

Mental Training in Percussion

By Paul Buyer



PAS EDUCATION COMMITTEE PANEL
Thursday @ 11:00 A.M.

Over the past few years at PASIC, the PAS Education Committee has made a commitment to offer stimulating panel discussions that have challenged the status quo. From “A Fly on the Wall in the Private Lesson” to “The Drumline Experience: How Much is Too Much?” to last year’s panel, “Building a Powerhouse Program,” these topics have ignited passionate discussions and revealed some of the real issues in percussion education today. At PASIC 2008 in Austin, the PAS Education Committee continues this tradition, presenting a topic often overlooked in training a percussionist.

Renowned sports psychologist Gary Mack proclaimed, “Once you reach a certain level of competency, the mental skills become as important as the physical skills, if not more so.” So often in teaching and playing percussion, we focus on the physical skills of playing our instruments. Whether working on our marimba shifts, timpani rolls, cymbal crashes, or conga slaps, our thoughts often become dominated by technique.

Without question, percussion is a very physical art form, emphasizing kinesthetic learning and visual and auditory awareness. Our largest instruments, such as drumset, timpani, marimba and vibraphone, and even marching tenors are some of the most kinesthetic instruments we play. But while we are spending so much time training our hands, our feet, our eyes, and our ears, what about training our mind?

THE PANEL

On Thursday, the PAS Education Committee will host a panel discussion titled “Mental Training in Percussion.” Our distinguished panelists encompass a collaboration of esteemed percussion educators, solo artists, innovative composers, inspiring authors, and incomparable leaders in the percussive arts. Panelists include Michael Burritt, Professor of Percussion at the Eastman School of Music; Steven Schick, Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego; and Tim Lautzenheiser, music educator, motivational speaker, and creator of Attitude Concepts, Inc.

The purpose of the panel discussion is to learn about the mental game as it relates to percussion education and performance. Some

of the discussion topics include visualization, Inner Game, memorization, performance anxiety, concentration and focus, awareness and trust, mental practice, relaxation and tension, preparation and confidence, pressure and self-doubt, and developing a positive mind-set. The panelists will also offer advice on how to incorporate mental training into our teaching.

VISUALIZATION

The best musicians, like elite athletes, use mental training to perform at the highest level. Ask any Olympic athletes about their preparation and you will hear about their rigorous physical *and* mental regimens.

One of the most valuable and effective mental skills for attaining peak performance is visualization. Visualization is seeing yourself perform in your mind. According to golf legend Jack Nicklaus, his mental training was like “going to the movies.” Gary Hendricks and Jon Carlson, in their article “How the Mind Affects the Body” say, “[Nicklaus] imagines each shot from start to finish before he actually makes it—mentally setting up, swinging, hitting the ball, seeing it take off, land, and roll to a stop.” According to Hendricks and Carlson, professional weightlifters “mentally picture their lift just before the actual attempt. When they stand in front of the bar and close their eyes they are lifting it mentally.” Skiers use visualization and mental rehearsals to review “every rise, hairpin, and dropoff on course, [so] on the day of the actual race there aren’t any surprises.”

My favorite story of an athlete using visualization comes from Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan. According to Ryan in *Mind Gym*, “The night before a game I lie down, close my eyes, relax my body, and prepare myself for the game. I go through the entire lineup of the other team, one batter at a time. I visualize exactly how I am going to pitch to each hitter and I see and feel myself throwing exactly the pitches that I want to throw. Before I even begin to warm up at the ballpark, I’ve faced all of the opposition’s hitters four times and I’ve gotten my body ready for exactly what it is I want to do.” This story is a tribute to the power of mental training. Although Ryan possessed enormous talent, a tremendous work ethic, and superior physical skills that led him to the

Baseball Hall of Fame, it was his commitment to mental training that helped make him one of the best pitchers the game has ever seen.

