers alike, ultimately leading to the fulfillment of their greatest musical potential.
The master of any game is generally a master of practice.¹

- George Leonard

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in the College of Fine Arts at the University of Kentucky.

By
Colin Jeffrey Hill

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: James B. Campbell, Professor of Music

Lexington, Kentucky

2013

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PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

The following thirty-six interviews were conducted between November 12, 2010 and March 25, 2013. While most were done in person, a few were done over the phone and via email. All of the percussionists were asked the following ten questions:

1. If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

2. How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

3. When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

4. When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

5. How do you practice problem spots?

6. How often do you record yourself?

7. Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

8. Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

9. How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

10. Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

Minor edits were made to the following transcripts, as most people do not speak in complete sentences. The content itself was un-altered and any grammatical edits were done with careful consideration to preserve the thoughts and opinions of the interviewees.

1
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

AH: Yes, if I’m going on the stage or whatever I have to do, my body has to react so I have a real good rule - I never start with my sticks. I don’t grab my sticks and do like this (air-drumming). I have learned that if I start like this (massaging and stretching muscles). Suddenly my blood comes and my body wakes up and says, ‘Aha, Joakim is going to make something with his drums or with his marimba, so I have to wake-up.’ So warming up for me is just a couple minutes of warming up (massaging muscles and rubbing hands together). Everything that makes my blood flow is warming up. When I go to the next step it is for me technical practicing but I have a strict limit for what is ‘warming up.’ I can do with sticks but I do it in air. My technical warm-up depends on what I’m going to do on stage or what I’m going to practice. It is really different every time, I can’t give you one answer.

JA: I have a special warm-up that I do. I prefer doing it everyday but life doesn’t allow that. But it is a very good day if I have done it in the morning. It could be maybe a half an hour or maybe an hour but I must admit it doesn’t happen everyday but I still stick to it as soon as I have the possibility. I do about the same thing everyday. I also try to make my students find their special things to do, like a mantra, because you feel good doing it. The purpose is not only for skills, it has a mental purpose. You feel like a percussionist. Even if bad or sad things happen in the day or you have a lack of money, if you go for one hour and do your things, it is a good day. The few things I always do in the morning on snare are here in these notes (scripts written in Swedish). If I’m cold, I do things very slow as possible. It makes the blood go fast. Never quick things. The slower you do it. It works.

AH: You got a point with the mental because when I was younger, I had a much easier time going into performance mode or practice mode, but growing older, things are in your mind. More things about your daily life than about being a musician. So the problem is when I go on stage and I don’t feel warmed up, it is not just the body, the head that has to be warmed up. That is why I think it is important to have some sort of warm-up that reminds your mind what it is about to do. For me, it’s these kind of things (massaging muscles). I think it is important not to forget that your mind has to be warmed-up.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?
AH: Yeah, my process is to never start playing. Read as much as I can understand sitting at my desk, or being comfortable in a sofa at home. Just read and read and try to imagine how it sounds before I play. I am not the best at sight-reading. that is a thing I must practice. I learn more by ear. I read what I have to read. To me, that’s perfect. I try to understand by humming and reading the notes. I try to understand everything melodically before. It takes so much time to put up the things, and that you can also plan. The big planning is trying to set-up. Also like timpani you have to plan before you start playing the piece and how you should tune them. It goes quicker if you plan as much as possible before you move to the instrument. When I was young, ‘oh here is the score,’ and when I started to play, it was inefficient. I don’t have time for that.

JA: It’s different depending on what you are practicing and what the reason is for practicing. Is it for learning something? If you decide in half a year I’m going to be finished with this, whatever it is (i.e. xylophone parts, something from the orchestra literature), I know I have a goal of half a year. When I played the Bolero, I know a couple of months so I started to practice a long time before. I tried and I make a plan for this. You have to make a plan for how long you have and what your goal is for practicing. That is first thing you have to ask when you get the piece.

I mostly play with other guys, not alone. I’m usually not learning a solo piece, it’s something that should fit in somewhere. I have so many different kinds of situations. If I am learning an ensemble piece, I start very slow. For example, if I have to play Porgy and Bess, I never go up in tempo before knowing what my limit is. I’m very conscious of that. I start very slowly. I check every note and every bar and go slowly ahead. Usually, you don’t have that time so you have to look at the piece and find out what things you can’t play without doing it some. If you read a part, there are often parts that you can play from the beginning and don’t have to ever practice. What are the problems? If I have more time I can go to a recording. If you are going to play an opera or whatever, you check it out and listen. Some parts of it I listen to a hundred times and practice in the air, on the bus, or on the train. I do it to save time.

Sometimes you are faced with the opposite situation. Once I had one and a half weeks before the rehearsals started. It was a tricky vibraphone piece that was up and down and the composer gave it to me one and half weeks before. I wanted to shoot him, haha. If I had half a year, I could have practiced and started slow. Instead, I looked through it once to figure out the character of the music and what he wanted from me? I figure it out, put the book together, and didn’t practice a minute. I went to the first rehearsal rehearsal and the composer was surprised! I figured out what he wanted from me. He wanted me to be focused and see me like this (playing frantically). This was his purpose and he didn’t care about the notes. I followed the music, looking for harmonic changes, and ‘almost’ played the part, but he was happy. It’s always about determining the goal. That is the first question I ask. What is my goal? If I’m playing a piece with Anders and he says, ‘This is an important part’ then I start by practicing those spots to make sure it is together. I practice these spots carefully, slowly and quickly.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so,
how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JA: It depends on the type of music, but if its classical percussion music in orchestras, I do it from the beginning. I do it the first and second time and listen to a couple of CD recordings. I even look at the Internet now days to see how some students are playing these. I’m curious. If I’m really interested in something, I do it on everything and on every stage. When I get to a certain level, now it is my opinion. I have to leave the other million guys playing this part. This is my opinion. I already collected what you guys do, now I do my version. Then I never go back again because I’ve made my choice and I did it carefully. I choose the tempo, I made my choice, and I stay with it for that period.

AH: If you are talking about classical music, I always try to listen to recordings. You know what you have to play, the tricky thing is to know where you are. In my world, when I play a lot of new music, most pieces are new. So I start by reading, like we talked about before. But nowadays, I’ve noticed a big change. Percussion is so big. It is on the Internet and so you find versions of strange modern pieces. You can find most things now. The big discussion is how much should you listen? Is it good to listen at other versions? You want to find your own idea of what the music is. If it is classical music you can listen to more recordings, but you still won’t know it completely. It depends on the conductor and what he is doing. I wouldn’t say it is a big problem because if you have the possibility to hear different versions of the piece, you can then discuss with your teacher, with yourself, or with friends of what you think.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JA: I do a lot of mental training. It is mostly mental. I go to my bed and do my mental training. I try to find out which parts I need to play without looking at the music. Then I learn it by heart so I can be free to look at the conductor so I know where one, two, three, and four are. I have to look and be focused. Some parts are memorized and I like to memorize, especially melodic parts. I like to memorize so you can be free to look at the xylophone or the conductor and not get stuck in your part. I have to also be aware of where I start not reading so I don’t hesitate or blank out. I know certain parts I am going to play by heart. That is my best rule for not getting lost. When it comes to modern music or chamber music it is quite hard to memorize, especially when the composers are very late giving you the music and you don’t have time. I have developed having one eye in the music so you don’t get lost in the music and can’t find your way in. Once you get lost it is too hard to get in. You have to decide. Of course, in the best of worlds you hope to play everything perfect, but when I have to make decisions on how to play this for the purpose of focus, because if I can’t get in, I’ll destroy the whole piece. Especially if you are recording a CD. You have to stay focused or otherwise they get mad at you.

AH: The best thing is always to be able to play without a score. I am fascinated when people play tricky pieces and I’m sure they are lost now and then but they just play and they never let you know if they are lost for a second or two or five. It should be your ambition to play music, chamber music and solo music, by heart as much as possible
because the audience would like to see the interaction. It is not the same when you are looking at the score. They are not there for you to play the right notes, they are there to see you and how you bring out your character. But with many modern pieces, it is sometimes impossible because there are so many notes.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

AH: Slow to fast is always great but being kind to yourself is the best way. Decide to leave the problem and not be stuck in the problem. When I was younger, after some time you notice you are spoiling your time because you cannot fill your brain with more. As a student, see where the spots are that need to be practiced and when you do it, don’t get stuck because I think you can build up a fear for the piece. Just practice and leave it, practice and leave it, so it doesn’t become difficult and you become fearful when you come to the difficult place. I think your brain and muscles cannot absorb problems in too large of amounts. You must leave it and sleep. Relax and do other things.

JA: Again it is about what the problem is. Is it a technical problem that my muscles can’t do or is it that my brain can’t make it? That is first what you have to figure out. If it is brain stuff then I think you have a certain amount of time that your brain can work. But if it is muscle stuff, you can do it as long as your muscles can do it, usually for a long time. If it is a brain problem I do it in my head in bed. I will go away from it and come back to it. If it is a muscle thing I can do it for a long time. If it is really boring and I’ve been practicing a lot, I can even do something else, like read books. I’m not saying you should read books while you are practicing but you should know when you should have focus and when to take your breaks. It is also good for you to learn something else while you are practicing.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

AH: Rarely. I am from the stone age and used cassettes. I also had these video cameras that were really large and students used to laugh at me. If I really want to learn something it is with the camera. In my younger years I would bring my recorder but didn’t tell people I was recording them. I would put it in my backpack. But I’ve stopped this for a couple of years because I’ve done the repertoire so many times that I don’t need it. I rely on myself. It is good to rely on yourself. If you don’t, you are always stressed. Certain times I don’t like it. When I’ve done a performance and recorded myself, I don’t like to go back and hear it because I’ve done it. The feeling is good for me, I like to stay that way. If I start to listen maybe it won’t be. It is the same if I’m in a studio working on a recording. I rely on the recording guys. I go in at the beginning and listen to what the sound is like but not day two, day three, day four, or day five because I get so nervous. I rely on the guys. That can be the bad thing about recording because you hear everything too much. But at certain level you need to hear everything.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JA: I can’t see any big difference.
AH: Depending on what you are doing.

JA: Depends on what is happening around your family.

AH: Sometimes I would rather take a walk because you need all your concentration and focus on the concert. So this is a good time to relax. I only have so much energy and I don’t spend it on practicing. I need to get to the concert with enough energy left.

JA: It would have been great for me many, many times if I had the possibility and opportunity to take a walk and relax before a performance. But as a percussionist and with an ensemble there is very limited time to be able to do that. You must pick up things. You are setting up in the halls and when people have breaks, you are building the next sets. I have colleagues that come up to me and say, ‘I can’t understand how you just can perform when you have to work so hard setting up before, between, and after.’ The only thing I can say is that I have to do it and I have to like it. If it wasn’t that way and everything was set-up, I think I would have better chances of playing a little better with better performances, but it seems like it never came to that, at least for me.

AH: If you are in an orchestra, then you do have five minutes here and there of getting that focus.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

AH: No, but even if it is hectic around you, you can’t just go on stage. Even if it is one or two minutes you have to somehow get time to yourself, you need it. But I have not developed a ritual. I remember my colleague had one. He always made me do some exercises before we went on stage that turned out to be a ritual for us all and it was very fun. Keiko Abe also joined in when we played with her and she began to expect us to do it every time. It was fun to watch six big guys and little Japanese woman swim. It was a good thing for us when we walked out on stage. I think it influenced us the way we entered the stage. I think it is a good thing.

JA: For me it is so different because chamber music is played so often and differently than you play regular concerts, performances, or operas. So for a regular week I can be performing four or five evenings and rehearsal daytime periods. So if you are going to play Madama Butterfly for the twenty-fifth time you don’t need it. Instead, you need to know how to avoid mistakes. Both are hard because when playing chamber music, it isn’t how to play it, but rather how to play it again when tired. I also have to eat good to make sure I don’t die in the evening.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

AH: I started at twelve. I played piano first in my music school. My piano teacher encouraged me to seek another instrument so I played drums in my teenage years. I
considered myself a drummer a long time in my life. In a way, I still do. I always play
drum set when warming up even though I’m a marimba player. I can spend hours on the
drum set but I don’t remember the last time I had a gig with a group. It could be ten
years ago. I entered the Academy when I was seventeen and of course, I had to grab
everything with classical music. I started playing timpani when I was twenty-two.

JA: Ten years old, playing in music school and fifteen years old playing more on the
marimba when I started regular music in high school. Already by sixteen I was working
with a professional orchestra. I have freelancing and did it regularly since sixteen years
old.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing
during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school,
early career, and currently.

JA: It was like three hours a day. Then the next step, pre college, it was like seven ho-
urs a day. I lived at school for two years (prep school) between eighteen and twenty years
old. Then I went to the Academy and my education at the university was hard because all
of a sudden the professional life started knocking on your head and you would go out and
have gigs. I moved to the capital of Sweden and suddenly started playing with the big
orchestras. So then it came down from seven hours a day. You didn’t have so many
rules so you would spend time waiting for your booking. I was so stressed so it went
down. Currently, it isn’t hours. If I work ten to two with an orchestra, perform in the
evening with an Opera, and teach some students in between, it is nothing. So when I
have students I play in their lessons. Somedays it is zero though.

AH: When I was small, I didn’t practicing much but did play a lot of drums and piano. I
was always playing in my higher education but I didn’t really understand how to practice
until I got through a year and a half. I was really young when I started the Academy. I
was too young at age seventeen. It would have been better for me to be somewhere else
before. Then it went up to three, four, or five hours. When you are a professional it can
be lots of hours and sometimes not many at all. Today, it is a happy day for me to be
standing with instruments but we can’t talk about hours unless I have something
important to work on. I have been practicing a lot for my concert this year.

JA: It is now more pragmatic. You have to do what you have to do.

Biographies

Joakim Anterot is currently contracted in Orchestra at the Royal Opera and is a member
of chamber music group, Sonanza, which was awarded a Grammy in 2010. Over the
years, Anterot has participated in a large number of recordings in different contexts and
performed with the Swedish Radio Symfoniorkeste, Fold Opera, Norrkoping and Gavle
Symphony orchestras, and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, to name a few.
Anterot has been a lecturer at the Stockholm Music Education Institute since 1990 and the Royal College of Music in Stockholm for the last twelve years. As a professor at the Music Academy Sarajevo, he built up Bosnia's first and only percussion education program. Additionally, Anterot is the founder and former president of the STOVE association, Percussion Teachers in Sweden.

In 2007, Anterot was awarded the Goran Lagerwalls Music Scholarship for his work at the higher music education. The award was presented at the Royal Court Music Academy formal gathering of Crown Princess Victoria.

Anders Holdar is a Swedish classical percussionist who is most famous for his involvement with the Kroumata Percussion Ensemble. As a founding member in 1978, Holdar has performed internationally as a featured soloist ensemble with many of the world’s best symphony orchestras. Kroumata have premiered over two hundred works by composers such as Sofia Gubaidulina, Iannis Xenakis, Sven-David Sandström, Rolf Wallin, Anders Eliasson, Britta Byström, Henrik Strindberg, Askell Masson, Georg Katzer, Mats Larsson-Gothe and André Chini among others.

Additionally, Holdar is a founding member of the STOVE association, Percussion Teachers in Sweden.
November 11, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JB: Yes, I do actually. As I’ve gotten older I’ve realized I had to do that more. Basically it depends on the instruments I’m playing. Since I play a lot of snare drum, in the past couple of months I’ve actually gotten back into the George Stone *Stick Control* book and I’ve started to work through that. I have a routine I do from that. It depends on what I’m playing. If I’m doing something that uses a lot of buzz rolls and stuff, I have my own buzz roll exercise that I use. On keyboard percussion, I like to really base it upon what I’m doing. I like to come up with exercises that are unique to the repertoire that I’m playing. I like to go into the music, and this really goes for all instruments, go into the music and come up with exercises based on the music. So that way, I’m warming up my brain at the same time as I’m warming up my hands, and also addressing some of the techniques that are maybe specific to those pieces.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JB: Probably like most people, I just begin at the top left corner. I do it very slow of course. What I do is try to come up with a timeline. A lot of what I’m doing now is certain repertoire for a specific event, be it for a concert or a convention or something. During the summer sometimes, or during a break, it’s always nice to get back in and pull out a piece and just kind of learn it just to learn it. Unfortunately there’s not really a whole lot of time for that. It’s very goal specific, the pieces I’m doing. So I try to set up a kind of a timeline of what I want learned and when. I really try to look through a piece first and see how long it’s going to take me, and of course I make sure I have a good amount of time left to get comfortable with the whole process. I really believe in learning the entire piece slow first and then bringing the overall tempo up.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JB: No I really don’t listen to a lot of recordings. The only time I listen to a recording is if I have a question about how something is done. I find that for me and my personality, it can kind of psyche me out a little bit. If I’m learning a piece and I’m doing an eighth note equals forty, and I’m just really having to discipline myself so I can feel good about learning every step of the way, if I then turn on a recording of someone playing a finished product, some people can find that encouraging. But I find it discouraging, so I try to stay away from that. Also, I try to really make sure I know a piece before I go to a recording so I don’t get a false sense of it. It’s really easy to listen to a recording just because it’s finished and polished and sounds really slick. It’s very easy to take that at face value. But
if you know the piece better and more importantly, if you know what you want to do with it, you have your own ideas, your own conceptions, then you can go and really evaluate someone else’s performance based on your own sensibilities. Instead of just thinking that it is automatically superior to what I’m doing just simply because they’ve been playing it longer than me. But typically, and maybe this is because I’m out of school and not doing auditions and trying to do my own thing, I’ll listen to recordings if I’m stuck on something or if I’m not sure how something is done. But generally for inspiration, I get more out of just trying to come up with my own ideas on a piece. I think that’s part of the fun too, taking the blueprint that the composer gives you and kind of going off in isolation and seeing what you come up with. Then it’s cool when you can play it really well for yourself and you listen to somebody else and then you can appreciate the differences between the two things.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JB: Pretty much the majority of the keyboard stuff I play, I play from memory, because I’m learning it so slow. Unless it’s something I have to do for an orchestral thing, or a percussion ensemble thing, I’m obviously going to read that. But if it’s a keyboard solo piece, I’ll generally play it from memory. Because of the process, as I’m learning it, I’m memorizing it along the way. I rely more on mental methods than physical methods. I’ve found that I don’t really trust my kinesthetic memory as much as I do my actual cognitive memory. I do lots of practicing away from the keyboard. I like to be able to visualize the entire piece, especially if I’m getting ready for a concerto. Last year I did two separate concerto performances, one with an orchestra and one with a wind ensemble. Two different pieces, and it was important for me that before I could feel comfortable going up and doing that, I really had to be able to almost lay in bed at night and actually see me hitting every note of the entire piece. When you can do that, even if your muscle memory starts to go on you, your brain is always going to trump your muscle memory in times of pressure. I tell students a lot, when we learn pieces, our brain isn’t present. We’re just in the practice room where there is no pressure and we’re just kind of doing what our hands are doing. If our hands can do it we feel good about it. But when we get up on the stage, just when the nerves start to kick in, then your brain wants to get in on the action but your brain wasn’t there when your hands were learning the piece. So it’s important for me to slow the tempo way down and see it note by note and really visualize that, that for me is what’s been really productive.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JB: I try to put those first. I try to come up with little exercises based on those things. Something that I try to do is not practice the piece as much as the techniques needed to perform the piece. And that’s something that’s a little different than when I was in college. Also, I think I can practice it longer and not get burned out or hit a wall because I’m not practicing the piece. The piece is not the end unto itself. I’m just using the piece as a way to come up with exercises. If you can do the techniques and you know the theory behind it, the piece is just a combination of those two things.
CH: How often do you record yourself?

JB: When I get confident on something, I’ll generally do that. I was very happy that my department got me a MacBook Pro this past year. Both for my students and for me, it’s been great. Not only audio but video recording. As much as we see people just putting a lot of stuff up on YouTube and Facebook and stuff like that, I’ll sometimes use that as a goal. ‘OK, this week I want to come up with something that I can put on Facebook.’ It’s not so much for comments, although it’s nice if someone gives me a suggestion and it’s constructive, but it’s more of creating some of that pressure. But yes, I find it very telling to record myself. And these days especially, with laptop technology, you can do a really high quality thing, something that you can go back and analyze, really early on.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JB: As I get closer to performance, what I try to do is practice the anxiety. I think a lot of people, they try to alleviate anxiety. I try to incorporate it into my practice. An analogy that I make is, if you never practice a five-stroke roll but then suddenly have to play one, you are probably not going to play a very good five-stroke roll. You got to where you can play a five-stroke roll really well because you just did a lot of that. I like playing in front of people and things like that. I try to do a lot of stuff like that as I’m getting ready for a performance.

I’ll do a bunch of pushups first, and really get my heart rate going, to get my hands all tense, get my breath going real fast and then try to play. So I’m trying to alleviate any unknown that I’m not experiencing in the practice room that I’m going to have to experience on stage . . . You practice the physical and psychological stuff as much, if not more, than you practice the music stuff. That, as we all know, is the real crux. It’s not the piece that’s hard, it’s the circumstances that are different on stage. I guess a lot of people try to do the opposite. They’ll work on breathing or meditation, and that’s cool, that may work best for them. But for me, I’ve always felt that if I can just get comfortable with the anxiety part of it, I’ll be most successful.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JB: Not really and this goes back to something that Mark Ford told me as a student. He said that if you practice every day, if you do the right things every day, the recital is just the next day. So I find that I get more nervous if I have some special thing that I do. Like if take a nap, or drink a bunch of chamomile, or try to do something differently. I don’t want it to be different when I get up on stage here at PASIC or a concerto or something, I want it to be as close to what I do every day as possible. So the answer to that is no. In fact, when I was getting ready for PASIC, I came up with a routine that I would do every morning before I ran my piece. I’d start with the first column of page one of the Stick Control book. Then I had some single hand exercises that I developed to work on some of my problem spots in the piece. I had certain tempos I would do and the number of times I would do it. I had certain sections that I would hit so many times and then do a
run-through of the piece. And I wanted to make that routine something I would do every day. That way, when it was time to perform, performing on stage was only a certain percentage of that routine. So I can go through that and it just gets me in that zone of this is what I do every day. I do my stick control just like I do every day. And I start trying to build it up really slow. And I do my exercises just like I do every day. I do it at three different tempos. So that way, not only am I warmed up, I’m going to have to get my blood going. But I wanted something that it’s all the same. That way, both physically and I guess, for whatever it’s worth, psychologically, your brain and your body adapt to that pattern. I think our bodies like predictability, both good and bad. And if you can build that in, you have your whole routine. And it’s not just about going up and just trying to run your piece, the piece becomes a smaller part of that whole routine. So I guess the answer to your question is that I do have a ritual, but it’s not specific to that one day. If anything, I want it to be the opposite. I want it to be what I do every day. And then that way, on the day of performance, it will seem less like a big deal. Then when the performance is over, you can let it sink in. Like wow, that was kind of cool. I got to play in front of all those people. But when I go up to play, I don’t want it to be any different. I just want it to be like if it’s going well in the practice room, I want to recreate that.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JB: I was ten years old. I was in the fifth grade and probably like a lot of other people started, the instrument man came by our fifth grade class and everybody got to pick out their instrument. It’s not like how it is now, where beginners have to audition and then they get placed on what instrument is best for them. This was a public school education in Connecticut in the nineteen eighties and music was just kind of an extra-curricular thing you could do, and we all got asked what we wanted to do. So I, and probably most of the other male students in my class, wanted to play drums. So we all got to do that. I started when I was ten, and like most people, then into junior high and into high school, I really didn’t think about this as something that I’d be doing, really, until maybe the end of high school. I did drum corps for the first time at a summer camp after my junior year. Thom Hannum at the University of Massachusetts had a percussion camp up there, and that was the first time I was really exposed to that, like this was something you could actually do. Watching him and his students and they’re doing this professionally and that was something I really felt like I could fit with and it was something that I felt I had a place doing that. So I went back after that summer and saved up the money to do drum corps, took the train up to Boston each month and did drum corp. I got exposed more and more. There’s a whole other world out there, there’s some things you can do. I was never talented at it, but I think I loved it enough where it was really the first thing that I felt like I wanted to work hard at. I was pushed to do well academically and to do well at other things, but percussion was the first thing that I really bought in to. For whatever reason, I felt that this was worth me giving my absolute all. And then, in turn, going to college after that first summer in drum corps, you realize you can do well academically because of the work ethic that you have to adopt for that type of activity. If you can be out on a football field in one hundred and ten degree heat, doing pushups and stuff, going back and taking an English class is not really all that hard.
I guess it’s things like this, at PASIC, and in published stuff, I get known for a lot of the snare drum stuff. I think that’s where maybe I have more of a voice than other instruments. I play a lot of marimba back home in Mississippi. I’m the principal timpanist of an orchestra there. I play in the faculty jazz combo. I’m just kind of a freelance, jack-of-all-trades guy, just trying to work the trenches and play as many gigs as possible, that’s where I’m at right now. But I do feel it would be silly for me maybe to play those other instruments at a place like PASIC because there are so many other people that have a voice on those. How it all washed out, coming out of graduate school, my primary thing that I feel like I can say something unique on is the concert snare drum. Focusing on that, coming out of New England Conservatory for my masters, I was able to study with Will Hudgins there and just being exposed to some really hot players, guys who made me realize what the high end of playing is. I think that maybe gave me a little bit of a leg up going into North Texas. It’s funny, I always tell people the irony of North Texas is you go there because it’s so big and you want to get exposed to all this stuff. But it’s so big, that you wind up just kind of sticking with your strength so that you can kind of keep your head above water. While I was there I taught snare drum and composed a few things and I had people ask me to teach them and show them the things I was doing, which were definitely not my own ideas. I imported them from the other teachers I had until I was able to get my own identity going. So I always played the instrument but thinking of it as a primary sort of thing was definitely during my doctorate.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JB: Wow, this is going to make me look terrible, but in middle school and high school, not a whole lot. And when I did, it wasn’t very well and if I had something specific I needed to do. The high school band I played in was pretty rough. Just because I took private lessons outside and didn’t really practice, I was still able to be pretty good I think. And that’s not saying I was good, but in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king sometimes. In college and higher Ed, as an undergraduate my first year I was clueless like most people that age. I was probably hitting the books more than practicing. I didn’t really get that your practicing needs to be as important or more important than your theory homework, your history homework, or your math homework. And certainly because there were specific grades and really quantifiable things that I had been used to from high school attached to that, I was a little more academic. But again, being at the University of Connecticut at that time, I was very lucky to be around a smaller studio of guys where I got to play on a lot of stuff that I really had no business playing on, like Schwantner and Kraft and things like that. And being around a bunch of guys that are really self-motivated, and if you wanted to be accepted by them, you had to be really serious as a percussionist. That’s not to say there was necessarily a lot of guidance. Our teacher was a great guy but he was there as an adjunct, only there maybe a couple days a week. So it was those older guys in the studio that really kind of pushed me. But coming along to my junior and senior year, getting ready to go to graduate school and see what else is out there, seeing how far I can take that, then it started to crank up. Maybe four
hours, and maybe I pulled a couple of eight hour days as I was getting ready for auditions and stuff. In higher Ed, in graduate school, in my masters, that experience was basically an orchestral trade school. We didn’t really do hardly any solo repertoire unless it was required for an audition or something. But to credit that experience, I think that working on excerpts, for me, at that time, really honed in my idea about sound quality and sound and being very detailed about things. I can now take that to other areas. I play orchestral timpani, and I’ll play some orchestral percussion from time to time. I’m certainly not at this stage of my life going to go out and take some orchestral auditions, but there are lessons that I’ve learned from that that I wouldn’t have been able to learn elsewhere. But getting ready for graduate school, that started the era of the six hour days, eight hour days. Getting ready for auditions you’re talking ten to twelve hour days. And that school was geared toward that. Your ensembles met early in the morning, you had maybe a couple of classes in the afternoon, and from there, every other hour up until the late evening and the early hours of the morning was spent just really putting in those hours. And even though I had a ways to go and in many respects I still do, that was where I got my act together in terms of knowing what quality was and seeing people achieving it and seeing people that were head and shoulders better than me and having to really figure something out. But that’s good though. In retrospect, facing that is good because it definitely pays huge dividends. In my doctorate, I was all over the place. I didn’t know how it was going to wash out. I knew that I was going to have been in school for ten years and thought this has to lead to something. At the end of this, I need to have a job, this has to have paid off. So I was doing a little bit of everything. I was taking auditions still, got close on a couple of military things, started working with Mark Ford in terms of getting me ready to apply for college jobs, and was even considering getting a certification to teach public school. Obviously the schools in Texas being at the high level they are, that was very appealing. And having to support myself and not taking out college loans to be there, just working my TA and teaching adjunct at a school in town there, teaching lessons, doing gigs. That’s definitely an era that I’m glad it’s over. But I’m so happy to have gone through that. That made me who I am. And I’m not saying that to be elitist or anything like that, I think that each person has that. They look at that moment where you say, OK, this is kind of the crucible moment where there are so many things that I am as a person now that happened on account of that. So, as far as practicing, it would vary. As much as possible and anything else to me was a distraction. And I was always working towards something, towards a doctoral recital, towards an orchestral audition. When I started doing interviews for jobs, I was just applying to everything. I had my first college interview when I was twenty six and had no business being there. But it was cool to get that experience and be around some people. In the orchestral community, I was very fortunate to be around Will Hudgins, Frank Epstein and the Boston Symphony guys, in addition to my fellow students, many of which have gone on to great things. When I was at North Texas on the academic side of things, guys that are at the top of their game with that, the planning and the whole higher education percussion coordinator gig, being around Mark Ford and Christopher Deane. So it was as much as humanly possible during that time.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?
JB: Yes, I think so. I think we all could say that. I think that it’s a question of organization, time management and work ethic. Since I’ve been working at Mississippi State, just for my own amusement, I started working on an MBA because I can take courses there for free. And it’s funny, I study for finance exams the same way I practice for a recital. I don’t even look at it as studying I look at it as practicing. You try to get all the possible questions they could ask you on a test. You work every problem from your past homework. You try to alleviate every unknown that they could possibly throw at you. Just like you are practicing your marimba solo. You work on every section slowly to get every section down. You ask what could possibly go wrong, and then you just practice it and practice it and practice it. I’m certainly not the only person who could say this, but I wasn’t one of those guys who was born to do this. I just happened to be influenced by certain people at certain times of my life that I was able to think this is something I want to do and this is something I want to be successful at, so I pursued it. I think music though, it definitely honed my work ethic, because I was so passionate about it and it’s so competitive. And adopting that mindset and that mentality, when you apply it to something else, it’s almost like you are in on this secret, this extreme work ethic. But yes, if I have had any success in percussion and if there’s a reason for it, it’s for no other reason than being organized and figuring out what I need to know and working very hard at it. And as I get older, I’m more interested in practicing smart in addition to practicing hard. I may be a little more confident than when I was younger, so I may believe a little bit more now in how I’m doing that and what I’m doing. But it always changes and always evolves, depending on what you are playing, who you are playing with, and what stage in your life you are at. I have two kids right now and have commitments at home. My wife is a full time band director. I teach a studio of about fifteen percussionists at my school, and as the years have gone on, I’ve taken on more administrative type things. So I don’t have the eight hours a day that I used to and I’m happy that I developed my hands early on and got a good idea about stuff. But now it’s really trying to come up with an efficient warm up, an efficient way of practicing, getting out in front of a goal early enough that I have enough time. If I don’t have eight hours a day to practice and I have only two hours, I have to get a running start a little bit sooner so I have to be a lot more organized.

Biography

Jason Baker currently teaches percussion at Mississippi State University. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of North Texas, a Master of Music degree from the New England Conservatory of Music, and a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Connecticut. His teachers include: Mark Ford, Christopher Deane, Will Hudgins, Peter Coutsouridis, Rosemary Small, and Ernest Centoscudi.

Dr. Baker maintains an active schedule as a solo artist, giving clinics and performances throughout the southeast, Texas, and New England. He has performed at several Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, and the Texas Music Educators Association Convention. Jason recently released his debut CD, "The Noble Snare", with Smith Publications/11 West Records. He is also an active performer with several regional
orchestras in the north Mississippi area.

Jason has also performed with the Glassmen, Boston Crusaders, and Connecticut Hurricanes Drum and Bugle Corps. He has previously taught percussion for the Boston Crusaders, Boston College Marching Band, and several high school programs throughout Texas. Prior to his appointment at Mississippi State University, Dr. Baker served on the music faculty of Texas Woman's University.

Jason is proud to be an artist for Innovative Percussion and serves as the secretary for the Mississippi chapter of the Percussive Arts Society.
November 13, 2010
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

KB: Very basic method of movement type exercises. They are very slow, always in the key of C but never with a metronome. Starts with general eighth on a mallet, then scales and arpeggios with a single mallet. The third exercise is octaves in a single hand. The fourth is scales with a stationary stick and one stick in motion, again in a single hand. The fifth is octaves scales and the sixth is what I call fast patterns, which is double laterals outside then double laterals inside followed by triple strokes outside and triple strokes inside. They start at the bottom of the keyboard and move up the keyboard slowly and chromatically until you get to the top. Lastly, a series of one-handed roll exercises. All of this takes about 25 minutes.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

KB: Not really because sometimes I don't have much time to learn a new piece. I try not to memorize pieces, I try to let that happen naturally. At some point, if you are in that void between memorized and not memorized you have to start teaching yourself how to memorize the music. I try to be smart and give myself more than enough time to put something together. The difficulty of the piece or program that I am putting together determines how far in advance I will start. Once I get pretty familiar with the piece, I spend most of my time doing the hard spots first and then moving my way backward, hitting the parts that I know much better.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

KB: I do not listen to recordings, typically. I only listen to them for one reason, after I have initially learned it to listen for note accuracy and make sure I have learned it correctly. I don't listen to recordings because I don't want to take somebody else's phrasing ideas until I've determined my own.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

KB: Slowly with a metronome, slowly with the metronome, slowly with the metronome, then gradually speeding up. I hope that over time they will clean themselves up. I also dissect them pretty severely doing hands separate and things like that. I try to get to the root of the problem as quickly as possible to make sure it does not become more of a problem.
CH: How often do you record yourself?

KB: Not as often as I should. Lately, it's every time I make a CD, or after a performance and someone gives me a recording of something. That's when I usually hear it. I should do it more often than I do.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

KB: Yeah, there are usually more run-throughs. I try to run-through in front of somebody and then I take notes after every piece. That determines what I practice the next day before the second run through.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

KB: I used to. I used to wear the same shirt until I had a bad recital and then that shirt would be forbidden. I also used to eat a Philly Cheesesteak sandwich from Subway but now I don't really have any sort of ritual anymore. I usually show up about thirty minutes before the program, sometimes twenty. I usually don't do my typical warm-up routine on the day of the performance. For some reason, it doesn't seem necessary. I'm not sure why.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

KB: I started percussion at nine and marimba when I was twelve. When I got to graduate school I focused mostly on marimba. There was some percussion but mostly marimba.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

KB: Middle school, probably not very much, maybe an hour and a half. High school, about three hours a day. College, undergrad, eight hours for the first couple of years and then I went down to about five my junior and senior year. Graduate school, five hours a day pretty much until the last half of my last semester and then I became a little useless, got a little burned out. First four years freelancing, anywhere from 3 to 5 hours per day and then once I started teaching full time, three hours a day. Now that I'm a father, thirty minutes a day. Having some trouble figuring that out but I'm working on it.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

KB: Yes, for sure. But my practice habits have enabled me to not sound like anybody else, at least they tell me I don't sound like anybody else. I don't think I sound like anybody else. I just try and find an individual voice through performing and writing. Trying to give somebody who commissions a piece exactly what they want but at the same time keeping it honest to myself about what I want to write. Also, trying to look at the instrument differently than everybody else.
Biography:

Internationally acclaimed marimbist and percussionist, Kevin Bobo is currently serving as Associate Professor of Music (Percussion) at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He holds a bachelor's degree from Wichita State University where he studied with J.C. Combs and a master's degree from Ithaca College where he studied with Gordon Stout.

In addition to performing solo recitals, concertos and clinics at major universities and percussion festivals nation wide, Kevin has performed at several Percussive Arts Society International Conventions. He has also performed at the 19th, 26th & 29th Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Marimba Seminars in Asbury Park, New Jersey, the Bellingham Festival of Music in Bellingham, Washington, the Pzsaislis Music Festival in Kaunas, Lithuania, the PerKumania Festival in Paris, France, The Australian International Marimba Festival in Canberra, Australia, the 12th and 13th International Festivals of Percussion in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the 11th International Days of Percussion in Valencia, Spain, and the 8th Days of Percussion in Fermo, Italy. He has also performed as a soloist in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Singapore, and at the 3rd International Seminar of Percussion in Mexico City, Mexico.

Bobois also a widely played composer with numerous compositions published through Studio 4 Music, PercMaster Publications and Keyboard Percussion Publications. He has been recorded on several albums and has also released three solo recordings Marimba Jambalaya, Chronicles, and Boboland. In 2007, Malletech released the Kevin Bobo signature line of marimba mallets and his book Permutations for the Advanced Marimbist followed by his snare drum book Odd Meter Studies in 2010. Kevin has been performing on Malletech marimbas since 1997, Zildjian Cymbals since 2001, and Evans Drumheads since 2009.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

MB: Yeah, but it changes sometimes, I’ll do some sequential sticking exercises every once in a while, I used to do a lot of arpeggios and things like that. It just depends on the amount of time I have to practice. Because some days practicing can be, I have an hour to get some work done and I have to go through two or three pieces so my practicing can just be running through something very simple just to get my hands moving, like a Bach chorale or something. I’ll do some arpeggios or a single alternating stoke, things that get my hands moving, just to get my hands happening. But I like to play something musical to warm-up, maybe a Bach chorale, an adagio from one of the Bach sonatas, or one of my pieces like the Offering. Something simple but something that makes me think musically. Along with trying to get my hands moving, I’m trying to get myself into the sound of the instrument and thinking musically. Because I’m trying to transition from whatever I was doing prior to practicing, into practicing, I find that the hardest. There’s a physical aspect of trying to get my hands thinking, ok, we’re doing this again. But there’s also the mental aspect of trying to concentrate and getting in to the mindset of, ok were going to do this now, and I have to think of the sound of this and I have to be in this vibe and I have to try and get myself focused. So I try to find things that make me concentrate. So I’m going to work on voicings and do this Bach chorale thinking about the voices while I do it, those kind of things. Or arpeggios and I’m working on line and trying to make sure these are sequential sticking arpeggios. Or making a nice line up and down the instrument, and there’s of course the accuracy and all that kind of stuff. I’ll definitely do some sort of warm up whether it be long or short, it just really depends on the day and the amount of time I have to practice quite frankly.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

MB: Yeah, we talked about that a little bit in the master class today. It starts, depending on what the piece is like, but certainly it starts with very slow practice and repetitive slow practicing. To me that’s kind of it in a nutshell in a sense that repetitive slow practice. So if I’m learning a big piece, I’m going to start at the very beginning and I’m going to learn it slowly and I’m going to be diligent about it. I’ll have a metronome marking and I keep track, it depends but sometimes it’s in my mind and sometimes, I’ll write it down. I’ll keep track of whatever I’m playing, if it’s at an eighth note one hundred and forty or something, or whatever I’m doing, and I’ll keep track of that very often. So I’ll keep track of this day I was doing this and this date I was doing this, to kind of remind myself of where I was at and the tempos. But I’m very careful with the metronome and I like to be very consistent with it and work a consistency from learning a piece. Let’s say that I’m learning the beginning and I’m kind of getting through it and I have some goals. And I
say I’m going to get through the first eight or nine bars. But as it goes on, I think one of the important things is, I’ll review the things I learned in the previous day to try to make sure that I’ve retained that, that’s tricky and that’s what’s hard about learning a piece. If you miss a day after learning something new, I always worry when I’m learning new pieces, if I miss a day, whatever I learned yesterday I’m going to forget two days from now. I’ll try to go through and go back and collect myself again, do a nice run of whatever it is I’ve learned and then I’ll stop and start new stuff, work on the new stuff and depending on the amount of time I have, I’ll set a goal. If I’m memorizing, I’ll memorize another eight measures or depending on how difficult it is, and if I’m learning more, depending on how long it is, I’ll go back at the end of the session to the beginning of the piece and make sure that I can bring in to the mix the new stuff I’ve learned. So I’ll go back to the beginning and maybe initially I’ll go back a passage or a phrase or two before the new material and I’ll try to bring that in to the stuff I’ve previously learned. I feel like I’m building continuity from the start and I go back to the beginning and I play all the way through what I’ve learned. And some of that comes with a bit of study too, I’ll look at this music and I’ll try to get a sense of what’s going on in the piece so I can understand it. It sounds too professorial to say I try to learn it on an intellectual level but there’s a part of that that I think I’m doing too, to try to understand what I’m learning and what going on in the piece so as I’m learning it I’m not just learning notes, I’m understanding to the best of my ability at this point in the piece and at this point in the progress, why, what these notes mean. Sometimes that’s easier to gather than other times, depending on the piece and depending on where I am in the learning process, but I do a little bit of that.

You have to understand the big picture and in some pieces that’s very apparent. So like I said, I’m puzzling the piece together, it’s like here we are and I’m going to plug this in and plug this in and keep building on the foundation of the piece. What I like about that, and again different pieces require slightly different systems of learning, but what I like about that is I’m building the piece up and I’m getting to establish a level of continuity as well. Because I keep going back and it keeps getting longer but now I kept going back and learning, and finally ok, I have it all here it is, but now it’s learned and I can play it. Now I’m going to play it slow and know how it all works together and have a sense of the arch of the piece. What I learn about it is, as I’m learning it and I’m working at it, I think what happens is the piece becomes, it’s a weird phenomenon but the piece then becomes smaller to me, eventually. First it’s just this big thing you’re learning and then it seems smaller. When it seems smaller, that’s a good thing because then I realize I have a better grasp and I understand, it’s more connected to me at that time and so I’m working towards that end. Now, it depends on the piece. Last year one of the big pieces I learned was Steven Stucky’s Concerto for Percussion and Wind Orchestra and I started with some of the elements that I knew would be harder to learn. So it wasn’t something I learned from the beginning, I learned one of the key verb movements that had a lot of notes first, third movement maybe was next and then later I went to some of the drum movements that didn’t look quite as intensive to put together and I learned those. So I think first I learned the third movement, the keyboard movement so I kind of learned and memorized those passages and then I learned the second one which is steel drum so I could memorize all those passages on steel drum and then I learned some of the other stuff later because I knew it would be less arduous to retain. So every piece is a little different depending on what it requires of me so I may go in order but some pieces, no
I’m going to learn what I know I need to, I prioritize.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

MB: Well first of all, when I’m learning new material it’s just new material. Most of the time I’m learning something that hasn’t been played before to be honest. So when I learn pieces, there honestly aren’t any recordings to listen to. When I was a student learning music there was no recordings, in graduate school, there was no recordings, I just had to learn it. I think it’s great. Sometimes when I’m saying here’s the piece I want you to learn you can listen to it here. Gives the student a reference for the piece, I think it’s fine to listen to it, I don’t really monitor that too much, I’m not too worried about that, because I’m going to give them my two cents and interpretation and where we’re going with the piece. I want them to find their own road in that as well but I think it’s great because other instrumentalist have had resources for years and we’re just now in this generation where we have the resources to listen to the pieces that you’re learning and I think it’s a great thing. Like anything else, initially you sound a lot like the person you study with, and then I think you begin to grow into your own person. Elements of that teacher will always be part of your playing, but you find your own way. And I think probably the same thing should be true of the way you play your piece. Elements of how you play a piece may initially be of one or two recordings that you’re listening to and how that sounds and how your ear initially heard is how this is done, and then eventually as you play it more, it becomes your own version of that which is important. But I think its ok as long as you’re not trying to imitate that.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

MB: Most everything I play is memorized, on the marimba anyways for sure. Some types of concertos depend on what it is or how long I've had the piece but for the most part, everything is memorized. For me, mostly slow practice helps me with memory because I’m slowing down my kinesthetic movement and I’m breaking down the kinesthetic patterns which are engrained at the performance tempo. If I go slower, I have to concentrate more. There are a lot of times when I’ll practice mentally, I’ll do things a lot away from the instrument, envisioning the passage and trying to make sure I can see a passage in my head. And then there are times when I will sit back and stare at the marimba and see if I can see the keyboard too. Right before a performance I try not to think too much about it because that can kind of psych me out if I get to thinking too much about how does that go, how does this go, then it’s like a game, a dumb game, that’s a dumb game to play. It’s hard, I just have to trust myself and trust my instincts. I just have to relax. And I find that if I take a good pace and keep my tempo right, that most of the time my kinesthetic, not that I’m not concentrating, but along with my concentration, my kinesthetic helps me through the passages. Because if I’m at the right pace, my hands have learned a certain pace you’re practicing, if you’re staying at the pace then I’m good with the piece. If I get going too fast, I get in trouble because my kinesthetic break down; it’s just like when you slow down. Your kinesthetic memory
breaks down when you speed up because your hands are used to playing it so fast and it makes them feel uncomfortable. And that’s very typical. So I think for me, definitely slow practice, something I learned when I was younger from Gordon Stout and I do that a lot. Some mental practice, I always feel like I could do more mental practice. It’s a matter of time and I want to do more so I could just stand back and see the piece go by. I think both of those things are very valid and can help me for sure.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

MB: Slowly, I just go at it slowly, every problem spot is a different issue so it depends on what going on, maybe I need to change the sticking, maybe it’s a body position issue. I try to examine it to find out what's happening with that so I guess my best method is I attack it and then I surround it. Let’s say it’s a two measure passage or a measure I’m having trouble with so I always then go before it and get in to it. I’m not just going to practice the issue, I'm going to practice the issue first but then I’m going to before the issue and get myself in to the issue so that I’ve practiced setting it up. A lot of time I feel like a part of it is, I can fix the issue if I’m playing just that spot but more often it’s what happens before it, or sometimes after it, that causes me to be uncomfortable with it. So I’ll do the whole circle wagon. Here’s the issue, let’s fix the issue and go through and make sure that’s solidified, ok great, let's go before it, ok good, let’s go before it and play after it and then maybe I’ll expand that whole zone even further, so that I'm going to play further before it to make sure that I have that whole zone resolved. Same old thing for problem spots when I come back to pieces I haven’t played in a while. The funny thing is the same problem spots keep popping up, and I think all of us have certain things like that, so I try to make sure I just relax and do the best I can. I think problem spots mostly come from stress or anxiety, and it’s a very normal thing. We hurry too much in our problem spot or do not concentrate through it, and just trying to remind yourself to relax and lay back in the problem spot and hopefully in doing that, you’ll get through it ok.. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t practice it and work on it. And some days that works great some days, you’re a human being and sometimes you don’t psych yourself out and some days you do.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

MB: Not as much as I should but, I think it’s true that it takes time to do that. I have this zoom in my office at Eastman that I use and I’ve been trying to use it. What bugs me about it is I can’t get it to delete the files. I’ll do it every now and then and sometimes more getting closer to a performance, I’ll do some recording of myself and try to listen to it and listen back and see what I get and what I’m doing. I do it, I’d like to do it more but I think it’s a very valid and important activity. I recommend it, it’s a good thing. I like it for two reasons, one, it allows me to hear myself and two, because it makes me nervous. For a bizarre reason, I put the recording on and it makes me feel nervous. I like that because it makes me deal with the nerves and forces me to step up my concentration from playing alone in the practice room or in my studio. There, it’s fine because I’m relaxed and doing my thing. It’s when you have someone else listening or you’re feeling pressured or slightly nervous that your concentration then has something working against
it. How can I focus if I have someone working against me, how do I deal with that and that’s what I have to work on strengthening. Remembering how that feels, putting that recording on not only helps me with examining what I’m doing but helps me with that recreating some of those experiences in that way.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

MB: Well yeah, I probably do more dry runs of pieces. I used to do this thing; I’ve done this before with bigger pieces, I’ll do a practice session earlier in the day. I’ll do slow practice, hit some spots, try to go through it slow, maybe do a run through and then I’ll teach for a while and at the end of the day I’ll go do it again, again after not playing for four to five hours, just do it. I’m going to do it now, just push myself through it; I might do that sometimes at the end of the day. And then I’m going to go home and I’ll have a glass of wine. Whether there’s a performance or not it might be fun to do something like that, not fun, but I’m going to do it just to keep my hands but with the performance I’ll tend to do that more with pieces. I think the thing that happens leading up to a performance, is I’m definitely doing more work on continuity and practice playing it through. I’ll ask students to come in and listen to me play. Students make me nervous because they expect me to play well, so it’s, here we go. And it’s good. It’s another thing in the room vying for my concentration. Someone is sitting there and I’m thinking about that now. I’ve got to think about what I’m doing. I’ve got to stay calm and I’ve got to play. And so it’s another good position to put myself in terms of just getting myself ready for how it’s going to feel when I play in front of forty or fifty or one hundred people. So I’ll do these things definitely more often if I’m preparing for a performance, or a group of performances, than I will if I’m just practicing to learn the piece or just practicing in general.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

MB: Not really, sometimes I run. I ran today actually, before the performance today, it wasn’t really a performance but you know. Sometimes I run but it really depends on the performance. I feel like the performances I give, if you’re on the road, it’s so hard to control what you can do the day of the performance. It depends on if you get in that day or that night before and where you are and where you’re at. I wouldn't mind getting in running and exercise and have time to rest before. I’d even take a nap before because I feel rushed and I feel my brain calm down. I like to eat bananas because they relax me, they have a natural beta blocker, and they’re also good for your muscles, containing high amounts of potassium. I drink a lot of water I find that helps; I find it helps my stress. It just helps cleanse me out, gets me calmer so I tend to drink a lot of water. One thing I’ve learned it try to take some time before I play to just sit and relax and be peaceful. I had a concert last night and I was really happy with it over all and just before the gig, I went backstage because it was the day of percussion, there was a lot of stuff going on, I had to conduct and do all this crazy stuff. It was just a long day and I was tired so I went back to the room and I sat there for ten to fifteen minutes, just quietly, and tried to relax and tried to not really even think about the pieces, just tried to calm myself down, get myself into a place of not talking to people. Because I find that if I’m distracted and then I’ve got to
play it’s harder to all of a sudden, ok now I’ve got to concentrate. But that’s sort of like when you give masters class, you’re talking and then ok now I go play. That can be hard rather than when you’re focused on just playing, it’s different. So I never expect as much of myself, I just know that it’s harder to be in the game of a focused performer when you’re doing that than when you’re in a concert because you’ve got to be focused only on that. So I would just say trying to have some peaceful time if I can. If I can, in the morning, try to do the run, I like the exercise because it’s a stress relief, it takes out some of my extra energy and it just helps me feel good inside. And I just feel like I’ve worked myself and I always feel better after that. I always feel like even though it may be hard at the time, if I’m tired, but it always feels better when it’s over and it’s just something that myself personally, it’s my own sort of little special drug. And concentrating and just trying to just catch some quiet time before, not be too active or too busy right before I play so I can go out there and be centered.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

MB: I started playing drums when I was about five or six because my dad was a teacher and he had a really great high school program in New York. I was always in the marching band so I started learning when I was in grade school; I started learning the snare parts to the marching band chops. I learned a sort of a drum corps type style, it was in the seventies but I would learn them by row and I’m sure I was learning them in a very ghetto way. So I learned a lot of rhythm that way, it was in my ear and I learned time and I would imitate the snare. By the time I was in fourth grade I had developed probably a good and bad thing; I had some ideas of what was to be happening because I had learned it by route. But I had to learn it again, learn to read, but I started playing when I was real little. My parents bought me a drum when I was in kindergarten or something. And then I liked doing it and I’ve always loved it, it was always a passion from a very young age. Then I think around sixth grade I decided, I remember I went to a solo concert in sixth grade or seventh grade and doing really well. I remember sixth grade getting into the top band in middle school, and I auditioned to get in to the top band because sixth graders weren’t allowed in at the end of the year, so sometime in the spring they decided they were going to open up a percussion spot and I auditioned and I won. And I had to audition in front of the whole band as a sixth grader and I got it. And that’s when I thought, I can do this. It made me feel like here’s something, like here’s something I can hang my hat on. Because when you’re in middle school you feel life is hard and kind of awkward. And then I started doing solo concerts, like state concerts, and doing really well. And sometime in middle school I remember my mom asking me, ‘what are you going to do?’ And I said ‘I’m going to be a performer.’ She asked me ‘You are?’ ‘Yup, I’m going to do that someday.’ And I just stayed with it because I knew it was me. I know what I’m doing, I’m going to be a performer, be a percussionist. And I just stayed like that so I think I decided sometimes in middle school in my own little way that this is what I’m going to do. And I wouldn’t say my work ethic was always impressive, up and down depending on what was coming up. If I had a solo ensemble I would probably work harder. And then I got close to high school and I got more and more into it but I always knew I wanted to be a musician from a young age and I stayed with it and it worked out
ok. No, not really, in high school I played because my father was a band director and he insisted that I was. I was mainly a set drummer and a drum set guy and junior year of high school I started learning some marimba solos for contests and I did that through high school as well, but I was never very good at it. I would learn it for that event and then I would not work on it throughout the year. I had really good hands, I could play things, but the other skills, keyboard percussion, were not something I had at all, I wasn’t a pianist or anything. So I auditioned for colleges and I went to Ithaca as a freshman and it was Gordon Stout’s first year at Ithaca and he was great, very enthusiastic. I remember learning Yellow After the Rain and the Bach a minor concerto when I was a senior in high school in 1979. It was just pretty typical at that time. So he heard me play and he goes ‘you’re good’ and I said ‘I am’ and he says ‘yeah, let’s go.’ Plus watching him play, he got me excited about it. I had never heard anybody play marimba like that and I thought wow this is impressive; all of a sudden a marimba was cool. The marimba to me before that was like something I had to do but not something I found appealing in the same way I found playing drums set or snare drum or maybe even timpani. But I heard him play solo marimba and heard him play with others in a chamber recital and I thought wow, and I think I grew as a musician and I saw a maturity of the musicianship he had in my own way. So that inspired me and he was a great teacher and he was very encouraging to me and very motivating and I just went after it and so that’s when I started getting more serious about it. As a freshman, I remember doing a marimba recital in the spring and doing things like Monograph IV, which was new piece in 1981, and a bunch Musser Etudes and some Bach. I went to Eastman as a junior, I transferred, and I remember we were playing Paul Smadbeck’s Rhythm Song in 1983. He had just written it and Julie Spencer, myself, and Paul premiered it and at that time it was the coolest thing in the world. I knew Paul because Paul had gone to Ithaca with me he was a grad student when I was a freshman and he was then in Rochester when I was there teaching at Nazareth college and living about two blocks from my dorm in Eastman. So I used to go down and watch cable TV at his house with Paul and I would play for him and he would give me lessons. He was a great marimba player and he would help me, ‘no do this, do this,’ he’s a great Stevens technique player, very beautiful playing, nice groove. And all those moments I just found I had a natural tendency towards it and people always said you’re good at this and so you just ok, I must be, so I did it. I never thought about a career as someone that would think of me as a marimbist, I never thought that would happen to be honest with you. For a while I thought I’d be a timpanist, so when I got my first job with Kent State I studied with Paul Yancich for a while and took lessons and he was encouraging me to take auditions. But then as I taught more and I started to practice more and play more marimba, I realized my passion was really not to be an orchestral percussionist, it was to be a college teacher and to have a career as a chamber and solo percussionist, however that looked like. And to just make my own way and so that’s how it happened, and I started writing music and doing my thing and kind of worked out. So it started with Gordon.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.
MB: Middle high school, an hour to two hours. In college and higher education, three to five hours, maybe six sometimes. Early career, probably two to three to four, depends. Some days two some days one. Now, I would say if I’m getting ready for something two, on a good day, if I’m getting ready for something and I have more time I’ll try to do three, I try to do three and then on the weekends I can do three. But I would say two to three on a good day. Some days I can only get an hour because I’ve got teaching and I’ve got a family but I’ll say on average currently, two hours. And I’d say some days three depending on if I’m learning music or not.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

MB: Yeah, I think so. I always feel like you can be better at practicing. I never feel like I have the wheel figured out. Especially when you’re performing, If I’d prepared better I’d play better, I’m always trying to reassess how I’m preparing and how I’m practicing. I think I’m good at practicing, I don’t think I’m perfect, I think there are habits that I still run into, that I do things wrong at times, that I really mess up. I’ll play too fast when I shouldn’t or I could be recording myself more, there’s always things that I think you can do better but certainly I think I’m good at practicing. I learned pieces very thoroughly and I think I spent a lot of time with the instruments and have become very intimate with them and that has helped my success because I think I have a voice at the instrument and that comes with spending a lot of time with them. I think more than feeling confident in how I will play at any given moment, I feel confident that I have a voice when I play which I think is even more, there’s more security in that which I think it a good thing.

And the one thing that I would just say is that you have to organize it. In my mind, I’m thinking about, in any given season, what I have to practice and when. So maybe I have some gigs coming up where I have to play this, and this, and this, and I’m going to practice a lot on these pieces. But a month later, I have this and this and this. I may be starting to practice some of those pieces on the back burner, while I’m focusing on these pieces, but starting to learn these or bringing back these pieces. Focusing on these, okay I’m done with that, put these away then these become more in the focus. So that I’m always thinking about what’s getting priority and how I’m organizing that. And that can be from a long span over a six month period, or a few months or two month period, to a week. On Monday I’m going to do this and on Tuesday I’m going to do that. Everyday I’m going to work on this but every other day I am going to work on that. For example, if I’m playing something like Vinao, I’ll do it every day. I need to. I’ll always make sure I keep it in my hands, and that I’m concentrating through it. If I’m playing Rounders, okay every other day, every two days I’ll run through some of the licks and make sure it’s in my hands to do that. Depends on what it is. So I think it is important to have in your head a sense of how you are going to organize your practice time. Not that it has to be regimented, you can even go back and say, ‘Okay, I’m going to organize it this way’ and go back and look at it and, ‘How did I do? Did it work out the way I thought it would, or maybe I should reassess what I am trying to accomplish.’ But I think it is important to have a sense of some idea in your mind how you are going to organize your week or your day. Because if you walk into it just saying, ‘I’m going to practice, here we go’ it can feel like, ‘what do I do?’ You know I think we’ve all been there; we just have so much to do.
But no, ‘Today I’m going to do this and this and this, here’s my goals.’ And that helps me. It takes the stress out of it too. It almost alleviates it because I’ve thought through it. It can even take five minutes, ‘Okay, I’m going to do this and this and this, work on this, get this done, okay, let’s go try it, see what happens.’ So I think from the smaller, more myopic sense of what’s going on today, this week, the next month or two, I need to think about those arches. And I always try to keep that in my plans as well. I definitely plan my practice sessions. I think about ‘Today, I’m going to warm up for fifteen minutes and then I’m going to work on Vinao for a half hour, and if I have time I am going to do the Bach for fifteen at the end of it. And then later in the day when I’m done. the last hour I’m going to do some Rounders and then I’m going to work on this other piece I’m doing with the percussion ensemble.’ It depends on what I’m playing at the concert. But I will think that or I’ll think okay, ‘I have this and this and this. On the weekend though, I am going to start bringing back this piece and this piece that I have to play with this group in two weeks. And so I’m going to get that going.’ That kind of thing, those are important things to do. Like today I’m learning a concerto I have to play in three months. I’m going to start learning the concerto, but I do have other gigs, so I’m going to practice the concertos here, and this is here, so they’re both going on at the same time. And as the concerto gets closer that takes up more of my time. But at the beginning it is taking up little time because I’m trying to get started on it and then I’m still practicing a lot of what I have to do for what’s coming up, and bringing the concerto into the mix, and then the concerto takes over. And those are important things to have planned out. You can never be literal about it. But I think it’s important. I bet you a lot of people do that anyway, but I think it’s kind of a good thing for me to talk to my students about because sometimes they’ll have those same kind of issues with things they need to juggle and how to juggle that.

Biography

Having performed on four continents and nearly forty states Michael Burritt is one of the World’s leading percussion soloists. He is in frequent demand performing concert tours and master classes throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia and Canada. Mr. Burritt has been soloist with the Dallas Wind Symphony, Omaha Symphony, Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, Richmond Symphony Orchestra, Ju Percussion Group (Taiwan), Percussion Art Quartet (Germany), Amores Percussion Group (Spain), Peaux (Sweden) and the Tempus Fugit Percussion Ensemble of Pittsburgh, PA. Mr. Burritt has three solo recordings – Perpetual, and Shadow Chasers and recently released his third entitled Waking Dreams on the Resonator Records label. All the recordings are comprised of Burritt’s original compositions as well as works written expressly for him. He has been a featured artist at seven Percussive Arts Society International Conventions. In 1992 he presented his New York solo debut in Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall and in 1998 performed his London debut in the Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Mr. Burritt has extensive chamber and orchestral experience and has performed with the Chicago Chamber Musicians, The Chicago Symphony, The Rembrandt Players, and the The Penninsula Music Festival Orchestra.
Mr. Burritt is also active as a composer, with two concertos to his credit, numerous solo and chamber works for marimba and percussion as well as two books of etudes. His works for solo marimba have become standard repertoire for the instrument and are frequently required repertoire on international competitions. He has been commissioned by The World Marimba Competition in Stuttgart Germany, The Paris International Marimba Competition, Third Coast Percussion Quartet, Exit 9 Percussion, Louisiana State University, The Northshore Concert Band and the Tempus Fugit Percussion Ensemble. Mr. Burritt is published with Ludwig Music, C. Allen and Keyboard Percussion Publications. Burritt is also an artist/clinician and product design/consultant for Malletech, where he has developed his own line of signature marimba mallets and an artist / educational clinician with the Zildjian Company. Mr. Burritt is a member of the Percussive Arts Society Board of Directors, a contributing editor for Percussive Notes Magazine and the chairman of the PAS Keyboard Committee.

Michael Burritt is currently Professor of Percussion and head of the department at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Prior to his appointment at Eastman Mr. Burritt was Professor of Percussion at Northwestern University from 1995-2008 where he developed a program of international distinction. Mr. Burritt received his Bachelor and Master of Music Degrees, as well as the prestigious Performers Certificate from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. His teachers have included John Beck, Gordon Stout, Paul Yancich and Herbert Flower.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

TB: Yes. I do two things, usually, one of two things. If I’m feeling very cold and I can tell it’s going to take me a long time to get ready to play something, I’ll just do some marching exercises with heavy sticks on a drum with a towel over the top. That gets everything nice, it’s not fast at first, it’s just very loose, Moeller stuff, just really fluid motions. Then I do some chop building, fast eighths, fast triples, and double exercises. Then some open roll stuff where you’re not rebounding, you’re just digging out each stroke. I do that for about ten minutes and you start really feeling open here (gesture), just to get your arms and everything. I’ll do that before marimba practice, which is mostly what I do. It’s not instrument specific, it’s just percussion stroke specific. Then normally I’ll do a warm-up. I have a set of exercises I use for marimba. They are warm-up exercises but that’s the least important thing they are. They’re multipurpose so they’re set in a way where I start with some very simple, basic stroke work. In those series of exercises, I’m reviewing my whole approach to playing, which includes stroke, stance, and how I move. All of that does warm me up as well. For my students, it’s developmental. They’re developing some of the habits that I’d like them to have. For me it’s maintenance. I have to go through these motions if I really want to play the way I want to, and while I’m doing that, I’m warming up.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

TB: Yeah, this is one of my big things actually. It’s really about what kind of analytical processes are most beneficial to the performance. In several ways, specifically how we learn music. So for example, Schwantner’s *Velocities* is a sonata rondo form so it works from the outer edge towards the middle. The process after looking at that, which isn’t hard to figure out if you spend a few minutes looking at it, is to learn it from the outside in. So if a piece is logical that way, the benefits of that are amazing because you understand the form, you understand how a and a and a’ on the other side, how they’re different, if they are. You get a really good bird’s eye view of what’s going to be difficult or less difficult. It really helps your interpretation when you get to that point because you understand the work from a very general standpoint. So the performance analysis is mostly all general, it’s not pitch sets, but it can go there. The other part of my dissertation was *Night Rhapsody* by Serry. That’s a sonata form so I learned the development last because I wanted to know what’s in there. Then there is some micro stuff, some themes that are important and that’s how you know how to voice things. You have to identify those themes. So when possible, I try to do that before I even start learning. I find it really improves my memory slips. I don’t have them as much because you just feel so
knowledgeable about the actual piece. So that’s the primary way, not every piece fits that paradigm very well or I might not have time to memorize something. I’m right in the middle of playing John Mackey’s, *Percussion Concerto - Drum Music* and that was a totally different process. I’m going to half read it and half memorize it. Have the music up, only memorize things that I know I have to look at the keyboard for, and look at easy stuff last. At this point in my career I have a pretty good idea what stuffs going to be hard versus easy.

CH: So it gets back to that same original process of looking at the piece as a whole to figure out formally or sectionally what’s going on?

TB: Yep. The last movement to that is this huge multi set-up - well it’s actually not that huge. I spent more time learning exactly how to set the drums up than I did actually playing the notes. The more time you invest in that, the easier the rest of it will be. It’s just efficiency really. With all the stuff going on at the convention, I’ve got to play this thing on Sunday afternoon. The timing of this is horrible but that just happens sometimes right? So if you don’t want to say no to things you really want to do, it’s all about efficiency. Looking at any way I can manage to learn it faster.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

TB: Sometimes. That’s a tricky question. My problem is that I hear in my head very early on how I want something to go. You develop that sense over a long period of time, experience, and your awareness of style. So my issue with practicing and learning is that I already know exactly what I want it to sound like, but I can’t immediately make it happen that way. So it’s about equalizing those two thing. I may refer to a recording if I just want to get some very general information, like how hard is this thing or what does the set-up look like? I did that for the Mackey. Eric Willie’s set-up for that was helpful. I didn’t end up using the same one but it gave me a starting point. I do Broadway shows once or twice a year and most of those have insane set-ups. So rather than reinventing the wheel, look and see what other guys have done, at least as starting point, and it’s so easy to get that information. So it can be nice to listen to recordings in that sense, just to get a general sense of tempo, especially if I’m unfamiliar, but those are the only times. Typically, I don’t like to do that.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

TB: I’m not a visual learner. I’m not one of those guys that can just look at a score and then boom it ends up in my head. This is a tough question because I don’t have any real specifics. I actually read fairly often when I’m playing solo. It just really depends on the piece and if I have time to memorize it. Certain marimba pieces you sort of have to. Others, like David Lang’s *String of Pearls*, I could memorize but it would take me almost a year probably and I just can’t do that. I can’t take that much time away from other stuff. So if I were to play that I’d have to read it and find a way. The very first marimba solo I ever played at PASIC was Eugene O’Brien’s, *Rhyme and Reason*, and that’s a similar piece where there’s just no way I could have memorized it so you memorize what you
have to, to minimize the page turns. Or you memorize certain sections but most of its up there. That’s an interesting topic because I realize more and more that when I do need music, I’m not looking at it very much, it’s just, “ok, this is what section of music comes next.” It’s not like I’m reading every note specifically. I feel like we need to come up with a term or something for that. But it really just depends on the piece and how much time I have. I’m trying to think of the last thing I really memorized. Gordon’s pieces that I recorded, I memorized. They just seemed to get stuck easier in my head melodically but with the Schwantner Velocities, I was mentioning before, it’s more mechanical because I can tell I know exactly what the composer is doing. If I know what they’re doing process wise, then boom, this pattern goes until it stops here and then the next thing starts. Breaking it down that way only works well for pieces you can understand. David Lang’s piece is very simple but there’s no way to process it all. The process is incredibly simple but the end result, interestingly, is too complex for anyone really to spit back. So it just depends.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

TB: I try my best to slow things down and break it down. I do that when I have to but most of the time it’s just willing it to happen. I’m just going to play it over and over and over until it’s there. That’s not the most pedagogically sound approach but it works well for me. Usually I can fix it that way. The other answer to that is sometimes just letting it go. There’s evidence that suggests our brain learns when we sleep. So sometimes I’ll take a day or two and leave it and when I come back, it’s better. I don’t know why this happens but I’ve experienced it numerous times. I don’t like the idea of breaking it down so much that you cease to play it musically. I think we are really guilty of that sometimes. That motion you might use in slowing it down is probably not helpful in a musical situation. That’s why I like to push through those things sometimes and not force myself to use a different motion than I’m going to at tempo or in a real musical situation. I want to play musically every time I make a sound. It’s hard to manage those problem spots sometimes, but there are times that you just have to break it down.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

TB: I’ve been doing it a lot more lately but not enough probably. It’s a very humbling experience but it’s a good thing to do. I think everyone should do it, but again, it’s like how I answered the last question. We all want to play as accurately as we can but if we get too obsessed with that we’ll forget about the music. So that’s the danger of getting into too much of that.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

TB: No. I practice performing all the time. It doesn’t matter whether I’m in the practice room or not. I’ll practice running it just like I want to do it in the show. I want to be just as expressive in the practice room as I do on the stage. So, not really.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

TB: A little bit. I like to run or exercise. Typically I do that in the morning, depends on what I have. Eat healthy. I’m not one of those guys that doesn’t eat at all. I hate playing
hungry so I’ll have a sensible meal. Tons of stretching. Full body stretching because what we do is so physical.

