

MINI ESSAY 17: MEMORIZATION

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Children tend to memorize easily using kinesthetic (muscle) memory. However, teachers should be proactive about teaching other kinds of memorization from the beginning of study in order to avoid problems with memory at the intermediate and advanced levels.

Three Types of Memory

There are three basic ways to memorize:

- **Kinesthetic (Muscle) Memory.** Memorizing the physical motions by repeating a piece over and over. The strength of this type of memory can be tested by:
 - ◆ Playing at varying tempos
 - ◆ Playing hands separately by memory
 - ◆ Counting aloud while playing by memory
 - ◆ Playing with the metronome by memory.
- **Aural Memory.** Singing a piece and listening the direction of the melody and the chord qualities. Developing Aural Memory can be achieved by:
 - ◆ Singing while playing
 - ◆ Pattern playback, where the teacher plays a pattern and the student repeats it by ear. Time should be devoted to this at every lesson from the beginning of study
 - ◆ Improvisation
 - ◆ Playing familiar melodies by ear
 - ◆ Practicing solfege
- **Mental Memory.** Mental memory means that the student understands how the piece is put together in terms of structure, form, and keys. This type of memory can be developed by:
 - ◆ Analyzing the form of pieces
 - ◆ Finding patterns in the melodies and key structure of the piece
 - ◆ Analyzing chords, keys, and intervals

A pianist should ideally use all three types of memory for every piece he memorizes. It is very important that these three types of memory are consciously developed from the beginning of study, even if a student seems to memorize "naturally." Most young children do memorize naturally. However, they generally only memorize kinesthetically. Teachers should help the child also understand and memorize the pieces aurally and mentally, so that if the kinesthetic memory fails, the child has the other types of memory to fall back on.

It is a mistake to allow children to only memorize kinesthetically, because when they reach the intermediate level of study or the more self-conscious teenage years, all three types of memory will be required to allow for solid performances that will continue to build a young pianist's confidence.

Memorizing Pieces in Piano Safari®

In *Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 1*, the Rote Pieces are memorized as they are learned. It is left to the discretion of the teacher how many of the Reading Pieces and Folk Songs the student memorizes. However, encouraging the student to memorize as many pieces possible will be most beneficial. A student really knows a piece if he can play it from memory.

One of the reasons why Rote Pieces are so beneficial, beside the fact that they are learned and memorized simultaneously, is that these pieces are built in patterns. The student is therefore memorizing patterns rather than blindly repeating muscle movements. Playing Rote Pieces from the beginning builds the student's confidence in his ability to memorize complicated pieces easily.

For the Reading Pieces, have the student sing and solfege them with you to reinforce **Aural Memory**. Help him discover the patterns in the piece to help his **Mental Memory**. And encourage repetition to activate his **Kinesthetic Memory**.

Memory at the Intermediate Level

At the intermediate level, memorizing a sonatina movement might include the following activities:

- Analyze the form of the piece (exposition, development, recapitulation, and its included themes).
- Analyze the chords and key areas in letter names and Roman numerals.
- Memorize each section of the piece (exposition, development, and recapitulation) hands separately. The student should be able to play either hand by memory in rhythm. This is an absolutely imperative step in studying Baroque music because of the complexity of the counterpoint.
- Play from memory beginning in any section you ask, for example, "2nd theme of recapitulation."
- Play the first themes from exposition and recapitulation back to back. Repeat with second and closing themes.
- Play by memory with the metronome at various tempos, including very slowly.
- Play by memory on a variety of pianos and in different performance spaces. This is helpful for solidifying memory because memorization is place specific. This means that even if the student can successfully play the piece on his piano at home, he may have memory lapses when he comes to his lesson. This shows that the piece is not actually 100% memorized. Playing in various settings will help solidify the memory.
- Play by memory while you create an accompaniment on a second piano.

Only after the student is able to play by memory successfully and securely in all of the above activities can we be sure that the student is ready to play in front of an audience. Even then, he may have memory lapses. These will lessen with the frequency he plays the same piece in front of many audiences. Playing the same piece in many performances, rather than a new piece for every recital, is extremely helpful for building confidence and security in performance. After all, professional pianists play the same recital many times in various venues. They do not prepare an entirely new program for every recital.

I believe so many adults think they are "bad at music," and "lack talent," because they studied piano for a few years when they were small and had a bad performance experience. It may be that they were not adequately prepared for the performance, the piece assigned was too difficult, they did not have enough performances of the same piece to overcome their nerves and feel confident about performing, or a combination of all three of these factors. How much better it would have been for them if they had been 100% secure with their memory on a piece that was well within their capabilities and had had several chances to perform the same piece. They might have continued their piano study and found life long enjoyment in music.