



The Art Of Memorizing Music

Playing from memory is a skill that I believe is not only possible for every player, but is indeed essential for every player. I never feel that I know a piece, or have “internalized” a piece, until I have been playing it for quite some time from memory.

I always found it quite easy to memorize pieces, and thought everyone could do this, until experience in teaching taught me otherwise. As I began to study the subject, I gradually uncovered the reasons why I found it easy, and others found it difficult. I could summarize those reasons as follows:

1. I practiced more
2. I paid more attention when I practiced
3. I isolated sections and worked on them separately
4. I often played “fragments” from memory during practice while watching my hands, one or the other

After awhile of working on a piece this way, I would just discover that I could play it from memory, because in many ways I was already doing that when I practiced it.

Why Do Students Have Trouble Memorizing Music?

I have noticed that many students have an absolutely fearful dependency upon the written notes! They seem to “grasp” at the notes with their eyes, while their fingers are having a desperate time trying to get the notes out. This whole approach, and the inner attitude that initiates it, is wrong.

The most glaring example of this fearful attitude is an experience I once had, watching an older man play. I met him after a concert, and he told me he had played his whole life. He did not play well, and had incredible tension, but what really struck me was this curious phenomenon. He was playing

from memory, (with many gaps), but kept his eyes glued to the music stand, where he had a piece of paper with only the names of the pieces he was playing! Not the music itself, but just the titles! It was like a security blanket for him to look at it while he played, when of course, he should have been watching his hands.

I have noticed this tendency in many students, and I am mentioning it first because it is the first thing you must deal with in order to develop the skill of memorization. If you haven't already, you must overcome the feeling that you NEED to look at the notes all the time. Notice I said all the time. Of course you must look some of the time. But you must also not look at the notes some of the time. This is the only way the ear, brain and fingers will begin to form the kind of connections they must form in order to play from memory.

After you determine if you are being held back by this fear of playing without notes in front of you, you must examine something else: the quality of your Attention while practicing. I firmly believe that Attention is what it is all about when it comes to memorizing. People just do not know when they are paying attention, and when they are not, because they are not paying enough attention to notice if they are paying attention in the first place! I spend a good amount of teaching time simply pointing out to people that they are not really paying attention to what they are doing, or to what they should be doing. Very often, the key to "getting something" is simply REALLY paying ATTENTION.

Examine yourself while you are practicing. If you pay great attention, you will notice that there are a few "channels" of attention playing in your mind when you are practicing. Usually, one of the channels is the "Critic", the one that points out and magnifies every difficulty you are having! Then the Critic delivers the latest news to that other part of yourself, the "Punisher", who turns up the volume on his channel, so you will hear him as he reminds you that you probably just don't have the talent to ever play what you are trying to play. And if those two voices don't get you, the "Worrier" probably will, especially when it comes time for your big solo, in front of an audience. Instead of focusing on what you need to do, you will be focusing on how afraid you are that you won't be able to do it. I think it's called "self-fulfilling prophecy". I know, I've done it many times!

If you are to develop to the higher levels of playing the guitar, these extra channels will have to go! You will have to allow yourself the luxury of turning off those channels, and using the power they have taken up for better purposes, like paying attention to what you need to do while practicing (Intention), and what you are actually doing (Attention).

Next time, I am going to go in to some specifics about the 3 kinds of memory that musicians use to memorize a piece of music. Most musicians do it instinctively, but they can be learned by anyone,

and even musicians who do it instinctively can improve by having a conscious understanding of the processes involved.

However, the subject of Attention is primary to the whole matter, and that is why I wanted to go in to it in detail first. I will summarize the things you can begin to do right now to improve or develop the ability to play music from memory:

* Examine yourself when practicing to see if you are broadcasting and listening to those “extra” channels, the Worrier, Critic and Punisher channels. If so, pull the plug!

* Take that extra mental energy you now have at your disposal, and focus on what is happening at the moment. Physically, be aware of fingers, hands, arms and body. Mentally, be noticing everything, and THINKING. Ask yourself “Why is this happening? What can I do about it? What can I do differently? ” Emotionally, be aware of your feelings about the music. (If you don’t have any, ask yourself what you are doing with a guitar in your lap!)

* Now, try playing some of that music from memory. Two notes, three notes, whatever. So many people say “I can’t play from memory”. They don’t know what they are talking about. Try it, just a few notes, then add some more. When you get stuck, THEN look at the music, and pay great attention to what comes next. Say the notes out loud, do whatever you have to do to “burn it into your brain”, and then try it again. Play it once while looking, then without looking. Keep repeating that process, you will get it.