CH: Where did you learn that?

TB: Tai Kwon Do. I used to do a lot of Tai Kwon Do and that was a massive learning experience for me. I take a fifteen to twenty minute power nap sometime before, that actually comes before the stretching.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

TB: Whatever I was in 6th grade. When I got to Ithaca and I saw Gordon play. That was the moment. I hated marimba until I got to Ithaca.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

TB: Middle school/high school, probably an hour or two hours. College, especially in undergrad it was probably six to eight. It was insane. Sometimes more. I don’t know how I did it. Especially freshman and sophomore year, it got unhealthy for me a little bit because I was just doing it too much. I wasn’t hurting myself physically but I didn’t have a life. It was insane. Like six to nine hours. I don’t remember making myself do it, I just wanted to. It was easy for me to work that much. I don’t do that now but early career, it’s always been the same since my career started. It’s not six to eight hours but it’s at least two hours every single day. I get that question all the time from people. They’re always like, “how do you do that?” Well its simple, only family comes before that. I have to do that as a creative person, it makes me a better teacher and performer. There’s no way I can’t. I used to feel guilty about not being creative every day. I used to beat myself up, “why I need that so bad?” but it’s who I am. I’m a better dad, a better family person, and a better teacher when I spend time being creative every day. So at least two hours, sometimes more depending.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

TB: Yeah definitely. In this specific way only though, because I obsess over interpretation, musicality, and phrasing every day. Just completely obsessing myself with that all the time while practicing. I feel like interpretation and musicianship is a strength in my playing and hopefully it’s one of the things I’ve become known for. That insatiable focus in the practice room, which is what I don’t see my students doing enough of, has been one of the keys to my success. The other part about that is my obsession with sound and what goes into making a sound. I work on that every day, like I said, with the warm-up exercises. What is there still to know? We don’t know everything after forty years of playing this thing.

Biography
Thomas Burritt received degrees from Ithaca College School of Music (BM – Education and Performance), Kent State University (MM), and Northwestern University (DMA). Active in the creation and performance of new music for percussion Burritt has built a reputation in chamber music, as a percussion soloist and a concert marimbist. He has performed regularly at the Leigh Howard Stevens International Marimba Seminar and was a featured faculty performer at the 2007 and 2009 Zeltsman Marimba Festival. In April 2004 Burritt performed in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall as member of the Hammers and Sticks Ensemble. Later the same year the Hammers and Sticks Ensemble released a CD on the Innova label featuring works by Steven Mackey, Zhou Long, Alvin Singleton, Alex Shapiro, Joseph Harchanko and Belinda Reynolds. As Percussion Soloist Burritt has been active performing percussion concertos by Steve Mackey, Joseph Schwantner, Michael Dougherty, David Maslanka John Mackey, and James MacMillan. Burritt has recorded for guitarist Eric Johnson and recording artist David Byrne. Burritt's first solo CD recording: "All Times Identical - New American Music for Marimba" was released in November 2006. His latest solo marimba recording "Groundlines" is now available in iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, Rdio and Spotify. In 2009, Burritt was nominated for a Grammy for his performances on “Conspirare in Concert” distributed world wide on the harmonia mundi label. In the spring of 2012, Burritt was cited as being one of "The most influential Music Professors on Twitter". He is currently Associate Professor of Percussion and Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and is a clinician for Malletech Instruments, Malletech Mallets, Zildjian Cymbals and Grover Pro Percussion.
March 25, 2013
Lexington, KY

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JC: My regular warm-up routine is stretching. I usually stretch my extensors and flexor muscles. Both arms go straight out, I bend back at the wrist, and then down. I do that three times. Another one I do is I tuck my thumbs into my fists and straighten my arms to stretch the muscle between my thumb and wrist. I do that three times and relax in between.

When I’m playing keyboard, I don’t do scales or anything like that. If I’m playing snare drum I will do eighths. The same thing with timpani. Any kind of drumming, because of motor skills or maybe bigger movements, I’ll do wrist-relaxed eighths. I’ll do eighth notes and sixteen notes, switching hands, and slow-double stroke rolls. Just big muscle groups and floppy movements.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JC: My first goal when I get a piece of new music is to play through it to find a tempo I can play through it the first time. Usually half tempo is my default. So if it is marked at one-twenty, I’ll set the metronome on sixty and try to read through it at that tempo. If half tempo is too fast I will slow it down. I try to play the whole thing with correct rhythms, dynamics, and good tone quality. Like sight-reading, I want to make sure the first time I play through something, I understand the road map and I understand the phrase. I’ll play through the whole piece and then I’ll know if certain parts of the piece are harder to learn or play then others. Then I’ll know when I break the practice session down, maybe I’ll need to break to the middle or work on something that might be harder, rather than just start from the beginning and go to the end.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JC: If there is something new, especially like with a Lexington Philharmonic excerpt, the first thing I do is listen to the piece so I get the context. for what it’s in and maybe the other instruments that are playing the part. Is it more blended in the texture or is it a solo part? Do I have to match my rhythm with other players? Typically the type of music I play are ensemble pieces so I listen to a recording before I start to read it. The first thing I do is listen to a recording if I’ve got it. Usually at the end, after I’ve finished it, I don’t listen to it frequently. I will listen to it at the very end, maybe one more time, just to check and make sure I didn’t miss anything the first time through.
CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JC: For me memorization is a byproduct of performing. For instance, if I have something I’m shedding and I start from half-tempo and work towards playing it at tempo, a lot of times it becomes memorized because of the nature of what you are doing - the nature of playing it over and over again. From the start of my preparation, I’m moving physically the same way at half tempo as I would at real tempo. So I’m trying to make the same gestures, mallet changes, and counting the rests. I’m trying to always perform it even if it is half tempo. I’m physically and mentally always in performance mode. I’m not really thinking of it as practice but as performing it at half tempo.

When something is memorized, I’m trying to think triple channel. I’m successful if I can see the part as I’m playing it. Not the notes on the staff, but I’m seeing the shape of the pattern on the instruments. On a vibraphone part that I recently had to play, I knew that I could see the pattern coming up. I’m ahead of where my hands are and so I see it and I am also hearing it. I’m singing it at the same time. I know how it’s sounding and I know if I get in trouble. If I miss a note it’s usually because I’m over gripping or doing something physical that I shouldn’t be doing.

As I’m playing something, to avoid memory slips, I always have to tell myself to lighten my touch. If I can’t see it before I play it then I slow down. Usually I can see the pattern on the instrument. If it is a multi-part, I know that there is a sweep on the toms coming up or there’s this high note my right hand has to go and hit. I know it is coming up and it’s in a different space. So I see it, feel it, and then I’m kind of singing it and I can hear it. I can hear what the part sounds like and I know when I’ve played a wrong note. I don’t have to rely just on a visual. Gary Cook calls those three areas, ‘triple channel.’ That really helps me when I’m memorizing something or to tell me I’ve got this half way down. If this is something I’m going to be memorizing, I will keep in touch with those three things - what the mallets feel like in my hands, what they feel like moving across the instrument, and being really aware of that touch. When I get in trouble it is usually because I’m tightening up or over gripping. If I can’t sing it I can’t play it, I can’t recall it. Sometimes before a concert I can feel myself warming up and air drumming but singing the part because it is in my head. If I’ve got it memorized I know I can sing it, I can feel it, and I can hear it. If I’m going to perform something I try to make sure it doesn’t just sound good in my basement studio, I have to play it on another instrument in a different room so I can see it outside of my comfort zone. I try to play it on another keyboard or with a different pair of mallets to make sure that I don’t just sound good in my basement but that I can do it outside of my practice world. I don’t go straight from my practice space to the stage. Instead I try to find other practice spaces so that I get used to the change. Or I will get another player from the section and say, ‘Let’s meet an hour before and run through our parts cause they happen at the same time.’ Just trying to get so I’m not just in my comfort zone but try to find another space so that I know that I can recall things that are outside of the four walls that I’m practicing in.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?
JC: When I’m not doing a run-through and if there is something I have to loop, I call it looping. This is where you take a shorter segment, set the metronome slower, and do it a hundred times in a row. I usually try to stay at one tempo for three to five times and take it faster three to five times correct before I move on. So if I play twice correctly and then I make an error, I have to go back to three again. So I take problem spots and cycle or loop them to get as much as I can out of the time that I have.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JC: Not as often as I should. The nature of most of the things I play is chamber or ensemble music, it’s not solo music. So I don’t record myself very often. If I’m playing and working up a solo for a clinic then I do record myself at least the last run through so I can listen to it and know what I need to work on for the next time. Only if it is a solo piece. But if it is an ensemble piece I usually am not recording myself.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JC: No, when I’m given a new piece of music, I figure the performance date into the schedule. If I have three weeks to learn this part I give myself five days before the performance or the first rehearsal to play it up to tempo. That is doing run-throughs at tempo. I’m practicing differently a week before the first rehearsal. A week before the first rehearsal or first time I have to play with others I’ve got it. I’m not doing maintenance on it. I’m actually practicing and working out the tough spots so the days leading up to the performance I’m just doing run-throughs and kind of performing it again. I’m not really practicing it.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JC: No, I like to do a run-through. If I have a 7:30 program then I will make sure that sometime during that afternoon, I have my usual ritual of performing the piece one or two times again so it’s under my fingers.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JC: Ten years old. Snare drum was my primary instrument and I started taking lessons when I was ten, never intending to focus on snare drum. When I got to college, marimba became my primary instrument because I was so far behind on marimba. Same thing with timpani and multi-percussion, it was my first serious introduction to all those things. I was basically a snare drummer who could read mallet parts. I hadn’t really ever worked up a mallet or a timpani solo until I got into college. So it wasn’t until I was seventeen that I started focusing on the other instruments besides snare drum. I played a lot of marimba, timpani, and multi because I was so far behind. I’ve always been a general percussionist and I’ve written solos for multi-percussion and snare drum. The repertoire I’ve probably played more than any other has been orchestral percussion. I’ve played
CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JC: In middle and high school I would say at least an hour a day, if not two hours a day. In college and higher education my guess is a minimum of three hours a day and then weekends in college I was practicing six to eight hours on Saturdays and Sundays. It might be three to four hours a day in college. Early in my career probably less than that. Back to when I first started teaching higher education probably more like an hour a day. Currently, I guess it would be best to say as needed. Last month I probably practiced three hours a day getting ready for a part. Next LPO concert I will have to practice a total of three hours. So I’m only practicing stuff I have to play. I’m not practicing to maintain a skill on an instrument. At this point in my career I’m only practicing things that someone is paying me to play. So I’m not practicing for maintenance but practicing for clinics I’m going to do, or practicing for repertoire, philharmonic, or something I’m going to play in a chamber concert.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JC: Yes, if I look at where I’ve started and where I am now it is because of the time I’ve put in, the practice time. I’ve gotten better at practicing over the years because as you get older the time you have to devote to it gets less and less. So you have to be more and more efficient. I think I’ve always looked for ways I could get things done in less time. I feel like as far as efficiency, and especially with using more tools, whether it is recording, using the metronome, singing along with the parts, or playing with other people, I’ve improved my practice habits. That has led to a more successful career.

Biography

James Campbell has received worldwide recognition as a performer, teacher, composer, author, and is a respected figure in the development of the contemporary percussion ensemble. He has toured extensively throughout North and Central America, Europe, and Asia. Currently Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, he also holds the positions of Principal Percussionist with the Lexington Philharmonic, drummer with the Kentucky Jazz Repertory Orchestra, and Past-President of the Percussive Arts Society. Well known for his long association with the internationally renowned Rosemont Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps, Jim has served as their principal instructor, arranger, and Program Coordinator. He was Percussion Director for the MacDonald's All-American High School Band and has performed at the International Society of Music Education World Conference, Journal’s de la Percussion, MENC National In-Service Conference, Midwest Band & Orchestra Clinic, MusicFest Canada, All-Japan Band Clinic, Texas Bandmasters Association, Bands of America World Percussion Symposium, and at several Percussive Arts Society International
Conventions. Among his works for concert and marching percussion, Jim has published with Hal Leonard Publishing, C.L. Barnhouse Co., C. Alan Publications, Innovative Percussion, Row-Loff Productions, Meredith Music and Warner Bros. Publications with whom he serves as Percussion Team Author for the Expressions Music Curriculum. Jim is an endorsee for Innovative Percussion, Evans Drumheads, and is a member of the Latin Percussion Educational Advisory Board. He is a clinician for the Avedis Zildjian Cymbal Company and a Performing Artist for Yamaha Corporation of America, Band & Orchestral Instruments Division.
~ Omar Carmenates ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 12, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

OC: No, I don’t because it relates to a question later about how I practice. I get warm as I go, mainly because I practice very slow every day. The most recent piece I remember was John Psathas’ *One Study*. I would warm up by taking certain licks of it, even as close as a week before the gig, at sixteenth note equals sixty (bpm). Every day was different. But that was my warm-up, taking those licks really slow. That’s when I’m learning new music. Now if I get to a piece and I realize there’s a technical deficiency, like there’s a permutation that I’m just not that good at or whatever, I build in a warm-up routine, a technique routine that helps me. I remember learning *Chameleon* and the 2-1-2-3-4-3 sextuplet run I couldn’t do them as fast as he wanted it in the music. So I would warm-up with that permutation every time before I started practicing. It was two separate things, the technique thing and the music thing. So there’s no regular warm-up routine, it’s all case-by-case. It’s always repertoire based.

In my undergrad, I was heavy into scales, arpeggios, and permutations. I stole it from Jeff Moore when I was at UCF, and it comes from North Texas before him, where you do permutations at every interval. Let’s say you’re doing perfect fifths, you do 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, all the versions. You scale them up, two hands, in parallel, and then you scale them two hands in contrary and back out. To me that’s like a cellist working on their fret board, just feeling the instrument out. That’s me too. I still do it sometimes. If I feel like I need a warm-up, I’m at the point now where I’ve done it so long I can do two different intervals on the hands, and scale them down chromatically and scale them back up. In my undergrad especially, I was heavy into the technique stuff. Not that I don’t need it now, but it’s all case-by-case. I’ll get to a point in a piece, ‘Oh, that’s not something I’m strong at. I need to work on that,’ and I’ll come up with something to address that issue.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

OC: Yes I do have a very, very regular process, but it’s also not regular. I run a lot and the running program I’m on – I stole some ideas from them - they have these four principles that I’ve incorporated into my practice. The first principle is what’s called specificity. The second principle is what’s called variability, and then the other two – one is called the law of diminishing returns and the other one is called reversibility. The easiest one is reversibility. That’s basically like you use it or you lose it. So frequency is more important than time to me. If I’m learning a piece, I need to practice it every day versus eight hours on a Saturday every week. I do this with my freshmen. I have the fortune of having them in a class every week. I have a freshman percussion class, so every year I take a Ford etude or a Goldenberg etude and split the class in half. I say,
‘OK, group A, you have one three hour practice session to learn it.’ For group B, I’ll split the week up and say, ‘You have forty-five minutes every day to learn it before class next week, starting tomorrow.’ Invariably it always works out that the group that did forty-five minutes every day instead of three hours in one day learns it better. Even though they’ve done it in the same amount of time. You either use it or lose it.

The law of diminishing returns - that principle for me is basically when you are first learning a piece, you are chunking through it, you’re working through it, and you’re doing like a page a day. It depends on the piece, but you are chunking through all this music every day. As you get toward the performance, I used to get really frustrated because I felt like I’d hit a plateau about sixty percent of the way through. What I found out, when I started applying this idea from running, is that as you get better, the things you improve at become smaller in scope. So let’s say you are learning Velocities. Three weeks before you perform you may be working out one two-beat lick and you might fix one note. You have to relish in fixing that one note. I used to get frustrated because I would try to fix this one note, but two months prior I was learning two pages a day. So as you get closer you have to relish in the fact that you are getting better at less. That’s what happens when you reach optimum performance. With running, once you are a world-class athlete, if you improve your time by a second, that’s a huge deal. That’s how to look at the process from beginning to end. If you going to learn a lot, then the scope is going to get smaller and smaller and you have to relish in those really small victories later on. That’s how I don’t lose patience through the process.

The specificity and variability things kind of work together. Specificity in running is basically if you want to run faster, you have to train running fast. You have to learn how to bio-mechanically train yourself how to actually run faster. So if you are training for a marathon, it’s not always about running 26.2 miles. Sometimes you have to run shorter distances faster. So you are training the body what it feels like to run faster. In other words, if you want to play Velocities, you have to practice Velocities. Or if you want to play Delecluse 9, you’ve got to practice Delecluse 9. You’ve got to be very specific about your practice.

Variability is another thing I think a lot of people look over. Some people get so hooked into practicing the rep they’re assigned. Students, especially my students, get very into whatever their etude is for the week or the semester and they only practice that piece. I have a student learning Doctor Gradus, the Debussy, and that’s all he is practicing - the notes on the page. Every once in a while, I find what helps is if you – like with One Study I practiced improvising in the style of One Study. Or if I’m practicing Delecluse 1, I’ll improvise on snare drum in the style of Delecluse 1. So you are actually learning the language. You are getting fluency in Jacques Delecluse. You are getting fluency in John Psathas. You’re not just learning a piece. That really informs, when you start getting very specific about it, the fact that you are aware of the language. It’s like the difference between orating a poem or free-style rapping. Those that can free-style rap can’t always orate a poem very well and those that can speak poems can’t free-style very well because they are always used to reading. Being able to do both I find really helps learning the piece because not only do you learn the piece, but you learn the language harmonically,
rhythmically, and idiomatically of the composer. That only helps you learn the piece as you go on. The first section of One Study is in this B-flat minor, pseudo-lydian kind of thing. The primary notes are B-flat, D-flat, E natural, F, and D-flat. So what I would do with that first section is I would improvise on those notes, maybe using the permutation style that he uses in the beginning. That really helps me learn quicker because then you see things that you might have already improvised. That helps. One time I played it and I actually messed up, I got out, but I was able to improvise like the piece and get back in two or three beats later. So it helps.

Delecluse 1 was the same way. I love improvising on the snare drum. That helps me a lot. So that’s the variability thing. If you’re just repping something very specifically - let’s say you’re on Delecluse 9 - you’re trying to run that really hot lick in the middle and it’s not getting any better. Sometimes it helps to work on 16th note drags on every other note, to just get away from the music for a second. Create an exercise from that. That’s the other aspect of variability, creating exercises from the technical aspects of the piece you need to work on. It’s a more structured way of improvising. A lot of time I’ll be sleeping at night and I’ll wake up and think of an exercise that I’ve got to try tomorrow, or in the middle of the day, not by the instrument. I’m constantly coming up with new exercises, which is why I don’t have a standard warm-up routine, because I create those things. That goes back to my drum corps experiences. We did that all the time with the drum corps kids. We didn’t really have a warm-up packet. The warm-up packet changed all summer, depending what the kids needed. So I kind of do the same thing.

As far as actually learning the music, which is the specificity thing, I think that’s more applicable. When I first learn a piece, I try to always have a metronome with me, number one. With marimba, muscle memory is super important so you have to input it. You have to inform those neuron pathways the right way the first time, otherwise it’s harder to undo. So I’ll practice two beats at sixteenth note equals thirty-five or as slow as my met will let me go, or as slow as I need to, to make sure I can get whatever chunk it is. Let’s say it’s two beats, I try to get that right ten times. I go by feeling. How’s my body’s feeling? If I’m still hectic when I’m trying to figure it out, I wait until I feel super calm about it and then I move on and add a beat. Then I chunk A to B, or beats one and two to beat three. Then I’ll work on beat three and put it together with beats one and two. Then I’ll work on beat four and put it all together.

The way I practice, I always end up memorizing it, but I don’t try to. I take small enough chunks that I can look down at my hands, know what it is, and instantly memorize it, essentially. I find that helps my sight reading too because you are forcing yourself to see patterns. You are forcing yourself to see words instead of letters. So it’s beat four, then beat three. Then I’ll pair beats one and two with beats three and four. I have this way of memorizing. I saw a show – I don’t want to go off on too much of a tangent - about people who can meet fifty people and remember all their names. What they do is every time they meet a person they say their name. Like, “Hi my name’s John.” The person who is trying to memorize will remember something about the person. He had a red hat on, and then he’ll create a story in his head with all fifty people. So like, “I woke up and I left my red hat on.” That would be maybe what he thinks. Then he might see someone
with a scarf, and so “And it was cold, so I put my scarf on.” So he has this whole story
and he’s able to remember the names because he can link them to the story. So what I do
when I’m trying to memorize, is I go by parts of my house or a place that I know well.
Like for the Psathas, the first page or first page and two lines is my driveway. And then
the next chunk is my garage. The next chunk is my kitchen, and then the next chunk is …
you know, that way it’s like a trigger. Steve Schick talks about that in his book,
mnemonic triggers. Those are my mnemonic triggers - my driveway. I can do that whole
first page if I just think of my driveway. Mainly I use my house, but I’ve used my office
before. What ends up happening is really cool. You can do your piece in order, you can
do the sections out of order. All you have to do is create a story in your head. I’m in my
kitchen, then I go to my driveway, then I go to my garage. You can play the piece
backwards. You can play the piece sideways. You can jump around because all you have
to do is think of that trigger and that triggers the whole section. It saves your nerves a lot
because you are not thinking about every note, you’re just saying this is that, and you go.
So when I am memorizing, that’s what helps me parse it in my head a little better, rather
than thinking about every bar, every beat. I come up with those as I go. It’s not like I look
at the piece before I ever play a note. I’ll think, this will make a good driveway section.
Or sometimes I’ll use my commute. This is me walking to my car. This is me getting into
my car. This is me on the back road at Furman. This is Realford Road. This is me on
Whitehorse Road. It’s neat that way. You can play the sections out of order and you can
still do it. Kerry O’Brien is good at this. She’s actually working on it now. She is learning
a poem, using her house. I think it is an Emily Dickinson poem. She can do her poem
backwards. She can do the stanzas in order, but do the stanzas backwards. She can do
them in all different ways just by triggering them with where she is in her house. So in
short, that’s essentially how I learn new music. The biggest thing is to input it right first.
Even if your met only goes up to thirty-five, you can make that your sixteenth note, your
thirty-second note. My first time learning the Psathas, I keep mentioning that because it is
the most recent big piece I’ve learned, I did it at sixteenth note equals thirty-five. It’s sort
of a tide thing, because you’ll learn a line, and then you start learning a second line,
because the first line will get better so you speed that up. But as you learn the second line,
you have to slow it back down to play it with the second line, to chunk that together. So
there are all these little sub strategies. The main thing is I try to get a really large chunk at
one tempo. Get it right ten times, and then thirty-seven, thirty-nine - I go by two click
intervals - forty-one, forty-three, forty-five. Tape pieces are hard to do that with, like
Psathas. I went into Audacity and I created clicks for every five clicks. So I have one
from forty upwards. I basically went as slow as I could while still being able to tell what
the tape is, because once you slow it down too much you can’t tell. I have tapes from
forty up, every five clicks. So once I had a run of the whole piece, I started playing with
the tapes.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so,
how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

OC: That’s a yes and a no. I find when I listen to a recording I end up playing like the
recording. Sometimes a recording is what pre-empts me to play the piece. I hear this
recording, or I’ve heard it for years and I’ve always wanted to play the piece. So that
means you’ve had that version stuck in your ear, and a lot of times my initial versions of the piece comes out like the recording. But then as you get to know the piece it becomes your own. So I wouldn’t say I intentionally listen to or don’t intentionally listen to recordings. If I do have a version in my ear, I try to make sure that what I’m doing is not just because that’s the way I’ve heard it. So I do have to be conscious of that. Or I may want to. I really dig Eric Sammut’s recording of Libertango and I want to try to do it like that, or parts of it. But at least I’m aware.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

OC: Performing solo, almost always memorized. Performing chamber music, almost always, sometimes not, depending on the amount of time I have. My mental things are the triggers we discussed and slow practice helps a lot too because you are inputting it right the first time. Honestly, except for that one time with the Psathas, I’ve rarely had a memory slip since I’ve started doing all this. I’ve hit wrong notes and done plenty of wrong things, but I’ve never really had a memory slip, besides the Psathas. And that was because I played it before I was ready. I did a preview performance for some students. I was playing it for a studio class three weeks before the performance. With that piece I kind of needed a little more time to get it under my hands. But yeah, I’ve rarely had a memory slip since then.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

OC: First, you have to identify the problem spots. You know your problem spots as you go. I find that, 70% of the time, problem spots are transitions, from one phrase to another. Using the Psathas piece as an example again, the recap at the end is not really a recap. It’s a line of the same music but then it goes into something else. Then it’s a line of the same music, but again goes into something else. So what I did with that was practice a bar before and after the transition. If it’s transitional, that’s what I make sure I do, practice that one thing. But if it’s a lick, like Kije or an excerpt, I try to make sure – and this is a John Parks thing – I try to excerpt the excerpt. Like with Kije you don’t really need to practice the repeating eighth note passages, you just need to practice the three notes that include the four-stroke ruffs. Doing the math, one rep of that takes about half a second. You can get fifteen reps of that in twenty seconds, with a few beats in between. I try to be really smart about identifying only the problem spots, working on that, and then the next step is usually the transition into and out of the problem spot. So it’s a two-step process for me when working on a problem spot.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

OC: All the time. I’m lucky that I have a mic set-up in my studio. I record all my lessons with my students. All it involves is me opening up Garage Band and hitting record. So it’s not a big deal. In my office, those mics pick up pretty much everything. So I do record myself all the time. I sometimes don’t, when it’s really early in the process because it almost doesn’t do me any good. I am getting a good tone and I am using good
stickings because I’m taking it sixteenth note equals thirty-five. When things get juiced up or when I start feeling my muscles not quite being as relaxed as ten clicks earlier, I’ll start recording myself to see what the effects of that are.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

OC: Yes I do. This is a running thing again. When you are running, the week before a race is called a taper. This is where you start pulling back the miles so that you are stronger the day of your run. I actually taper before my performance. By that point, it’s the week of and I pretty much know where my problem spots are. If it’s the marimba, I pretty much have the piece memorized. So the week of, I start pulling back the hours. I still hit it every day – the reversibility thing – but I really don’t do a run-through. Maybe early in the week I’ll do one. If the performance is Saturday, I’ll do a run Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, but other than that, I try to spend no more than an hour, maybe thirty minutes. I just have to trust that I know the piece at that point and hopefully my process has led me to that point. I can’t say that works every time. There are times, like last week I had four days to learn the vibe part to Mudra that I played with Bob Becker. I didn’t taper that. I did four hours a day for three days and then I pretty much had it. But if it’s a solo recital and I have plenty of time playing it, I taper. Now what that means is, and this is again my running program, for a twelve week program, I plan it out from day one. Like with the Psathas, I started learning it in November last year and I had until February. So I planned all my work from November to February on that piece. I knew by December I wanted to be here. I knew by January I wanted to be here, and I knew by the week of, I had to be here. And I had all these other sub goals. So from the day I started learning it to the day I performed it, I had a program. I know walking into practice I’ll go as far as I can today. I had a plan and if I got to that point, I stopped. So the week of – I think the recital was on a Wednesday – Sunday I ran it, hit the trouble known spots I knew. Monday I didn’t run it. Tuesday morning I ran it and then I hit trouble spots that afternoon. I really didn’t play it Wednesday. I try not to make it a crescendo because that just makes you more nervous about it. I try to make it a decrescendo. That only works if the process took place from day one. With Mudra it wasn’t that. It was like, that morning, ‘I’ve got to learn these last few notes.’ It’s a crazy feeling to do it the first few times, but I really feel like it works because you are fresh when you go in. The last few memories you have of playing the piece are usually really good so you walk into the performance in a positive space.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

OC: Yes I do, part of that taper process. Don Greene’s books, Audition Success and Performance Success, are great resources. He was the sports psychologist for the woman’s olympic diving team and he came up with this whole program for calming nerves. He did it with sports people for a long time, with athletes, and then he eventually moved over to musicians. The first book he published was Audition Success. He did it with a French horn player and a vocalist. All the book is are transcriptions of phone calls, of their conversations. He has this whole process called centering, which is like mnemonic triggers. He has triggers for calming your nerves. You have to come up with
process cues for each piece. For the Psathas – and it can be anything – but for me it was Bach, because that piece is very much like a Bach prelude because it has all these hidden lines you’ve got to find, even though it’s 21st century. ‘Bach’ and ‘relax’. So the week of the performance, as part of the taper and as I’m learning it too, I have these process keys. Think Bach, think relax, think Bach, think relax. Have you ever seen Cars? The movie? In the beginning, Rusty is in the trailer. It’s all pitch black and he’s going, ‘I am speed. I am whatever.’ He’s thinking and it shows a little flash of the cars going by. That’s process cueing. You are just saying to yourself something that has nothing to do with the music really. It does but it doesn’t. Something that characterizes the music. It could be water, it could be fluid, it could be whatever, and you just repeat those words, take deep breaths, and focus on your abdomen. What happens is, all those jitters that you feel, the fire you feel in your arms, and your adrenalin, all goes here (abdomen). It calms everything down. It’s basically channeling your nerves instead of trying to get rid of them. He has one called Performance Success, which I haven’t read, as a sequel to Audition Success, which changed my life as far as the day of stuff. I practice being nervous. If I’m practicing Delecluse 9, something quiet, you know the shakes, because usually you are not nervous in the practice room, I’ll do something like take a lap around the building, sprint as hard as I can to get my heart rate up. Then I’ll run in my office, grab a pair of sticks and try to play the first four-stroke ruff of Kije or something. That’s a good way of simulating being nervous, the physical aspects. So there are all these different things that you can talk about rituals the day of performance, but the centering thing is big for me. Like before I walked out yesterday, all the Nief-Norfers were in there talking. Now I can do it in like five or ten seconds. It used to take me a minute or two. I’ll just walk away and in two or three deep breaths, you can feel everything go right here (abdomen). I get this warm feeling right here. It sounds really metaphysical, and I’m totally not that. I’m not religious, but it does work. The chin on your chi is what they take it from.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

OC: I was in 6th grade. Middle school band. I don’t really feel like I have a primary instrument. It’s a jack-of-all-trades kind of thing, master of none. I would say if I had a primary instrument it would be vibraphone, and I didn’t really start focusing on that until 2004. It was something I felt gravity to and I started practicing that a lot. But I don’t really have a primary instrument. I do whatever the job entails.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

OC: In middle school and high school, zero. My undergrad and masters, I was lucky if I practiced an hour a day. I was actually lucky if I practiced an hour every two days. My practice habits were really, really bad. This is what led me to re-evaluate everything. In fact – going back to the recording myself, what led me to re-evaluate everything, or investigate everything, is I recorded myself practicing once, and it sounded like a gorilla
on a marimba. I can’t remember what I was playing, but it was bad, and it was an hour of that. I recorded the whole practice session and I was like, ‘Oh my God.’ I got it wrong more than I got it right. At that point I was at a point in my playing where I couldn’t get past eighty percent on any performance. It was like, ‘I played that so much better this one time on that one day in the practice room.’ Instead, it’s all about getting things to work in your favor. My undergrad and masters I definitely didn’t practice very well and I didn’t practice very long. In my doctorate, thanks to John Parks sort of kicking the crap out of me, I got very good at the specificity part of the practicing thing we talked about. I could drill everything at thirty-five, sixteenth note equals thirty-five. I could do all this and that helped that. Now as I have gotten older, I’ve come up with all these other methods, and now I can actually practice less. I can practice an hour or two a day but it’s more efficient because I know what I’m doing. I walk in, I don’t necessarily write it out all the time anymore because I know my process – but I used to and I would have my timeline and I knew how to get this done today – and have an hour to do it, great. Sometimes having an hour to do something is better than having nine hours to do it. Like when I’m sitting at home and I have nine hours to clean the house, I’ll wait, and then nine hours later I never got through it. Versus if you have an hour, you are scrambling to get it done. Early career, I can’t say I practiced much because I was trying to figure out my job. But I was playing my recitals and I was trusting my process. So I practiced two hours a day, maybe. At FSU I was doing four or five, and then my wife got pregnant, and it went to zero. But no, I was practicing a lot. Currently, as long as I have something to practice for, like a gig, I’m practicing two to three hours a day. Now that Six Marimbas is over, I’m probably not going to practice for a little bit. It’s task based now, but I know my process in that task well enough now that I can gauge everything. Mudra was the exception. With other pieces, I know I have a performance date, I start from where I’m at and work backwards and figure it out.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

OC: Yes, I believe my practice habits have contributed to my success because I have done it for a really long time the other way. I have practiced worse longer than I have better. I’ve been doing this practice thing for about five or six years, and I practiced pretty much all my life pretty terribly. I was blessed to be a pretty good reader, so if I could read it and get away with it, that was always my mentality, ‘Oh I got away with that one. I got away with that one.’ Even if I never thought that, that’s what subconsciously was going on. I was always good enough to get through it, versus getting good. It’s like those stupid motivational posters that are in every high school band room. Like ‘Practice it right. Practice it until you can’t get it wrong.’ This is the forty-five minute version of that poster. I did it so long the wrong way, that I now have a contrast and it totally works. People think, ‘Oh my God, a sixteenth note equals thirty-five, ten times right. I can’t believe, that’s got to be so tedious.’ But I’ll take the first bar of the Psathas, in a clinic I’ll play it, it takes five seconds to play the first bar of the Psathas at sixteenth note equals thirty-five. I can’t remember the exact time, let’s say it takes ten seconds just for a reference and rounding. And let’s say you put four beats in between, let’s say it’s twelve seconds. That means you can get it right ten times in two minutes. I like having that gauge, that’s very clear, ‘OK, I have to get this right in the next two
minutes, ten times.’ You can see mathematically that it all works out and they’re like, ‘Oh!’ And not only that, after ten times, it’s in there and you don’t have to go back later. So you are actually saving time later.

Biography

Omar Carmenates is a versatile performer and pedagogue, having played in many groups in various genres. His interest in contemporary chamber and solo music has led to collaborations with composers and performers such as John Luther Adams, John Psathas, Eighth Blackbird, Christopher Adler, David Skidmore, and Christopher Deane. He has also premiered many works for percussion including the U.S. premieres of John Luther Adams' Inuksuit, John Psathas' Omnifenix for improvising saxophone, drum set, and orchestra, and the European premiere of Christopher Cerrone's Memory Palace for solo percussionist and live electronics. Carmenates' debut solo CD, The Gaia Theory, is being released by Rattle Records in 2013.

Additionally, Carmenates is a member of the percussion collective the nief-norf Project and hosts the nief-norf Summer Festival, which brings together dozens of percussionists, scholars, and composers in a 10-day collaboration focusing on contemporary music.

As a pedagogue, Carmenates has taught and given clinics across the United State, Europe, and Asia, and has garnered a reputation as one of the foremost authorities in the field of marching percussion. He is currently a percussion arranger for the Spirit of Atlanta Drum & Bugle Corps, and was the percussion caption head for the Boston Crusaders Drum & Bugle Corps from 2007-10 and the percussion arranger from 2009-10. Carmenates is a proud endorser/artist for Vic Firth, Inc. Remo Drumheads, Sabian Cymbals, and Pearl Corporation/Adams Musical Instruments.
~ Gary Cook ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 2, 2012
Austin, TX

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

GC: I believe in warming up because you have to warm up both the physical muscles and the neural pathways; get those firing. The synapses and the mind. So whatever I’m doing, if I’m playing marimba or if I’m drumming, or even if I’m going to play chimes at a concert, I’ll even work out on a pad backstage before going to play a few chime notes or something just to get everything tuned up. On marimba, if its four mallets, usually you go through a series of double laterals, all the different permutations. Drumming is large muscles down to smaller muscle groups. So it varies and I like to be inventive and sort of improvise too because it’s more fun that way.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

GC: If it’s new music like a commission or something, you don’t have any recordings to go listen to so there’s a lot of away-from instrument study. If it is a commission, you many times know the composer so you know what their tendencies are; what they do in their compositional style. But as far as the tangible music, spend time studying it away from the instrument. You audiate it. Edwin Gordon kind of coined the term audiation which means, you hear it in your head basically. I’m a big believer in mental practice, and so to start with I’ll spend as much time as possible practicing that way and you figure out set ups and some mechanical things and logistical things. I believe in slow practice first, not with absolute precision or perfection, certainly, but slow enough so information going in is accurate. It’s about input storage and recall. But it’s important that it goes in correctly for the most part so that you can recall it correctly. The whole process of what some people call ‘triple channel learning’ or ‘multi-sensory learning’ which the primary senses that we learn music with are visual, auditory and kinesthetic. You smell tastes, you’re burning incense or something, really it becomes a trigger and you anchor that to recalling an experience. So being aware of all that is really important and try to program the music; input it visually, auditorally, kinesthetically and try to separate that out as much as you can and then blend it all together. When you mentally practice you’re doing a visual-auditory and then when you physically practice you’re doing a kinesthetic-auditory. You know when you strike the bar you’re getting an auditory which is also an anticipation of sound there. There is a process, VAK we call it, visual-auditory-kinesthetic, being really cognizant of that as much as we can and its sometimes not so much learning new music but later on you probably ask it different ways to facilitate the recall.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?
GC: I will and I encourage students to if they’re going to play a Keiko Abe marimba piece or something. They’ll go hear her play it, go hear some good performances, they all go to YouTube anyway and sometimes they hear good performances or not. And that can be somewhat dangerous. I talk about the input; the programming, storage and recall and if you get garbage in, you get garbage out too. That’s the real process. At the initial stages I don’t think there is any harm done. It gives you a sense of the piece. There’s an auditory road map or ariel view of the piece but then don’t listen to recording after that other than maybe recordings of yourself. Record yourself and listen to you when you have your musical ideas developed and mainly come up with your own interpretation so at the initial stage, recordings are good.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

GC: Well I haven’t played a lot of music lately by memory. When I used to memorize ragtime leads and stuff like that, again very conscious of visual, auditory and kinesthetic. A lot of mental work. I was on vacation and had to come back and play a pops concert with the symphony. I went on a ski trip with my brother for a week and had to come back and play two or three rags with the orchestra a day later. So I had a copy of the rags in my ski coat and we’d go up the chair lift and I’d visually play through it and kind of air drum it; air xylophone it, I guess you’d call it. And if I’d get to a point where I wasn’t sure of a note or something I’d pull out the old wrinkly copy and look at it. So I did that for a week, I didn’t touch an instrument. That was a long time ago when I was experimenting with VAK and I mean, I don’t remember the performance and it was really good. The recall was really supported by the mental practice. So for memory work, I think it’s imperative that you triple channel it.

Leigh Stevens and I, years and years and years ago, were talking about what he learned from Vida Chenoweth mental practice looking at the keys. I have a theory, never proven it yet, but it worked for me and most of my students; if you air drum it above, even having your hands over the instrument (but not striking), that is much easier than if you put your hands behind you and then try and play the same thing, because you don’t have the same kinesthetic connection.

It challenging at first, but you get better at it the more you practice it. Most drummers are more kinesthetic, audio learners than they are visual learners. Not that you’re one or the other, we’re all three. We utilize all three all the time. Do you know anything about neuro-linguistic programming? It was developed, discovered and labeled in the seventies by a couple guys, Bandler and Grinder and Michael Colgrass, the composer. It’s a big component of NLP, learning music, and performance. Colgrass has a lot of articles. His book, *My Lessons with Kumi*, is a really interesting book, somewhat autobiographical, but it is also a lot of what he does. Anyway, I worked with Michael in the eighties, and that was a big influence on me. There’s a tremendous amount of application there.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?
GC: Yeah, well again you VAK it but, isolate it, figure out, not just ‘I can’t play it’ but figure out what it is, if it’s an interval change or whatever. You try and analyze it a little bit and figure out what it is and then practice it slowly and it’s important make the transition into and out of it. A lot of people don’t do that. They just practice the spot and then it’s still a spot rather than connect/make the transitions. It just comes back to understanding really what the issue is there; if it’s mental, physical or both, which it usually is.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

GC: When I have the equipment I will a lot, especially video, especially students, I use a lot of video with them. As often as possible. The more you can record yourself and then listen to yourself, the better. I don’t think people do enough. My wife’s a singer and she discovered her solo voice later in her life, she sang in choir, and she’s been studying voice now for several years. She takes a recorder to her lesson, records every minute of the lesson, she listens to that constantly all week long, and it’s just amazing the feedback she gets from that; reminders of things her teacher said and she hears herself and she grows from that. She’s almost fanatical about that. She’s a counselor so that music is her release from regular work and she’s a very good musician too. She does it more than I ever did. I’ve had students as you’ve had colleagues, I’m sure who record their lessons, some don’t, and some listen to it a bit. I think there’s more to be gained there than what we usually do. It is a time issue, it takes time to do that. Bill Moersch says it takes so much time in lessons to do this and my thought was yes, but you do it on your own constantly. I think recordings are imperative. With today’s technology it’s easy, simple and high quality. When you say record in all of these, I’d say video too. Again, it’s VAK, when you see yourself performing, that will trigger recall. Where just hearing yourself performing sometimes doesn’t trigger the same recall, especially if you’re working with performance anxiety or performance excellence issues. You can see a player going in and out of levels of absorption, the zone, whatever you want to call it. By looking at a video and working with the students and saying, ‘well what were you thinking about right here?’, ‘well it was the note I just missed’. Well of course because you can’t be in the past or future you have to be in the present. But in the video they go, ‘ah ha, I was thinking about my dirty laundry right there.’ Video is very strong that way, very powerful.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

GC: Yes, well in the days leading up. If you don’t know it by a certain point, you’re not going to cram it in the night before or the week before. If I have a performance coming up, I try and figure out a schedule to pace myself. What I do now is I go in and have a rehearsal or two and play a concert or a concerto or something. You only have a chance or two to work with a conductor and a colleague. I’ve played the Glass Timpani Concerto several times and you go in with a timpanist who’s prepared and you guys meet, maybe with a conductor and you have one rehearsal, maybe two, with a wind ensemble. So you have to really pace that out and you need to be prepared for all the ensemble things.
Sometimes you practice extra slow the week going into it just to vitalize the programming of the piece, some details and things like that. It’s a time issue, if you have time for that. But if it’s learned efficiently all the way along with understanding and application of visual-auditory-kinesthetic then it develops in the time you set for yourself. But that’s important, time management planning.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

GC: Well I try not to get too tired out. You’ve got to save your energy. As a teacher for many years, sometimes you’ve got to teach all day and then go play at night and you can’t avoid it. But I played in the symphony and the opera and I don’t know how I did it sometimes. But especially at a recital or something like that, you’ve really got to give yourself the rest, eat well, and have the energy to get through it. It’s a stamina issue and mental fatigue is the biggest concern. That and then sometimes there’s certain exercises and things that I do before playing to stimulate my vestibular, which is the inner part of the ear. The vestibular has a lot to do with being balanced and effects both your physical and mental states when you’re playing. Its some stuff I got from Colgrass, they’re just exercises you do backstage. Some people juggle, things like that. I know a lot of string players that will juggle to deal with their performance anxiety because you can’t be thinking about anything else but juggling, paying attention to the balls in the air, and there’s a physical warm up there. You can’t be thinking about getting nervous about playing because you’ll drop the balls. So there’s different things and I don’t know if I’d call it a ritual, although lot of people do.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

GC: I was in middle school. It was about sixth or seventh grade I guess, so ten or eleven years old. I started drumming and taking drum lessons, snare drum lessons and drum set and just onward from that.

Well my career ended up going towards timpani. I was timpanist for a couple decades with the symphony when I got to Arizona, so my career sort of turned that way and I enjoy timpani very much. I’m more of a timpanist professionally, orchestral musician too, percussionist, than calling myself a marimba soloist. I did it all because as a college teacher you have to. I enjoyed it all.

It was of the era of total percussion training and not a lot of specialization. I mean I dabbled in all of it, jazz, vibes and everything else. When I was in college I had an opportunity to study with Sal Rabbio, with the Detroit symphony, a colleague of mine said ‘you have to go down and take some lessons with Sal.’ So that was kind of a focus on tympani, not wanting to be an orchestral timpanist. I was happy to and was studying excerpts with Sal and all that but I wanted to be a college teacher. In high school I think I wanted to teach college percussion and fortunately things worked out that way. So I did a little bit of everything.
CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

GC: Well middle and high school, I would put in at least an hour or two when I had things to practice, when I was preparing for a solo in ensemble or something like that. A lot of the band literature, you don’t have to practice. I started taking drum lessons, my junior year in high school with Jim Salmon at the University of Michigan. So one to two hours every day at least, I was trying to learn a lot of stuff then. And I remember summers, probably my junior or senior year, I couldn’t really get a good job for summer work. I had a scholarship to Michigan which helped a lot. I remember going to the high school, it must have been my senior year because I graduated, and I would use their instruments because I didn’t own them then, and I would practice almost all day long and would never have enough time. I remember vividly, ‘oh I didn’t get to jazz vibraphone today!’ I couldn’t do jazz vibraphone for a couple days. Or, ‘I didn’t get to timpani today.’ There was so much to do and there is so much more now. That was in the late sixties. I went to college in sixty nine.

Part of the challenge of being a percussionist is we have so many different instruments we have to work on, so that’s where the specialization emphasis has come along. It’s still a balancing act. In college, I’d say four or five hours of focused individual practice, that’s not rehearsal time. We’re working on parts for band orchestra, percussion ensemble and your lesson material. I was studying with Rabbio and Salmon at the same time for a couple years of college. And playing with a contemporary music ensemble. I did a lot of playing in college so it was a lot of music to prepare. You’d put in just about all the time you could and then Saturday night I’d take a break and go out and party. Early career I found less time to practice because once you start teaching you have less time. You start in Louisiana and build the whole program and you do some solos with the band and stuff like that but you’re building the studio and teaching and have much less time. You might get in an hour a day of maintenance. Although you’re playing in lessons too, you’re very conscious of that, thats keeping things in shape and then trying to learn new stuff. Currently, I drum on a pad almost every day to keep everything going and develop it through. I think technically, the finesse and some things I have now are at higher levels than I’ve ever had in my life. Although I started tabla ten years ago and I didn’t go so far, too old for that I felt. I had fun doing it, but you have to do that every day or else, forget it. But what I do now is mainly go off and I’ll do some teaching, I’m retired from University of Arizona but I teach some at UNLV. So I have to be able to demonstrate things. And I’ll play a concerto or I’m doing a piece commissioned for choir and two percussionists, at Princeton in the spring. It’s a piece I’ve played before so we’ll work that up again. So now, since I’m retired especially, its maintenance stuff and stuff that I want to do. And experimenting with learning processes. If you’re familiar with my book, what I call cloning in the book, I’m really interested in that and physiologically what’s going on and that’s more research. Some of my former students who are teachers now have taken some of those principles and really developed them in everything from drum lines to individual studio. There’s definitely stuff going on there that transfers. So some of my practices are experimenting with that more so than working up a piece. I’ve always
been interested in that, how we learn.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

GC: Definitely. because as a performer, that’s where practice habits directly impact. You practice to learn a piece, you can play it, play it well and have success that way. And satisfaction too. But practice habits also influence my success as a pedagog by being curious about how we process music, how we learn music, the scientific side of it and the psychological side of it. Then there’s that part of practicing too, which the end result isn’t necessarily a piece of music that you have to go perform, but understanding more of the learning process for me as a player and then sharing that with the students. So that’s important. The first PASIC which was in 1976 in Rochester, I was walking down the street with Tele Lesbines, who’s eighty four now, who’s a retired timpanist in the Milwaukee symphony. I met him there and we just hit it off, he was my dad’s age practically. He said, ‘You know, there’s a bass player in the Philadelphia orchestra using the inner game of tennis with his students.’ Gallwey’s book had just come out, and I said, ‘really!!?’ And I started looking into that and you know, years and years ago in the eighties Barry Green wrote the Inner Game of Music. But that really just opened the flood gates. I studied that, I studied the Alexander Technique, encountered Michael Colgrass’ ideas about neurolinguistic programming. I added all of these things to learning to play paradiddles and understood the learning process more. We’re meeting today with Robert Duke, he wrote the book Intelligent Music Learning, he’s on the faculty at Austin. A few of us are meeting with him today to talk about maybe coming up with a tool for the mentoring day, assessing teaching, he has some software. There’s a very good YouTube video of him giving a lecture at Cornell, I think it was. The topic is something along the lines of ‘why students don’t learn what we think they do.’ He actually was a drummer early on. He talks about giving drum lessons and getting paid for it in high school. I said, ‘I did that!’ He’s a well-respected education psychologist. And the lecture is real down to earth, it’s not way off into scientific terms or really technical. He has a good style about it. Practicing is about learning and the more you understand the learning process for yourself and teaching then the more efficient teacher you are. The more efficient learners the students are to accomplish whatever it is, learn to play a paradiddle, learn to play a piece, but to learn about yourself too and how you work. And then it applies to everything in life.

Biography

Gary Cook is well known as the author of Teaching Percussion, currently in its third edition with DVDs and used world-wide. He founded the percussion department in 1975 at the University of Arizona where he taught for 33 years until retiring in 2008. Prior to that he taught at Louisiana Tech University. Cook was Timpanist and Principal Percussionist with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra for over two decades and held similar posts with the Arizona Opera and other orchestras. In the summer, Cook is Principal Percussionist with the Crested Butte Music Festival in Colorado and has performed with other summer music festivals in Colorado and Nevada. He enjoys commissioning new
music for percussion and chamber music and voice combinations and has premiered and recorded many commissions. His most recent CD on Albany Records features the Philip Glass *Concerto Fantasy for Two Timpanists and Wind Ensemble*. He is honored to be a SABIAN Lifetime Achievement Award recipient and endorse SABIAN products and philosophy. Cook was President of PAS from 2007-2008 and received the PAS Lifetime Achievement in Education Award in 2011. He is most proud of his many former students who hold distinguished professorships in colleges and universities around the country and in Trinidad, perform professionally around the world, and are successful teachers and performers in all areas of music and the arts.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

CD: The warm-up routine is unison strokes. On timpani, it’s virtually the same as what I do on a practice pad for snare drum. Of late, I’ve been using the Accents and Rebounds patterns at the bottom of the pages. I play them fairly slowly and in unison. The important issue for me is injury. I had one period in my life where I injured my hand slightly, aggregating in practice. I had to stop playing for a month and a half or so. The key is slow and continuous motion, without stopping. Just slow and continuous. If you go through one of the two groupings, either in duplets or triplets, by the time you get to the end, you are remarkably warmed up and comfortable. Right now, that’s really what I’m doing.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

CD: First of all, break things down. I like to divide and conquer. For instance, I just played this wicked piece by Boulez last week. When I was working on it, I simply played the pitches pictured on the page. I completely ignored all the rhythms. That way page by page, I got a sense of what the combinations and colors were without assigning them to rhythms. This piece is highly rhythmically strange in a wonderfully way so I actually beat out rhythms, which some were necessary for me and some were not. Then there were dynamics attached to almost every note which was a little different. That I may have not done as well as I should have, but still the idea was that I left that for last. The dynamics I plugged in after I was feeling like I could combine the notes and rhythms. That has been given to me so that is not original.

Every measure is an etude. I feel it is better to work for three minutes on one measure than three hours on one page and not have anything to show for it. So I isolate very small groupings like so many people do. In fact, I have a little term called ‘putting your piece in Stone.’ By saying putting it in Stone I’m talking about using George Stone’s methodology. You take Post-it Notes and isolate one bar. The eye likes to wander, but this won’t let you go further than one bar. Putting Post-it Notes on that one page, limiting it to that one brief period, and putting the timer on - because as you know, I am a big believer in the timer - keeps me honest.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

CD: My belief is that recordings are documents of performance practice whether it is good or bad. Just as jazz musicians listen to jazz interpretations, I believe that we as
classical musicians have to listen to recordings as well. People who don’t do this are missing the opportunity to expand musically because recordings are a documentation of a musician’s thought process on that piece of music. I may disagree with it but at least I know that I disagree with it.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

CD: I think everything is best done when it’s for memory because it becomes part of your soul. If the music makes sense and you understand each note you don’t tend to have much in the way of a memory slips. I do, of course, because sometimes I don’t have the time to learn the function of each note or the meaning of each note. But I do love to memorize. Although, this Boulez piece for instance, there was no way on planet earth I could memorize it so it was a serious reading experience. Both are good but I think the music dictates whether the necessity for memorization is imperative or not.

In one little passage of the Peck Timpani Concerto I could not remember the placement of the sixteenths. They seemed random and it wasn’t really that big of a deal but it was so simple it made it difficult for me to remember. So I put words to it: Russell Peck likes it when I play on the drums, when I play the Peck boogie down ‘till I get my check playing timpani. These were the words I put to it and immediately I never forgot it again because I had a linguistic connection to it.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

CD: Slow, slow, slow repetition. The terrorist method is to practice it really slowly until you are comfortable. We are practicing not to play the right notes, but to be comfortable playing the right notes. Once you get to that it’s an issue of seeing if you can play ten successful performances of it within a certain period of time. That could be ten out of forty, which is not great and probably means you are going too fast, but the ultimate goal is ten times in a row and you generally own it. Unless you change your thought process. You have to think the same thoughts when you practice it as when you perform it. When I screw up, it’s because I’m not thinking the same thoughts I was thinking in the practice room. If you can do that, which means understanding the meaning of the notes, then there’s no reason you cannot play successfully in the performance because you are thinking the same thoughts.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

CD: Not as much as I should because I always think the next run is going to be better. But it is always illuminating, and it is vital. There is no way around it no matter how painful it is. So I guess I can’t give you a frequency, but I can tell you I believe wholeheartedly in it. Everyone should have a recording device.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?
CD: Of course, but probably not because it is a method but rather because of everything that is going on in life around it. My goal, when I really want to prepare for something, and it’s a luxury that doesn’t happen very often, is to do fifty solid, successful reps. If you do fifty, like ten a day for a week or something, you pretty much know you are in good shape. So that’s the final stage. If I can be hitting that a few days out, the ideal is to be there before you ever get into the danger zone. But overworking it sometimes isn’t good either.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

CD: I used to have more of one than I do know, which was never eating anything more than something simple like fruit after three o’clock in the afternoon. Limit it to one cup of coffee in the morning and try to get some sleep of course, sometimes induced by a Tylenol PM or something just to make sure. But lately I’m finding it’s not needed any more.

Years ago I did a personal study where I had a series of symphony concerts every night for two weeks - give or take one or two on the weekends - on a mountain tour. It was the same show and the same book. I would eat heartily one night and go play, and the next night I would only scavenge a few nuts and berries. I consistently found that I played so much better when I wasn’t eating a lot of food. When I was just a little bit hungry, it made me more focused and it made me more desirous. I had more drive. But I’ve found lately, since I don’t perform all the time, or maybe it’s biology that has shifted, but I actually have to eat now. If I don’t, I will have a little hypoglycemic sort of thing where I lose focus. So it’s changed. But when I was young, no eating and I would be on, hungry, and ready to throw it down.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

CD: I started drums in the 5th grade although I had some piano lessons in the late third grade and fourth grade, but I quit the moment I had a snare drum in the house. But I was also interested in guitar. So I was playing guitar and drums all the way through high school. I took some rudimental lessons with a guy in high school then I started studying with man who was a timpanist late in high school, and he taught at the local college, so I ended up going to that school because he was already my teacher and a brilliant timpanist and great musician. So that’s why timpani was a strong thing for me, but I really wasn’t serious about percussion until I was almost 18. That’s pretty late. We played everything, but because my teacher was mainly a timpanist, he wasn’t a grand mallet player – he could read and hit notes – but he wasn’t a mallet player. And he certainly wasn’t a snare drummer. He had been raised in that era when you could be a timpanist. He was a good Goodman student and a Friese student. I was very interested in mallets until Jon Metzger showed up at my school and then I decided maybe timpani was really what I should focus on. So I have him to thank for that.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing
during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

CD: Middle school and high school - not much at all. Barely any. No focused regiment of any kind. It wasn’t until I got to college. Then it was every spare minute of my life, basically. I recognized that I was way behind so I really lived in the practice rooms when I was in school. We only had one main percussion room, one storage room, and a couple of piano rooms that we could pull a practice pad or a snare into. Easily six hours a day. Not that it was high quality practice all the time, I was pretty dumb about it. I was living in practice rooms. Six is probably a pretty good guess but there were times when it certainly was eight. In years when the class load was lighter, I was sneaking in and staying late, doing everything that everybody does. Then when I started playing professionally right after undergrad, probably no more than four a day, unless I was getting ready for an audition, and then I would significantly up it. Four is probably a stretch. I probably wasn’t getting any more than two to two and a half. I tried to get that and in fact I’d bought the Green book which says to do anything you have to do more that two and a half. Currently, I’m lucky if I get an hour in. It’s very depressing and means that performances are frequently built on adrenalin and not on preparation. I’m not proud of that fact and am working to try to fix that.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

CD: Yes, because I wanted it real bad. I wanted to make my life as a musician. That’s what I mean by I wanted it real bad. I wanted to be a musician and I watched other people succeeding and tried to figure out what they were doing that was making them successful. I tried not to lose the passion for this stuff. I think it’s the love of the music that gives you the fuel. I still believe that. I still like it. But there’s so much serendipity. Doing gigs that don’t pay sometimes have been more successful gigs than the ones that pay a lot. So I’m a believer that we go with our gut on accepting these things. We do things that sometimes are a waste of time but your gut will tell you this is a good thing to do. Work towards versatility. For me, that’s what I do. I’m not focused on one specific thing. For me, I thought versatility was my equation. Be OK on a bunch of things instead of brilliant on just one thing.

Biography

Christopher Deane is associate professor in percussion at the University of North Texas. Prior to his appointment with UNT, he was the principal timpanist of the Greensboro Symphony for nine years and a regular performer as both percussionist and timpanist with the North Carolina Symphony for ten years. He has performed with numerous orchestras including the Cincinnati Symphony, Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra and the Spoleto Festival Orchestra.

Deane's chamber music experience includes performances with the Aeolian Chamber Players, the Percussion Group Cincinnati, the Mallarme Chamber Players, and the New Century Saxophone Quartet. He is a founding member of the Philidor Percussion Group.
Recording experience includes the North Carolina Symphony, the Cincinnati Philharmonia, the Crofut Consort, Mallarme Chamber Players, and the St. Stevens Chamber Orchestra.

Deane has won both first and second prize in composition from the Percussive Arts Society. A number of his compositions are considered standard percussion repertoire and are played internationally. Deane has appeared as a performer, composer, or clinician at seven Percussive Arts Society International Conventions. Deane is an Artist/Educator clinician for Innovative Percussion Company and Sabian Cymbals.
November 1, 2012

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BD: Basically, I work a lot on snare drum and I basically play Stone page one. I start with that, I’m basically working on smoothness of stroke, with those sixteenth note patterns, one through thirteen, I guess, that everybody does. I start with the metronome on forty, and then I go from forty to fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, one hundred. Then I have a very simple exercise with eighth notes and sixteenth notes where I’m just working on my single stroke roll. I use a metronome, start at one hundred and try to go to two hundred from that. Pretty much on a daily basis, if I have time, I play all my rudiments slow to fast to slow. I haven’t had time lately because of my child. It’s hard enough to keep up with all that stuff with the child, a bunch of gigs, and all the music you have to learn. With Marimba, typically I do work a lot on scales; I work a lot with four mallets. Basically, I have this set of warm-up exercises where I work on intervals. Do Re Do Mi Do Fa Do Sol, all the way up to the octave and back down. One, two and three, four moving at the same time in octaves and then I would go through all twelve keys and then when I finally get up to C I go down the same way. So I go Do Ti Do La Do Sol Do Fa, just to work on in interval shifting. From there, I just have a couple small little warm-up exercises that I do for single independent, single alternating, and triple lateral strokes. I work on those a little bit, when I have time. If I’m really at a point where I have to play a marimba solo for a recital or for that kind of thing, normally I wouldn’t be doing a lot of marimba unless there is a purpose. Marimba is kind of like a hobby. I have to maintain enough chops. In my opinion. I’m not a Michael Burritt, I’m not one of those type of guys where that’s what I do. So I only really do it when I’m working on a recital at that point or if I’m playing a recital somewhere else and I need to play marimba, so that’s when I’m working on that. Other than that I’m not really doing it because I very rarely get paid to play marimba, not many people do.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BD: This is going to seem kind of funny, I don’t mean it to be but, I sit down and I learn it. I start on page one. I have done a lot of technical work in my life and I should be able to play whatever is in front of me unless the composer has done something that is impossible. If I go to learn something, I sit down and start learning it. If it’s a solo piece, I often skip around a lot and I learn different sections first. I don’t start at the beginning; maybe I’ll go to the end and see what’s going on over there. For the most part I really want to get an idea of how things work as a whole. Basically, I try and read as much of it as I can at first, and then I work sections. Try and get the picture first, sections second, and then bring it back to the picture third.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so,
how frequently and during what stage of your progress?
BD: It just depends. I sub a lot with the Louisiana Philharmonic so I typically have to
play a lot of orchestral things. In that sense, if it’s a piece I don’t know, or a piece I have
never played before, of course I listen to a recording because we have very few rehearsals
and I have to get there and be able to play what I’m supposed to play at the correct time.
Play piano at this spot, wherever I’m supposed to play. So when it comes to orchestral
material, absolutely all the time. When it comes to solos, typically I put myself in a
position where I don’t learn things that people have played before, because that’s what
I’m interested in. There are no recordings and I’m not really interested in composers
giving me midi recordings of anything. I can’t stand the way it sounds. It really doesn’t
give me any kind of expression to the playing what so ever, so I typically tend not to
listen to those either. If I were to learn, suppose a piece like Merlin, I have never learned
Merlin. There’s tons of recordings of Merlin, I would probably, maybe would take a
listen once or twice, or once, but I think that if you start to listen to recordings a lot you
start to sound like them. I think that becomes problematic because I want to be able to
study the music and interpret the piece the way I want to interpret it, rather than the way
some recording interprets it. So I would say very little, I would try to do it as little as
possible. I would, but I wouldn’t do it a lot. It’s not really good to study recordings, let’s
put it that way. I tell my students that all the time, it’s not really good to study recordings
because then you end up playing the recording. In my case, I enjoy playing music that is
brand new, that no one else had done before so in that sense, there is nothing for me to
listen to, so I get to do it my way first, which is great. A lot of people aren’t in that
position and they will do something differently and that’s great but I am kind of a new
music junky and I love it and that’s always what I wanted to do so that’s how I do it.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any
mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BD: Of course. I did the Leigh Howard Stevens thing when I was a kid, and I studied
with Lee for a month, and did the whole summer studies thing, and I really got a lot out
of hearing how he memorizes things. Slow practice and the whole idea of mental
memory opposed to kinesthetic memory. That’s a big deal and especially when you are
playing keyboard instruments, that’s really a big deal. Drumming is a bit different
because with drumming you can really kinesthetically memorize something on a drum,
it’s possible. With a mallet instrument it’s not as possible because they are very little
bars that you have to hit. As you know, we often miss. There’s this new thing right now,
I’m playing a lot of glockenspiel repertoire and basically this all came out of somebody
saying to me ‘Are you interested in playing it?’ And I said ‘Well, you know what, I am,
so I’m going to play it.’ So I did. I don’t really memorize any of that; I really try to read
as much as possible because the keys of the instrument are so small that it’s a lot easier
not to miss. Marimba is a completely different story. I tend to memorize everything that I
do on the marimba and I tend to tell my students to do the same thing. Because if it is
memorized, there is less of a chance for screwing it up. I’m not a big technical person as
much as Lee is, but I do agree with his methods of memorization because it’s proven to
work very well. So I use it.
CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BD: As far as problem spots, slow, slow, slow. That’s the only way to do it. You have to practice with a metronome, you have to take the tempo down very, very slow. That is the only way to cure your problem spots, and sometimes you can never cure them, it is what it is. Sometimes composers write things and they think it’s playable, it’s playable, it’s playable, if I just slowed down enough I can play it. And who knows, it might not be me who does it first but maybe some kid twenty years from now might be able to do it, and that’s great. Some of the first marimba literature that was written people thought nobody could play this and now everybody can play and that’s the way goes. You may look at a piece and think nobody can play this, of course they can, everybody can play it. You think nobody can possibly play this but we can, it just takes time, it takes time for us to mature into it. It takes multiple people to go through it and learn the tricks of it to figure it out. But for me it’s really about slow practice, slow as possible, and really ironing out what my hands are doing to make it happen.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

BD: It’s a lot more now than it was when I was younger mostly because we have the ability to do it now. When I was a kid in college, twenty years ago, CDs had just come out. But now GarageBand is on every computer and you can just turn the mic on and record yourself. So, there’s absolutely no reason to not record yourself anymore. So I record myself a lot more now. A lot of what I do, I do a lot of YouTube recordings and it forces me to learn to play a piece as well as I can play it. Specially this glockenspiel stuff because I want to, this is sort of a project where I want people to hear the music. Here it is, here is the piece. If you’re interested, fine, if not, fast forward to something else. In that sense, I’m recording myself playing a performance, which is a really good thing to do. And I kind of look at my playing and go ‘wow, I didn’t know I was doing that there’ or realize I have this weird habit. I can’t tell you how often that I do record myself but I can say that I’m doing it a lot more now than I did when I was younger. There is no reason not to do it, it will tell you a lot about yourself, it really will.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BD: Yes, I practice less. If I’m in good shape and in a position where I’m comfortable I will practice less. Because I think that I want to get my brain to a point where I know this piece about two weeks before I play it. I can already play it two weeks before the date that I have to do it. So my goal at that point is to run sections or to run the piece very slowly or to actually let it sit and not play it for a couple of days and then go back to it. Give my mind a chance to take a break from it, and come back to it. And most of the time, when I take a break from a piece, for like two or three days before the performance or concert, it is better when I go back to it. So, it’s a thought. A lot of people are crazy practicers, like ‘when I get to the performance I’m practicing eight hours a day.’ I don’t have time anymore to practice eight hours a day that’s for the guys who are in college, that’s when you’re supposed to do that. I just don’t have the time to do that. But I have a lot of time to think about things and I think it’s very important for guys my age; I’m 40
this year, to think more about the music than to practice it. It doesn’t mean that I’m not playing any instruments or not playing the piece, but I’m thinking about the piece and thinking about how it goes. I’m going through it in my mind or while I’m studying the score and finding things out about the score that I didn’t know before I start learning it.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BD: Yes, I try not to do anything. Mostly, the day of a performance, if I’m performing at a college somewhere and I have to do a recital at night, I normally teach the whole day. I teach the whole day, I don’t take the day off I’m doing a reset on here. I teach my students, I come in and I do what I normally do. My only weird thing that I think I do right before a concert, if I feel nervous, and a lot of times I do. I’ve dealt with performance anxiety a lot in my lifetime, I try to do push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks to get my heart rate up to the point where my mind is. You have that flight or fight syndrome, and if I get my heart rate up I don’t feel it. I don’t feel nervous as much because my heart rate is up when I walk out on stage. So I get my heart rate up pretty fast and I have a towel and wipe my forehead off because I’m usually sweating before I walk out on stage. So that’s what I do to combat flight or fight syndrome. Give it a shot.

