

## How to Memorize a Song or Aria

### The Distinction Between Memorizing and Memory

“The *act* of playing from memory is purely an *automatic* action of the brain. Recalling something means that our brain has formed an automatic sequential action in that respect.

But the act of *committing to memory* is precisely the reverse process—it is a compelled action. In short, the action of the memory is automatic, whereas the act of committing to memory is more or less consciously a wilful one.

Memorizing, from its *physical* aspect, is obviously a change of state in the grey matter of the brain. It may be pictured as the forming of physical fibrous connexions or channels between one brain corpuscle and another—so that when one corpuscle is excited this excitation is transmitted to any other corpuscles that may have been thus connected-up by such physical fibrous channels.

The moral to be realized is, that facts, so long as they are *isolated*, mean nothing. Therefore, to memorize anything, the only possible process is to bring the something you wish to memorize into some form of connexion, progression, or sequence of thought.”<sup>1</sup>

### Memory and Learning

“In the early nineteenth century, the German philosopher Hermann Ebbinghaus demonstrated that the amount of information we retain depends upon the amount of time we spend learning (the “total-time” hypothesis). He also realized that it is more effective to break up the total learning time into short periods (of between fifteen and forty-five minutes), separated by five- or ten-minute breaks. This is the “distribution-practice” effect, and it works partly because of a phenomenon called *reminiscence*—the way in which our memory of something actually improves steadily over a period of several minutes after we have stopped learning it.

Reminiscence is probably a result of the memory traces gradually strengthening. The timescale for reminiscence varies with the type of learning: somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, our memory of a photograph is strongest one and a half minutes after studying it, while our memory of a manual skill is strongest around ten minutes after first practicing it. Distributed learning increases our number of reminiscence periods. Also, when we learn blocks of information, the memories that we create interfere with each other, and regular intervals of rest lessen this effect.

Another learning strategy, applied unconsciously, is *chunking*. In 1956 American psychologist George Miller noted that the short-term memory seems able to hold only about seven items at a time, placing an upper limit on the powers of retention—if we look at a

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<sup>1</sup>Tobias Matthay, *On Memorizing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 4.

scattering of marbles on the floor, we will only be able to hold in our minds the positions of a maximum of seven of them before we become confused. Miller speculated that the short-term memory can hold vast amounts of information, provided that information is organized into no more than seven coherent “chunks”. The brain seems to do this automatically—for example, as children we did not learn the alphabet as an unbroken string of 26 letters, but used rhythm and inflection to divide it into something similar to abcd/eft/hijk/lmnop/qrs/tuv/wxyz—seven manageable units.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Six Kinds of Memory**<sup>3</sup>

1. Muscle Memory. Developed through repetition, muscles retain basic and simple coordinations. When we have good muscle memory, the theory is that we can would allow us to think of other things. However, when we rely too much on muscle memory, it does not hold well under performance conditions.
2. Imagistic Memory. Often neglected, it is the "ability, with eyes open or closed, to play an entire piece of music in detail mentally." Imaging "prepares the mind-to-body hook-up so that the command center is where it should be: in the mind, not the hands!"
3. Visualization. "Using the mind's ability to create pictures."
4. Auditory Memory. "The ability to hear the entire piece in your inner ear without referring to your sheet music.”
5. Visual Memory. "The ability to 'see' the printed page like a photograph, without physically looking at it." The most relied-upon type of memory. Lieberman thinks of it as over-rated and overly-left-brained.
6. Analytical Memory. Using analytical thinking to look at the overall construction of the piece, starting from the smallest details (note names, key and meter signatures, phrasing, form, etc.).

### **Memory Strategies**

#### **Working with the Poem**

1. Pay attention to rhymes.
2. Pay attention to imagery.
3. Pay attention to repeated phrases. Find larger patterns, similar constructions, repetitions.

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<sup>2</sup>Dominic O’Brien, *Learn to Remember* (San Francisco, Chronicle Books: 2000), 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>Julie Lieberman, *You are Your Instrument: The Definitive Musician's Guide to Practice and Performance* (New York: Huiksi Music, 1991), 22-23.

