

Mental Training in Percussion

Wisdom from the PASIC 2008 Education Committee panel discussion

By Paul Buyer

At PASIC 2008 in Austin, the PAS Education Committee hosted its much anticipated panel discussion, “Mental Training in Percussion.” Our distinguished panelists consisted of three esteemed percussion educators and incomparable leaders in the percussive arts. Panelists included Leigh Stevens, performer, educator, composer, publisher, and inventor, as well as a successful entrepreneur and member of the PAS Hall of Fame; Steven Schick, Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego, and Music Director of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus; and Tim Lautzenheiser, educator, author, speaker, creator of Attitude Concepts, Inc., and Executive Director of Education for Conn-Selmer, Inc.

The purpose of the panel discussion was to learn about the mental game as it relates to percussion education and performance. Some of the discussion topics were visualization, 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 also offered advice on how to incorporate mental training into our teaching.

To quote Dr. Bob Weinberg, Professor of Sports Psychology at Miami University: “Mental training involves training the mind to deal with different kinds of situations. One of the problems I encounter is players who seek assistance with their mental game only when there’s a problem. But mental training needs to be worked on all the time, not just when things are going badly and the big game is coming up.”

The following edited transcription represents the best of what was said at PASIC 2008.

Stevens: For me, the mental part of playing a musical instrument and performing and learning is 90% of the game. The physical skills are really a small part of it if you have the mental part under control. I learned this very dramatically in the first Bach lesson I took with my theory teacher, Dorothy Payne, who was an inspiration to me through my Eastman years. I was playing a two-part

invention for her in a lesson and she said, “Start on measure 13.” Well, I was totally unable to start on measure 13. I knew the piece from beginning to end, my muscles could play the piece at a fast tempo, but I couldn’t play it slowly. I couldn’t start in a different place, and in fact, I didn’t even have the piece memorized. That was a huge wake-up call for me, and [I realized] that I was playing my instrument on a gut-level, a Neanderthal-level if you will, and I really had no chance of being a great performer on my instrument unless I started using my mind.

Schick: First of all, I think this is *the* topic.

This is the most important thing we can talk about. Obviously, percussionists are interested in the issues of sound and technique and repertory, but learning is really *the* thing. We tend to think of the learning process as a way in which we can have impact on a piece of music. That’s really the definition of interpretation: How can we take something that exists and inflict it with our own points of view? But the topic we rarely think about is how can we enter into an engagement with a piece of music in such a way that it influences us? How many pieces do we have [in our repertoire] that we really prize and value?

Not that many when it comes right down to it. A couple dozen might be generous. If you learn a piece like “King of Denmark” or “Psappha,” this is the one time in which you can come into a first encounter with a piece like that in a way that you not only learn it, but it can have an impact on you. And I think that if we don’t

have a sort of mutual influence, then we’ve missed the most important part of our art, and then how will we change in response to the music we play?

The second thing is that the mental aspect of playing percussion music goes beyond music. The most important thing for me is thinking about what separates us as musicians to us as human beings living in the world, or the way in which our mental lives outside the practice room have a really strong impact on what we do in our lives.

Lautzenheiser: [to audience] How many of you have ever taken an audition? How many of you didn’t do as well on the audition as you did preparing? We’re fight or flight creatures; we’re survival creatures, and when we get into that situation and adrenaline rushes into the brain, we really think we may die. We have to learn to control that positive energy so we can connect to the music instead of having a mindset of “let’s just get this done,” without getting hurt too bad. I’ve watched so many people play beautifully in the practice room or in a lesson and then get in an audition and just lock—and then walk right back out and play beautifully again. It’s all that mental energy that we’re talk-



(l to r): Tim Lautzenheiser, Steven Schick and Leigh Stevens

“The mental part of playing a musical instrument and performing and learning is 90% of the game.”
—Leigh Stevens

ing about. I think it’s the most interesting subject in the whole world, and for every profession.

Stevens: For me, one of the most important things about getting beyond the emotions that can put us into a tailspin in an audition, or any high-stress environment, is the fear of forgetting. Being a classical musician and playing from memory almost exclusively in recitals—for me, that was my fear, but I didn’t know the source of it. As the years went on, I began to identify that the source of my fear was the fear of stopping—not being able to continue with the performance on stage. When I identified that was my fear, learning to memorize properly allowed me to go out on stage knowing that there was nothing that was going to stop me.

I had one experience when a gel from the lights caught on fire. I was playing Bach’s “B-flat Prelude and Fugue” when a flaming piece of gel came down and landed on the stage in front of my marimba, and I had the focus to continue and play through the piece—probably the highlight of my entire career! It took many years of hard work to get to the point that I knew the piece so well that nothing could stop me from getting

through it. When that fear was eliminated, I was liberated. I could walk out on stage and focus on music and other performance aspects and not have that terrible adrenaline overload.

Schick: I think it’s good to trust our memory to a greater extent than we do. Forgetting is not the absence of something, it’s what you’re doing instead of remembering. If you think of the forgetting as “that’s the activity that you’re engaged in at the moment,” rather than remembering, then it becomes much more an issue of behavior modification rather than a weird ritual in which you have to invoke the spirits in order to remember. It’s a process that everyone can address in a very logical way.

Lautzenheiser: If you look at Maslow’s scale, the minute survival is threatened, everything else is pushed aside. In that moment of, “I’m afraid I’ll forget,” that’s what’s prime in your mind, and the mind leads itself in the direction of its most dominant thoughts, so we forget. How do we teach kids to be at ease performing? It’s probably going to be in smaller bites [so it becomes more manageable].