We do a lot of it in master classes at LSU. Three weeks ago we had a guy come up and play, a freshman, and he folded because he was so damn nervous. So I said, ‘okay stop, let’s do some push-ups.’ So he did some push-ups and jumping jacks, ‘okay great, now let’s do some sit-ups.’ Then he said ‘my heart is really racing,’ okay now go play and he went to play and he got through the piece. What’s happening is your heart, if you let that nerve get to you, your heart is actually beating and that causes your hand to shake, but if you get that heart rate up a lot of people will stop shaking. You have used that energy, you basically folded. You’ve run no way okay now I can play my piece.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

BD: I was six. I had a drum set at my house and I played it but I’m not sure how much I practiced it. My dad was a drummer so would say ‘here try this’, ‘so I tried that, and then he’d say ‘play this.’ It became a fun thing that my dad and I would do. And then I kind of got curious about it and I really start taking lessons with somebody in middle school and then in high school I started taking lessons and in college I got very serious.

Middle school, as little as possible, if I’m being honest with you. I loved to play the drums but I’m not so sure I liked to practice the drums because I was into girls and trying to figure all that out, trying to figure out where I fit in in society and all that sort of thing. So I wasn’t really driven to be this protégé. I had a lot of other interests I guess too, I was a soccer player and I want to play soccer too. Then in high school I had a choice. I was on the volleyball team and I was on the All-Star team for the state of Pennsylvania and a few colleges were looking me at. So my choice was either going to school for volleyball or going from music. But I chose music because I met a guy from West Virginia University who I thought was just really great. He taught my drum line and was just really great. He talked to me about doing music and I thought hey I could really do this. So by that point in high school, my junior year I was up to four hours a day.
It was a lot, almost too much, like kind of weird. Unless it was a volleyball season and then I wouldn’t do it but then I’d go back in the summer and do it some more. But I knew by my senior year that I wasn’t going to do volleyball, I knew for sure. I couldn’t really jump very high, so I knew I wasn’t a good enough blocker so there was nowhere for me to go with this and I can’t do both at the same time. So I met this guy, and he really hard on me about practicing. So I would say, three to four hours a day. Then I got a scholarship to Duquesne University and that’s when I think I really went into high mode, probably six to eight hours a day. I did one summer of eight hours a day for a whole month. I did one summer of that, because that’s it I was told I was told that all good musicians go through one summer where they practice like it’s their job. I was told that, so I did it. I believe what people tell me, and I don’t know why but I did. But it worked out because I got really good. The hard work kind of pays off. That was college. Less so in my doctoral degree, because I started to become who I was and knew what I could learn and what I wanted to learn and how to approach what I wanted to learn. I was turning thirty when I was doing my doctoral work so I wasn’t really interested in practicing eight hours a day at that point. Now, I practice when I can. I’ll give you an example, last week the LPO played Three Movements by Steve Reich and I had one of the vibraphone parts. And a big vibraphone solo with orchestra and you’re in front of the stage. So there were a couple of times when I had to tell my wife, ‘hey I’m staying at school today for an extra two hours because I have to practice I have to learn this.’ When there’s big performances and solos like that sort of thing that’s when I really turn it on. But I can never get more than two hours a day in now, never more than that. I’m too busy teaching, too busy on a committee, too busy composing, too busy with my child.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BD: Absolutely. I see this all the time and I saw it when I was young and I see with students now. I see so many students that are naturally so good. Do you ever see a person that doesn’t need to practice? There are people like that; they are so good that it falls into their hands naturally. I was not one of those people, I just wasn’t I really feel that I did my work, I did my work when I was in my twenties. I really did what I was told I needed to do in order to do this as a living. And I did it and I’m thankful that I did because I have a really great job, I wake up every morning and I teach kids how to play paradiddles. I mean, other things too, but if you really boil it down to it, that’s what I do. And I get to play the music that I want to play and it’s really great. I get paid a really nice salary to four nine months, I get three months off every summer to do whatever I want to do, and I spend most of my time composing during that time. It’s really great. And I think that my practicing is what got me here.

Biography

Brett William Dietz is Associate Professor of Percussion at the Louisiana State University School of Music. He is the music director of Hamiruge (the LSU Percussion Group). He earned the Bachelor of Music in Percussion and the Master of Music in
Composition/Theory from the Mary Pappert School of Music at Duquesne University. In 2004, Dietz earned his Doctorate of Music from Northwestern University. He has studied percussion with Jack DiIanni, Andrew Reamer, Stanley Leonard, and Michael Burritt while his principal composition teachers include Joseph W. Jenkins, David Stock, and Jay Alan Yim.

Dietz is in demand as a clinician and soloist throughout the United States and abroad. Recent performances have taken him Paris, France (perKumania International Percussion Festival), Bangkok, Thailand (College Music Society International Conference), and General Roca, Argentina (Patagonia International Percussion Festival). He has performed at several Percussive Arts Society International Conventions and is a founding member of the Tempus Fugit Percussion Ensemble. TFPE has performed throughout the United States and Europe and has released two compact discs (Tempus Fugit and Push Button, Turn Crank) that have received great critical acclaim. Dietz’s new compact disk, Seven Ghosts was released in 2006. He performs with and conducts Hamiruge on Stanley Leonard’s new recording Collage and also performs on Michael Burritt’s newest release, Waking Dreams.

An avid composer, Dietz's music has been performed throughout the United States, Europe, East Asia and Australia by numerous ensembles including the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Portland Symphony Orchestra, Eastman Wind Ensemble, National Wind Ensemble, Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, River City Brass Band, Northwestern University Wind Symphony, Louisiana State University Wind Ensemble, Duquesne University Symphonic Wind Ensemble, the University of Scranton Wind Symphony, the Northwestern University Percussion Ensemble, Ju Percussion Ensemble, Malmo Percussion Group, and the University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble. His compositions have been featured at the 1998 College Band Directors National Association Eastern Division Conference, and the 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007 Percussive Arts Society International Convention. Dietz's composition, Pandora's Box received its New York Premiere at Carnegie Hall by the National Wind Ensemble conducted by H. Robert Reynolds. His opera Headcase was premiered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Called "haunting and powerful – a remarkably sophisticated score that blends words, music and visual displays to touch the heart and mind" by the Pittsburgh Tribune Review, the opera relives the story of the stroke Dietz suffered in 2002.

He was a recipient of the 2005 Merrill Jones Young Composers Band Composition Contest, the 2002 H. Robert Reynolds Composition Contest, 3rd Place Winner of the 2002 Percussive Arts Society Composition Contest, and the 2001 Pittsburgh Foundation Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts. His composition five-0 for brass quintet received an award from WFMT (Chicago Classical Radio) and was premiered live on the air as part of the station's 50th anniversary (2001). He has also received numerous teaching awards at Louisiana State University including the 2010 School of Music Teaching Excellence Award and the 2011 LSU Alumni Association Faculty Excellence Award.
In addition to his work at Louisiana State University, he has also served on the music faculties of Duquesne University, Westminster College (New Wilmington, PA), and the Merit School of Music in Chicago. Dietz endorses Dynasty Percussion, Zildjian Cymbals, and Innovative Percussion. When not composing, performing, or teaching, he spends all of his free time with his wife Jennifer, his son Owen, and working on his golf game!
March 1, 2013
Lexington, KY

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

MD: I don’t have one; well I guess that isn’t true. I do warm up with the material I’m doing in a concert, but that is just slow practice. So I don’t just charge in playing my loudest and fastest stuff. But I do start thinking about what I will be doing that night and just do things really slowly and thoughtfully. But that is pretty specific thinking about performing all the time. Yeah, no warm up routine. When I start working on material, depending on what I’m working on for performing, the practicing all comes out of the parts. So whatever I’m having trouble with that might be what I work on. I turn it into an exercise or something and do it slowly. But that would be my warm up. In practicing I don’t really do a warm up anymore.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

MD: I break things down into really small chunks. It helps me map it out. I write everything down when I practice. I map out sections on a piece of scratch pad. I usually prioritize really difficult passages first and sort of get my head around that. I also prioritize if it is a set up piece. Setting the whole thing up and figuring out the stick changes so I know how I am going to get through it. Often I’m working on material that is pretty new and so I am looking at the part to find problematic material that I need to go back to the composer to work on, to work something out. Once I’ve broken things down into micro sections, phrases, or cells, then my practice is pretty systematic. Usually I start by doing a section. No matter how easy it is I’ll do it ten times and I keep track with hash marks. That ten times thing is not just to be redundant for the sake of being redundant but I found when I practice that way it eliminates the, ‘What should I do next?’ question and it eliminates getting distracted or wandering between things without really having focused on something, especially if the material isn’t too seemingly difficult on the surface. I find if I do it ten times in a row, without questioning, that during the course of that process I find things I would have overlooked. It exposes even small things. It might be a musical thing, it might be the part or it might be something that is in my hands, like I realize I’m standing a funny way or doing something technically that is less efficient or sort of sloppy because when you doing something ten times in a row, that redundancy gives your mind a chance to focus on a lot of different aspects of that moment, not just the notes. Usually, we play it and say, ‘These are the right notes.’ And then move on. But once you have the right notes that is just the jumping off point for, ‘Oh, now that I’ve got the right notes I don’t need to pay attention to it and now I can pay attention to the sound. Or I can start paying attention to my sticking. Does it really work? Does it make sense for what is coming up next? Is the stick change as efficient as it could be?’ Depending on the section and what is coming up in the next section. There
are just a ton of things that just float through your head. If you just decided to learn the notes and you’ve moved on that you would not take all the time for all the other stuff to have a chance to sink in or expose themselves. I do the hash marks on a page and that is a big part of it all the time. It is a focus technique so I know I’m spending enough time on material and not wandering through my practice session.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

MD: Yeah, I listen to recordings. I don’t think there is any harm in being as informed as you possibly can be. But I’m a very liberal interpreter anyway. In fact, I very proactively do things, I don’t really say are against the rules because it is so subjective about what people say is and is not. But I will just blatantly change things so if they ask for three symbols and you have this notion of high, medium, or low. This is really a bad example but I can’t really think of one now. But if they ask for three symbols and I think there is a better color I will throw in more symbols and different kinds. It is more about trying to figure out the different combination of sounds, what they are trying to accomplish, and what is going to best serve that moment. So I feel pretty critical when I listen to recordings and I don’t feel too biased because it is pretty easy for me to break out of expectations. As a player, I’ve never been inhibited that way. By the same token it does save me a lot of time. I learn from the examples. Now days, it is not just the recordings but what is available on the Internet. I feel like I learn an incredible amount from other players, both their oversights and their failings save me an enormous amount of time. The goal is to do the job as well as it can be done. Sometimes where it does become tricky and conflicting is when someone does something so successfully, you stumble across a unique interpretation and so you have to ask yourself and the challenge becomes, ‘What can I do that is my own statement?’ So that was amazing what they did and you do learn from that but then you have to ask, ‘If I’m going to do this, what am I going to bring to it that is personal?’ And so that if you stumble across another remarkable performance, then you face a different challenge. There is nothing wrong with imitating another person’s performance. That is what teachers in classical studios have been teaching their students for generations. This is the way we play Beethoven, we phrase it this way in this school. In this famous lineage from Julliard, or whatever the case may be, from Curtis you know. And this is how we interpret Schumann and Chopin, so this is how you are going to play it. Sometimes it is almost like a doctrine. So, it is not like there is a precedent for doing things the way it is supposed to be done.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

MD: A lot of what I practice because I practice in that sort of systematically, redundant way. One of things that happens when I practice things like this is I’ll take four measures I’m working on quarter notes equals eight and I’ll do it ten times. Okay that looks pretty good, now quarter note equals nine and do that ten more times. Maybe I’m working up to tempo or trying to find the right tempo. When you’ve played something forty or fifty times, then you can memorize it. There is a big difference between that, and putting all
those small, memorized chunks together into a memorized completed whole. But you are very close to that if you practice in a way that lends itself toward engraining the material. So I would say I memorize a large amount of my material because of the way that I practice. But whether I take the transition from that memorized practicing to actually consciously memorizing the entire thing as a whole performance, it's a big leap. I think as a result of my practicing, I'm closer to it than a lot of people are when they decide to memorize something. So I memorize a fair amount of my repertoire because by the time I know the music for performance, it is not much of a leap to do that. When I prepare material for performances, I usually do everything I can to eliminate as many page turns, and all that sort of jazz, as possible. So one thing that is routine for me is that once I've learned it, I'll create reductions of the parts, like skeletal hand written versions or I'll just cut and paste parts to eliminate sections that are memorized and only have sections that aren't still in the part. Even if my parts don't have rehearsal numbers and/or letters, I'll add them. So on my scratch sheet I might write rehearsal A memorized and then rehearsal B, I'll have it photocopied seven systems of material, and rehearsal C through D memorized. So when I get up on stage maybe I'll have only two pieces of paper for that performance that still isn't memorized but because I often do that for performance. If you step back that it is also a stepping-stone towards complete memorization. Not everything benefits from memorization but a lot of things do. I prefer to play memorized when I can. I feel like if you've memorized something you've really learned it. It is just the way of raising the caliber.

To avoid memory slips, I break my parts up into small sections and then I number all the measures of phrases. So that if I break a piece into five smaller parts then maybe the first part of it is eleven measures so then I'll number them one to eleven. Whenever I'm learning the piece I will immediately get into the habit of counting that as one through eleven, not as individual measures. But it is not like I'm counting measured numbers because for the next section I will start with a new phrase and so that starts as one. One of the things that forms in my mind as I play through a piece I'm also walking through this map and so that piece of five parts may be in five phrases of eleven measures…thirteen, eighteen, twelve, nine. So then I see that those are like a telephone number in my brain. As I am counting through in my internal counting I don't just start counting one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four… I count…one, two, three, four…two, two, three, four… and so on all the way to eleven. And then start over again. I find if I get tripped up, as long as I don't stop counting, I might get off in measure seven but I know how measure seven starts so then I come in on measure seven and have engrained what measure seven means. Even if you trip notes and get messed up, mentally you don't get lost in the course of navigation in the architecture of the piece. So that is one thing that I do pretty routinely.

The other thing I do is that I don't try to remember every note. I have trigger notes so that could be lots of things or moments that stand out. Maybe it's an entrance or maybe it's a top of an arch of a phrase. But I also remember the location of those landmarks in the course of the piece and so you start the piece and that is trigger note number one. That starts off the seven measures and maybe that is end of eleven measure phrase but you enter on the down beat and the first note just triggers everything that comes after it.
for three or four bars and then I get to the next trigger note. And in my brain I don’t remember every note but I do remember those trigger landmarks. I play from one landmark to another. It is the combination of those two - breaking them down into phrases to count the piece and the order of the trigger notes. If material is really similar but not quite the same it often trips people up. Some composers write material where it is a variation of what they wrote earlier. Sometimes I’ll stick things in a way that doesn’t make sense but by altering the sticks in different situations I’m also changing, I am more radically changing those sections and preventing that confusion. So that is an intentional way to set things apart. Stickings have a big affect on your phrasing. As long as you don’t stick in something in the way that is altering your phrasing.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

MD: I don’t think it is impossible to break things down. You can’t break it down too far or play it too slow. The trick is when you stumble across the problem spot, rather than struggle with the phrase or the whole, virtuosic lick, you have to parse out precisely what is tripping you up because usually it is a very specific thing and, more often than not, there is some technical obstacle. It is either something you need to work in your hands and you’ve created an exercise around the problem, or it is something that is idiomatically inappropriate for the instrument and it is always going to be a problem. Then you have to adapt in some fashion. I don’t think you should force a square peg into a round hole because that is what’s on the page. The practice room is where you go for accuracy but I think in performance a lot of people get nervous because they are going for the accuracy in the practice room. I don’t think that is what is called for in the moment. In performance, you go for gesture and playing something technically correct is not worth compromising the gesture and performance. The technical facility is the means to the end, not the goal. So being true to the page is perfect only if it gets you the musical result you are going for. But if it is not, then I think you find what serves the gesture so when you go on stage you can perform and entertain. People aren’t there to observe you to technically dissect, doing that kind of homework. It’s not necessarily about being able to play the one handed roll, the technical thing in a certain way, because sometimes even if you do accomplish that, it is still an awkward musical moment. So if you are tripping over something, there are the two things to figure out as if whether there is something technical that needs to be fixed, something technical that needs to be adapted, or something that is never going to work well on the instrument. So you have to figure out exactly what the problem is, even if it is just one particular shift or your elbow having to move too far and you can’t get there in time to make the entrance. So once you figure out that very specific thing it sorts the whole thing out itself. So the phrasing wasn’t the problem and maybe that one note was the problem.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

MD: Very rarely but that is to my own detriment. I always learn from recording myself, and often our recordings. Our records of recording sessions teach me more about my playing then months of work in the practice room. The thing about video taping and recording yourself is that it requires an incredible amount of discipline to take the time to
do that, instead of practicing. So it is a discipline issue, not a question of whether not it is productive. It is extraordinarily productive.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

MD: Yeah, I cram. If you do it right, this is the arch or the practice preparation timetable. You learn the really frustrating work is done. It takes as long as it takes you if you have the luxury of preparing like your recital, on your own time and table, and you are not handed a part and told to play it in three days. Like in a solo recital, I think this is a fair generalization of how to prepare for a solo recital. You know you are going to have to play five or six pieces or whatever. You are preparing a whole show. I think if you are not prepared for your recital about six months in advance then you really aren’t going to be ready, which is pretty conservative. But I think it is really crucial to learn all of the repertoire. This is very idealistic but you learn the repertoire early enough in the process so that you can put it away for six weeks, then bring it back. That is when you really learn it. The other thing about recital preparation that I think is really true, is that I think you learn something after three performances, you start to better understand what you need to work on. After ten performances you start to feel like you know it. This routine in degree programs in which we prepare a recital, we do it once and move on the next thing, we feel like the weight of the world as students in those moments but that is just your etude, that’s just your dress rehearsal when you do that performance. Another thing that is crucial to work in your preparation timetable is the practice performances that are real. You have to invite people to listen because playing for people is different than playing for a video camera. You have to do that multiple times and when we are on our game. We do practice performances in our small studio and we prepare in front of live people. That makes an enormous difference in our preparation. I guess you should record and video yourself in addition to practice performances but we have been better about doing the practice performance in our own work.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

MD: No. I think this is a percussion thing. Everybody works like crazy before they walk on stage like doodling with their instrument. But for percussionists, our instruments are on stage. Once they open the doors I just read or play video games and don’t dwell. If I did have my instrument off stage I would practice something else or it would be really slow practice. It wouldn’t be running the repertoire you are doing in the show. It would feel like you’re blowing it and you should save it for the stage. That is not reinventing the wheel. The greatest performers usually play scales before they walk out.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

MD: I start playing piano in second grade maybe and snare drum in the school band in third grade but it was always just for fun and extra curricular. It wasn’t until college, in my freshman year, that I learned to practice. That was one of the wonderful things to me that no one pointed out that I didn’t practice. I just played and messed around. I didn’t problem solve. I just tried to bang through stuff. My freshman year of college is when it
was finally pointed out to me by my teacher, Mike Rosen, that I didn’t know how to practice. Everybody always says to you that you’re not playing your piece well but he was the first person to say you are not practicing well. So that was light bulb going off and it seemed so obvious in hindsight but it was just never pointed out. So then I got really OCD about practicing and the whole notion on focusing on that, rather than the performing side. Focusing on practicing was really new to me and I became really obsessed with that and it wasn’t until my third or fourth year of college. Even then I was really invested in academic work and I liked to practice and I liked the application of applying myself but I wasn’t seeking a career. I was sort of invested in the process. But I wasn’t thinking about making money or career choices. It wasn’t until my third or fourth year that I was thinking I would want to be a professional musician. And even then it was only because it personally interested me and things I was able to do with regularity and there were opportunities that interested me that I started to pursue. I was a little of a late bloomer as far as the seriousness of it. Another thing that Mike Rosen pointed out to me was the distinction between doing something just for fun and thinking of it as work. Again, I always thought of it as this fun thing to do, which I think was cultural. You grew up in band and it was an extra curricular activity and everyone would say, ‘Music is fun but what are you going to do for your job?’ And that was socially what people thought of it where I grew up. It was never presented to me as a career choice and I didn’t think of it that way until the distinction was made for me in school that it was a choice.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

MD: In middle school I practiced very little, maybe a couple hours a week and it was spread out and very inconsistent. But maybe for an elementary or junior high kid I think I practiced a fair amount of hours without really thinking about it. I think most of it is because I thought of it as playing. Maybe the younger ages it is not so bad to focus on the playing instead of the practicing because it sustains interest better. In high school it is funny, I was at a performing arts high school. I went to Interlochen so you would think that I would be influenced to practice a lot but it wasn’t the case because I was interested in so many things that I practiced to learn the material for my lessons. But if I knew it well enough then I was done practicing and I didn’t think of it anymore. I did other stuff. I would say I practiced about an hour a day.

In college I practiced hours and hours and hours. For preparing for my college audition, I was being influenced by other students who were more serious about their music. For me it’s not that I wasn’t a good student it is just that I didn’t think about music as that serious thing. I just prepared for my college auditions because I was going to school anyway. I didn’t audition at any conservatories that were purely performance programs. I applied to a lot of academic liberal arts colleges. Among those were Oberlin and Ithaca because I liked those schools and those two schools happened to have excellent conservatories so I auditioned at those two conservatories as well. But if I hadn’t gotten into Ithaca and went to Oberlin, because I was interested in the academics, I wouldn’t have studied music in
college. If I would have gotten in to other schools, I wouldn’t have been in a conservatory and influenced by that environment and I would have gone in a different direction, I’m sure of it. It never occurred to me I would have a career in music. When Mike Rosen said I had to practice in college, I started to practice against the timer. I didn’t really know how much I was practicing but I would clock six to eight hours, which meant I was there ten to twelve hours, and lot of my time in my freshman, sophomore, junior and senior year was spent that way. I’m really lucky I fell into that because I didn’t feel like I had to try hard doing it.

There is a lot of information out there about this concept of flow. It is this educational phenomenon and educators observe and that psychiatrists and neuroscientists have studied. It is sort of this documented phenomenon; particularly seen in children when they become so engaged in activity that they truly lose their perception of everything going on around them and you really can’t interrupt them. You don’t have to get them to do these and they can’t help themselves from doing it. You are in this mental space and not even really trying and the hours just disappear. My first couple years of college were like that and I didn’t even try to have to work in that fashion. I almost only realized that after it was over. I still fall back into that sometimes and it feels amazing. I can feel myself slipping into that mindset and it’s only occasional now. When you are in college and you are lucky enough to be in that place to have this opportunity that you won’t have later in life. You have the distractions that everyone one runs into like professional life or family, but during that time all of your time is your own to do as you choose and you can choose to screw around or be in the practice room. It is sort of the pitfall because that time is either to embrace or waste. In my undergrad work, I was only really dedicated to my degree work in my opinion. I started playing professionally coming right out of undergrad. When we went to Northwestern and University of Cincinnati, we went there because those programs were enabling and facilitating our professional work. We weren’t going there in hopes of finding professional work there in the future. And so all my time there was spent on professional work, though I did take time for lessons from time to time. When I needed to get things done professionally or when that process of my preparation of professional work was a priority and I was being disciplined and successful in that preparation, it didn’t get in the way of any of that and I focused on but I certainly have regrets.

After college we went to Cincinnati and the first two years there was another incubation time where I just practiced and I lived in the studio. We were trying to build up our repertoire. That was a very intense time too. I slept there, I took naps I would go to sleep at 11:00pm and wake up at 2:00 or 3:00am. It was awesomely intense. Easily practiced twelve to fourteen hours. Physically you can’t play all that time but I was preparing parts, fixing instruments, and building set up and doing administrative work for the groups to do booking, and I was practicing and memorizing like crazy. So it was full out for a couple years then. Then we got to a better place professionally and had built programs.

For elementary I was doing piano and percussion. I would say four to seven hours a week and for high school it was probably the same. The thing that was different then was
because we had many various ensembles, I was practicing parts for them and again it was practicing to play, but the amount of play that I was doing necessitated a lot of preparation. I was playing seven hours per week because of the ensemble. In college, it was very intense practicing. I kept all the practice journals. It is now incredibly challenging to practice now. If I can accomplish two hours a day that would be efficient and I would be doing really great.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

MD: Yeah, I think they are fundamentally based on redundancies so you are reinforcing, reinforcing, and reinforcing. At the end of the day there are so many distractions when you walk on stage. The best you can do to sort of serve your success is to be that hyper-prepared. So practicing in that redundant way is not very efficient and is very time consuming and a lot of people probably find it very inefficient and wasted. But even if it is time consuming, you cannot learn the notes when you practice in that manner because they are being jammed in your hands and your brain. You can’t do it. You can start to work on it by how can we phrase it or put it together. You can follow those things in rehearsal without actually even playing your part. So that hyper-preparedness is the best place to be when you actually have to work with people or perform. You don’t want to think about how do I play it but how do I want to play it.

Biography

Matthew Duvall is the percussionist for the chamber ensemble Eighth Blackbird. Matthew is a founding member of the ensemble, currently approaching its 20th season.

Eighth Blackbird champions a performing aesthetic redefining the chamber music experience. Notable accomplishments include two Grammy awards, competition wins with the Concert Artist Guild and the Naumberg Foundation, six studio recordings with Cedille records, and ensemble-in-residence positions with the University of Chicago, the University of Richmond, and the Curtis Institute of Music. Composers commissioned and premiered include Steve Reich, David Lang, Stephen Hartke, and Steve Mackey. Touring nationally and internationally 200+ days a year, the ensemble is regularly engaged in coachings, clinics, speaking engagements, and other related activities, in addition to concertizing.

Matthew studied at Oberlin College, and the Oberlin Conservatory with Michael Rosen, completing degree work in Percussion Performance, Classical Civilization, Art History, and Religion. Additional studies were completed at the University of Cincinnati and Northwestern University.
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 11, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

IF: I think usually when I start warming up - I’ll use marimba for this question – I usually just start very basic, just start with verticals on the major chords, just do chromatics up and down. And that’s what I ask all my students to do. And after, I just kind of go through the strokes, double strokes, single alternating, and double lateral. And that’s what I do before I start my piece. I do those exercises from Method of Movement. That’s what I tell my students to do too. I sometimes ask my students to do an open fifths, just sometimes, for the major chords, a different interval for the two hands, for the students. So I ask them to just do the open fifths to start with. So that’s pretty basic.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

IF: To learn music, I usually will look at it first and I will kind of see the basic structure. And depending on the day of the performance, if I only have about a month, then I will say OK, I will have to learn it well, know it, by about ten days before. Shortest, a week before the performance. Then I split it up, separate the days. Say I have twenty days. Then I can learn it and, if I need to memorize the piece, I give myself another week to memorize it. So I have about fourteen days or so to learn it and about a week to memorize it, and then a week to refine it. I start assigning the days to the music, to the page of the music or to the section of the music. I’ll probably learn the first page or the first two pages on the first day, and so on, depending how difficult the page is. Then sometimes I probably won’t review it right away, but I’ll learn the first two to three day’s pages then the fourth day I’ll review it. I give myself some time to learn it, some time to review it. And that’s how I go about learning new music. Sometimes for new pieces I learn, I have a little piece of paper next to it with the date schedule. And usually I want to follow the goal. Of course sometimes something comes up and you cannot practice that day, or sometimes you have a very good practice session and you learn a little more. And I note that, I actually say OK, I got to this page and it’s a little early. But I checked it, and if I miss one or two days I’m OK. And if I miss one day and I’m not up to my schedule, I make sure I catch up the next day or so. Because when there is a deadline, you have to go through the schedule. So that’s what I do with new music.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

IF: I don’t like to listen to the new material right away. I find that I’d rather first have my own idea of it, then I’ll listen to it to see what other people do. But of course some other reference can influence me a little bit in my decision later, but at least I’m not captive to
it. First I know what I want, and later I may think that something sounds a little better and then I will change it. So I can evaluate it myself, as well, instead of copy it. And I do the same thing with my students as well. Even though they are evaluating pieces, I don’t ask them to listen to it right away. For Bach or something, I will allow maybe three weeks after they learn all the notes, after they’ve thought about what they want to do, maybe they are not sure, then I’ll say, ‘OK, go listen.’ So they are not listening to it first, because then I don’t think they can create their own idea. I want to make sure we all have our own, because this is how they make it different from other performers. So for me it’s not really frequent. If there are a lot of recordings, then I’ll plan to listen one or two times tops for each recording. Sometimes even just once because I get an idea and then I’m done with it. If it’s a newer, not as catchy type of tune, a more complicated kind of tune, I may listen to it a little more than two times, maybe three times, but no more that five times. I don’t think I’ve ever listened to anything five times, really. Now when I was younger I listened to Keiko all the time. I was a Keiko freak I think. But no, not any more. So later in the stage I would say, after I’ve already learned all the notes and have an idea.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

You’ve seen me perform and you know that I don’t always memorize all the music. It depends if there’s a way that I can turn pages. If it’s not more than just four or five pages, then I might just read it. But if it is more than four or five pages, I’ll force myself to memorize it, even though sometimes I think that reading is easier for me. But for things like Velocities, you can’t really read it. So for some pieces, physical muscle memory helps, but I’ve found that, for example with Velocities, I think that mental was helping me better, because there is no break for you hands and you are doing pretty much the same thing throughout so you can’t really rely on your muscle memory. So what I did was, I did my dissertation on the piece, I felt like I could write out every single note, before I memorized it. So it was almost like my hands would try to chase my mind. But I rarely do that. I rarely do that entirely, with the muscle memory thing. I found that it is really helpful if you can picture the note that’s coming. So with Velocities, I almost memorized the piece before I could play the piece. But that’s only been a one-time thing, one or two times. Velocities is the one piece I can really remember I did that with. With others, I just usually learn and memorize as I go. So I guess it depends on the piece, because not every piece is the same physical method all the way. I’ve had one memory slip in a performance, only one that I actually stopped and then went on. But that was the time I had just got off the bus from the speed train and went directly to play. And I was carrying my luggage and had no warm up. That was the only time and all those that knew me were saying, ‘I have never seen you stop.’ And I said, ‘I know. It’s because my hands were really tired.’ And that time I couldn’t avoid it. I actually just told them, ‘You know what, that never happened to me.’ And I went on. I have had memory slips and I’ve recovered. So I think if you practice in sections, and tell yourself, today, I’m going to start right here and then go ahead and do it. Sometimes when you go to a master class or something you’re like, ‘Can you start right here?’ But the student will have to go back a couple of bars or several sections to get to that point. I think it doesn’t matter which bar,
you should be able to go to any bar say ‘start there.’ And they should be able to just start. So that will avoid the memory slips. Because sometimes we have memory slips but then you can always say this bar sounds almost like another bar and you can always just connect to that even though it’s not really connected. And you might skip a section and nobody will know. So now you know my trick, that’s how I avoid obvious memory slips.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

IF: Very slowly, and if I can split my hands, you know right hand only. Kind of like practicing piano, that’s how I learned to do it because I was a pianist and we always started with one hand at a time, the graphic on the score is always separated. For us, it isn’t all the time, but I tend to try to find the line between. Unless it’s a piece that has all one line, that’s different. But if I can split the right hand and left hand, then that’s how I do it. Sometimes even if it’s just one individual line, I will still split it, just to see if I can do it. I you can do just one hand at a time, that means you really know it. So that’s how I will practice problem spots.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

IF: Now with the better technology, I record more. Before it was harder and you get lazy. But now I can record with my phone and then just play back, so I actually do that quite a bit now. Not every day, but when I feel like I have a section ready, then I will record. Ready, like I know all the notes and I can play through without stopping, and when I know the phrase, then I’ll do it. I don’t do it very early on during my process because I don’t want to hear it when it doesn’t sound very good. So I do it when I will appreciate it. I say, OK now I can find what I don’t appreciate easier. If you don’t appreciate everything, then there’s no point.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

IF: Leading up to a performance, I do practice differently. The week before I kind of just try to refine it. I don’t do as intense practice right before unless it’s a very short period of time that I have from getting the music to the performance. Sometimes you get pieces with just two weeks to prepare. It’s like, ‘Here you go. You have two weeks.’ Actually one time I was given a piece and had just one week. That was for marimba. And I was like, ‘OK then!’ So then it depends. But if it’s a good schedule, I tend to take it easier before the performance. I try to run through it and if I feel good, I just leave it. I don’t practice too much. And of course if I run through it and there are problem spots, I only work on the problem spots. And then at the end of the session, I run through it again and that’s it.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

IF: The day of the performance I usually take it easy. If it’s an afternoon performance, I don’t even worry about it. Actually I look at my score, but I’m not really playing it. I just look through it. If it is an evening performance, and it’s been a little longer since the last
time I practiced it, then I will run through the piece. But I will make sure I am sleeping. Kind of like yesterday, I didn’t do much at all. I have a lot of things I want to go do, but I was like, ‘I want to be sleeping.’

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

IF: I started playing percussion really in third grade. In second grade I was just learning how to count pretty much and learning rhythm on a pad. I didn’t concentrate on starting playing percussion until third grade, which is eight or nine years old, something like that. And then focusing on my primary instrument, I would say probably masters degree. I was really practicing my marimba more than everything else. But even when I was at Carnegie Mellon, I tended to do that but the team didn’t like that idea. Because I loved marimba, I tended to do that. But they were like, ‘Play timpani for me’ or something like that. So really focusing on it was in my masters’s degree because I was with Burritt, so that was easier if I wanted to only play marimba.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

IF: Middle and high school it was about one and a half to two hours per day. In college, it was weird, because my first year at Carnegie Mellon I was only taking lessons, ensembles, and English. I didn’t have to take any other courses, because I was just fifteen. I couldn’t really take any classes yet. Just lessons and an English program. So I had time and I would say about six or seven and sometimes nine hours a day. So I feel like I got my practice down early, because now I feel like there’s no time to practice. So that was early in college, Then later on as the coursework got more, if I could fit three hours a day, that was pretty good. At Northwestern I actually practiced more. That’s because I started a new grip, I started the Stevens grip when I was in my masters degree. So just to warm up with the Stevens exercise was sometimes three hours a day. Just to warm up. But then after I got better, I probably practiced four or five hours a day, and that would be good enough. But I sometimes take a day break. I don’t do that every day, but on the weekend, I usually take a day that I don’t touch the instrument. Otherwise I’ll burn out. So at least three hours a day, sometimes I could do more. I guess it was more than that because I sometimes practiced during the day, when I had a sign up sheet and could go. And at night, before they closed the building, I knew the janitor so I would go in and just stay until two or three in the morning. And then I kind of lost track how much time I practiced. So I would say at least three hours a day or more. But then I would always take one day not touching the instrument. At North Texas, I don’t quite remember, because teaching and practicing, and teaching and ensemble, I don’t remember how much I was practicing. Whenever I could practice I would practice. Waiting for a student or a no-show, OK, practice. I would say at least two hours a day, if I could get it. Of course more if I could. And on weekends definitely more, when I didn’t have to teach lessons. The days I teach lessons I don’t practice, because after hearing marimba for five hours I’m like, ‘I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to play anymore.’
And I practice between lessons when there is a student no-show or something. So maybe when I’m teaching during the day, that night I don’t practice. Weekend I tend to practice more. I couldn’t say how many hours a day, I could say twenty hours a week, maybe, mainly during weekends. Early career I practiced more. Not as much as in school, but my first two years of college teaching I tended to practice a little more. But it’s different every day. Probably like at UNT, I practiced about fifteen to twenty hours a week. Now it’s less. It gets less because I have more of a workload. If I can fit two hours in a day I am happy. Sometimes I can’t even fit two hours in a day. If I can fit two hours a day, it’s nice. Sometimes just running through the pieces, so maybe just taking forty five minutes and I can’t do any more.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

IF: Yes I do believe my habits have contributed. I think early on, the college time really helped, I was building my fundamentals. I remember when I was at Carnegie Mellon and I was playing the Green exercises, for just hours and hours and hours. Also I had a piano background so that really helped. And I was a good kid. I would wake up very early, and go through every single scale before breakfast. And then I would go to breakfast and then go to school. And my mom didn’t have to wake me up because I was determined. I was in a music program in third grade and some of my classmates already had a two year experience with a music program before me, so I felt I was really behind when I went in. So I told myself I’m going to be better. So I’d just do the scales every morning. All of them, major and minor, on piano. And that really helped because it translates to the marimba very easy. So I found that because I did that at elementary school, I can still play the scales on the piano at one hundred and twenty, even now. And I don’t practice piano at all. Because I did that every day, every morning. And for two years probably, for all of elementary school, I know I did that every day. So I think that early foundation really helped.

Biography

I-Jen Fang joined the faculty of the McIntire Department of Music at the University of Virginia in 2005 and as Principal Timpanist and Percussionist of the Charlottesville & University Symphony Orchestra. She has recently appeared in Staunton Music Festival, Heritage Repertory Theater, and will be performing the Ney Rosauro Marimba Concerto with the Charlottesville & University Symphony Orchestra in the 2006-07 season. Also, she has been invited to perform the world premiere of Judith Shatin’s Time to Burn for multi-percussion duo with oboe at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) this November.

Fang was born in Taipei, Taiwan and began her musical education at age six on piano. Taking up percussion at the age of nine, she came to the United States at age fifteen to pursue her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Percussion Performance at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA. Later, she received her Master of Music degree from Northwestern University and her Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of
North Texas where she served as a teaching fellow. Her principle teachers include Tim Adams, Michael Burritt, Christopher Deane, Mark Ford, Paul Rennick, Robert Schietroma, Ed Smith and Ed Soph.

As a percussionist, Fang has performed or recorded with artists such as Keiko Abe, William Cahn, Mark Fork, Mike Mainieri, Michael Spiro, Nanik Wenton, and Nyoman Wenton. She was a guest marimba soloist with the Taiwan Youth Orchestra in Austria, France, Hungary, Romania, and South Africa. Also, she has performed as a soloist with the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic in Carnegie Music Hall in Pittsburgh, PA. As a pianist she was a winner of the Pittsburgh Concert Society Young Artist Competition. In 2003 she was a featured performer with the Bain Percussion Group at PASIC. In that same year she was selected as a marimba soloist to perform in the Marimba Mania Concert at the 6èmes Journées de la Percussion in Paris, France. In 2004 she performed at PASIC as one of the finalists in the Solo Vibraphone Competition. In 2005 she was invited to perform at PASIC on the Gamelan Gender Wayang.

Fang has performed with many ensembles, including the Oratorio Society of Charlottesville-Ablemarle, the Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra, Taiwan Youth Orchestra, the North Texas Wind Symphony, the UNT Indoor Drumline, Northwestern Symphony Orchestra, Northwestern Contemporary Music Ensemble, Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic, Carnegie Mellon University Wind Ensemble, UNT Steelband, South Indian, Gamelan, Afro-Cuban, contemporary and classical percussion ensembles, and is a member of a percussion quartet, the Bain Percussion Group. She has been involved in the recording of eleven CDs and a DVD with the North Texas Wind Symphony on the Klavier and GIA labels.
~ Mark Ford ~  
Personal Interview with Colin Hill

November 12, 2010  
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm-up routine, could you please describe it?

MF: Yes, I have a warm-up routine. It starts off with improvisation for that day. It may last ten minutes or thirty minutes sometimes, usually not that long. Then I'll go on to technical exercises based on pieces that I'm preparing at the time.

When I was younger, I definitely had more specific exercises. I may do them for six-month periods or three-month periods. It would typically utilize the four basic strokes: double verticals, double laterals, single independent, and single alternating. It would be some of each of those, typically. When I was really young I was doing technique a minimum of forty-five minutes to an hour a day because I needed to get my hands to work right. I had the time so I could do it then, but now, I don't have that time.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

MF: I don't know if I have a regular process. I try to wrap my ears around where the piece is going and I try to understand the piece a little bit. Nowadays, many times there are recordings so I can look at the score, hear it, and study the score so I can get a sense of it. I usually don't approach it technically at first, I'm just trying to get a sense of it. Then I will read through sections of the piece. Depending on the difficulty level, some pieces are not readable, so I will have to take it apart slowly.

Typically, I like to grab a small chunk of music because my time is limited. I take the premise that if I can learn eight bars, in a manner that if the concert was tonight, I could play those eight bars. I'm going to try and make that first phrase at the right tempo, articulation, dynamics, and sticking. I try to fix everything. It might take thirty minutes, or longer but the point is I don't have time to rough out a piece and then go back and do those things again. I do them right from the beginning. For me, I feel like I learn the piece quicker that way because I'm dealing with it artistically right from the start, but with small amounts of material: one phrase, four bars, eight bars, or sometimes one bar if it's a really crazy piece. It depends on the music.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

MF: If I listen to it at all, it would be at the very beginning and then about 7/8 of the way through. Sometimes I don't listen to it at the beginning because there are no recordings or because I know the composer so I have a sense of the style already. The reason why I listened to it about 7/8 of the way through is because I want to use it as a gauge. By that
time, I have pretty strong ideas of what I want to do with the music and now I'm comparing it with somebody else to see what choices they made versus choices that I made. Also, sometimes I find that I missed something. There may have been a detail that I hear them playing that I missed on the page accidentally.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

MF: I think the best way to avoid memory slips is to be as prepared as you possibly can. Has it happened to me? Yes, but it is very rare. I don't usually have memory slips. Most of my performing his solo.

With chamber music, I prefer to read, or at least have the music there as a roadmap. It all depends on the preparation and how difficult the piece is. Usually, I will look up at the music and say ‘oh this is section a,’ and then I'll play section a. Even though the music is there, I know it. I might use it just to make sure that we are right together, if it were a duo. Or I may just look up and see the form to remind myself of the section because I have it memorized. With ensemble playing, you’ve got to be reading.

So it just depends on the performance. Typically though, in my role it's usually solo, so it's memorized.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

MF: I open up the music and I point to my worst problem in the piece. I don't look in general specifics. I look at every time I come across this three or four bar passage, it causes me troubles. That tells me ‘this is where I must start practicing.’ I want to make those four bars the very best bars of the piece. Doing so, I've raised the whole piece up because that was the lowest link. Then there will be other links that will be lower but they weren't as bad as that one, so they take a little less time to fix. Once you know a piece, and we all have technical problems that creep up, you go ‘there it is.’

Tempo adjustment, especially if it's a technical issue. I'm going to go slow. I'm going to consider all the sticking issues at that slow tempo to find other ways that may be beyond my first one or two ways to look at it. I may also look at my positioning behind the keyboard to see if I'm actually positioning myself to be successful with the particular passage.

I try to get it to tempo as quickly as I can because I want to get it in the style, but some passages are tricky so you have to stay slow and methodical with it for a period of time.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

MF: Often. Weekly for me, not daily. I do daily when I'm closer to a recording session and am making daily adjustments. General practicing, it's probably weekly. Especially if the performance is not really close.
When I record myself, I typically don't play the whole piece. I'll just play sixteen bars and listen to it and fix those things. I use it as a tool. I'm not trying to play the whole piece to the very end. Closer to the performance, however, I may play the whole thing and record it.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

MF: Visualization. Being able to visualize yourself on the stage playing perfectly with the expression and the tone that you want to deliver. Visualization is a huge tool. If you can't see yourself actually doing that one-hundred percent then you probably won't do it when you're on the stage. If you feel like 'this one is not going to be good' than it probably won't be. I try to think positive. I try to picture the environment and I try to position myself for the best success that I can have. I know my limits on tempos. If it gets over a certain level of tempo, I know my accuracy is going to start to wane.

I try to think more about the expressive elements towards the end of the preparation because if the audience is only getting technical things out of my playing then they're really missing the boat. There should be some expressive content and I really try to zone in on those things in the last period before the performance.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of a performance?

MF: No, they are all different. Best case scenario - I typically have to work in the morning and then I may have an hour or afternoon off and then I can go play. That usually doesn't happen, that would be really nice. Sometimes on the road, you get off the plane and you have to play. So you have to be prepared for a variety of different circumstances. None of them are usually perfect. Usually when you're traveling, everybody wants to talk to you. So when you get in the room to warm up, it may only be five minutes before somebody comes in the room to ask questions. So it is really more of a mental state than a physical state. You can physically warm up in five minutes or so. I don't need to play for thirty minutes to get my hands going, but mentally, it's a different story. So you need to make sure you have a little quiet time, depending on the piece, so you know what you're dealing with.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

MF: I started playing percussion when I was ten or eleven but I had experience in dance at a younger age, around six or seven, with live music, dancing, bodies moving to music, and that matter. So drumming was a natural extension. I played some piano before the percussion thing came along. So drumming was natural for me, it was just what I wanted to do. Before I had drums, I was beating on army helmets and the floor, so I wanted to do that. I started formally in fifth grade, I think I was maybe eleven years old.

Marimba, I played in high school a little bit but it wasn't the atmosphere that it is now.
DCI wasn't what it is now and a lot of young people did not play. I hadn’t seen anybody play four-mallets until I went to college. I could read two mallet parts in band, but I really didn't start playing keyboards until I was eighteen, with four mullets. And really, even more when I was twenty and got really focused on what I was doing.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, college, graduate school, early career, and currently.

MF: In high school I was probably playing at least two hours a day, I'm sure. I'm talking about drum set, band, and everything, maybe two to three hours a day in high school. Maybe on average, two hours, depending on what was going on. College, higher education - I think when I was younger, again three hours a day as a freshman or sophomore. More towards graduate school, probably playing six to eight hours a day, for certain, sometimes longer. Early professional career, soon as you get out of school, the hours fall off. Currently, if I can get two hours in a day that's a great day. A little more than two hours is gravy, serious gravy. I have to budget that time. Early professional, it really wasn't that much different. I probably ended up still working maybe three to four hours when I was teaching early on. I didn't have kids and didn't have some other issues that take time away.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

MF: Yes, for sure. But more importantly I'm fortunate enough to do things I love to do. I have a job and I teach. Nobody is over my shoulder saying ‘do it this way or do it that way’ or ‘dig the ditch over here or dig the ditch over there. Some people may interpret success as money or who knows what, but for me personally, I am doing things I love to do so I am not going to stop. I like to do these things but I don't always do them well. I try to but sometimes I screw up, and that's what happens in life. I think that if there is any one thing I might say, it’s persistence, passion, and enjoyment. I don't give up. When I'm doing something I like to learn as much as I can about it and go as far as I can with it. I try to keep an open mind that I may be on the wrong track. I am constantly asking people that I know for input on a product, whether that be my playing or a student’s playing, or whatever. Success is a weird word but persistence, passion, enjoyment, and open-mindedness are key components.

Biography

Mark Ford is the coordinator of percussion activities at The University of North Texas in Denton, Texas and a Past-President of the Percussive Arts Society. He is a marimba specialist and the coordinator of one of the largest percussion programs in the United States at UNT. Ford is an active performer on the marimba and he has been featured throughout the United States at universities and music conferences. He also regularly performs at International Music Festivals in South America, Asia, Australia and Europe.

With several marimba and percussion CDs to his credit, Mark’s recordings have further established his dedication to excellence in music. Ford’s solo marimba CDs, Motion
Beyond and Polaris, have received outstanding reviews including *The Instrumentalist* which stated Ford's performance is "superb and his compositional style is equally outstanding." Mark has also recorded two DVDs and a CD with Japanese virtuoso marimbist Keiko Abe and the UNT Wind Symphony.

As a composer Mark Ford has written several popular works for solo marimba and percussion ensemble including *Head Talk, Polaris, Kingdom Lore Fanfare, Stubernic, Afta-Stuba!, Heads Up!* and *The Surface of Life*. His compositions have been performed at universities and concert halls throughout the world and also featured on National Public Radio. Ford is also the author of *Marimba: Technique Through Music*, a four-mallet marimba method book published by Innovative Percussion, Inc. Mark’s latest composition, *Marimba Heritage* is a mallet ensemble showcase. The work is built on motives of numerous marimba solos and is designed to honor the tradition of solo marimba performance.

Ford has been recognized as a leading percussion educator and his UNT Percussion Ensemble was selected as a winner in the 2009 PAS International Percussion Ensemble Competition. Mark Ford proudly represents Dynasty Percussion, The Zildjian Company, Evans Drum Heads, Latin Percussion and Innovative Percussion Inc. as performing artist and clinician.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

AH: Specific to marimba, I do have a daily routine and it’s one of the things that I talk about a lot in my clinics and with my students. It is super important to have a daily routine. On marimba I start warming up the big muscles first. I do double vertical strokes first and block chords, just to get my hands loose and get warm. Then as I start to warm up I can start working on the smaller muscle groups and focus on single independent strokes, single alternating strokes, permutations, one-handed rolls, and start incorporating some more intricate movements.

On marimba I focus on just the primary strokes and octaves especially because that is a big deal in what we do. I also do some inner mallet and two mallet things, mostly scale patterns and patterns out of the Green book, the xylophone book. Always at the end of my routine I have five or ten minutes where I focus on one particular technique from a piece that I’m working on. It might be giving me problems or just something I want to isolate for that period of time. Right now I’m really focusing on one-handed rolls to develop more independence between my hands. I always try to do this at the end of my routine.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

AH: First thing that I always do with a new piece is try to get an overall perspective of the piece. So I read the whole thing through from top to bottom and try to get an overall idea of the shape and the form of the piece. Then I will break it down to sections that I know will take me a long time to learn, do color coding: red, yellow, green. The red sections are the ones that I have to start working on now because it is going to take me six weeks to get it. Green is stuff that I can already play so I don’t need to work on that. I might do run-throughs of it or things like that. Yellow is stuff that isn’t going to take me as long. Over a couple of weeks, the goal is to get the red sections up to yellow and then move all the yellows up to green. I try to read everything and so I don’t work on memorizing but I work on reading. I feel that helps to reinforce number one, my reading skills, but also to reinforce the music because I’m seeing it over and over and over. It is good for memorization for me as well. All of a sudden I’ve got the piece memorized and I don’t even know it. It’s not like I have to memorize this bar and watch my hands. I’m constantly looking at the music and the score is always up on the stand and I’m reading.

I would say that eighty-five percent of what I do is really slow. In my daily routine I’m working on technique all the time. So I know my technique is there so I know I don’t have to work on technique to the piece because I feel like I’ve worked on technique for a
long time and my technique is there and it naturally applies to the piece. So I’m really working on musical gestures and everything at a slow, slow, painfully slow tempo, to make sure I get it right the first time so that I don’t have to unlearn it, to relearn it. I tell my students all the time is slower is faster. Take it slower and learn it right the first time so that six weeks from now you don’t have to unlearn something that you’ve been playing for a long time because you’ve learned it wrong.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

AH: It’s funny, now that we have all of these recordings of pieces on YouTube. When I was going to school none of that was around. When you learned a new piece, you bought the music and played it to see what it sounded like because there weren’t a lot of recordings. Keiko Abe had several CDs out and Leigh Stevens had the Bach on marimba, but as far as other pieces, you didn’t know what they sounded like unless you heard it live, or if you liked it. Now, a lot of the pieces I play are written for me or are brand-new so there’s still no recordings. So you just figure it out as you go. The great thing about that is that you get to totally make your own musical decisions. You are using your own musical intuitions and you are not affected by an outside source.

I do encourage my students to listen to recordings to get several ideas. The great thing about YouTube is you can find a lot of performances of popular pieces. So then you’ve got a wide variety of choices that you can make. I think it’s a great resource. Sometimes, however it’s bad because there are a lot of bad performances too.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

AH: I have always had a good memory and the only time I have had memory slips is when I have been extremely exhausted. I have a semi-photographic memory. Because I always read, I am seeing it all the time. If I’m having trouble, I can see the notes on the page. The problem with that is you have to constantly turn the page. But for me, slow practicing helps me to avoid memory slips because you have to concentrate harder to be able to do it. I think it is a really common problem that people walk in the practice room and play through the whole piece at tempo using mostly muscle memory. Instead of practicing you are just performing all the time. When you get on stage the first thing that goes is your muscle memory because you get nervous and it’s not the same. It doesn’t feel right, something is different every time. So you need to have a back-up plan. You have to know the music. One of the tools that my undergrad teacher, Donald Bick, suggested was writing out the music to see if you really knew the notes. I was playing the Creston Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra and I was reading it in my lesson but I told him it was memorized. He didn’t believe me and made me write it out in my lesson. That was a good tool because it really did make you think, okay what is the next note - you are away from the keyboard when you are doing this. I know a lot of people that use this as memorization exercises, to visualize yourself playing. You can do that a number of ways. You can look at the keyboard and visualize your mallets across the keyboard.
Then put your hands behind your back and look at the notes. Then you can do it totally away from the keyboard. It’s difficult, but it’s useful and it works.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

AH: Total isolation. That goes back to my warm-up routine. Taking the last five or ten minutes of my warm-up routine to focus on my problem areas. Your brain will only allow you to focus intensely for a short period of time and if you try to isolate a problem spot for several hours you aren’t going to get as much done as if you take it five minutes at a time here and there. For me, that’s been always really effective, short bursts of really pounding it for five minutes. There is a lot of repetition involved but there is also a lot of thinking involved and concentration. After about five minutes, I can’t do it. Going back to it repeatedly. Spaced repetition.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

AH: It use to be a lot more often and it needs to be more often, for sure. I think it’s a great tool but I wouldn’t get caught up in doing it every day. when I was recording myself regularly it would be every couple of weeks. That gives me a chance to work on some things and then go back to it. Video too, not just audio because you can watch yourself getting into bad performance habits or why does it sound bad? You can isolate what you are doing physically rather than just listening to it.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

AH: Like I said, most of my practicing is at eighty-five percent, is slow stuff. Obviously, as you are getting closer to the performance you need to start bumping the tempo up and getting it closer. I’ve used this method a lot and I gauge it depending on where I am leading up to the performance. If I am six weeks out from the performance, I need to be at like sixty percent tempo. The next week I need to be at seventy percent tempo. I gauge it so that I’ve got about a two-week buffer zone, so three weeks before the performance I’ve got everything up to tempo and it’s perfect at ninety percent. By the next week it’s perfect at one-hundred percent, and now I have two weeks to get used to the performance of it. The grueling stuff in the initial stages. It’s always really, really slow, painfully slow.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

AH: I try to get a lot of sleep the night before and make sure my diet is really good leading up to the performance. Make sure I’m hydrated. When I say hydrated, I’m drinking a gallon of water every day leading up to the performance because that helps your muscle memory and keeps you more alert when you are on stage. The other thing that I do, and I don’t recommend just trying this but I’m used to it, a low dose of caffeine before you play really helps to keep you mentally alert when you’re on stage. A lot of things go through your mind when you are performing, some of the most ridiculous things go through your mind. Why am I thinking about Chinese food while I’m playing? A 50 mg dose of caffeine before I play really helps me focus. If you get really nervous
than that dose of caffeine might send you over the edge, so I would suggest practicing with it to get used to it.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

AH: I got a drum set when I was in sixth grade, like ten or eleven years old. I didn’t know what I was doing but I had fun. I had a Royce, gold, sounded terrible I’m sure, but it was awesome! Then I joined band in the seventh grade and started taking private lessons. I had weekly private lessons but they were always on snare drum and drum set. I was really into drum set going into college and I didn’t start playing marimba until I got to college. I’m known as a marimba player, but I do everything. But my niche in this industry is marimba. I didn’t start learning my scales and reading music until I got to college. So it’s definitely do-able for people who think ‘I’ve never had any experience on this instrument and I’m never going to be good at.’ You can, you just have to work at it. As an undergrad my teacher always encouraged us to get our hands in as much stuff as we could. Learn as much as you can. I never honestly really thought I would be a marimba player. That was not my goal. My goal was just work, I just want to be good and get gigs. That’s what I wanted to do. So we didn’t really focus on that a whole lot. I just loved it and ended up playing, and the more I played the better I got.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

AH: Middle school, probably thirty minutes a day, just having fun, playing around. Same thing with high school, thirty minutes or an hour. Some days would be four hours of rock drumming - Rush, Tom Sawyer. College, I had an adjustment period to go through my freshman year so not very much. Generally I would say between four and eight hours a day after I got it together. Weekends, for me as an undergrad and a master student, weekends were twelve hour practice days and nothing else. That’s all I did was practice. It was amazing. Practice a lot of different things, not specifically marimba but everything. Orchestral excerpts, drum set, multi. I practiced site reading a ton, just a lot of that. Early career, out of DMA, life gets in the way. You are trying to work and you have a family. I would say still probably three hours a day, maybe two to three hours a day. Currently, I have no time. I have zero time to practice. I’m going to Australia in two weeks and I don’t even know what I’m going to play. I’m just doing what I can do. The good thing is because of all those hours I spent early on, now it’s much easier to whip things together. I think, that’s how a lot of people get through this stuff. I know for example, I was talking to Kevin Bobo last night. I know he played last year at PASIC and it was an unbelievable and inspiring performance. It was amazing! We were talking about it and I know he spent a lot of time preparing for that. For something like this, you have to immerse yourself in it. For regular concert dates and things like that, I do practice and I’m not saying I don’t, but you just don’t have as much time. It’s really important to get it together early on so that later you can go ‘Oh, I know how this is supposed to go, how this is supposed to feel.’
CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

AH: Yes, for sure. It’s the answer to the last question. If you don’t practice, how are you going to get work? How you practice makes you more successful. It’s really important to develop good practice habits early so that you’re not wasting a bunch of time, so that you can get to everything that you need to get to. Take it slow so you can focus on your technique. Focus on everything that you’re supposed to be focusing on instead of developing bad habits that you will later have to get rid of or replace. Yeah, absolutely. I think it’s so important. I try to do my daily routine every day. There are some days that I don’t get to it but if I do that every day I know I’m going to be okay. I can make it through, whatever I have to get through, regardless of what it is. Whether it’s an orchestra gig or a freelance thing that I’m doing, I know that because I spent all of that time, I will be alright.

I did this article for percussive notes called *The Truth About Practice* that started out as a list of things for my students. I was just going to write five truths about practice and it turned into ten, and then it turned into fifteen, and then it turned into fifty. So I have this list of fifty truths about practicing. It was published last June, maybe? There are a lot of connections between items so it’s not just fifty different things to think about. One of the big things is you have to have something that you do every day. It’s so important because life gets in the way later on sometimes and you may not be able to practice for a week at a time, or a month at a time. You are just so busy that you can’t get to the instrument. But if you have done your daily routine, during your undergrad especially, you can go back to it after missing a month and you know what it feels like, and you know what it sounds like, you know what you are supposed to sound like, and you know what it feels like to sound good on the instrument. Whether it’s snare drum, or tambourine, or anything, crash cymbals. If you practice crash cymbals before wind ensemble or orchestra three days a week. Just crash and get familiar with the instrument. If you get called to play with an orchestra and you get the cymbal part and you haven’t played cymbals in six years, you know what it sounds like and you know what it feels like to pick up some cymbals and sound good. If you never do it, you are going to suck. You just are. All of that is hugely important, to be able to do something every day and know what it feels like to sound good on the snare drum. Know what it feels like to play marimba well. Everything that you are interested in. The other thing about that is that all of these things have transfer value and they all help each other out. You might be playing a marimba piece that really grooves and if you have never played drum set and felt a groove you may not sound as good on it. Merlin is a great example of a piece that grooves and I can tell the difference between people that play it, who have a good groove background and people that don’t. All of the things that we do as percussionists, we have to do so many things, but it all helps each other out and it all has transfer value. It’s not like you have to spend 10,000 hours on snare drum, another 10,000 hours on timpani, another 10,000 hours on whatever, because then you’ll never make it. Repetition, spaced repetition, daily routine, consistency, patience, and dedication. Dedication to your art and dedication to what you believe in and who you are as a musician, and being true to that.
Biography

Praised by Percussive Notes Journal as “A Master of Musical Nuance”, Andy Harnsberger enjoys a versatile career as a performer and educator. He has performed in a variety of settings across the United States, Europe, and Japan and presents numerous solo recitals and clinics throughout the country each year. He has been a featured solo artist at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC), Spoleto Festival USA and Piccolo Spoleto Festival. He has also appeared as a guest clinician at many Percussive Arts Society Days of Percussion. His compact disc, “Vertigo,” has been recognized by the Percussive Arts Society as “a must purchase for anyone who collects important marimba recordings…His performance makes it clear that he is a master player, not only technically, but musically as well.”

Dr. Harnsberger has performed as percussionist with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, Alabama Symphony Orchestra, Charleston Symphony Orchestra, Richmond Symphony and Richmond Ballet Orchestras, Key West Symphony Orchestra, Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, Chattanooga Symphony Orchestra, Lancaster Symphony Orchestra, Macon Symphony Orchestra, Lynchburg Symphony Orchestra, Hilton Head Symphony, Long Bay Symphony, Gainesville Symphony, and Carroll Symphony Orchestra as well as the contemporary music ensemble “Currents”, and has toured extensively as percussionist and xylophone soloist with The Jack Daniel’s Silver Cornet Band. He has also made several guest appearances on National Public Radio, both in interviews, and live performances to bring public awareness to the marimba as a solo instrument. “Andy Harnsberger is a joy to watch in performance and a feast for the ears. The sensitivity and strength in his live playing was a treasure for the audience…simply phenomenal!” – National Public Radio.

Andy Harnsberger earned his Doctorate of Musical Arts in Performance and Literature at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he also received the prestigious Performer's Certificate. Dr. Harnsberger is Director of Percussion Studies at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee and is active throughout the year as a freelance percussionist and recitalist. He is also in demand as a clinician across the country, presenting workshops and masterclasses at many universities each year. Andy is a performing artist and clinician for Pearl Drums and Adams Musical Instruments, Innovative Percussion, Inc., Evans Drum Heads, Sabian Cymbals, Ltd., and Grover Pro Percussion.
~ John Lane ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 12, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JL: One of the things that I do that is unique, both in my job and as a player, is that I’ve never specialized in one instrument or another. I don’t think we don’t need to warm up too much. You can play a little stick control and you’re ready to go. However, depending on where you are in your development, you do need to devote a percentage of your time to technical practice. I’m a huge proponent of practicing technique separate and thinking about how we move.

I would say my warm up routine on each of my instruments is I have a series of technique exercises that I go through, even to this day. Depending on where I am with a certain piece or what I’m preparing for will determine what percentage I will work on that technique for the total time, and whatever the task of the day is. If I’m taking an audition and I’m working on excerpts, I will practice thirty to forty percent of the time on technique and the rest of the time on excerpts or whatever it is that I’m studying. So I think thirty to forty percent is a good number to throw out. For students, I tell them sixty percent should be technique.

For example, snare drum I work on stick control and things that use shaping like the Buster Bailey book, Wrist Twisters. So I’m working on shape of some kind such as subtle changes of velocity and dynamic shaping. I will work on rolls, both soft and loud, and then connect them together. Then I will work on ornaments. If there is anything in particular, like a certain rudiment I’m having issue with in the piece or the excerpt I’m working on, I will work five or ten minutes on each of those things constitutes the warm up.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JL: Right now I’m learning a new piece. It is a concert link solo percussion piece. Any new piece I’m learning I will isolate the most difficult selections first. I try to look at the whole and just by score study. I try to get a sense of what is going on, the form of the piece, what’s happening, what I want to do with it, what I want to say with it, and any creative, abstract ideas. Then I identify what is going to take me the longest. So I start working on that first. I don’t always start at the beginning. Wherever that part is, that is where I go to and get that. Then try to work my way backwards or forwards to the piece, as that dictates. It is a regular process of pretty much what I do.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?
JL: Listening to recordings is good to do especially if it is for a reference that you are unfamiliar with. Where that really becomes important is preparing for orchestral auditions and learning excerpts. You have to listen to recordings. You need to listen to multiple recordings, not just one. If I’m learning a Bach cello suite I want to listen to as many recordings as I can. If I’m learning something that is more contemporary, that has more of an individualized interpretation to it, I may not seek out as many recordings because I want to discover the piece for myself. Afterwards I might compare my version with someone else’s. It is an interesting question and is a case-by-case study.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JL: I’m not a great memorizer, I’m a reader. But the thing I try to do is to de-emphasize the music. In other words, if I’m playing a big solo piece I don’t put it on a giant poster board. I try to come up with subtle ways of putting the music here or there, reducing the score size. For the performance I did yesterday, I had the music and it was shrunk down. So you really couldn’t see the music. I have the music there because my mind doesn’t work that way and I don’t memorize things well. Sometimes when I play marimba pieces I memorize those. But I would say mostly I’m a reader.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JL: I think there are two ways of playing problem spots. They are usually in terms of you can’t play fast enough or you are missing a lot of notes. But it depends on what you mean by problem spots. I will give you two examples.

I’m a firm believer in practicing slow. Particularly like playing Bach on marimba, I’m playing a lot of notes very quickly and it is very tonal and everyone can hear when we miss a wrong note. So what is important there is slow practice. The reason for that is creating the connection between the brain and the hands to where the notes are. That has to be done slowly. I’m a big believer of slow practice.

On the flip side of that, just because you can play it slow doesn’t necessarily translate to being able to play it fast. There is this method for playing fast passages that I learned from Kenny Werner, the jazz pianist. He has a great book on jazz improv and he did a great clinic at CCM when I was there. He is known for playing these fast runs and odd meters or playing odd subdivisions for the beat, ripping up and down. He said when he was first learning to practice slow, it didn’t help because he could do it slow but he couldn’t do it fast. That was the problem. So what he did was set the metronome at the tempo he wanted to go but he would play just one note, the first note of the lick – one, one, one. Then one, two, one, two, one, two. Then one, two, three, one, two, three. Until finally he was (demonstrating a ripple) able to do it. I taught that to my students some and sometimes I will do it too if I have a lick that needs that kind of work.
I got from Ed Soph once that you should practice what you are not good at. That is where your practicing should be and you can’t be concerned about what you sound like in the practice room to a certain extent if you are working on things that you are not good at. You can’t worry about what Joe Smith is going to think standing outside when you are messing this up because you are doing the right things.

I tell my students that you sometimes have to put your pride in your pocket and work on the things you are not good at. It is the only way you are going to grow as a musician. If you just practice the things you are good at, you are going to continue to get better on those things, but you are also going to have big gaping holes in your abilities.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JL: There is an interesting thing about listening. I’ve been thinking a lot about pedagogy of musicianship and listening is one of those issues. I think we should strive to listen to ourselves as we play, as if we were listening to a recording. That takes a long time to develop. I’m sort of at a point now where I almost kind of get that. Yesterday when I was performing, I almost could listen to it as if I were in the audience. I wasn’t worried about right stick here, left stick here. I wasn’t thinking about eighth or quarter notes. I was just listening to being engaged with how it was sounding and how was it going. But you don’t get to that point until way down the road.

