

Practice Techniques and Time Management



By W. Lee Vinson

Strolling past the practice rooms in any music school you are exposed to a wide array of sounds. You hear many different instruments and performers at a variety of different ability levels. You hear a wide range of music, old and new. You hear musicians practicing music that is in different levels of preparation. You hear Beethoven and Bach next door to etudes and scales. And maybe you hear sounds you can't even identify! And then invariably you hear someone "practicing" the same thing over and over and over again, making the same mistakes. This has led me on many occasions to walk in on my students and say, "Stop practicing the excerpts!"

Why are you missing notes? Why are you playing it so fast? Why is the rhythm sloppy? Why are you getting undesirable sounds out of the instrument? Why is there no musical or emotional content to what you are playing? These are questions that need to be addressed, most of which cannot be cured simply by repetition. Repetition certainly has its place in the practice room, but it has to be used intelligently. Bad practice habits, including "mindless repetition," can be counterproductive and are more conducive to engraining bad habits than making the most out of our time in the practice room.

At my Symphonic Lab Session at PASIC 2009 I will address the subject of practice techniques and time management in the practice room. While the musical material covered in this session will be taken largely from the orchestral audition repertoire for snare drum, xylophone, and cymbals, we will be addressing practice goals and techniques in a general enough sense that a wide audience should find this presentation interesting and useful.

What exactly are you practicing for—and why? Do you have a recital tomorrow? Next week? Next month? Do you have an audition

of some kind coming up? Maybe you simply have a private lesson or studio class to prepare for. Do you have a difficult ensemble part to be performed in an upcoming concert?

These are all short-term practice goals, which we address every day in the practice room. Working towards short-term goals usually requires our immediate attention and often involves learning and refining new material in short periods of time. And for better or for worse, a large part of short-term preparation consists of learning the notes and rhythms.

Do you want to build up your chops and refine your playing technique? Are you planning a recital a year or two from now? Do you have graduate-school auditions looming in your future? Are you striving to become more competitive at orchestra auditions? These are larger goals, which are better addressed as more long-term goals.

Technique especially isn't something that can be developed overnight. Achieving good technique on any instrument requires hard work over a long period of time. One challenge we all face is how to incorporate technical practice into our busy schedules when we are faced with so many other obligations such as practicing, performing, teaching, going to school, working, or simply living our lives! Better technique, however, can lead to more effortless execution, which makes it well worth our time and energy to develop. Among the topics emphasized in this session will be effective technical practice routines.

Then there is the matter of being more musical and more spontaneous in

the practice room. These are crucial elements to any great performance that can easily be neglected in our day-to-day preparations. To address this, we will discuss ways to incorporate musical ideas into our practice routines as well.

The majority of the session will discuss practice techniques. What are practice techniques? The easy definition is that these are simply different ways to practice. We will take this idea in a number of different directions related to all of the concerns already mentioned—short-term goals, long-term goals, technical goals, and musical goals. Paramount within these practice techniques is finding ways to address problems intelligently while avoiding mindless repetition and the reinforcing of bad habits, and making the most out of our practice time. And to "stop practicing the excerpts!"

W. Lee Vinson is section percussionist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a teacher at Boston University and the Boston University Tanglewood Institute. He holds a bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music and has done graduate study at Boston University. While at Eastman, he performed with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and from 2000 to 2004 served as a member of the United States Navy Band in Washington, D.C. Visit Lee's website at www.leevinson.com. PN



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SYMPHONIC CLINIC/PERFORMANCE
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