

WHY SHOULD STUDENTS DO REVIEW? — TO HAVE A PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE!

by Faith Farr

This past fall I was invited to be part of a panel presentation to Suzuki teachers on how to get students to do successful review. I wondered what I could constructively add to the conversation when the sort of stickers and review charts I use are commonly known. Teachers have a clear idea of why we want students to play review pieces—because we want to teach students to practice more deeply. But I realized it's ultimately because we want them to move from what I call the "student mindset" to the "professional mindset" for practice and preparation. I believe the approach to practice/performance is fundamentally different for a student than a professional because a professional is mostly doing review, and a student is mostly not. The problem is how we get students and parents to change their outlook. The professional outlook is that review is where the hard work happens—creating the nuances of dynamics, articulation, tempo that makes our piece compelling in performance. For students, review is often seen as onerous and boring and something that is "holding me back."

Should I play a new piece or a review piece at my next recital or audition?

The student answer is, "Obviously, my new piece." This is understandable because students live in a world where most of what they do is a "personal" or "world premier." But...most professional performances are of "review pieces." Even when a world-class artist is performing a world premier it is not a new piece to them because they have done months of private performances for friends and colleagues before they play for the paying public.

We need to help students move their "normal" from the "premier" attitude to a "review" attitude. Successful advanced students learn that they need to perform their competition piece many times before the big competition. We need to use review to help younger students have that experience.

Should I play an easy piece or a hard piece?

The student answer is, "Obviously a hard piece." After all, in the student world, playing a hard piece proves they are an advanced player. Students usually live in the "zone of

discomfort" where they may understand what the technical and musical challenges are, but have not yet really mastered them. On the other hand, what does the professional do when faced with playing a "hard" piece in the zone of discomfort? The professional will cancel or postpone the gig, or simplify things to solve the technical problems!

We need to help students find the "zone of expressive comfort" where technical issues vanish and their musicality can shine.

But "hard pieces" win competitions

The student's (and often the parent's) attitude often is, "I need a hard piece for the school competition because hard pieces win." In my experience, the person who played the hard piece often does win—but not because the piece was hard. The person wins because they have mastered the technical details and can play with expression and ease.

We need to help students and parents listen for the music, and not just the notes. The professional attitude is, "Mozart is too easy for students and too difficult for professionals."

Review is holding me back

Students often think, "Review is holding me back; learning a new piece is progress." To some extent that is true because students need to increase their "bucket of skills." Professionals are usually not working on notes/technique but on musical qualities like tone, dynamics, articulations, phrasing, pacing, and clarity.

We need to help students and parents understand that developing those musical skills is as important (more important?) than playing notes. We're not repeating a review piece just to fill in time; we're adding new skills that weren't there before.

How often do you perform the same piece?

Inexperienced students answer, "Once." For them, the piece they played last spring got "used up" at that first performance. Again, the world students live in is a world of "personal premiers" and they think that is normal. How often does a professional perform the same piece? I had the pleasure of hearing Leonard Rose in live performance I

think 4 times years over about 15 year span (about every 5 years). The first time was in Toronto and he played the Saint-Saëns Concerto. The next time was in Minneapolis 5 years later and he played the Saint-Saëns Concerto. Another 5 years later, Rose returned and played the Saint-Saëns. The last time I heard him, he played Schumann. After 15 years, he learned a new piece?!

Rose was listening, imagining and communicating differently than students do. He had a reason to perform so often the piece he loved so much. We need to help students have such a love for a piece that they want to perform it repeatedly.

How long does it take until the piece is ready for the first performance?

Students are often ready to perform when they have achieved what I call the "some day" level of learning. At first a new piece is completely impossible, but when the student has figured out the tricky rhythm or fancy shift or other preview spots, they develop confidence that indeed the piece is accessible. At this point in their preparation they probably have played the whole thing (disjointedly) correctly, under tempo. They think they are ready to perform.

The famous maxim is, "A student practices until they get it right. A pro practices until it can't go wrong." We need to help change students' attitudes towards what it means to be ready to perform.

But review takes so long because I have to re-memorize.

I once heard Pinchas Zucherman at a masterclass and in the Q&A at the end someone asked, "How do you memorize all the pieces you play?" Zucherman actually looked puzzled for a moment. And then he said, "It's not a case of memorizing; it's a case of knowing." He didn't elaborate, but I have thought about what he must have meant. Our students "know" how to count to ten, what their brother's middle name is, and probably how the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* goes or something similar. They don't have a panic attack at breakfast thinking, "Oh-oh. I forgot to study last night. There's going to be a test today on counting to ten."