So the idea is that I record and video myself as much as possible. In my office I have a Mac and it has a little camera on it so at the end of my practice session, when I think it is going well, I will put on my camera and play through whatever I was working on. So I just check it out to make sure what I’m hearing as I play is actually what is happening. I’ve gotten more and more that it is true. I will play it back and say, ‘Yep, that is what it sounds like.’ When I was much younger I would play it back and say, ‘Oh man!’ But that is something that grows over time I think. Just learn to listen to yourself.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JL: I do practice differently in the weeks leading up to a performance. The reason is you should be focused on big picture kind of things and more runs of the piece. For example, on this Peter Garland piece, about a month out I was still practicing slow because I wanted to train the dance movements, the choreography of it all. But by two weeks out I was maybe only running through it three times slow. Then I would do ten runs of the whole thing. I would do lots and lots of reps and do the whole piece and get the pacing down. That’s what would say is different from the start.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JL: I’ve done some different things. When I was in Cincinnati I studied Tai Chi and I would do that a little bit before the performance and that kind of helped focus in a bit. Recently I’ve gotten into meditation. I found if I just spend ten minutes being still and doing a little meditation before I go on, that helps to calm the nerves and get focused for
the performance. The other thing I find is that I need to be warm before I play. You know like physically warm. The other ritual is that I don’t want to eat a big meal right before I play.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JL: I started playing percussion when I was five years old. My parents bought me a little toy paper head drum set, maybe I was just three! My uncle was a country music drummer so he showed me how to do some things. What I notice with my cousins is they all have the same aptitude as I have. I can see it but they haven’t developed it. I think I always had a natural aptitude for coordination and movement. But I started early just listening. My dad was a big country music fan. He said when I was a kid I would fall asleep listening to music with my headphones. From the earliest age, I was just taking a lot in. I think drum set was the first instrument I did. Of course, I started the school band in sixth grade. I started snare drum and mallets and stuff.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JL: More in high school than middle school, I always had a drum set at my house and I would play for hours and hours. I probably say two or three hours in middle and high school, but that wasn’t regular. Sometimes it would be four or five hours playing drum set and the next day I wouldn’t play anything. I didn’t have any idea on how to do that. In college during my undergrad years I probably played six hours a day. There were days after an orchestra concert I would go back to the studio, still in my tux, and practiced for an hour. In my post-graduate studies it was even more. When I was preparing for auditions I was playing six to eight hours a day. At North Texas I was rehearsing and practicing all the time. I say easily six hours. Early career, which is now, I say if I get two hours I’m able to maintain something but I like to do at least four hours.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JL: I think you have to think about the last question and what you mean by success. Everyone defines success in different ways. If success means you are well known and famous, then I’ve not been successful, but that is not what I’m trying to do. If success means you are able to perform the music that you want and make satisfying and creative projects, then I would say I’ve been successful in doing that. I’ve been able to play the music I’ve wanted. I’ve been able to work with composers and with colleagues in ways that are rewarding. I like this definition of success: where preparation meets opportunity. The more prepared you are when those opportunities come along; the more likely you are to be successful. So if that is winning a college teaching job. I always tell my students to be honest with their selves with what they want to do. When my students are coming in that first semester I tell them if your goal is to be the principal percussionist in the New York Philharmonic and you are practicing an hour a day. If you not going to summer
festivals and taking lessons with the local symphony guys and going to PASIC, you are not being honest with yourself. So I told them to be honest with their selves. Look at what your goals and aspirations are, where you want to be, and then you can look at what kinds of practice habits you need to get there.

Biography

John Lane is an artist whose creative work and collaborations extend through percussion to poetry/spoken word and theater. As a performer, he has appeared on stages throughout the Americas, Australia, and Japan. Recent credits include performances with his percussion trio, PULSUS, at the Hokuto International Music Festival in Japan, an appearance as a featured concerto soloist with the National Symphony of Panama, and featured as an international guest artist at the Antarctica Music Festival at the Australian National University.

Commissioning new works and creating interdisciplinary collaborations are integral to John's work. Over the last few years, he has been connected with a number of composers including Peter Garland, Emiliano Pardo, Mara Helmuth, Christopher Deane, John Luther Adams, Kyle Gann, Michael Byron, Wen Hui Xie, Kazuaki Shiota and David Farrell. John has several on-going collaborations with writer Ann McCutchan, poet Todd Boss, percussionist Allen Otte, and has created original music for choreographer/dancer Hilary Bryan and granite sculptor Jesús Moroles.

Currently, John is the Director of Percussion Studies and Associate Professor of Percussion at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, TX. He taught previously at the University of Wyoming and held fellowships at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the University of North Texas.

He received a Doctor of Musical Arts in Percussion Performance from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, a Master of Music in Percussion Performance from the University of North Texas, and a Bachelor of Music from Stephen F. Austin State University.
November 12, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JL: Well I think on any instrument my regular warm up routine, if it’s a multi percussion thing, or timpani, or marimba, whatever it is, just something that’s going to work me around the span of the instrument, really slow, really general dynamic levels. But I think it’s most important on multi percussion and timpani. Things you do just to figure out where the instruments are and reacquaint, and sort of learn the instrument because it’s not always in the same place. And on snare drum its either going to be buzz rolls or stick control still, everyday that I do it. And marimba, sometimes I don’t really warm up on marimba but I probably should. But that’s probably it.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JL: I think I’m probably going to end up focusing on multi percussion stuff because that’s what I do the most now and that seems to be the thing that has the most challenges with learning new music because you have to learn the instrument and learn the notation every time. I mean marimba music to me, usually I will just read it and try to read it as slow as possible, not keeping time, not worrying about anything like that but just reading the notes and figuring out where it is and figuring out stickings and then start. That’s the first thing I would do when learning the music. But multi percussion, like having to get acquainted with what the actual instrument is and then getting acquainted with what the notation is, is really the first thing I would have to do and then figuring out stickings. Stickings always comes after just understanding how to read the music, stickings are the first thing I would try to figure out how to do because then I will be able to do things the same way every time and have normal or regular muscle memory built from the very first steps of learning the music.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JL: Generally, I’ll listen to it before I start learning it and then I will not listen to it again until maybe two or three weeks before I perform it. I don’t want to listen too much because I don’t want to make my interpretation the same as someone else’s, generally. I mean there are some pieces that you kind of, might want to imitate someone’s interpretation of it but generally I don’t want to do that. So I will listen to it to kind of decide whether or not I actually want to play the piece and then I’ll decided that I do and then not listen to it again until a couple of weeks before I perform it to maybe get new and fresh ideas. Because generally I’ll come up with how I want to phrase things and maybe get new inspiration or just get tired, you get burned out after learning something
for a couple of months and then need some fresh inspiration. So I wouldn’t listen too much to other recordings beyond deciding that I like the piece and that I want to learn it.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JL: When I do marimba, most of the time it’s memorized. Multi-percussion I would say fifty percent of the time it’s memorized completely. And even if it’s not completely memorized, most of it is memorized I just have the music up there to act as a road map. And I do use a lot of mental, I do a lot of visualization and a lot of practicing by not playing but just visualizing the physical, my physical relation to the instrument and also the visual relation to the actual music, like sheet music. So when I’m performing memorized music, I have a back up because I have sort of have like a photographic picture of the music in my head or I have a photographic picture of the shapes that my hands make on the instrument. And I’m thinking mostly multi percussion and marimba because I don’t think I’ve ever memorized a snare drum solo because I can read it. And generally it takes me, because I’m not a very good, not very good at memorizing music, it will probably double my preparation time to memorize something because I can read pretty well. So I do a lot of visualization for probably two or three weeks before a performance, I’ll visualize every night. Or slowly while I’m lying in bed, start reading through each note of the piece whether it’s whatever multi percussion or marimba. And it’s funny because it will take three or four times longer to go through it note by note in my head like ok, I’m going to read the notes of Bach cello suite and I’ll actually make myself see it on the page and see it on the instrument, see my mallet hitting the bars and I do that for a couple of weeks before the performance and it seems to give me several back up options. Or if I have a memory slip, I have the back up of visual, I have a backup of the picture of the sheet music and also, obviously I have the muscle memory because I’ve played it enough. And actually, sometimes I’ll air play the piece as well. I would say that especially in the two weeks before the performance, fifty percent of my practice time is not on the instrument at all because I don’t want to burn myself out physically. By two or three weeks before the performance, you’re pretty ready to play it, generally, and I don’t want to play it too much and over express or overstate things that I feel in music. So I would not run it every day, I would just do visualizations. And it does take a crazy amount of time to get through. A ten minute marimba solo would take me thirty minutes to visualize, and to have that kind of focus to actually take thirty minutes to go through a piece like that. But then the run through is probably much easier in real time and you feel like yeah, this went by really fast. Although I will say it doesn’t always work. I had one very bad memory slip but that wasn’t because I wasn’t prepared, it was because I was mentally distracted and there was no way I could recover from it. I did it on a department at UNT once; I actually stopped in the middle of a piece and had to walk off the stage. I was totally prepared for that performance, it was the day before my recital and I was completely mentally distracted because I was really angry about something. And no matter what I did to prepare, I couldn’t recover form it.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?
JL: Super slow, and most of the time isolating one hand or the other. No matter what instrument it’s on, I will find the right hand notes and play those in the rhythm that they are whether its multi percussion or marimba or snare drum. Unless it’s snare drum, because it’s not about the coordination and more about rhythm reading and time. But marimba and multi percussion it’s usually about a coordination issue so just working one hand at a time and then trying to slowly put them back together.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JL: Quite a bit I would say in the month before a performance. Let’s just assume I’m practicing something that’s taking me six months to learn and memorize, in the last month and a half I would record myself a lot but not too much before that. I don’t record myself until I really feel like I’m running something. And I’m always practicing in front of a mirror so I’m always checking my technical relationships but I don’t usually video tape to determine what my technical problems are. I would do it to listen to whether things are musically coming out the way I want them to.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JL: Yeah I don’t think I really have too much to add to that except that in the actually physical practicing that I do, aside from the visualization, I have very specific goals. I always have weekly goals, daily goals, and what things will I accomplish in each practice session and it’s something that I revise. And as I get closer and closer to the performance I revise it more and more often. I start off with a six month plan, and literally I have calendars for pieces that I’m learning. If I’m preparing a full recital with five or six pieces on it, I’ll have a calendar that says ok I’m going to do this piece this day, and I always have rotations. If I’m practicing one marimba piece that’s super hard, one that’s pretty easy and then doing a multi piece and a timpani piece, obviously I can’t practice every piece every day and I can’t even practice all of one piece every day, it’s impossible. So I make grids and matrix how I’m going to run things. And I’ll do it at six months and I’ll stick to that for about two months, and then I’ll revise it four months out, then I’ll revise it three months out, then I’ll revise it two months out and then I’ll revise it almost every week after that. Because I’m making the plan but you don’t always follow the plan you make. And it’s funny because I always have a plan but allow myself flexibility. I accomplished that so I can move on to something else. If I didn’t accomplish it, I have to do it over and over again until I do. For this reason, I have to allow myself flexibility in the schedule. I think that some people would say that I probably spend too much time organizing my practice time, but it works really well for me and I like to do that so it makes me feel better. I don’t have time blocks, generally it’s goal oriented. So when it comes to two or three weeks before a performance, I’m at the point where I know where my problem spots are, things that I need more time on, technical runs on the marimba or whatever. So and I have say four or five tough spots and I’ve got seven days during the week and I’m practicing three hours a day, so how do I divide that evenly and get a full runs and get section runs. So I will say I’m going to work A-D on Monday. I’m going to work D-F on Tuesday I’m going to work F-I on Wednesday and then make a three day rotation of those three. But then every day I will run those hard technical spot, every
single day. And I write this on my chart too, A-D on Monday and then run technical spot on page one and technical spot on page two and then I don’t do runs of the full piece every day. It would most likely be an every other day rotation and it would become less and less as it gets to the performance because generally I feel like I psyche myself out. If I was doing runs everyday before the performance, I would get tired of the piece. I would expend all my emotion before I got to the performance and/or I would make mistakes and then worry that I’m going to make those mistakes again. So I try to avoid that by not running the piece too much. It sounds weird, but generally I freak out enough six months in advance that by the time it’s two to three weeks before the performance, I know I’m ready and I just have to not get in my own head. Yeah, right.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JL: Yes, I do. First thing I will do is run the piece at like half temp with no dynamics and no feeling because again I don’t want to freak myself out. If I have runs that I need to run, little technical things, I’ll try to run those a couple of times but I’ll do a run of the entire piece at a very, very slow tempo for any and all instruments and all pieces. So that’s like my first practice thing and then I will likely not play the rest of the day. And I have a couple of pieces of music that I will listen to, they mean something to me and it doesn’t mean anything to anybody else. There’s a piece of music, a Pat Metheny tune called Travels, which I listened to before my senior recital at Capitol in 2002. That was the first performance I ever had that I felt like I had expressed what I wanted to express and I wasn’t angry at myself for missing notes, even though I did. That was a really pivotal moment for me so I always listen to that piece of music right before I play, in the hour before, and I’ll just put on my headphones because I don’t want to talk to anybody. I don’t know how people have huge conversations or even small talk with people before they play, I don’t want to talk to anybody, and so I’ll just put my headphones on and find my own space. There’s that and a couple of other tunes that I’ll listen to that are really soothing. I will never listen to the music that I’m playing and I’ll never listen to percussion music. And then I have a little mantra and actually I told somebody what it was and they said that it sounded really negative but I still say it. The mantra is that I am ready, I do have something to say and it doesn’t really matter anyway. I try not to take myself too seriously. Who really cares if I miss a note, really? It’s not going to ruin my life and it doesn’t define me as a human being. Once you go through that, you really believe it. So that’s what I do and then obviously I do something to warm my hands up, but usually it’s just chordal things or doing these simple warm up things that I would do at the beginning of any practice session, definitely not running anything. My phrasing does change, and it changes from day to day too. That’s actually another thing that I make sure to incorporate into my practice early on. I allow myself the flexibility to say something differently and still know what I’m saying. I learned this from either Mark Ford or Christopher Deane, but I think I learned it way before that, but taking a tune that’s in straight eights and swinging it. Obviously that’s an extreme example but just playing the piece or changing the rhythm, whatever the rhythm might be, just changing the rhythm up or playing it extremely loud when it’s supposed to be extremely soft or playing it extremely metronomic when it’s supposed to be rubato or rubato when it’s supposed to be metronomic or something like that. I also try to prepare myself for the
fact that I’m going to be distracted by random sounds that are happening. But also allowing myself to say things in any practice, to say things a different way and I think that that’s sort of come out in the styles of music that I like to play too, that have a lot of freedom in expression. I like Bach, I love it, I love playing it on the marimba but I wouldn’t do all pieces of music like that where everybody’s sort of expecting to hear it a certain way. So the flexibility for me to express things in different ways at different times is partially due to the music that I choose to play. And I like that because I don’t feel the same every day. I couldn’t prescribe for myself exactly how I’m supposed to feel on the day of my performance, I wouldn’t say like extremely different by any means, but little nuances, to me.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JL: I started playing percussion in fifth grade band but actually, I started on the flute, I did flute for five weeks and then I said I don’t like this instrument. I actually wanted to play percussion because I played organ, I took organ lessons when I was in second grade because my parents bought me this little keyboard, like a thirty key synthesizer, and my parents had an organ. They got it as a wedding present and nobody ever knew how to play. It’s a double keyboard, foot pedal, and full two octave foot pedal. And I started learning how to play in second grade and so when I started in fifth grade I wanted to play the bells. But as far as my primary instrument, well I don’t know. I think I’m all over the place but I would say multi percussion and marimba is what I do. And when did I start doing that? I didn’t start playing marimba until I got to college, in my undergrad and I didn’t really get into multi percussion until I was at UNT, and that’s pretty late I think. But I always had in my mind, when I went through my undergrad I didn’t really want to have a focus, because I always knew I wanted to teach and I wanted to be able to get a broad background in everything.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JL: Middle school, none. High school, I started practicing my senior year when I was auditioning for college. But I didn’t have, not as an excuse, but I didn’t have a percussion ensemble. I was in marching band and I did some youth wind symphony and orchestra stuff but I never had anything that I actually had to practice until I started auditioning for school. College, during my undergrad I was practicing eight to ten hours a day I know that for a fact. And then it got less and less as I got through because you get all this other crap and in graduate school you have papers to write and a job to do and practicing ten hours a day is really impossible. So I would say all the way through graduate school, it probably worked itself around to an average of probably four to five hours a day. And now I’m in my early career and I will be lucky to get an hour of practice a day when I’m not preparing for a recital. When I am preparing for a recital I make sure to get about three hours a day, five days a week. I won’t usually have the time
to practice every day because teaching days are way longer than others. So that’s currently as well.

10. Yes. Mostly because I know that the way that I’ve structured my practice habits has allowed me to feel comfortable and prepared everywhere I go. On a musical level that is the reason why I feel they’ve contributed but I also feel like they’ve contributed to my success in getting a job and just being influential to my students. Because they see the dedication and the regularity of my process and it’s clearly influential to them. So I feel like that’s a success. And I think that’s just in terms of me getting a job, I think the fact that I am very organized, I think the way I organize my practice is basically the way I organize my life. I always have goals but I allow myself to be flexible and I take all of that in to my teaching. How do I judge my success as a teacher? I don’t really know yet but I feel that people know that I have that skill of organization and that’s part of the reason why I got the job in the first place, they can see that I know how to get things done. Yes, yes.

Biography

Julie Licata has served as Assistant Professor of Music at State University of New York, College at Oneonta since the fall of 2008. At Oneonta, Julie teaches ensembles and private lessons that span a wide range of percussion instruments and styles, including West African drumming, Indonesian Gamelan, Brazilian Samba, solo marimba, orchestral percussion and drum set. Specific ensembles taught include the World Percussion Ensemble and the Classical Percussion Ensemble, as well as the SUNY Oneonta Drum Line (a.k.a The Drag'n Rolls). Julie also regularly teaches Music Cultures of the World and Music for Listeners, a survey of Western classical music.

Julie's current performance and research focus lies in contemporary music performance, specifically solo and chamber percussion music with interactive computer processing. Her doctoral dissertation, entitled “Physical Gesture, Spatialization, Form and Transformation in Watershed I/IV, for Solo Percussion and Real-Time Computer Spatialization by Roger Reynolds” includes several analytical approaches demonstrated through embedded video excerpts of her performances of Watershed IV. The document also includes lengthy interviews with Roger Reynolds, Steven Schick and her musical partner/engineer, Greg Dixon. Interviews topics range from the creation and performance of Watershed to the preservation of electronic music. As an advocate and active performer of new music, Julie has developed relationships with many great composers, premiering and commissioning numerous works over the last ten years by composers such as Thomas Licata, Greg Dixon, Chapman Welch and Scott Comanzo. Significant recent performances include: Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States (SEAMUS), International Computer Music Conference (ICMC), New Music Focus Week at SUNY Oneonta, New Genre Festival in Tulsa, Oklahoma, NOW Music Festival at Capital University and numerous performances at the Center for Experimental Music and Intermedia at the University of North Texas.
In addition to contemporary music performance, Julie is also active in the field of ethnomusicology. Julie spent the summer of 2008 performing, recording and transcribing traditional drumming of the Ewe people in the Volta Region of Ghana. These transcriptions and recordings are invaluable tools used in her classes every semester. She is planning to travel to Indonesia in the next few years to expand her repertoire of traditional gamelan music.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

FM: I don’t really have a regular warm up routine. When I perform with the orchestra I just warm up while playing with the orchestra except if there is some difficult, complicated things to play right at the beginning of the rehearsal. I don’t really have any warm up before anything because I always start playing with something not complicated. It’s not really necessary on the timpani. If it would be some complicated things on snare drum, yes, I would probably just do warm up exercises. Just warm up for me is nothing special.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

FM: Yes, the first thing I do is read the music. Really read the music and try to check the sense of the piece, try to know where the complicated places are, the hardest places to play. That really is the first thing. The second thing after that is to learn it really well just by reading the complicated places of the piece. And only after that, when I really know it, I play the instrument. The first thing is just hearing the music and trying to put it in my head. That is the most important. It is very important to know what you play. The second step is I try to make the movements. Not only making the movements but also changing the tunings. Tuning is also a big deal and you need to know that well. And then it depends, if it’s to play alone or with some other musicians, with someone that really needs to practice, it depends. It can be slow and fast and faster or more or less with the tempo. If it is some orchestra piece I listen to the piece. And then I practice the piece at just some playable tempo.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

FM: I don’t listen to recordings before playing except for orchestra music. It is just not to listen to what I have to play, it is to listen to what happens in the orchestra. I never listen to the piece before to play by myself, I mean solo piece or things like that. I know now with YouTube, and other similar resources, a lot of people do that. I don’t like this process because you have to build your personal interpretation and find the way and what the composer had in mind, by yourself. If you listen to other interpretation first, you will start to practice with an idea that is not your idea. It is the idea of someone else. So I don’t like that way.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?
FM: It’s not memorized in a sense of I could not play without the music. I play very unusually without the music. But, of course, it’s memorized. I know perfectly what I have to play. It is just the part is just the support. But I could play without. But in the music we play, we always have a lot of things to manage. So managing, I think for me it’s easier to read something even if I know it 99% by memory. To make another effort, spent some other energy just for this one person. The balance of the energy spent is really too bad. But of course, memorization is already done before starting to play the first time because I already know the music in my head. Then there is a second way to memorize. It is just a physical memory. It is just the movements, how you move, where you go, what happens there. So practicing is just the way some movements have to be practiced, have to be studied. If it is the right one or the wrong one, if we can change it or do better. Then we just need to memorize it. It is very important because when you play a Concerto, when you have twenty or twenty five minutes of music without really a rest, you don’t have time to think, ‘Well, so what will happen now?’ Anything can happen, especially with timpani, you don’t know instruments that you choose. You can have a problem with a pedal or just miss something and so you have to listen to others. If you don’t know exactly the music in your head and the movements you have to do with hands or feet, every time something wrong will happen. That’s the problem.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

FM: It depends. Just try to reduce the problem. Very often people create themselves the problem. It’s not really problematic but sometimes it is. Always find the best way of playing, the best movement and the solution. And for that it is without the instrument. 99% of this work has to be done without the instrument. Just think and imagine what you are doing and don’t play on the instruments. Eighty or Ninety percent of the solution is already done. Also, we don’t have the problem we have with the instruments. We don’t have the instruments all the time. And so it’s always without the instruments is the biggest part of the problem. When you practice, practice the solution and always in tempo. The difficult things I always taught in tempo. Just to have a physical idea of what is possible or not. A lot of people start slowly and increase the tempo. But what works slowly sometimes doesn’t always work fast. And so they waste the time because they will notice it doesn’t work with the tempo. They have to find sticking or whatever. I go directly to almost the tempo and so this will work, I have to practice it a little bit but it will work. Or if it doesn’t work, find something else. For instance, in a piece I’m playing, in the third movement, there is a place that can work in a certain sticking in about eighty percent of the tempo. At the tempo it can’t work, not possible so when it happened to me I immediately noticed the tempo didn’t work and I needed to find something else that worked. When you have found it, then you can practice slowly and increase the tempo.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

FM: Now, my age, never. When the performance is recorded but not the way to practice. For me you have to listen and control what you do when you play. I understand when
you are a younger performer, you don’t have the experience to do that. But it is just to help. You should always listen and you should always have an idea of what you’ve done, and what you are doing. Because listening after one hour, one week, or one day, it is too late. If you listen right now when you are playing you can correct the changes. I think that is the best.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

FM: No, I know I need to be ready at this time. I try to be ready for the performance. So no, if I am ready, I view the performance as just one more practice session. And that’s it. Something that has to be considered is when you have a performance you shouldn’t spend a lot of energy in doing some things. Some people play ten times before and when they have to play they are just tired because they’ve spent too much energy. That is not necessary. If you know perfectly your music you know this place has to be practiced just a little bit more, I need to warm up on this before, or you will feel more comfortable if you try it once. But if you are ready, it is just for the head. It is psychological because if you are ready on this day, keep your energy for the good performance and the concentration. I generally don’t practice. I sing a lot the music I have to play. It is also very important for the tempo. Just think of what will happen at this place and this place. It is like a movie. Just look at the movie in your head. This is what I do and I don’t really practice, it is too late.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

FM: I don’t think about it for hours. Just you know what will happen and just to be ready is to know what you will do at this time. So it is not necessary to spend one full day to think about it. Just in the morning take ten or fifteen minutes to do what you have to do. And just before, think about it.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

FM: Fourteen. I liked playing timpani and played it in the orchestra. I’ve been playing timpani for almost twenty years now. I wanted to play timpani just because it is two hundred years older than other repertoire to play and much more interesting.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

FM: In middle and high school I would say one hour or something like that. Then in higher education probably four, five, six hours. Then early career you start to not practice really, maybe one hour. Currently now when I have time and when I have the instruments. Nothing is regular now. But you know, by chance, timpani doesn’t really require a big practice. You just need to study the new pieces. But if you really study with the music, with the paper for the part, on the instrument it doesn’t take much time. In our professional life, we don’t have the instruments and we don’t have the time.
mean I play with the orchestra, I teach, I have other activities so I really don’t have time. Depending on how well you know the music, and it depends, you may have to practice a little bit more. Next week we play Rite of Spring and of course I did practice that twenty or twenty-five years ago, but right now I won’t practice it. I will just read the music a couple of times just to remind myself what happens here and there. I know the piece. This is why it is always, in many cases, better to learn the piece on the paper because you memorize it and then when you have to play it again you know what will happen because it is in your mind, and its in your head. If you practice like crazy on the instrument you will memorize movements, physically, and then when it’s over, you forget. If it isn’t connected to something intellectual, it doesn’t work. You know it is exactly the same. For example, a tennis player or golf player or whatever. He will not practice a movement. He will strike the ball at a certain place but it is the brain that is connecting not only the arm and for us it’s the same. If you just move on the instruments without any connection you will not memorize.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

FM: I don’t know. I don’t really have habits practicing. Yes and no because I practiced really a lot twenty five or thirty years ago but now I practice a lot less. Just because I practice with my brain now much more than thirty years ago. I ask for my students, for instance, just to play their studies without the music because they need to memorize some things. Very often when I teach I don’t have the music because I know the studies. I know everything that is written, accents, dynamic, etc. and they are playing with the music and they don’t know that. They don’t notice there is an accent or that they are missing a forte or something and I always tell them, ‘You are playing and I’m not. You have the music and I don’t have it. You don’t know it and I do That’s not normal. You should know.’ I understand it is complicated when you are young and you have a lot to practice and so this is why I don’t really ask them to play a piece and then leave it and play another one or two others and leave it. Now we play something and we leave it in the corner, we do something else and then after two or three months, we will get back to the first one and play it again. So we try to give this comfort when we play, to know what will happen when we play and what we need to do. This is why now I don’t need to practice so much now because I know the music first. And when you travel or when you are busy you cannot practice on the instruments, just read. When you are on the train or plane it is easy to read. I think that is the good way.

Biography

No doubt Frédéric Macearez is one of the most active musician of his generation. Through his different musical and pedagogical activities, he always shows his concern for growth of Arts of Percussion, for excellence of musical performance and for establishment of strong links between the different actors involved in all the percussion fields.

Currently Principal Timpanist of the Orchestre de Paris (Christoph Eschenbach, musical
director), Frédéric Macarez is also famous as a soloist and a chamber music player. He travels all around Europe, Asia, North and South America, where he performs solo recitals, concertos and chamber music concerts with the best musicians (Christoph Eschenbach, Tzimon Barto, Martha Argerich, Marie-Josèphe Jude, Alexandre Rabinovitch, Jesse Levine, Sandrine François …) and Paris-Percu, the chamber music ensemble he founded. Teaching since 25 years, he is actually Director of the percussion studies at the Conservatoire National de Région de Paris.

His very popular master classes and clinics take him through all European countries, America and Asia, visiting some of the most famous schools. He has also taught in the main European Summer Courses. Moreover, Frédéric Macarez is the founder and Director of the International Percussion Festival "perKumania", and he is also the Director of the “PAS International Instrument Competition” in Paris and the Director of the competition “perKu en Herbe,” for children.

Composer of works for percussion published by A. Leduc and Alfonce Production, he is also an Editor for the percussion music by the French publisher Gérard Billaudot. His works are now very popular and performed all over the world by students and professional performers.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

PM: First I should preface this by saying that I practice two things. I practice my percussion instruments, obviously. I also have been taking voice lessons off and on for about ten years, but quite seriously for the last year or so. I’ve been studying Hindustani voice, specifically Dhrupad. Yes, I do have a warm up routine.

I practice marimba a lot because it is a particular interest of mine. I do lots of arpeggios, scales, and all kinds of modes – major/minor scales, different kinds of artificial scales from the Slonimsky book, and different things I’ve made up myself with various combinations. I also use some theme and variation processes which I’ve adapted from my study of tabla drumming. I’ve figured out how to work those on marimba where they are actually quite interesting to listen to. I use them a lot in my super marimba music and they are a great way to warm-up your hands. I will take about ten to fifteen minutes doing that. I also almost always sight-read some Bach chorales for a good fifteen or twenty minutes or so.

For voice, we have a system called Akar, which is singing on the syllable ‘Ah.’ The idea is to open up the sound before you get into text and other things. It is a lot of long held tones because your singing with the drone. Long held tones in specific justly tuned intervals for a full breath and then very slow and rapidly accelerated scale patterns up and down and various ragas and modes. That also takes about a half hour or so.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

PM: I think it is contextual and it depends on what I’m doing. I learn a lot of new solo music. I work in a lot of different areas. I do a lot of non-improvised music but I also have a whole life and career as an improvisor too. Sometimes I play music that straddles both. If I’m playing non-improvised music, especially solo music, it depends on the nature of the piece. Some pieces I can approach from a more global perspective. I can read through them and figure out what’s going on in terms of the architecture and hone in on important details. Other pieces that I’ve commissioned by Stewart Smith or Charles Wuorinen are too hard. You can’t, or at least I can’t, read them. So for those I just take them beat-by-beat, measure-by-measure.

My system for learning them is pretty mechanical and it comes a lot from talking with Steve Schick and other people about these ideas. It’s basically a chunk method. I take a small amount of material, sometimes half a beat and sometimes two measures, depending on the nature of the material. I take it way under tempo. I solve various problems like
sticking problems or articulation problems and then gradually increase the tempo. Then I will work on the next chunk in isolation. I will string them together as one chunk.

I’m different than Schick in that I don’t memorize everything because some pieces I find that I can get to the essence of the piece better by not memorizing it. Other pieces I find that memorization is important. It depends on the piece. If I’m memorizing the piece, I start the memorization process right away. For me, it is a different approach behind the instrument. If I am not going to memorize the piece then I’m careful to always have the music in front of me, getting used to that second reference point visually.

It is also a different kind of mental wiring. The key to “chunk” practicing, when you get section A and section B learned and put them together, you have to slow down your tempo again. That is one of the most important keys and I talk to my students about this because you can play the first measure very well in isolation and when you throw them together, the assumption is going to be that they’ll go, but it’s generally not true because that’s a new rewiring of the brain that you have to do when you put them together. This is what I use my metronome for the most - to keep me from going too fast. My tendency, which I find is true for almost everyone else, is that I always want to go too fast. I can hear what it is supposed to sound like but my ears, my mind, and body are not all in alignment yet to actually make that happen. I use the metronome a lot. I don’t use it so much for time sake but it’s more just to keep me slow. It is hard, slow and painstaking work. I can usually figure out when I get a new piece - I have been doing this long enough - how far away I’ll be ready to play the piece. Sometimes it is two months and sometimes it’s eight months. Sometimes I really need that much time.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

PM: Very little of the music I learn has been recorded because I’m doing so much brand new stuff. But if it has, I usually check it out right away. I think at this point I am secure enough with who I am and what I’m doing with my own life that I’m comfortable with developing my own interpretation, or simply using someone else’s if it is really good. I don’t always feel a need to reinvent the wheel. If someone has interpreted a piece and come up with ideas, approaches, mallet choices, mechanical things that work, and realizes the intent of the composer, then I’m fine to just go with that. But honestly, I’d say maybe five percent of the music I learn has been recorded.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

PM: I just put in an article to percussive notes about this from when I played the Wuorinen solo here two years ago at the convention. I’d say that solo repertoire is about half and half. I do memorize some, and some I don’t. It just depends. If I’m memorizing it - yes - there are a lot of things I do. I spend a fair amount of time away from the instrument working on it. I do that in two ways: 1) I often just sit with the music and read through it. As I am reading through it I’m trying to hear in my mind what’s
happening, but I also actually visualize moving around the keyboard. 2) I will often close
the score and attempt to play through it in my head, but what I actually see in my head is
the keyboard. I see myself going through it and presumably hear the intervals, if I can.
But sometimes it is too dense. That visualization technique for me is really essential. For
example, I will be doing that tonight with Blake’s piece. Even though I have it
memorized, just to make sure a few things are solidified.

The third thing I will do, if it allows for it, I will do some kind of harmonic, pitch, or
rhythmic analysis. It helps me to construct another framework to work on. But I don’t
get too crazy with that. A friend of mine once said, ‘there is a big difference between a
piece of music and a piece of music theory.’

Most music, I play because I am emotionally attracted to it or in it intellectually. I don’t
play it for its architecture. That’s not usually the most compelling reason for me. I
usually am interested in how it sounds and the sound world it creates, but the architecture
can be the means to an end. I don’t get too obsessed with that, and ultimately, what I end
up doing is building a house of the piece in my head. That architecture might be partly
analytical but sometimes it is partly poetic. So a certain section will remind me of
beautiful woman or a sunset or something. It might be corny. Or maybe it’s not even
something I can put into words. Music is music, you can’t really talk about it at the end
of the day.

At the instrument, I don’t know if I do anything different per say. I guess there comes a
certain point where I have to make sure the score is not up there at all. I have to get used
to coming up and playing it without any kind of reassurance around. So I will actually
take the music stands away. It’s kind of mundane but it’s important. I usually have a
music stand at home in front of the marimba full of stuff I’m working on, but when I’m
memorizing a piece, I’ll actually move it to another part of the room so I get used to that
openness and more direct conduit with the audience. For me, I don’t want to get on stage
for the first time when that happens. To avoid memory slips the visualization work for
me is the key.

Greg Zuber is the only other person who has taken the plunge in learning Charles’ piece.
I put together this consortium to commission and he and I are the only two that have
learned it yet. We had a conversation about this and he said that had read this book by
Sandra Blakeslee about brain mapping.

Sandra had cited some research that these scientists had done that was very interesting.
They had taken a large group of people and divided them into three sub-groups. None of
them had ever thrown darts before. They picked darts because it is fairly easy to get a
basic handle on. They had everyone throw a game of darts and they took a baseline
score. For the next month one group threw darts every day for a half hour to try to get
better. The second group would throw for fifteen minutes and visualize throwing it for
the second fifteen minutes. It wasn’t like they were seeing themselves like a movie
camera but they felt what they were doing and visualized it. The third group just did the
visualization for thirty minutes. They didn’t throw a single dart for the next month. Then
they retested them and what was interesting is they all got better. The group that got better the most was the group that did the mixture of the visualization and the actual throwing, which is what I do here. I do visualization but I also get behind the instrument. In second place was the group that did just visualization and third place was the group that just threw the darts. It confirmed what I knew from studying great pianists like Glenn Gould and Vladimir Horowitz. This is a lot of times how they learned music, just visually. I was very lucky, in 2003 I toured with Keiko Abe for three and a half weeks, playing with her. That’s how she learns a lot of music - totally away from the marimba. So it works but it takes a lot of self-discipline. Tremendous amounts of self-discipline. It takes a lot of concentration. It is very tiring. You can find yourself getting one page in and then you are thinking of something else. You have to build that muscle because that is what happens on stage. You are playing and suddenly you think about this and boom, you’re lost.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

PM: I isolate them just like anyone would do, but I have begun to be more sophisticated in my analysis of what the problem is. Sometimes it is not always what I might think it is if I’m not thinking about it carefully. Sometimes it is as simple as moving your hips to problem solve. Sometimes it has more to do with the two bars before, making sure that I hear where the melodic line is going. Sometimes it is a hearing issue. If it is a contrapuntal passage, perhaps I’m not always really sure what I’m trying to do contrapuntally. Once I clarify that in my mind, I can play the part. Sometimes it is more mechanical like, I have a chop problem. I can’t do this thing so I have to develop some exercises to build some muscle and coordination. Honestly, that is not much the case anymore. Maybe it’s just that I’ve reached a certain level of facility in my playing. I practice but what I’ve learned are the problems are different, very contextual. I have to be honest about what they are and figure out a solution.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

PM: Fairly often, usually more as I’m getting closer to a performance. I’m recording myself singing maybe once a week or so to check-up. It’s a little brutal to listen back to it. My teacher is in India right now so we are doing Skype lessons, which actually works great. I’m really surprised. They work amazingly well. I record the whole lesson. It’s an oral tradition so he’ll sing a phrase and then I sing it back. When I go back and put the recording on the computer, his is an A+ and mine is about a C-. Yeah, I definitely record myself.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

PM: I will purposely make myself uncomfortable before I play. It depends on the nature of the music. If I’m playing a non-improvised piece where I just have to walk on the stage and play, I personally find that very hard. It is nice to be able to warm into stuff. The concert tomorrow is tough. It is only a four minute piece but it is technical and tonal of course - it’s Blake’s music - and I don’t get to warm-up. He gets to play for a half
hour and then say all these nice things about me on stage, which makes it even harder. Then I have to walk on stage, play, then leave. I will often do things like, grab my mallets after dinner and go run the piece, no warm-up, nothing. I will often dim the lights in the room. I will often lower the marimba a little bit. Sometimes I get to gigs and the height adjustment mechanism doesn’t work. Not so much re-create specifics of performance but I want to create the feeling of being out of my comfort zone. That’s what I want. I want to have that feeling of “whoa, this doesn’t feel good,” because that’s usually how it feels. At tomorrow’s concert I know the vibe will be at the right height but I won’t know about the lights. Mike Burritt might be sitting in the front row, that messes with your head a little bit, right? Those are the kinds of things I try to do. The recording machine is good for that. It helps. It puts a little pressure on me. It is like playing in front of people. Mostly I just try to make myself really uncomfortable.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

PM: It depends on the nature of the performance. If I’m playing my own music, like a super marimba concert, which is all my own compositions and involve a lot of improvisation, those are usually one to four hours, longer stretches of time, I will almost always make sure I get in some kind of long walk, preferably in nature. I will be careful to eat well and I will try to rest for forty minutes or so before I go in. I usually don’t warm-up much for those except to get my mics all set and get my hands loosened up. Then I go backstage and rest. For something like tomorrow’s concert, not really. I’m going to be running around, going to stuff, and talking to people. It is going to be like, ‘go on stage and play.’ You just have to do the best you can. But if I’m doing a big solo thing, especially if it is my own stuff, I will definitely try to create this space where my mind is more open so I really am listening to the room and what is happening.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

PM: I was about nine years old when I started playing and I got really into mallet playing when I was thirteen or so.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

PM: I usually bank a lot of time in the summers. I still practice a lot. I like practicing even if I don’t have concerts coming up. It is more like a lifestyle issue. If I don’t have anything to do, I usually just go practice because I enjoy it. To me it’s like being in the woods or being with my family. It is just part of who I am. Even if I stopped performing I think I would still practice everyday and play. But if you’re saying the number of hours a day, it depends on the time of year. In the summertime, it could be up to eight or ten hours a day. I sing for three or four hours and I will play a lot of marimba. It’s hard to say, I’m composing too. I spend all day in the basement making music. But in terms of the school year, like middle and high school, I was practicing a fair amount. Three or four
hours a day. Same with college, early career, and currently. Now, I am getting in a couple of hours of singing and a couple of hours of percussion time. Some weeks I’m doing a little less because I’m composing. I have a whole other career as a composer where I am writing string quartets and orchestra pieces and so some weeks I will be more wrapped up with that and my practice time will compress a little bit. But when I finish a big project it will open up again and I will practice more. It averages out to about three or four hours a day and five or six hours in the summer.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

PM: Absolutely, in a couple of ways. It has helped me learn the notes, get on stage, and play them correctly, most of the time. More than anything, it has confirmed and reaffirmed a lifestyle choice - a total dedication to the art form. In my case anyway, a particularly profound lack of interest in the commercial aspects of it. My manager will send out emails about what I’m doing and while that is part of the professional thing, at the end of the day, honestly I could care less about all that stuff. Everyone in this room has these long bios but what it is really about at the end of the day is getting behind the instruments and playing and making music. I think there is huge value in that in terms of the quality of my life. It’s a lot like people who have a real strong religious conviction. It is an anchor for them. I think it is that way for me. The devotion to music and it always being there. I give to it but it gives back to me in a lot of huge ways. I have a lot of friends who do triathlons with me. Some are bankers and they have these nine to five jobs, and they make a ton of money, but they just don’t have that sense of grounding and deeper fulfillment that I have, like a lot of my musician friends have, and I really think it has to do with the practice thing. Honestly, it is not about performing the piece. Performing is like another practice session in a way. That’s how I’ve begun to view it. Sometimes they go well and sometimes they don’t go well, but they are certainly more intense. It’s great way to share what you are working on with other people, but at the end of the day, it is just a life work in progress. You do it as long as you can, then you pass away, and someone else takes the torch. I stopped getting so uptight about them because it is just another step on the ladder and that ladder goes on forever. It is not actually a vertical ladder but a horizontal one for me.

In terms of how it contributes to my success, it depends on what you mean by success. If it has to do with my material success, I make decent money, I have this teaching job, and I’m doing a lot of good gigs and stuff. So sure, it has definitely done that. I had to win the audition. But I think success honestly is more about the fact that when I get up I still feel the burn. I’m thirty-seven now and I’ve been doing this for twenty-seven years and I still get up and want to play and sing. Tonight my parents are coming in and we are going to dinner but I know I will want to get back to my room to practice my singing before my roommate gets back. I am really excited and stoked about it too. That is why a guy like Steve Schick is so interesting to me. I know it’s the same way with him. It is a process - it flows in and it flows out, it nurtures you. It is interesting and exciting and you keep doing it. One day I’ll die but I won’t regret one second of it.
Biography

Payton MacDonald is a composer/improviser/percussionist/singer. He has created a unique body of work that draws upon his extensive experience with East Indian tabla drumming, American military rudimental drumming, Jazz, European classical music, and the American experimental tradition. He works across multiple musical genres, often at the same time. MacDonald studied music at the University of Michigan and the Eastman School of Music. His composition teachers include Sydney Hodkinson, Robert Morris, Dave Rivello, Bright Sheng, and Augusta Read Thomas. His percussion teachers include John Beck and Michael Udow. Further studies include tabla with Bob Becker and Pandit Sharda Sahai, and Dhrupad vocal with Ramakant Gundecha. The New York Times described him as an "energetic soloist" and The Los Angeles Times described him as an "...inventive, stylistically omnivorous composer and gifted performer ..." MacDonald is an Associate Professor of Music at William Paterson University.
March 10, 2013

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BM: Depends on what I’m practicing. If I’m practicing marimba, yes I do. I’ll go through some basic terms, double lateral, things like that, spreading, just to get my hands warmed up. Usually if I’m playing drum set or snare drum or something like that, I’ll do a little bit of basic stick control type things. In most cases, through limited practice time I jump right in, but it just depends. I’d like to say yes all the time but it isn’t always convenient.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BM: I personally use a lot of casual types of names for things. My first run I call it a ‘slop through.’ I do a general read and close to the tempo as possible so I can determine trouble spots in the music. I can determine spots that aren’t going to require much work. By doing that it gives me a general outline as to what I’m up against. Is it going to be something that is going to take a minimal amount of time or is it going to be labor intensive? Just depending on the technical needs and certain phrases. That is typically the most efficient for me because of the limited practice time. Again, it is one of those practice times that I can again take the approach of whatever is the hardest. I work on that everyday. Then all the other things, depending on their level of difficulty, get added into the routine. I think of it like cooking a meal. Whatever is going to take the longest to cook, I start first. So at the end everything is hot at the same time. So that is kind of my go to.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

BM: If I have a good recording I use it in the capacity of that it becomes part of my practice routine because I’ve got teaching software called the Amazing Slow Downer. Especially if I’m going to play the recorded audio, I will put it in the Slow Downer or I’ll play along with it and I can reduce the tempo. I’m trying as much as I can to play in the context so that as many elements of the process of learning are incorporated as I go. I think that makes my time spent more efficient. If I’m taking a four or eight bar chunk and looping it, I can use the Amazing Slow Downer and I can play right along and I can hear the audio I’m playing along with that or I can learn that. If it is purely a recording that has some element of regular time to it then I can play along with that artist. Possibly mimic their style if you want to, or things like that in the process. So I do use recordings. If it’s orchestral, then I’ll listen along and write things in my parts. I don’t look at it from a pure point of view where I don’t want to taint my perspective and accidentally mimic someone else and be ingenuine to whatever my thought process will be. I feel like I can make my own decisions on that even after I’ve heard someone play it.
because I can decide whether I want to do it that way or not. Maybe a technical limitation requires me to play it a certain way. In the end, I always end it with my version of it, if you will. So I do use recordings.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BM: If I’m going to give a recital that includes a mallet keyboard piece, it is going to be widely memorized. If it is a snare drum, multiple percussion, or timpani, it is more than unlikely it will be memorized. I may know it to a level of familiarity, where I don’t really need the music, but I’m not going to take my chances typically with that. But usually I go the memorization route with the mallets.

The way I teach students to memorize something, and what I believe and do myself, are three levels of memory. There’s aural memory, so you know it and what it’s like. To me, that is the weakest kind of memory because there is nothing proactive about it. It is purely reactive. The second level is kinesthetic or kinetic. It is muscle memory and I think that is really good to be able rely on that because your body knows where to go. Then when you hear something, like you might have skipped a note or something is off, you can make a physical adjustment and dial things in. You encounter that a lot when you play on different instruments or you’re borrowing instruments or visiting and playing on equipment you’re not very familiar with. I think the best form of memory is visual memory, being able to close my eyes and visualize myself performing. I’m using the aural and muscle memory to watch myself perform this piece and when I get tense and it goes blank, then I know it isn’t truly memorized and there is a trouble spot so I can track that. I don’t really even have to be at the instrument to practice that. My level of knowledge at that point is harsh so if I were to perform at that time I would be relying on part of my aural or muscle memory to get through that moment, which may or may not help. I can draw blank and have a problem. When I’ve got the visual memory going I really feel like I can rely on that and I’ve got a lot of confidence to get through it. I feel like it is a second teacher perspective because I can watch myself doing it. On that level, I know that I really know the material.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BM: I look at the issue and it depends how deep the problem is. If I’ve built up a wall and no matter what happens I get to that spot I always stop. Then I’ll literally go to that place where I made that mistake and I’ll go to the one beat before it and one beat after it, and I’ll play that until I have it down. Then I’ll back up a beat and add a beat, and over the course of time, I’m ironing out the wrinkles. I’m getting lots of reps on whatever the problem is and being able to get into it and get out of it with confidence. It is a tedious process but that’s how I deal with the trouble spots. Those usually are our transitions. Whether they are a key change, instrument shift, drums change, or whatever, I try to clarify the moment. I’ll take the areas and work my way out until the problem is gone and then I can move onto the next one. I try to put it into context to make sure I’ve got it and try to get enough reps. When I’ve learned a mistake I’ve got to try and do my best to
put in as many reps doing it right. If I’ve done it incorrectly, I’ve got to do my best to get in the process and unlearn that problem. Sometimes it’s easier than others because of personal limitations or ability and skill levels.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

BM: I don’t record myself and I definitely don’t practice what I preach with that. If I have that luxury of watching a recording of a performance and if I’ve got the fortune of being able to perform it, than I can learn from that. But on the front end, unfortunately I typically don’t have enough time to be able to do that. Or I haven’t taken the time to get the resources set-up to make it easier to do. If I spent a little more time doing that, it would probably be easier to do it and manipulate.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BM: Yes, in the aspect of knowing that a performance is coming up and I’ve got everything down or I have a trouble spot here and there. Bottom line is that I have to be able to perform a piece in its entirety. Maybe a week out or two weeks out I’ll start doing long runs. Instead of stopping at incremental periods, working on this section, I’ll do whole length runs. That will start to become more important the closer I get to the performance because ultimately I’ve got to have the endurance mentally and physically. Also, I find that the closer I get to the performance time, and especially when I have very limited time to practice, I spend the majority of my time practicing very slowly so that when I play a rep or something it is as correct as possible. I understand the material in context and the only variable is tempo. I try to plug that back into a full length run. I have more success being able to do the trouble spots and manage difficult spots because of that method.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BM: No, other than just making sure I try and allow enough time to set up and organize. Well, I could say yes, right before I perform, minutes before I perform, I’ll try do some quick physical things like push-ups or physically jog in place for five seconds, something to get my blood flowing because the adrenaline rush when you start to perform sends chemicals out and your fine motor skills essentially go away. If there is a problem with fine motor skills, when those nerves kick in and I’ve got my blood pumping, I feel that period is shortened because I can adjust more quickly and I’m able to go out and be focused and aware of the adrenaline instead of being debilitated. Aside from that, I try to allow at least thirty minutes of quiet and focused time when I’m not distracted by anything because I’m already set up. I can just relax and I can get my thought process going. I guess you can call it the demons or the negative thoughts or naysayers that are inside of us because we are worried the moments leading up to the performance. I try to put them to rest and set them aside and relax. Those are two things that I definitely do on a performance day. I feel a lot more stressed than normal. Whenever I wake up that day I’m already feeling stressed.
CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

BM: I started when I was ten years old in fifth grade. I would probably say single surface playing would be my primary instrument. I would like to think it is other things but I have to say, I’m best at playing the snare drum or reading multi-set ups or something like. I think since I spent the most time on those types of instruments I’m a lot more comfortable and a lot more natural in those situations. I find myself not being in those situations very often. For whatever reason it seems like anytime I play with the orchestra or any kind of gigs or whatever I’m playing a lot of ballads. I feel comfortable doing that but it definitely puts my skills on the edge because I’m not extremely accurate. I’ve not really put the time into playing scales, arpeggios, and things like I should. Hopefully that changes now that it is a program requirement. You know to be able to demonstrate that you need to put the time in on it. I’m looking forward to that actually over the summer. To be able to just sit down and play some scales because I really do think things like that increase accuracy and confidence behind the instruments, especially reading, familiarity and all that stuff, sort of going to the 10,000 hour concept. So ten years old and I’d say pretty much right away. In 5th grade, recess was right after band so I would stay in for recess and the band director would give me private lessons. He was a trumpet player but he showed me the high school street beats, back-sticking, stick tricks, and things like that.

Then at the Spring concert in tenth grade I played a snare drum solo and I think that is where all that stuff started. I was encouraged to do that at an early point in my playing but percussion really wasn’t my first musical experience. I was in church choir when I was eight years old and the director told my parents and grandparents that I had an aptitude for music and they suggested that I started learning an instrument. I was given two choices, piano or guitar. So I, of course, chose the guitar because of girls and it didn’t take long at all for me to get disinterested, about a year and a half. When they actually asked me what I wanted to learn I said drums. They said, ‘No, it’s too loud on the table.’ So I was always doing music, going way back. Actually because of that experience I wasn’t even going to tryout for band but they talked me into it. It was peer pressure. I always wanted to be a drummer and so that is the story there.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

BM: I would say I put in at least three hours per day in middle and high school. I practiced a lot. When I was in college there were periods where I played four or five hours a day and there were days where I only played for thirty minutes or nothing. On the average, when I was in college, two hours a day would probably be a reasonable average. Then when I was in grad school probably three hours a day. Now, on average I probably get about four or five minutes a day to practice, like focused practice and me just doing what I want to do, not talking about giving a drum set lesson or doing reps with a grad student when I am behind a kit and he is behind a kit. I don’t really call that practice, but it is. Early in my career out of grad school was zero practice. When I was
right out of grad school I was already teaching Drum Corp and traveling. I was in an airport every week. I really wasn’t playing a lot of gigs while I was in town because I was gone all the time, teaching Cavaliers and I was judging. I had an active career by the time I was out of grad school. I wasn’t making a lot of money but it definitely consumed a lot of my time. That sustained for another fifteen years or more. Eventually it is not completely dissimilar to now, however, my day gig pays the bills and I’m able to make choices of what to cut out. I can stay home more which allows for more practice, which is great. But with Drum Corp it wasn’t just the traveling and doing the job but it was the writing. I was busy six hours a day behind the computer writing music. So if you are talking about practicing that muscle, and not the actual playing, but understanding music composition and theory and all of that, I practiced for a long time. So there is just a different skill set.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BM: I do. I know that my success or lack of success in performing is a direct correlation to the inherent skill that I have. When I say inherent, I should say developed skills. Along with that, we call it the Michael Jordan factor. When he was late in his career, he could keep up, but he didn’t have the speed or the endurance, but he was a lot smarter and wiser so the choices he made were more efficient, and in some cases, more meaningful. I look at where I am now, knowing what I know now as an educator, a musician, and how everything factors in, history and theory and all of that. I feel like in this limited time I could take the skill set that I have and get the maximum out of it. If I can increase my skill sets it is just going to make it easier, give me more options, more facilities, or more gigs. It deepens the well. I definitely do feel like the way I’ve practiced and the things I’ve learned, like my practice routine on marimba has everything to do with my confidence behind it.

Looking holistically at it, you have to have a plan, a working plan. I think people need to be realistic about the amount of time they have and to determine whether they can tackle a project or not. If they can’t, they have to say no. Sometimes people get in over their heads and they learn things the wrong way and learn things in such a way that can cause problems down the road. Whether it is from a health stand point or just learning bad habits, or whatever. I think it is smart to have a good self-awareness and not just the ability to manage and juggle your schedule. I’ve seen a lot of students set a recital hearing day and it is unrealistic or they schedule a program of things that are just unrealistic.

**Biography**

Dr. Brian S. Mason is a highly respected innovator of the contemporary marching percussion ensemble. In high demand as a clinician, designer, and adjudicator, he has traveled extensively throughout the United States, Japan, Canada, Korea, and Mexico. His career in the DCI activity has spanned more than two decades, with his most noted work coming via the Cavaliers, Phantom Regiment, and the Santa Clara Vanguard,
claiming numerous awards and honors with these organizations during his tenure.

Currently, Brian is Assistant Professor of Percussion at Morehead State University in Morehead, KY. He is also the director of the award-winning Marching Percussion Ensemble, featured on VicFirth.com in a web-based instructional video series, Marching Percussion 101. At MSU, he has performed with the Faculty Jazz Ensemble, the Faculty Chamber Ensemble, and the Faculty Brass Quintet. Off-campus, he is a contract section player with the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, and appears as a guest artist with many high school and university percussion ensembles across the country.

Brian received his D.M.A. and B.M. as a student of James B. Campbell at the University of Kentucky, and his M.M. at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas as a student of Dr. Dean Gronemeier. He is a member of the Vic Firth Education Committee, the Percussive Arts Society Health and Wellness Committee, and the Percussive Arts Society Marching Percussion Committee. Brian has published articles in Percussive Notes, has been interviewed in Modern Drummer and Band and Orchestra Magazine, was a contributing editor for Stick It magazine, and co-authored the 2000 Modern Drummer Readers Poll's "No. 1 Drum Set Method Book," The Commandments of R&B Drumming (Warner Brothers). His original works are published through Row-Loff Productions, Bachovich Music Publications, and Tap Space Publications. Brian proudly endorses Vic Firth sticks and mallets, makers of his signature line of mallets, as well as Zildjian cymbals, Evans drumheads, and Pearl Drums and Adams Musical Instruments.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

WM: The first thing that I try to always do, and I certainly did do it at a stage when it was more critical, but I physically warm up the muscles and the tendons involved. I’ll fill a sink with hot water, not scalding but as hot as you can tolerate. I try to find a fairly deep sink so I can sink my elbows, forearms, and hands without contracting my wrists in any way. I submerge them in fairly hot water for three to five minutes. I learned that from hand therapists that I saw for awhile. Then I will usually take a hand cream – I use Nivea Hand Cream. Gary Burton suggested this to me many years ago, not only just for softening calluses and stuff like that but I’ll also take that and gently massage it into the skin and slowly move through a range of motions in my forearms, down to my wrists, and then down to my fingers. That is largely to get all the physical materials ready to go. I think the worst thing that we could possibly do is just walk up to the instrument and start playing without any kind of preparation for that. I didn’t know this early on, but I had a very serious Tenosynovitis injury quite a while ago back in the 80’s due to it. This occurred when I was about to premiere a new version of a Steve Reich piece. I was out of commission for a year with a serious problem. I had to come back from that and really re-address the way that I was playing. A lot of this was an outgrowth of that experience. That was back in the spring of ‘86 and I had to cancel a New York recital and had to cancel my London debut recital, both of which I was producing myself. I saw a very excellent hand doctor in New York that diagnosed it correctly. Then I saw a hand therapist three times a week for about six months. I was also in a splint for six months to immobilize my thumb and index finger. Then after six months I started playing light two mallet stuff, freelancing a little bit, and then worked back up to playing half a recital. It was a full year before I could play a full solo recital after that. I’ve been more knowledgeable and more careful about it ever since then.

Two years later I was premiering Richard Bennett’s *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra* and I had become very good friends with my hand therapist. She came back stage at that concert. I had a couple things flaring up from the stress of that concert and she did some work on me during intermission. That was the only time I’ve had any problems since then and it’s been fine ever since. To avoid that kind of a situation, it’s really critical to be careful about warming up before you start. Then when I get on the instrument finally, I’ll usually do fairly slow full stroke kind of things. I have this mode exercise that adds one synthetic note – it runs through eight notes in all twelve keys in a continuous stream. I think the most important thing about warm-up exercises at the instrument is to try to engage your mind and brain in the same process. It is not just a matter of dumb repetition and letting yourself zone out and not think about it. I try to come up with various little warm-up exercises that involve some aspect of transposition.
and being conscious of not only what it is you’re playing immediately, but what it is that you are going to be playing next and how you keep track of it and thinking ahead of what you’re playing. I think that’s also a very important part of warm-up. You really need to engage your brain and your thought processes in the various sorts of things when you’re playing, at least in my way of looking at it. Some people say you have to be totally in the present, Gary Cook I think - and there is no past and no future. I agree with that from a kind of Zen aspect of thinking about your life that way. But in performance, especially solo performance, I find much more that the audience exists in one conscience. To me the audience exists in one time frame or one frame of reference where they have no awareness of the future. You’re playing new music they’ve never heard before. This is kind of the scenario. They don’t know what’s coming so they are primarily in the present and they have a small recollection of the immediate past. But that’s all. The performer has to be almost exactly the opposite. The performer has to have a small amount of consciousness in the present and pretty much nothing of the past, with one exception. You’ve played something and it is over and done with. Don’t even think about it, whether it went great or whether it went bad. Don’t even think about it. A small amount of attention on making sure things are happening the way they should be happening in the present but most of the attention I find has to really be on the future. What’s coming next? What do I have to be conscious of next? Now the one reference point that I would say for the past, particularly in regard to dynamics, you have to remember dynamic consistency over the course of the performance so that you can come back to the same dynamic and reference correctly to where you were before. And possibly a little sense of the treatment of musical material from the past when it’s coming back, but that’s when you’ve honed exactly what your version is going to be.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

WM: I’ve been doing it for so long and in so many different contexts that it’s changed from time to time. There was a time when I was hot and heavy in New York and really doing a lot of stuff and I was constantly premiering things. It was a short time frame kind of scenario when I would get something and say, ‘I know I have X amount of weeks, days, something until I have to play it. That evolved into a certain way of doing that and being able to quickly move through things. I’m not in that situation so I’m not under quite as much pressure or quite as short a time frame as I used to be. That’s also probably interconnected with the injury issues. Following the injury situation I also tried to reassess how I was doing everything, how I was learning new stuff, how I was practicing. So now I try to do as much mental preparation away from the instrument as possible. Actually, I did this in the early days too. If somebody gives me a brand new score, a lot of people I know would just go to instrument and start trying to sight-read through it. To me, that is not productive at all.

The first thing I would generally do is un-bind or copy it so I can spread all the pages out on the floor. This enables me to see the entire piece in one glance. I actually sit in a chair and look at it and really try to study the overall piece as carefully as possible. I try to gain an understanding of the structure of the piece and how it works and how it’s put together. Part of this was because I had a fairly strong compositional background even though I’ve
never been able to write for myself. I also have a strong improvisational background and I never took the time to write for myself. I’m really conscious about the structure of the piece and I try to understand that fully before going into the details too much further. So that would be part of it. From a larger sort of holistic perspective, I like the idea that we have to start from the macro version and gradually work our way down to the micro version until we understand every single detail. But that is half of the job. In that process we have to be deciding the priorities of the material. How the piece works and the sense of what the most important things are that the audience has to get out of it. Again, I’m primarily dealing with stuff that people are hearing for the first time. In order to understand this piece, what do they really have to hear and what do I have to say, ‘This is the important stuff. Hang on to this. This is transition. This is not so important.’ So really getting that kind of hierarchy of the material while understanding it carefully.

You’re half way into the process with most students when they finally say, ‘Okay, I know all the notes. Now I’m ready to play this piece.’ Not at all. You’re halfway in when you are down there at the micro level and know absolutely everything. Then you have to be able to extract yourself and come back out again to the surface level because that’s what you’re presenting to the audience. So you have to be making all these choices and priorities because they don’t want to know about every single little thing. They don’t want to know about all the stuff that we have to know in order to play it. They want to get the larger blocks of material and understanding and structural things like that.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

WM: Probably ninety percent of the stuff I’m playing, I’m premiering. So there are no reference recordings. In the early days there were a few things that I only knew about because I heard a recording and said, ‘Oh, that sounds great! I want to play that.’ With students I usually suggest that they not listen to recordings right off the bat. It varies, nowadays you get students who only find material by going through YouTube or something, which I think is a horrible situation. It is not the way I would suggest doing it at all. First of all, you have no idea whether you are listening to a good or bad performance. So on the one hand, the idea of getting interested in a piece because you heard a performance or because you heard a recording is valuable as far as helping you choose from the stacks of material that are down on the exhibit floor. But once your interest is piqued and you say, ‘OK, this is the next piece that I want to learn,’ then I would really strongly recommend not listening to a recording until you’ve developed some of your own ideas.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

WM: I studied with a fella who studied with George Hamilton Green so I have a background that’s pretty much based on this whole idea of no mistakes. Play everything within all of the musical parameters from the very first day except for the tempo. Get all the rhythm, get all the pitch, get all the dynamics, get as much of the phrasing as you can, as early as you can. Start to be able to understand what the phrasing is and decide what
the phrasing is, and keep drilling the idea of always playing it correctly. Giving yourself enough time to prepare it, think about it, and to deal with the rest of it. Then as you are going over that, gradually remove that extra time and gradually pick the tempo up. Some things are more conducive to that approach than others but under many ideal circumstances, if you are really going to do that the right way, you may not play at a performance tempo until the performance. When the time comes to finally play the performance, there must be hundreds of correct versions of the piece already filed away in the performer’s physical and mental self. And there should only be one version there, in the file, in the system, and that’s the one that’s going to happen. And the only question is, ‘How fast would you like it?’ As opposed to these people who play a passage ten times and miss a different note each of the ten times. They expect to be able to play it just by saying, ‘OK body, play the piece.’ The body has to go, ‘Which one of those ten would you like?’ I am a strong advocate of that and don’t think it’s used enough in many people’s practice routines. Charles Owen, who was the fellow I studied with, had this little thing, especially more so for working on excerpts and things like that. Reach in your pocket, pull out all of your pocket change, and put it on one side. Each time you play it correctly, move one coin over to the other side. When all the coins are gone from one side, you can move on.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

WM: Not nearly as often as I should or would like to. I’m always suggesting it to students and I’m always being reminded, ‘Oh yeah, I should be doing that.’ From time to time I’ve been prepared to do that and then technology changes again or something like that and I’m just not keeping up enough. I finally got a hand held digital recorder but I’m still not using it as much as I should. I just drool over John Parks talking about having his whole studio wired up. For years I’ve wanted that. I had a house designed and was ready to build it and that was going to be part of the house. Then I got a job and moved and didn’t do that. So I would confess, not as much as I should. I would strongly recommend that to everybody, particularly for me. The main reason that I recommend it for students is you think you are doing all this stuff when you’re playing, but you really have to record it and listen to it from a one step removed kind of situation to figure out what’s actually coming across. What’s getting out there? Are all those little nuances that I think I’m doing really registering? And it’s usually not.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

WM: Yes. There are different aspects of that. One aspect is that I think once you’ve learned the material, then you actually have to practice giving the performance, which is a completely separate issue. That’s where the whole aspect of doing mock recitals, bringing people in to listen to you and so on and so forth. I’ve definitely done that many, many times in my history. I’ve actually basically invited a dozen people over, set up a row of chairs – this is when I had a loft in New York - and come out and actually played the whole recital as if it were the real deal. I’ve also done that with only one person listening. A lot of this I got from Michael Colgrass and his performance workshops when I was leading up to my New York debut recital and some other significant points. I was
taking a lot of ideas from him in terms of neuro-linguistic programming. He’s got this whole thing about creating the performance before you go do it. You say, ‘OK, the recital’s going to be at this time,’ and it could be a week, a month, sometime before that. ‘I’m going to eat my usual meal before a concert, I’m going to get into my concert dress, I’m going to have some time to play, I’m going to walk to my instrument, and I’m going to play the concert.’ I’m really trying to recreate as much as possible, all the psychological elements. I think that’s very, very helpful. When I was playing Merlin a lot, I knew that there were maybe three passages in that piece that I needed to review in order to be able to play it. So by that point it was sort of honed down to those issues. I needed to go through the broken octave thing at the end and I had different methods of approaching it, but mostly it was just review it and drill a couple other places in the piece. I wouldn’t really worry about the rest if the piece, as long as I refreshed those spots, then I’m fine.’ So that would be another aspect of it.