Stevens: As percussionists, we are kinesthetic people and we are attracted to this whole field, to a certain extent, because we like the feel of it. That is, in fact, the flipside of where I want to be preparing a piece. The muscular memory is going to be there. It doesn’t take any special work or attention to develop that. The other side of the coin—developing the real mental structures to remember—requires work.

Here’s a story. At my very first lesson with Vida Chenoweth, she said, “I’d like you to learn the first movement of the Milhaud

‘Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone’.” When I opened the score, I noticed right away that there were sticking issues. I asked Vida, “What kind of sticking should I use there?” She replied, “Don’t worry about that. Forget about the sticking. I want you to learn the music, not play the piece.” [After much thought, I realized] that’s basically what a conductor does. The conductor looks at a score and imagines the music in his or her mind and learns the music. I was then into a whole different zone of learning that I never really knew about before. I learned [the Milhaud], and before I ever played the first note, I knew it.

Schick: I think the question of “what do we learn when we learn” is a really important one. One thing we hardly ever talk about is the longevity of pieces. How can you learn a piece in such a way that you are going to play it more than once? What can you learn that will provide the fuel that will drive the piece forward when you’ve played it for 10 or 15 years?

I think of learning pieces as weather systems. My thought is that I resist learning pieces as unchangeable objects where the goal is to “perfect” a reading of the text.

“Forgetting is not the absence of something, it’s what you’re doing instead of remembering.”
—Steven Schick

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One learns then for maximally consistent reproduction. My “weather system” notion is that what one actually learns, on top of the basic information of the text, is a fluid system of interconnected forces. The goal is to develop an understanding of the linkages among interpretative decisions—often ones that seem unrelated: Does a slower base tempo require a different set of mallets? Does a more open roll dictate a change in the shape of a crescendo? The motivation is to create a language, not a phrase book, of interpretation.

If you learn a piece in such a way that you are learning a physical act and your only goal is reproducing that physical act perfectly, then what is the most you can hope for? The most you can hope for is a passing grade, in essence. Great, but then why would you ever do a piece again? If you’ve done it once right, get rid of it! But if we want to play a piece for a longer period of time, then we have to learn the relationships within the piece.

Buyer: *What are some of your favorite techniques for mastering the memorization of a piece or group of pieces?*

Stevens: You have to know yourself and know how you learn. That’s fundamental to teaching yourself how to play a musical instrument. I use an approach called “headwork.” That’s what I call that part of the day when I work on things in my brain. It’s the toughest part of the day for me, and it’s also the most satisfying. I practice silently, sitting or leaning up against a chair behind my marimba, and I visualize what notes I have to play. Going from the first measure to the end of the piece, I visualize on the keyboard what that would look like if I were not using my muscles.

I can do this [mental practice] at about half tempo, hearing the music, and visualizing what notes—what bars—I should be hitting. For me, the most important thing is visualizing what notes I’m going to hit so I can see and hear as if those keys are lighting up on the marimba keyboard. If I can see what I’m supposed to hit, my technique is good enough that most of the time I’m going to hit it. But if I don’t know what I’m supposed to hit, it doesn’t matter how good my technique is, I’m not hitting it!

Schick: I think what we’re all saying is that there’s not a template that can be waived upon the learning or the memorizing of a piece. There’s not a method that says, “If you just do these things, you’ll be fine.” There is such a large variation of individual proclivities in terms of memorizing, that it’s almost impossible to generalize. Some people learn well from a score, other people rely heavily on muscular memory, and others rely heavily

on visual memory. As Leigh alluded, there are a lot of different variations among different human beings, so the method I use works for me, and if it works for you, well then that’s great, but I wouldn’t guarantee it.

My approach allows me to experience a kind of slow-motion time. [I think about] what it will be like for the audience or the listener to experience it in real time. In other words, there’s a sense of discovery of the moments that you care for in the piece, or having “the intelligent management of boredom,” which is a part of every piece. You can have big moments if you have less big moments. It’s an immediate translation from dots into muscles.

Lautzenheiser: I love the way we lie to our college students when we say, “You can’t cram for a test and expect to get an A.” That’s a lie; you can! How many have done it that way? And how many, when the test was over, walked out and said, “Delete; I’ll never use that again.” We know now that, as my colleagues have said here, the way we learn music has to do with how we connect to it and how long it’s going to be there.

Schick: Almost as interesting a question as how we memorize is *why* we memorize. When you watch [solo] musicians playing [using the music], they are [in a way] saying, “I am not making this up,” as though the music stand was a deputized representative of the composer on stage, looking over and making sure [you were playing the music as written]. If you choose to play from memory, you are choosing to essentially face that line between composition and performance. You are choosing to give the impression that you are creating it at the moment. This reverts memory to the kind of classical discussion in which memory can be an ethical or philosophical point of view rather than a skill set.

The absence of a music stand and a score says, “There is no wall, there is no filter between what I am saying and what you are perceiving”. A music stand is not only a

“The way we learn music has to do with how we connect to it and how long it’s going to be there.”
—Tim Lautzenheiser

physical kind of blockade; it is also a signal that somebody else is responsible for this, and I think that’s a big question to answer before you start memorizing.

Stevens: In certain cases, logistics are just so complicated that having this other element there, of having this piece of paper with notes on it, is just in the way.

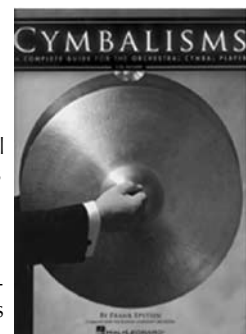
Lautzenheiser: We’re different than any other instrument. Where [other instrumentalists] are connected, and “this is the space,” we’re all over the place. That’s probably what gets us in trouble sometimes! [And in many cases] it’s shifting every time. It’s evolving at the moment. The river’s running; it’s not static.

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