Learning Time Out of Mind

James Risdon
www.jamesrisdon.co.uk

This is a revised version of an article first published in the Recorder Magazine in 2009.

Introduction

Alan Davis taught me for many years, and shared a personal interest in the topic of memorisation. Alan was the first person who challenged me to think about how we memorise music, and his ideas have shaped my thinking greatly.

At the time I commissioned 'Time Out of Mind', Alan Davis had just finished preparing the entire set of Frescobaldi *Canzoni* to memory in readiness for teaching on a Summer School. 'Time Out of Mind' owes much to this genre, including the structure of several short alternating sections in different meters and the culmination of the piece in a lively and characterful dance. The genetic make-up has inevitably altered in the intervening 350 years, and the use of tone rows, irregular time signatures and hints of jazz among other things give the work a distinctly twentieth-century flavour.

The stages of memorisation

The stages described below are by no means the only, or even the best, way. The process for me as a blind musician may include several steps which a sighted musician may not require, and there may be elements missing from my account which sighted musicians find helpful. Not all the stages below may be equally applicable to other pieces.

Stage One - Familiarisation

As there was not a Braille version available at first, I decided to immerse myself in the audio. I listened to it over and over again, whilst cooking, whilst on my commute, and perhaps most importantly just before going to sleep. This process builds up a passive memory of how the piece actually sounds. Many of us learn through this process of osmosis: Even those who claim not to be able to play a note from memory would probably make a good go of humming a familiar piece and may well even hum it in the right key.

Almost without realising, I was able to learn the final dance-like section and coda in this way, perhaps unsurprising as this is the most melodically memorable section. I then went back to the beginning, splitting the first section into four short phrases, playing them first with the audio and then on my own. The braille score soon followed.

Stage Two - Analysis

The idea here is to build up a map of the harmonic and melodic structure. Don't worry, we're not talking A-level analysis here, and no one is going to test you; just look for any themes, motifs, patterns or interesting features or anything that will help you plot your route through the piece. For me, the first and second sections were broadly similar, perhaps with a lighter character in the second. The middle section stood out because of its minimalist texture and fragmented recorder line. The fourth section featured two patterns

set against each other, one in five and one in seven. The final section was a dance in 7/8 time.

Stage Three - Memory by Association

Taking a technique used by memory experts for remembering apparently random sequences, I experimented with developing a scenario for each of the five sections, with the piano and recorder as the protagonists in a set of random scenes. For example, I thought of the second section as an argument between piano and recorder reminiscent of young children snatching the theme from each other like a toy car. Eventually the smug piano emerges the winner over the sulky recorder.

Not every section suggested strong associations but memorably, the final coda brought to mind a tape measure being sprung back into its holder as the meter accelerates from 7/8 to 5/8 to 3/8.

Stage Four - Muscle Memory

Many musicians talk about "muscle memory". Of course, the memory is not in our fingers, but in our brains, it just appears this way as our fingers eventually seem to run on autopilot, especially in fast passage work where our brains cannot possibly process each note and finger movement as individual commands. Whatever the science, this is the part where things become interesting for me as my visual and sinaesthetic memory kick in. I have always seen musical notes and fingerings on the recorder in shades of colour. Interestingly, fingerings and notes are independent, so that the fingering for the middle F on a treble is the same colour as a C on a tenor or descant. Thus, the opening six notes of the middle section were not just random pitches but were immediately set in definite, if indescribable, shades of colour for me.

Stage Five - Visual Memory

Although braille is a tactile code, I visualise braille dots as others may visualise the printed notes on a score. Not only the braille dot patterns, but their location on the page also helps me to recall what I have read. I made a mental map of the piece as a whole and of each section. I soon had all but the middle section securely learnt.

And so I had just 22 bars left to learn, but not any 22 bars. These were 22 bars nominally in 7/4 with a sequence of piano chords over which the recorder has a "quasi improvisando" line, almost like a minimalist jazz riff. At first I found this section very hard to internalise, particularly as the melodic line didn't seem to fit naturally into 7/4 time. Once I had a Braille score to study I realised the whole section is an elaborate mirror image, pivoting on an F natural, the only one in the section. This was progress of sorts, my workload had immediately halved without me learning a note, but I was still struggling to commit it to memory. Alan's very sensible advice was "ignore the bar lines and stop worrying about where in the bar you are." Counting notes that are either 4 or 8 beats long was far easier than remembering where I was in a 7/4 bar over a featureless accompaniment.

Luckily I was blessed with either very deaf or very polite neighbours who claimed not to have heard my repeated practice of this section with the accompaniment. After several near misses, I eventually landed on my final note of the section, to use the late Humphrey Lyttleton's expression, within a gnat's crotchet of the right place!It was time to rehearse

with a real human accompanist and turn the theory of what I had learnt into a living, breathing piece of music.

Stage 6 - Full Circle

It occurred to me at this stage that the learning process had come a full circle. I had started listening in sound, then studied the score via the symbols in the notation, and had now returned to thinking in sound. The underlying information gleaned from the notation had turned the sound from analogue to digital. To use another analogy, I had stripped the scaffolding away to reveal the architects vision, not as individual bricks but as a whole building.

Footnote

‘Time Out of Mind’ is a fascinating and challenging addition to the repertoire for recorder and piano, and exploits the full colour of the tenor recorder. I look forward to many more performances to come.
Time Out of Mind is available from Peacock Press.