



CGU

Classical Guitar University

Technique

VI. Memorization



Technique

6. Memorization

1. Do you normally play/perform by memory?

- If so, why do you choose to do so? If not, why do you choose not to memorize?

2. Do you have any specific methods that help you memorize pieces?

- Please discuss in detail. Do you play from start to finish over and over?

3. How long does it typically take you to learn a piece by memory?

- Please discuss and cite specific examples.

4. Do you ever struggle with memorization?

- If so, how does it manifest? Through random memory lapses? Inability to get a piece started? Do you have music on a stand as a backup?

The Most Powerful Method For Memorization

The mind is a truly powerful instrument; in addition to the soul and the heart, it is one of the places in which music is created.

The mind has a profound ability to visualize. This tool can apply to many different things in life including sports, writing, painting, reading, and of course music.

Chess players can play a game purely in their minds, without a board. Guided imagery, visualization, mental rehearsal, or other similar techniques are used by athletes to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of their training. The great German composer Johannes Brahms reportedly composed his symphonic music purely from his mind's ear. A photo of his home workspace is below.

The Space Where Brahms Composed



Now if you think you're not good at visualization, I want to prove you wrong.

You visualize all the time, and here are just some examples -

- If you like reading, especially fiction novels, you are very good, if not masterful at visualization.
- If you've ever written anything – a paper, an essay, a Facebook post, a book – then you have practiced visualization in your preparation for writing it.
- If you've ever planned out your day, then you are very good at visualizing.
- If you've ever played sports, then you will have used visualization to plan the game, improve the swing, and so forth.

Visualizing can be a somewhat vague word when it comes to practicing, so I want to define it a little and give you two different methods; one a very quick and relatively easy one, and the other a more elaborate one that will take more time and energy.

Defining Visualization

The dictionary definition of visualization is to “form a mental image of; imagine, or to “make (something) visible to the eye.

How can this apply to music making? Here are some ways -

- 1. Form a mental image of the guitar’s fretboard in your mind. See and feel your fingers play through the piece on this mental fretboard.**
- 2. Hear the music in your mind, and try to hear it at the correct pitch - I recommend checking, as this can help your pitch memory and memorization accuracy.**
- 3. Combine the above – see the fretboard and hear the correct pitch in your mind. Once you can do this, you can practice anywhere, anytime!**
If you’re having a boring day at work, or waiting for the bus/train to arrive, or sitting on a plane, you can practice on your imaginary guitar.
- 4. Using only the score, practice with your brand new mental guitar.**

Mental practice is limitless; you no longer have the constraints and limitations of your physical body to hinder your imagination. You can imagine the most ideal, supreme, and flawless rendition of your music. You can imagine several different ideal, supreme, and flawless renditions.

Mental practice doesn’t have to be limited to full renditions of your pieces - you can practice any method you desire in your imagination.

Visualizing in small doses during practice

All that is required of you is to hold your instrument and not play it!

It’s so easy when the instrument is in our hands to switch off the mind and become finger moving machines.

Break this habit by visualizing what you’re about to practice on the guitar before you play it. Play it in your mind - musical, flawless, and beautiful. Then do your best to transfer that onto the guitar. Do this for small bits of material, like phrases and short sections.

Perhaps later on you can try and visualize an entire piece once in full, and then play it on the guitar. If you can do that, then you can be pretty confident that the music is deeply internalized and memorized.

The Most Powerful Method for Visualization

I'm now going to show you the method I've used and found to be very powerful for visualization. It actually relates to a practice that was common in the 19th century and prior. Composers often copied out scores by hand in order to learn about good composition. This was done by composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, and it is now a forgotten practice. If they did it, why aren't we doing it!

Luigi Cherubini was the director of the Paris Conservatoire from 1822, and was a highly regarded composer in his day – Beethoven thought Cherubini to be one of his greatest contemporaries! In 1835, Cherubini published a treatise on counterpoint and fugue, and in it he wrote:

“I would induce the pupil who aims at becoming a composer, to read, and even to copy out, with attention, and with reflection, as much as he can of the works of the classical composers particularly, and occasionally those of inferior composers, with the view of learning from the former what mode he is to pursue for composing well, and from the latter, in what way he may avoid the contrary. By such a proceeding, frequently repeated, the pupil, in learning to exercise his ear through his sight, will gradually form his style, his feeling, and his taste.”



The method is as follows

1. Grab some blank manuscript paper. If you don't have any, download a page from below and print it out.

2. Choose either a short piece, or a section of a longer piece (you don't have to start at the beginning). I would recommend no more than one page worth of music.

This should be something you are already relatively familiar with.

3. Write out the music on the manuscript without the aid of your instrument or the score. You will be surprised how long it takes you to write down one measure.

4. If you do get stuck, try as hard as possible to keep going before you give up. If you can't go any further, then go to your guitar first and try playing from the place you got stuck.

If that doesn't work, then use the score to refresh your memory.

5. For an extra challenge, write out all markings as well.

This includes fingerings, dynamics, tempo indications, repeat signs, etc.

From my experience doing this, you really do exercise your ear through your sight, as Cherubini put it.

