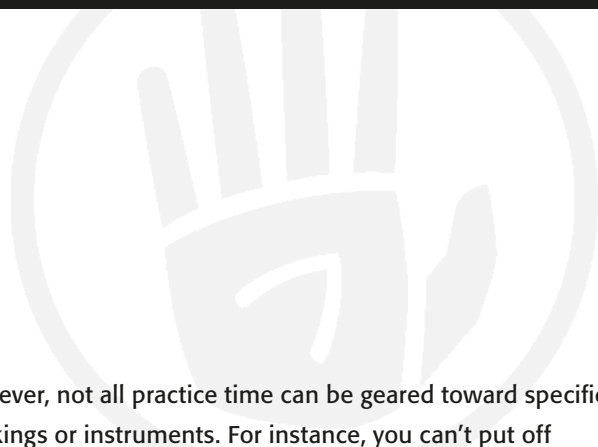




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Success in the Music Performance Industry

Making a success, and a living, in any aspect of classical music is no easy matter these days. Being versatile is a must. Plus, there are special challenges to a multi-percussionist who has to master, and usually transport, dozens of different instruments from each solo, orchestral and chamber booking to the next. I'm typically preparing for about three different programs at once, all while trying to make progress with whatever material I'm planning to record on my next CD. Setting priorities, staying organized and being prepared means everything.

Recently, I had the chance to work with the conductor David Robertson at Carnegie Hall. The concert included a piano concerto by G. Ligeti, which has two of the hardest xylophone licks I've ever encountered. Just the week before, I'd reentered the world of that instrument by playing the xylophone part of Bernstein's Chichester Psalms with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, also at Carnegie Hall. Still, the Ligeti required more than a month of steady, slow practice that I had to get started well before practicing the Bernstein, which was actually performed first. In this case, prioritizing my practice time was essential in being equally prepared for both performances.

When I was a student at Michigan and Juilliard, more than one professor told me, "You'll never have as much time to practice as you do now." A dozen years into my performing career, I've come to realize how right they were. Because of my limited practice time, I find it beneficial to keep a practice diary and schedule on my Palm Pilot. I can better track the various gigs and rehearsals coming up, and am able to plan my prep time accordingly. Developing and adhering to a structured practice schedule has really helped me stay focused and organized for future events.

However, not all practice time can be geared toward specific bookings or instruments. For instance, you can't put off practicing hand drums, and then expect to get back in shape on them in the space of a few days before a gig. That's why, in the midst of whatever else is going on, I try to allow a small amount of time each day to keep up my chops on the various instruments I play by hand. Being well rounded in my practice time is also must.

Everyone in classical music today, including conductors and performers, is under the gun. With limited rehearsal budgets, no one has time to wait for a single musician to catch up to the others. Knowing this, I always request my part, and the whole score, be sent to me as much ahead of time as possible. Doing this, for instance, really saved me earlier on the Ligeti. Only days after that engagement, I had to fly off to do a concert with Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble in Tel Aviv, where I'd be playing not the xylophone, but the darbuka, riq and doira (a Central Asian frame drum). While I'd been performing in New York, the rest of the SRE had been playing in Azerbaijan, and their program had included a new composition. When we all met up in Israel, that piece was still brand new to me, and I knew that this group of super-talented colleagues wasn't going to give me any extra time to get up to speed. So, on the plane to Tel Aviv I studied both the score and a recording of the piece, which allowed me to be that much more prepared for our rehearsals. CD players and iPods have made plane flights a lot more productive for musicians on their way to an engagement.

Like anyone else, I'll stumble from time to time, but I make it my business to be as prepared as possible by the first rehearsal, even if it means the offstage rhythms of my life get as complicated as the ones I've got to perform in the concert hall.