That was also the case when I was touring the Libby Larsen Marimba Concerto for a couple of years. I was playing the premier for about two years. I played it with twenty five different orchestras and I was playing it almost every other week on an average basis during the season. And that was the same way. I basically knew the piece but I would pick out a few places just to review carefully before hand to make sure I was up to speed on those, then, ‘Time to go.’ So it’s kind of a different equation depending on your situation, what your repertoire is, and your history with that repertoire.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

WM: I did. Now I’m not doing as many solo recitals as I was at another point in time. Yes, I would usually have a fairly considerable routine. There was one period in New York when I always had sushi for a meal before the concert. I always wanted to get to the hall at a particular interval, usually not less than an hour before show time. Yeah, I definitely I had a routine. I think that also came out of working with Michael Colgrass and some of his advice. Yeah, and a certain amount of what is often described as superstitions, or something like that. We fall into routines that have worked for us in the past and we tend to repeat them. What’s interesting, and I think this is also tangential, my initial goal was to be a soloist and that is what I wanted to do. When I first went to New York, I started doing whatever I could do and whatever work I could get. I was very lucky and went into a number of good situations. I observed that – and this is back in the days when New York debut recitals were a big part of the business and happened every week. The New York Times had a special section that was just reviews of the debuts and recitals that had happened the week before. All that’s gone. It doesn’t happen anymore. You had two different types of debut recitals. You had people who were really trying to make a career for themselves and the main point of the debut recital was trying to interest management in what they were doing. It was much more of a long-term kind of process. Then you had other people who usually were young, tenured track professors at some university around the county and they set-up a Carnegie Recital Hall debut. They flew into New York and they were there for a couple of days and they did this recital. They usually had all their friends and family and that was about it in the audience. Then they hopefully got a review in the Times and went back to go through their tenure
process. It was just that little isolated incident they needed for the tenure thing. The two had an entirely different function to what was going on long-term, not only the preparation but also the process itself and the goal of the process was completely different. So that was part of my observation. The other part was I was also more on the long-term career building idea, which was you have to get an audience there. You have to be building an audience and it has to be a fairly significant audience. It also seemed to me that I’d probably do much better if I built a name for myself as a player in New York first, and then do the recital, where I had some following. Also, another factor that I had forgotten but I remember now, for me, I was totally about commissioning new pieces and new repertoire. I had the desire to do the recital long before I had the material for the recital so it was kind of a multi-year process of commissioning music and finding pieces that I really believed in, to utilize. Another stage of this was you could come to New York and there were these various recital competitions. Some of them were for non-profit management and some of them still are young concert artists and concert artist skilled. I made the rounds and talked to them and usually it was like, ‘What’s your instrument? Marimba? Forget it. Percussion? Forget it. What do you play? Forget it. Contemporary music? Forget it.’ Click. That’s changed fortunately over the years but I found that there were either not openings where it was going to be possible for me to play my instrument, or there were situations where the program choices that I would need to make in order to win the competition were not the things I wanted to play in the recital. So there were a lot of factors going into this. The other thing was I read these collections of debut recital reviews every week in the Times, religiously, because I kept thinking, ‘OK, what am I going to be up against? What are people looking for here?’ The common thread that I kept coming across again and again was, ‘XYZ, (whatever instrument) great technique, but doesn’t play the structure of the music, doesn’t reveal the structure of the music,’ or something like that. I never had a lesson in my life about the structure of the music, not a performance lesson. Composition yeah but I don’t remember a single lesson, ‘This is how you do that. This is what you do.’ So that became the key thought for a couple of years, ‘What the heck are they talking about here and how do you deal with that?’ Finally it all started to make sense to me and I had started to have a better understanding of it. Also, having somewhat more of a compositional background gave me a better way of looking at pieces in that sense. So in a way I was putting the recital off until I had a better handle on what that was all about. So in the process of being a hardened New York freelance player, I discovered that being on stage had become just another room in my house where I was living. I was on stage so much in so many different capacities that it completely lost the edge, which was OK for a bit. Then I started discovering, not in solo stuff because I hadn’t started doing solo stuff yet, but in a few chamber situations, I started discovering that I was out there and I was ready to go and the conductor would give the down beat and I was still a million miles away. I was not in the place that I needed to be to really be on the spot and do the job right. It would be like, ‘Oh yeah, we’re doing this. OK, fine.’ It would take me a couple of seconds to get into it. It was just from doing it again and again. Part of it was that there is this whole freelance camaraderie backstage before a performance. I don’t know what it is, but at least in New York at that point in time, there was this jaded cool aspect about, ‘I’m above all this, or I can handle all this or I can do it.’ I don’t remember what it was exactly, but I can remember falling into that trap. I discovered part of that
also in working with Colgrass and some of his things. I realized that, ‘Well I can’t do that as a soloist, that’s not going to work at all.’ So I actually had to go through a period of time where I was recreating the difficulty of stepping out onto the stage. I had to actually be in a certain physical and mental state to be able to step through the doorway and to go into that other space. Along the way I discovered that meant that I couldn’t hang out with everybody backstage. I couldn’t socialize in the usual sort of way. So part of my ritual then became that I had to have some absolute private individual time in a quiet place, for at least fifteen or twenty minutes or slightly more, before I could enter the proper mental state to go out and perform. So there were a lot of ramifications that came in because of that, but that also became part of the ritual. Having that quiet private time to really focus exactly on what it was that I was going to do.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

WM: I was ten when I first became interested in drum lessons, only because I had seen several of my best friends in the class in grade school getting to leave class to go take drum lessons. I remember thinking, ‘That looks like a good idea!’ So I signed up for drum lessons, or I got my mother to sign up for drum lessons or something. We didn’t have a whole lot of music in my family background. My father had played cornet or trumpet or something at one point and we had a lot of orchestral recordings on 78’s in those days, which was old fashioned even at the time. I remember listening to Bolero on 78’s, it took six sides on the record. The snare drum would play the introductory part and they would go through a couple of A themes and a couple of B themes and then there would be a few measures of just the snare drum. You would turn the record over and there would be a few measures of just the snare drum, and then the orchestra would come back in again. It was bizarre. This is well past the age of 78’s and long playing records and stuff but for some reason that’s what my father had in his collection. So we didn’t have a whole lot of musical background and they said, ‘Go out and buy this book and buy these sticks, buy this pad.’ I remember getting all this stuff and sitting down on the living room floor and looking through the book and going, ‘Okay, so that’s how music notation works. Fine. It’s a vocabulary. It’s a language.’ I went through the book all the way up to the point of the roll, and at the roll I couldn’t quite figure out what they were talking about, getting a double bounce roll on a snare drum or something, but the rest of it looked pretty straight ahead. Then fortunately my parents put me into private lessons right away with a wonderful student at the university, Gerald Hartwig, who then went on to be the head of percussion at the Arts Academy at Interlochen, and was Peter Erskine’s first teacher, well maybe not first, but he was the one Peter was working with when he was a student at the Academy. Hartwig happened to be the percussionist in the Contemporary Music Ensemble so right off the bat I went, ‘Oh, he’s my teacher I should go hear what he’s doing.’ So instead of going to hear an orchestra or something like that, I went to hear this new music ensemble in the 60’s playing all this totally crazy stuff. That became the music that I grew up with, basically. It was this totally out there stuff that had all this percussion in it, chamber music with a ton of percussion. I thought, ‘Wow, that looks great! That’s what I want to do.’ Then I got into the concert bands and a little xylophone and some of the other stuff and it never really clicked until I got to high
school. Gordon Stout was also from Ann Arbor and he was two years older than I was and Gordon was kind of a role model. But the year I started high school they decided to build a second high school, leading up to when I was going to start high school. So I was a member of the first class in this brand new high school and there was a brand new marimba sitting there in the band room. I remember, whoever the senior was who brought Gordon over from the other high school, coming to check it out, ‘Oh yeah, it is a good marimba!’ So it’s the marimba that really drew me into it. I think it was just the sound of the instrument. I asked to take it home for the summer and I taught myself the first movement of the Creston. I got really absorbed in that and that was my first year in high school. By my senior year I won a couple of marimba concerto competitions and played marimba concertos with orchestras and said, ‘This is great! I want to do this for the rest of my life - be a marimba concerto soloist.’ This was when there were only three concerti basically, that we knew of. It was right after Keiko Abe had started but before any news services were first reporting it in the US. So still in this little quiet period before everything exploded. So I started marimba at sixteen.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

WM: In high school, when I started marimba, between two and three hours a day, everyday, in the morning. I remember that distinctly because I would do that and then I would go to the courses. I was in a couple of AP classes and I had a ton of homework late at night so I would always go in and practice marimba in the morning. Finally I said, ‘I can’t do this. I can’t do all this stuff,’ so I remember dropping the AP calculus class because I didn’t think I was doing very well. Years later I heard from somebody that I was being held up as this example by the calculus teacher about choosing what was important to you in life. It turned out I was doing great in the class and the teacher didn’t understand why I had dropped it but it had become clear to them that I was making this choice, that I was focusing more on music. It was very peculiar. So two or three hours in high school. In college, about the same. Then the strangest thing happened. I went to Berkeley for a summer and Gary Burton suggested a piano book, the Bonpensiere, *New Pathways to Piano Technique*, which I read. It is a really interesting book, much more of the sort of mental aspect of practicing, but I kind of misinterpreted it or something and it sent me off in another direction that gave me too many reasons not to practice. I fell off for a little bit during the latter part of my college career. Then I came back later on as I got into professional life. I don’t even know, hours and hours. In most of my New York phase, I was fortunate that I had saved enough money and was getting some support from my parents and stuff like that I didn’t have to work some drudge job in order to pay the rent or something like that. So I was hitting the street and I was scuffling and trying to make connections, trying to get musical jobs. But if something didn’t come along, then I had my own projects that I was working on, which I think was really important. It’s interesting, even within the freelance world of musicians that I saw, there were two different people there. Those musicians whose ambition in life was to be a successful freelance player or the Broadway show players - their ambition in life was to get their own Broadway show and ride it until they retired. Then there were a smaller number of
people that clearly had this other goal in mind who had some larger, more personal, ‘This is what I really want to do in music, and in the meantime I’m doing this other thing to pay the bills until something can happen.’ It was interesting to see that there seemed to be such a clear distinction between those two types of mindsets. I was definitely in the latter one. So I spent a lot of time. I’d spend five or six hours a day, no problem. I was reasonably sensible about it. It wasn’t until I got into this one stressful situation that I overdid it. Everything before that was fine. I got involved in the formation of a new contemporary music group. I was the one who had the loft in Soho with enough space that I could rehearse. I was the one that actually owned a fair number of music instruments, coming from outside of New York, where everything wasn’t rented, so I had a fair amount of gear. In the first year of the group, I had always wanted to play Berio’s *Circles*, and never had the opportunity. So we set the whole thing up in my loft and left it there for a couple of months and rehearsed constantly. Every morning I’d roll out of bed, walk in the other room, have *Circles* all set up, and start practicing. That was the best! So when you are in a situation like that, you can practice all day long, ‘Oh, time for lunch. Take a break. Come back.’ Currently it rises and falls. As a freelancer, I was in New York for twenty-two years and for part of that, maybe the last half of that or so, I would go out and started teaching one day a week at Rutgers and the rest of time I would be freelancing. So if I had work to do, I would go off and do the job. If I didn’t, I would be home practicing. So it varied a lot, and there was also a lot of rise and fall in the solo stuff I was doing and the nature of it, and whether there were other chamber groups. I had a lot of different things going on. Then moving into the later phase, having a full time university job, man what a shock that was. After a couple of decades of one day at Rutgers, I added one day at Peabody in Baltimore at a certain point, and that kind of lead to saying, ‘I can’t handle this anymore.’ Dealing with everything in one day - commute to Peabody, teach all day, and commuting back. So that led to the attraction of going for a university job. I never had a full time university job until I took this one at Illinois and that was a real kick in the butt to find out what that involved. So its been an uphill battle for the last thirteen years to get enough time to practice and be able to do stuff, which also coincided with a shift that I made on a personal level. Now I’m not playing as much marimba as I used to play. Now I’m playing primarily orchestral timpani, which I had never been that interested in. I’ve never been smart enough or aware enough and never really had the opportunity to do. So my personal career synopsis is, starting with this interest in marimba, studying all the rest of percussion, studying the orchestral repertoire, and really identifying with the sound of the orchestra that informed my marimba playing. So that when I went to the marimba and I started working on solo material, from the very beginning, I would orchestrate just about everything in a solo marimba piece. I’d say, ‘Now if this was the orchestra, which instruments are playing and how are they playing? Is this pizzicato strings with a solo oboe? Is this a cello section?’ I was constantly thinking about the orchestral color and how something would be orchestrated. Then I turn back around and say, ‘This is what that sounds like. How can I get that sound out of the marimba? How can I make it sound like the pizzicato cello? How can I make it sound like an oboe? I was always bringing that aspect to it and that was reinforced by the decision that rather than suddenly going full bore solo marimba in my early professional career, I was more interested in putting the marimba in chamber music situations. Moving through that process, because I had not been playing much marimba before, I
was like, ‘Let’s start this way and sort of evolve back into the solo stuff after that.’ That also put me in a situation where I was working very closely with other non-percussion instruments, which for me has been the most valuable musical learning experience ever. To be rehearsing and performing on a regular basis as a marimbist with winds, strings, and brass, dealing with them on a daily basis of understanding all the aspects of the music that they deal with are totally foreign to us as percussionists. Different qualities of attack, different qualities of breath, even different aspects of rhythm. Only working with musicians that are not percussionists you realize that you can have rhythm without necessarily being metronomic. That’s one of the key lessons that I try to encourage my students to discover. There is a whole world of more prominent and larger music out there that we as percussionists almost never encounter unless we get very lucky. So my orchestral background informed the way that I was playing marimba. Then I went through this whole career phase being a marimbist. But it is only going through the process of developing as a musician in that role, that I then started having an appreciation for what timpani was really all about. Before that, as a percussion student, timpani was basically another one of the percussion instruments. It’s just a bigger drum or something like that. That’s not at all what timpani is, by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, the more you remove it from the rest of the percussion, the better understanding you have of what the instrument is. So much later on in life, being able to come back to it and saying, ‘OK, this is the harmonic underpinning of the orchestra.’ You’re connected to the cellos, the lower strings, and to the lower brass, lesser so, and to the concertmaster, to the principle trumpet, and to the wind section to a degree. You have little or nothing to do with the percussion section over there. I suddenly had this completely different concept and understanding of what it was about. Part of this was just paying more attention. When I started teaching at Peabody, being around John and the students and their interest in timpani. More and more of the students are also being influenced by Cloyd Duff. I was paying a lot more attention to that so whenever Cloyd was giving a clinic in Manhattan or playing in New York, I would go see it. I was also contemplating it and percolating thoughts around, just as I was, I didn’t realize it at the time, toward the end of my New York phase. I happened to get a few opportunities to play timpani and so I was thinking about it for about five years before I actually moved to Illinois. When I got to Illinois, suddenly the main opportunities for me were to be in an orchestra and the most interesting aspects of that were to play timpani. After a year or two transition, I shifted into it. That is mainly what I do now and I absolutely love it! I’m having the greatest time. From time to time opportunities arise to go back to marimba and I’ll pull it out again and do it, but not as much. The practice thing is an uphill battle again. How much time I can take away from the rest of my life?

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

WM: There should be some proportional/fractional thing about success. It is determined by a certain amount of innate talent, but probably a much stronger sense of determination, or willpower, or ‘stick-to-it-iveness’, and those senses. You have to have some ability and you have to be smart about making career choices and know how to utilize the ability that you have, but I think the bottom line is that it means so much to you that you are just going to keep at it in the face of defeat, failure, and negativity. You’re just going to keep
Biography

William Moersch is internationally renowned as a marimba virtuoso, chamber and symphonic percussionist, recording artist, and educator. He has appeared as soloist with symphonic orchestras and in recital throughout North and South America, Europe, the Far East, and Australia. A regularly featured artist at international percussion festivals, he is perhaps best known for his solo compact disc, *The Modern Marimba,* and for commissioning over the past twenty-five years much of the prominent modern repertoire for solo marimba, from composers including Richard Rodney Bennett, Jacob Druckman, Eric Ewazen, Libby Larsen, Steven Mackey, Roger Reynolds, Gunther Schuller, Joseph Schwantner, and Andrew Thomas. In addition, he was the first marimbist ever to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Solo Recitalist Fellowship and has also been honored by NEA Recording and Consortium Commissioning grants.

Chair of the Percussion Division at the University of Illinois since 1998, Mr. Moersch previously created graduate degree programs in marimba performance at the Peabody Conservatory and Rutgers University, and has presented master classes throughout the world. A graduate of the University of Michigan, where he was a scholarship student of Charles Owen, Mr. Moersch was a free-lance musician in New York City for over two decades. He performed with the American Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, New York Chamber Symphony, New York City Opera, Metropolitan Opera, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, and as a featured soloist in the New York Shakespeare Festival's Broadway production of *The Pirates of Penzance* and on numerous motion picture soundtracks. Currently, he is Principal Timpanist/Percussionist of Sinfonia da Camera, Artistic Director of New Music Marimba, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Percussive Arts Society.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JN: Yes, but it is instrument dependent. For instance, I always do Marimba. I do scalar exercises, double verticals and then some rotation exercises. On snare drum, I do the basic hand warm ups and rudiments, some accents and rebounds stuff. And then I take stuff that might be in the music I’m playing, like if it’s a solo piece and then put that into a warm up; some techniques that might be involved. I always try to get my hands warmed up with basic fundamental techniques on whatever instrument. And that’s my routine. And then to add in, possible techniques that might be used in solo playing, regardless of instrument. I do both technical exercises and take excerpts from the music. It depends on the music, but it always starts with a basic technical exercise. For instance, on marimba, doing major scales and double verticals at the same time, and diads, then coming back down and doing it rotational and doing it chromatically, and doing it different speeds. I’m pretty methodical about it, you know, start really slow to get the blood flowing when I do warm up, which is not always.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JN: The first thing I do if possible is listen to it, because I’m an aural learner. And so I listen to it with the score as much as possible. And then I analyze; I think it helps me learn to analyze it from a theoretical standpoint after I’ve listened to it. It helps to memorize, to mark the form, phrasing, the scales used, whatever harmonic content. And then I read through it a couple of times, beginning to end, regardless of what instrument it’s on. And then after I know the form, and have read through it and know the piece from listening to it, I tend to take it in small pieces, and I’ll start doing slow practice; taking phrases. Sometimes I start from the beginning but sometimes I do it out of order, it depends. Sometimes I find myself going to harder passages and starting with those and working those out first because I feel like at this point I already analyzed and listened to it so much I know the piece so I might go for a harder passage. And I like to go slowly at the beginning, take my time and I do a lot of what Corporon does, a minus one plus one system. I’ll take a passage, methodically start slow and get it worked out and then I’ll do the measure before to get into it and then I’ll do the measure after it. I just found this process to be very methodical metronomically, and I learned it is very efficient and I don’t waste a lot of time. Also, when I’m listening to it or looking at it, I’ll pick target areas. I really need to start with those or work on those. Whether it’s difficult or usually the hardest stuff, I’ll do that so I’m not wasting time just starting at the beginning each time, running through it then coming back.
CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JN: Very frequently and in all stages. And I try to listen to multiple recordings if they exist. I like to hear multiple interpretations because I think you can learn so much from different people playing it. But I’m an aural learner, I learn more by listening to it so I use it in every step of the process. It’s important to me, to me it helps you learn and understand the piece at a much faster rate. So, I start with that, that’s actually the first thing I do; listen, if possible. And then every step of the way I listen to multiple recordings, from multiple sources.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JN: It really depends on what I’m playing, whether or not it’s memorized. It just depends on the piece. I like to have music there and usually I’ll memorize harder passages but now I try to get comfortable with reading so I don’t have to do it as much. And it’s just going back and forth. It used to be that I memorized just on marimba, everything else I felt like I could read it. But now it really just depends. I played Third Construction with a group, a month and a half ago, some of it I memorized. If I needed to play the cans in a certain area, to get the right timbre, I needed to look down. I think it’s just based on what calls for the best sound now. And if it’s a hard passage and I need to look down, then I will. One thing that helps me with mental slips, drawing from Zen philosophy, I work on exercises to eliminate the left brain ego side; that’s that chatter in your head, ‘Oh you’re going to mess up. That’s difficult.’ That helps with memory slips. It’s hard to train your brain to do that, to shut it off and it just comes from studying Zen philosophy. And I am NOT an expert; it’s still hard for me to do. Practicing meditation, and I know this sounds ‘new-agey’, but meditation. Singing through music helps me avoid memory slips. If I’m singing inaudibly while I’m playing, that really helps me because I’m connected to the music. And it helps distract the chatter. Visualizing when you’re practicing, actually visualizing your performance and putting yourself in that position where you imagine the hall and you’re playing. And the distraction of the left side of the brain, the distraction of that so to avoid memory slips when I’m getting to a point, I’ll focus on the phrasing only, or the technique only or try to have one particular thing to distract this brain when I know it’s going to come up. And you kind of learn where it’s going to happen. I know older players who have practiced Zen philosophy and they’ve done it so long, these different meditations, and reading about this and studying it for years that they can actually shut that off, or distract it. So right now, I’m fifty-fifty with that. I think another thing is, memory slips, to me, when I start worrying about memory slips is when I make a memory slip. So trying to prepare myself when I’m practicing that there might be a slip or a mistake and how to recover from that. And when you’ve practiced thinking about recovering you’re not as worried about the mistake. As a result, you make less mistakes and I try to tell my students about that. There is going to be a slip somewhere, it’s about recovery. And that relaxes me and other people and they focus; ‘Oh we can get out of it if it happens.’ And therefore you don’t have your brain thinking, ‘oh crap you’re going to mess up.’
CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JN: I do it very slowly at first so I can figure out technically what I need to do from a movement and kinesthetic standpoint. What kind of motion I need to use, how I need to work out what sticking works best. I really break it down as slow as possible. And then I seem to be very methodical about doing it twenty times and making sure I have consistent motion that works. Speeding it up ten metronome clicks and doing the same thing. Once I have it down pretty well, I’ll jump up to tempo just to make sure it still works and then I’ll go back down because sometimes if you do it just too slow and you don’t do it at tempo, it won’t work. So I’ll jump up, after I’ve gotten it down a little bit, to make sure everything’s ok. And then I just go up, methodically, ten metronome clicks. I just take my time with it. I’ve found that it’s more efficient that way and you don’t get frustrated. And in ten minutes, you have something worked out as opposed to just practicing it for two hours, running it over and over again. And then I also, again do that minus one plus one because I’ve found that you’ve got to get into the problem area and get out of it. Sometimes those are more of an issue than the spot itself. Some people don’t do that, they just practice that one thing and then the transition in and out of it is hard. That’s what I do; I’m pretty methodical about it.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JN: As much as possible. It’s humiliating but as much as I can. And I think students should record themselves as much as possible. I do Audio mostly. I’m starting to get into video though; we have the capability for my percussion ensemble to video and audio now. But at least audio because I have my MacBook there and I just record it. Or I use a Zoom or something like that.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JN: No. I may run it more from a total standpoint but I don’t like to change things, I like to stick to the routine and not build it up in my head that there’s a performance, that way I just feel like I’m playing on a different day. I will run the piece in its entirety more and I’ll do it at tempo and I also like to play it, in its entirety, way under tempo a few times, that seems to calm me down a little bit. That may be what I do differently but I don’t like to change too much because that way you start adding pressure of a performance and I think if you just settle into a routine you go up there and you play it just like it’s any other performance in a practice room.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JN: No. I’m a little neurotic and if I had a ritual I think it would make me more nervous. The thing I try to do is relax and distract my brain from worrying about the performance. If anything, I try to give myself, especially over the past couple of years, more positive reinforcement. Like, ‘you’re going to play well, this is going to be nice, people are going to enjoy it.’ Because, they’ve proven psychologically, if you’re like, ‘this is going to
suck, I’m not going to well’, that’s just reinforced in your brain and can become a self-
fulfilling prophecy. But I don’t like to do rituals because I think it would make me more
nervous that I already am.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start
focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JN: Eleven. I got into drum set. I started with piano and trombone earlier but at eleven it
was drum set. And then by twelve I was taking lessons and doing mallets and stuff but
definitely drum set was my impetus to get into percussion.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing
during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school,
early career, and currently.

JN: Usually about two hours in middle school and high school, if not more. But back
then, some of the practicing would be for lessons and some of it would be playing along
to CDs. Sometimes I’d do that for hours on end; that was the fun drum set part of
growing up. But I would say at least a couple hours a day. College and higher education,
five to nine hours a day, it depended on what the school day was. Because, again, I was
trying to do jazz and classical and so in the summers I would practice over nine hours a
day, just doing as much as I could, which was probably stupid, I probably should have
just tried to focus on one instrument and not do everything. Early career, two to three
hours a day and now it varies. It depends on my teaching load, I could go zero to four
hours a day. And the neat thing about now teaching is that I’m playing all day with
students so I’m sight reading all day, I’m showing them and demonstrating technique and
everything. I guess I’m practicing more than I think but individual practice time really
depends on my schedule, what concerts I’m playing, what gigs I’m playing and what I
need to do for that so it varies.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JN: Oh, of course. It seems to me, as I’ve learned from more teachers, to be a little more
methodical about it and efficient about it. You learn at a faster pace, you’re not as
frustrated and you can learn more literature and you learn it more solidly. My problem
was mentally distracting the ego or the back talk in my head that was always, ‘oh you’re
not going to do well.’ I actually had a big problem with that and these kind of methods,
going slow and methodical; listening to stuff, focusing on certain elements, and singing,
helped to distract that, and makes me a better musician. I’m a lot happier now and play
better than I did three or four years ago. But you have to work hard and I think I’ve had
teachers that guided me in my practice habits. And just running stuff from the front to the
back and just playing stuff over and over again, that only reinforces mistakes. The
isolation that I talked about seems to really benefit so I think it’s healthy.
Biography

Dr. Jason Nicholson, Assistant Professor of Percussion, received a Doctor of Musical Arts in Percussion Performance from the University of North Texas. From 2005 – 2008, he was a Graduate Teaching Fellow in percussion at UNT where he taught applied lessons, percussion methods and percussion ensemble. Jason was also a featured soloist with both the Graduate Percussion Ensemble as well the Wind Symphony (under the direction of Eugene Corporan), performing at the 2006 PASIC alongside Keiko Abe and the UNT Percussion faculty. In 2006, Jason was honored with the award for The Most Outstanding Graduate Student in Percussion and also served as the principle percussionist with the UNT Wind Symphony.

Prior to his studies at UNT, Jason was a Lecturer in Percussion at Winthrop University where he taught applied percussion, drum set, percussion methods, percussion ensemble and African drumming. He simultaneously served as the Director of Percussion Studies at Rock Hill High School where he coordinated percussion activities between the high school and the two feeding middle schools.

Jason has been an active performer in orchestral, jazz, chamber, solo, pop and world genres throughout the Dallas/Fort Worth, Miami and Charlotte metropolitan regions. He has performed with notable groups such as the Charlotte Symphony, the Charlotte Philharmonic Orchestra, the Charlotte Repertory Big Band, the Charles Craig Jazz Trio and the Dallas Wind Symphony. In addition to his training on traditional Western percussion instruments, Jason has extensive experience in Afro-Cuban drumming and African Drumming.

Jason received his undergraduate degree in Music Education from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. He then completed a Master of Music in Percussion Performance from the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL. Some of his teachers include: Dr. Michael Williams, Dr. Robert Schietroma, Ed Soph, Rick Dior, Mark Ford, Christopher Deane, Keith Aleo, Ed Smith, Jose Aponte and Poovalur Srij.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BN: Depends on the instrument. For keyboard I definitely do. Specifically for mallets I do, and it's pretty standard. I do block chords first of some kind. Most of it I got from Andy Harnsberger when I was learning from him and I just adapted it. One of the big things though that I find is unique is that the very first thing that I do, especially if it's on mallets, is block chords in root position. I'll go root, first inversion, root, second inversion, all the way up the octave. Then I'll just do that chromatically. I remember when Andy showed me this form and said ‘You just do it.’, I would sit there and do it, but I was hitting wrong notes all the time. It was the shift. I needed to work on the shift. I got to the point where I would just start on the C major block chord. It's not just the physical warm-up of moving my hands, but for me it becomes this mental Zen like warm-up of getting myself in the head space to practice.

I'm going to play C major chords and I'm not going to move on until they are the world's most perfect C major chords. Everything is balanced. I'm moving exactly the same way and I'm not having any flams, anything like that, and from there I go first inversion. I just go back and forth, back and forth between those two. Again until they are perfect. All the way through until I am playing straight up to three variations, then back down, and up to maybe F, and then I stop. The next day maybe I'll start on F. It can take a little bit of time and for me the big thing is that part of the exercise is not about the hands, that's the mental thing I need. That's the point where I'm going don't worry about the rehearsal you've got tonight. That's where I'm clearing away all the junk and putting myself in that space to practice.

So sometimes it can take five minutes or sometimes it can take ten minutes. That is honestly for me the single most important thing I ever do because if I don't have that clear mental head space, the practice session will be a wash usually for me. Then I tend to do some single independents, do some permutation inversions up and down, and a one-handed roll exercise just to get my chops going. Then usually I end the keyboard warm-up with looking specifically at whatever it is that I'm learning or playing and I already know that I've run into some issue of some kind or something that's specific. So if I'm doing Merlin, or something like that, octaves are hell. Then I do scales and octaves, or something like that. Or are there a lot of minor sixths in this piece? Maybe I'll do walking up minor sixths chromatically through the whole keyboard.

Then snare drum would be the only other ones that I have some sort of warm-up. It's very basic, drumline like, alternating 16th notes. Just get the hands flowing. Do some rolls. Do a little bit of stick control and then move on to whatever it is I need to do. For drum set or
anything like that, that's where my warm-up shifts and it goes immediately into some sort of technical exercise. I'm opening up to *New Breed* and I'm starting to work on this specific page or I'm working out of the Chapin book. I jump into a more etude based warm-up if you will on drumset.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BN: Usually, I start at the top and go to the bottom. I should say, before that, it's read through it without any instruments. I sectionalize it, I find the big problem spots. I never have the original in front of me. I always have a xerox, just so I can mark the heck out of it. If I don't know the piece, I'll will always listen to it. If there is a way for me to find a recording, whether I have it from a friend's recital disc, or if it's on YouTube, whatever. Even if it's on YouTube, let's face facts, YouTube has some great stuff and some awful stuff. Even listening to a really awful recording, I'm educated enough to know this is not a very good performance, but at least it gets the tune, because my ear is awful. It would be a struggle for me to sing a perfect fifth for you. I've never been good at that. So to look at a piece and think about how it's going to sound, I can do that rhythmically, and maybe even do it stylistically, but I really need the pitch stuff in my head if I'm doing something like that. So I'll listen to a recording but I'll sit down and glance through and go ‘OK, this is obviously a section, this is another section, this is another a section, this is going to be a beast to learn, let's circle that, so that I know what I'm getting into.’

Then I'll just start at the top and go down. Start at the beginning, measure one, measure two, measure three, until I can play the whole thing down. Then if I'm running into problem areas, where every time I hit measure 26, I screw that up. Now that I know I can play each measure individually and I've started to put those sections together, but there's obviously a disconnect between here and here, I'll tackle that area. I'll take that measure, combine it with the measure before, then combine it with the sections before and after. I'm putting it into context and go from there. I'm all about having the plan of knowing what can I sight-read right now, what's going to be really hard, how is the piece put together structurally? As I get into the piece more and more, I'll actually start to do some harmonic analysis, something like that. Identify some key centers because that will help me not necessarily memorize, but have stuff in my brain so if something does go wrong I can go ‘This is where I'm going to G minor right now.’

Then I go top to bottom and start piecemaking it together. This is for everything. By the end of it, eighty percent of it is probably memorized, simply for the fact that you've played the damn thing so much. A single surface instrument or a multi-one is so much easier to read because nine times out of ten there are so many less targets to hit. So usually I will read that stuff. For keyboard, what ends up happening is I'll have almost all of it memorized. There will always be just three measures there, five measures there, whatever, and I just need to make a conscious decision as to whether I want to spend the extra time learning those or not. Like when I played *Thief* on my recital the other night. There were three pages up and really I didn't even need the third page, it just happened to be there. There were two pages and this one section where I'm rolling on the pipes, and I knew that if I spent thirty minutes, if that, I could have had it memorized, but I just didn't
want to spend the time. I needed it on other things, so I never bothered. With Blues for Gilbert, pretty much the first two pages are memorized. It's only when I get back to the recapitulation of the slow stuff that it gets much more randomized from the beginning that I need to read it. But even then, I'll have little guide markers like E flat major and I'll see that and I'll know the melody and I'll know that this is where that lick comes in. It ends up being most of it is usually memorized. Even for snare drum or something like that I could probably play the entire first page of Walking Down Coolidge or even things like that. Like Delecluse, I could even play the first half of it from memory. Then things start to get jumbled, and why take the chance.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

BN: Just in the beginning. I know there are a lot of people who are like I never listen to recordings because I don't want their interpretation to impede upon my own personal musical interpretation. But for me, I just need to have it in my head. I need to have an idea of at least this is what the tunes sounds like, whether it’s a snare drum piece, a multi piece, a timpani piece, whatever. And just stylistically too, it’s easier for me to listen to some recording, to get it into my head and then I usually never go back to it unless I’ve run into a severe point where somehow I’m just getting really confused and I don’t quite understand what the composer wanted here. Then I will go check out two or three recordings to see how those people handled it. Did they all do the exact same thing? Sometimes I’m just an idiot and I was reading it wrong and had it in my head. And sometimes it’s one guy did this and one guy did that. But it’s pretty much only in the beginning, just to get the tune in my head and then I’m done with it. Because at that point then as I’m playing thorough it, I can hear it just from my own performance.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BN: If I can memorize something, if I really feel that it’s important, I will. For something - especially on keyboards – like Thief, there are the pipes and stuff, where I feel like I really have to focus making sure I am hitting those precisely because it is very easy to miss them, or whatever, I will. The only reason I didn’t bother memorizing that one section was because I can read it and it’s very, very easy for me to read and it’s a very slow portion. So I’ve got the time to look down to make sure my mallets are all in the right place and look up at the page. So I’ve got the ability.

I don’t know that I’ve have ever run into anything that I absolutely had to have memorized. It’s always just a little section here or there and I personally don’t mind that because so much of the rest is memorized. The only disadvantage to the not memorizing thing is, especially in my mind, percussion is such a visual instrument. So depending on the event, like playing here at UK, I didn’t mind it. I always made sure that my stand was the bare minimum height to where I could see the music so the audience could see. Sometimes that works better than others. Sometimes you play it so much that you realize, ‘Holy crap, I have this memorized.’ It usually ends up being that I have played it enough
that I have 70-80% memorized, and then I just make a conscious decision that ‘OK, I know that this section is not and do I want to put forth the effort to learn it or do I want to keep it on the stand? It usually tends to be the slower, everything was memorized except the slow rolled sections, and I could have done it if I’d wanted to, but I just had bigger fish to fry. So I had those two on the stand and I figured, ‘easy enough.’

As far as memory slips, that’s probably the biggest problem with my playing. I have really bad mental lapses sometimes. It used to be just nerves in general. I got really nervous, butterflies in the stomach, shakes and whatever. I actually took beta-blockers before any significant performance. If it’s me doing a concerto, me as a soloist, or something where it’s very exposed. I played Bolero with a symphony last year and I took a beta blocker just because I need to be focused and on it for that.

If I’m just playing with a jazz combo, or a random gig or whatever, I’m not going to bother with it then because I know I’m not going to be nervous and everything is fine. The biggest problem that I honestly always had was without the beta-blockers I had severe mental slip-ups. I remember standing before a recital was about to go on and I couldn’t remember the first note I was supposed to hit. I’m like ‘Ahhhh,’ and I had to run back to the practice room, whip the cover off the marimba and go where? Ok, there it is and then ran back and played. So the beta-blockers helped that a bit, but the other thing I try to do a lot is just slow practice. I do everything really, really slow so that my brain has the time to absorb everything that’s going on. That way when something is starting to shift a little bit in a not so good way, my brain can rely on going back and remembering this is the part where we do this, this, and this, and here we go.

I had a big discussion with Harnsberger about this. He said the slow practice is necessary because when you are relying on muscle memory you are relying on your muscles. But what’s the first thing to freak out when you get nervous? Your muscles. They start to tense up or they shake. Did you ever go to the gym and do weight lifting and then your arms feel like jelly? My god it feels like I couldn’t pick them up. That’s the way I always end up feeling just before I’m playing. I feel like my hands don’t want to do anything right now. So for me to rely on my muscles is idiocy in my mind. I can’t rely on them for anything right now except to get the mallet from one place to the other. They are not going to remember whether it’s a C-sharp or an E-flat or a D-natural at this point. So it’s much more about having the brain focused for me.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BN: Slow. If it’s something that is very specific, like it’s a lick that involves the exact same technique, I’ll end up incorporating that into my warm-up in some way. Something to incorporate it so I am building that technique and I’ll apply it to that particular lick. If it’s a randomized thing and it’s just not one technique but it’s all over the place, then it’s just taking that one measure slow, and I usually fragment it. I do this a lot on drumset, like if I’m learning a certain style, I would take one line of that style, take the ride cymbal, and I’m just going to play that pattern, whatever the ride cymbal pattern is. I’ll do it with a click track and then as soon as I’ve got that down, I’ll look at the next line. If
my first snare drum hit is on the ‘a’ of 1, I talk to my students about this a lot, focus all of your mental energy on that note. You’ve got your right hand down you’re good to go. Focus everything that you have on that note, making sure that note is played in time, in the right place, and the right way, everything. I focus on that, and once that’s down, just move to the next note. I can just keep building and building and building. So I’ll do that sound on keyboard, and I’ll just take the first note, hit it, and have a click track going, and I’ll take that time to go ‘1-bup-bup-bup-1-bup-bup-bup’, and then, ‘OK I’m good with that, let’s add the next portion.’

If it’s a problem spot, it will be down tempo and then once I’ve reconstructed it down tempo, then I start to pick up the tempo. The way I end up doing any down tempo stuff is exaggerating everything, exaggerated movements and exaggerated dynamics. If I’m practicing it at 120 and I’m practicing it at 60 right now, if my dynamic range is ridiculously wide, then when I start practicing and then once I’ve got it down at that ridiculously wide range, as I up the tempo, it’s obviously going to shrink. But if I’m practicing it like this it’s obviously going to shrink down like this…. it’s still a pretty wide one. But if I started here (smaller), it’s going to be down to this and that’s practically no dynamic contrast at all. So it will be slow and I will reconstruct from the beginning to the end. If it’s some sort of weird independence or interdependence line, or whatever, or if there’s an ostinato in there, then I’ll get one line going and then slowly focus on building in the other line until I have it down at that slow tempo. Then it’s four clicks up, four clicks up, four clicks up, to where I’m at. Then always about eight or twelve clicks beyond that just because you don’t practice to the ceiling, you go beyond the ceiling. That’s basically the big thing with problem spots.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

BN: Not often enough. It’s one of those things where I hadn’t done it in a while and then for my recital hearing here, since I was in North Dakota, Jim said ‘I need YouTube videos.’ I went and got out my zoom and I would listen to them and I’d be like ‘oh man that does not sound … I didn’t realize… OK, we’ve got to fix that.’ So it’s been one of my things now, one of my practice resolutions now that the recital is over is go back, especially with this rep that is just going to be in my hands for interviews and whatever, record it a lot and really start getting meticulous about that stuff. The nice thing is with the Zoom is it takes five seconds. In fact, I got this from Parks at FSU, but I use my Q3 now and I record every lesson of my students … and they are all required to have an eight gig thumb drive and after the lesson they just give that to me and I plug it in and that way I don’t have to bother taking notes any more. I just go through and chit-chat and do whatever. They are required to go home and sit down and make their own notebook. Part of that was Parks telling me that we record all this … and the other thing was Ed Soph. The first thing that would happen is I would walk in and hand him my VHS cassette. As soon as I was done - my lesson was always somewhere around lunch time - I would walk home, I would pop the thing in the VCR, hit play, eat lunch, and I would immediately watch the lesson. I would write down here’s the things he’s keying me on. Here’s the things he actually said I’m doing well, all these things, so I have this written record. All I could think is those things are gold to me. Those video tapes are gold as far as I’m
concerned. There’s such great stuff and so many things he said and I definitely didn’t get that stuff then but now I see exactly what he was talking about. So all I could think is if that’s the way it is with just these two VHS tapes, what if I had every lesson with Ford, every lesson with Rennick, every lesson with Deane, every lesson with Jim, this would just be unbelievable to have this library. So I make sure to do it with all my students now with Q3 video. It’s got this condenser mike so it sounds great, for what it is, and I’ve got the video right there. So I don’t have to worry. It would drive me nuts if I’m listening to a student play *Virginia Tate* or whatever and I’m following the music and it gets to L or something and ‘oh he’s got to watch that part,’ and so I’m sitting there and I’m writing and writing and writing and the next thing you know, a section has gone by at this point and I have no idea – he could have totally botched something up, but I wouldn’t know because I was focused on the writing. Back in the day, maybe it was a little more of a pain in the butt, but now it is so insanely easy, there is just no excuse.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BN: Not really, just because I think the practicing evolves over the time anyway. I have a recital in six months, I want to learn X piece that I’ve never played before. For that first couple of months I’m going to be shedding out the notes and figuring out the piece. As I get closer and closer like a month out, ideally I’ve got the piece learned and it’s just a matter of reinforcing all those things that are getting a little worse for wear, practicing those problem spots. It goes from very, very big picture to very, to very small picture. So the evolution of learning a piece takes care of that in my mind. It changes, but it changes in a very organic way. Also, it’s different based on if I’ve played this piece before. If I’d played it before, the two months it takes me to learn the entire piece, now I can learn it in about two weeks, and then it’s just a matter of rehashing. The thing that I’m the worst at is the later stage where it’s isolating sections, and say practice this lick that’s been a problem for you. That’s probably the thing that I’ve been worst at, just because I’m rather impatient and undisciplined and I don’t want to sit there and break that down. All I can think is it will be good enough and I really need to get on to the other thing. So that’s where my discipline fails sometimes and I need to get better at that. But no, pretty much it’s just the organic development of it.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BN: Not really and I probably should because maybe that would also help with the mental things a little bit. I try to be there as early as humanly possible where the gig is. It depends on what the performance is. If it’s something that I’m not - I don’t want to make it sound like I’m not invested in it when I perform - but when it’s with the symphony and we’re playing nothing of consequence as far as anything difficult for me, you know, it’s just show up an hour before, get the drum ready, and then just hang out and do it. But if it’s a recital or something, I want to be there as early as possible. Today, I was here for most of the day then I left for an hour to go home and eat a sandwich and come back. I wish I hadn’t done that, because I always feel like I’m just not there. I’m not there right now, I’m not feeling good, I don’t want to be there. It sounds weird, but I’m probably the most comfortable if the gigs at seven and I show up around 1. I’m probably the most
comfortable when it’s the whole day and I don’t have anything to do. I’ve moved all the equipment and played through things and I’m feeling alright. I’ve got like two hours left, I would much rather just find a practice room and read a book or take a nap. I’d rather be there than go home. I’m the guy that’s starts freaking out, ‘Oh crap, what if I hit traffic and …’ At least I’m all ready there and there’s little that can go wrong at this point. The only ritual things I really have are not the day of but just the second before the performance, something Ford talked to me about, he said you’ve got to get something, get that ritual so that you do that every time you play and that becomes second nature. It’s like the guy that does the free throws. He spins the ball, bounces once, puts the ball in his hand, dribbles twice with his right hand, up, shoot. I do that every time, and it’s like ‘Yep, makes sense.’ So I have some little things I do like that, I took it from Ford. I sit there, I look at the drum or the instrument, I’ll see the first notes I’m about to hit, I hear them in my head, then I approach the drum, put the hands up, deep breath, hear it again, and then go. So I have little things like that, but as far as the day of the performance, as long as I’m there early. If I can have a Jimmy John’s sub, that’s like the perfect meal, light, that’s the only thing. Bourbon and Toulouse would suck before a recital.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

BN: I started in fifth grade at ten years old. I think it was about sophomore year when I truly decided I’m going to go into music, but my primary instrument at that point was drum set. All I wanted to be was Mike Portnoy of Dream Theater. My kit was all laid out like his. That’s all I wanted to be. So I was practicing that at that point. Before hand I didn’t really ever get it. I was really, really bad about being very serious. I was taking lessons from one guy and he actually had me involved in this Empire State Youth Percussion Ensemble, which to me blows my mind that I didn’t take advantage of it. As I look back now, before I had graduated high school I had played Ionization, I had played the Mancini drumset solo and percussion thing. I had played all this stuff and now I’m like ‘Dude this was awesome, but I had no earthly idea what I was doing.’ No idea what I was playing and no idea of the significance of it. Especially then, I was pretty arrogant. I was kind of a little punk. I’m sure there were people that told me how great it is that I was able to play this. I was able to play Chavez Toccata I remember. All this like rep, and I was just like ‘Whatever dude, who cares.’

As far as focusing on a primary, I didn’t really feel like I had a primary. I loved the drum set, that was my big thing, but even then I wasn’t practicing it as much as I would just go down at play with recordings. Even then it was like Metallica. I wasn’t whipping out Miles Davis CDs and playing along with that.

Then when I got into undergrad, I had the mentality that Jim instilled when I was at a different school. It was like, ‘I want to be able to do everything.’ Even to a point – and this is a little different than we had at our earlier conversation, but for the longest time all I ever wanted was - I never wanted to be the virtuoso marimbist, or the killer crazy drum set player, or the incredible snare drum player. I wanted to be the guy that you could give me any part and you didn’t have to worry about it. I’m not going to be incredible, but it’s
going to be solid and you don’t have to worry about it. So I almost avoided the primary instrument thing for a while just to be the jack-of-all-trades. Now I’m looking at it and going, ‘You can’t really do that in this field at this point. You have to have some specifics.’

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

BN: When I was in middle school, I would be lucky if it was thirty minutes a day. I barely practiced. I didn’t play mallets at all until sophomore year in high school. In middle school, I thought about quitting drums. I had enough natural ability and I wasn’t yet taking private lessons where I could come in and just sight read. So I really didn’t practice very much then. High school sophomore year I decided I was going to go into music, I remember saying to myself, ‘Well I guess I better start learning this mallet thing then.’ One of the directors of that youth percussion ensemble, his name was Scott Stacey. He was the director and I said ‘Do you teach privately?’ He was forty minutes away in Troy and said ‘Yeah.’ I said ‘I needed to start learning now.’ He said ‘OK, come on over.’ Then I started to practice a lot more just because I was so not used to it. I’d never played the piano. I could tell you this is middle C, this is an E flat, and whatever, but I was the kid who would have to go and write G, F sharp, G, A, above the notes. That was totally me and so I practiced a lot more because very early on he got me into four mallets. Here’s how you hold them, and here’s how you whatever. Sophomore year, my teacher let me bring the marimba home from school and I kind of got into it. I was like ‘This is actually kind of fun. I’m kind of digging this.’ Especially then, preparing for college auditions, every day after school I was in there for at least an hour so I could get on the marimba, get on the tympani, get on the snare drum, whatever. So probably once I got out of high school it was an hour to two hours a day, and then that kind of carried over into undergrad. It was an hour to two hours a day at least.

Honestly, the most practicing I ever did was at North Texas. That was because of the fact that I was really angry because my undergrad experience was not very good. I did not get a very good percussion education as an undergrad. So I show up at UNT five years older than some of the master students coming in. I’m getting another master’s degree at this point to compensate for the lackluster undergrad experience. I’m looking at these guys and they are five years younger than me and they can all outplay me, easily. I remember having big doubts even during my first semester, calling Harnsberger and saying ‘Dude, I don’t even know if I should be here, this is just bad.’ So I practiced probably the most I’ve ever practiced. I said OK it’s time to buck up. It’s time to play catch up. That was where it was three to five hours per day of practicing, just to play catch up. That was probably the most. When I got here to Kentucky, I was lucky if I got in an hour to two hours sometimes because you’ve got so many other things. You get to that point where you have so much stuff to learn but you have so many responsibilities. You feel like you don’t get better in your doctorate. You get worse, and basically all you are doing is maintenance. You say, what do I need to do today? I’ve got this stack of music to learn to play and get it to the point where I’m at least not going to fall apart, and not going to
destroy the ensemble I’m playing with and not be laughed at. That’s what you do. Even up to pretty much right now, with this recital, it’s maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. I’ve got all these gigs, I’ve got all this stuff to do. OK – just maintain. Now, finally the recital is over with, I can easily see that my practice time will probably jump exponentially. I’ll feel better about it simply because I’m not going to spread myself so thin. I don’t have to practice vibraphone any more. I don’t really have to practice snare drum any more. I’ve got the stuff that I know I can play, that I can take a week and work back up and it will be fine. I’m done with the snare drum. Bye-bye snare drum. It’s a great instrument, sometimes I’ll whip out my pad and have some fun, but I don’t actually see myself playing until next year - the Bismarck symphony is playing Scheherazade. Then OK, I’m going to have that snare drum part and I’m going to have to sit down and shed that a little bit. That maintenance is OK, but it feels like through your doctorate and through the past few years I’ve just been maintaining and trying to get by. Now I feel like I can go and sit down and practice those things that I want to practice and truly move forward and I feel like I am getting better at drum set now. I really feel good about how I play now, as opposed to, ‘Well, I really didn’t screw up too much.’ Now that the recital is over, especially with the summer, it’s nice. My goal is to get three to four hours in a day, because my schedule still hasn’t changed, to a point. I get up in the morning, my wife is still asleep … that’s my video game time, for about two hours. Then I’m usually in by eleven and I leave by about four or five. I go to school every day and still work, even if it’s just making sure the percussion library is together, or changing the heads on this drum, or whatever. Within that time, I can probably get in three to four hours of practice. When school starts up, I learned my lesson from the past few years. When I first got the job, I had failed my quals the first time so I had to take them again. I had two days a week – well actually every day of the week, once the end of the day was there, I had three hours blocked for just quals. Don’t bother coming by, office hours are over, I may be in there but I’m not answering the door. I actually usually go to the library and just study. Then the same thing ended up happening once quals were done, now it’s dissertation time. Monday, Wednesday, Friday I just staked myself with everything, so that Tuesday/Thursday I taught a ten o’clock class and then I was done. It went from noon to five, I just said - dissertation. People tell you this all the time but I never listen - it takes me failing. I learned that long ago, I have to fail to learn, and otherwise I just never hear it. So that’s what I need to do now. So my goal is two hours – whether it’s spread out or a two-hour chunk, I have two hours. That will be my goal. We’ll see if it happens.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BN: Absolutely, but they have nothing to do with the fact that I can play paradiddles at whatever tempo or I can play this style or that I can play this piece or whatever. It’s just the sheer discipline, because if you don’t have that discipline in our field, it will never happen. Harnsberger has written some good articles on motivation and stuff like that and he had some line where he said something like, ‘Obviously you must care about what you are doing because you are in a practice room at ten o’clock on a Friday night while your friends are out partying and you’re practicing scales.’ You have to have that discipline. Sometimes it takes some people a little longer to get to, but in my mind, that’s the biggest thing that practicing does. It forces you to learn how to be regimented, how to problem
solve, how to look at issues from different perspectives, how to have multiple tools in your toolbox to take care of any one problem. The whole practicing thing to me goes beyond being able to play a C-minor scale. It’s just what prepares you mentally for all the things you end up having to do in this field. I’m still figuring it out and some of the things I’ve talked about in here, I learned them last year, or two years ago. There are major points that I figured out along the way, but you are always rehashing and refiguring it all out. That’s probably the most definitive one. It molds your personality and your work ethic, because you can’t cram in music. You can try, and if you are lucky you’ll get away with it once or twice, but the minute that you fold, all over a piece, and you are sitting there thinking to yourself, ‘If I had just...’ You reflect on that. Tuesday night, I played X-Box until two AM and I could have been in a practice room and I could have avoided this gut wrenching feeling that I feel right now because the whole ensemble is looking at me right now because I just crapped all over the piece. That’s what helps you do the most.

Honestly, probably the biggest other thing that I push toward my students is to enforce perfection. I had this sign made that says ‘Enforce Perfection.’ I was practicing out of the George Hamilton Green Xylophone Book and that book is great because it has all these notes. Right next to the exercise it will have, ‘Play for three minutes straight without stopping at a steady tempo, no wrong notes.’ So I was sitting there practicing one day, going over this for the first time. This was in Georgia, so it was just before I came to North Texas, and I’m starting to play catch-up. I’m taking lessons from Harnsberger and he’s the one whose got me doing these things. I’m playing it, so alright, three minutes. I started the clock and started playing with the metronome. Everything was going fine and then all of a sudden, at about two minutes and forty seconds, I started to get nervous. Am I going to make it? Am I going to make it? And sure enough, I missed one note right at the end very end. I went ‘OK, one wrong note,’ and I’m about to move on and I thought, if Andy were standing behind me right now, what would he say? Would he be like, yeah, it was only one note, don’t worry about it, no big deal? Or would he be like, you screwed up, do it again. And so I went, all right, I’ve got to do it again. I remember saying to myself, ‘I’ve got to ‘enforce perfection.’’ So I wrote it down in green ink on this paper and I still have it. I put it above my drum set, or above my marimba. It comes with me everywhere. If I do clinics to talk to younger students or whatever, I have a Word document that has this big ‘Enforce Perfection’ sign and I print it and give it to everyone because I would love nothing more than to have so much ridiculous money that I could pay you to just stand behind me to be the little dude on my shoulder to where I would just play and you would say, ‘You know you screwed that up for the fifth time. You know you did, go back and play it again.’ That’s what I need. One of the big things you have to get with practicing is that idea that it’s on you. You have to force yourself to do it right, and do it again until you own it. If you don’t put in the time, then it’s your own damn fault. A friend of mine just had this gig. It was a thrown together gig, with these other musicians, and they were all really great, but they only had like three rehearsals, and the music they were playing was pretty demanding. It was kind of like a jazz combo, pop type gig. But the music was really demanding. Well they played the gig and it was OK but it wasn’t the greatest in the world. A couple of the guys in the group were really upset that it didn’t go as well as they wanted it to go, so they left right after the gig and they didn’t hang out because they were pissed at themselves. My friend goes, ‘When you
don’t prepare enough, because we all knew we should have prepared more for the level we wanted to play at and how difficult this music was - we should have had a lot more rehearsals than we did. But no one was willing for whatever reason or another, and there were some schedule issues. OK we get that. But they could have made it happen more and they didn’t. When you don’t prepare and you know you haven’t prepared enough, you forfeit your right to bitch. And I was like, it is brilliant because it’s absolutely true. The minute you are saying, ‘Well I really sucked.’ It’s like, did you prepare enough? And it’s probably, ‘Not really.’ Then you can’t complain, because it was going to be as good as it was going to be. You have to be realistic with yourself. Pat Schleker, timpanist of the Cincinnati Symphony, had a conversation with me once. I’m going to paraphrase, but it went something along the lines of him saying, getting an orchestral gig is not hard. It’s really not. It’s basically like math. Orchestral excerpts are almost like math. Here’s what you have to do. You have to go to one of the schools who you know are cranking out the really good orchestral guys, go there, listen to what they do, and then practice eight hours a day, and practice just the way you are supposed to practice. You’re recording yourself, you’re listening to all those recordings. You’re doing this every day, eight hours a day. He said if you do that you’ll get a gig. I promise you. The problem is so many people don’t know to do that, or they know to do that and they don’t bother. So immediately, half the field has cut themselves, because they are not willing to put in the eight hours a day, or they are not willing to record themselves every time and then go listen to those recordings that night and then make the notes and then be hypercritical about it, and do all those things. When you look at some of these people, like Paul Rennick, he was practicing like six hours per day when he was in high school. Tafoya and Pat, they know it’s hard, but they know what it’s going to take. John Lane nailed it. You need to be realistic. I know that’s not me. I know I am way too lazy to do that and I’ve got other passions that I want to do. I need to write, so I need to have that time as well. So practicing three hours when I’m in the school year and I have the other things to do, probably won’t even happen and I’ll be lucky to get in two, because I also need to spend at least that much time writing as well. I need to do all the stuff with the day job. The other about being realistic is you can’t just be a playing robot. You and I both have wives, we have outside friends and things. I just watched The Shining, the original for the first time, and there’s a saying, ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’ If you don’t have that balance of a life, you can easily lose track of what you are doing this for.

The enforce perfection thing has always been a big thing for me, because it was an epiphany moment where I thought, ‘Oh my God, I just figured it out.’ But then saying it and actually doing it takes some time. The big thing that I have to do now is I actually have to shift my focus to more mental stuff. My recital, I wasn’t very happy with it, but a lot of it, I realized, were the times I screwed up. I’m not thinking when I’m playing. I’m thinking and all the sudden, my brain, I don’t know if I’m ADD, but my brain starts thinking about something else. The next thing you know I’m going, ‘Oh crap, I’m hitting wrong notes’ and so you check back in. Then you are like, ‘Crap, where am I in the piece, what’s this?’ We are at the point where we are such perfectionists, that one wrong note ruins a take, because of the fact that there are guys out there where there will be no wrong notes. There will be nothing wrong. I remember figuring this out just before I flew down here. I went, ‘It’s not going to happen now, but that’s where I need to go with my
practicing.’ The fact is, I literally need to train myself that when I’m practicing, I’m making the investment that for the next four minutes I’m playing this piece and my mind will not think of anything else. That’s where I will be. I can deal with the physical side. Deane used to talk about that all the time. He’d be like, ‘I just think that I’m in prison. When I walk into the practice room I imagine I’m in prison. I’m here for two hours. I can do nothing else. But hey, look, I’ve got a snare drum in front of me, and I’ve got some sticks, and I’ve got this book and I’ve got a metronome. So I could sit here and stare at the wall for two hours or I could practice. So I might as well practice.’ I need to do the same thing, but I need to do it on the micro-level. I’m playing this piece for four minutes right now and my mind needs to be on only this piece for four minutes. Not flying away, spacing out, thinking about the next piece, or thinking about whatever. Just focus on hitting B-flat, then D, B-flat, the right hand, and then this chord. So yeah, the mental side is almost more important I would say.

I remember Paul saying once that ‘The better players are the smarter players, hands down.’ I always took that to heart. You can take that on many, many levels, but the fact is, the guys who can just mentally focus in and be really precise and intelligent about what they are doing, they’ll get all the work done that you got done, in half the time and be rock solid on it, because they mentally have the capacity to do what needs to be done.

**Biography**

Brian Nozny’s career as a percussionist, composer, and educator spans a wide array of musical styles, including classical, jazz, world, and popular genres. As a percussionist, he has performed in an orchestral capacity with many orchestras such as the Macon Symphony, the Hilton Head Symphony, the Irving Symphony Orchestra, and currently serves as the Principal Percussionist with the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony Orchestra. His excursions into chamber music have included collaborations with groups such as the Bravura Percussion Trio, the Copper Street Brass Quintet, the nief-norf project, and the Omaha Percussion Ensemble. Active as a jazz musician, he currently performs as the drummer with the Brickhouse Jazz Combo, in addition to freelancing throughout North Dakota.

As a composer, his original works and arrangements have been performed at respected academic institutions such as Indiana University, Northwestern University, and the University of Texas at Austin. Notable ensembles that have premiered Nozny’s compositions include the Troy University Percussion Ensemble, the Caixa Trio, and NEXUS. Brian’s most recent commission, an original work for percussion orchestra, Have You Ever Seen The Grand Canyon? will be premiered by the Florida State University Percussion Ensemble in the Spring of 2013. Brian’s compositions have been published by Drop 6 Media, Henmar Press, and Innovative Percussion.

Brian’s extensive teaching experience includes positions both in the United States and abroad. In the summers of 2007 and 2008, Brian served as a faculty member for the Music for All Summer Symposium in Normal, Illinois, and was a percussion consultant.
for the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission in Kingston, Jamaica in 2007. From 2009 – 2010 Brian was a staff member of the Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps. Currently Brian is on the percussion faculty at Troy University in Troy, AL.

Nozny holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Virginia Tech, Master’s degrees in Composition and Performance from the University of Miami and the University of North Texas respectively, and his Doctoral degree in Percussion Performance from the University of Kentucky. His primary percussion teachers include James Campbell, John Willmarth, Mark Ford, Christopher Deane, Paul Rennick, Ed Smith, Ed Soph, and Ney Rosauro; his compositional training has benefited from study with Jon Nelson, Don Wilson, and Jon Polifrone.
November 12, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JP: I do have a regular warm up routine, but what’s happened over the past few years is that my warm ups have actually turned into just really slow practice of whatever it is that I’m working on. When I was younger, maybe I would go in and work on roll exercises or work on my hands or do stick control. But what’s happened to me now with the program being as big as it is and me being the only person there, and with two children and an active family, and all the crazy PAS stuff and all these other things going on, I have so little time. I’m lucky just to maintain, and just to be able to play in lessons and be able to be an example of what I’m trying to get the students to do. So most often I have to plan almost a year in advance for the stuff that I’m going to be doing out the next year. If I’m playing the Schwantner again, or I’m playing the Mancini at Midwest, it’s the same kind of system I talked about in my presentation. It’s this triage and I don’t actually warm up using warm-ups. If I’m playing Bach, I actually warm up by playing through Bach really slow, but with everything in place, all the lines that I want to bring out, everything sounds the way I want it to sound. The only difference between that and actually being on stage is the tempo. So I’m still able to maximize my time because I’m practicing music, but I’m physically making sure that my muscles are doing what they need to do in order not to hurt myself and to do what I need to do with some consistency. So if anything, I think I probably don’t do real warm-ups anymore, I mostly just warm up by playing the music that I play. But you know it depends on what’s on the docket. If I’ve got a real heavy orchestra week, then maybe I do spend a little more time doing stick control. But if I’m playing something like Bolero or Shostakovich Seven, I’m just going to play Bolero or Shostakovich Seven loud and slow, and then gradually take it down to fast and soft. And that’s one of the other things, it’s like do the opposite, make it easy first. If you are playing Kije, play it loud and slow. Do that over and over and over again so that you feel good about what you are doing and really the only difference is the tempo and the dynamic. And for every click that you get closer to the tempo, take it down dynamically. And the cool thing about that is you always feel good about what you are doing, versus going in and you warm up a little bit and you start trying to play Kije at the dynamic that you need to play it and you just get mad. You just want to quit and run out of the room screaming. This way, not only are you making the best use of the time that you have, but you also feel good about what you are accomplishing. So I know when I leave or when I have ten minutes here or fifteen minutes there, or maybe an hour in the morning, I’m going in and focusing exactly on what I need to do. And when I’m done, I can just say, OK, I’m done. So when I go home and I’m hanging out with the kids or doing whatever, I’m not thinking about all this stuff that I have to do. I may think about it a little bit, but I know that I did what I was supposed to do for the day. So I don’t stay up late at night stressing out about It. It’s different for everybody and it depends also on how much
playing you are expected to do in addition to everything else that you do. For me, I think what’s starting to happen a little bit is that I still play a lot, but I’m becoming more focused and am kind of noted for certain things that I can keep up sort of easily. And I just choose to do those things more often that not because I know that I’m not going to have to spend five months working on it. Because at this point in my career, with everything that’s going on, I just don’t have the time to do that.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JP: It depends. I start everything super slow, like Leigh Howard Stevens style. The big difference is if I’m playing marimba, you know if you’ve worked with any of Leigh’s pedagogy, it’s the fast move. When you are playing really slow and working on shifts and memorizing all that stuff. The only difference is that I don’t really work on that unless it’s something that eventually is going to be fast. I still try and maintain elegance and make sure that the sound I want is there, so I’m not just thinking about my muscles. And Leigh does that too, but I think often times when people read Method of Movement or they interpret what he’s talking about, they think it’s purely technical. I’m just trying to get my hands moving. That’s part of it, but again, I’m trying to do everything at once. So even then, I’m starting to think about how I’m going to perform it. I can still move quickly but I’m not thinking just purely mechanically and horizontally and vertically. And it really depends. I don’t have to learn a lot of new stuff now if I don’t want to, because I’m tenured, and when you are not tenured and when you get your first job, you are probably going to have a lot of opportunities to do chamber music and other things. But you are also going to be asked to do some things that they ask you, but they are not really asking you. It’s kind of like, ‘Hey, I just wrote this new piece and it’s coming up in a concert and I’d really like it if you would play it.’ And this person is a senior faculty member and is probably somebody who could be on your tenure committee. And what are you going to say? ‘No, I’m too busy man?’ You really can’t, even though you really are too busy. And so when I have to do that, I’m just really methodical about it. I take everything very slow and the only thing that’s missing is typically the tempo. So there’s a speed at which I can play Velocities right now. It may be super slow, but I can play it perfectly and musically right now, if I got to choose the tempo. Even if it were one note per day, I could do it. So if I know that already, then what I have to do is find a tempo that helps me maximize recording it into my body the way that I want it to be, but without learning it wrong because I’m trying to go too fast. There are so many examples. Like in the old days there were phones that had push-buttons or combination locks on lockers. The first time you open up a lock, you are really slow and careful about it to make sure you do it right. And as you continue to do it, you get faster and faster, and eventually you get to a point where you don’t even think about it. You just go up, do it, and it opens. But the beauty of that is that if you do it that way, ten years later if you come back to the locker you think, what was that combination and you can’t remember it. But sometimes you walk off and come back and just open it easily and it all comes back. And that’s just really powerful if you choose to take advantage of it. It can be detrimental too if you train it the wrong way. And that’s where you can interfere with the process. So I just try really hard to make sure that I’m basically performing all the time. The only difference is that I’m just performing really slowly.
CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JP: No, I do not typically listen to existing recordings unless it’s something that I have to do really fast and I need an idea of what’s going on. There’s a percussion concerto that John Mackey wrote about ten years ago. We were going through our music director search with the Tallahassee Symphony and one of the first conductors came in and programmed this concerto to play and was going to bring in an artist from New York. And I was thinking this is going to be awesome. It was Damien Bassman actually who was the percussionist. He ended up going out to LA and was playing with Barry Manilow for a while out in Vegas. This guy was a super talented, Julliard person. So I’m really excited, and thinking great, we’ll bring him in, and we’ll work and we’ll do what ever we need to do. Then about a month before the show I get a call from our Executive Director in the orchestra who says, ‘The percussionist double booked himself. He’s doing something else and the conductor really wants to do this piece. Can you learn it?’ And I said, ‘Let me go listen to it first because I don’t know what it’s like. I heard a couple of Mackey’s band pieces, I think I probably know what’s going on, but let me go find out.’ So I went to John’s website, I checked out the piece and listened to the recording that was on it. So I went back and said, ‘Yeah, I’ll learn it.’ I set it up and went super slow for about three weeks and it was fine. But I took a lot of time. It was right at the beginning of the school year and I basically said, ‘The first week, I’m not teaching, leave me alone, leave my setup up. Come in and listen to me, but this is what I’ve got to do.’ And it turned out great, but I had to listen to it first to know what I was getting into. But for reference, like if I pick up a new Bach piece that I have never heard before, I never listen to anything first because I want to try to figure it out myself to see what my instincts tell me. And then either go back and kind of salt and pepper that, with something that someone else does if I like it, or just say, ‘No, I don’t like that, I want to keep mine.’ And that’s one of the cool things about when you get to be my age; you are not really playing for a juried thing anymore. You don’t have to worry quite as much about what people think of what you do, because it doesn’t matter. I was out in LA about five or six weeks ago for a day of percussion and they had all the artists play in a concert together. I didn’t have anything prepared, and I’m not going to play a tambourine solo, so they said, ‘Will you play some marimba or something?’ So I said, ‘Sure, I’ve got some Bach in my pocket that I’ll use every now and then and I’ll just work it back up.’ I do a C major with two mallets and I’ve never listened to a cellist do it, ever. And it’s weird because the comments I got were ‘I’ve never heard it like that before, it’s really beautiful, there are lines in there that I didn’t know were there.’ I think a lot of that is just because it’s mine. But it will be different six months from now when I pull it back out. I know it will be and I think that’s a good mark of great music is that it can continue to grow with you. So I try not to listen to recordings, especially with Bach because there is such a stigma about it. For students, I really don’t want them to hear it first because then they start mimicking. While that’s not a bad thing, I’d rather them start to develop their own trust in their instincts because you guys all have it, you’re just scared sometimes to use it. You go into lessons saying, ‘I think I want to do this but I’m not sure that it’s right.’ But the thing is, it’s already wrong, because you are playing it on the wrong instrument. So
really, how can you argue past that? I grew up a piano player and when I went to college I was a piano major. I’ve probably played more Bach than I’ve played anything else. So I’ve got all this stuff that I didn’t even think about that I had, I’ve got years of playing this stuff. I’ve listened to tons of people play it, but I want to do it myself. I don’t want to sound like anybody else because that person is already out there. But when you are a student, you have to kind of balance that with doing what your teacher asks and is suggesting. But when you get older, you realize that’s less important and you can actually just do what you want, and that’s cool. So anyway, the point being, that eventually you get to be your own teacher and that’s cool. Before I went out to LA, a lot of the students would come in and say ‘I want you to listen to this and tell me what you think.’ You just have to trust yourself.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JP: I almost memorize everything. I learned early on that I have a really good memory. I can tell it’s starting to slip a little as I get older. But when I was younger and I was a piano player, I didn’t learn to read music for a very long time because I could hear my teacher play something and basically be able to figure out how it went just from hearing it. It’s great but it’s a curse too. You are never really happy, playing timpani especially. It’s incredibly arduous because the orchestra is always changing. But it’s a nice thing to have, especially as teacher for note corrections and things like that. But at the same time, the memory stuff is really kind of natural to me. So I very, very rarely ever play with any music in front of me, for two reasons. One, because I think it’s a barrier between the audience and myself, and two is because I’m more comfortable without it. I don’t like reading things. Obviously I read a lot better now than I was when I was not able to read at all. I don’t do it a lot, because I don’t have to, so I try not to do it if I can help it. Now when playing with the orchestra, if it’s standard repertoire, I’m still going to have the music up there of course, but I’m probably not going to be watching the score. If I’m playing Scheherazade, I just know how it goes. But if it’s something new, you know playing in the orchestra is a little bit different than playing a solo concert, so I try to memorize most everything I can as much as I can.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JP: Chris Deviney has this great saying, he says, ‘you should excerpt the excerpts.’ And in Don Greene’s book, Audition Success, he talks a lot about using Post-it Notes of different colors. Greens are ‘I don’t need to practice this. I can do it.’ Yellows are, ‘I need to touch it a little and then it will be OK.’ And reds are, ‘I need to spend a lot of work there.’ And it’s the same idea as the triage thing I talked about in the CPC meeting. If you have four months to prepare for an audition or recital, or you know where trouble spots are in a piece, if you just go into a practice room and play the piece over and over, you are actually just wasting your time because you are just rehearsing things that you already know how to play. But if you go through and say, ‘I always miss this’ and you spend fifteen minutes just working on that and then plugging it in, it’s kind of like letting glue dry. Practicing has always been that way for me. When I was a kid, I put models
together. And I’m also incredibly inpatient, in general. My students will tell you I want it and I want it now, because I want it. I need order and I need structure and I’m just really super inpatient. So I’ll just go in and say I want to work only on those things that I can’t do. And then I’ll work backwards toward the yellows and then by the time I get to green, everything is a green. So then when I’m running it, I can address little yellow things that might pop up. I have the same strategy for rehearsal with the ensemble. When we played in two thousand seven, we spent an entire two or three rehearsals on nothing but the quintuplet section, because that’s the hardest part of the piece. To me that’s the hardest part to get everybody on all those split fives and all the other stuff. And so we just came into rehearsal and it was just ten or fifteen bars and we’d spend the whole rehearsal just on that. ‘Slowly, let’s take this beat; let’s take this beat, now that’s A, B C, D. When it splits up, which hand is moving where, etc.’ And then when you go back to the beginning, yeah you need to practice that a little bit, but not nearly as much as the fives and some of the other things. So it’s kind of working in reverse. Only practice stuff that you can’t play and then incorporate that into the stuff you can play. Lee Vinson put this perfectly, when he won the Boston audition. He wasn’t invited until he sent in a DVD. The way they do it in Boston is if you are not invited, they might ask you for a DVD, but you have to record the entire list without leaving the frame. So if you play a perfect audition and do poorly at the end of it and blow it, then you have to take a chance on do you have to go back and record the whole thing again? So in a way it’s good preparation for the audition. But at the same time it’s just insane. Lee said, ‘When I was prepping for Boston I didn’t even touch Porgy for two months. I know it, I know how to play it, and I’ve done the homework. But I’ve never played this, and I’ve never played this in an audition. So I immediately went to those and then went to the yellows and got them all green.’ What happens is what happens, but at the same time, little things that happen, if they are different every time, it’s probably not a systematic problem. It just what happens.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JP: I record myself, now, not as much, even though we have the rig up all the time and we have everything. I’m usually pretty savvy about what I’m doing. Like when I was getting ready for Northwestern, actually when I was a finalist for that job, I started recording myself about three weeks out. I knew that I played Merlin and I played Delecluse, another solo, and Canaries, and some other stuff. I worked on it like a madman because it all happened so fast and at the same time my first child was born. I was actually on the phone with the Dean in the delivery room when my first child was born, figuring out travel schedules and all that kind of stuff. I wasn’t even sure it was going to be the right move for me, but I had to check it out. You know Chicago, and I loved being there. So anyway, I recorded myself to send to friends to say, ‘Listen to this and tell me what you hear.’ Not so much for me to hear it myself. Because being in both sides of the recording spectrum now, I have a pretty good idea of what it’s going to sound like if I go in and listen to it. So I don’t spend as much time as I make my students do. But if I were you, I would have that Zoom recorder out all the time. But there’s no need to record the minute you go in and start on eight on a hand, you have to focus it. Say ‘My job today is to work on my soft rolls. Here’s what I’m going to do and I’m going to
do this for fifteen minutes.’ Do that for twelve and then the last three minutes, run the whole thing, and see how it comes across. And that’s a better way sometimes to spend your time, than going back and listening to the whole thing. But it also depends how old you are and how much you trust your ears when you are playing and if you can be objective about it.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JP: I only change the tempo. And I start playing in front of people for a while and then there’s a certain point where I won’t play in front of people because you have to congeal it at some point. You can’t take comments right before you are going on stage because you just can’t. And even with our group, we record all our rehearsals and we dump them in a drop box, so every kid can plug in their phone and listen to it the minute the rehearsal is over. So we invited a lot of people to listen early on in the process, especially with Aldridge and the Ravel, because these arrangements were done from scratch and they were very different by the time we got to the end than they were at the very beginning. With Aldridge, we must have gone through forty revisions and were still tweaking it on the tour. So at a certain point, once I started getting the gist of what people thought about it, that I trusted, I didn’t want them to hear it any more. Because at some point, you just have to cut it off and say we’re going to do our thing, and I’m not going to listen any more. You know the day before, if someone says ‘Did you really mean to do it that way? What if you moved this to another voice?’ It’s too late for that. So if there’s anything that’s different it’s that I kind of cut off all outside stuff before I go out and play because I want to make sure that I know what I want to do.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JP: No, not really rituals, although when I was younger, if it was a weeknight and I had a recital or a concerto performance or something like that, I just wouldn’t come into work. I’d take the day off, I’d sleep in and I’d just chill around the house in my pajamas, watch TV, take a long shower, get cleaned up, let my head get clear, go in and start warming up on the piece, and then just let it rip. But now sometimes I can’t really do that. I’m on a plane right before, or you know something’s always going on. My son is sick and I’ve got to go pick him up at daycare and take him home, and I’ve got to go pick him up at daycare and take him home, and get my wife home, then get a sub for this and do that and then run in at the last second when I’ve got like five minutes to go and then just hit it. So it’s just different. I think rituals are important, but mostly the ritual for me is the practice routine, so that by the time I get ready to play, really you just have to flip the switch and go.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JP: It’s funny but now that I look back, when I was a little kid, I was a trash can drummer, pots and pans and stuff. Neither of my parents was very musical so they probably just didn’t recognize the signs. But my mom really felt that piano was important so she started me there. But when I was growing up it was the mid seventies
and drums or percussion was more for parents, especially people that weren’t musicians. I wanted to play for Journey, that was going to be my thing. But I was a piano player and I didn’t really start getting serious, I didn’t take lessons until I got into college. I mean I played in the drum line in high school, but we had, for lack of a better word, a Caucasian boogie band. And we played the same halftime show every year and we danced and we did all this stuff and it was very old school, kind of traditionally African American college band stuff. But we were all Caucasian; it was the irony of ironies. But I learned to play on a set of tenors that went ten, twelve, thirteen, fourteen like a drum set. We were playing on plastic and slings and fifteen inch drums and stuff and I didn’t know any different. Because of that, when I got to college it was a big wakeup call, so that’s when I started taking lessons. I didn’t know grips, I didn’t know anything. My sophomore year, people came in that were playing Stevens and I was going, ‘What’s that?’ Because my teacher played Burton, and all the other guys were playing Burton, and I came in with that and people were saying, ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ My parents wouldn’t let me do it, and even to this day, they still don’t know what I do. My mom saw us on the tour and she’d never seen the ensemble before. She drove up from Atlanta and had no idea what to expect. She actually pulled some of my kids aside, they told me later, and said, ‘Is John good at what he does? It seems like it, but does he teach you individually? How does this work?’ I’d been doing this for a while and she still doesn’t totally understand it. So I kind of got a late start with all this stuff. All state band, I didn’t get to do any of that stuff. So there’s hope.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JP: In middle school and high school – I didn’t practice at all. In college, for my undergrad, I practiced for my senior recital a lot, but most of that was due to the fact that I was a real slacker. My first two years in college, I was in a social fraternity; I got kicked out of my pledge class for screwing around. I was playing in marching band and symphonic band and I never really practiced anything. Because the drag about being at Furman was that the studio was really small, so everybody played in everything. There was one section that did everything. So there was never any time to practice. You were either in class or you were in a rehearsal. The thought of actually practicing for a rehearsal was something that never occurred to me. I know it’s amazing, but I never got called out on it either. So I didn’t know until I got to school at Northwestern, and Angie Zator was a freshman then, and Brian Resnick was there, Matt Gold, and Mark Dennis with the Air Force Band. We had some real killers there. They were practicing all the time and I was like, ‘What, like cymbal crashes? I need to work on this?’ I had no idea. In graduate school it obviously took a lot to catch up. I practiced a lot in graduate school. And then I got a job early. I was twenty three. I had a lot of responsibility. I was the marching band teacher, and the percussion instructor, and ran the jazz ensemble, and started a steel drum band. I didn’t know how to play steel drums but we’d gone to a NASM review and we needed improvisation, ethnomusicology curriculum, which was a big thing back in the nineties. So I wrote a grant and the president bought a huge set of Panyard drums. Literally, none of the kids knew how to play. I said, ‘There’s a Sharpie
marker on there already. You guys go figure it out. We’ll see you in a couple of weeks.’ So when I was at Northwestern, I would practice the standard seven to eight hours every day, but I would stagger it. I’d go in the morning, play two, go to class, come back, play one, go to lunch, come back, warm up for rehearsal, go to rehearsal, get something to eat, come back, play for three, etc. But we also had a pretty tight knit group of people that really motivated each other to stay and practice. And if you weren’t really ready to leave yet, they’d be like, ‘Are you sure that’s ready? Are you sure you’re ready for your lesson?’ And even then, when I first got to Northwestern and I didn’t get it, I remember we went to play at Michigan State and I was the first drum line TA they’d ever had there, and we went to Michigan State over the weekend, and Patsy taught lessons on Sunday, because she wasn’t there all the time. Nobody was there when I was there during the week; we were all on our own. And Patsy would teach on Sundays. And I came in on a Sunday night and we had been in East Lansing, and came back, got back Sunday. And I’d gone to do some homework and I showed up for the lesson and I had an apple and a Newsweek. And I said, ‘I’m really sorry, I don’t have anything ready to go. I didn’t get it all done this week, and I figured we’d just talk a little bit.’ I was one of those people; I thought we’d just talk. Well Patsy, to her credit, sat down and we talked about stuff and then I got up and said, ‘Can I be in touch with you and reschedule?’ And she said, ‘There’s no reschedule.’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She said, ‘You get an hour a week. You just had it. How you choose to spend it is up to you.’ Well that really hit me like a ton of bricks, because nobody had ever said that to me before. And so then I kind of got it together after that and started practicing a lot more. When I was at Eastman, I was much more focused on what I wanted to do than I was when I was at Northwestern. I practiced a lot there. But the academics for the DMAs are so rough that I spent a lot of time in the library too. So if I don’t play a snare drum roll today, I know I’ll be able to play one tomorrow. Theoretically it may not be as good as it would if I do it both days, but I know that I can do it, so am I going to do it or am I going to go study for this exam. So that was me.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JP: Yes, absolutely, but mostly rehearsal technique, and I think I’ve learned to practice by being a teacher first. And so my practice routine is just me trying to teach myself to do the things that I try to get my students to do, so definitely. You can’t get a job now without being a really fine player. You can’t. There are too many people coming out who are ridiculous players.