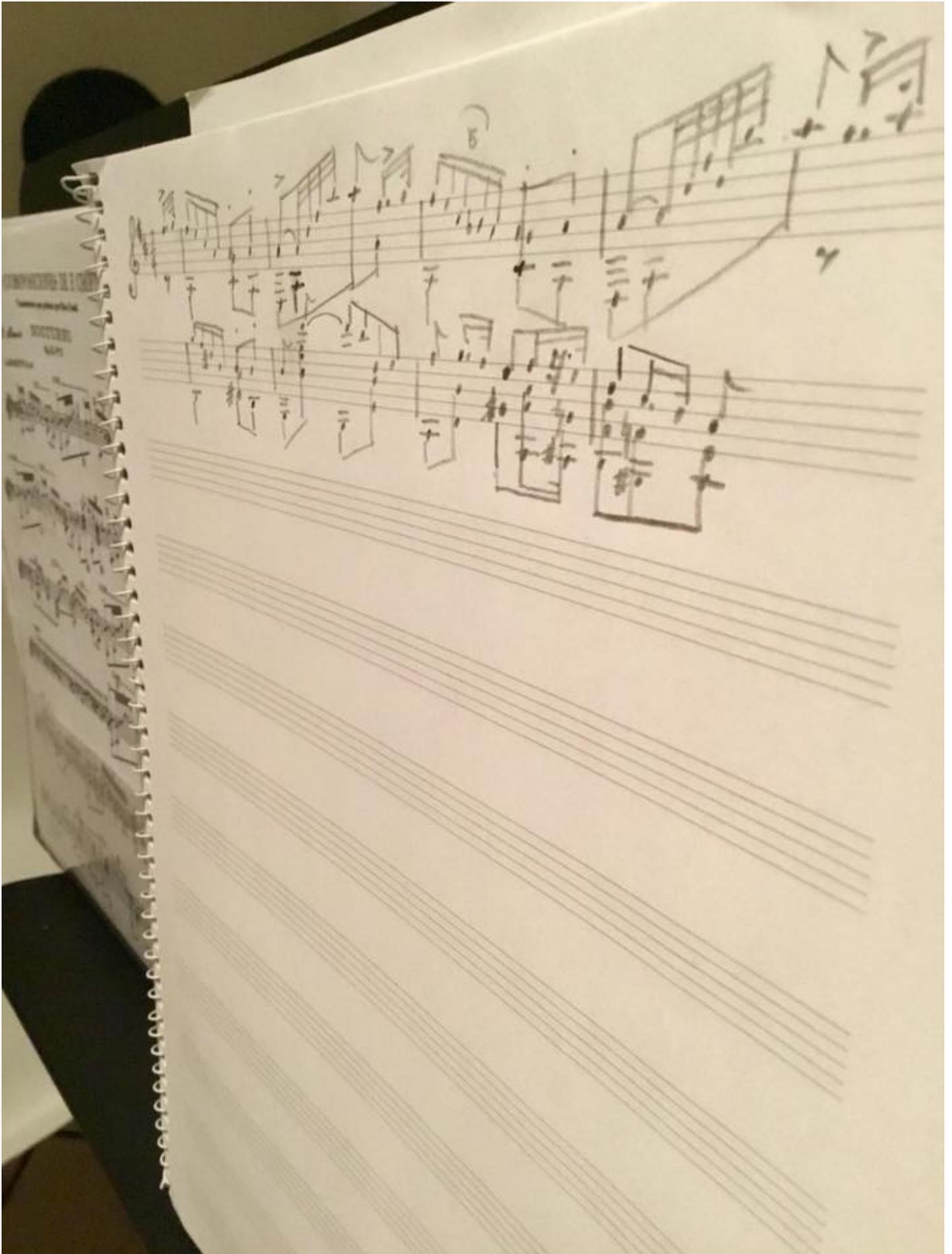
In some ways you feel like you're composing the piece, seeing all of its intricacies and structures that would usually go unnoticed from just playing through. By this process you are deconstructing and then reconstructing the piece, all from your mind. Putting it on paper ensures that what's in your head is actually correct, and it also allows you to reflect on the music you just wrote down.

This is not just a useful tool for memorizing, but it can help with many other areas of your playing. You can make your phrases more singing, make your shifts smoother, be more authoritative and affirmative with your dynamics, and use rubato super effectively. This is because you now have thought and intention behind your music making, not just finger movements!

Some old examples of mine that I dug up are below. It doesn't have to be neat (mine certainly aren't!).

You can see that I attempted to write in some dynamics here and there, and I also wrote in some places where I struggled to remember what came next. I couldn't find any examples where I had written in fingerings, but they're around somewhere.

Give this memorization method a go and share your thoughts about your experience



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Handwritten musical score on ten staves. The notation includes notes, rests, and various symbols. Annotations include:

- mp* (mezzo-piano) in the first staff.
- memory* written twice in the second staff, with an arrow pointing to a specific note.
- Viol* (Violin) written in the third staff.
- memory* written in the eighth staff.

The score is densely written with musical symbols and some corrections or additions.