INNER GAME

In the third edition of *Teaching Percussion*, author Gary Cook discusses the breakthrough work of Tim Gallwey and his many books on the Inner Game. “In the conclusion to... *The Inner Game of Golf*... Gallwey states that sports could become ‘the laboratory in which research and experimentation about human motivation, performance, and self-interference take place.’ According to Gallwey, “It will no longer be sufficient for a teacher of the game to be a good player and know the mechanics of the swing. Forward looking teachers will attempt to develop an understanding of the learning process. If they do, they will be more valued than their old role as swing mechanics for they will be teaching such valuable inner skills as concentration, self-trust, will, and awareness... such teachers will be recognized as making valuable contributions to the quality of a student’s entire life.”

MEMORY

Most will agree that memory and memorization are important mental skills to develop as a percussionist. Whether memorizing music for marching band or preparing a solo recital, we encounter many musical situations which require music to be memorized.

According to solo percussionist, educator, composer, author, and panelist Steven Schick in his book *The Percussionist’s Art*, “The central question to many performers—of how and why musicians memorize pieces of notated music—have never really been addressed.” Schick also emphasizes the qualities unique to memorizing percussion music: “the absence of a fixed instrument, the intensely physical nature of the practice, and with it the commensurately heavy reliance on kinetic memory.” In summarizing his philosophy, Schick captures what most of us feel. “To memorize is to internalize; the goal is to own the music.”

Without question, memorizing music can be a challenge for students, especially if it is a new experience or expectation. In addition to discussing the process of memorization, the panel will comment on the validity of memorizing

music today as well as offer tips and strategies for improving memorization skills.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

All musicians have experienced performance anxiety at one time or another. So what are the mental skills we need to help us relax, have fun, and enjoy our performance? According to She-e Wu in her excellent article “How to Reduce Performance Anxiety and Enjoy Being Yourself on Stage,” “The most important way to avoid anxiety is to be prepared. Many of the problems performers experience are caused by improper preparation.” She also emphasizes defining whether problems are physical or mental. “Ask yourself, ‘Am I having physical trouble playing the notes, or am I confused as to what notes I am supposed to play?’” As for ways to reduce performance anxiety and stress, Wu suggests, “If someone asked me how to become a better reader, I’d say ‘Read more!’ The more we perform for people, the easier performing becomes. Imagine performing on a regular basis; performing would become just one of the things that we do every day!”

Performance anxiety sometimes results from choosing to focus on external factors out of our control such as the audience, results, or what other people are thinking. “When you are standing on stage,” says Wu, “there is absolutely no benefit to worrying about what people think of your playing because *it’s too late*. There is nothing you can do but play, so you might as well be yourself...play the way you want to play and be proud of how much you have achieved.”

CONCLUSION

The discussion will begin with opening remarks from the panelists describing the mental skills they use in their teaching. They will then touch on some of the topics discussed here and respond to prepared questions, followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. Some of the questions being considered are:

- What are a few simple processes you can start students with to begin to incorporate the mental aspect of practice as a specific focus?
- What are some of your favorite techniques for mastering the memorization of a piece or group of pieces—for example, for a piece like “Etude for a Quiet Hall” by Christopher Deane that has many sections that are similar with small changes?
- Memorization: should we do it or not? On what occasions should we consider memorization, and what are some techniques to aid in memorization?
- What techniques can you suggest to help overcome performance anxiety and/or teaching students to overcome performance anxiety?
- Since not everyone has access to an instrument when needed, what are some suggestions for developing visualization skills to help with mental practicing?

• How do we as teachers prepare students who have thoroughly prepared—both physically and mentally—to handle unexpected situations and think on their feet?

We hope you can attend “Mental Training in Percussion” at PASIC 2008 and add another tool to your toolbox. No sticks or mallets required—just bring your questions and a sharp mind!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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SYMPHONIC

Ted Atkatz
Symphonic Clinic
Friday @ 10:00 A.M.

Will Hudgins
Symphonic Clinic
Thursday @ 9:00 A.M.

Frederic Macarez
Symphonic Master Class
Friday @ 12:00 P.M.

Stanislaw Skoczynski &
Peter Dabrowski
Symphonic Master Class
Friday @ 2:00 P.M.

US Marine Band Percussion Section
Symphonic Clinic/Performance
Saturday @ 3:00 P.M.

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