

Memorization

Psychological Data and

Some Practical Tips

We do not remember days; we remember moments.

Cesare Pavese, *The Burning Brand*

Dr. Scott McBride Smith
19 Lewis Irvine, CA 92620-3364
949.262.0540 scottsmith@iiym.com

Historical Perspective

- Clara Schumann, 1828
First to play in public without a score, at age 9
Critics describe her as “that odious woman” for playing works of other composers from memory
- Franz Liszt, shortly thereafter
Turns memorization into “dramatic ritual” (Edwin Hughes)
- Hans von Bülow, 1870
Responding to critics who thought playing from memory was a stunt that drew attention away from the music, brought music onstage but played from memory anyway
- End of 19th century
Memorization becomes standard for concert soloists, particularly pianists



Is memorization really a good idea?

Edwin Hughes (1915)

Performing with music inhibits “freedom of expression and the most direct psychological connection with the audience”

Béla Bartók, Raoul Pugno, Dame Myra Hess

Perform in public with score open before them

Contemporary Research on Memorization

Does memorization offer “freedom of expression”?

Audiences rate memorized performances higher than non-memorized ones
This does not seem to be dependent on their angle of vision or having a clear and unobstructed view of the performer

Does memorization provide “most direct psychological connection with the audience”?

Yes; musicians rate memorized performances even higher than non-musicians

Is the extra effort that it takes to memorize a piece worth it?

Yes; both musicians and non-musicians rated performance higher after an extra month of practice in which the piece was memorized

Aaron Williamon, “The value of performing from memory”, *Psychology of Music*, 27 (1999), 84-95.

Interviews with Professional Musicians

Susan Hallum, London, 1995

Diversity of strategies in use
Aural, visual and kinesthetic memory all important
Analytical strategies paramount, especially in harder works

“The development of memorization strategies in musicians”, paper presented at Seventh Conference on Developmental Psychology (Cracow, Poland, 1995)

Rita Aiello, New York, 1999

Wide range of strategies used; aural memory more important than kinesthetic Clear idea of musical structure important
Developing improvisational skills crucial

“Strategies for memorizing piano music; pedagogical implications”, poster presented at Eastern Division of Music Educators National Conference (New York, NY, 1999)

How do we memorize?

"[A performer is like]...the river pilot who keeps his course by sticking to the channel, but notices only a very few markers along the way."

Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*

SHORT-TERM MEMORY

Experience first stored here

Visual Information
(music on the page, visual layout of keyboard)

CENTRAL EXECUTIVE

Speech-based information
(direction from teacher)

information must be moved to

LONG-TERM MEMORY

PROCEDURAL
knowing how to do something
kinesthetic information stored here

EPISODIC
specific personal associations

SEMANTIC
Understanding causes, results and motivation

SKILLED MEMORY

information is stored in "chunks"
retrieval cues are decided and rehearsed

these can exist on several levels

- global—the skeletal image of the piece
- middle level—had significant detail, but not everything
 - local level—every detail included

What do we know about how professionals memorize?

- Three types of retrieval cues**

- Basic**

- fingerings, places of technical difficulty, units of musical form, big and small (motives, phrases, sections, etc. and their pattern of interrelationship)

- Interpretive**

- phrasing, dynamics, tempo, pedaling

- Expressive**

- mood, image, story or mental picture

Roger Chaffin, Gabriela Imreh and Mary Crawford., *Practicing Perfection: Memory and Piano Performance* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002)

- Some sort of formal analysis of piece is essential**

- does not have to be as thorough as traditional theory analysis, but major components have to be in place

- Individual strategies vary**

- audiation crucial to all

- Vary practice techniques**

- several studies show that experienced pianists tend to practice in longer sections than less experienced

- all pianists practice in longer sections as learning process continues

- however, practicing in short sections remains part of practice and memorization routine up to time of performance

- Context is important**

- altering the performance environment may lead to memory failure

Jennifer Mishra and William Blackin,

"The effects of altering environmental context on the performance of memorized music", poster presented at National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy (Oak Brook, IL, 2005)

Scott's Practical Tips for Memorization

1. How piece is initially learned is crucial

start with overview
work in musical units from beginning
always relate parts to whole
place retrieval cues along the way
make sure that cues are drawn from all three categories

2. If you can't hear it, you can't play it

3. Practice performing, don't just practice practicing

4. Be creative in inventing games to test memory

memory flashcards
hands alone
varied tempi
"slip" practice
"freeze" practice

5. Don't be afraid to throw your gloves into the audience when necessary

Copyright 2008
Scott McBride Smith
All rights reserved
May not be duplicated without written permission