



# Memory & 'Luckless' Performing

One of the most frequent questions I get from students (second only to 'how to not be nervous in a performance') is how to memorise things. I am someone who deliberately memorises most things I play, and wonder how people manage to deliver fluent performances without memorising.

How to memorise can be a very tricky question to answer, because for the most part, it can be a very personal matter that differs substantially from person to person. Clearly though, there are some fairly standard ways of memorising music that all of us would have used at some point to greater or lesser success. The first principle which is crucial, is dividing the material up into small bites. Which leads to the question - how small? The answer depends entirely on the complexity of the material, and the comfort level of the performer. That's one of those "how long is a piece of string" answers that will have students looking at you with a glazed expression. Unfortunately it often takes a good deal of trial and error to learn your own personal bite size.

I could fill a ream of paper with the various techniques of committing information to memory, but that would be missing the point in the same way I believe most people are missing the point in their attempts to learn to play from memory. Why? Because its a two part process. Part one is that you need to put the information into your head. Part two is that you need to get the information out again in the right order and on time - and this is very often the part that people forget, or just don't pay any attention to.

You might ask 'how is it that part two is forgotten? Surely that's what I am doing when I am playing?' Not necessarily consciously, and here in lies the key. Too many people think that repeating something over and over will eventually commit their pieces to memory - maybe - and then they will be able to perform them from memory - maybe. When you bank on 'maybe', you often end up bankrupt . . . and in a public performance situation, that really is the worst case scenario. I know so many people who

practice this way (in the absence of better direction, I use to be one them), its no wonder that playing from memory is widely regarded with fear and trepidation. Anything that relies on 'luck' deserves to be.

So how do you fix this? Lets go back to small bites, and part 2. Imagine you wanted to memorise and recite this: apples, bananas, oranges, lemons, limes, pineapple, mango. The small bites technique involves dividing the information into parcels to work on that make it easier to remember, for instance:

apples & bananas  
oranges, lemons & limes  
Pineapple and mango

Why this combination? The first two are kind of everyday fruit, the next three are citrus, the last two tropical. Well, that's one way of thinking about it. Or...

Apples, bananas  
Oranges, lemons  
Limes, pineapple  
Mango

Given that I explained the first grouping, you might see it that way too now, and therefore the second grouping might make less sense on first sight, but some people might see the list as:

Green, yellow  
Orange yellow  
Green yellow  
Orange

Now you might be able to see that too. And if there was phrasing attached and dynamic marks there would be more ways to look at it. What's the point of this? Musical information needs to be parcelled the same way the fruit was, in small sections that make the most sense to the person playing it. Therefore it is critical that whilst demonstration and options are provided, students are encouraged to divide the information up themselves, so that it has the most personal relevance, plus they will also learn what sort of parcel is

memorable to them and apply that to future pieces.

So now that we have a system of remembering our fruit, we need to know how to commit it to memory and then later recall it. If your normal practice method is 'repeat until I can't stand the sight of it and then cross my fingers at performance time' then you should be prepared to lose a large chunk of your time, and start getting nervous right now. We need to do something more reliable and time efficient – because who wants to be embarrassed and who has time to waste?

There is a better way. We are going to take care of both memory and recall tasks at the same time. I am going to go with grouping number one and use the memory technique that I like best: imagining visually (choose your own favourite method) and commit apples and bananas to memory. Imagine the banana after the apple before you say it. Not so hard so far, so move onto the citrus group. See the orange lemon and lime in a row, and as you say them, practice seeing the fruit before you say its name. This is the critical part of the process, you must see the fruit (or what ever your experience is) before you say it, so that you are practicing recalling the information in a conscious way. Now put the two groups together, see the first 'group' and then pre-empt the items before verbalising, then before you are finished saying banana, you must 'see' the next group before you so that by the time orange is due, you know its coming and that lemon is next etc. If at any time you fail to know something is coming before it gets there, your recall is at fault and needs further work.

The heart of this technique is recall, and all of the work should be geared around deliberate recall of pre-sorted information. Every moment that you spend playing should be a deliberate conscious act. The fruit groups that we used are extremely simplistic and probably equate to the sort of music that you would be learning in lesson number three rather than year 3 or beyond. But as the music gets more complex, so does our ability to call on previously learned 'stock' material to simplify the sorting process, (Alberti bass, scales, chord progressions, etc) and our deliberate recall markers become groups in themselves rather than single notes.

Some degree of repetition is necessary to input the information in the first place, but

every repetition should be regarded as a test of the recall process. That way you will quickly come to an understanding of how your particular thought process works in every piece, and what you need to do to get the quickest and best results. Dynamics and phrasing and your own musical colouring are all part of the information you make decisions about before hand, but can be memorised and applied to the recall process at any time.

The best part about this method is that it gives you a clear map of your entire piece, and if in your performance your nerves attack and you stumble, just move along to the next recall point and keep going. You should even practice doing that deliberately. Your practice performances can become a further test of your recall concentration under stress (which gives you further concrete practicing goals); rather than 'lets see how lucky I am today', as if accumulating enough lucky performances breeds more luck, therefore you are sure to have enough luck when it really counts! How many times has something not gone well, and the response is from others is "oh, bad luck!"

So why doesn't the 'blindly repeat over and over' method work? Repeating something that often moves the information into autopilot type of memory. Now that's very useful if you plan to multitask your practice so you can plan your shopping list or the next days wardrobe at the same time as you play, but it doesn't give you much control over the process. And if your attention returns to the piece at some obscure moment, you are unlikely to know where you are or what comes next. Retrieving information from autopilot storage is also difficult, not to mention the enormous amount of time it takes to get it there in the first place. As I outlined above, reliable memory is built on deliberate control of recall, automated playing has no conscious control. Plus, who can make great music while compiling a shopping list?

Now that you are in control of your recall, you will probably find that you have also answered that question about nerves. The next time someone wishes you good luck before a performance, you can confidently reply that luck has nothing to do with it.

