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Practice Habits

Q: How do you structure your own practice sessions in order to be most productive? How do you suggest that your students structure their practice time?

A: I always start with at least ten minutes of a technical warm-up. I spend more time on technique if I don't have too much repertoire to plough through. If I am learning new repertoire, I choose sections of the music to be learned by the end of that day. If there is still time left over, I will skim through other parts to get a start on the next day's work. Every day I review what is already learned, then tackle another section. I really look at the music before I play it. It helps to take it away from the harp and analyze the patterns, rhythms and harmonies, notice the dynamic markings, and figure out the "architecture". I mark in the pedals and some possible fingerings. Then I play a section slowly enough that I can play it without mistakes. Then I try it at full speed to make sure the fingerings still work. Even when it's well-learned, I take it apart and play each hand separately to make sure the left hand knows what it's doing and the lines in the music are coming out. I prioritize the concerts that are coming up like a surgeon doing triage, and set deadlines for when each piece needs to be learned. I use a metronome to do a "reality check" all along the way so that I know what my target speed is, and figure out how to get the piece up to that speed in the allotted time. When things are slack, I like to sight-read through new books of music, in order to keep those skills sharp, and also explore new repertoire. If it's chamber music, it's not enough to know just the harp part; I always sing the other parts while I am practising my own. If a student only has an hour: 10 minutes technique, 45 minutes learning pieces, a few minutes of practising rhythm exercises and sight-reading as a "cool-down".

Q: How much time per day/per week to you dedicate to practice? How much practice time do you ask of your students?

A: This depends on the type of concerts I am involved in. It can range from a minimum of one hour for basic maintenance to four hours if I am preparing a concerto or recital along with my orchestra work. Since my students range from eight years old to middle-aged, their practice time varies as well. The serious ones who aspire to a career in music need to practice much longer than the ones who are just playing for fun. The main thing is that they know to take breaks so they don't get over-use injuries. One student may learn a piece in half the time it takes another, so I worry more about the attainment of goals rather than how many hours it took to achieve them. If a student is chewing up repertoire, has great technique, and still has time left over in the day, they can spend some time listening to great music, researching music history or working on theory and harmony.

Q: What kind of warm-up exercises do you play? What kind for your students? Or if you have an exercise you've made up and would like to share it with us, that would be great, too!

A: My warm-up always includes scales, arpeggios, and inversions. Then I alternate various other patterns, some from exercise books such as Larivière Exercices et Etudes, others from my orchestra repertoire. If the students are working on specific techniques such as trills, we make exercises out of them and they warm up with them. Renie's *Method for the Harpist* is a really thick volume full of great exercises and good advice.

Q: What kind of physical exercises/warm-ups/stretchers do you do before practicing, if any?

A: I don't do any right before I practise. I used to, but I did not notice that it made a difference. Weight-lifting, however, has made a huge difference to my endurance and strength. I just use 5-pound weights, and I am very careful not to over-do it.

Q: How do you measure the success of a practice session?

A: I would measure success by the end of a week of practice rather than a single session. The brain takes a while to really absorb new knowledge. When you sit down at the harp and play perfectly the segments you have worked on for a week, that's success.

Q: Do you keep a written log of your practice? What you're working on, trouble spots, etc.?

A: No, but it's a good idea for those who are having trouble calculating how much time they need to accomplish their goals by their deadlines.

Q: Please feel free to include whatever other information you feel we could all benefit from regarding practice habits, teaching good practice habits, etc.

A: The most important thing to remember when practising is to cultivate the habit of playing in a completely relaxed way at all times, breathing deeply and regularly. If you are tense in the practice studio, you'll be tense while performing. I highly recommend Philip Johnston's books on practicing. His web site is www.practicespot.com. He has numerous helpful hints on how to prepare a recital piece to perfection, how to manage nerves, how to memorize, etc. Here is a tip for 'practising performing'. You set a time every night to play right through your program, just like you are on tour. You come out from 'the wings' and bow to your fake audience (teddy bears work well), play your recital, bow again to the imaginary thunderous applause, and walk 'offstage'. Wear the clothes and shoes you plan to wear to the real thing, and try to simulate the bright lighting you will have on a real stage. (Make sure they are clean for the real performance, though!) By the end of a week-long 'tour', you are much more comfortable with your program, and you have a realistic idea of how you will play.