

Crunch Time!

By Anne Sullivan

If it hasn't happened to you yet, it will soon. Your head will start to swim, your stomach will churn – you have too much music to learn!

Every year, performances pile up around the same few weeks. When you add in other factors like family time and the holiday rush, it can seem impossible to find the time to prepare all the music you need to learn. Whether it's music for church services, weddings, parties, recitals, orchestra concerts or just for yourself, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the pressure and the amount of playing you have ahead of you.

So how do you handle it without collapsing under the strain? With just a little organization and planning, this holiday crunch time could be nearly stress-free.

Practice during crunch time requires just two things: clear goals and defined practice time.

The key to setting crunch time goals is to divide your work into small, manageable goals, the way you would slice a loaf of bread into pieces that are easy to eat. These small goals will be intermediate steps on your way to total preparedness. Each piece of music will need its own set of goals, which could include tempo increments (half tempo, three-quarters tempo, full tempo), learning different pages, movements or sections, or memorization.

Next you chart your goals. Here's how this works: At the bottom of a piece of paper, write down the performance date. Use a separate piece of paper for each piece of music. Then moving up the page, write down the dates of each week before the performance. Next decide on your intermediate goal for each week. This should tell you where to start as well as give you a look at the steady progress you want to make and help you organize your practice each day by reminding you exactly what you want to accomplish. Do one goal chart for each piece you want to prepare and then refer to it each day before you start your practice for that piece. You will feel organized and in control, and your practice will be focused and effective.

Let's talk about practice time. The best practice time is "defined" practice time. This means time that you have dedicated solely to practice. It means time that you can reliably schedule at least five days a week. It doesn't have to be hours long, unless you have the time and the need, but it does need to be time you can depend on. Perhaps it could be one hour in the morning after everyone's out of the house, before anything else happens in your day. Or maybe one hour after dinner while the kids do the dishes for you. Or maybe during your lunch hour. But whenever you "define" it, you must make it "definite." Don't give that time away to any other task, or schedule appointments or answer the phone. Don't check your email. And don't fool yourself by thinking you can alter your plans on the fly and practice later instead. Schedule it just like any other appointment, and then keep your appointment.

During your practice time, keep your goal charts in front of you. You can even paperclip them to your music to help remind you what you want to work on. Be sure to work on each piece every day, or if you have too much to fit in to your defined practice time, rotate your pieces so that you can stay on track. Sometimes it can be a good idea to schedule an extra “catch-up” practice session during the week, just to make sure you meet your goals for each piece.

With just this much advance planning and some “defined” practice time, you can face the holiday concert crunch with ease!

One extra tip: Save your goal charts for each piece with the music when you put it away. Then the next time the same repertoire comes along, you’ll have a plan ready to go!

Questions about this topic or another harp issue? You can email me at harpist@annesullivanharp.com. Plus, you can find more articles as well as podcasts and sheet music at www.arsmusica.us.