

"Tools" for Memorization

Conference Call - June 2012

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Expanded Notes:

The following is a summary of various learning strategies or "tools" to aid you in memorizing your music. You will not necessarily use all the tools, maybe only one or two.

Remember, good memory skills develop over time---they are not wishful thinking, good genetics or incredible intellect? Your memory **WILL** get stronger as you practice, just like exercising your muscles! The point is to just get started; choose one "tool" and move forward!

We each have different styles of learning: visual—from a printed page; auditory—from listening to a sound track; kinesthetic—repeated action/motion. But utilizing more than one sensory style is always more beneficial. In O'Connor's book, "**Not Pulling Strings**," he states: "The more senses that are involved (in the learning process), the more likely something will be remembered."

MEMORY TOOLBOX:

Study times:

1. What is your best time of day? When are you most alert/creative? Are you a morning person or do you function best in the evening hours? This is when you should work on committing a tune to memory.
2. Just before you go to bed, practice as much as you have worked on that day. Some research has shown that the brain automatically rehearses through the night what was done prior to going to bed. How's that for effortless practice?!

Analyze and strategize:

1. Make a copy of the original notation so you can mark it up/use sticky notes & highlighters. If ledger lines are a challenge, use colored pencils to mark all the "C" notes red and the "F" notes blue. If large skips are problematic, use a different color to alert you. The brain **LOVES** color, so get creative!
2. Take 10 min. or so to do a quick overview of the song (if it is on paper). Get analytical: look for repeating patterns, what's the lowest note/the highest/what key/time signature? Sight read or play through the melody line slowly to get the tune in your head. As someone once told me, "If you can hum or sing it, you can play it. For the left hand: what chords are used? Or are they single notes? Again, look for repeating patterns...they are your friend!
3. Work out (and mark) your fingering and bracketing (placing) patterns. Dee and Laurie Riley suggest this is critical for "muscle memory." Even if there is fingering notated, it's only a suggestion...change it if it doesn't work for you.

4. Some say starting at the end of a song works well, working backwards to the beginning (see notes under "chunking"). Sometimes when we begin at the first measure we go through the first parts of the song many, many times and by the time we reach the end we have only gone over the last group of measures only a few times. Plus our attention may fall off. Practicing from the "bottom up" may help to keep the ending of the song more fluid.
5. Try writing out the music by hand on blank sheet music. Some say this is another avenue to lock it into memory. It's a bit arduous and time consuming, but can be effective. Helps you to see the "shape of the music"...where does it rise or fall in pitch, etc.
6. If the left hand causes you to stumble, maybe it's too complex...too many notes or the pattern is not comfortable for you. Reduce to just one or two notes or a rolled or blocked chord in those areas. After all, we need to simplify!
7. Be realistic. Work on only ONE tune at a time to memorize before adding another, then review the tunes you have in memory frequently.
8. Remember you are not trying to play at tempo, slow and steady gives you the most progress.....but as you get comfortable you can increase the tempo gradually...use your metronome!

Brain Power/muscle memory: (don't forget to BREATHE...the brain needs oxygen to function!)

1. Respect your brain! Be consistent w/your fingering, especially for repeating patterns: practice the same fingering correctly and SLOWLY every time until it is imbedded in your muscle memory. If the song is from written notation, check back frequently while learning a new piece to confirm you are on the right notes/fingerings...DON'T GUESS. The brain likes consistency and operates much better when you honor that! Give it that familiar "trail" to travel on.
2. Repetition is good! But EXACT repetition (consistent fingering/patterns and timing) is KEY; it allows you to memorize more quickly. Be slow and precise, because if you practice the same imperfect phrase, that is what will be retained.
3. Make a "practice sandwich:" Review/new/review. This is like brain calisthenics! This is one of my favorite practice tools. Always begin your play time with what you know from memory. It's uplifting mentally and gets your brain in gear. Then add a new segment to challenge those activated brain cells...and then review again.

Visualize:

1. Try some mental rehearsing: Even when you are not at your harp you can work on memorizing that tune. Visualize your fingers on the strings as you hum the tune.
2. Look at the strings—your fingers—when you play and get a visual of the "form" and sequence of the notes in your hands on the strings. Again, the brain learns fastest when multiple senses are used—SEE the notes/strings, FEEL your fingers on the strings and HEAR the melody/harmony.
3. Place your hands on the strings for a certain measure or chord. Close your eyes and FEEL your hands on the strings, how far apart are they? What is the form/shape you

feel? Squeeze the strings. Let your hands drop and with your eyes still closed, try to replace in that position.

"Chunking":

1. Remember what your Mom probably told you: "Take small 'bites' and chew well." Take a small chunk, like 3 or 4 measures or a phrase (which may not end at a measure mark) and practice each hand separately/work SLOWLY/focus also on timing. Then put both hands together and practice just this much until you can go through it 5 times perfectly, without looking at the notation! Then work on the next chunk (3 or so measures) and repeat the process. Next work on putting these segments together. You may have to work on the last measure of the first chunk and the first measure of the second chunk to get a smooth transition.
2. Chunk your time, too. Don't try to memorize to memorize the whole tune in one setting! Set a timer if necessary and work for 10-15 min. The brain functions better if you work in smaller chunks of time with rests in between. Get up, stretch, go fold laundry—humming what you have practiced! Relax and breathe....Then return and play through it. I have found this more effective (and studies prove it) than trying to do a marathon session for an hour or more.
3. If there is a difficult section, "chunk" it and use it as a daily exercise.