Biography

Dr. John W. Parks IV, Associate Professor of Percussion at The Florida State University and faculty member at the Eastern Music Festival, holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music, Northwestern University, and Furman University, and has studied with Patricia Dash of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, John Beck of the Rochester Philharmonic, Michael Burritt, Paul Wertico (formerly of the Pat Metheny Group), and John Beckford.
He is an artist/clinician for Pearl Corporation/Adams Musical Instruments, Avedis Zildjian Cymbals, Innovative Percussion, Grover Pro Percussion, and Remo. Parks made his Carnegie Hall solo recital debut in Weill Recital Hall in May of 2007, and has performed with diverse performing organizations ranging from the Eastman Wind Ensemble on their 2000 tour of Japan and Taiwan and the Schlossfestspiele Orchestra of Heidelberg, Germany to the Kansas City, Alabama, Key West, Jacksonville, Florida Orchestra, and Tallahassee Symphony Orchestras. Parks also leads the award-winning FSU Percussion Ensemble, winners of the 2007 and 2011 Percussive Arts Society International Percussion Ensemble Competitions, and is a member of the PAS Board of Directors and Executive Committee. John has appeared as a performer/clinician at the 2011 Basilica Festival in Belgium, 2009 Thailand Brass and Percussion Conference in Bangkok, two Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinics, Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, NACWPI, on National Public Radio, and state MENC conventions. In 2006 he was nominated and selected as a winner of a university-wide teaching award at FSU.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

PR: The first reaction that I have is that I don't have a regular warm-up routine because of the conflicts between different things in my schedule. Every single day is not the same. I do practice quite a bit, especially on concert snare drum. I typically teach through these things, such as the Stone books, and that helps me focus. I basically do a lot of reading and from a technical standpoint, I do Stone's accidents and rebounds quite a bit to where it's virtually memorized. A good warm-up routine would be to go through all of them. Do the first page of Stick Control and apply the concepts of Accents and Rebounds to that. In terms of keyboard literature, I don't really have a routine. It's typically what I have to play. Preparing for gigs is pretty much the routine. The next thing that's on the music stand and that's really what I'm working on. The luxury of practicing like a student practices quickly goes away. Even in school, you learn that you don't get less busy, it only gets worse and worse. So what gets better is your efficiency and your ability to use a smaller amount of time more wisely. That is really what changes. What has become regular about my warm-up routine is that I have become a lot more efficient and better at using a small amount of time to zero in and be very specific about upcoming performances.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

PR: I got some great advice once from a violinist that really affected the way I practice and learn music. There are two concepts that are very basic but important and I think about them. The first one being the ‘perfect practice method.’ It is a essentially allowing yourself to sound good all the time and that's relative to tempo, more or less. Given a slow enough tempo, you can learn some really difficult music and if you give yourself enough time to process in your brain you can play some really complicated stuff accurately. Then you just become more efficient about your thinking between the notes. Make sure you are aware of that instead of going right to the point when you take it up to tempo or what it's supposed to sound like after the process. That becomes a very typical thing when people want to hear it right away. So having the patients to have that ‘perfect practice method,’ allowing yourself to sound good and not hitting wrong notes. Being patient is an important part of the process.

The second one is learning the music from the back to the front. This is a very important concept I learned from that violinist, in terms of memorizing music and being able to come through in a performance. The theory being if you start from the end work backwards and you are constantly repeating the end. If you do it the way it's normally done, you start at the first measure and you go until you make a mistake and then you go
back to the first measure. So you are constantly departing music that you have prepared more into the unknown and the less familiar. The idea with the other method is that you are always approaching more familiar music. It gives your music a more natural direction. I even have all of my ensembles do that. The basic philosophy of adding direction to music by rehearsing that way is common.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

PR: Yes, I do. I like to be familiar with it. I like to see what other people did with it. Not that it's going to determine what I do with it entirely but it saves some time. It gets you in the ballpark and helps you form an opinion of what you appreciate or don't or if you want to do something different. You just get it out there and you can go where you want with it. If there is more than one recording out there I make sure I listen to them because sometimes there are some pretty severe differences and I want to be aware of what has been done. Modeling sometimes is a good way to learn. If you are learning a Keiko Abe piece it might be a good idea to hear her play it. That is the first example that comes to mind and I really started doing that when I was a young guy. I had learned a piece called Conversation for Marimba by Miyoshi, and I learned the whole thing and then I heard that Keiko Abe had recorded it and so I listened to it. That was a very eye-opening experience in terms of phrasing and tempo. It was so useful because I had already known the notes and then to apply what I had learned from the recording was the icing on the cake.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

PR: I think it depends on what it is. When I think about memorizing music for a public performance there is one general rule that I follow. If it's a solo piece I will do everything in my power to memorize it. If it's an ensemble piece I won't. I'll make sure I have the music, even if it's for reference because the more people that are involved the more variables, the more risk there that somebody else will have a memory slip. Just being prepared that way then you can reference the music to get out of that situation. But if it's just me, I'm free to do it. I remember Steve Schick came to the University of North Texas probably six years ago. I was teaching there for a long time and he came. It was great to see him play. He did a master class and somebody came up and played Prim, the snare drum piece. They were a diligent student who had gotten the poster board and reduced the music but still there was this wall of music between them and the audience. It was actually straight on. It was just completely disconnected and disengaged to the audience. His comment was ‘you gotta do something about that even if it's put it to the side or figure out a way to put it up there so that it doesn't interfere.’ He emphasized the importance of the physical experience of performing live for people.

I had worked for Blast for years. I wrote a significant amount of their percussion features. I was rehearsing their music ensemble for years from basically 2000 to 2003 and it was amazing how little time we spent talking about the subtle things that you talk about at the
University about music. Phrasing, shape, direction all those kind of things were rarely, if ever, talked about. Almost all of the subject matter was performance, stage presence, and engaging the audience. It was what we would call non-musical things, but it showed that they were just as valuable, if not more valuable, considering the amount of time we spent doing it. I guess you could make a case it was more valuable. The basic principle of engaging the audience as a person to another person it seemed to supersede whether you hit the right notes or not. Obviously, our focus is music. We want to play good music and accurately, but the fundamental level of performing was something that I had to deal with quite a bit and was very conscience of. So if you're out there by yourself having the music memorized, having it internalized, seems to be a more positive experience for everybody. Even if there is a slip or two, it seems to be well worth that risk. In terms of memorizing music, and how to make it solid in your own mind, there are two things that you can certainly rely on. 1) the basic principle of repetition. It seems to basic to understand. Everybody wants to know how to think about it and all these deep psychological things, and I think there are two things that I get right, especially for myself and for groups that I conduct. The first time you learn it is clearly the most important time. To do it right the first time, to take time, to have patience, if you are rushing through it or have to skip steps, then you are increasing your risk of memory slips. The second is when you are burning a CD, you don't want to erase it and do it again. You don't want to do something and then change it. You want to think about it thoroughly and do it correct the first time so that the lack of changes cement the memory a little better. So if it's not change and your approach doesn't change very much then you have a better chance of being successful. The other thing is once you do that, sheer quantity of repetitions. Think about the analogy that every drummer can play a rock groove. Think about how comfortable it is. If I asked you to stand up in the audience and play two and four on a drum-set, rarely would somebody get nervous. They would simply do it and it would be comfortable. Well that's because the comfort level of that is related to the repetition of it. How many times have you done that? A million times? So that makes you feel comfortable. You have to try to get to that point with everything else you play. The more comfortable you are, the less your mind will race, and the more stable you'll be when you perform. There are different difficulty levels, it's not as simple to play the Kahn Variations as it is to play a rock groove but the goal is to get Kahn Variations to be closer to that comfort level. The only way to do it is through repetition. Putting yourself out there, getting the experience, with varying degrees of pressure during performances. So that it's not all or nothing the first time. You have progressed in terms of how intensely these performances are, then you'll be more comfortable. The more comfortable you are, the less your mind will race, the more stable you'll be when you perform.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

PR: I think about every everything I play as a pickup to something else. Instead of playing something and falling away from it, it always is connected to something that follows it. I think in terms of the last measure of a phrase and the first measure of the next phrase are connected into one thing. That connection in getting across the bar line and being able to seamlessly get in and out of things tend to be problem spots. I address that
right away when I learn music. I think it was Mike Mainieri that said, ‘when you are learning a jazz tune, the first thing that you should really do is learn the bridge, instead of the head.’ The themes are easier to remember but it's the bridges that are tougher. There is a lot of truth to that. Learn the bridge first, learn the transitional moments first, learn the connections, and then all the stuff is a little easier to get.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

PR: Not enough. I think technologically it's certainly becoming a lot easier. Ideally, if I wasn't a teacher and a writer, but simply a performer, it would be a huge part of what I do. I would have system set up where it would be literally a push of a button. That would make it more automatic, but you have to go through the process of figuring that stuff out. Instead of prior to performances, I tend to listen to the performance recording a lot. I will rehearse and practice to get myself prepared, keeping in mind that it’s not the only performance that I’m going to do. I really study the performance recordings a lot more then I record myself rehearsing, which I should do more of.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

PR: Naturally, you just focus more time. It’s a build up to the moment in time when you are performing. It depends on what I'm playing. Not everything is the same and I think that's an important thing to notice. There are so many different things. How much set up time do you have? Some of the bigger chamber works require such an enormous time to set up, move, schlep, and things like that. I set up a practice place and a routine where I spend as little time doing that as possible. I have my own equipment and make sure it's set up in my own way and in my own room where I have a key. I had a key and I could practice whenever I wanted to. I would set up a time, which makes it easier to do it. Much like everything in this world, it’s deadline related. Just like a performance or recital, it's a deadline. So what I learned to do is create deadlines without there really being a deadline. I create a deadline and I treat it that way so it keeps me on task.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

PR: I eat bananas, like everybody else. I try to keep the nerves down through that and just try to be as prepared as I can. I think I'm right in the middle of the road - some people don't like to play a lot the day of the performance and some people over-do it and play up to the last second - I think I'm right in the middle. I make sure I have maybe two reps of something and then the third one is the performance. That's usually a good rule of thumb.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

PR: My family was not musically inclined and there was not that much music in my house, but I took to it. It was a situation where I gravitated towards it and just did it. It was all sort of independent. I would say that was around sixth grade. My friend was in the junior high stage band or jazz band and he was one of my best friends. I went to the
room with him and found myself there. He had some sort of a conflict - somebody came to the room and said that he had to go to the office so he handed me the sticks. He took about a minute to show me what to do - he goes "just do this," and gave me the sticks. Here I was with this jazz band and I could actually do it. It was a seriously encouraging moment because I was naturally able to do this and I just wanted to do more of it. I gravitated towards it and obsessively practiced forever. That was around sixth grade.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

PR: I'll try and be as honest as I can be because some of these numbers may sound ridiculous. In middle and high school there were moments when I practiced on a regular basis from 3pm to 9pm. Six hours a day, every day, and even more on the weekends. It was part of that obsessive thing I was telling you about. It was total ear training, exploring the drum set, and just exploring improvising and playing. I could just practice for that long. That was my personality type. I could practice for that long all the time. My parents, bless their hearts, I would come home from school and go down and start practicing. Then before you know it, my Mom would flick the lights on, because this was downstairs in the basement, and that would be the time I stopped or else I would break for dinner and then I would go back down. For the majority of that time period, between 3pm and 9pm, I was practicing with the exception of dinner or something like that. That was a huge part of it. When I went to college, it became even more obsessive. There were times when it was eight hours a day. I think everybody goes through a period of time like that in their lives. All successful musicians, whether they’re performers or not, go through that self-examining period where they practice a ridiculous amount. There’s a combination of exploring your instrument and solitude. It's that whole combination that creates what your musical personality is and I think everybody has to go through that. If you do the hour a day practice thing, I don't think you ever get to the depths that you do when you practice, at least for a period of time, obsessively. Obviously, you can't do that forever, so it happens at some point in your life. Early career, I discovered teaching and writing. I excelled at teaching and writing, especially with groups. I could get people to play well and I could connect with them from a teacher's standpoint. So my career started splitting, like everyone's usually does as a musician, especially as a percussionist. You have so many irons in the fire. There was a period of time when I obsessively approached marimba. I remember the first recital that I gave, I played Bach's *G minor Fugue*. It went deeper from there and I just tried to obsessively perform. Three recitals when I was in undergraduate and I also played on everybody else’s recital. When I was a graduate student I never said no and did everything. I went from playing drumset obsessively, to snare drumming obsessively, marimba playing, and then moved to orchestral repertoire, playing timpani constantly. I covered those bases so it was more of mono-tasking. That's how I did it and that's the method I used. As I went through my life, I approached different things obsessively. Then you're early career, that's when you start dealing with conflicts. Life gets in the way - schedules. That’s when you really learn that you don’t have a practice room available to you at all times. Then you have to learn different ways of practicing. Mental practicing - looking at the music and being able to go through it in
your head so that you are ready when you have the instruments available. Currently -
now it's almost per gig. It's relative to the performance schedule. When I told you this
before, in terms of deadlines - For example, there was a period of time where me a
Christopher Deane would try to play something each semester. The beginning of the
semester it's like, 'what are we going to play this semester?' So we create the deadline
before we carve out the time. It's almost like you have to set the date for your recital or
you've got to set the performance date and make yourself do it. So it's all relative to that
nowadays - concerts. I just make sure that I'm involved, from a performing standpoint.
It’s that deadline thing we were talking about.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

PR: Yes, I do. I think that intense period of time in my life that I told you about - as long
as you do that once in your life, per instrument, you have to do it at least once, and now I
don't really have to do it as much. It all probably makes perfect sense to everyone, but it
seems to be very true for me in my experience. It's sort of like the analogy of when you
learn something when you're a kid. For example, I was a skier and I learned to ski when I
was very young. So now, I can ski once a year and I don't really need to re-learn how to
do it. I can just jump right back into it. It's almost that way when you spend this intense
amount of time on one instrument. You just have to rub the rust off a little bit and then
you're right back on the saddle again. Writing as well. There were large stretches of time
where I would write lots of music. So you're writing chops are sort of the same thing.
Now I am much more efficient. Without those intense periods of my life, practicing that
way, I wouldn't be able to get right into it. It's the same thing with practicing and my
ability to play without this long routine of warming up. I can just play right away. It
requires less warm up time and maintenance because of those periods of time.
You're not going to have those periods of time your whole life, really you're not. You'll
go a month or three weeks without touching things and it’s no fault of yours, it's just that
you're so busy. You get into other things. So relying on those earlier period of times in
your life becomes increasingly more important.

Biography

Paul Rennick is a Lecturer in the Percussion Department of the University of North Texas
and an Adjunct Faculty at Texas Christian University. Having taught, written, and
arranged for many of the most successful percussion ensembles in the country, Paul is
recognized as a leader in the field of marching percussion. He has been a featured
clinician at many Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, Music Educator's
Association Conventions, and many Percussive Arts Society State Conventions.

At UNT, Paul teaches applied lessons, percussion arranging, and is the director and
arranger for the Contemporary-Pop Percussion Ensemble, which has featured some of the
world's most renowned percussionists as guest artists. Since 1989 Paul has also written
and designed the shows for the 13-time PAS National Champion University of North
Texas Indoor Drumline. He has also been percussion arranger and caption head for the

Paul was a design team member, music composer/arranger, instructor, and percussion manager for the Tony & Emmy Award winning production "Blast!", currently on tour throughout the U.S. and Japan. He was also a musical arranger for the Conrad Jupiter's Hotel Casino in Gold Coast, Australia, and directs the percussion troupe "Stickworks" which has performed throughout Australia and currently in the U.S.

An active arranger and instructor for schools across the United States and Canada, his credits include numerous P.A.S., W.G.I., B.O.A., and MACDBA National Championships. Paul is currently on staff as an Artist/Clinician with Remo Inc., Dynasty USA, the Avedis Zildjian Co., and is a Signature Artist with Innovative Percussion. He is also a member of the P.A.S. Marching Committee, and has many percussion ensemble works published through Drop 6 Media.
November 3, 2012
Austin, TX

CH: Do you have a regular warm up routine?

ER: No. I just turned eighty and I want you to know that it took all this time but I practice in my head. Whether I’m laying in bed or doing exercise - I mean physical exercise - I practice in my head a lot more than I do on an instrument. I just learned to do that. I’m so used to practicing for so many years and it’s so engrained that now, I can really do it mentally and get as much accomplished. Of course you don’t keep your chops up by doing that, but I get a lot done mentally now.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

ER: I don’t learn new music. I gotta tell you that one disadvantage of playing in the studios is I read music by the pound every day. At the end of a session - a six hour session which is an hour for lunch - at the end of the day the composer says ‘Hey you know that cue we played early this morning?’ You won’t even have time to find it because the clock is running out. ‘We gotta get out of here but you remember that cue we did this morning? I want to do that again. You can remember that can’t you?’ I don’t remember anything. Because of just reading so much, my memory is not that great as far as spontaneously trying to read a piece or trying to learn a piece. I’m just used to reading so much.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

ER: I’ve thought about that and done it a couple of times. I’d just as soon pick up the music and try to learn it that way. I’m telling you, it could be age or something, but it’s very difficult for me to memorize music. I’m just reading so often that I’ve depended on that. There are some guys in the studios that are very very bad readers and after the second time, they know it down cold, they don’t even have to look at the music anymore. I’m just the opposite. I’ve let my memory skills go for just knowing that it’s in front of me and I can do it easily. But there’s two advantages, one is the other way as well. To be a good memorizer, if you’re a poor reader I know that’s what happens.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

ER: No, there is no particular way. Some of the problems would be sticking. I try to work that out and when I go to play it again, I know it’s much easier if I’ve worked out some kind of sticking.
CH: Do you do it at tempo or do you slow it down?

ER: No, I try not to slow anything down. I like to play everything where it’s supposed to be, otherwise it takes too long to get there. We don’t see music before we get to a session. At nine o’clock the downbeat comes and we’re playing, we’re recording. So you have to just be right on top of it. Trying to slow down and go thru that whole process would slow you down like crazy.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

ER: I don’t build up to anything. I go right for where it’s supposed to be. I’ve been doing that my whole life so that’s my process.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

ER: No.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion?

ER: Six, I started on xylophone.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

ER: Yes, my dad wanted me to play an hour before I went to school in the morning and I’d play a couple of hours when I come home from high school, every day. On the weekend, he wouldn’t let me out until I played at least three hours.

CH: What about when you were in college?

ER: I’d say the same thing. I just kept the habit going. It was an engrained procedure and I just kept with it. I’d say three hours a day.

CH: What about early career?

ER: About the same, if I had time. I would do the same. First I went in an army band and then I came out and went on the road with George Shearing for three years and then came to LA and worked with Sinatra a lot. But then I just got so busy there was no time for practicing any more. We were averaging three record dates a day and almost seven days a week. I was averaging nineteen record dates a week, which was three hour sessions. From there we went to TV film and from there we went to movies. And working nights and clubs so I didn’t need to practice any more.

CH: What about currently, do you have any practice time?
ER: Yes, and like I say I practice in my head a lot. Even laying in bed, you know. I can stay in bed for an hour in the morning and my mind is bright and alert when I get up and I practice mentally.

CH: When you are practicing mentally, are you visualizing the instrument or are you visualizing the music?

ER: Both ways, I visualize the music and I visualize playing on that instrument.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

ER: Absolutely. Practice is very important because it shows you have a love for it or an interest in it. I think if you didn’t do that you wouldn’t have that desire or that feeling.

It’s just that anytime there was a challenge, I dove into it until I learned it or until I had it under my fingers. I’ve just been playing for so long that if anything came along that I couldn’t make, I would be embarrassed so I just always make sure that I got it under my belt.

**Biography**

A well-respected studio musician long based in Los Angeles, Emil Richards has been on a countless number of sessions, contributing his vibes mostly anonymously to recordings in all genres of music. He started playing xylophone when he was six and, while still in tenth grade, Richards played with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. After graduating from the Hartt School of Music and Hilliard College (1949-52), he played in an Army band in Japan (working with Toshiko Akiyoshi). Richards later worked with Charles Mingus, Willie Ruff, Ed Shaughnessy, Ed Thigpen, George Shearing's Quintet (1956-58), Paul Horn (1960-64), Jimmy Witherspoon, Shorty Rogers and many others. In the early-to-mid 1960's, Richards co-led the Hindustani Jazz Sextet with Don Ellis, mixing together Indian music with jazz. He was also a member of Stan Kenton's Neophonic Orchestra, the Roger Kellaway Cello Quartet and toured with both Frank Sinatra and Frank Zappa in the 1970's. Emil Richards, who recorded as a leader for Impulse (1965-66) and Interworld (two CDs in 1994-95), owns over 350 percussion instruments and has long been interested in ethnic folk music although he considers his main influence to be Lionel Hampton
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

SS: I do not. I just began immediately practicing whatever needs to be practiced and I sometimes warm-up within that context by choosing my starting spot or perhaps starting a little under intensity. But normally I just begin playing.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

SS: I think the only thing I would really say is even if I’m learning a piece from music, whether that’s for chamber music or when I learn a piece as the conductor, now which I do more often, I start at the beginning and just begin learning in fair detail, in order. In other words, I don’t do a gloss over the whole piece and then go back and work again. I just begin right in the first bar and whether that’s to learn or memorize a Brahm’s symphony, chamber piece, percussion music, or a new solo - although I guess I have played all the ones I’m going to play, I’m not really learning new solos anymore - but if there’s a new piece I commission, then I begin learning music with bar one.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

SS: I would say I don’t listen to recording, not universally, again to draw on the conducting, I don’t hesitate to the listening of recordings of classical music when I’m learning a classical score and if I had a percussion piece that fell into that paradigm I would use that. Also, I have nothing against it but the fact is that almost nothing that I play has been played before. Certainly now, every new piece I’m learning is a commission or a one-off piece in one way or another, so there aren’t recordings. So I would say I don’t do that. I discourage my students from doing that because I feel that it narrows the range of possibilities pretty dramatically so I think that while I’m talking about other people, especially less experienced players, I generally try to steer them away from that. I feel that after forty some years I can listen to a recording without it changing my approach too much. It just so happens that the kind of percussion things I play there aren’t really recordings.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

SS: I don’t know the answer to the second part of that question. I think that this is really what one does in the practice room, is to practice dealing with memory slips because you have them there too. Basically, I try to recreate the feeling of being in a practice room on stage. In other words, that focused or surrounded feeling. A lot of people talk about ‘oh
it’s good to import the feel of a concert hall into the practice room.’ In general, I like doing the other way around. I like feeling like I’m alone and I’m just playing for myself. That helps memory I think to some extent. Over the years I’ve learned a lot of strategies for coping with memory and errors and I don’t really have a system for that, I just found ways of doing it. I don’t know, it depends on what mistake I just made. The answer to the first part of the question is I still memorize all the solo music and I will continue to do so. Chamber music - there was a time in my life where I used to memorize even the most difficult chamber pieces, but I wouldn’t do that now. I think that it’s actually pretty important to have a relationship with the score. When you’re playing chamber music and maybe, playing solo music. I’ve changed a little bit that way. Then there’s also conducting. There I memorize but I perform with a score. So I have it memorized but I like to have the score there. Not so much a safety but so I have a document, that look on the page to respond to. I really think that the strategy for dealing with memory errors doesn’t take place on stage, it really takes place in the practice room. So you learn in such a way that you can restart at any given point. You learn in such a way that you can visualize the score and hear the tune in your head, even if it’s a tune of noises, you have a kinetic approach. This is really the thing that I talk about in the book. There is an organic or holistic way of memory that isn’t just muscle memory but it’s also not just visual memory. The secret to dealing with memory slips in the first place, not to have them, that means that you practice in order not to have memory slips. Then if you do, I just don’t think that you can have a system - ‘ok here’s what I’m going to do if I have a memory error’ - so much has to do with where that is, what piece that is, whether it’s a little flub of something or whether you really just don’t know what to do next. I don’t know if there’s a system that is possible.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

SS: After I graduated I taught at the Berlitz School, and they have wonderful ways of teaching language, which really involved the ability to analyze where a problem was and pin-point the smallest possible strain. Once you’ve done that, you fix that problem and then you back up a little bit. Back up the lens so that you’re doing a little bit before the problem and a little bit after. Then once that seems to be secure you put it in a larger context. I think that makes a lot of sense and I don’t think that’s an unusual method, except that what was interesting, at least in language construction, is how do you figure out what the problem is? Sometimes the problem is actually not where you’re making the mistake, sometimes the problem is someway that you’re setting yourself up in the moments just before or that the learning process on the day that you memorized it was somehow slogged because of whatever - being distracted, sick, or who knows why it could be. So it’s not always, ‘I’m playing this note wrong so let me play this note right,’ that could be the case, but the problem could be something else. I think the primary way to address that is to first of all have a very very sharp set of diagnostic tools to be able to, twice a week, identify and fix that problem. Sometimes the problem is not the problem.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

SS: I never do. I never do because I know what I’m getting right. I’ve certainly heard
recordings of myself, but I don’t listen to them very often. I actually never listen to concert recordings and I hardly ever listen to commercial recordings, except if I have to give a lecture or presentation. Of course I listen to them while I’m making them so I’m certainly aware of what I’m doing. But I think I know when I’m in the right spot with a new piece by how it feels to me. There’s a feedback mechanism. I sometimes have been deceived and sometimes I wish I had a better strategy for listening to recordings because I might have caught certain kinds of things, but to me, a successful performance is both about a type of accurate representation of the score, but more than that, that it feels right, that you resonate with it. If I’m doing that and it feels right to me, it’s probably going to feel right to other people. Sometimes when you listen to recordings you get caught in a certain kind of listening which is listening for accuracy and listening for adherence to the score. While that’s important, that’s not the only thing that’s going on. As you listen to recordings you can certainly find yourself just concentrating on a certain aspect of performing over another. That’s a very long way to say I don’t listen to recordings.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

SS: Yeah, I think there’s an end game approach and I think that for me it is to arrive close to the performance but still not right at the performance with a sort of punctual run through level. There are different methodologies for new pieces than there are for repertory. In a repertoire piece, like for me say Xenakis’ Psappha, that I played a lot, I just practice and then I play it. I practice for two or three days before a concert and that’s enough. But if I’m learning a new piece, and I think that may be what you’re talking about mostly, then I would say that a week to ten days before the performance I’m able to run through the piece. I like to be able to run through the piece but then in the last week I want to get out of run through mode and go back to the kind of detail and sort of stress free thinking about something other than just getting through the piece from top to bottom. I think one of the best ways to practice for memory is to practice things other than avoiding forgetting. When you play from memory, a lot of times, I would say like ninety-five percent of the effort, that I see in my students for example, goes into not forgetting. People forget to practice lines, phrasing and the overall shape of the piece. They forget everything else except the goal of not forgetting and it becomes this incredible thing. When you put that much effort in to something, and say you don’t forget, is that a successful performance? It might be a horrible performance. You succeeded in not forgetting but you failed at everything else. So I think the last days before performance should be spent on things that you actually really care about. There are sonic details, there are large scale shapes, whatever there might happen to be.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

SS: No, not a particular ritual. If you are playing on tour, very often, your time is not completely your own. The hall is available at this time or that time or you might need to choose instruments. There’s a lot of stuff that’s not in your control. One thing I would say, is that for me, it’s incredibly important to eat regularly and well on the day of the performance. It’s also incredibly important to eat regularly and well during practice or just everyday. I have this discussion with my students, and members of my orchestra may
feel like maybe I’m some sort of nutrition wacko. No, I notice in myself, especially as I age, that my ability to focus is tied to how well I treat myself - eating, sleeping, and exercising. So the one thing I would be sure to do, even if I’m under the gun with a big piece, is to do those things. I might not exercise a lot on the day of performance, but very often I will do a little bit of exercise. It’s important to be a complete human being when you walk on stage not just a guy who knows how to play that piece. I think it’s also relaxing to me to realize, ‘oh yes, there are other things involved in the world other than this fourteen minute long piece that I’m all worried about.’ So if I exercise, and especially if I eat and sleep well, I think that makes it a lot easier.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

SS: My first lesson was in first grade so that would have made me six. I was a pre-med major for one year, as a freshman in college, and then I left that program and transferred to the University of Iowa as a sophomore. That’s really when I started taking percussion seriously.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

SS: I didn’t really practice in middle school or high school. I didn’t think I would be a professional musician. I suppose I practiced. I certainly played drum set and things like that but I’m not sure that counts as practice. I probably would have played an hour or two a day. I was in a band and that kind of stuff but practice the way you and I are talking about it, was very little I suppose. I would say that when I made the change to being a music major and decided to do percussion performance, I was very serious about that and I probably practiced an average of four to five hours a day but there were also many years or months within a year where I would be higher than that, seven to eight. And now, if I were advising me then, I would have said to practice less but practice better. But I would say probably an average of four hours a day. This went though my early professional life probably up until about fifteen years ago, or something like that. I was practicing that much. Currently, my life is different every day so I find that I have a hard time finding time to practice because of the number of things I’m involved in and the amount of organizational work I do. But I go in practice phases. Now I don’t worry. For example, if I take a month off and I’m not really practicing very much I don’t fear I won’t be able to play. When I get back I’m going to start a practice phase for a performance in early December and I’ll be at the three to four hours a day mark at that point. But then February will come and I’ll have a lot of conducting and a lot of other kind of touring and I probably will not practice very much for a month. So when I’m in a practice phase, and I have them sketched out on my calendar for the next year or so, I know that these three weeks I’m going to be at home and this is the focus, practicing. These two weeks I’ll be away and I won’t be able to. These two weeks I’ll be at home but there will be other type of work, or whatever. That kind of thing. So in a practice phase, I’m practicing three to five hours a day.
CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

SS: To the extent that I have been successful, absolutely, because I have a baggage claim theory of playing percussion or playing music - you cannot unpack anything that you have not packed. I keep hoping that I will take my bag home from a trip one day and I will unpack something that I never packed. You only ever unpack the things that you put in. I view the same thing with practicing. I think it’s a pretty boring life as a concert musician if the only thing you do on stage is to retrieve and repeat the things that are done in the practice room. It is absolutely essential to practice in such a way that you prepare yourself to do a whole bunch of things on stage, not just one thing. I clearly wouldn’t be where I was without practicing and I hope that my practicing is not limiting but offers a range of possibilities.

**Biography**

Steven Schick was born in Iowa and raised in a farming family. For the past thirty years he has championed contemporary percussion music as a performer and teacher, by commissioning and premiering more than one hundred new works for percussion.

Schick is Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego and a Consulting Artist in Percussion at the Manhattan School of Music. He was the percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars of New York City from 1992-2002, and from 2000 to 2004 served as Artistic Director of the Centre International de Percussion de Genève in Geneva, Switzerland. Schick is founder and Artistic Director of the percussion group, "red fish blue fish," and in 2007 assumed the post of Music Director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus.

Steven Schick recently released three important publications. His book on solo percussion music, "The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams," was published by the University of Rochester Press; his recording of "The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies" by John Luther Adams was released by Cantaloupe Music; and, a 3 CD set of the complete percussion music of Iannis Xenakis, made in collaboration with red fish blue fish, was issued by Mode Records.
~ Robert Schietroma ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 3, 2012
Austin, TX

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

RS: No matter what instrument I’m going to be working on, the first thing you have to do is get good blood circulation. You have to have it for your joints. I think the blood circulation is the most important thing in the warm up. But right now, even as long as you’ve been playing, you probably are still not aware of when you when you’ve got enough blood flowing. And as you get older, arteries get smaller. Regardless of the instrument I have certain exercises, not the normal ones you see in your book, but what they do for me is the diagnostic, they let me know where I am that day. What things are good, my technique is bang, bang, bang, what things need to be improved. So as opposed to most people that warm up, who do all their exercises and then practice the solo their working on, even thought that solo may be full of techniques, if you really knew how to diagnose your warm up, you’d be like why am I playing this today? It’s going to be detrimental. I’ll learn some notes, you can sit down in an easy chair and learn notes, in fact you should. You want to have the mind take a picture of the piece. If the hands take a picture of the piece, you lose it, it doesn’t stay with you forever. I see the piece in my head. For example, if you were playing a piece for me and I heard something wrong, I would say ok, on the bottom of page seven, that’s where these things are in my head. It’s funny because students need something to look at, they actually want you to look at something so you’re not going to miss anything and when that doesn’t happen they wonder, is he really paying attention to me? Yes I’m seeing the same picture that you are. Hopefully you’re seeing the picture, because if you’re not, we’re not on the same wavelength and anything is possibly distracting. It’s very apparent when things are flowing along beautifully. I can play right through it, so muscle memory is good when everything works. It’s terrible when the mind is almost attacked and you don’t know where you are because there’s nothing else to rely on and you can continue to play but always multiply your errors. So what are you gaining? No one wants to sit down in a chair and spend that kind of time, too bad, what is your career, what is your intent? There’s a pretty good and consistent sound that everyone is supposed to get in their head so they can and should be practicing with the same type of discipline. Slow strokes, practice that since the contact sound, to me, is so critical in the classical excerpts. On marimba, the beating spots are the most critical. And they’re so close together I’m just making the distinction of trying to build a bridge, you have to get from here to there, there’s a lot of ways to support that bridge but you have to find your own. The teacher tries to give it to you but I can’t give you those notes, I don’t have to, they’re printed for you. They just have to be indelible in your brain.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?
RS: Two ways, the first involves sitting in that chair, being very very comfortable and I almost speed reading. Like when you’re reading a book, when you become more proficient, you no longer go ching ching ching ching, like the old typewriter. You learn to look at the page from top left hand to bottom right, and so you’re sort of reading the page but you’re reading it this way, and you learn to discard all these ins and outs and when it really comes down to it, there’s only a few words that have to be indelible. Did you ever play a piece of music that’s just blobs on a page? It’s like, small, large, a lot of density, very little density, loud volume, soft volume, and you have all these things that you’re putting in your head. The first Japanese repertoire that came over, people had difficulty playing it, it’s not conventional. Well they use space and they use volume, it’s a five-seven reward, tension, resolution. So when you’re looking at the page, you should be saying the things I’m talking about first instead of reading. My eyes are doing this, that’s redundant because you’re not going to be able to play a piece of music and see all that, because it’s very dense. There’s a lot of things in those two stages, if it’s marimba. So you have to pick out the clusters, and the more you pick out the clusters, the more you realize it’s a box piece of music. These things can apply to all the music that’s prevalent today as well, the contemporary stuff. At one time I did a lot of contemporary playing, and it’s fun. No one could tell you that you’re playing it wrong. Now let’s go back one step to what you were talking about before, in classical orchestral repertoire, all the dynamics are there, everyone learns the dynamics, it has to be just perfect for the audition, but how you play in the audition is not perfect for the stage. You might go through it and play it that way first out of the shoot because you just want to nail it. But I’ve always been amazed of how certain notes come out when played by someone that really knows their repertoire is doing. And it’s not like the piccolo you’re playing along with in unison, but they’re not upset about it, it helps give them some kind of direction. This is where we are, it’s not wow, wow, and automatically the other instrument plays the shape off of that because their line set is like this. It’s almost like a static signal and then they phrase a little differently so you can be in a full orchestra and playing with someone and just having fun with it. They love the way you play your part and it inspires them to play their part. And then the orchestras looking around. You can’t adjust something that has been around one hundred years, just the way you want to do it. One other thing is, there’s been studies of why people were attracted to different instruments. A cello, it’s the way it’s so comforting, like being in the womb. A percussionist doesn’t spend much time in that stage. Originally we’re attracted to the motion and the visual aspect of it, because when a percussionist plays, it’s very physical. That is something that you memorize, it’s why we have these conventions. You see all these great artists you know, what are they doing? You see what they’re doing, you do what they’re doing, you hear the end result. So I could tell you right now if you were to lock me down in this chair and said memorize a solo, I’d have a hard time, I need to move. Sometimes I’ll get up and walk around but I’m memorizing. We’re attracted, that’s why we selected the instrument, it’s the image of motion, the motion helps us learn the notes. Because that’s what drew us in and because to me the instruments tend to be static, we can make them loud or we can make them soft. We use loud and soft all the time, to shape our phrases. Walking, when I’m memorizing music, it’s not like I’m just walking, who knows, I may do a pirouette, I’m enjoying it. It’s a very important thing. You may not need motion, you yourself, but I do. All of this is a puppet to your brain. But all this works because
you’re holding these strings.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

DS: No, I don’t want to be influenced; I want to hear what I’m looking at. And I’m sorry, if you can’t hear what you’re looking at, then you can go out and dig ditches. You need to get another profession because all you’re doing is target practice, that’s very bad.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

RS: I took a special class when I was working on my doctorate. We would take a page of music that has one chord, two chords, five chords, whatever you call it and it looks like this and it looks like that and that’s all it is, and that’s a movement to a symphony. You’re not just trying to memorize letter A to B, you’re trying to look at this and go ok, this is an important thematic idea, this is a cadence, this is a cadence, this is a cadence. I’m not doing left to right, I’m looking just like I look at you. I see your hair, your eyes, your ears, and your nose. I’m not going to concentrate on your ears, because that would be useless. Unfortunately, that’s how some people learn music. Ok, now I’m playing here, ok now we’re going up into the nose, it makes no sense. I see his smile, I see a twinkle in his eye I see his ears wiggle, I see all this stuff so that’s how I get to know you, that’s how I apply or think or music. My job is to bring that group of one-thousand notes into my brain, into my engine and out comes music, not notes, music. Because I’m applying from here to there.

Honestly I think we all have memory slips. What we really do is we learn how to. We can play perfect notes, but perfect notes without any musicality is useless. A piece, a complete piece that you play is just such a fun adventure. Most of the time you will never have to play that soft, you won’t be heard. We’re using our brain cause that’s what it is, but it has to be on. If you just have trained it to be a photograph and I have semi photographic ability, pictures are a real danger in it, being very mechanical sounding. So I had to enlarge my picture. Wouldn’t you like to look at a picture that’s been enlarged a bit and observe all the detail? Well that’s what you want to do with the piece of music.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

RS: Well, I can’t say that I sit around thinking about it, I do a lot of floor practicing. I really do. I will take all the exercises you’re supposed to do on marimba, sit on the floor and lean up against a couch or something comfortable and just play. It’s not very good rebound but there’s nothing wrong with that, you just strengthen yourself. For mallets, the same thing. If I’m not thinking a piece of music then what I’m playing is redundant, I watch the news every night and I practice all my marimba exercises. And they sound good. I know this, we can walk and chew gum at the same time, well we can do a lot of things. So you have to have that auditory sound transferred to this technique that you
develop in your hands. We know, there’s people who can just whip those things off like rudiments, they make them in to rudiments. To me it’s all about honestly getting a sound out of the instrument and I’ve always had six inch tubes. I have two there so when I’m practicing it’s all parallel. When I’m practicing, I’ll put one raised up on that 2x4. I think that’s very important. I’m not sure how many people do floor exercises and for how long, but I still really like to do them. I like to really feel the warmth in my forearms. The reason to take away the standing is because everyone has certain amount of bad posture, mine is I lean on the right side. But when I’m sitting, my butt is there always in the right place. So when I go to the instrument, it depends on how long I practice but I discover the timpani’s still there, do the same thing. That helps keep you center. I’m playing with symphonies all the time over in Europe and all the percussionists play on a stool, all of them. It makes you very centered, you can now relax so the guys or girls that don’t do it jog a lot, a lot. Your playing capability is directly related to your back and your legs. Trying to make this better is not going to cut it. So you isolate it, and usually I don’t have to spend that much time on it.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

RS: I don’t record myself very much, I really don’t. I know it’s good to hear it but honestly, when I’m practicing, when I stop, I’ve recorded it already. I think if you don’t hear it, you’re not going to be able to, you have to have something in there.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

RS: I might do some passages on tempo. We go back to what I was saying before this, having this piece in your head, being able to hear it. I’ll practice phrases from the end to the beginning. I will not start at the beginning. I want to be more secure as I perform a piece. Why people fold on this stuff is they really don’t have it memorized. They start off, they end ‘boy that is great, I can play all the way through that’. Sometimes when I go to senior recitals and masters recitals, I think to myself, ‘How was it?’ and it was one of the best practice room recitals I’ve ever heard. That’s what happens to us and that’s what separates us. I’ve have people have, what I consider, pretty bad technique that make great music. I’d rather have that than a machine that has no idea how to give this piece to you and you’re going to like it. When you play this way and you have this concept you’re very secure so you can play very forceful, that’s why Keiko Abe’s so powerful. She’s a little lady, darn good friend, she’s lovely to visit, her husband is very, very sharp. The sound recording of things that he produces, not necessarily for her but he produces a lot of albums so he’s got a great ear and a great mindset. So you go over there and you have dinner and then you go downstairs and start woodshedding. I’ve been blessed, I’ve been blessed with great students, I’ve been blessed with staying in these people’s homes and understanding them gives me understanding of their music and their culture, etc.

For percussionists, the sound of the instrument is truly the most important. You can buy one that sounds better than the other or different than the other and I always stress beating spots, I always stress sound. I couldn’t be a sculptor right? A sculptor you have to have
some mud. My sound, it’s not just volume and we forget that as percussionists. We just walk in and hit the instrument. We, in many ways have been compared to piano, which is totally wrong. When I go to different kinds of concerts, I’ll go to Yo Yo Ma, the venue over in Fort Worth and I listen to a lot of piano stuff. Because the more music we see as it is grown on our instrument, it’s difficult stuff because it’s much more like playing piano. We’re now using a lot more fingers, before it was more independent.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

RS: I wish I did. I don’t eat before a performance. It’s kind of different because I’m touring and playing drum set and I don’t even set up the drum set. We have so many tight spots, fly in and it’s like getting into a cockpit, let’s go, where do you want to go? I’ll take you wherever you want to go. What I try to do when I’m playing is take the audience somewhere. A ninety piece orchestra does not let a drummer assert his will. I’ve been doing that for twelve or thirteen years, seems like they enjoy once they give in.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

RS: I’m sure it started a little bit before high school. I was a trumpet player and then I got in a fight with a kid and he took a snow shovel to my head and then I got these stitches. I’ve always been short but I was one of these kids who’s feet wasn’t even touching the floor and I was doing always getting into trouble. My grandfather played a lot of different musical instruments and I would go to his house every Sunday for dinner. I made the pasta with him, let it dry on the newspaper or the clothesline in the basement and after we ate I went into his back room where he taught lessons. He had hundreds of students in the school systems. He’d look over and he’d pick up an instrument. Ok, here’s a trombone and we’re going to play. Maybe it was six months, maybe it was longer, but I played that when I was very young, ten or twelve. And I played that, I played cello, it’s whatever instrument he had sitting over there. He could play them all. And he was shorter than I was. Percussion happened because I was unable to play trumpet after the fight, I think it was in junior high school when the fight happened. That’s how it happened.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

RS: That’s a really hard one. I probably could tell you how many hours I was on a bus. I always bussed to school and I had a drum lesson in Pittsburgh. How many hours did I practice? I practiced in the basement, I can remember that, and I can remember my mother always calling me for dinner. So honestly I don’t know, I’m going to say two hours, faithfully two hours. But we finally just put my bed down there. My bed and my drum set and my dresser. I still messed around on trumpet, had a couple of things that I would play, a lot of instruments available. I went to college because my grandfather gave me $1,000 dollars. So I played, I don’t know, I just didn’t have money that’s why I was
on the bus. After that $1,000 which back then probably covered most of my tuition, I started gigging in the neighborhood. I was playing three, four, five nights a week. I was sending money home to my mother so she’d have some, some crazy money. I do know I practiced a lot because if anyone opened the door I threw a stick at them, so no one really bothered me. We didn’t have such a thing as, you had a practice room to go to. I think it’d be pretty safe to say I always practiced a couple of hours, but I’m a night owl and I remember the room I practiced in because it was the organ teaching room and they’d let me practice in there. There was no such thing as a practice room for a percussionist. Early career, there’s not an exact, I would cram when I had time, which is not good. But I always played and I always played a lot of concerts, symphony stuff, I was usually a video timpanist.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

RS: Yes, I know they have. The whole concept of getting sound out of every instrument, to me, that’s why you practice. Good tone out of every instrument you play, that’s paramount, it really is. I used to always go listen to concerts and play their instruments and try to realize that, I could play that on whatever instrument. You learn to site read, that there were not a lot of texts back then and I used piano books for reading on marimba. Whatever book I had, cello books, clarinet books, I played every one of those instruments, so I played it over there. To this day I know it paid off because honestly, I’m always sitting down at a different drum set in a different country, and I can get a sound out of any one of those kits. It’s fun, I don’t think I’ll be giving it up soon. Everyone asks me, when I’m going to give up teaching at North Texas, when I’m going do this, when I’m going do that, why does everyone want me to quit? I’ve got a few more years.

Biography

Dr. Robert Schietroma is currently a Regents professor at the University of North Texas after serving as Coordinator of Percussion from 1977 to 1999. While heading the UNT percussion department, he developed an internationally recognized program offering a myriad of percussion opportunities. The ensemble program was widely recognized for its excellence in all genres including the North Texas Drumline, which won the National Collegiate Marching Percussion Competition twelve times.

In addition to teaching, judging, and consulting, Schietroma maintains an active performance schedule. He has toured with the Warner Bros. production Bugs Bunny on Broadway for the past several years, and performs with the Dallas Opera Orchestra and the Summer Musicals. He has released a DCI Marching Percussion video; several highly regarded CD's with UNT ensembles and authored several instructional textbooks and chamber pieces. As President of drop6 media, Inc., he has published over one hundred ensemble arrangements and compositions.

Schietroma's professional affiliations include the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, American Federation of Musicians, and Percussive Arts Society, which he served as President from 1991 to 1993. With colleagues all over the world
soliciting his talents, Schietroma remains active as a clinician, consultant and performer.
~ Joshua Smith ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 11, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JS: I don’t have anything regular except I try to warm up my big muscles first. I take the physical part of it and I warm up my big muscles first. I took a weight lifting class in undergrad and that was the concept – big muscles and then work down to small muscles because you need to be warm or you’ll tear your small muscles, etc. Andy Harnsberger has really great thoughts about the physical part of all of this stuff. So I just do either snare drum stuff, I always try to practice with the metronome where I can or I’ll do, if I’m getting ready to work on a keyboard piece, I’ll just work on two mallet stuff first. Even if it is a chorale section, I’ll try to block out the chorale with two mallets, just to get my muscles warm and then I can start moving down to the activities that require fine muscles. So that is the only thing regular I try to do. I try not to jump right in and start doing intervals of major second scales, runs, and things like that. I always try to do big stuff first and then I zoom in on whatever task I’m trying to do.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JS: It is nice now that I can pretty much play whatever I want to play. I’m in my job, I’m not limited to what I have to do for my recitals or something like that. So new music, if I’m going to do a recital, what do I want to play? I’ll only know that from recordings I’ve listened to or concerts I’ve been to. I’ve geeked out and saved all my programs and taken notes on the programs of all the concerts I’ve attended. So I’ll flip through the programs and ‘Oh, that’s the piece,’ and I’ll find it. So if it is something like that, if it is new music like that, it would be new for my hands but not new to my ears. I have done some collaborations with clarinets and other instruments that is all new. I’ll just try to get familiar with it from the recording and then I usually put a pause on listening to the recording.

I try not to listen too much in the beginning. I listen to it at first just to get an overview of things to where I can see, ‘Okay that is going to be a problem for me.’ Check that part, this part. Then I’ll dig in and do it my way and figure out my notes because I want to have my own interpretation of the music. I think whatever piece I’m working on, I practice the hard stuff first. I got done with my lecture recital at UNT and they said, ‘Well, on this piece that you just talked about, if you were going to assign it to a student, what would you have them learn first?’ And I said, “Definitely THIS. The corral in the beginning is easy, but THIS is the hard stuff.” You can go back to your experiences as well, the pieces that you’ve worked on, you’ve spent eighty percent of your practice on these eight bars, and the other twenty percent on the rest of it because THIS is hard. So I don’t want to run into that situation where if I’m running out of time before the
performance or if I get the orchestra music three weeks before the gig, I want to get the hard stuff first, knowing that I’ll get the easy stuff later on. I always try to zone in on what’s going to take me the most time to learn. That is the way I approach a lot of stuff. I try to front-load all of my stuff. When I was a student I took all of my hard classes first and I maxed out my hours first so at the end I could relax and focus on what I wanted to do. I’ll do that with music too. I’ll do the hard stuff first so that way I’m not taxing myself at the end when it gets down to the eleventh hour and I have to perform it.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JS: I’m an audible learner, whatever I listen to I can pick up. Whether it’s a conversation nuance from somebody in their personality or whether it is a phrasing in a certain piece of music. I want to make sure I have my notes first and I have my view of it. So I’ll listen to the recording at first, then it will be me, and once it gets close to the end, I’ll start listening to some recordings again to see, ‘Okay, how are they interpreting it? Oh, I never discovered that that was going on in that phrase.’ So now how do I feel about it? I want to be the one in charge of the decisions. I know me and I know how I’ll be influenced by anything I hear so I’ll go that way without even making a decision for myself first.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JS: The stuff that I’ve memorized, I’ve always performed consistently better than the stuff that I’m reading off the music. Just because I own it a little bit more. I guess it is different for pieces of music I go about memorizing. Sometimes I’ll just play through things and I’ll start to realize that, ‘Oh yeah, I have this part memorized.’ How did I memorize it or what made it easy to memorize? Well, it’s because in this particular piece, everything’s repetitive up to this point where it changes. Then I’ll take that and say, ‘Okay, does that happen somewhere else?’ I try to zoom out everything else as much as I can. Looking at forms and patterns helps me to memorize as well. It helps me more than a lot of stuff. You’ll memorize the hard licks just because you can’t afford to look at the music. You’ve got to look at your hands and watch where the vibe bar is or make sure you get the bow over, whatever the case is. I guess it is just different for everything for me. I don’t have a set way. I know a lot of people say, ‘When I do the chord structure I’m going to analyze the chords. I’m going to analyze the phrase. I’m going to analyze the cadences.’ If you are playing a cello suite, yeah, that is going to help you because that’s a lot of the meat of the music. You’re doing a lot of music. But if you are playing something that requires more interpretation then you are looking at form. You’re looking at big chunks of things or if it is a general ABA. I just do better if I simplify things, if I zoom out. I tell that to my students all the time, to zoom out and get the big picture. ‘You’ve got this, this, this.’ Then you can zoom into the street view of your Google map and so, ‘Okay, so that’s where the A changes to the A-flat,’ or whatever the case is.
Avoiding memory slips is getting easier. I’ve had memory slips before but for me, every memory slip that I’ve had, I’ve experienced in the practice room. It’s almost like I know it’s coming. I may psyche myself out and have a flub here. I’ve even been in performances where I’ve said to myself during the performance, ‘I knew that was going to happen. Let’s just move on,’ as I’m playing. One thing that helps out is, I don’t know who said it or what clinic I think I heard it at, but it was, ‘Practice in your bed and where it is you’re going to sleep. Close your eyes and can I visualize the vibes?’ Sometimes it has kept me up a lot longer and I couldn’t fall asleep because I realized, ‘Oh goodness, I don’t know exactly where that is.’ Then when I’ve gotten back to the instrument the next morning or the next day, I’ll immediately go to that part. ‘What was that part? Oh that is what it is.’ Then it solidifies. So I try to do a lot of mental stuff where I’ll try to visualize things. I’ll sing it back to myself. My memory gets better when I try to do it away from the instrument.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JS: I have to slow it down. I always have to. I’ve always had to work a lot harder. I didn’t have a strong melodic background in high school so I’ve always had to work harder at that stuff. For me, I just have to slow it down. I remember very clearly, I couldn’t play inverted flams. I just couldn’t do inverts in high school. I remember I had a putty pad and I had to take it at quarter equals thirty. I wore the putty pad down to the counter. It was an hour later and I was, ‘Okay, now I can do it faster.’ I took a break and came back and did it faster. I don’t rely on muscle memory, but if I get it in physically, it helps and I can’t get it physically right if I do it fast. So for trouble spots, I’ll do that. I always try to zoom in to the spot, then do the measure after that, then do the measure before. Then zoom in on the spot and work out, like bookmarks there. Either because it’s the end of a phrase or it’s a memory thing and I can’t remember what comes next. I get to the point of destruction and make it equal on either side. I’ll take the hard lick and say, ‘Okay, now I can play the lick. Now can I get into the lick?’ I add the measure before and I can not get into the lick. Now that is the trouble spot so I will practice the transition. ‘Now can I get out of the lick? No, I can’t.’ Now that’s the trouble spot so I will just work myself out evenly. That’s one thing that Paul Rennick opened my eyes about. I had a three-movement snare thing I was doing, ‘Okay, so where do you want to start?’ ‘Let’s start at movement one.’ ‘Why are you starting on movement one?’ I just thought, ‘I don’t know. I’ve never asked myself that I guess. I’ve never thought about it.’ ‘So let’s start on movement three. Okay, this was beneficial. This was the hard spot. Now I can zoom out.’ So that is how I do problem spots.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JS: Not often enough. I try to record every performance. I’m trying to build up a tenure thing and I’m trying to build up a packet, a dossier of all of my work. So I have to make sure I keep that stuff up. It would be so much better if I recorded myself more often. When I was in my Master’s program I did it pretty faithfully. I had a mini disc and I’d record it and then I’d put headphones on and listen to it as I walked away from the lesson. I was usually walking home or something and that was always so much more beneficial.
I just don’t do it enough now.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JS: Yes, and this is something I learned from Corporon at North Texas. He treats rehearsals like an hourglass or a timeline from the first rehearsal to the performance. You can draw an upside down triangle above an upright triangle. I’ll start off with the big picture – and this is how I rehearse my ensembles and they love it. If I’m performing in eight weeks, the first week I’m doing big runs of stuff, getting an overview. By the fourth week, I’m hitting trouble spots. By the fifth week, I’m starting to expand it. By the seventh week, I’m doing more full runs and listening to recordings again. And then by the performance, I’m doing full runs. I may be checking on some trouble spots now and then. That’s really worked for me. You know how you pick up things sometimes and they just click for you? Well that has really clicked for me. Just doing that hourglass approach – big to small to big. It was in Corporon’s syllabus. I’m a nerd and I keep all that stuff and hand it out to my people, my students.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JS: I used to but I don’t now. I used to have to go to the bathroom an hour before just because of my nerves. I still have the nerves but I’m using them for good instead of evil now. Usually I’ll eat and if my hands get cold I’ll run them under hot water just to get a fresh start with things. I try not to eat too much before a performance. I found that out at Kentucky in my undergrad. My stomach was playing tricks on me and I couldn’t handle it. I couldn’t eat a lot. So I usually don’t eat a lot. I’ll eat fruit all day or something but it is not a ritual. It is not like Michael Jordan’s North Carolina shorts or anything. I just discovered what worked for me. So I try not to eat a lot that day. After the performance, I’ll always eat a lot because I haven’t eaten much that day, but that is just works for me. I like to get into the hall and run through stuff just to hear things. I try to do that at least a couple of days before the performance. Not the day of, but leading up to the performance. I’ll try to play it. I’ll re-orient the keyboard to a different wall in the room and sometimes that will throw me off enough to give me those performance jitters. ‘This is new and fresh, how’s my body going to handle it?’ I had a buddy and before he would do a run of a concert, he would take like three laps around the room. He would go outside and run around the building, get his heart rate going. Walk right in and boom, start playing, to see how he did with an accelerated heart rate. Did he change tempos? Did he fluctuate this? Did he goof? So I try to do that every now and then. But for me I just need to know that I’m comfortable with everything I’m playing. I’ll try to walk through everything, from instrument to instrument. I’ll start it and finish it. I’ll start it then move to the next thing and start it and finish it. It is the way I approach music. I try to do the transitions and see if that’s going to do anything. At North Texas, I would always go back and write – I had my own copy of the program and I would write all the metronome markings. I would go back stage and check the metronome of the next thing. I found out early on, when I performed I went faster. That happens to a lot of people and I was just one of them. So having the metronome to keep me honest for the next piece really helped me and everything really started being more consistent. It was more true to
what it was like in the practice room. I try to treat the performance like the practice room. Otherwise, you lose all that stuff you worked on in the practice room. If you’ve worked on phrasing at a certain tempo and it feels a certain way - you have this arm movement connecting the notes in the air - it’s going to throw it off, or it could. It would me.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JS: I went to school in New York and they have a band starting in second grade there. I remember there were auditions for the band and I said, ‘No thanks!’ I didn’t even think about it. Then they came back and the band director said, ‘This is final call. We need another percussionist. Is there anybody who wants to play percussion?’ I’d thought about it before and said no. I raised my hand and said, ‘Yeah, I’ll try it,’ and I went in and I was better than those who were already there. But what does that mean in second grade? I could pick up things and I could hear it and play it. We’re just talking snare drum rhythms, but I could do it. Lessons were factored into the school so I was in lessons in second and third grade. Then I was always in band. Then I was fortunate enough to be in a really good high school marching band program. That success helped to give me some confidence in music before I even knew what this whole scene was about. I didn’t have a lot of keyboard experience going into undergrad so I really had to work my tail off. My first real percussion experience was with Jim at UK and it was just a well-rounded thing. You got to play everything so I was like, ‘Okay, I’ll play everything then.’ Then I went to other schools and realized that not everyone was like that. I felt really fortunate to do it that way and that’s the way I teach now. That’s how our job is, we’ve got to be able to do everything. I’m starting to focus more on classical vibraphone. I’ve written articles and did my dissertation on it. Not that I’m shunning jazz vibes but there aren’t a lot of classical vibraphonists out there, so I’m starting to make that my niche. Not that I didn’t have the freedom in school but now that I’m not in school I can do what I want. Okay, so what do I like? It has been just in the last couple of years that I’ve been leaning towards doing a lot with vibraphone.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JS: Maybe thirteen hours a week in high school and middle school. In undergrad, maybe five hours a week at the beginning. Once I got to my senior recital I was amazed at how much time I could find to practice. So once I got up to my recital for undergrad it was probably back up to fifteen hours a week and maybe two hours a day. For my Master’s, I was consistently doing two to three hours a day. For my DMA, good grief. You had to do four recitals, which is probably like Kentucky. For my second recital, it was four and a half hours a day because it was the beginning of the Fall and that summer I treated it like a job. I clocked in at 8:30 in the morning, came home from lunch and went back. It was my best recital. Currently, maybe five hours a week. I try to do it every day but I don’t do it every day honestly. When I do have a day to practice it may be my only session and
I will spend anywhere between ninety and one-hundred and twenty minutes that day. That may be all I get that day because I have to go conduct the wind band and grade sight-singing papers, which is fine. If there is an orchestra gig coming up then I will practice that stuff and it will be an hour a day. So when I do practice it is usually an hour to two hours a day.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JS: Oh yeah, absolutely. There was an article about Mozart. He did a lot of stuff and was very talented but he did it like eight hours a day. There is something to be said about hard work. Talent will only get you so far. If you are talented it is going to happen regardless. We are this far in our career in percussion so we have a natural tendency towards this but still it is not just going to happen. It definitely is not going to get easier as you get older. That’s the way I’ve always approached things. I’ve just always had to beat the bushes to find a job, just a Joe job like Dairy Queen. I’ve always had to work since I was sixteen. I’ve always had a job because I know I had to. If I’ve gotten good at music it is because I’ve known I had to, because I’ve had to work at it. I’ve always had to work at it. I wouldn’t be anything if I didn’t practice.

