



# Harp

## Managing Time in the Studio and Beyond

by Janet Jackson Biely

*The American Harp Society's Teachers Forum magazine devoted their Summer 1999 issue to Time Management. We are grateful for permission to reprint this article.*

"You want me to write an article on Time Management?" I cringed at the thought as Elizabeth Blakeslee shared her ideas with me over the phone. "Harp teachers don't always have the support system that piano and violin teachers have, and I was hoping you could share with our readers how you manage your time with students and with your professional engagements." "Good grief!" I thought. It was late November and I was feverishly learning *Dancing Day*, by John Rutter, (for a first-time performance!) and preparing my students for our annual "Brandywine Harps Christmas Concert" a week away, knowing full well that my life would not be my own until the holidays were over. (Sound familiar?) A good dose of time management is just what I needed. Believing that weaknesses can be transformed into strengths, I accepted the challenge, hoping that I could help others as well as myself in developing a plan to become more time and task efficient.

With the availability of good harps, a reasonably sound economy, and exposure on the Internet and media, interest in the harp has never been greater. I began teaching privately in 1984 with a handful of students. Over a decade later my studio, "Brandywine Harps," has blossomed into more than thirty-five students. I have never advertised and credit this success to being devoted to my students, having a good location, and presenting my students in recitals and concerts on a regular basis. However, finding the time to plan my own agenda and complete my own tasks is becoming more and more difficult. I am constantly setting my own projects on the "back burner"

as I tend to my students and professional obligations. The time for "managing time" is now!

Assessing one's use of time can be the first step in discovering what strategies are effective. Ask yourself these questions and answer, "usually," "sometimes" or "rarely."

*As a teacher:* Do you feel in control of the lesson time? Do you and your students have a sense of accomplishment? Do you exchange ideas and music with other teachers? Do you arrange/edit pieces to suit the needs of your students? Do you read harp-related articles?

*As a performer:* Do you have time to practice to maintain/improve your technique? Are you learning new music, memorizing others? Do you feel prepared for upcoming solo, orchestral, choral performances? Do you return professional calls promptly?

*As a person:* Do you make time to exercise? Do you have time to organize your finances? Do you keep some weekends open for family and socializing? Are some weeknights open for nonmusical pursuits?

If the majority of answers are "usually," you are managing your time very well; otherwise, a change in behavior is in order.

We are all given the same amount of time, and what we do with that time is reflected in our objectives, tasks, and goals. If we begin to think of time as being "sacred" then we become more aware of how we spend it. However, all too often we develop habits and permit distractions into our lives that insidiously

chip away at the minutes and hours of each day.

Below is a list of "time-wasters" and how they might be affecting our time in the studio.

**Disorganization:** Do you spend time looking for a particular piece of music, or a student's phone number?

**Procrastination:** Do you let obligations pile up to the point that you cannot complete them?

**Inability to say No:** Do you tie up every weekend with make-up lessons or jobs?

**Waiting:** Do you plan what can be done during periods between students or no-shows?

**Phone Calls:** Do you interrupt practice time to answer the phone only to discover it's a telemarketing call or a chatty neighbor?

**Mail:** Can you find your bills/checks hidden between piles of unread newspapers and magazines?

**Lack of Interest:** Have you been teaching/playing the same pieces over and over without replenishing with new material?

**Burnout:** Are you so overloaded that you can barely stand to look at one more vibrating string?

Taking time to plan on a monthly, weekly, and daily basis is a great way to think positively about time usage as well as defining objectives and goals. Structuring time can increase one's capability to become better informed; communicate with students and colleagues; relax to avoid burnout; think about professional goals; dream about personal endeavors.

I would like to share with you my experiences in managing my studio and professional obligations. I have never had a course in management; this has been a "make it up as you go, trial-and-error" operation. With that disclaimer, I give



you my experiences.

