



HARP

On Determining the Art of Working Outline of Rules for Securing Successful Results

by Carlos Salzedo

The statement has often been made that the principal point to be developed in the music student's mind is his own share of responsibility in his work. The good sense of such advice is obvious; but in attempting to follow it, the student finds that the chief problem lies in knowing how to work. Most students waste years before they solve this complex problem. To know how to work is as difficult as to know how to live — and as rarely discovered. A student may be helped to solve this problem through competent guidance, but in the end the result rests chiefly with the student himself. The most skillful teacher can only explain and analyze; he cannot actually work for the student.

There are three principal phases in the development of an instrumentalist: first acquiring technique, including the different kinds of touch, tone color, and so forth; second, learning how to work; and third, mastering interpretation, that is, learning how to assimilate and to project the inner idea of a musical work.

The first phase involves mechanical problems only, which can be overcome by most students. The second phase makes an appeal to the equilibrium of the individual; it is a matter of adjustment and readjustment. The third phase depends on the degree of receptivity, the mental suppleness and the artistic tendencies of the instrumentalist. In this article I shall deal expressly with the second phase.

Preparing the Mind

The first step toward learning how to work is to rid oneself of all that is unessential; in other words, to put oneself in a frame of mind capable of instantaneous discernment before the many problems encountered while working.

In general, students go to work unprepared; the first part of the period of work is generally wasted. For most of them, to work is a bore. Yet what could be more interesting than work, for work offers such rich opportunities for scientific experiment which results in valuable experience and the satisfaction of achievement? But few

students realize the benefit for practice well done, which, if the time is spent intelligently has a double result: the mastering of a musical work and the development and affirmation of one's own nature.

Many students are worn out after a short period of work. This results from unconcentrated practice, mental diffusion. Work well done acts on the student as a reconstructive force.

Students are often apt to confuse laziness with fatigue. This is particularly true of talented people. Inexperienced students stop working as soon as they feel tired. If the fatigue is cerebral they ought to stop so as to start anew with a fresh viewpoint. If the fatigue is physical, that is, muscular, they ought to keep on for a short while longer; this will gradually develop the power of the muscles.

Preparing the Musical Work

The method of preparing a musical work is simple and logical; it consists of intelligent repetition of each passage and section of the composition. The composition, at first, should be read and played in its entirety so that the student may have a general idea of its contents; but as soon as he has become familiar with the composition he should spend time on the details until each detail is firmly mastered and assimilated. This does not concern technical details only. Passages of a dynamic or emotional nature must be affirmed by means of the same procedure. Few, even among professionals, devote a sufficient amount of time and thought to passages other than merely technical ones. Yet a dynamic effect will not be well executed at the performance if it has not been affirmed through intelligent repetition in practice; the same holds true for any passage requiring great finesse or emotional power.

The repeating principle appears to the inexperienced student to be a drudgery, a

waste of time. The necessity of spending ten or fifteen minutes on a passage, or a measure or half a measure or even on a simple chord, is beyond his comprehension. For those students who might not understand, I will compare this repeating principle to the constructing of a building. Both the musical composition and the building must be put up in as indestructible a manner as possible. To that end each part must be firmly built; each detail solidly affirmed. Buildings need frequent repairs; so does the instrumentalist's repertoire. But these should be only local repairs, and the ensemble as well as the details must be assembled, from the start, in such a way as to resist the storms to which the career of the instrumentalist — as well as the building — is subject.

Even as an abandoned building may again become serviceable if it has a good foundation, a composition put aside for a while, even for years, can be revived within a few days' notice — even a few hours — if it has been solidly assembled.

Principles of Repetition

Intelligent repeating does not only assure the assimilation of a musical work, it also will solve the problem of memorizing. To play, to recite, something from memory is to remember it; remembrance is but a matter of assimilation, and the logical way of assimilating something is to repeat it until it becomes a part of our organism.

There is no definite rule as to how often a passage ought to be repeated. This is to be determined according to the particular degree of aptitude of each student. But there are two distinct phases in the repeating system: the "prelude" and the "affirmation." By "prelude" I mean correct reading of a passage and the repetition of the same for at least five or six times; by "affirmation," the assimilation of the same passage.

Most students call "working" what is but the "prelude." As soon as they have repeated a passage a few times they run on



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to the next regardless of how well they have assimilated the preceding one. This has no more solidity than a castle built on sand.

