

STACK THE DECK IN YOUR FAVOR

A Winning Practice Strategy

by Faith Farr

Until they develop good practice habits, students tend to:

- always start at the beginning of their piece and find it hard to start at a middle section or phrase
- enjoy practicing the parts they already know and find it hard to focus practice on the difficult sections
- repeat a spot that has an error several times until getting it right once, and then go on to a different spot
- get really good on a phrase or section that repeats exactly in a piece and find it difficult to give enough practice to a section that does not repeat
- get confused over phrases that start the same but end differently in different parts of the piece
- be overly optimistic about how solidly their piece is memorized
- find it hard to recover if they have a slip during performance

I have used an ordinary deck of playing cards for a practice game that largely solves all of these problems. The technique simple: assign colors or suits or numbers from the card deck to phrases or sections of the piece. Shuffle the cards. Pick a card and play the section designated by the card. (Already the student is learning to start somewhere other than the beginning of the piece.) The rules of my *Win A Card* game are:

- If the student plays that section successfully—on the first try—the student “wins” the card and keeps it out of the deck.
- If the student makes a mistake, they should practice the section until it is correct, and then—put the card back in the deck.
- The goal is to win the whole deck of cards by the end of the week.

I assign the card game practice at the point that the student has mastered the piece enough that it is reasonable to expect that they can play each section correctly. I use it sometimes while the student is still playing with the music, and always as a memorizing strategy.

I use the card deck from the very begin-

ning of lessons, when I will be the one suggesting what the sections are. As students get used to the idea, I find they are able to find logical starting places at the beginning of phrases or major sections of their piece. Once we have decided on the sections, we write into the music, at the beginning of the phrase or section, the color or suit for that section.

I use colors (red and black) for pieces in ABA form such as *Twinkle* or AABA form such as *Allegro*. A is one color, and B is the other. Doing the card game ensures that the B part gets the same amount of practice as the A part. And if the A part is easier when you start the game then those cards (say the red ones) will be won quickly and set aside. If the black cards are more difficult, they will be put back in the deck, and gradually the deck will be stacked with mostly black cards remaining. This ensures the B section will get more practice!

When there are three sections, I use suits. Sometimes the 4th suit is a “free card”—an automatic win. *Twinkle* in half phrases might be: ♠♣♦♥♠♣ —with hearts as an automatic win. Sometimes the 4th suit can be doubled up with the suit that designates the section the student finds hardest. *Perpetual Motion* in full phrases might be ♥♦black♥.

A piece with 4 sections makes it easy to use suits. *Musette* might be: ♥♥♣♠♣♠♠♦. In a piece like this one, I deliberately choose the same color ♥♦ for the similar phrases. Handel *Bourree* in full phrases might be ♦♦♠♣♥♠♣♥. Here I deliberately choose ♦ (Diamonds) for the first phrase because for cello you go to the D string where the phrase is different from the ♥ phrase. The shape of top of the ♥ looks like a sideways 3, and indeed for cello you play finger 3 at the crucial spot on this phrase.

Interestingly, some phrases do repeat exactly but a visual student may not realize it because maybe finger numbers were printed the first time but not the second, or the line breaks are different, so that the two sections look different even if they are exactly the same.

When a piece has 5 sections, I often use A–10 in the four suits, and any picture card (K, Q, J) for the fifth section. *Perpetual Motion* in half phrases might be ♥♦♠♣

picture picture ♥♦. Here I chose the two red suits for the two halves of the first full phrase; the two black suits for the two halves of the second full phrase. ♦ (Diamonds) reminds me this phrase for cello ends on the D string. ♠ (spades) reminds me this phrase for cello ends on the A string. Handel *Bourree* in half phrases might be: picture ♦, picture ♦, ♠♣, picture ♥, ♠♣, picture ♥.

When a piece has similar sections, I sometimes suggest odd for the first time and even for the second time. *Perpetual Motion* in half phrases might be: ♥odd, ♥even, ♦odd, ♦even, black, black, ♥odd, ♥even.

For a piece that has many different places that tangle, we may need several decks. For *Allegro Appassionato*: 3 suits for the three ways that follow the opening phrase; a different deck with 2 colors for the two ways that start with chords. The fourth suit of the first deck might be for the syncopated part. The picture cards (K, Q, J) of the second deck might be for the *lento*, *meno mosso* and *coda*. By this point in the literature, my students who embrace the game do pretty well at using cards on the confusing spots, and not necessarily on the whole piece.

For a piece that I am trying to memorize on short notice, I use the numbers in the deck and write out for myself a phrase clue chart on a separate piece of paper. My clue chart for Dvorak *Silent Woods* uses all the numbers A, 2, 3, ... J, Q, K and begins:

- A theme, starts ♯, has C as the third note
- 2 theme, starts ♯, has B♭
- 3 starts ♯ on E♭
- 4 starts ♯ with ♩ rhythm

I can't remember what all 13 phrases are randomly, but when I pick a card and read my clue sheet, I know what I am supposed to play.

When I devised this *Win a Card* game for my students, I was basing it entirely on probability. E.g., in an AABA piece – you need to play the B section as often as you have played the A section to have them equally secure. Or, if you've played a section wrong 5 times in a row and then right once—what are the odds you are going to get it right the next time? 5 to 1 against! By

putting the card back in the deck, it ensures that eventually the section is played right more often than it has been played wrong.

I am interested that recent brain research shows that “spacing” and “interleaving” practice is more successful in long-term retention than simple repetitions of the same thing in succession. “Spacing” means you practicing something, wait a

while, and then do it again. “Interleaving” means you practice something (A), practicing something else (B), then a third thing (C) then start random mixing of your repetitions. Studies show AAABBBCCC is less effective than for instance ABCBCACBA. (See *Spacing and Interleaving of Study and Practice* by Shana K. Carpenter, Iowa State University.)

The card game provides interleaving practice each day as the shuffled cards are in random order, and spacing practice as the goal is to win the deck of cards over a week.

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