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Developing Your Technical Skills

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A No-Nonsense Strategy for Developing Your Technical Skills

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I constantly find myself giving advice about how to practice basic technical skills. Sometimes it's high school students who are trying to develop and reinforce good habits. Other times it's college freshman who, throughout high school, relied primarily on natural ability but in college suddenly need several hours of practice a day just to

keep up. From beginners, who need to be walked through their practice routine, to advanced players, who are trying to take themselves to their own next level, they all seem to crave direction on how to continue developing their technique.

Often, the literature we work on presents a distraction from improving the very skills needed to perform those pieces with quality. Whether you are practicing exercises, etudes or solos, they each have their own set of approaches and technical demands. Musicians at every level strive to sound "in command" of the music they are performing and the older we get, the more virtuosic we desire to be. Lately, I've been defining a virtuoso as someone whose technique far surpasses the demands of the piece they are performing, therefore allowing them to make fine music. By contrast, if your technical skills only meet the demands of the composition, then you wind up sounding like a "student of the piece you are playing." Of course, if your technical skills fall short of what is required, then you will probably sound in over your head, unprepared or just plain old bad.

The following presents ideas about working technique and continuing to develop basic skills. The advice does not deal with preparing specific pieces, but developing technique obviously has an impact on how well any given piece is prepared. This is a simplified, (perhaps even over simplified) no-nonsense strategy to help you to plan how to get things done.

Components:

Whichever instrument you are working on (snare, mallets, timpani, drumset or any world percussion instrument), you can always break down everything you play into a few basic components. I will use the example of four-mallet marimba playing to explain.

In an over simplified sense, I break down all marimba playing into four main components or primary motions. They are obvious, and they have been explained many times, many ways and are seen in just about every text - including Stevens' *Method of Movement*. They are: 1) basic up & down strokes where both mallets hit simultaneously (coined as "double verticals" by Stevens); 2) permutation strokes (with both double laterals and single alternating strokes); 3) individual strokes (single independent); and 4) expansions (making the interval larger and smaller). Much of the playing we do in our literature is based on any one of these components or is a result of combining two or more of them. In fact, expansions must use either component 1 or 2 at the same time; otherwise you are just moving your sticks in the air above the marimba.

Strategy:

The next step is to use these components wisely with a common sense strategy. The goal is to efficiently develop your technical skills, so you can practice, learn and perform the solo pieces you really want to play. My strategy towards developing technical skills involves recognizing three essential purposes: 1) warm up; 2) maintenance; and 3) advancement. Each purpose uses the same components (four, in the case of 4-mallet marimba playing). The difference is the amount of time it takes, the amount of variety you use with each and the intensity with which you push yourself.

Warm up:

I remember attending a clinic presented by Dave Friedman at an Ohio State University Marimba/Vibe Camp back around 1980. Dave was late to campus due to a delayed flight. When he finally arrived, there was a vibraphone waiting for him with about 40-50 students arched around it. We clapped as he entered, and he said, "Would you mind if I warm up a bit before I play for you?" He started by playing single and double paradiddles at a comfortable tempo using thirds or fourths in each hand, not really worrying about notes - just comfort and getting the blood flowing. After about 30 seconds, the paradiddles turned into rolls and then the rolls turned into arpeggios - nothing fancy, just some diatonic runs using a couple different permutation patterns. This was followed by a few rolled scales and then block chords up and down the keyboard (expansions). He started noodling a bit, and before we knew it, he was improvising over his Etude #25 (from *Vibraphone Technique*). This all took place in about two minutes.

"Warm up" literally means to warm up your hands. Use the four components in a comfortable, basic, non-sophisticated fashion. Get the blood flowing and the muscles warm. Don't think too hard! You probably aren't very focused during your first few minutes of practice anyway, so don't start running through a lot of keys or playing lengthy sequential material. Just make

sure you address each of the basic components. A proper “warm up” should typically only take 2-5 minutes.

Maintenance:

If we don't maintain our technique, we will lose it. Maintenance will use the same four components, but with more time (5-20 minutes), more variety of exercises and more intensity. Ways to use more variety and intensity include: different keys with which you are comfortable, more thorough use of each variation (for instance, permutations: warm up might only need one or two, maintenance should cover all four hand to hand [1234, 1243, 2143, 2134] and the two interlocking [1324 and 1423]), playing at your current tempo limits and combining components in logical and helpful ways. An example of combining components might be to practice each permutation using every interval and with chords moving in parallel and contrary motion. As a student at the University of North Texas, we also made use of the piano book, *The Virtuoso Pianist*, by C.L. Hanon. Many of the fingering oriented exercises applied themselves well to marimba, because the slight reaches and sequences paralleled our own expansion exercises.

Warm up every time you play, but if you are in college, or even high school, and time is limited or being shared by practicing on other percussion instruments, then Maintenance might only be practical 3-4 times a week.

Advancement:

Sometimes we improve with our technical skills simply by repeating them enough and then applying them. That's fine, but it's not always the case. As long as we are active in our performance careers (as a student or professional) we owe it to ourselves and our fellow musicians to advance our abilities. Advancement requires the same four components as Warm up and Maintenance, but with more time (20-60 minutes or more), more variety and difficulty of exercises as practical, and even more intensity - faster tempos, more difficult positions and keys, more challenging sequences or patterns, more combinations, more isolations and endurance. If you can't come up with your own creative variety of exercises, there are a lifetime's worth in Stevens' *Method of Movement*. If you are working to be a total percussionist, you should strive to have Advancement sessions at least once or twice a week - more times if possible, especially if you are a specialist (meaning you focus on one instrument).

Application:

As I said before, this is an over simplified, no-nonsense strategy towards developing technical skills. I'm sure it sounds like many other routines, but when I put it this way to my students, it seems to put things into perspective. The beauty is that it works on every instrument. Snare drum components would include: legato strokes (eighths), hand to hand usage, accent/taps, diddles, stick control and rudiments. I know

that sounds like a drumline warm up, because it is! These components represent our primary motions. We should warm up with them, maintain them and advance them routinely, regardless of performance genre. Similar parallels can be drawn for two mallet playing (legato strokes, sticking, double stops, rolling, velocity and “kinesthetic” or keyboard awareness skills), timpani (tone, stroke types, rolls, dynamics, muffling, sticking and tuning), and drumset (hands & feet, independence, style and time, moving drum to drum, fills and soloing).

Closing:

I remember a motivational speaker saying once (in regard to time management), “Plan your work, and work your plan.” Another said, “The key to success is definitely not luck, and it's not necessarily completing long or short term goals (or even just setting them, for that matter). It often comes down to simply the identification and accomplishment of individual tasks.” Tasks! In this case, each day you should identify the necessary components you need to develop on whatever instrument you are practicing and then define your purpose and strategy. Are you warming up, maintaining your skills thoroughly or advancing them with intensity? Whatever you are working on, having a strategy for developing your technical skills will not only advance your technique but will ultimately help you reach that virtuosic goal of being in command of your instrument, as well as the music you are playing.

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