Sometimes, after a period of good practice, the student will begin the next period with uncertainty and consequently might be inclined to think that the preceding period was fruitless. There is nothing abnormal in that, and the student should not be discouraged. It is a mere question of readjustment, and a few minutes of concentrated work will suffice for him to catch up and to be again on a level with his self of the preceding period of work.

The choice of fingering is very important. It should be decided upon during the “prelude” period and should not be changed during the period of “affirmation,” unless the student finds out the impracticability of his first choice. To use indifferently one finger or another is a loss of time.

During the period of affirmation, the student should “ventilate” his work, that is, take slight breathing pauses in between each repetition. If consciously done this will act as a reconstructive factor and will prevent the student from becoming tired and mentally stuffy.

Keeping Musical Values in Mind

It is imperative that the student should always bear musical values in mind while studying, or else he will not be able to grasp the inner idea of the composition. It is no less imperative that he should always practice with the musical text before him no matter how well he may believe he knows the composition. Bad habits may result from practicing from memory and these are very difficult to get rid of.

Concerning instruments where both hands play an independent role — organ, harp, piano — there is no definite rule as to working hands separately or together. This depends on the peculiarity of the passages. In some instances practicing each hand separately simplifies the work; in others it complicates it. Often a passage practiced with hands separately will be at first difficulty to play with hands together, but the student should not become discouraged; this is nothing more than a matter of readjustment of both hands once each hand has been individually adjusted.

There are cases of physical stubbornness that may puzzle students. A finger will obstinately refuse to go to the right key or string. This often comes from too little time spent during what has been termed above, the prelude period.

Professionals vs. Amateurs

Two categories of musicians evolve from those who undertake the study of music: professional and amateur. The latter is often more artistically disposed than the former; but that which differentiates these two categories is less a question of talent than of intelligent guidance and individual perseverance. During his years of study the will-be-amateur rarely goes beyond the prelude period. He flirts with music. He stops where the will-be-professional starts, and his lack of self-affirmation relegates him to the role of passive musician. It is

true that amateurs constitute the best part of our musical audiences, but one cannot sufficiently deplore so much wasted talent because of lack of perseverance. Once imbued with this conception of work, how much good might the student accomplish for himself and the cause of music.

Originally written for a magazine of the Curtis Institute when Salzedo was a member of the Curtis faculty.

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On Salzedo

by Saul Davis

I am pleased to present a seminal essay on the craft of practicing by the pre-eminent harpist Carlos Salzedo. This essay provides a solid platform on which to build one's approach to practicing. When I first read it, as a student, I was a little daunted by the intense language, but I now see its clarity of purpose. Salzedo is suggesting the application of the whole mind, the conscious spirit, to one's work. This approach, if applied successfully, will certainly develop considerable powers of concentration.

I suggest the following methods to help focus the mind and make repetition more effective:

- cover up the rest of the music so you can only see what you're working on
- focus on only one aspect of the music at a time — dynamics, ornaments, tempo, rhythm, fingering, individual finger action, hand position, posture, breathing, eye movement, note reading, etc.
- break down the music to as little as two or three notes at a time before practicing whole measures or phrases
- practice the links between practice units
- practice the connections of musical flow between notes and their relative intensity to each other — is it increasing or decreasing?
- use exercises to prepare the hands for the demands of a particular

passage so that the amount of effort required is equalized with the rest of the music

- use solfège or narration for every aspect of the music; say your notes, pedals, fingering intervals, harmony; narrate your dramatic experience as a coach might.

Music is all about learning to listen to what you're doing — what you're actually producing as opposed to what you think you are doing or intending to do. It's listening to the potential in the instrument and music. Indeed, we are guiding ourselves along a path of the future, not just being in a moment, for each moment of practice contains all the future moments as well. Listening is not just about what just happened, or will happen next. It is very much about what will happen the next time you play.

Saul Davis lives and teaches in Philadelphia. Last summer he was commissioned by the Simpson-Flanagan Harp Duo to arrange Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp for flute and harp duo. He is looking forward to the performances of several of his compositions at the American Harp Society's International Conference in June 2004 at the University of Pennsylvania. His music will be performed by Emily Halpern-Lewis, and his Suite Provençale for Harp Duo will be performed by Sonja Wangensteen and Piper Bareford-Runnion at the conference and also at Curtis.