

Playing by Heart Doesn't need to be a Heart-stopping Experience

Playing by memory. These three words make some harpists shiver with the fear of feet and fingers “forgetting” where to go next. However, with the right tools, playing by memory needn't be frightening. Memorization will help you take ownership of the musical expression within a work and is required for many harp auditions and competitions. Not only can memory enable your musical expression, it also lets an audience connect by seeing your face and hands by eliminating the music stand barrier. Just as we practice our thumb-slides and trills, memory is part of our technique that will improve with daily practice. *Imagine:* purposefully memorizing a line of music each day for the next three months would add up to quite a collection of pieces to play at any moment's notice...an added bonus is fewer heavy music bags to heft!

Rote memory:

In my first years of playing, my teachers would assign pieces to memorize and I often found myself waiting for this memory to magically appear while I practiced. I would play straight through my pieces enough times that I could do it without glancing at the music. Then— *voilà*—memorized! Of course, I never admitted that I was holding my breath the whole time, because I would have to re-start if I missed even a single note. This type of memory—rote memory— is the quickest way to memorize; it is also the least reliable.

Repair (or prepare) points:

Later I learned to use “repair points” (or “prepare points” as one of my students prefers to call them). These points may occur every 4-8 bars, depending on the difficulty of the piece, frequency of pedal/lever changes and phrase lengths. (Pedal harpists normally mark these with a pedal diagram.) Writing these “repair points” in the music while learning the piece can also help clarify the phrase structure and identify repetitions. Each of these points represents a new starting point and should be practiced so it is just as certain as the beginning of the piece. These points mark off bite-sized segments which can be memorized later. If a mishap occurs in performance, *jump ahead* to the next repair point to avoid repeating any errors. In order to do this, you should be able to play through the whole piece, playing just the first bar of each repair point before jumping to the next. The visual position of these points on the page can then be memorized so that you always know where you are in the piece. Another way to practice is by playing the piece backward by memory, beginning with the last repair point, working through the entire piece and ending with the first repair point.

“Familiarizing” before memorizing:

One of the most common mistakes is beginning memorization too soon or too late— either can make the process difficult. The perfect time depends on the performer and the piece itself. For example, some harpists will memorize short passages that are difficult so the fingers can be watched while playing. In most cases, the best time comes when the piece can be played accurately, musically and near tempo, but before the polishing work is finished. Before memorizing you need to be familiar enough with the piece that you can glance briefly at the music without reading each individual note before playing. In this case, you have already begun the process of *familiarization* by “chunking” groups of notes and making them into smaller pieces of information. We often treat phone numbers or addresses this same way. For example, it's easier to recall “fifty-two sixteen” rather than “five-two-one-six.”

What type of learner are you?

After your repair points are set and you have decided that the time is right to begin memory work, consider your learning style. Most people have a preference between visual (seeing), aural (hearing), or kinesthetic (feeling) learning. For example, ask yourself if you would best recall a phone number by visualizing it, saying it out loud, or by physically dialing it on a phone. Ideally, we want to use all three of these learning methods when learning and memorizing a piece. So, if you tend to “play by ear,” spend more time looking at your music while you play. If you tend to “play by feel,” then watch your music while listening to a recording of your piece.

Visualization and Focus:

Out of these three learning modes, visualization is the most secure memory for musicians (even if you tend to be a different type of learner). Imagine you are performing on stage and a noisy air conditioning unit suddenly clicks on, disrupting what you hear. Then, the air conditioner suddenly makes the stage much colder than usual, which causes your hands to feel clammy. If your visual memory is secure, neither of these circumstances would affect you because you are firmly rooted in the image of music on the page and your fingers on the strings. Although visualization takes longer to develop, it is the most secure in performance and will remain with you many years after learning a piece. (And... I promise that you do not need to have a photographic memory in order to practice this way.) Before practicing your pieces this new way, remind yourself that if the memory seems like “work,” then you are doing it the right way, and this type of practice goes far beyond hearing the piece play in your head.

Before beginning, I recommend sitting away from your harp in a quiet room with your music closed but nearby. Close your eyes and imagine setting the pedals or levers and beginning your piece; can you picture each finger on the correct string? If not, open your music to check and begin again. At first, you might find that it is difficult to see all the notes—you might be able to picture the bottom of a LH chord and the note for the RH thumb, while the other notes are a blur. The next time, you might “see” more notes in each hand. Working in very small sections, you can add more layers each time you practice. Be patient; it may take 10-15 minutes to play from one repair point to the next (4-8 measures) in your head, but you will see the benefits the next time you sit behind the harp and recall these notes more easily. After mastering each repair point section, begin at a new repair point, so they can all become equally secure.

When you have the full visual “picture,” it will seem as if you are watching a video of yourself playing your piece with your fingers and feet going to the correct strings and pedals. Anytime you encounter a string or pedal that seems uncertain, make a note of it and check the music. This way you’ll be fixing memory errors before you perform and practicing your performance focus. This time away from the harp also prevents you from becoming fatigued through endless repetitions.

Practice, practice, practice... then smile!

Now that your piece is memorized, the real musical process begins. Memorizing music is similar to planting a seed which requires care, attention and nourishment—and it is really the beginning of the polishing process. In order to have a successful memorized performance, a piece must be performed by memory many times, in different settings and for different audiences. One of the best ways to set up an “audience” for yourself is to put a chair in front of your harp with an mp3 recorder. Then, listen to your recording (be your own audience) and make a list of the areas that need work. When playing these practice performances (even if you are alone), make sure to always continue forward if you have any errors. Rather than stopping to correct these errors, test yourself to make sure that you can recover

quickly and smoothly so that you'll be able to do this in performance. After completing the performance, you can return to the area and fix any mistakes.

Above all, remember that the hard work you put into preparing your pieces with diligence will always show through. You can smile at the end of your performance, knowing that you visualized your success even before stepping on stage.

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