

Improving Your Mental Focus

By Gene Fambrough

One of the latest PASIC Panel Discussions dealt with the elusive subject of “Mental Training for Percussionists.” There was some wonderful insight provided by the panelists, but students who deal with mental hurdles need a more concrete method of approaching the issue. The “mental game” has always been of interest to me, something I discuss with my students quite often. Fortunately, I developed an early interest in “thinking” about rhythms and experimenting with patterns without the aid of written music. My experience in drum corps (under Mike Back) also dealt with mental training to a large extent. The focus of this article will be to provide ideas for performers and educators to help develop mental focus to improve performance.

FOR THE PERFORMER

One of the biggest areas of interference during a performance is our own thought process. Whether it is thinking about future events (“Here it comes....don’t miss it....get ready....”) or dwelling on previous mistakes, often our mind is our own worst enemy. What can we do to slow down (or stop) our personal interference? Sometimes not much, but we can learn what to expect and train ourselves to think on our feet a bit quicker. In my view, the more we think about music the better we are when we are forced to think about it. Below are some ideas for individuals to implement into their practice routines.

- Perform for other people as much as possible. Choose people you respect musically and/or personally; this will make you a little more nervous than playing for your friends.
- Change your environment. We would all love to practice as much as possible in the performance hall, but most often this is only possible the day before (or of) a performance. Moving to a different room or even changing the angle of the instrument will change your perception of the instrument and its surroundings. Warm up before the move so that you can do an immediate run-through, making the best use of the change of environment.
- Change the lighting. We all remember the first time we saw the glare of the stage lights bouncing off the marimba bars and reflecting back at us. You can simulate this effect by turning out the room lights and moving the marimba in front of a window (during daytime hours). Although effective, I wouldn’t recommend doing this for long periods of time so as not to strain your eyes.
- Change your hands. Personally, my hands are always “jumpy” for the first two or three minutes I am on stage. There is nothing I can do to recreate this situation, but I have found a way to simulate the effect. As I get closer to the performance date (and more comfortable with the program), I will do a quick warm-up so as not to damage any muscles and do a run-through of a piece or two. For me, this makes my hands less comfortable. It also doesn’t allow my brain to get fully immersed into the act of playing/performing, thus putting me a little more “on edge” for the run-through. Engaging in this process makes me react to unexpected sensations in my hands as well as forcing me to concentrate harder when my mind may still be occupied with other business of the day.
- Practice without the instrument. This part is essential. All too often, we are consumed with the mechanics of performing a certain piece; the sticking, the notes, the dynamics, the physicality—all of the elements that go into playing an instrument can overwhelm the brain. Spend plenty of time studying the score, analyzing, and listening when possible.

FOR THE TEACHER

Many students often have performance issues on less familiar instruments. From my experience, this happens most often on the keyboard instruments with students who are more comfortable on the battery instruments. I use a few “tricks” to help students discover how their own mental focus should be working while playing or performing.

- Stop/Start. For this exercise, students start their selection from the beginning. The first time I clap, they are to stop playing but keep the piece going in their head. The next time I clap, they are to join in with their mental performance, exactly where they should be. In essence, they should train their mind to play the piece as well as their hands.

- Create distractions. This can be almost anything, bordering on the comical. I will tell the student that his or her goal is to focus through any outside distractions I might cause—making noises, turning on a CD player, playing another instrument at the same time, even playing the same piece, but somehow distorted or in a wrong key or tempo. The idea is that most everyone prefers a quiet environment in which to work or perform, so try to create the extreme opposite of what is preferred. Depending on the student, though, you may have to ease into this at first. These kinds of “games” help students focus their attentiveness on the task at hand.

- The “Stop” command. A variation on the above technique is to tell a student that no matter what happens, do not stop playing. A few measures after they begin, say the word “stop.” Nine times out of ten you will catch them off-guard and they will actually stop. You can continue this idea by giving contradictory remarks to specific points of the piece; when there is a *ritard* for example, verbalize “don’t slow down” or “speed up” and see how the student reacts. Although somewhat quirky, this can be useful at times.

- Metronome tricks. Another variation is to set a metronome in a way that conflicts with the student selection—either through the use of a completely unrelated tempo, or by using the same tempo but a different subdivision, meter, or both. Using Mitchell Peters’ “Yellow After the Rain,” for example, set the metronome to 4/4 (with emphasis every four clicks) and set the subdivision to triplets.

- Studio time in the performance hall. One of the most beneficial approaches is to schedule studio time in the hall used for performances. This allows students to experience what it will be like on stage. When we use such time for student performances, it also allows other students a chance to offer feedback in a less stressful environment.

FOR THE GROUP

More often than not, mistakes in an ensemble setting are due to lack of focus, not lack of practice. Getting a performance ensemble or large group to strengthen their mental chops can be achieved with various exercises. Some of these exercises incorporate other aspects as well, but the overall approach still utilizes some type of mental challenge.

- Rhythm workshop. On occasion, our studio class topic will be rhythm. Using sticks, practice pads, and a metronome, we will drum through timing exercises, accent patterns, and diddle patterns. I then explain several variations, and we continue to work through each one by rote. This forces the students to think about large-scale patterns and how they are related to one another, and then apply these relationships as they are playing through the exercise.

- Counting exercises. Using eighth notes, create a sequence from 1 through 8, inserting a single eighth rest in between each group (1, 1–2, 1–2–3, etc.). Variations can be backwards, evens/odds, or odds/evens;

designate groups to play certain variations against each other. You can also create a similar exercise using quarter notes and quarter-note rests.

- Student developed exercises. Have your students make up their own exercises and then teach them to the class. This makes the students directly responsible for their own mental development, and builds on it by having them teach it to others.
- Listening exercises. Create a scale passage (or use 8's for a drum-line) and designate one person to be the leader. This person will speed up, slow down, or stay the same for each successive run of the pattern, while the rest of the ensemble follows.

CONCLUSION

It takes some creativity to come up with techniques that will help us overcome our mental deficiencies, both as teachers and performers. For all of us, once we achieve a certain level of technical proficiency, our mind is our biggest obstacle. We can learn to look past the obstruction, though, through the right types of exercises used in a logical approach. As I tell my students, it's about developing the "cabbage" as much as the hands, if not more.

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