

Connecting your Head and your Hands

This article addresses the connection between technical practice and mental visualization in preparing excerpts for an audition.

I approach audition excerpts in two different ways. I first address an excerpt from a purely technical point of view. I try to tackle any technical problems independently from the excerpt by creating simple exercises that apply directly to the issues presented in the music. Secondly, I want to be mentally prepared to perform an excerpt. I do this through a variety of visualization techniques which we will discuss below.

Most audition excerpts present certain technical challenges that must be overcome. Some examples of this include the soft four stroke ruffs on snare drum in Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije*, the quick grace notes in the xylophone part to Kodaly's *Hary Janos*, and the soft cymbal crashes in Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto* to name a few.

My approach to preparing excerpts is somewhat abstract in that I don't generally spend much time practicing the excerpt itself. Instead, I find it more useful to spend the majority of my practice time working on the technical elements that make each excerpt challenging. Rather than endlessly practicing *Lt. Kije* for example, try developing a series of brief one or two measure patterns involving the same technical and musical elements. I find it helpful to write these exercises out and practice each one for a specified amount of time at a certain tempo, most likely the tempo at which I intend to perform the excerpt. For this I always use a metronome and a stopwatch.

Using a stopwatch helps me monitor my practice session in several ways. First of all it eliminates the need to count repetitions. This allows me to focus only on my playing and not on counting the number of times I've repeated a pattern. Secondly, by spending a certain amount of time on each measure, usually just one or two minutes each, I know that I have covered all of the technical elements I needed to address in a specified period of time. And finally, my practice schedule stays focused and on schedule knowing that my work on a particular excerpt is done for the day. To use the *Lt. Kije* example one more time, if I spend twenty minutes on soft four stroke ruffs every few days, I only need to actually practice the excerpt a few times per week. Ultimately, this approach keeps the music fresh and saves me time in the practice room. In addition, practicing strictly the technical elements involved gives me the confidence to execute the passage at a very high level when called upon to do so.

Let me begin our discussion of mental preparation by telling a story. While preparing for the BSO audition I was very conscience of everything I put into my body. (Exactly what I eat and drink when preparing for an audition I will leave for another article.) Every morning before leaving home to go practice I would fill up my water bottle. This particular water bottle had a very small mouth, much smaller than the spout of the water pitcher I was pouring from. Usually, I would get bored waiting for this tiny stream of water to slowly fill my water bottle. As a result I would try to pour the water faster which made a bigger stream of water which would inevitably miss the bottle and pour water all over my kitchen counter. Finally, this routine got old. I eventually realized

that all it took was a little patience. Then it became a little game I would play every morning. Could I pour the water into the bottle without spilling a drop?

Maybe this is a silly example but it has a strong point. The fact that water ended up all over my kitchen counter every morning had nothing to do with a lack of ability to pour water from a pitcher and into a bottle. It did however have everything to do with my lack of focus for the period of time required to pour the water. All I had to do was to really focus for about 30 seconds. I learned a valuable lesson from this about how strong the mind is and how not to underestimate the psychological side of practicing.

Let's talk a little bit more about the mental side of excerpt preparation and connect that back to the technical side of things. While an entire article could easily be written on mental preparation alone, we are going to discuss the subject here as it relates directly to physical preparation, or the technical work done in the practice room. While I consider there to be several phases and different types of mental preparation, I would like to discuss here mainly the techniques that can be used to prepare mentally on the day before an audition and methods for preparing to perform each excerpt when in an audition.

Most of my mental preparations in the last few days leading up to an audition are focused around fostering a feeling of confidence and positive energy which will motivate me to perform the music at the highest possible level of artistry and execution. Practice should now be centered totally around fostering this sense of confidence. Do not allow yourself to make mistakes. Making mistakes at this point will undermine your confidence in that audition.

I try to avoid making mistakes by practicing differently than I have for most of the audition preparation period. Practice everything very slowly and at a reserved dynamic range. Try experimenting with other practice techniques such as only playing the first measure or two of each excerpt to set the tempo and to grasp the musical character. The last repetition you practice of each excerpt should be played at an extremely slow tempo to instill confidence. Try visualizing the music in your head or singing the excerpts out loud without actually playing the instruments. Try this both with and without music and with and without the instruments in front of you.

When going to sleep the night before the audition your entire consciousness must be focused completely on being positive and executing well in the audition. If you can convince yourself while falling asleep that you are going to play well the following day then you will.

Let us skip ahead now to the audition itself. Before each excerpt, go through your mental keys to executing the music exactly as you intend to. Recall your tempo, dynamics, phrasings, and difficult points in the music. You must have a routine before each entrance so that you always begin the excerpt the same way. Set your technique if necessary, visualize yourself executing the passage perfectly, and count off the excerpt in your head the same way every time. Consistent preparation breeds consistent execution.

Ultimately this is where the connection between your head and your hands finally shows through. All of the hours of technical work and mental preparation now come together to provide the end result. If your hands are in great shape and your mind is keenly focused on the task at hand, there should be no remaining obstacles to playing a great audition.

In the end, however, auditions are a crazy thing and there is no substitute for audition experience. If all of the other techniques discussed here are used to their full effect, you should be in good shape to play the best audition possible. Good luck!