Biography

Joshua D. Smith is currently the Assistant Professor of Music at Bethel College in McKenzie, TN. His responsibilities are for all aspects of percussion, including teaching applied lessons, directing the Percussion Ensemble, and directing the marching drumline. Smith also conducts the Wind Band, serves as the assistant director of the marching band, and teaches academic classes within Bethel's Division of Music. Smith received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of North Texas, a Master of Music Performance degree from James Madison University, and a Bachelor of Music in Music Education degree from the University of Kentucky.

While at the University of North Texas, Smith was involved in a myriad of musical activities as a member of the Graduate Percussion Ensemble. Being apart of the UNT Wind Symphony, he participated in several USA and World Premieres, as well as contributed to CD and DVD recordings through the GIA/Windworks label.

Dr. Smith is published as an author, composer, and arranger. His teaching career includes both university and public school experience. Dr. Smith's professional and academic affiliations include the Percussive Arts Society, The College Music Society, Pi Kappa Lambda, Phi Beta Kappa, TRI-M MUSIC National Honor Society, and a four-time honoree of WHO's WHO Among American Teachers.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

GS: Well the issue is regular, but yes, I do warm up. If I have time, I have a regular routine that I go through. If I don’t, then I warm up by practicing what I’m learning, really slow. When I warm up I spend a lot of time doing double vertical strokes in both hands, and explore different kinds of harmonies and structures that way. Double vertical strokes and alternate hands, things just to get my muscles limbered up, and to get balance, coordination, and relaxation going with two mallets in each hand. That often leads to improvising and coming up with ideas for pieces, but that’s not often my specific intent. It just kind of happens sometimes. If I have time, then I will go into single alternating strokes and sequential sticking patterns, and sometimes even interval-changing exercises if I need to get my fingers more limber. But it’s basically a five-stroke type warm-up. If I have time, that could be anywhere from a half hour to forty five minutes. But I rarely have that much time to spend warming up. So if I have less time, I certainly just start out with double vertical strokes and alternating hand double vertical stroke things. Or just playing the pieces that I’m trying to learn very, very slow. So that’s kind of my warm-up routine.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

GS: Most of the music I’ve played in the last few years has been my own music. So I’m kind of learning it as I’m composing it. But I guess my general answer would be that how I go about learning a new piece of music depends on what that piece is and what the issues are. If the piece that I’m learning gives me technical issues, then I’ll work on those techniques. So I’ll develop exercise outside of the context of the piece. If the main issues of learning the piece are reading, say with 4-mallet marimba, then I might go to the piano, because I’ve got 10 fingers instead of 4 mallets. I guess my regular process is to start out ignoring the musical elements, so I just do notes and rhythms. I’m not one that practices dynamics and phrasing from the beginning. I come more from the Vida Chenoweth system of practice, and that says if you can’t play the notes perfectly, why are you worrying about dynamics. That’s kind of the whole Vida Chenoweth approach, which I’m very much influenced by. When I had to learn Autumn Island by Roger Reynolds, which was many years ago of course, I first learned just pitches with no rhythm whatsoever. Just note, note, note, note, note, note - just one note at a time. And then I learned the rhythms away from the marimba with no pitch, and then gradually put them back together, because that was an extremely complex piece. So I break things down as far as I need to, to be able to deal with it, and then put them back together. It’s nothing really new but I’ve always kind of practiced that way and still do.
CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

GS: I personally do not like to listen to other recordings while I’m learning it. I don’t feel I need to first of all. I have the skills to learn what I feel I need to know based on what’s on the printed page. And I’ve learned over the years to trust my musical intuitions and that they’re good. In other words, people like the way I play. They like my music. So I don’t feel the need to listen to recordings and often I don’t. But if I’m really having trouble and there’s a resource available, then I will avail myself of it. Or sometimes, it’s just general stylistic characteristics. If I want to learn more about choro, I would get four CDs of choro music. I just listen to them over a period of time, six months or whatever, to internalize lots of different things about the style of the choro. I may not have ever listened to the actual music of the choro that I was learning, because maybe there wasn’t one, but I still immerse myself in it and the style. In that particular case, I would play them for the guitarist, who suggested that I play those choros on marimba, because he was from that country, from Argentina. So I had him to make sure I was going in the right direction, plus all the many recordings that he gave me. So I would guess, not frequently and not during the beginning stages of the process. That’s just me personally. Sometimes I’ll have my students listen to a piece many times before they are allowed to start learning it, especially if it’s a source that I know and trust, not just go to YouTube and listen to the first recording you find. Because that’s going to damage their ears in many cases, because there is so much crap. But if I can say go listen to Kevin Bobo. Well he isn’t on YouTube, but listen to someone who is known and who I respect. I tell them it’s always easier to learn a piece if you have heard it a thousand times. So for some younger kids who don’t know how to trust their own musical intuition, or maybe don’t have much because of a lack of background, then modeling can be a valuable thing. For me personally, I don’t need to model my playing after anybody in particular.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

GS: I rarely play from memory. I’m an excellent sight-reader, so basically if I can play it I can sight-read it. My sight-reading level is very close to my playing level, so I’m always most comfortable playing with music. And I’m not a good memorizer, so I go to my strength and I play with music. And I often use a page-turner. Sometimes with my own pieces, I still use music. Like I finally memorized Sedimental Structures after playing it for years. I finally memorized Beads Of Glass. I probably don’t have Wood That Sings memorized. I do have the second movement of Rumble Strips memorized but not the first. So I just don’t place a lot of importance on memorization, and like I said, I’m not very good at it. But if you give me something to read and I can do it, I think it’s more viable professionally. Kevin Bobo always plays from memory. But he’s never, ever had a problem in a concert with his memory. He’s really good at it. He has a lot of strategies for how he goes about memorizing pieces. I don’t usually have time to memorize either because I’m not fast at it. Regarding mental or physical methods during or before a performance to avoid memory slips, well with Beads Of Glass for instance, I know this section for the first time is this way, and that way the second time. So I’ll go over those
spots and go over them just to be sure I have them straight in my mind. And then I’ll go
over this little transition. So I just do spot checks at the instrument, reading the music. I
do believe in visualization, like I’m writing the piece out from memory in my mind. I
visualize the notes on the staff, not on the marimba. I write them out from memory in my
mind, because I don’t want to see too many of the notes on the instrument while I’m
playing. That’s not my style. I actually try to see as few as the notes as possible. It’s all
kinesthetic in other words. That’s a large part of the way I play. So I don’t want to see too
many notes on the keyboard because then I get confused. Other people can do that of
course. Leigh Howard Stevens sees almost every note he plays. But that would just drive
me nuts. I just can’t do it.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

GS: Go slower. If I have problem spots, first thing I’ll do is go slower, and go slower,
until I can deal with it. And then through repetition at a slow tempo where you have
worked everything out, then you gradually approach your performance tempo. But if I
need to, I’ll make exercises. But basically, slow practice is the key to almost everything
for me personally.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

GS: I don’t record myself as often as I should, because I’m always telling my students
they should do it all the time. I don’t actually do it that much personally and I probably
should. I guess I’m lazy about that, and half the time my students have my Zoom
anyway. I let them borrow it because I tell them they need to record themselves
practicing on a regular basis and learn to critically listen back to it. Because the younger
kids don’t critically listen to themselves while they are playing. They are too involved in
this is fun or this hurts. So I think it is important but at this stage of my life – hardly ever.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

GS: I don’t practice any different on the day of a performance. I like to just teach a full
day. Whatever is on that day, I’ll teach it. I never cancel lessons on the day of a concert.
To me it’s just totally normal. I love to eat sushi. Something very light but really good for
you. It’s brain food, right? It puts your body and your brain in a good position. So I love
to eat sushi. I don’t like to have a lot of time to go over things and think about things. I
would really prefer just to be totally busy until five minutes before and then just walk out
and play. Because I figure by then if I don’t know what I’m doing, there’s nothing I can
do that’s really going to make it any different. So I don’t make a big deal out of a
performance day. I don’t have strict routines that I go through. I just like to walk out and
play and I’m at peace with whatever happens. As long as I do the best that I’m capable
of, I don’t really care otherwise.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

GS: My ritual is just to have a normal day. Some people can get very neurotic before
performances. I don’t like to be around people like that. I don’t make a big deal out of it.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

GS: Well I started piano first when I was probably four or five years old, and marimba by eight or nine. So that was my first percussion instrument, and I didn’t start timpani until junior high school, because I could tune them. And I started snare drum and the rest of percussion in high school. So really until I was a senior in high school, I was a piano major and a percussion minor. It was right about at the end of high school that I switched. And then I went to Eastman of course. So my primary instrument that I’ve been playing for more than forty years is marimba. That’s pretty rare for my generation, and I think it’s because I had a strong piano background and my parents let me choose, and I chose marimba. I thought, wow, this makes a beautiful sound, you just go boom, and it’s like, wow, cool. And already knowing treble base clef, knowing key signatures, playing scales, playing easy Bach inventions, or Clementi sonatas, it was like, you just want me to hold two mallets and read that? OK, that’s easy. It really was. So it was a lot of fun right in the beginning because I could do a lot of that basic stuff really quickly. And John Salmon was a wonderful man and I was attracted to him and that’s why I started out on marimba, because that’s what I chose. I mean I don’t remember this, but that’s what my parents told me.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

GS: Middle and high school were maybe an hour a day, because I was also practicing piano an hour a day. And then maybe I was on the diving team, or track team, I had other interests. So probably an hour on piano and an hour on marimba/percussion through high school. In college, a whole lot more than that. Maybe three to four hours per day. But I remember there was probably three to four hours per day composing too. And often times I think my practicing suffered because I was always rehearsing and playing. So it’s hard to really put a number on it. But if everything was perfect, probably three to four hours a day in college. Early in my professional career, which was also early in my college career, practicing would suffer over preparing for teaching, because I was getting paid to teach – not to practice. So I’d go, holy crap, I’ve got to fly to so and so tomorrow, and I haven’t played in weeks. So I learned how to mentally practice on the plane and do all that kind of stuff. How to be very productive in a short amount of time. Knowing what to practice, and what isn’t necessary to practice. Like if I don’t practice this section, it’s going to suck. But I don’t need to practice the other section because that’s perfect. So when I started out in my college career the challenge was learning how to be productive and get a lot out of a short amount of time. And it’s probably been that way ever since. Now, I mostly practice on vacations, semester break and in the summers in particular. Summer is when I practice all the time. It’s lucky to have a career that allows that. It’s the greatest lifestyle in the business. My dad was a college teacher so I grew up in the lifestyle. But what else could you ask for that you essentially work seven months out of
the year and get paid twelve. It’s a great lifestyle. When you are working, even in academia, it’s not just five days a week, as there are dress rehearsals, there’s student recitals, you’re working hard. But I think it all works out in the end. But I wouldn’t change the lifestyle for anything.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

GS: Yes, of course. My practice habits enabled me to play well, and when I played well, people always seemed to like it. But one thing I’ve learned is it’s OK to strive for perfection, but it’s just unreasonable to expect it of yourself. So I’ve learned to live with that. I don’t play perfectly, and early in my career it really bothered me. Because I would say, oh my God that was just awful, I played so badly. And yet people would come up and say, that was just amazing, you changed my life. And I’m going, what the heck, are you crazy? But it happened enough that I realized OK, what’s going on there? Either they don’t care, or they don’t know. And I think it’s usually a combination of both. Your audience doesn’t necessarily know when you make a mistake, and I don’t think they really really care most of the time anyway. That’s not why they are there. Most people don’t go to listen to music to be note counters and say, ah missed that. They go to enjoy and to feel something and they will forgive mistakes if the music is good enough, if they even hear the mistakes to begin with. I mean look at Keiko Abe, one of the least accurate players I’ve ever known. But who cares, right? Now there’s some players that have it all. Like Kevin Bobo. Well I don’t let that bother me. I’m too old. So what? So I’m not a genius. Or like Bob Becker, who can just do anything and nothing is hard. Playing with Bob is terrifying, because I’m not perfect. I adore playing with Bob anytime, but it’s terrifying, because he is perfect. But he’s the most humble guy in the world, absolutely. I saw him make a mistake once, at PASIC, playing a ragtime with Nexus. And for a couple of seconds he just stopped and started laughing, like, wow, I really made a mistake. Then he started again. But I’ve only seen that happen once.

I tell my students the same thing I tell myself when I practice. I don’t teach them to practice any different than I teach myself to practice, because that would be disingenuous, and I can’t make stuff up. I can only teach what I practice.

Biography

Gordon Stout (b.1952) is currently Professor of Percussion at the School of Music, Ithaca College, Ithaca, N.Y., where he has taught percussion since 1980. A composer as well as percussionist who specializes on marimba, he has studied composition with Joseph Schwantner, Samuel Adler and Warren Benson, and percussion with James Salmon and John Beck.

As a composer-recitalist he has premiered a number of his original compositions and works by other contemporary composers. Many of his compositions for marimba are published, and have already become standard repertoire for marimbists world-wide.
His recordings are devoted not only to his own music, but also that of the general standard repertoire by important American composers. See the Discography section for detailed information.

A frequent lecture-recitalist for the Percussive Arts Society, he has appeared at twelve International PAS Conventions to date, as featured marimbist, as well as throughout the United States and Canada, Europe, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Hungary, Mexico, Denmark, Puerto Rico, and Spain. In May of 1983 he performed clinics and recitals in France, Germany, Holland and Belgium with "transcendental virtuosity", being described as "the Rubinstein of all aspects of the marimba".

Gordon was on the Jury of the 1st and 2nd Leigh Howard Stevens International Marimba Competitions during the summers of 1995 and 1998. In the summer of 1998 he was a featured marimbist at the World Marimba Festival in Osaka, Japan and he was a member of the jury for the 2nd and 3rd World Marimba Competitions in Okaya, Japan and Stuttgart, Germany respectively. In the summer of 2006 he was a member of the jury at the International Marimba Competition in Linz, Austria. On new years day in 2006 he conducted a 100 person marimba orchestra in the National Concert Hall in Taipei, Taiwan as part of the Taiwan International Percussion Convention. His composition "New York Triptych" for marimba orchestra, was commissioned by and written for the 50th anniversary celebration of the Percussive Arts Society, premiered at PASIC 2011 in Indianapolis, IN.

Gordon was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in November of 2012.
CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

JT: This answer depends on the time either in my career as a student or as a person who is taking audition, or later in my career. For instance, in regular warm up routines when I was taking auditions and trying to get a job, I had no warm-up routine whatsoever. I freaked out some students when they asked about it, but it was the truth. The reason is, at auditions you often didn’t have the opportunity to do a warm-up routine. It doesn’t mean you didn’t do things that were working without any kind of stress but I didn’t really have any problems with my hands. But it really depends.

Certainly early on I remember doing a lot of stick control exercises on snare drums that George Gaber had us doing out of Phil Krauss’s Modern Mallet Method. All it was were a series of patterns, scales, and arpeggios. In terms of timpani, I have to think long and hard about actual warm-up routines. It was more likely working on short etudes or exercises that exist like in the Saul Goodman book or working on your roll or your muffling. But as I got older when I showed up at an audition they would show you a warm-up room that didn’t have any instruments in it. I would have to figure out how that was going to work. As an orchestral timpani player, the warm-up routine kind of dwindled away because it was counterproductive to have a warm-up routine to rely on.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

JT: If I’m learning a new solo it is completely different. But learning a new piece of music I’m going to play with an orchestra means if there is no recording that exists, I’ve got to go to the library for the score. For example, at the Kennedy Center you would go and check out what was happening with the music, especially if there wasn’t a recording available because then you would have no frame of reference or idea of the tempos for sections. So you had to look at the score. But as far as how I got about learning new solo music? I was asked to do an ensemble with a group in California and I was asked to do a solo piece with them. I wanted to do a piece I had never played before. I wanted to do a piece by Nick Papador called Summons for Timpani and Percussion Ensemble. The process that I usually use when I’m working on a brand new piece is to first get an idea of what the piece is all about. You can find almost anything on YouTube these days.

I like to put myself in a situation where every practice session is productive, meaning I will take it ten times slower than it needs to be. As long as I can, I do start early. I remember practicing in December when I had a concert I was doing in March. That way I can really live with the piece for a while. It probably was a little overkill but there is a level of comfort every time you go through it. So I like to do that. I like to anti-
procrastinate a lot. When familiar, it’s amazing how fast you can get up to performance tempo. Once you’ve done it five hundred times slow you can do it at almost any tempo. But it really varies between solo and orchestral stuff.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

JT: As an orchestral player sometimes listening to recordings is dangerous because you get used to how the tempo is going to be, you get used to hearing that recording. What I normally do is listen to a recording first; I make markings in the parts that have nothing that has to do with me. But maybe the bassoons come in two measures before I have my entrance and they have something very distinctive, so if I miscount or if I get distracted I know exactly when I’m coming in. But then usually after the first rehearsal, at that point I would never go back and listen to a recording again. It would inevitably be different than what the orchestra is doing.

We live in this generation where you can get a recording anywhere, and for ninety nine cents a track you can get whatever it is you need which I think is great. I’ve said at my clinics that the best thing that can happen when you are listening to a recording is hearing something that doesn’t match up with what is on the page. I think that is awesome and you have to figure out and question, ‘Why did they do that?’ You might find some interesting things once you get into it and research it.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

JT: Hardly nothing I have ever done. Although, when I did my interview at Indiana University, I played a multiple piece with CD accompaniment and it was vibes, concert toms, cymbals, and crotales and that I memorized because I wanted to be able to see everything I was hitting. It was literally a four-mallet tom. In some cases I was playing with four mallets and I just wanted to know where I was visually hitting the instruments. So in that case I would memorize because I just feel more comfortable to consuming it that way. But timpani pieces I usually almost have the music out even if it is a solo because I’ve been playing that so long that I can be looking at it and it is perfectly fine.

There a couple of different things with memory slips. One is you’ve got to be really focused in on the music. I think you’re going to find memory slips with works like Bach. Anytime you are doing Bach in a program, that is really the opportunity where the slip is going to happen. There is something just weird about playing that style of music. It is so accessible and we always get the feeling when we’re playing something like that, that even someone off the street or another musician would be able to tell if you were playing a wrong note. So there is that kind of extra pressure that goes along with that.

It’s either Leigh Stevens or Kevin Bobo that talks about where you are basically playing a piece and someone claps their hands and says stop. You have to continue it within your head. Then go back and continue from where you left off. Basically you are creating
planned memory slips. What I often do especially if it is a keyboard piece is I will practice without the instrument. You know, practice before you go to bed. See the instrument and hear yourself playing it. Seeing what the stickings are going to be and really kind of internalize it because you know as percussionists we rely a lot on the muscle memory of how it is and sometimes we go through a couple seconds of, ‘Oh my God, where are we?’ But that’s all it is good for with the muscle memory and it is much better if you are able to internalize it and consume it that way, then decide what instrument you are going to play it on. Often I think memory slips happen when obviously you are just thinking about something else. If you are really zeroed in on the music; If you’ve got a comfortable level of anticipating what’s coming up next at a reasonable point, not looking too far ahead but looking far enough that you can preview the next section and the next pattern, then you usually are in pretty good shape and you feel in control of this moving object The music that is moving along.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

JT: It is going to depend on what the technical demands are but obviously people are going to start practicing from the beginning of the piece all of the time. So the beginning of the piece is always going to be fine. A lot of people don’t want to dive into the problem spots. If you are practicing and you come to that spot and are thinking, ‘Oh God, I’m coming up to that spot.’ Then that’s the spot that you are going to have to learn to attack and to work on as if it is your favorite. Figure out a way to make it that way or fool yourself so it is your favorite spot.

It would depend on if a specific section had to do with accuracy if you were playing a keyboard instrument. It would have to do with accuracy if it had incredible and difficult leaps. Obviously you are going to take your time and you are going to practice it really slowly. Start to work on where is my vision lining up and do I actually need to be just looking at the bar or looking at the middle of the instrument and feeling the distance? Find ways that are going to work that way. I think it would just depend on the specific spot and what it really is.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

JT: I recorded myself a lot when I was first employed. I had a job where I made just enough money to live on. Before there were digital recorders, I had a tape deck in my office and I was teaching at University of Evansville. I would come into practice every day and the first thing I did was hit play and record. I had some real cool surface microphones on the ground. They were really good for picking up timpani. If an audition was coming up, I had a little process. I would work with the metronome a lot at first for a few weeks and have that steady beat going on. Then I would get rid of the metronome and start recording. So if I was practicing for four hours that meant I went home and listened for another four hours. Then I would make notes about what was going on in terms of either balance or tempos, where it was rushing or where it was dragging.
For recitals, I think recordings do a couple of positive things for students. If you record yourself and listen to the play back you go, ‘God, I thought I was really exaggerating this phrase and I can’t even hear it on the recording.’ So it is a way for them to really take stock in what they are hearing and doing musically. But once they get to that point and start hearing their playbacks and like what they hear, I think it gives them a level of confidence. I think a lot of times when we perform we get worked up because we are not sure what it sounds like on the other side. If they flat out know what it sounds like that is a big confidence boost. So I think recording is really, really good at a certain level and for certain things it is necessary.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

JT: As an orchestral player, once that dress rehearsal is over you are kind of ready to go. I would get to the hall early, at least forty five minutes, if not an hour before the show. If there were any tricky parts I would play through it and really take inventory. What am I doing with my hands at that spot? How am I going to jump in and play that? It became more mental than physical. But when you are doing three concerts every week it would be wonderful if people said they were thinking about that music every waking moment. But when you get to the hall you have to think, I need to make sure that happens, or what have you. I think I would look at it differently if I was touring with solo recital stuff. It might be a little bit of a difference, a more concentrated approach.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

JT: I think one of the interesting things about performing is if you take a scenario of a recital. If every day leading up to the recital you play a portion of the program, but when you do it, wear the same shoes you are going to wear for the show, maybe even the same clothes. You actually walk up to the instrument and you bow. You do all the things that you would normally do at the recital but you’re doing it in your late practice sessions leading up to this. There is something about the mechanics of it, physical and emotional, of doing everything that you are going to do at the show that really helps. Even down to the rehearsal room where you can futz with the lighting a little bit. There is something about that, when you finally do it for the recital it might make it feel like the twenty fifth time you’ve done it because you’ve gone through everything all the way to the bow. The sensations are all very similar. As far as recital wise, that would be a really good ritual to do.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

JT: So I was a product of the regular public school system. At fourth grade was violin. At fifth grade you could choose a band instrument so I chose percussion. I was doing both but a year off from each other. In fourth grade I was ten. I was very lucky because both my parents were very familiar with the orchestral business and they knew the importance of getting great teachers, getting a teacher who was qualified, so I was really fortunate that I had that experience right away. I always had really top level instructions
from the get go. I told the story recently of when I announced I was interested in playing a musical instrument. Most parents would say that’s really exciting, but my parents looked at it as if it was this giant, serious commitment. I was thinking, I am only nine, give me a break! But the nice outcome was getting really hooked up with really good teachers so that it was really high level from the get go.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

JT: I certainly could have practiced more than I did. In middle and high school I was juggling two instruments at the time. I was practicing two hours on each instrument. This is an interesting question because I’m sure people are going to give creative answers that might not really be true. I had a fairly busy schedule and I was performing in other outside groups and so I was playing but it wasn’t a solitary practice session. So I say in that time frame about two hours on each instrument.

College was different. I think I got in at least an hour or two in the morning and after ensembles would go on. So for college level, probably at least four hours a day, some days more and on the weekends a lot more. But I certainly could have practiced more. I did have a particular talent for timpani and I spent a lot of time going to concerts and watching people play. If that counts as practicing, then so be it. That’s where I took in a lot and was able to quickly learn pieces and my memory is such that once I get it, it’s kind of there.

Early career, I say a lot of practicing. Only because it is nice to be employed but when you are employed up to where you are barely making a living, you are hungry physically and otherwise. I mean you are hungry literally and figuratively. Thank God I had that situation because I had office space to practice in and I probably spent more serious practice time than early in my career because it becomes very real then. If you don’t practice and you don’t work you are not going to succeed and you are going to be stuck making like back then it was nineteen thousand a year. You don’t want to do that.

Back then easily six hours a day or six hours of listening to a play back track of a practice session or whatever. When you are not making enough money you can’t be doing anything, so get in the practice room and work you butt off. When I was in Florida it was a really nice job. I was making mid-fifties and teaching so I was banking at least sixty five or seventy thousand a year but I would still go in almost every night and practice. Sometimes it would be for the orchestra but most often it was for auditions. Thank God I did that because that orchestra no longer exists and folded. So I think for many people they start working initially and then the practicing becomes very real because it is kind of life or death.

Currently, quite honestly, I don’t practice that much. It would just depend. I practice for the event now. The beating area in the timpani is within range and it is fine so you don’t have to be as precise per say as you do on a mallet instrument or playing the subtleties
you get from the snare drum and the control. But I’ve been playing long enough that I just need to be able to take some of the rust off and prepare for something. I’ve got some concerts coming up in January with the Baltimore Symphony. They are doing Sprach Zarathustra and I’ve played the piece but I know where the hazards are and the little spots where I need to practice. I will need to listen to the recordings for the section again and what have you. So I have that really luxurious situation affording myself time where I don’t have to put in a lot of time. But then there are times where I have to get right back into some routine because some series of performances are coming up. Quite frankly if I’m teaching all day long and I go home and have family activities at night come up, I still mentally practice a great deal. I really keep it in my head because a lot of it after a while becomes less this and more in your head.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

JT: Having a routine and a discipline about it is really necessary. It has to be there. If you have an inconsistent schedule there are times where you are practicing a lot, like eight hours or more, and then you go back to very little. Then you will feel it in your hands and it just won’t be a good situation. A book by Jeff Colvin called Talented is Over Rated shows data from tests and other things that they looked at groups of instrumentalists and musicians. And those groups where they really put in a lot of practice are more likely going to succeed.

Biography

John Tafoya serves as chairman of the percussion department and is professor of percussion at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. From 1999-2007 he served as principal timpanist for the National Symphony Orchestra and has held previous principal timpani positions with the American Wind Symphony, the National Repertory Orchestra, the Owensboro Symphony (KY), the Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra (IN) and the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra. Mr. Tafoya has also performed with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra.

John Tafoya earned BM and MM degrees in percussion performance from Indiana University. While at I.U., Tafoya was the recipient of the prestigious performer's certificate, first prize winner of the 1985 National Society of Arts and Letters competition, and performed as solo timpanist with the Indiana University Orchestra. Mr. Tafoya's percussion teachers at Indiana University were George Gaber and Gerald Carlyss.

An active educator and sought after clinician, Mr. Tafoya has presented numerous master classes and clinics at universities across the United States. He has also been a featured clinician at the Virginia/D.C. Percussive Arts Society's Day of Percussion and at PASIC 2002, 2006, and 2011 (Percussive Arts Society International Convention). He has published articles for The Band Director's Guide, the Texas Bandmasters Association, the Florida Percussive Arts Society Newsletter and Percussive Notes magazine. His
informative and educational web site, www.johntafoya.com, is accessed by thousands of percussion students and professional players each month. Mr. Tafoya has served on the music department faculties at the University of Evansville, Kentucky Wesleyan College, Florida International University, and the University of Maryland.

In May 2004, Carl Fischer publications released Mr. Tafoya's first book entitled; "The Working Timpanist's Survival Guide"; offering practical advice on how to prepare and perform orchestral timpani excerpts. The book also includes illustrations displaying various timpani technique and a CD-ROM containing complete timpani parts that can be printed out for further study. His second book, "Beyond The Audition Screen", has just been released and is available through Hal Leonard.

Mr. Tafoya can be heard on the 1987 Summit Brass compact disc release: "All American Brass" on the Pro Arte label and on the 1992 Arkay compact disc release of William Albright's "Music for Organ and Harpsichord" featuring organist Douglas Reed. He performed in the award-winning Florida Philharmonic Orchestra recording of Mahler's First Symphony under the direction of James Judd. Tafoya has also performed in orchestral recordings by the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Leonard Slatkin. He can also be heard on the recently released American Wind Symphony Orchestra compact disc: "Concertos All And Sundry", performing Kaoru Wada's Concertante for Timpani, Percussion and Winds under the direction of Robert Austin Boudreau.

Tafoya has worked under many prestigious conductors including: Marin Alsop, Vladimir Ashkenazy, James Conlon, Jiri Belohlavek, Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos, Christoph von Dohnanyi, Valery Gergiev, Christopher Hogwood, Carlos Kalmar, Lorin Maazel, David Robertson, Mstislav Rostropovich, Leonard Slatkin, Osmo Vanska, John Williams, Hugh Wolff, and David Zinman.
November 3, 2012
Austin, TX

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BT: The answer is no but the answer is also I used to. I used to have a regular warm-up routine that consisted of linear scale stickings, arpeggios, and all sorts of exercises from Method of Movement that I would do everyday. I think that really helped my technique a lot. It gave me a solid grounding in technique, which is good because now teaching eighteen to nineteen students a week and doing percussion ensemble, grad courses, and stuff like this, when I have time to practice, I don’t feel like I have time to warm up in the same way as I did when I was a student. So generally I try to warm up while I’m practicing with things I need to learn.

Now as I get older I am more conscious of how my body works. I definitely can feel I’m not eighteen anymore when I play, so I try to be very conscious about not hurting myself. At the same time I still have a regular warm-up routine I love to do and I still do it if I have time. I just think about warming up while I’m working on learning notes or something like that.

If I do anything to warm up I’ll do what I did today before I went over to play the concert, which is to use a practice pad and drum sticks. That was one thing that John Beck does. He did that every day when I was a student when I would go to my lessons. I had the first lesson of the day. Every morning he would practice on his practice pad and he probably still does it. He would warm up and he would do the whole routine of rudiments, sticking, and stick control. He did it every morning. He still has chops and he is almost 80. He just came down to UCLA and played concert, still ramming notes. It is not regular anymore but I certainly would like to do it if I have time.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BT: I am a pretty good sight-reader, so when I learn music I try to get a big picture first. It is not a situation where I go in and say I’m going to learn this first page and then I will worry about the rest later. I generally read through things a good bit the first week or two, just to get the big picture of what I’m trying to do with the piece. Like a new concerto or a series of marimba pieces, maybe ten to twelve minutes long. Then after that I’ll go back in and try to break it down.

I still do a lot of metronome work, which I think most people do. When I have to practice thirty minutes here and twenty minutes there between lessons, I find the metronome gives me some kind of focus that I can’t achieve on my own to focus on that pulse. It keeps my brain focused because there are so many things when you are in school and you’ve got
these emails popping on your computer and people knocking on your door or you’re late for a meeting. There are so many things that run through your brain. But the metronome for some reason, I don’t know if it happens to everyone, is a calming influence that focuses me in. I really like doing slow practice with a metronome because it just feels good. It is just the thing that clicks as you start and stop. Your mind doesn’t vanish for a moment.”

We can also go into this huge thing about learning more about the composer or trying to get into other pieces the composer has written. If I’m learning See You Thursday by Steve Mackey then I definitely will want to go listen to Steve Mackey stuff or string quartet guitar and listen to his orchestral stuff. I would try to get an idea about his voice and what he is doing so that I can understand it better. Steve Mackey is an example of somebody whose music I know very well so I wouldn’t have to do that, but if I was playing a piece by a composer that I didn’t know then I would try to do that. I would delve into what else they are doing so I could have a better understanding of where they are coming from. Composers have so many different ways of creating their voice these days and many different styles of music and writing. All the way from what Charles Wuorinen, which he is still doing mid-century to people like Steve Mackey or Steven Stucky who are doing more, I’m not sure what you call it, post-modern. So I think it’s important to understand where they’re coming from. So I do that too.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

BT: I think students do that a lot. When I was a student I did that more. These days I don’t. When I hear a recording sometimes I’ll play a piece because I’ve heard it, maybe on Youtube or somewhere else, but I don’t need to listen to a recording to learn a piece. I am conscious if I listen to a recording. I will adopt idiosyncrasies of that recording. But since that recording already exists there is no point in me imitating it. I try to stay away from doing that usually, unless it is something where I’m learning the Ewazen Concerto and the only recording that is out there was She-e’s recording. At some point when I’m practicing I’m going to play it with a recording so I know what the orchestra sounds like. So I’ll do things like that maybe. That would be the only reason I would listen to one over and over again.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BT: I usually don’t memorize chamber music. I’m a pretty good sight-reader and I have a piano background from when I was seven. I think that set me up better than a lot of other percussionists.

Even my students coming in playing snare drum and drum set have to learn marimba. That double staff and grand staff is hard. So I have the advantage of being able to sight read, which for many years kept me from memorizing things just because I could read it.
These days I tend to gravitate more towards memorizing as much as I can just because I feel if I don’t have it memorized there is just a little bit of a barrier there. Sometimes just time constraints make it impossible to memorize. For example, you’ve got to play this piece with the wind ensemble tomorrow. The best-case scenario is going to have me reading and not memorizing it. But when I can these days, I do memorize more than I used to because as a musician I feel more connected to it now when I’m just letting it come out of me instead of the extra process of taking it in and then spitting it back out.

CH: Do you ever have problems with memory slips?

BT: Even when I play my own pieces I have problems with that sometimes. I think most people do. But I think if you understand the music you can get out of it. If you understand the theory of how its written and you understand how it works and the language you are speaking then you can pull your way out of it.

Certainly there is a famous recording by Rubinstein. I think that it’s Chopin. I can’t remember what piece it was. It was famous because he let them release it with mistakes because he got lost toward the beginning of the piece. He just improvised his way around it for thirty seconds or so. He finally found where he was again after sort of banging around. That is what sometimes happens in a concert. You have to work your way out of it. I look at it that way when you are playing live. Michael Burritt told me if people want to hear all my right notes they should buy my CD. But if they want to hear me play they shouldn’t expect all right notes. I feel the same way. With marimba it is so difficult. I don’t want to make excuses but I would never say this to a cello player, making excuses. It is a very difficult instrument to play accurately and sometimes things happen and you have to just work your way out of it. They happen but I’m better at getting out of them than I used to be. I don’t stop and drop my mallets and run off stage.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BT: Sometimes the best way to practice problem spots is to quit practicing them. My students get stuck and that is what I tell them. They’ll come to me and say they spent most of my time practicing these four measures and I just couldn’t get them. I say, ‘Isn’t that a bad idea to stop everything else and practice these four measures? Why don’t you just skip ahead?’ Some people don’t think about that and if they’ve learn a piece sequentially they get to measures they can’t play and say ‘Well I better learn these before I go on.” For me I think it is best to move on. The whole idea about your brain working while your sleeping. Sometimes it is best to sleep on it for a few days. Practice it slowly with a metronome and say forget it and practice the stuff you can play. You can make progress on it and come back to it in a few days. For me it seems easier and all those moments when you say, ‘Oh that’s how it goes. I got it.’ This happened for me and I think that is true for a lot of people. I think the best way to practice those rough spots is with the metronome. Focus and make sure you got it with your brain. Let your brain figure it out.

CH: How often do you record yourself?
BT: Not as much as I should. I record myself a good but just with the computer. My office is set-up so that my computer screen points at my marimba so the camera is there too. I open up iMovie and hit the space bar for recording. So it’s easy.

I don’t audio record myself much anymore. In my office I mostly just use the built-in video stuff on the computer. It is good to see what you look like when you play so you can make sure you aren’t doing something stupid that distracts from the music. I don’t use it as much as I use to. Back when I used the cassette recording tapes and those rectangular recorders which I used when I was an undergrad. But I did that a lot.

I remember the very first time I ever did it. I couldn’t believe it was me because it sounded so bad. It didn’t even sound like anything like I thought it sounded like and so I played it back and thought, ‘That sounded terrible!’ What I learned from that is your brain fills in a lot of holes. Your brain wants it to sound a certain way and it sort of lies to you. So I learned a lot when I was a student, definitely when I was recording myself, So I wouldn’t constantly lie to myself about how I sounded. But these days by doing that I got better at real-time processing. One of the reasons why I don’t do it too much anymore is because I got better at the real-time processing to understand exactly what I sound like when I’m playing. I think that is good for musical performance. Get the feedback instantly to make those adjustments right there. Instead of listening back and saying, ‘Oh I never heard that,’ I learned how to do that by recording myself. It is like hearing your own voice. Your voice sounds different when you hear it. You’re saying that’s not me, but the funny thing is you think your voice sounds different. I found by recording myself a lot my voice to me sounds exactly like it sounds in the recording, but I would just ignore how stupid it sounds.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BT: It depends on the level of desperation involved. I think that is true for everybody. If it’s a situation where you’ve got ten days for a premiere and the composer says, ‘We got a premiere here,’ then my practice is different. That happens more than it should but I do the same thing to people. But If I have a lot of time to prepare, for example, this PASIC clinic, I practiced and played my music a lot. I had a pretty steady practice routine for the stuff I was playing because I really wasn’t playing much of anything new except for a segment of a small piece. What was different for my practice for this session was that I practiced doing this clinic a lot. I did this clinic five times before I did it here. I feel every performance wasn’t quite one-hundred percent, but I spent a lot of time tweaking it. After each clinic I said, ‘that didn’t work,’ like rewrites in a music script. Then I did it again and did the same thing. Today’s clinic was like me doing it five times, so that was a different practice thing than I usually do. It probably was just the time limit because you’ve got to squeeze it in there and get everything out you want to say. It is like a TV show or movie. Especially like a TV show, you’ve got twenty-one minutes to get your story in and everything. Sometimes you have to cut stuff that you want to say because there is no time. You have to show the commercials and you have to thank Zildjian. I tend to be pretty good at pre-planning, like consistent practice so I’m not desperate, but
with a premiere sometimes you’re desperate. There is nothing you can do except be in your office Christmas Eve, which has happened. I have definitely been in my office Christmas Eve learning stickings with the metronome.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BT: Nope, I did this workshop with a sports psychologist once. We talked about how we approach things. What he told me was that maybe I should get more nervous because most people are there to deal with being nervous before a performance and he said, ‘I think you should try to be more nervous.’

I actually took that to heart and said, ‘Maybe you are right.’ I tend to be pretty calm and accepting about what is happening. I really don’t get this nervous sweat and nervous energy before a performance. But what he suggested to me that was really helpful was to make sure that you don’t tap things down so much so you’re not so excited. Don’t be nervous and if you are nervous, try to channel that into excitement. I tried to be so chill about things that it effected my interaction with the audience in some ways. I am excited about playing. So these days I try to remember that I’m excited but as far as debilitating nerves, nothing like that at all.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

BT: I started playing percussion by accident in ninth grade. I played piano since I was seven and I went to the band director of the high school when I was going into ninth grade and I said I want to play piano in jazz band. He said jazz band didn’t have enough people in the fall and so they weren’t going to meet but we need someone to play bells in marching band if I wanted to do that. I told him I didn’t know what those are. He said, ‘It is like a piano.’ So I said, ‘I’ll do that.’ So that is how my professional career started. I started to play bells in marching band and got into all the other percussion through that. I took from a really good teacher when I was in tenth grade, Peggy Benkeser from Atlanta, who plays a lot of contemporary stuff. She really was my first true percussion teacher and she was a really good teacher. I still think about her pretty much everyday. She had really high standards and commitment to composers, and all the neat music she played. So that was a big influence on me. As far as focusing on the primary instrument, I also played viola in high school. I started percussion and viola in college, but I found I couldn’t do both and I was being bad at both so I had to pick one. I don’t know why I picked percussion but I think there was a time when I thought I was really going to go the viola route. It did help me to read music theory because I could read the alto clef really well, so that was a bonus. But I picked percussion and I pretty much gave up the viola. I started getting really serious about percussion and here I am.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.
BT: I think the first thing I thought about when I was thinking of a music career in high school was that I really didn’t know anything except being an orchestral player, so I thought about being an orchestral musician. Then in tenth grade when I started playing with Peggy Benkeser, she introduced me to Leigh Stevens’ *Method of Movement*. It probably was in eleventh grade when I got his Bach on Marimba album. When everyone was idolizing Michael Jordan and there was a campaign, ‘Be Like Mike,’ I told everybody I was like that but wanted to be like Leigh. There are people today who probably have marimba idols that they want to be.

Today I don’t want to be the Leigh. I like Leigh and he is really the reason I do what I do and I am forever grateful to him for that. But it is the same thing when I talk about composing. I copy a lot of composing style so I finally taught my own. That is how I do marimba. I wanted to be Leigh so I did everything I could do to play and sound like Leigh. I studied with Mike Burritt. Mike really changed the way I played. It helped me get out there on my own. I think about sounding like myself rather than like someone else.

In middle school I didn’t play percussion so I probably practiced a descent amount. In middle school I really started to focus on music and got into playing a lot of pop music actually with piano. The percussion stuff was sort of an after thought. I had a piano teacher named Margery Ingle who was really great. I still use the ideas that she used with me. I was disinterested in Mozart and in Bach when I was in middle school so she taught me how to play piano by using Beatle songs and pop stuff that I listened to on the radio. I didn’t realize she was teaching me music theory and I was learning chord progressions and all that stuff. It was in middle school when I fell in love with Mozart and playing all this classical music. I had this background that she had very deceptively tricked me into learning. Even though it seemed like I was a terrible student, in a lot of ways, she was such a great teacher that she didn’t give up on me and taught me stuff in a way that she wasn’t really comfortable with in that style of music but she was able to work it out. I did practice piano a lot but not percussion. Then in high school I definitely was the kid who stayed after school. I was in the band room until they kicked me out practicing. Until my senior year, I only had a two and a half octave kelon xylophone that I could play four mallets on. I remembered playing Tchaikovsky’s *Album for the Young* on that two and a half octave xylophone, having to move octaves around all the time.

I wouldn’t be surprised if it was at least two hours everyday after school plus I was taking piano and viola. I didn’t have much of a social life in high school because I was a total music nerd. In my undergrad and my Master’s degree, I definitely played a lot. Probably like five or six hours a day pretty consistently except when I had those papers due.

I would get up early in the morning when I was an undergrad and I would play an hour and a half before music theory at 8:00 am. I found that kind of sucked in some ways, but like I said, I still wasn’t doing a lot of college stuff. When I look back at my college life it was so different than so many people I know. The number of parties I went to when I was an undergrad is zero. I never thought about it.

My girlfriend, who is now my wife, wanted to practice more than me, so I had this
practice buddy. We would be at school until like 10:30 pm and I would say, ‘We need to go’ but she would say, ‘I need to do another hour.’ So I would say, ‘Okay, I’ll stay and do another hour.’ It was great to be pushed like that from her and I guess it was my own motivation.

You have a lot of time to practice during your Master’s degree usually and so I did. There was sort of a churning intensity that kept me focused. But then at Eastman, not as much practice during my DMA because there was so much of an academic component. In my Master’s, I spent about five or six hours a day and I spent a lot of late nights there. At Eastman I had to cut back because there was a lot of time in the library and analyzing stuff. Honestly doing my performance in Literature, which means you had write a lot of papers and analyze a lot of post-tonal theory, I was probably not technically as strong when I left Eastman as when I went in because I had such a decrease in practice time, but musically I was a lot stronger. Musically, everything I learned there and all the experiences working with so many great musicians there pushed me to a higher level of playing musically. But definitely it took me down a notch technically so I had to make up for it.

Steve Owen and I were in the Marine Band together and we would practice together until they kicked us out at Eastman at 10:00pm. It was in downtown Rochester and they didn’t want you to be leaving school at 3:30 am. It was a bad idea being in the downtown area.

Steve said practicing was like being a monk. When you are a monk or whatever religion or belief system, you pour your life into one thing all day long. You have this focus and then you go to bed. Then you get up the next morning and you pour your life into this one thing again. That is what we are doing. That is a good analogy.

Steve and I would practice until we would get kicked out and then many nights we would go see a movie. There was a dollar theater about ten minutes away from Eastman. We would leave and go there and catch the last show. It didn’t matter what movie we watched. We would be going there to watch and relax. We saw *Austin Powers* eleven times and *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America* ten times. That was our little ritual to cool down and relax. We would go to bed and the next day get up and pour our lives into it again. So I practiced as much as I could. Now there’s just a lot of papers and academics that have to do with it and so I just practice less.

Early career I practiced a lot. Part of that was because of a job I had in New Mexico state while my wife was teaching in Boise state. I wondered do I stay and practice or do I go home to my empty apartment and watch Andy Griffith re-runs. So I stayed at my office and practiced. It was one of those things where I was there all the time.

When I got my job at University of Central Arkansas it was the same thing. Leanna lived in Idaho for two or three years. So I poured my life into it. But now I can go home. My wife lives with me and my dog and cats live with me. I want to go home and relax a little bit and see my dogs and hang out with my wife. So obviously I practice less than I used to.
As I built all those warm-up exercises and all those Methods of Movements, I built up that base that never leaves me. The technique I have now is a result of all that hard work I did when I was a Master’s student.

Currently, I practice an hour or two daily, but earlier in my career a lot because I was by myself. It was about five hours during my Master’s degree.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BT: For sure. The early stuff was building my base. If I hadn’t done that then I couldn’t do what I do. I would have never developed that technique to start with and it definitely wouldn’t still be with me. I think that is important and I talk to my students about that too.

So many people learn techniques only to play a piece they want to play, but there is no depth to that technique so you can’t re-apply it. If you learn to play Velocities, but all those techniques in there are specific to Velocities, when you try to apply it to a different key or a different situation they are not solid. You have to re-learn to play another piece. But if you solidify these techniques, I like to say you’re in a vacuum. Make sure you are solid away from these pieces. You won’t spend so much time learning a piece and trying to learn the technique. It will be there and you won’t have to spend so much time learning the piece. So that definitely made a big difference in my career. Learning and having that technique and making sure my octaves are working all the time. I don’t have to worry about it, most of the time.

Conscious practice is important as opposed to practice when you are not paying attention. For the days that I only have an hour to practice, I can’t mess around. I’ve got to stay focused and I’ve got to make sure everything I do counts towards the final product. Sometimes when you are practicing and you are tired it is really easy to thirty minutes later not remember anything you just did. You have to find ways. Like I said, the metronome really helps me a lot in keeping me focused, even when I’m tired. It is like a Shaman’s draw. No matter what trance I go into it still keeps me focused in the real world. Make sure you practice with a very conscious effort to move forward. Kevin Bobo once said, ‘Sometimes it is good to just watch TV for an hour and play paradiddles, that’s something. But you can’t get very far doing that because you can’t watch TV and learn Velocities.’

**Biography**

Blake Tyson has a multifaceted career and is known as a teacher, performer, and composer. Since 2001 he has been a member of the faculty of the University of Central Arkansas. His international performances have taken him to Europe, Africa, South America and Asia. He has performed at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, the Northwest Percussion Festival, the Leigh Howard Stevens Summer
Marimba Seminar, and at numerous Days of Percussion throughout the United States. He has also performed as a percussionist with many orchestras throughout the United States, and is currently principal percussionist with the Conway Symphony Orchestra. He received the DMA degree from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. While there he was also awarded the prestigious Performer's Certificate. He holds a MM from Kent State University, and a BM from the University of Alabama.

Blake Tyson has composed many works for percussion, including *Vertical River, Anubis, A cricket sang and set the sun, A Ceiling Full of Stars*, and *Cloud Forest*. His teachers include John Beck, Michael Burritt, Larry Mathis, and Peggy Benkeser. He has also studied derabucca with Halim El-Dabh and has devoted intensive study to El-Dabh's unique notational system for the instrument.
~ Michael Udow ~
Phone interview with Colin Hill

November 16, 2012

Note: Michael Udow’s interview follows a different format than the rest. His most important thoughts were freely discussed before going into the ten interview questions. Not all ten questions were asked because many of his points naturally answered some of the questions.

MU: The way I generally approach practicing, as in life, is to set up specific goals for myself – short-term, midterm, and long-term goals. If I have an upcoming concert and am handed the music three days prior to the performance, the short-term, midterm and long-term goals are compressed radically. But if I am working on a huge piece it can take a year or more or a semester of working on technical and musical points of interest. No matter what the time frame, I do tend to think in terms of immediate short-term, midterm goal, and then long-term goals.

I also keep in mind that I have complete flexibility adapting and changing the goals as I move from one practice session to the next. But at least I have a concept from the initial outset of what I want to accomplish within the three phases of my working process.

I also set practice times that work out well for me. I always suggested to my students that they never think about cutting a practice session for an exam cram session or if they are behind in a midterm paper. They need to be highly organized and stick to their practice schedules if they want to successfully reach their goals. But I realize that when push comes to shove and they are feeling pressed for time they might need to adjust their plan a bit. However, if constantly changing or skipping practice sessions becomes the norm, their career objectives with start to implode into a downward spiral. Things come up in the lives of professionals as well. For example, if a child gets sick, one must adjust. But, as much as possible, I always try to my schedule. I like to practice earlier in the day before any distractions come up. Now that I’m winding down my performance career, I am doing the same thing with compositional work. After my 5:30AM coffee, I get in a couple of hours of composing before breakfast and then get back to work until about 11AM before heading to the gym, then by 2:30 or 3PM I’m back composing until dinner time and then perhaps finish off the day with another couple of hours of work. Of course there’s email and other things that creep into the day, but that’s my basic schedule. And I do factor in days off to head to the mountains with Nancy, my wife, to do some hiking or fly-fishing.

Before my retirement, I would teach in the afternoon and often into the early evening so that I could have my mornings free for practicing and duo rehearsals with Nancy. I’d leave the get the university bureaucracy for late at night. I found that for me, the best time to be creatively mentally engaged was in the morning and/or very late at night after the family was asleep. However, for others, their prime productive hours might be quite
different. Each person to explore and understand when within the 24-hour clock time frame they work the best.

As for the practice process, when I was a college student, I heard that Pablo Casals first studied the score and would not pick up his cello until he had fully committed the work. I thought that it was a great approach and attempted to follow that paradigm. Keiko Abe also seemed to learn repertoire away from the instrument first before she actually picked up mallets and begin playing the music. I would also notice Keiko looking at the score and the music before rehearsals. Especially with multiple-percussion repertory, I found that I really needed to understand the score before determining what I thought would be the ideal setup of the instruments. Even when composers include setups, I consider that setup as a guide only and often do change my setup to better suit my realization of the work. CH: Was that hard for you to develop at first?

It has been so long ago that I can’t recall details of my process early on, but I’m sure there was a long learning curve process. It was important for me with tonal music to understand the harmonic motion to have a good feel for the composition. In this way I could almost learn the music away from the keyboard. This “away from the physical instrument” approach to practice works very well on tour; I can get in good mental practicing done on the plane. If students are in their dorm rooms, they can pull out their music and can really study it at their desks. If it was a marimba part or whatever, one can also go through the mallet stickings with, say for four mallet playing: thumbs and little fingers.

CH: Are you visualizing what it looks like to strike the instrument or are you visualizing the music itself?

Both, I think there are all kinds of ways to assimilate music. One is closing your eyes and visualizing the staff and the notes on the staff, the key signatures, and the meters and so on and so forth. I wish that I had had solfeggio training. So many great musicians have incredible solfeggio skills. But I also think many people who carefully use solfeggio are not always as careful with learning the meter and the significance of the bar lines. So there have been many performances of music that I listened to in competitions where students are playing with almost a disregard for the weight and the sub-groupings of the meter. So they are playing the notes and playing the rhythms correctly, but the metric shift and so on isn’t always followed. Visualizing the staff and the music itself, as well as solfeggio would be best. I always take time to carefully consider the stickings to enhance the music – the phrasing, in my minds’ ear, so to speak. String players do this with bowings and I think mallet keyboard players and multiple-percussionists, need to do this as well. I’m not a proponent of composers, especially percussionists who compose, writing in stickings into their music. I think each interpreter/performer needs freedom to find the appropriate stickings that best helps them express their musical intent.

When I go downstairs to my studio at home, I use a concept that was introduced to me by Michael Colgrass at one of his workshops. He has done a few introductory Neuro-Linguistic Programming sessions at PASIC and at university residencies that I’ve
attended. Michael would pass out golden-colored ropes about 6 feet long - large enough to make a circle on the floor. He’d have the participants lay out their ropes in the circle and step into their circles with the idea that this is your quality space. It’s your golden sphere and when you step into this world and it’s your special world to accomplish your goals.

I take that concept not literally but figuratively. When I go down to my studio, that’s my special world without distractions. It’s a place that I can get lost in. I almost like a child again, exploring and getting lost in making music. In general, setting up the principles of how I’m going about ultimately making music and playing. Those are the concepts that I think are germane to my approach.

As far as warming up - having participated in workshops with KODO, the Japanese drumming ensemble who live on Sado Island, KODO takes participants through slow and easy rotations of the torso to begin warming up the body. After that first session with KODO, I began that type of warm-up full body warm-up and found that it really helped. I’m not necessarily thinking percussion at this point, but just loosening up. Nothing holistic, just slow, very easy and then increasing rotation and movement as my torso and shoulders warm up.

One of the most important practice habits that work well for me and seems to instantly help improve musicality with students when I do residency teaching these days is to sing or scat out loud. When I do this, I’m able to inflect phrasing and experiment with many different ideas. In this way I get to understand it at the level of a singer, when and how to breathe helps me find the best way to musically inflect the phrase gestures. I will also experiment singing slurs and articulations; singing helps me emulate the articulated nuance I am after when playing the instruments. It is certainly something we all think about, but by singing aloud, I feel and I do think that I can push the envelope of what I’m able to musically achieve as a performer. Also, I think by singing there is kind of a nuanced expansion and contraction of time of the pulses and the beats, if that’s appropriate in the type of music that I’m working on. Certainly, if you are doing a minimalist piece that’s not always (often) part of the equation, but the antithesis of that would be keeping really precise time which is important too and that can be worked out in singing as well. And then how a singer would approach a high leap like say…

(Udow sings to demonstrate what he means. He shows how the higher note is lighter dynamically.)

For example, some marimba players when they have a big leap, they slam the high note, even a lot of really good professionals marimba players do this. There is a concept in vocal music of how you lighten up on the higher note to let it sail. There is a lot I’ve learned through my career in the opera orchestra listen to artist singers - of the importance of vocalization for percussion is incredibly important. I find that I can avoid unintended accents, and produce the phrases I want to make when I have sung the music in the practice room while playing.
The other most important thing I do in the practice room, in my actual sessions when I’m playing, is taking a lot of quality time in considering not only my sticking options but also combining the stickings options with stroke types - the downs, ups, taps, and full stroke combinations. I carefully consider all logical stroke combination possibilities to enhance the musical phrase. I’m listening to it in my head when I’m singing. Dut, dut, dee - ah dah could be left, left, right, left, right but then I want to understand that the inverted paradiddle might have stroke types - tap, tap, down, up, tap, or whatever it happens to be. So I’m always trying to meld the stroke types with the stickings.

CH: Trying to match that articulation that you hear in your head?

MU: Right, the articulation and the phrase concept.

For me, those are the two most important things and those are the areas I tend to get “lost”, in the best possible sense of “being lost” in and with the music. It is counter-intuitive to set up a short-term goal of what I want to practice in the session and then “get lost”, totally absorbed in the phrasing and articulation, singing while experimenting with stickings and stroke-types. In reality, in my professional career, I tend not to have the compressed time constraints, compared with a full-time orchestra player who’s in a top five orchestra with a new program coming up weekly and sometimes twice a week.

Some pragmatic things - if it’s a keyboard instrument, for instance, I like to warm-up with fluid and relaxed scales. I think about where my mallets are coming in contact with the bars. Optimally in terms of tone quality and listening for the tone in each marimba bar. But it is in flowing sixteenth notes so the motions aren’t mechanical but fluid. I do that on timpani or multiple percussion set-ups as well. As an example, when warming up on snare drum, I have a compilation of etudes from a variety of different method books that I have put together. I find those quite useful. In a way, it is kind of my personal mini-course pack, if you will. I’m not just using one book. I also created a magic square table of time that utilize either with a constant sixteen note pulse or as polyrhythms by flipping the numbers vertically one on top of the other. Within a sixteenth note context: the sub-groupings could be, as an example, 1,2,3...1,2,3,4,5... 1,2,3...1,2,3...4,5 with alternating sticking or a with a different combination of sticking, such as: RLL RLL RR, RLL RLL RR or RLR LRL RL RLR LRL RL, or other sticking combinations. So if within the table the number 3 is followed by the number 5, I might stack the numbers 3 over 5 or 5 over 3 and work on the polyrhythm by playing three in one hand with five in the other. It is important to work on conceptualizing both 5/3 and 3/5 as 5 with (over) 3 [5:3] is quite a different “feel” as compared with 3 with (over) 5 [3:5]. Thinking of this within the context of meter, one can think of the five and put it over three. So in 3/4 Meter you are playing three quarter notes with a quintuplet over it. Or you can reverse it so you have the 5 on the bottom and think of the Meter as 5/8, and while playing 5 eighth notes in one hand play three notes in the other hand. So I use that to keep my mind really active and I switch it around so I am not going through the whole table at every practice session. I use that as a warm-up and some things from Buster Bailey’s Wrist Twisters because of the concept of stroke types and stick control. And even Emile Sholle’s, The Big 230, the Podemski Standard Snare Drum Method and the Goldenberg Modern
Method for Snare Drum.

As a warm-up, I like to read the Goldenberg Simple Duets in the snare drum book. I’ll play the top line with my right hand and the bottom one with my left hand and play the duets by myself. That was something that was suggested to me when I was in junior high by Jack McKenzie. He was the major proponent of the match grip and I studied with Mr. McKenzie at Interlochen’s National Music Camp, the Arts Academy and then at University of Illinois. He had suggested that to me when I was a kid at Interlochen that I consider the matched-grip, it made perfect sense and it was a very easy switch for me as it is for most people. Anyway, I like to read through those Goldenberg duets, but obviously I’m not doing the flam duets - just the simple duets and I am really focusing on the stroke types in terms of downs, ups, taps, and full strokes within each hand. I like some of the Wilcoxen, Wrist and Finger Stroke Control exercises and copied them into my little course-pack as well. I also like to warm-up with some of William Street’s Etudes, compiled by John Beck Sr. and Bill and Ruth Cahn. While practicing these exercises, I’m scatting them out loud to get the kind of flow and whole musical gesture I’d like out of them in terms of the groove or the regimented quality that’s thus interpreting them in different ways. So as an example, in one approach, I have an inverted paradiddle, just like George L. Stone outlines in the first or second page of Stick Control, where instead of RLRR LRLR, I’ll have, LRLR RLRL. I’ll do it as Stone suggests, keeping the articulations completely even, no accents, but I also morph it into my own kind of exercise where I’ll think of it in 2/4 Meter so the LRLR is on beat one and the RLRL is on beat two. Then I’ll weight it and actually accent it - Lrlr Rlrl Lrlr Rlrl, which in terms of stroke types would be tap down up tap, tap down up tap. So the accent with the finger [snap and release] is on the tap rather than on accenting on the down as in this case, the down-stroke would be a non accented stroke. Then I take it a step further in my own practicing where I’m not saying simply “tap down up tap, tap down up tap”. Instead, I am inscribing it as a tenuto note in terms of time, space, and energy. So I will say tap down UP tap, tap down UP tap, so I am saying UP as an ascending long (tenuto) eighth note with my voice. I’m kind of scatting the UP as if the motion of my arm is going up for that length of time. It helps with the fluidity of my motion. That is just one little example. So when I’m exploring stickings it is always in the context of thinking about what are the stroke types with those stickings.

When I do have limited practice time, it is not a problem because I can go right to the repertoire, warming up by playing with fluid motions at a slower tempo. This is a concept that came up in discussions with Dan Lidster. Dan’s wife, Mary, is a pianist and she was having hand problems. She found out about the Dorothy Taubman Institute and the Taubman piano method based on fluidity and the ease of motions. One of the concepts is that by playing the repertoire under tempo, you can warm-up on the rep itself. So if there is a crunch, and there always is for musicians, I can go straight to my repertoire and play with fluidity, under tempo, assuming that I already have the stickings figured out. As tempo will often have an effect on what stickings are possible, one can’t always figure out stickings when one is playing under tempo. My point is that once one can play the passage at tempo then the passage can be used as a warm-up by playing slowly with fluid motions.
One other thing that I would tell my students, and that I do myself, is when I’m practicing, even when I’m singing, I am always listening to the music that I’m making. It is almost as if it is an out-of-body type of perspective. I’m making a connection where I know what my hands (arms, shoulders, etc.) should do and I know what the desired outcome should be. So my hands and my feet are working to produce the desired result, but I’m intently listening to the sound that I just produced, constantly getting feedback, so that my brain is constantly evaluating the outcome. It’s as if one has put on “big ears” in the concert hall. You can listen to your sound right where you are, listening at the timpani. You can also conceptually put on big ‘Mickey Mouse ears’ and listen to what your timpani sounds like way out in the hall. Be it marimba, cymbals, triangle, whatever it happens to be, the same concept of getting out of my immediate space and listening as if I’m someone else teaching myself. I think it is a really great way to improve one’s practice and one’s musicality. I think it was well worth my time to develop that skill. So if you are working on that, I encourage you to keep doing it and you’ll master it, for sure.

I played a chamber music concert in Kansas City, of music by the Canadian composer, Murray Schaffer. In a lecture at UMKC, Murray made the point that human beings, and most animals, don’t have ear lids but they do have eyelids. So we can choose to close our eyes and not see, but we do not have ear lids and so we are constantly being bombarded by sound. So hearing is very passive and there is very little that we can do about it. A gunshot goes off or a car backfires and it’s a boom. But how we listen to the sounds that we are making is something completely different. So this act of practicing thinking about an active feedback loop is at the core of my practice habits. Having the concept in my head of how I’m going to produce that sound (tone quality, dynamics, rhythm, etc.), often singing the phrase while playing, gripping the mallet with a “fat hand”, a tight hand, or a relaxed hand while listening to the result in an out-of-body sense to actually complete the feedback loop, etc. is an essential part of my practicing.

One of the things that Michael Colgrass talks about in his performance excellence sessions is always ending on a positive note in your practice session. At the beginning of his session, Michael passes out golden colored ropes to the participants having us loop the rope in a circle on the floor and then stepping into our golden circles. Michael speaks about the importance of when leaving that golden space (leaving the practice room) doing so on a positive note, thus feeling good about how the session wound up. I do this all the time. As a result, the next time I go back into the practice room, I am excited to be there. So instead of leaving the practice room hacked off that I couldn’t perfect a difficult passage that I was working on and dreading going back into the studio later on, by ending on a positive “note”, I am looking forward to the next session. Also, say if I was working on a multiple percussion piece and a passage was getting the best of me and I was getting frustrated, I might just go over to the marimba and play a little passage from Keiko Abe’s Memories of the Seashore, that I know I can play really well, and end the practice session that way. I think this is a really good concept that I have used throughout my career and have Michael Colgrass to thank for this approach.
I always harped on my students to, at least once a week, videotape themselves and watch and listen to the playback. Especially when gearing up for auditions recording using audio software programs such as Garage Band, Audacity, and better still, video, and then looking and listening to the playback to make sure everything is just the way you want it is incredibly important. I think video is great because then you can also carefully watch your strokes as well as listen to your sound so that if there is a sonic concern without a doubt it can be traced back to a motion issue. It’s one thing to practice while looking at yourself in a mirror in real time, but it’s another, almost an out-of-body experience of being one’s own best teacher by watching and listening to oneself on video. There are so many things I pick up on when I do that. So that’s one way I can become my own best teacher in that regard.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

MU: If it’s a solo piece, not so much, but if it’s a part within a large ensemble or a part within a chamber music setting, then absolutely because I want to know how my part fits in with the orchestration. No for solo and yes for ensemble.

CH: For solo, is it a fear of being influenced by the phrasing and articulation?

MU: Yes, the composer put the notes on paper and I like to interpret the composer’s intentions without being influenced by how other people interpreted the composer’s intentions.

I can study a score of an orchestra piece or a small chamber music piece and write in entrance cues. If I playing, say, the woodblock part in Messiaen’s Turangalila Symphony or a marimba part in Colours of the Celestial City aside from the score study, I also want to listen to a recording so when I’m playing I have an even better sense of how my part is going to fit with the rest of the ensemble before I arrive at the first rehearsal.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

My wife and I just finished putting together a thirty-seven year retrospective DVD of our touring together. In fact, Jim had us down at University of Kentucky years ago for a residency. While assembling this retrospective DVD, we realized that almost all of the music and the dance that we did together (dance and percussion duo) we did for memory. The last three or four works that we did were all in the thirty to forty-five minute range. I realized as we were watching the DVD that these were all memorized works. When I’m playing, it depends on the repertoire. I think it depends on the piece. Sometimes I really like to use music, for confidence, and at other times I just know the music so well that I would rather not use music because it is distracting. So it depends on the specific situation as to whether or not I use music.

I think there are three ways to avoid memory slips: One is solfeggio, learning the music
structurally that way and knowing how it all fits together within the key signature, modulations, and so on is extremely useful. The other way is visualizing the staff and the notes on the staff. I would have my students, some of them who had troubles with memory, sit down at a desk away from the instrument and write out the score. For young players, working on *Yellow after the Rain*, let’s say a junior high school kid, it takes a long time but the more they do it, the better they get at it. The third approach is to focus on the kinesthetic aspect of muscle memory, which is the easiest for me. But that is the one that can get people in trouble the most. Muscle memory is very important, but solfeggio and visualization are tops on my list; ultimately they are all integrated.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

MU: Yes, I “tried” to video myself once a week. Note that I said, “tried”, the past tense, of “try” as while I’m still playing some, I’m focusing in retirement, more on my compositional output.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

MU: Early on, I spend a lot more time figuring out the stickings and emulating the phrase gesture that I want. Then leading up to the performance, I focus more on run-throughs. For an orchestra audition, making flash cards for each piece and then shuffling them so that you are constantly changing the order in which you play your excerpts is important. All those kinds of techniques are useful.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

MU: It depends. In general, no because when I am on tour things are constantly changing. I think being flexible is important. For orchestra auditions, you can’t count on your plane arriving on time or being picked up and getting to the hall on time. So to be comfortable not having a ritual is very important because chances are your routine is going to be broken. Let’s say I’m always going to go to sleep at 10:00 PM the night before a performance and I the next morning I’m always have the same thing for breakfast and so on, but things don’t always work out that smoothly. Let’s say that you are in a hotel and someone’s making noise in the room next door - their TV is too loud, or kids are running up and down the hallway. So I think the best concept is to remain flexible. But some horn players I know, as an example, on performance days won’t eat pizza as they don’t want to take the chance of burning their lips. So there are certain considerations - avoiding certain kinds of foods that might upset your stomach, that sort of thing.

I remember in Santa Fe, at the Opera, if we were doing *The Magic Flute* - it is a three and a half or four hour opera and the first solo doesn’t come up until the finale of Act I., an hour and twenty minutes into the first act. In the 1968 theatre, the audience could see the orchestra entering and exiting the pit, so we had to be in the pit from the beginning of the opera. So I sat in the pit, and as the finale began, I would do metal and kinesthetic practicing and then stand up an hour and twenty minutes into the first act, and play the
minute long solo and then sit down again until the act was over. Similarly, in the second act, all of those solos happen later on in the opera. I just learned early on to be mentally flexible. In the case of *The Magic Flute* or Henze’s *We Come to the River*, I would take a nap in the afternoon before the performance for sure, a twenty-minute power nap, just to be at the top of my game. So in those instances I had a set routine, but those were about the only works that I remember that I constantly had that ritual of an afternoon nap.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

MU: I was in fifth grade in Detroit. I started on drum set and congas because my cousin was a drummer. I started two years earlier with piano but unfortunately, I really wasn’t that interested in piano at that time. I wish I had been, but it wasn’t my passion.

