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c e l l i s t

Essays

On Preparing for a Concert

It happened many times that I was asked how an optimum preparation for a concert by the performing artist might be ensured. I here undertake to point out some of my experiences which provided me with viable backup as regards a convincing performance on stage. There are numerous different approaches, of course, and these can vary considerably, so each musician is bound to ultimately find his or her individual style. My suggestion, thence, is reading this text and finding out what works best for yourself.

Mastering an instrument involves facing a host of psychological processes which occur when practising and performing alike. In a concert situation, a certain mental state can be supportive but may also impair; which state we are in not only depends on the actual circumstances, but also on the proceedings of the past. This means that the way we prepare ourselves beforehand and organize our time controls our well-being on stage. Which aspects, though, influence our performance at last?

Firstly, it is of utmost importance to secure a pleasant frame of mind whilst practising: for one thing, this extends the readiness to learn, for another, this backs up the later performance itself, since we lean on the process of practising which, on stage, will repeatedly spring to our mind. Thus, recalling scores of bad incidents, for instance, would only give rise to more or less pronounced anxieties. Secondly, it is of greatest use to realize the miscellaneous contingencies that may have an impact on the frame of mind and, again, on the later performance itself, i.e. essentially to get to know and learn to handle feelings, reactions and necessities. The following issues can stimulate the frame of mind:

- acquaintance with learning processes and learning principles;
- acquisition and application of learning strategies;
- awareness of educational goals;
- affirmative pedagogy;
- welcoming experiments.

They elucidate the significance of psychological processes in practising.

Let us look more closely into the subject matter. Procuring a detailed picture of a musical text entails layering information in succession, each time increasing its density, and hence its informational value, just as scanning the pixels of a photograph. This furnishes definition in concept and its execution. When practising, familiarity with the functions of our brain and with the way we grasp allows to select learning strategies that are most appropriately tailored to our needs. Applying knowledge of learning principles, moreover, aids to increase the speed of progress, leaving endless inefficient repetitions behind.

Before we start practising, it is advisable to clearly define and verbalize educational goals in conjunction with artistic tasks so as to avoid unsystematic work. It is also wise to take time and describe processes in order to achieve transparency in what we do; remember that spontaneity should be preceded by analysis! When judging the efficacy of practice, it should be borne in mind that we all learn at a different pace and that the individual expenditure of time required for dealing with a certain unit can fluctuate appreciably. It equally helps to note that learning comes about in curves rather than in straight lines: the level of intellectual gain established at the beginning of a learning process will gradually decrease in the course of further work and eventually disappear so that no receptivity of mind remains. Another prerequisite for learning successfully is having patience and, above all, having faith in ourselves. The latter includes accepting mistakes, as they are the most important source of guiding information. Learning success in turn draws heavily on the setting of artistic tasks. But these call for positive designations; so always turn “don’ts” into “dos”! Needless to say that all endeavours can only have an effect if open-mindedness, curiosity and the desire for experiments persist.

Now, when addressing psychological processes in conjunction with appearances on stage, it deserves mentioning the great significance of rituals and the beneficial repercussions of a well-structured period of time before taking the stage. Thus, distinct courses of action encourage the power of concentration. A further, cardinal point here is the interrelation between the muscular tonus and the frame of mind. Everyone will remember skating on ice for the first time. Didn’t we all invariably tense our body out of the mere feeling of anxiety and insecurity? On the other hand, we observe a reduction of tension in our body as soon as we experience joy. It is therefore sensible, in advance of giving a concert, to keep just these phenomena in mind and reserve enough time for slowly fading out occurrences of our hectic everyday life, which otherwise might irritate us during the performance in any way. Moreover, dressing up some time before an appearance on stage, leaving scope for getting used to the outfit, avoids discomfort through cold, unruly clothes and pinching shoes, else prone to affect our mental state too: whilst performing, such harm can not only distract our personal attention but also increase our muscular tension, resulting in a curtailed readiness for body movement which, in turn, may upset technical elements of our playing and, hence, our mental state – a vicious circle indeed!

To conclude, I should like to reveal two mental techniques of preparation, which proved useful for me over the years. In order to obtain a general view of the musical text to be mastered ahead, it is expedient to go through the whole course of the concert in short beforehand so as to develop an “index print” and résumé. Avoiding confrontation with innumerable details that way, we gain clarity, and with it, sovereignty. Emotional balance and full concentration on the body at last, but by no means least, can be achieved by meditation or by walks out in nature to find inner repose – a strengthening as well as inspiring action regarding this universal art, which allows to integrate so much of life.

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