

“Big Picture vs. Little Picture” by Anne Sullivan

Sometimes we need a vacation to refresh our outlook on our work. Last week, I got the same benefit from someone else’s vacation. This summer I have been teaching Sara, an Italian harp student who is taking lessons from me while she is visiting relatives in Delaware, and she helped me rediscover some important truths about the way we practice.

At home, Sara is expected to have her music for her weekly lesson memorized. Yes, each week. Memorized. And she is only a high school student. (Are you feeling like a lazy American yet?) When I was at Curtis, I knew pianists and violinists who were required to do the same thing, but it was easy to brush that off as being a “different tradition.” (Obviously, I’m one of those lazy Americans.)

My revelation came when Sara and I started to work on some new material in her lesson. I watched her learn, just a measure or two at a time, a passage of a difficult piece of music. I watched her analyze what was on the page, what the patterns were, what she needed to know, and in only a few repetitions, she achieved a level of knowledge about the passage that would stick with her the next day and beyond. She had actually begun learning the piece, not just playing it through.

Before you get too discouraged, especially if you’re one of my students, I’m not advocating a change to the European system. What I saw as Sara worked was the other end of the “big picture vs. little picture” learning dilemma, and I saw how it could help some of my students balance their practice better.

When we play through a piece of music we are trying to learn, we are working on the “big picture.” We are learning about the flow of the piece, its form and structure, its musical presence. If we continue playing through the piece as our only mode of practice, we never learn the intricacies and the details, never see or pay attention to the small mistakes. We play the notes without full awareness, letting the information flow directly from our eyes to our fingers. Perhaps we do some concentrated work on particularly tricky passages, but we try to do efficient practice and not spend time on sections that don’t need extra work. And when it comes time to memorize a piece, we find a lot of holes in our knowledge; parts that we can play easily and thought we knew have not really been learned in any conscious and lasting way, making our memorization spotty and shaky.

In that lesson, Sara was doing “little picture” learning, exactly the kind of learning I advocate in my Learning Music from the Inside system. She was learning **at the outset** the significance of the notes in every sense: their names, their pitches, their patterns, the fingering, the pedals. The care she took in this early learning phase helped her every day as she practiced, increasing her understanding, cementing her memorization, allowing her to work on the technical difficulties without scrambling to read the notes.

For myself and my students, I recommend a balanced approach. I believe the “big picture” playing through the piece serves the important function of helping us learn the scope and shape of the work (or in bigger pieces, the scope of a section of the work). It is helpful to play through a page or two to get the feel of the piece, even as you start a new piece. It helps your sightreading, as well! But learning from the inside, in the “little picture” mode, helps achieve a speedy understanding and proficiency that nothing else can match. Thank you, Sara for reminding me of this essential practice method. Try it today, and you will thank her, too!