I would say that by sixth grade I was pretty passionate about percussion. By seventh grade I knew that’s what I wanted to do with my life. I was in the Wichita Youth Symphony in Kansas. I remember that first rehearsal they were doing Enescu’s *Romanian Rhapsodies*. I was in the junior group because I had just started playing and there were some kids who were much more advanced. I had the triangle part so I didn’t play for a while, but when those kids in the string and woodwind sections started playing all of those beautiful melodies and I listened to “that sound” I just thought, “whoa”. From that moment on I knew I wanted to be an orchestra player.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

MU: Middle and high school was a challenge because I was also into athletics - football, basketball, and baseball. Probably Russell Hartenberger, at the Settlement School in Philadelphia, wished I had practiced more. Probably at that time, if I have to be honest and confess, a half hour to an hour a day and maybe four or five days a week. In college, two to six hours a day, it just depended on classes and rehearsal schedules. I know some people go a lot longer than six hours but I’m pretty burnt if I go longer than that. Early in my professional career, it was probably about the same 2 – 4 hours, maybe 6 hours if there was something really tough coming up. It just depended on what was going on. Now, having retired, I really want to focus on my composition career from here on out. But I am still playing a bit. I’m playing repertoire that does not require a great deal of refined motor skills and does not take a great deal of practice time. Although, I do have to say I miss that kind of ongoing meditative practicing, when I was in that sphere, in the zone and in that all consuming world of sound. I don’t meditate but I think the altered state of mind when practicing is probably a lot like meditation.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

MU: Absolutely, I think that my singing out loud when practicing has contributed a great deal to whatever modest successes I have had throughout my career. I sing with the kind
of depth of tone that I want to be listening to in the concert hall. In prepping for a concert with Keiko and I’m practicing a multiple membranophone part, say a drum part in Prism, with a bass drum, a taiko, tom-toms, log drums, and gongs, I’m emulating the sound I am imagining in my head as if Keiko were also playing and then I notice that I’m singing out loud as I am practicing. I think, certainly not with a puffed out chest, I would say that one of the signature things that people who knew my playing or know my playing tend to admire is the depth of tone, sound, articulation, and phrasing that I produce as a player. I think that came through this type of practicing.

CH: When you perform, are you vocalizing on stage or is it just in the practice room?

MU: No, just in the practice room. There are people like Glenn Gould, is a prime example, you can listen to him at times softly singing on his recordings such as the Goldberg variations. I can hear some people stomping their feet when playing; I do find that distracting. In performances, I’m “singing along in my head” not out loud. It is so engrained in my corpus that it’s corporally part of me. I don’t need to sing out loud or grunt or stomp my feet.

CH: Is it hard to turn off when you get on stage?

MU: No, not at all. There is that old adage about practicing with a metronome and how it becomes a crutch, but I have never found that to be the case. I find it to be a great tool to reinforce my focusing on inner-pulse. If I put the metronome on the back beat, it helps me focus my pulse all the more accurately as it demarcates half the time of each beat so the the backbeat sub-divisions of the metronome really helps me be all the more precise. The metronome reinforces my attentiveness to time; it doesn’t become a crutch at all. Maybe it does with some people because some people I have known have said that it is a hindrance to them to use the metronome and then when they put it away they think they are not as secure with their inner-pulse. I don’t always use the metronome when practicing, but when I do, I never feel that it hinders my ability to keep better time when I am not using it. In that same way, when singing, I’ve never had the problem singing in the practice room and not being able to simply internalize my signing when on stage.

Biography

Michael Udow has had an expansive diversified career including the symphonic and opera repertories, contemporary solo and chamber music, and composition. Dr. Udow served as principal percussionist with the Santa Fe Opera from 1968 through his retirement after the 2009 season. His credentials also include being a member of the New Orleans Philharmonic, Summit Brass, the dance/percussion duo Equilibrium, the Tone Road Ramblers, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Galaxy Percussion Group and numerous other chamber ensembles. Michael has also designed and manufactured innovative percussion instruments and accessories used by major orchestras, service bands, and percussionists throughout the world.
As a solo percussionist, Michael performed the roles of the Drummer/Madman in the American premiere of Hans Werner Henze's We Come to the River for the Santa Fe Opera as well as the gypsy cimbalom soloist in Santa Fe's production of Countess Maritza. Udow was soloist with the Buffalo Philharmonic in the world premiere of David Felder's Between for solo percussion and orchestra. He has performed as a soloist at Paris's Dragon Center, Amsterdam's Stedliejk Museum, Tokyo's Interlink Festival, Düsseldorf's Rhine Music Festival, Salzburg's Aspekte Festival, England's Dartington Dance Festival, and Tübingen's International Percussion Days.

Udow has received grants from the Michigan Arts Alliance and the Michigan Council for the Arts. As performer and composer, Udow can be heard on the Columbia, Columbia/Denon, Forte Music, Advance, Opus One, CRI, Orion, New World, EQ and Einstein labels. Under his guidance, the University of Michigan Percussion Ensemble performed at Lincoln Center and Merkin Hall; Tokyo's Seimei Hall with Pro Musica Nipponia; the National Concert Hall of Taiwan for the inaugural Taiwan International Percussion Festival; a three-week tour of Japan with Keiko Abe; and the Toyama Japan Festival.

Udow has taught and coordinated percussion at five of the International Festival of Youth Orchestras in Banff, Canada and was a jury member and clinician at the International Marimba Competitions in Stuttgart (2) and Japan (2).

Having recently retired after a distinguished career at The University of Michigan, Udow continues to perform while also providing extended guest residencies at Conservatories and Universities around the world (his most recent Asia Residency schedule is listed below). Udow also anticipates devoting greater quality time towards composition while continuing his research and development with unique quality percussion timbres and supporting products.
October 31, 2012

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BW: The specifics of my warm-up routine depend on the instrument I am practicing on and the timeframe I have to work in. Additionally, as I teach a number of lessons during a day, if I am practicing after a run of lessons I have normally modeled a number of techniques that needn’t be revisited in warm-ups again.

That being said, I generally run two types of warm-ups for myself – a short one for short to medium practice sessions and a long one for extensive practice sessions.

Both routines include loose revisiting of fundamentals, improvisation, and a visit into physically demanding material that explores full ranges of motion, but nothing too strenuous. It is worth noting that I do allocate different time for technique development in long practice sessions as well.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BW: I will listen to a recording away from the instrument, with score in hand. Next, I will do a substantial amount of score study, including ‘mental practice’ in a particularly vivid mindset. And finally spend adequate time at the instrument, often revisiting mental practice techniques/inner game sports theory if memorization is a component of the performance.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

BW: Yes, the beginning to familiarize myself with the work and toward the end to reconsider any musical directions I have taken.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BW: At this point in my career, I perform about forty percent of my material from memory. The other sixty percent is often ensemble work that does not call for it. When memorizing, however, I have enjoyed a lot of success with performance practices introduced by Prof. Doug Wolfe of the University of Utah.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BW: First, I identify them. Then I make a point to embrace it as an opportunity to grow –
not a shortcoming on my part or a stressful affectation of the composer. Then I will take note of how much time I have to practice a given problem spot and gauge how meticulous I can be in that given amount of time. When practicing, I will then take it very slowly – crazy slow – slow enough to play everything perfectly every time - and gradually increases tempos at a rate that is fitting for the time allowed.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

BW: Sadly, only about once or twice as I prepare a performance.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BW: Yes. To be completely honest, while in principle I feel a person should allocate an equal amount of time for every day of practice as he or she approaches a performance, I normally end of ‘cramming’ for performances as I’m getting older. The good news is that I am a lot better at it now that I was when I was younger, but I should try to incorporate this discipline into my growth even now.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BW: I take note to eat a healthy breakfast and set out performance clothes well beforehand. I also try to arrive to engagements well in advance so that any surprises (which always seem to show up) aren’t cause for concern. In addition, I try to schedule hang time with friends and colleagues after performances whenever possible.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

BW: I started percussion when I was six and started focusing on my primary instrument in sixth grade.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

BW: Middle and high School: three hours. College and higher education: two hours. Early career: two hours. Currently: half hour on average.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BW: Unquestionably, yes. As a teacher, I recognize that young students simply will not respect someone who cannot model what is being asked of them. As a composer, I am able to save a lot of time by being able to demonstrate what it is that I ask of colleagues. As an audience member, I am able to enjoy the difference between what is very good in a performance and what is excellent. There is a very subtle difference but a gulf of work in between. Being able to recognize that difference is so rewarding when it makes itself
During Your Imaginary Thirty Minute Practice Session…

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<th>Time</th>
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<td>2.5 Min</td>
<td>Warm Up Routine!</td>
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<td>5 Min</td>
<td>Improvise/Experiment Nice to ask “What if?”</td>
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<td>10 Min</td>
<td>Technique Review Old, Reinforce Current, Explore New</td>
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<td>10 Min</td>
<td>Goal Material in small chunks “Rule of 9/10”</td>
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**Practice Tips for the Young (and old) Musician**

Establish a good practice environment where interruptions and distractions are minimized. Other family members should be encouraged not to disturb you during practice time.

Always stay relaxed when practicing or performing. It is often helpful to try giving yourself “relaxation” challenges.

Know your goal: Have a clear idea of what you hope to accomplish and a timeframe to accomplish it in.

“Divide and conquer”: Break the task into easily accomplished small bits.

Use the metronome: It is like your best friend, the one who is honest with you when it counts the most.

Be methodical in your work. This means working very, very slowly sometimes.
Be “hyper-observant”: Listening carefully and watching carefully will reveal new, more helpful goals.

Finish the job: The most difficult practicing is that which raises good to excellent.

Establish a regular practice routine: 20 minutes a day every day is much better than 1 hour a day but only twice a week. If you do find yourself in a longer practice session than normal, schedule a break time(s).

Take care of things outside of the practice room so that they don’t cloud your judgment in the practice room.

Don’t beat yourself up. It is tempting to do, but useless to spend energy yelling at yourself.

Always see to it that your job as a musician is to give rise to the joy of making music.

Biography

Ben Wahlund is an internationally award-winning music composer, music educator, and performer of percussion. With bachelor degrees from the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota, as well as a Master's Degree in Music Theory and Composition and a Performance Certificate in percussion from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, Ben Wahlund has seen success as a musician on a number of fronts since the early 1990's.

As a composer, Mr. Wahlund's works have been performed in the United States, Canada, Germany, Spain, Poland, Japan, Australia, France, Taiwan, China, and most recently, Jordan. Additionally, his compositions have placed twice in the Percussive Arts Society International Composition Contest, first place for the Quey Percussion Duo Annual Composition Contest, first place in the international Methanex "Symphony and Steel Composition Contest" for a concerto for steel pan and orchestra, and second place in the Keystone Composition Contest.

Ben Wahlund is the Assistant Director of the Birch Creek Music Center Percussion Session, in Egg Harbor, Wisconsin, as well as a private teacher and adjudicator in the Naperville, Illinois area and serves as adjunct faculty in music theory, percussion pedagogy, composition/orchestration and music education at North Central College, in Naperville, IL.

Ben Wahlund also serves as the director of percussion at Naperville Central High School, where the high school percussion ensemble's concert Drumshow consistently performs to
capacity crowds of over 2,500 people. Additionally, Ben has designed and is director of the District 203 Riverwalk Percussion Camp.

His performance history involves successful performances in all aspects of percussion throughout the United States as well as Europe, including the Montreaux Jazz Festival, Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival, Elmhurst Jazz Festival, two Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, a number of state Days of Percussion, and the Illinois Music Educators Association State Convention.

His effective and engaging teaching has earned him two Golden Apple Awards for Excellence in Education, a number of citations as outstanding studio staff member at NCHS, a nomination for the Disney Excellence in Education Award, and, most importantly, a roster of tremendously successful students.

Ben Wahlund endorses Sabian Cymbals, Remo Percussion, and Innovative Percussion Drumsticks and Mallets. Mr. Wahlund's work is published exclusively by HoneyRock Publications and lives in the Chicago area with his wife, Jennifer, and two dogs, Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker.
~ Eric Willie ~
Personal interview with Colin Hill

November 11, 2011.
Indianapolis, IN

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

EW: I play a lot of snare drum and mallets and drum set, those are my bread and butter right now. For snare drums, I always do the same thing. I do the first page of stick control, I do both full and tap heights, page five. I do it about one hundred beats per minute, for the half note. I get my hands moving and then whenever I’m through, I just do a couple variations of acts into rebounds, I think it’s page four, same tempo, just to get your hands so you can get blood flowing. It’s pretty quick, no more than five minutes. For keyboard stuff, I’ve got my same Green exercise I do, it’s arpeggio with a six added and then I run it through major and minor. It doesn’t take long, you run it through it in major and then in minor, it really works on body positioning so I can think about moving. For drum set, I do the same thing, I do triplet syncopations. I put the bass drum on one, two and three and go through the seven forms of a triple, eight note and triplet. With the metronome to make sure my time is solid, make sure my ride symbol is solid, rather.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

EW: That’s a hard one. I guess I can talk to you about the Mackey piece that I just learned. I read through the whole thing, with the met on sixteenths, and do that for about two days. Reading, and making notes and one thing that I got from Susan Powell, we did the East Tennessee Day of Percussion together last spring. She doesn’t move, so if you’re doing an exercise or something, she doesn’t move her torso. It’s kind of like the Stout ideo-kinetic where you have a rotation note but you don’t move and so if you know in the middle this is always D, you don’t move and you always have a center. When I was first reading the Mackey piece, I went through and marked my body. In this passage I would write f g, so my body would be between the F and the G so every time I played there I knew if I stuck my elbows out, then that was the right position and I would be able to hit the right notes without having to move and do other things. F and G, boom there it is. Other than that I set goals and I also do this with my kids, you have a goal up to your performance. Two weeks before you should be able to run the entire piece at tempo, two weeks prior to the performance you’re doing reps. No matter what it is, orchestral audition, performance, recital, etc. So that’s kind of it. Two weeks ahead of time.

CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

EW: The only time I listen to an existing recording is if I’m deciding to order the piece, that’s it. No, I think the worst thing we can do is copy something that’s already been done. There’s a reason why baroque performers chose to embellish things the second
time, like binary form. There’s a reason why there’s all those rules for doing it that they have options for creating their own piece of music. I think it’s a shame, when I was at North Texas there were so many people that planned their recital along with a Burritt recording. It’s like Burritt’s already played that, I can listen to that recording, it needs to be your own ideas so you can create your own identity. Other than just referencing a piece to see if you’re familiar or if I speaks to you. With drum set it’s different. You gotta listen to drum set players, it’s the same thing with orchestral players, I think. You need to know how long it’s going to play with a symphony, how New York is going to play a symphony, how Dallas is going to play it. Take their tempo marking and get an idea but especially drum set players. Let’s say Nica’s Dream with Art Blakey, the last thing I would want to do is play exactly what Art Blakey did. I may take his influence as far as phrase marking and stuff but I would try to make it my own identity within the context.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

EW: I really grown to be a big fan of memorization because it removes an element so you’re not only worrying about rhythm, a note you know, and style accuracy but you’re removing a visual element so you can communicate. With the Mackey, that’s been my latest solo performance, I could communicate with the conductor. Last thing I’m going to do is have to look at a piece of music when I have sixty different playing surfaces on a marimba, so I think it helps with continuity and allows you to focus on the music. As far as mental or physical methods, it’s starting at eighth note equals sixty and repping it a ton. Now, if there’s something hard I try to focus on, or sometimes if I have the piece, like the Mackey, I didn’t have the full piece until after I started practicing. But sometimes I’ll try to start within the movement first and then work backwards. So the end of the movement is always strong. I did that with percussion ensemble too, with my kids. I started with the hardest point, to the end and then worked backwards so they’ve had a ton of reps on that. But other than that, to avoid memory slips, it’s the Christopher Deane process. I remember playing with him in 2003, he said he could play The Process of Invention thirty times in a row without missing a note. A whole evening he would spend just repping that. So it would be almost three hundred minutes, however that adds up, so you’re looking at five hours straight which for Deane would probably be normal. But repetition of perfect practice.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

EW: First of all you have to figure out what your problem is. Is the problem a bad sound? Is the problem bad notes? Is it bad rhythm? Or is it just inconsistent note accuracy? I’ve been referring to this a lot with keyboard stuff I guess because keyboard stuff always seems to be a weak area. Obviously it’s the same thing, before and after the phrase, slow practice and figure out the physical movements. And then it comes down to can you play it, the penny trick. Every time you play one perfect, put one penny over, play it perfect, put one more penny over. You suck, those pennies come back. That depends on your own diligence being able to do that.
CH: How often do you record yourself?

EW: I have to admit I’ve never recorded myself, personally, a lot on solo performances. I record every percussion ensemble and then I make a to-do list for the next rehearsal. I post it in drop box so my students have it and know what to work on for next rehearsal. That’s helped a lot. The percussion ensemble level has really jumped and I stole that from John Parks. And it only takes 30 minutes, I listen to the piece, I make my notes and then I type it up really quick, put it in dropbox, the students have it. As far as recording myself, to be honest, I don’t do it a lot until roughly about 2 weeks before and then I try to listen for inconsistencies. And really time and consistencies is really what it is.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

EW: No, other than two weeks before, I’m trying to get those three, five, or ten reps in a row without making a mistake. [At this point] you should have the piece nailed, so there’s no excuse. You’re looking for consistency. I heard this quote the other day that went something like ‘a professional is waiting to make a mistake’ like they’re going to be that consistent that they’re looking for themselves to make a mistake cause they’re that consistent. So just being able to do that three, five to ten times.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

EW: A couple of things you’ve got to practice before a performance. You’ve got to practice how you’re coming on to the stage, all this is keyboard oriented since I’ve been playing that a lot. But you have to practice how you’re going to walk up to the marimba. Are you walking up to the high end, are you walking up to the low pitch end? How are you going to bow, how are you going to pick up your mallets, are they going to be on the marimba? And most importantly, how are you going to count yourself off, are you going to think of the first phrase and then play the first note, or are you going to do one, two, three, breathe. So you make sure that’s consistent. And you know I got all this from reading Lee Vinson. I read some of his articles and I thought that was a very novel approach, a unique approach, I think I read it on his website. But so you practice the same way you come in if it’s a performance. You come in to the room, you bow, you step back from the keyboard, you sing through the first couple of notes and then you do one, two, three, breathe. So it’s the same routine every time. You can work on the bowing, but that’s not important once you’ve played the last note, for me at least.

CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

EW: I started playing percussion, at six I think it was. My dad was a drummer in a rock band in high school and so he introduced me to Sandy Nelson, Let There be Drums, Wipe Out, and In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida. Those were the three records I listened to. And then I played on chairs until I got my first drum set. When I was a kid, MTV came out when I was six, so I would watch MTV and mimic what those guys did. Primary instrument, I
don’t even know if I could say my primary instrument but I would say my primary instrument for my entire span of being a musician would probably be marching percussion. I would say at fifteen I got into drum corps and I would spend time transcribing the passages so I could figure out what they were doing. I spent a lot of time in drum corps.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, undergrad, graduate school, early career, and currently.

EW: High school I spent a lot, I spent at least two to three hours a day. I would get home from school at about 3:15pm and I would practice until roughly 5:30pm and then I went to work from six to nine every night, I worked at Sonic. College, my undergrad was horrible. I learned how to site read on mallets really well but to be honest I didn’t practice enough in my undergrad. I didn’t have a timpani lesson, I didn’t have a drum set lesson, I didn’t have any accessory percussion or world percussion. I had classical marimba and concert snare drum and that was it. It was pretty bad, I didn’t practice a lot. I got to Kentucky and I was probably doing four to six hours every day. I did my Masters at Kentucky. I did my undergrad at Austin Peay State University with David Steinquest. Early career, when I got to Whitewater, I bought a marimba and so I practiced marimba a lot. I had several lessons with Michael Burritt, I had some at Austin Peay, I had one at Kentucky when he came through. And then when I was at Whitewater I came down once a month and had a lesson with him, and recognized my technique sucked. It was a whole way of gripping the outside mallet that he really clued me in so it wouldn’t slip. So I practiced mallets a lot, as far as a daily routine, I’d say two hours probably. When I was teaching at Whitewater, early career say, when I got to Tech, I did a lot of drum set, a lot of drum set. That’s just because it’s what I like doing. I’d say at least three hours a day. I was recently divorced and didn’t have anything else to do, I barely had any kids in studio and had some guys who were really interested in drum set so I was trying to keep up. Currently, it’s probably about two hours, I guess two hours is probably the median. Everyday I play my snare drum, I’ll play Scheherazade, Capriccio, and Kije everyday. I play Porgy and Bess, Appalachian Spring, Harry Janos, and Colas everyday. So those are about thirty minutes, I just run through them, it’s not like I break them down and do hand isolations, it’s just to say ok I can remember this everyday. It’s just been a focus for the last two years, I realize that I never studied it, with Jim I studied keyboard, I studied xylophone and snare drum. At North Texas, I didn’t study anything. With Deane I did my recital stuff, I didn’t do timpani. I passed my barriers because I knew what do to, you listen to the recording you mark articulations, the balance, and that’s it. But I realized I never played the tambourine part for Peter Grimes, cymbals on Mirliton, and the bass drum part for Rite of Spring so that’s why I’ve been doing it the past two years, because of the education I lacked. Plus the idea of being able to do nothing but play and then be able to do chamber music on the side is pretty incredible and make about ten thousand more than I do right now a year, it’s pretty incredible. It’s just getting the job.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?
EW: Yeah I guess so. I don’t know. I think my success has been because, although it’s changed a lot in the past two years, I don’t talk a lot, I try to absorb as much as I can and see what people are saying, see how they’re approaching things. I’m talking about, let’s say when I was first teaching crown with Rennick. First week in sectionals with the quad I went and did my own thing but when it was full drum line I was checking out. Working with Paul is a different thing because he likes to run it and he doesn’t like anyone else to get in the way. But finally I got to where if Paul wasn’t calling something I would jump in and say something to them and Paul actually liked that, which I didn’t know at the time. So I observed a lot and saw what he was doing. At North Texas I was lucky, I would go and observe rehearsals, I would observe the drum line rehearsals, the undergrad ensemble, because at the time there was an undergraduate and graduate ensemble. John Lane used to let me come in and play congas or shakers or something during steel band and I would just observe and see what’s he saying and what am I hearing. Just any chance I could to learn something new. There’s a guy I went to school with at Kentucky, a grad student at the time, the DMA guy and I remember I was really interested in tabla and his opinion was, you won’t have enough time to learn tabla to be able to play it on this performance. Or there was some Stevens’s exercises and we had discrepancies on how to approach and it was his way or the highway and I was confused by that. Michael Burritt, Mark Ford, Nancy Zeltsman, Keiko Abe all played marimba really well and they approach it four contrasting ways. There’s always the way, so I think observing and figuring out what I wanted to do alone, through my own ideas, that have been filtered through everybody else’s, made my success. The practicing thing, I don’t know, I don’t think I’ve figured it out yet. But I think studying with Deane was the best thing, he calls it micromanaging, but just mapping it out. For example, a daily routine like when I was doing orchestral auditions: Monday was soft snare drum, bass drum, and glockenspiel. The next day was loud snare drum, triangle, tambourine and crash cymbals. And you had so much more time for each. So I would spend two minutes on Romeo and Juliet, I would spend two minutes on Mirliton. That whole Zen approach when you Only do something for a fixed amount of time and then leave it. If you didn’t make your goal, then you know what to add for the next day. I think that this way of doing things is the most beneficial. Somewhat of a Zen in The Art of Archery, by Eugen Herrigel, that’s a great book. It’s like the Inner Game of Tennis, it’s like that just being able to apply it music. That guy didn’t really know how to approach it but it’s kind of the same thing.

Biography

Dr. Eric Willie serves as Associate Professor of Percussion at Tennessee Tech University (TTU) in Cookeville, TN where he teaches applied percussion, directs the Classical and Pop Percussion Ensembles, and arranges for the TTU Golden Eagle Drum Line. In addition, Eric serves as President for the Tennessee Chapter of the Percussive Arts Society (PAS) and as a member of the PAS Education Committee.

Eric regularly performs with the Nief-Norf New Music Ensemble and the Eclectic Chamber Players. He has been a featured performer at the 2011, 2010, 2009, 2007 & 2003 Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, the 2009 and 2006 Eastern
Trombone Workshops, the 2005 Florida Electroacoustic Music Festival, the 2003 World Saxophone Congress, and the 2001 Bands of America National Percussion Festival. He has performed with the Nashville Symphony, Nashville Philharmonic, Murfreesboro Symphony, Lexington Philharmonic, Beloit/Janesville Symphony, Oak Ridge Symphony, and as Principal Percussionist with the Bryan Symphony Orchestra. In addition, Eric will make his second Carnegie Hall appearance as an extra percussionist with the Nashville Symphony in May 2012 (first appearance occurred in 2006 with the Legacy tuba ensemble).

An avid promoter of new music for percussion, Eric most recently commissioned and performed the world premiere of John Mackey’s *Drum Music* (2011), a concerto for solo percussion and wind ensemble, with the TTU Wind Ensemble conducted by Joseph Hermann. During the 2011-2012 academic year, Eric will conduct three world-premiere performances of works by Paul Lansky, Christopher Deane, and Blake Tyson, with the TTU Percussion Ensemble.

Besides his talents as a classical percussionist, Eric is well known for his marching- percussion arranging and teaching experience. He has served as instructor and/or arranger for the Spirit of JSU, Southwind, Carolina Crown and the Madison Scouts drum and bugle corps. The University of North Texas, University of Kentucky, and the Murray State University Drum Lines have performed his marching percussion arrangements. In addition, he has instructed for the University of North Texas "A" Line, Music City Mystique, served as Arranger for the University of Kentucky Indoor Drum Line (2000 WGI College Class World Champions), and served on Faculty for the Bands of America World Percussion Symposium. As a clinician, Eric appeared at the 2007 Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, IL. He has also appeared at several state music educators' conventions throughout the midwest and southeastern United States. His educational articles have appeared in *The Instrumentalist* and *Percussive Notes*, and he has contributed educational resources to Innovative Percussion, Inc., Sabian Cymbals, Evans Drumheads, and Black Swamp Percussion.

Eric holds the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of North Texas, a Master of Music from the University of Kentucky, and a BS in Music Education from Austin Peay State University.
November 2, 2012
Austin, TX

CH: If you have a regular warm up routine, could you please describe it?

BZ: Most of the stuff that I do now is keyboard based. Lately, I’ve been doing a lot of marimba solos and chamber music. I’ve started using Jeff Queen’s 10 Minute Warm-up. He has an online pdf document with midi recordings of the Finale file. It’s literally ten minutes and goes through all the basic stroke types. It includes grid exercises, flams, drags, and concludes with some triplet exercises. I really like the double, triple, quadruple beat that he has on there. So I started using that and after 10 minutes my hands feel great. Once I’ve done that, I then go over to mallets and I have five basic exercises two mallets and four techniques for four-mallets, that I’ve broken down. This summer I wrote play-along exercises for all of those warm-ups, and at three or four different tempos for each technique. So I have thirty-two play-along tracks that go with all these techniques. Lately I’ve been doing that which means in about ten minutes, I can cover almost every technique in mallets. It was actually because of Jeff Queen’s method and his 10 Minute Warm Up, and I thought, ‘Why don’t we have a 10-minute warm-up for keyboard?’ It’s not to promote anything, but it’s something that I want to move forward a little bit more. I want to have a package deal where junior high kids can have something that they can go home with. Or for an ensemble, instead of having the drum set guy or a Dr. Beat blaring through the speakers, I have a rock tune or African music. I have an African 12/8 groove for my double stroke exercise and a jazz thing for my blues scales, so I do that with my own practice as well.

CH: How do you go about learning new music? Do you have a regular process?

BZ: Not really a regular process. I’ve found that I don’t have a whole lot of time to learn new music. So basically, I go through it once or twice trying to get a macro idea what the piece is about. From there, I start understanding what the structure of the piece is. Then I start breaking it apart. I keep it slow, looking to see where the hardest spots are. Then I go to those hardest spots first, once I understand the bigger aspect of things. I try to go with the harder spots, and then work transitions into that harder spot, out of that harder spot, and then transitions from the bigger chunks of music, depending on what the form of the piece is. And then I start piecing it together. So it’s very much a macro-micro-macro approach, and then I start putting it back together. And that could be in a weeks time that I do that, or a three-week timeframe. And that’s for harder literature. If it’s easier, I don’t really need to spend a whole lot of time on it. So if it’s something moderately challenging, I actually now try to do it as close to tempo as I can because I feel I can learn it pretty quick. I can learn music a lot quicker now than I could fifteen years ago.
CH: When learning new material, do you typically listen to existing recordings? If so, how frequently and during what stage of your progress?

BZ: I do try to listen to it. I do it mainly at the beginning to get an idea of what the piece is about. About halfway through if it’s something that I’m working up, tempo wise, then I look to see how close I am to what tempos the professionals did it. After that, I don’t really listen to it a whole lot. Once I’m close to a performance, I actually record myself more often than I listen to other people’s recordings. I record myself and look at the music, I always want to be sure I’m looking at the music. That’s a big thing for me, am I doing the things that are said or that the composer is requesting? Or have I just gone so right field that it’s nowhere near what they were looking for? So I use the recordings for a reference at the beginning, a reference in the middle, and then I start going towards what I want to do.

CH: When performing, how much of what you play is memorized? Do you utilize any mental or physical methods during or before the performance to avoid memory slips?

BZ: I usually try to memorize marimba solos. If it’s a chamber piece, I don’t force myself to memorize it. Again, as I’ve progressed in my career, I’ve felt like I’ve become a much better reader that I can read it right then and not really have to look down much, even on keyboard pieces. My reading ability has improved to a point that I don’t have to memorize just so I can look down at the keyboard. I try to memorize solo pieces as much as possible. But if it’s a snare drum or multi percussion solo, I don’t worry about memorizing it. I’m not Steven Schick. I’m not at that level, anywhere close, so I’m not going to even attempt to memorize that.

Regarding memory slips, I do have them every now and then. Actually, talking about Steven Schick, I do try to work on those transitions. Because in his book, he talks about those different triggers in transitions where he triggers something and then muscle memory takes him through the whole next section. And then he can think ahead to what that next transition is and how he’s going to kick himself into that next part. So I do that, and a week or so before the concert, I try to do a lot of runs of pieces to make sure that if I miss something, I know how to get out of it. I actually had a really bad memory slip last spring. I was playing a marimba concerto with our wind ensemble at Carnegie Hall. It was a world premier of a piece – no pressure – and it was on a different instrument, one that Dynasty had shipped in for me, and it looked just a little different. As I playing there was this little buzz whenever I hit the low C-sharp, and my brain went to that. I got to the cadenza and I went 4 bars into it and nobody else is playing, it’s just me, I’m in the middle of Carnegie Hall and the crowd is there and everything. I totally forgot where I was supposed to go next. And I am freaking out! ‘Oh my gosh’. My mind was thinking, ‘OK, where am I, where do I need to go?’ And I didn’t know where I needed to go so I was like, ‘Where am I and what do I need to do to keep playing?’ Fortunately, it was this part where it was an ostinato figure that I just looped several times and I adjusted the dynamic so it didn’t look like I was just holding it. I allowed that and I went a little bit softer, then a little bit louder, and it kicked in and then I knew where I was supposed to go, and it was fine. Only my students noticed and they didn’t say a thing after the concert.
It wasn’t until the studio class a week or two later when a girl in her studio performance stopped about 4 times. I said, ‘OK, we have a lesson to learn here. Don’t stop. Alright, let me tell you a story.’ I started telling the Carnegie thing and all my students that were in the ensemble just died laughing. They said, ‘We knew, we were too scared to say anything to you, because we didn’t know if you would be mad.’ I said ‘I’m not mad, it happens. You just have to keep playing.’ I’ve gotten to the point where I’ve learned that I just have to do it. Trying to be keen and aware of where I am so that I can get back on track as quickly as possible without allowing people to know.

CH: How do you practice problem spots?

BZ: That could be a twenty minute answer, but for me personally, and what I try to give my students are techniques about practicing certain things that I know are troublesome. For example, let’s say double lateral passages. I just kind of stumbled on it, but any double lateral passage that I have, I always play it as double verticals, but in the rhythm space. I practice it slow so I can do really precise piston strokes, so I get my hands right over that next note. And what it does is it trains my hands where to go, and then I add in the other stuff. I do just one hand – I do the left hand, and then do the right hand. I’m a big fan of making sure my technique is at the highest level possible and then applying the exercises that I do to develop my technique, using those ideas in music and working on those spots. There was a piece that I played about four years ago by Steven Stucky and there were three bars that were the hardest three bars I think I’ve ever played. It wasn’t fit in on the board really well. I started playing at that spot and once I figured out where my hands needed to go along with my body and arm positioning, it was a snap. It was like, ‘Why haven’t I been doing this more?’ For chorales, I like breaking them apart into thinking about how to have a smooth vertical motion, but a very fast and precise horizontal motion. I do quadruple stops with thirty second note or sixteenth note triplets altogether. Then I split it up so you are playing thirty-second note sextuplets, so I’m getting that shifting, but trying to make the line as smooth as possible. I know there are probably a lot of people that do that, but those two things are examples that are popping into my head. Making an exercise out of the music so that I’m able to isolate it and know exactly what my hands are supposed to do. So that’s for marimba, and for snare drums, it’s all about hand breakdown in my mind. Your right and left hand – they’re doing something. And if you know what type of stroke your hands are doing, you can break it down and you’re going to be able to figure out exactly what you need to do.

CH: How often do you record yourself?

BZ: Lately I have been recording myself probably once every other practice session. I use Audacity. I also encourage my students to do it because usually it takes them a little longer to learn music. When using Audacity you can slow the music down to look at the sound waves. I use Audacity exclusively right now because it is easy to set up; you press just one button to record it. Listening to the play back is really helpful. I always tell my students to read the music and look at the music while listening to the recording, and I do it as well. I think that is vital because you are going to get something in your ear but if
you don’t see it on the music, you are not going to be reminded of what’s coming up and you’re going to start modifying it to fit your interpretation. That’s OK, but if it starts going so far away from the music, are we staying true to what the music says? So you want that as the starting point but you also want to do things on your own, and that’s how you can use the recordings with the music to make it your interpretation of what’s on the piece. That’s what I do.

CH: Do you practice differently the weeks and days leading up to a performance?

BZ: Yes, I do more run-throughs leading up to the performance. I try to make sure that I’m still warming up before hand, but sometimes I don’t have time. If I don’t have as much time leading up to a performance, I have a couple of exercises I can do so that in about 3 minutes, I’m ready to go. I don’t need to do the Jeff Queen 10 Minute Warm-Up or a 15-minute mallet warm-up. But I definitely start practicing different. I go back to the macro ideas so I can get the bigger picture of the piece. I can start making it more muscle memory so that I can be really precise on a bigger scale. All of the little bitty things that I was doing before, I’m putting together to make the whole complete performance. Leading up to a performance, one of the things I always think about is the performance presence. How can I best deliver an entire package? Not just the notes and rhythms, not just the musicality of it, but what do I look like before I step up to the marimba? I don’t film myself, but if it’s a real slow piece, I want to make sure I practice bringing my mallets up. How am I bringing my mallets up to the board? How am I breathing? How am I breathing between phrases? And with the recording I can get an idea about the pace. What are my hands and feet doing, in a phrase, in a transition, before I start the piece, and after I end the piece. I want the audience to get the whole package. Not just, ‘Wow, that was a lot of notes, a lot of cool rhythms.’ I want the audience to leave saying, ‘Wow, that was a great performance and what a great piece!’ So those are to me, kind of that cherry on top, those final little things that I can do leading up to the concert.

CH: Do you have a ritual the day of the performance?

BZ: Not really. I just want to make sure that I can warm up. I don’t really eat a ton before a performance, but I want to have a little snack, something like that. I’m a Christian, and I pray before I play, that I’m doing it in the right way. I want to perform really well, but I don’t necessarily want it to be about me. I want it to be about the music, and hopefully convey that I’m a pretty decent player and emote and deliver the best message possible. And the audience experience? I want them to have an experience and remember it. If it’s because something I did, great, but if it’s something with the music, with me being Christian, it brings me comfort to know that no matter what happens, it’s going to be ok. This is a small part of what I do in the grand scheme of the world, but if I can do just a little bit, I know that God is going to support me and he’s going to be there. He gave me this ability to deliver my message and that brings me a lot comfort. I don’t get as nervous when I do that because I know that I’ve done the work and he’s going to be there to help me get through it.
CH: How old were you when you started playing percussion? At what age did you start focusing on your “primary” instrument?

CH: I was in sixth grade when I started playing, so I guess I was about twelve years old. I had never played piano before that, no percussion, no musical background at all before sixth grade. My sister played in the band and she said, ‘It’s fun. You should play.’ So I started doing it. I had to choose between percussion and trumpet, but I was going to have braces so they said, ‘Do percussion.’ And so I did just that. I liked all percussion stuff but I think in high school I just started migrating toward keyboards. I played a concerto with our high school band my senior year and always really liked marimba. And with the culture of the school that I was in, I was able to focus on marimba a lot. I played snare and tenors in the drum line, but marching band wasn’t so incredibly heavy and serious that it ended up my focus. I started migrating toward marimba in high school. That’s when probably I would play the most.

CH: Please give your best guess as to the number of hours per day you spent practicing during the given time periods: middle school, high school, college, graduate school, early career, and currently.

BZ: Middle school was probably an hour and a half at least per day. Seventh and eighth grade, I would go to school early and I would stay late. High school, this is individual practice, was anywhere from an hour to two hours a day. College undergrad, I’d say maybe two to three hours a day. I probably practiced more in my undergrad than I did in my masters. When I was with Keiko, I actually practiced about five to six hours a day. I studied with her after Baylor. I graduated from Baylor with my undergrad, and it was probably about two to three hours a day, some were more, some were less. It’s hard to remember. But I do remember with Keiko, I was there for eight months, in Japan with her. It was five or six hours a day and I learned a little less than a piece a week there. So that’s where I got a lot better at reading, practicing, and technique. Half the time would be technique, half the time would be learning music. And then early on in my career with a job, if you averaged it per day, it probably would be maybe half an hour. Currently, maybe a half hour a day, maybe forty-five minutes. For the last month, I think I got an average hour a day. Leading up to the concert yesterday afternoon, it was sparse. There would be times when I would have to go up on the weekend and practice for two hours. Two to two and a half hours I can tell is my limit now per day. Because I have so many other things to do, my mind can’t focus on practicing for longer than that. And I have to switch pieces more often. I can’t spend two hours on one piece. I can’t do it mentally now, because there are so many other things that I have to do. I have to learn it quicker in the time that I have now.

CH: Do you believe your practice habits have contributed to your success?

BZ: I think so, and my practice habits have definitely changed. With drum corps, and learning a new grip when I went over to Japan. I did Stevens technique all through undergrad, and then I learned to play with traditional grip before I went to study with Keiko. I wanted to get better with that grip so it was a lot of technique. I’ve felt like, as I
have been teaching more, if personally I can get my own technique to a higher level, then I need to work to get my students’ technique to a higher level. That makes the music much easier to learn. So my practice habits have been - make sure that I maintain my technique. As I’ve gotten better at reading music, I can learn music a lot quicker. I don’t have to spend so much time on it. I can learn it at a little bit faster pace or a little bit faster tempo, early on in my practicing. So I do think my practice habits have been pretty decent. I keep going back to the Keiko thing but I practiced so much when I was there that my hands would hurt sometimes afterwards, and they would start bleeding because my calluses hadn’t worked up, and I just put Band-Aids on and kept going. I think through that, I was able to develop a better idea about what I could do physically and mentally to get to where I wanted to be.

I really think a lot of it is about the quality practicing, not as much as the quantity. I think, personally, younger students need that quantity time, just to get their minds worked up to be able to practice for and hour or hour and a half without having distractions. I mean there may be a couple minute breaks here and there, but I think that is important at the early age. As they go on, as they get older, then they need to understand what the quality time is, because now they need to transfer from quantity to more quality, because when they graduate, they’re not going to have the quantity. That’s one of the things I try to make sure my students can do, to understand how to practice and learn how to practice, giving them ways of making it more efficient to learn their music, their repertoire, and their techniques.

Biography

Dr. Brian Zator is in his 13th year serving as the Director of Percussion at Texas A&M University-Commerce. His responsibilities include the classical and marching percussion ensembles, the "Panimation" Steel Drum Band, “Samba Leão” Brazilian Ensemble, undergraduate and graduate applied lessons, and the percussion methods and literature courses. He earned his Bachelor of Music Education degree from Baylor University, Master of Music degree from the University of Michigan and his Doctorate of Musical Arts degree from the University of North Texas. He is also a student of world-renowned marimba artist, Keiko Abe, having performed and studied with her in Japan.

As a marimba/percussion soloist or ensemble director, Dr. Zator has performed at seven Percussive Arts Society International Conventions, Carnegie Hall, the Texas Music Educators Association Convention, the Texas Bandmasters Association Convention, the College Band Directors National Association Convention, the North Texas Marimba Workshop, and abroad in Brazil, Japan and Australia. He has been a soloist with groups such as the Lone Star Wind Orchestra, the University of North Texas Wind Symphony, the Baylor Woodwind Quintet, the A&M-Commerce Wind Ensemble and Symphonic Band, the Conroe and The Woodlands Symphonies, and with college and high school percussion ensembles and concert bands around the country.
Dr. Zator and the A&M-Commerce percussion ensemble were one of the three winners of the 2010 PAS International Percussion Ensemble Competition and performed a showcase concert at PASIC 2010. The studio’s third CD, “Epic Proportions”, contains music featured on this concert. The ensemble also presented a concert at PASIC 2006 featuring works of Minoru Miki and in 2007, released a CD entitled “Sohmon III: New and Unknown Percussion Works of Minoru Miki”.

Dr. Zator is the primary keyboard artist for the iPhone app, Pocket Percussion Teacher, providing detailed video explanations of technical aspects for marimba. He is a founding member of the percussion groups Pulsus and NT3, and the principal timpanist and percussionist with the Northeast Texas Symphony. He was a member of the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps and taught the University of Michigan drumline. Active within the Percussive Arts Society (PAS), he is Secretary on the Executive Committee, and has served on the Board of Directors, the Keyboard and Percussion Ensemble Committees, written reviews for Percussive Notes, and has adjudicated the PAS International Percussion Ensemble and Composition Competitions.
Degree Recitals

UK
University of Kentucky
College of Fine Arts
School of Music

presents

Colin Hill

In a Doctoral Percussion Recital

April 23rd, 2011
Singletary Concert Hall
4:00 p.m.
PROGRAM

(b. 1977)

Scirocco (2003)  Michael Burritt  
(b. 1962)

(b. 1978)

Dieter Rice- Saxophone

Fertility Rites (1997)  Christos Hatzis  
(b. 1953)

Mvt. I

Interzones (1996)  Bruce Hamilton  
(b. 1966)

Monkey Chant (2005)  Glenn Kotche  
(b. 1970)

Acknowledgements: First I would like to thank my wife Mallory for her continuous support and encouragement. There is nobody I would rather come home to at the end of a long day at school. When things get crazy busy and stressful you always have a way of bringing me back to reality, thanks for keeping me sane Mall! To my family, I cannot express how much your unconditional love and support means to me. I truly appreciate that you always travel so far to come and hear me play. Thank you so much for always believing in me. Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Jim for making me feel at home here in Lexington. You have a great relationship with all of your students and you always find a way to keep the school atmosphere fun and entertaining. Thanks for your guidance over the past year and I look forward to what the next two years have to offer.

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctoral Degree in Percussion Performance. Colin Hill is a student of Professor Jim Campbell.
Colin Hill

In a Doctoral Percussion Recital

with Brian Blume

April 6th, 2012
Singletary Concert Hall
7:30 p.m.
PROGRAM

Toccata for Marimba and Vibraphone (1995)  
Anders Koppel  
(b. 1947)

CaDance for Two (1989)  
Andy Pape  
(b. 1955)

And So the Wind Blew (2008)  
Gene Kosinski  
(b. 1957)

A memorial to the victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan

Conversation for Two Tambourines (2010)  
Bobby Lopez  
(b. 1978)

Octabones (2007)  
Adi Morag  
(b. 1976)

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank my teacher, Jim Campbell, for his guidance and expertise as well as my wife and family for their continuous support. I'd also like to thank Brian Blume for all of the hard work he has put into this collaboration.

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Percussion Performance.

Note: Luminaries will be seated at intermission or at an appropriate time as arranged with performers.
Presents

Colin Hill

In a Doctoral Lecture Recital

April 15, 2013
Concert Hall
7:30 pm
PROGRAM

Chain (2001)  Kazunori Miyaki  
(b. 1963)

Lonely City Suite (2006)  
Another Day in the Back Bay  
Things Fall Apart  
Last One Out  
Jason Baker  
(b. 1976)

The Offering (2003)  
Michael Burritt  
(b. 1962)

March (1950-66)  
Elliot Carter  
(1908 - 2012)

Porgy and Bess (1935)  
George Gershwin  
(1898 - 1937)

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank my teacher, James Campbell, for his guidance and expertise as well as my wife and family for their continuous support.

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctoral Degree in Percussion Performance.

*Note: Latecomers will be seated at intermission*
Curriculum Vitae

Colin Jeffrey Hill

EDUCATION

2008-2010 Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Master of Music Degree in Percussion Performance (May 2010)
- Cumulative GPA: 3.50
Outside Area: Jazz Studies (May 2010)
Primary Percussion Instructors: John Tafoya and Kevin Bobo
Primary Jazz Instructors: Steve Houghton and Pat Harbison
Primary World Music Instructor: Michael Spiro

2003-2008 University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Bachelor of Music Degree in Percussion Performance (May 2008)
- Cumulative GPA: 3.68
- National Scholars Honor Society
- Magna Cum Laude
Minor: Music Theory (May 2007)
Primary Percussion Instructors: Mark Ford, Christopher Deane, Paul Rennick, and Robert Schietroma
Primary Jazz Instructors: Ed Soph, Ed Smith, Michael Drake, and Henry Okstel
Primary World Music Instructors: Poovalur Sriji, Gideon Folli Alorwoyie, and Jose Aponte

Additional Study

She-e Wu (marimba), Jeff Bush (marching percussion), Rich Henshaw (marching percussion), Roger Allen (percussion), Gordon Rencher (percussion), and Rob Lewis (marching percussion)

Professional Development

Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention
- 2012 (Austin, TX), 2011 (Indianapolis, IN), 2010 (Indianapolis, IN), 2009 (Indianapolis, IN), 2008 (Austin, TX), 2007 (Columbus, OH), 2006 (Austin, TX), 2005 (Columbus, OH), 2004 (Nashville, TN), 2003 (Louisville, KY)
Mentoring Day - Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention
- 2012 (Austin, TX), 2011 (Indianapolis, IN), 2010 (Indianapolis, IN)
Jazz Education Network’s Annual Conference
- 2012 (Louisville, KY)
Day of Percussion - Percussive Arts Society’s Kentucky Chapter
- 2012 (Lexington, KY), 2011 (Lexington, KY), 2010 (Lexington, KY)
Day of Percussion - Percussive Arts Society’s East Tennessee Chapter
- 2012 (Cleveland, TN)
Day of Percussion - Percussive Arts Society’s Indiana Chapter
- 2009 (West Lafayette, IN)

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**TEACHING**

**Collegiate Level**

- Adjunct Percussion Instructor - Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville, TN (2013 - Current)
- Interim Percussion Director - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (Spring 2013)
- Visiting Percussion Instructor - Centre College, Danville, KY (2012 - Current)
- Graduate Teaching Assistant - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (2011 - Current)
- Music Theory Assistant Instructor - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (2012 - Current)

**Other Professional Appointments**

- Percussion Instructor - Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Lexington, KY (2013 - Current)
- Percussion Instructor - George Rogers Clark High School, Winchester, KY (2013 - Current)
- Director of Percussion - Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2012 - Current)
- Percussion Instructor - Central Music Academy, Lexington, KY (2010 - Current)
- Drumline Faculty - Music for All Summer Symposium at Ball State University (2011)
- Percussion Instructor - Bloomington North High School, Bloomington, IN (2009)
- Percussion Instructor - Coppell High School, Coppell, TX (2006 - 2008)
- Percussion Instructor - Coppell Middle School East, Coppell, TX (2006 - 2008)
- Percussion Instructor - Coppell Middle School West, Coppell, TX (2006 - 2008)
- Camp Counselor / Instructor - University of North Texas Summer Drumline Camp, Denton, TX (2007)
- Percussion Instructor - Denton High School, Denton, TX (2005 - 2007)

**Student Recital Mentoring**

- Stewart Stevens BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2013)
- Brian Angel BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2013)
- Kelsey Walls BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2013)
- Matt Geiger BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (March 2012)
- Tyler Cantrell BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (November 2011)
- Tyler Swick BM Senior Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (October 2011)
RESEARCH / CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

Professional Ensembles

Nief-Norf Contemporary Music Ensemble (2013)
Geyer-Espinosa Quartet - Drummer (2013 - Current)
EnVaGe Chamber Ensemble - Percussionist (2012 - Current)
Bluegrass Area Jazz Association Big Band - Drummer (2012 - Current)
Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra - Section Percussion Extra and Substitute (2011 - Current)
BluHill Percussion Duo - Percussionist (2011 - Current)
The Rep Theatre Company - Drummer / Percussionist (2011 - Current)
Xplorium Chamber Ensemble - Percussionist (2010 - Current)
Blue Steel Caribbean Ensemble - Event Coordinator / Director / Drummer (2010 - Current)
Bahama Brothers Steel Band Trio - Percussionist (2010 - Current)
Walnut Street Ragtime Ramblers - Drummer (2012)
Kollective Percussion Ensemble - Percussionist (2012)
Dieter Rice Jazz Quartet - Drummer (2011 - 2012)
Bloomington Pops Orchestra - Principal Percussionist (2009)
Seattle Cascades Drum and Bugle Corp - Snareline (2002 - 2003)
Oregon Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corp - Section Leader / Center Snare (2001)

International Invitations / Performances

Workshop - Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Indianapolis, IN (November 2013)
  - Clinic titled “Practice Like the Pros”
Performer - Boomslang New Music Festival, Lexington, KY (September 2012)
  - Showcase Concert with EnVaGe Chamber Ensemble
Performer - North American Saxophone Alliance Biennial Conference, Tempe, AZ (March 2012)
  - Two showcase concerts with Xplorium Chamber Ensemble
Performer - Jazz Education Network’s Annual Conference, Louisville, KY (January 2012)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of Kentucky Jazz Ensemble
  - Featured soloist on Real Life arranged by Raleigh Dailey
Performer - Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Indianapolis, IN (November 2011)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble
  - Featured soloist on World Premier of Circle of Wills by Jordan Munson
Performer - 20th Chiayi City International Band Festival, Chiayi, Taiwan (July 2011)
  - Two Showcase Concerts with Xplorium Chamber Ensemble
Performer - Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Indianapolis, IN (November 2010)
  - Focus Day Performance with the University of Kentucky Chamber Percussion Ensemble
Performer - PerKumania Percussion Festival at the Paris Conservatory, Paris, France (November 2007)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of North Texas Percussion Ensemble
Performer - L’Ecole Municipale de Musique, Le Mans, France (November 2007)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of North Texas Percussion Ensemble
Performer - Ecole Nationale de Musique d'Alençon, Alencon, France (November 2007)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of North Texas Percussion Ensemble

National Invitations / Performances

Workshop - University of the Cumberlands, Williamsburg, KY (October 2013)
Workshop - Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY (October 2013)
Workshop - Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX (April 2013)
  - Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Workshop - Percussive Arts Society’s East Tennessee Day of Percussion, Lexington, KY (March 2013)
  - Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Performer - College Band Directors National Association Convention, Greensboro, NC (March 2013)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of Kentucky Wind Ensemble
Workshop - Campbellsville University School of Music, Campbellsville, KY (January 2013)
  - Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Workshop - Centre College School of Music, Danville, KY (November 2012)
  - Lecture titled “Practice Habits”
Workshop - University of Kentucky School of Music, Lexington, KY (October 2012)
  - Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Guest Recital / Workshop - University of Tennessee School of Music, Knoxville, TN (April 2012)
  - Showcase Concert and Workshop with BluHill Percussion Duo
Guest Recital / Workshop - Centre College School of Music, Danville, KY (April 2012)
  - Showcase Concert and Workshop with BluHill Percussion Duo
Workshop - University of Kentucky School of Music, Lexington, KY (March 2011)
  - Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Selected Participant - Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Marimba Seminar, Asbury Park, NJ (June 2004)

Regional Invitations / Performances

Performer - Tribute to the Ballet Russes, Lexington, KY (September 2013)
  - Collaborative concert between the EnVaGe Chamber Ensemble and the Lexington Ballet Company
Workshop - Kentucky Educational Television’s Annual Super Saturday Event, Lexington, KY (August 2013)
  - Hosted drum circles as a representative of the Lexington Philharmonic Percussion Section
Performer - Miss Kentucky Pageant, Lexington, KY (June 2013)
  - Event music with the Blue Steel Caribbean Ensemble
Performer - First Presbyterian Church, Lexington, KY (June 2013)
  - Musical production of “100% Chance of Rain”
Guest Recital / Workshop - School for the Creative and Performing Arts, Lexington, KY (May 2013)
Guest Recital / Workshop - George Rogers Clark High School, Winchester, KY (May 2013)
  - Guest Recital and Clinic titled “Finding your Practice Personality”
Workshop - Percussive Arts Society’s Kentucky Day of Percussion, Lexington, KY (March 2013)
  - Clinic titled “Making Musical Decisions on the Marimba”
Guest Lecturer - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (March 2013)
  - Lecture titled “History of Afro-Caribbean Instruments, MUS 390: World Music and Culture
Workshop - University of Kentucky Honors Wind Ensemble Weekend, Lexington, KY (February 2013)
  - Percussion masterclasses and sectionals with high school students from Kentucky who have been selected to participate in the Honors Wind Ensemble.
Performer - Lyric Theatre, Lexington, KY (December 2012)
  - Musical production of “Smackdown for the Christmas Crown” featuring Actor Steve Zahn with The Rep Theatre Company
Performer - Henry Clay High School, Lexington, KY (November 2012)
  - Showcase Concert with the University of Kentucky Jazz Ensemble
Performer - Summer Concert Series at Equus Run Vineyards, Lexington, KY (August 2012)
  - Showcase Concert with Bluegrass Area Jazz Association Big Band
Performer - Lexington Opera House, Lexington, KY (August 2012)
  - Musical production of “Bye Bye Birdie” with The Rep Theatre Company
Guest Recital / Workshop - Center Grove High School, Greenwood, IN (May 2012)
  - Showcase Concert and Workshop with BluHill Percussion Duo
Guest Recital / Workshop - Northview High School, Brazil, IN (April 2012)
  - Showcase Concert and Workshop with BluHill Percussion Duo
Performer - Lyric Theatre, Lexington, KY (December 2011)
  - Musical production of “Smackdown for the Christmas Crown” - Debut Production of The Rep Theatre Company
Performer - Lexington Opera House, Lexington, KY (October 2011)
  - “Rhythms of the World” Showcase Concert with the Lexington Philharmonic featuring the
University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble

*Featured Soloist* - University of Kentucky Preview Night, Louisville, KY (September 2011)
- Showcase Concert with the Dieter Rice Quartet

*Featured Soloist* - University of Kentucky Preview Night, Lexington, KY (September 2011)
- Showcase Concert with the Dieter Rice Quartet

*Featured Soloist* - University of Kentucky Preview Night, Covington, KY (September 2011)
- Showcase Concert with the Dieter Rice Quartet

*Performer* - Percussive Arts Society’s Indiana Day of Percussion, West Lafayette, IN (March 2009)
- Showcase Concert at Purdue University with the Indiana University Percussion Ensemble

**Artistic Collaborations**

**John Riley**
- Performed with Lee University’s Jazz Ensemble as a featured trio with John Riley and Lalo Davila (March 2013)

**Lalo Davila**
- Performed with Lee University’s Jazz Ensemble as a featured trio with John Riley and Lalo Davila (March 2013)

**Frederic Macarez**
- Performed World Premiere of Macarez’s *Errances-Escales* with University of Kentucky’s Percussion Ensemble featuring Macarez as a soloist (October 2012)

**Keith Aloe**
- Performed Michael Burritt’s composition *Streaming* featuring Aloe as soloist (April 2012)

**John Fedchock**
- Performed with University of Kentucky’s Jazz Ensemble featuring Fedchock as soloist (March 2012)

**Graham Breedlove**
- Performed with University of Kentucky’s Jazz Combo featuring Breedlove as soloist (February 2012)

**Roger Ingram**
- Performed with University of Kentucky’s Jazz Ensemble featuring Ingram as soloist (October 2011)

**Michael Spiro**
- Performed with Indiana University’s Brazilian Ensemble featuring Spiro as soloist (April 2010)
- Performed with Indiana University’s Afro-Cuban Ensemble featuring Spiro as soloist (November 2009)

**Kevin Bobo**
- Performed US Premiere of Bobo’s composition *Flurries* featuring Bobo as soloist (November 2009)
- Performed Zechariah Goh's *Marimba Concerto* with the Indiana University Wind Ensemble featuring Bobo as soloist (November 2008)

**Published Recordings**

*“Maidentrip”* Soundtrack (Movie) Label: (c) 2013 Saint Claire Recording Company
- Music composed by Ben Sollee

*“Works by Warren Benson”* (CD) Label: (c) 2012 David B. Henderson Studios
- The Kollective Percussion Ensemble

*“Ionization by Edgar Varese”* (CD) Label: (c) 2012 Alex Harmon Music
- The University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble

*“Krasch”* (CD) - XPlorium Chamber Ensemble (2012)

*“Circle of Wills by Jordan Munson”* (CD) - University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble (2012)
- Featured soloist

*“Concerto for Saxophone and Wind Ensemble by Chris Rutkowski - Featuring Thomas Walsh”* (CD)
- Label: (c) 2008 Indiana University - Indiana University Wind Ensemble
“Vespertine Formations” (CD) Label: (c) 2009 AUR Recordings
  - University of North Texas Percussion Ensemble
“The Music of David R. Gillingham: With Heart and Voice” (CD) Label: (c) 2006 Mark Masters
  - University of North Texas Symphonic Band
“Teaching Music Through Performance in Beginning Band Vol. 2” (CD), Label: (c) 2008 G.I.A. Publications
  - UNT Symphonic Band

World Premieres

An Old Joke by Jake Riddle (April 2013)
Tranquil by Carlos Espinosa, Jr. (April 2013)
Concerto Maxo Mosso by Mike Mower (March 2013)
Till Brandon by Anders Astrand (December 2012)
Order Without Beauty: A Reflection on the Holocaust by Brent Klein (November 2012)
4BY4 by John Psathas (October 2012)
Errances-Escales by Frederic Macarez (October 2012)
Circle of Wills Movement 2 by Jordan Munson (March 2012)
Fur Blue by Tyler Swick (March 2012)
Smackdown for the Christmas Crown by Robyn Peterman-Zahn and Diana Pulliam (December 2011)
Blue Burn by Joseph Tompkins (November 2011)
Drumkit Quartet #51 by Glenn Kotche arr. by James Campbell (November 2011)
Circle of Wills Movement 1 by Jordan Munson (November 2011)
Sambatown by Dave O’Fallon (October 2011)
Aria by Dave O’Fallon (October 2011)
Panta Rhei by Dave O’Fallon (October 2011)
Tuesday by Tyler Swick (October 2011)
Compression by Mark Engebretson (July 2011)
Carnival of the Animals for Chamber Ensemble arranged by Michael Young (July 2011)
Mount Rainier by Stephen Lias (July 2011)
Tihai by Brendan Faegre (November 2009)
Starry Messenger by David Dzubay (April 2009)
Barely Breathing by Brett Dietz (November 2007)
Nocturne by Greg Dixon (October 2006)
Themes and Distractions by Peter Saleh (October 2004)
Aggression for Six Snare Drums by Yo Goto (October 2003)

Honors / Awards / Grants

School of Music Grant in Aid - University of Kentucky Jazz Department (Fall 2011 - Spring 2012)
Student Support Scholarship - University of Kentucky Graduate School (Fall 2011 - Spring 2012)
Student Support Grant - University of Kentucky Graduate School (November 2011)
  - Funding to present a concert at the Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention with the University of Kentucky Chamber Percussion Ensemble
School of Music Grant in Aid - University of Kentucky Percussion Department (Fall 2010 - Spring 2011)
Gillis Scholarship - University of Kentucky Graduate School (Fall 2010 - Spring 2011)
Dean’s Scholarship - Indiana University (Fall 2008 - Spring 2010)
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra 2010 Modern Snare Drum Competition, Atlanta, GA (June 2010)
Indiana University Percussion Concerto Competition, Bloomington, IN (October 2009) - First Place
  - Resulted in performance of Russell Pecks’ Glory and The Grandeur: Concerto for percussion and Orchestra with the Indiana University Symphony Orchestra
Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Indianapolis, IN (November 2009)
  - Marching Percussion Keyboard Individuals Competition: Second Place
National Society of Arts and Letters Solo Competition, Bloomington, IN (November 2009)
  - Solo Marimba Category: Third Place
Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Columbus, OH (November 2007)
- Marching Percussion Keyboard Individuals Category
Music Performance Scholarship - University of North Texas (Fall 2003 - Spring 2007)
Chancellor Academic Scholarship - University of North Texas (Fall 2003 - Spring 2007)
Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Austin, TX (November 2006)
- Indoor Drumline Competition: First Place with the University of North Texas Indoor Drumline
Percussive Arts Society’s International Convention, Austin, TX (November 2006)
- Marching Percussion Keyboard Individuals Category
College Musicians Scholarship Award - The Blue Shoe Project (October 2003)
- Essay Contest Winner, “History of the Blues”

Masterclass Performances

John Fedchock - University of Kentucky (March 2012)
Graham Bredlove - University of Kentucky (February 2012)
Josh Dekaney - University of Kentucky (February 2012)
Anders Holdar - University of Kentucky (November 2011)
Joakim Anterot - University of Kentucky (November 2011)
Roger Ingram - University of Kentucky (October 2011)
Michael Spiro - Indiana University (September 2010)
Evelyn Glennie - Indiana University (April 2010)
Blake Tyson - Indiana University (March 2010)
Steve Houghton - Indiana University (March 2009)
James Campbell - Indiana University (February 2009)
John Tafoya - Indiana University (November 2008)
Kevin Bobo - Indiana University (October 2008)
Ed Soph - University of North Texas (May 2007)
Keiko Abe - University of North Texas (October 2006)
She-e Wu - Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Seminar (June 2004)
Leigh Howard Stevens - Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Seminar (June 2004)
Gordon Stout - Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Seminar (June 2004)
Michael Burritt - Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Seminar (June 2004)
Peter Saleh - University of North Texas (October 2003)

Degree Recitals

DMA Lecture Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2013)
DMA Chamber Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2012)
DMA Solo Recital - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (April 2011)
MM Solo Recital - Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (April 2010)
BM Solo Recital - University of North Texas, Denton, TX (April 2008)

School Ensembles

University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (Fall 2010 - Spring 2013)
- Jazz Ensemble, Jazz Combo, Percussion Ensemble, Steel Band, Brazilian Ensemble, African Ensemble
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (Fall 2008 - Spring 2010)
- Symphony Orchestra (Principle Percussionist), University Orchestra (Principle Percussionist), Wind Ensemble (Principle Percussionist), Percussion Ensemble, Afro-Cuban Ensemble, Brazilian Ensemble, New Music Ensemble
University of North Texas, Denton, TX (Fall 2003 - Spring 2008)
- Wind Symphony, Symphonic Band (Principle Percussionist), Concert Band (Principle Percussionist), Symphony Orchestra, Classical Percussion Ensemble, West African Ensemble, Afro-Cuban Ensemble, Steel Band, Indoor Drumline, South Indian Cross-Cultural Ensemble, Spectrum New Music Ensemble

Church Ensembles

First Methodist Orchestra and Worship Band, Lexington, KY (2012 - 2013)
First Presbyterian Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2011 - 2013)
Christ Church Cathedral Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2013)
Central Christian Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2012)
Mt. Sterling Advent Musicale Orchestra, Mt. Sterling, KY (2012)
Anchor Baptist Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2012)
Southern Hills United Methodist Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2012)
Versailles Baptist Orchestra, Versailles, KY (2010 - 2011)
Cathedral of Christ the King Orchestra, Lexington, KY (2010)
Fairlawn Presbyterian Orchestra, Columbus, IN (2010)
First United Methodist Worship Band, Colleyville, TX (2007)

SERVICE

Committees

Percussive Arts Society
- Kentucky Chapter Committee Participant (2012 - Current)
- College Pedagogy Committee Participant (2012 - Current)

Community Outreach

“Nationalism in Music: International to Local”- Central Kentucky Youth Orchestras, Lexington, KY (March 2013)
- Present educational workshops and concerts to elementary, middle, and high school students.
- George Rogers Clark High School, Shearer Elementary School, Mt. Sterling Elementary School, Montgomery County High School, McNabb Middle School

“Drums: From West Africa to Trinidad” - University of Kentucky Steel Band (2010 - 2013)
- Present educational workshops and concerts to over 5,000 elementary school students annually

Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra Community Ambassador, Lexington, KY (Summer 2011- Fall 2011)
- Facilitated drum circles at the “Rhythms of the World” Showcase Concert (October 2011)
- Presented lectures to community on orchestral percussion instruments (September 2011)
- Facilitated drum circles for PB & J Summer Series (Summer 2011)

Percussion Instructor - Central Music Academy, Lexington, KY (Fall 2010 - Spring 2011)
- Private Lessons Instructor for underserved K-12 students who were unable to pay tuition
Adjudication

Undergraduate School of Music Auditions, Instrumental / Vocal - Centre College, Danville, KY (February 2013)
Undergraduate and Graduate School of Music Auditions, Percussion - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (Fall 2010 - Spring 2013)
Undergraduate Ensemble Placement Auditions, Percussion - University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (Fall 2010 - Spring 2013)
Ensemble Auditions, Percussion - Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra, Lexington, KY (Fall 2010 - Spring 2013)
Band of Gold Marching Classic, Percussion Judge - Kentucky Music Educators Association, Hazard, KY (September 2010)
Texas All-State Solo Contest, Percussion - Texas Music Educators Association, Coppell, TX (April 2008)

Artist Endorsements

Innovative Percussion Artist Endorsement (2013 - Current)
Grover Pro Percussion Artist Endorsement (2013 - Current)
SABIAN Cymbals Artist Endorsement (2013 - Current)

Professional Affiliations

Chamber Music America (2012 - Current)
College Music Society (2012 - Current)
Percussive Arts Society (2003 - Current)
Bibliography

PRINT MEDIA


ELECTRONIC MEDIA


INTERVIEWS


Baker, Jason. Personal Interview. 11 Nov. 2011.


Burritt, Thomas. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.


Cook, Gary. Personal Interview. 2 Nov. 2012.

Deane, Christopher. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2010.

Dietz, Brett. Phone Interview. 1 Nov. 2012.


Fang, I-Jen. Personal Interview. 11 Nov. 2011.


Lane, John. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2011.


MacDonald, Payton. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.

Mason, Brian. Phone Interview. 10 Mar. 2013.


Nozny, Brian. Personal Interview. 30 May 2012.

Parks, John IV. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2011.

Richards, Emil. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.


Schick, Steven. Phone Interview. 31 Oct. 2012.

Schietroma, Robert. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.

Smith, Joshua. Personal Interview. 11 Nov. 2011.

Stout, Gordon. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.

Tyson, Blake. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2012.

Udow, Michael. Phone Interview. 16 November 2012.

Wahlund, Ben. Email Interview. 31 Oct. 2012.


Zator, Brian. Personal Interview. 2 Nov. 2012.