**Establishing a monthly schedule:** I teach an average of 15-25 students weekly, depending on how busy I am with professional and personal obligations. Prior to the new month, I discuss with the student/parent about setting 2-4 lessons that month, trying to keep the same day and time each week. These dates and times are written on my calendar and recorded on a schedule sheet that is kept in the student's notebook. I provide either 45 or 60-minute lessons. Most adult and home-schooled students are scheduled during morning and early afternoon hours. School students are scheduled between 3-6:30 P.M. I do not teach after 7:30 P.M. and do not teach on weekends. I find being flexible and applying a "Swiss cheese" approach to scheduling works best when dealing with conflicts such as doctor's appointments, sport activities, SAT dates, and school musicals. Teachers need to define their own policies, be it strict or lenient in dealing with missed lessons, no-shows and make-up times.

**Bookkeeping:** I strive to keep this aspect of teaching as simple as possible! On the student's schedule sheet, I write the month's total lesson fee (I prefer to be paid for the entire month). I write "pd" on my calendar after the student's name, write dates on the memo line of the check received, and then record check number and amount on a monthly account sheet. I usually do not cash checks until the end of the month.

**Managing the lesson time:** First, always have the harps tuned before students arrive.

**The New Student:** I have a packet ready for new students which includes my lesson policy which they read and sign, lesson schedule and payment sheet, addresses and phone numbers of harp music stores, my own beginner pieces, and a beginner book. I require new students to take weekly lessons for at least five weeks so I can carefully monitor their technical development.

**The Unprepared Student:** I give an unprepared student a "practice session" going over the assigned lesson slowly,

hands alone, phrase by phrase, repeating difficult passages many times. The student reviews the assigned warm-up or exercise with the metronome, and receives a new warm-up. No new piece is given until the old assignment is prepared. Playing a previously learned piece concludes the lesson.

**The Serious Student:** An hour goes by very quickly when teaching a well-prepared student. I begin with 10-15 minutes of exercises, which may include intervals, triads and inversions, scales and arpeggios. The lesson continues with reviewing memorizing assignments, sight-reading a new piece, preparing orchestral or choral pieces, and performing the assigned solo work.

**The Infrequent Student:** These students are often the most challenging because continuity is difficult to establish. Make them aware that they must be their own stewards against bad technical habits. Assign exercises with points to carefully monitor, along with a range of metronome markings. I try to listen to two prepared pieces and start two new pieces, always going over the notes, rhythm, and fingering.

**Student Recitals and Ensemble Concerts:** Performances are the best motivational tool for students, and provide teacher accountability to the parents. For

the past eight years, I have had an annual Christmas concert on the first Saturday of December. Students and parents are informed of the date well in advance. On the day of the performance we have one large ensemble rehearsal (15-20 players!) from

1-3 P.M., with a concert at 4 P.M. To prepare, I double or triple up students during lessons, set performance metronome markings, and play along with students at their lessons. These concerts are very successful, bringing pleasure to the audiences and a sense of accomplishment for both student and teacher. After the December concert, I try

not to schedule lessons until the second week of January.

In the spring, my younger students present a recital, showcasing the solo player more than ensemble groups. In June my adult Celtic students perform a concert of Celtic solos and ensemble work. This is a satisfying closure to the year.

Summer's schedule is very lenient, my priority being arranging next year's music and searching for new pieces. I also like to attend workshops and learn new repertoire. I see an average of ten students each week.

**Practice Time:** I try to set at least one hour every day for my own practice time. This time is spent completely at the harp, learning new pieces and memorizing learned ones. Writing and arranging music is not included in "practice time."

**Phone Calls and E-mail:** I do not answer the phone during lessons or practice time unless I am expecting an important call. E-mail is efficient in that you can respond when you're ready to, although I find it more time-consuming than the telephone when I'm responding to detailed requests.

**Bulletin Boards:** A bulletin board in your studio is a great "catch all" for current happenings. Post student's names and phone numbers for scheduling lessons. Post contact information for your local AHS chapter for teacher and professional referrals.

Psychologists say it takes thirty days to develop a good habit and break a bad one. Just think, in one month you could be on the road to experiencing more time to do the things you always wanted to do!

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