4. We remember songs when they have personal meaning to us.
5. Write or type out the words, putting the poem into its stanzaic form.
6. Memorize key words of each phrase (when memorizing by phrase).
7. Write out the text no fewer than 10 times.
8. Read the text out loud.
9. Memorize the poem first—perform it as a dramatic reading.
10. Subtext—what's the “backstory?”

### **Foreign Language Text—Not just Random Sounds!**

1. Work with the translation.
2. Transcribe the foreign language text into IPA symbols.
3. Foreign language—analyze word roots.
4. Look for cognates and meaning with foreign language.
5. Memorize key words of each phrase (when memorizing by phrase).
6. Speak text in rhythm—find rhythmic identity of the words (stressed syllables).
7. Pretend you are a native speaker of Italian, German, French, etc. Speak the text as a native speaker would ("make friends" with the sounds).
8. Seek larger patterns, similar constructions, repetitions.

### **Score Study**

Mark the note that rises,  
 Mark the notes that fall,  
 Mark the time when broken,  
 And the swing of it all,

So when the night is come  
 And you are gone to bed,  
 All the songs you love to sing  
 Will echo in your head.—Robert Louis Stevenson

1. Dissect the song (analyze form, harmony, rhythm, melody, etc.).
2. Record and listen while studying the score.
3. Notice the details and overall concepts within phrases.
4. Don't leave the score too soon—keep looking at it regularly.

**The Song**

1. Use recordings as a supplementary resource, not as a crutch.
2. Component study: text, rhythm-meter-tempo, melody, form, harmony, dynamics-articulation-expressive markings.
3. Rote repetition in small sections (learn/memorize phrase by phrase).
4. Learn the accompaniment as you would your own part.

**Tips, Suggestions**

1. Act out or stage the song. This memory technique is known as the “Location Method” and has been in existence since the time of the ancient Greeks!
2. Interpretive dance!
3. Work with a friend.
4. Mnemonics (acronyms, acrostics, story cues, keywords).
5. Creative visualization.
6. Color code or highlight your scores or texts.
7. Poetry pictures.
8. Start memorizing from the end of the piece to the beginning of the piece.
9. Make it a game!
10. What learning style works best for you: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or analytical? A combination?
11. Don’t “cram!” Cramming cancels the advantage of regular practice.
12. Memorize before falling asleep at night and then review in the morning. Studies of college students have demonstrated that transfer of knowledge from short-term to longer-term memory is enhanced and when memorization was practiced at these times.
13. “The rule of 3” (or, “the rule of 5”). This is a tried-and-true memorization method that piano teachers have used for years! Work on a long phrase until you can repeat it perfectly from memory three to five times consecutively. Repeat the process with the next phrase. Combine the phrases—this is called “The Element of Progression.” Build by phrases until you sing perfectly, from memory, an entire section of a song or aria three times consecutively. Build by sections until you have memorized the song.
14. “The rule of 10.” Write your song texts and translations out by hand, 10 times. You’ll have it by the 5th or 6th time.
15. “Mindful repetition.” Sing and speak the text repeatedly. Do this while you walk, drive, work out, cook, clean, shower. Have friends quiz you or check your accuracy.
16. Try memorizing while lying on your back. Studies have shown that actors memorize roles faster in this fashion.

17. Visualize the words in the upper left quadrant of your vision (Neuro-linguistic programming has shown that memorization takes place more quickly and more deeply in this quadrant). But, don't sing it with your eyes in that position!
18. Delay gratification: memorize your favorite piece last. Memorize the most difficult music first.
19. What is your preferred learning style? Visual? Visualize the score while you memorize (how many staves on a page, the position of the words on the page, how many pages). Aural? Make memorization tapes (with accompaniments, melody line, texts, cues, etc).
20. If you are using the partitioning or layering methods of learning a song, you are essentially memorizing as you go.

With regard to memory, people may be placed into three different categories:

1. The person who memorized *instantaneously*, and *never* forgets.
2. The one who memorizes *slowly* but surely, but never forgets; and lastly—
3. The unfortunate, who memorizes with much painful labour—but forgets almost immediately.

*Great artists there have been under both of the first two categories. No one suffering under the third should ever attempt a public career as performer—it would only make for life-long misery!*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Matthay, 1-2.