We need to help students internalize

the pieces so that “re-memorizing” is not arduous. This involves practice strategies of sections and spots, and avoiding playing on auto-pilot. I have started to use the term “play by heart” rather than “by memory” with students.

I can do review if you give me enough notice.

So how much time does a seasoned pro need to “review” a piece before a performance? Some time ago, I was in San Francisco on a 2-day trip with the days fully occupied and an evening to myself. I looked into tickets for the San Francisco opera and decided not to go, but I missed an amazing event. The Opera was scheduled to perform one of the major warhorses—something like *Turandot* or *Madama Butterfly*. Pavarotti got suddenly sick. At noon they knew they had an opera without a tenor. Fortunately, Placido Domingo happened to be in New York on a day off. The phone call went out; the answer was “yes” and Domingo had 3 hours on the plane with the score in his lap to review a 3-hour opera. The news reports the next day were that the show was spectacular.

We need to help students “know” a piece so well they can perform at a moment’s notice.

When are we “done” a piece?

Students often think they are “done” with a piece yesterday, last week or last year. A professional—never. Pablo Casals discovered an edition of the *Solo Bach Suites* in the late 1890s, at a time when Bach wasn’t well known by cellists. Casals practiced daily for over a decade and started performing the *Suites* in the 1910s. He made famous recordings in the 1930s. But he never made a published edition of his bowings and fingerings as so many cellists have done. When asked why, he said he wasn’t sure he had completely figured things out.

We need to help students have the musical imagination and curiosity that kept Casals practicing Bach for decades, never quite being satisfied.

Some ideas on changing the student mindset

Getting students to review successfully requires getting them to practice differently. How do we get students/parents to change their approach? My suggestion is to give students experiences that are closer to the professional experience. For instance:

- Don’t let them perform unprepared. Expect every piece to be memorized, and have a studio “rule” that no-one ever performs their newest piece.
- Encourage opportunities to perform a piece a second time—at a studio recital, home concert, school or church event.
- Provide opportunities where students perform more than one piece at a concert. One will be “older” than the other, and students will get a taste of what a professional recital is like.

Make practicing interesting enough that students and parents see the purpose of review. For instance, help students see the sequence of teaching points. For example big-little bowing ♩ ♪ is needed in *Aunt Rhody*, *O Come Little Children*, *Long Long Ago*, *Musette*, and many more. Zig-zag bowing ♩ ♪ is needed in *May Song*, Vivaldi *Sonata* third movement and Fauré *Élégie* syncopation. The bariolage in the Goltermann *Concerto* returns in the Sammartini *Sonata* first movement. Solid chords are needed in Breval *Sonata* first movement, *Danse Rustique* and Haydn *Concerto* first movement.

Use a topic list to make review more interesting / challenging: e.g. dynamics,

articulations, phrasing, bow hold, straight bow, eyes closed ... I tell my students, “You know that once you get something I’ve asked for, I’m going to make it harder. I’m greedy; I want it all—dynamics *and* vibrato!”

Have the student choose: do they want to practice the technique with the new piece or the review piece? Do they want to work on speed and sautillé on open strings, scales, *Perpetual Motion*, Webster *Scherzo* or Van Goens *Scherzo*?

One terrific practice technique I learned from Philip Johnston’s *Practiceopedia* is what he calls *Details Trawl*. The student places a ruler vertically at the start of the music and slowly drags the ruler to the right, noticing and naming every mark on the page: bass clef; key signature F#, C#; time signature $\frac{4}{4}$; then the notes, dynamics, articulations, bowings and slurs... Like a net behind a fishing trawler, the ruler catches everything it passes. I added the next step I call *Honor the Ink*. Students must now perform every mark on the page. If they play for a home audience/adjudicator, they ask the audience to write down where they hear for instance *f/p* or staccato/legato. If audience gets it wrong, it’s the player’s fault! *Honor the Ink* works well even with an imaginary adjudicator—as long as the player has in mind what the ink marks are. It is impossible to do on an unfamiliar piece.

If we can get students to adopt a professional approach to practice and performance, students, parents and teachers are likely to be very happy with their progress.

Faith Farr teaches cello at her home studio and is an active free-lance cellist in the Twin Cities. She has served on the boards of the Suzuki Association of Minnesota (SAM) and MNSOTA. Her pedagogy articles have been published in The American Suzuki Journal and in MNSOTA’s String Notes. ‡