

TINA'S COLUMN NOVEMBER 20, 2018

PRACTICE HACKS—Is that what it's all about?

When I first started The Practice Project I thought the job was simple enough; to teach people Practice Hacks to help them learn hard music. Right? There's a nifty 7-part process to follow, something like this:

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

- Define the problem
- Analyze the problem
- Identify potential solutions
- Try them out
- Implement the best one
- Monitor the results
- Switch potential solutions as needed

So my task would be to help players find the right solution for each problem and teach them how to implement it.

Except, we kept hitting a snag at step one; people not only had trouble isolating the problem--once they did, they didn't have the language to define it.

It turns out that most of us were never taught the nuts and bolts of how music is constructed. If people had studied music theory at all, they learned key signatures, time signatures and maybe something about modes. Hey, as a kid I took 11 years of music theory lessons from a Nadia Boulanger disciple (imagine getting your school basketball team coached by Magic Johnson; her students were that big a deal in the 1950s). And I never learned anything that helped me play a piece differently, much less, better.

It wasn't until graduate school at NYU that I found someone with a useful method of analyzing what happens during a piece of music. A folksy professor with a bow tie, Jan LaRue, had just written a book called Style Analysis. It made sense for any kind of music, and I'd like to introduce it to you. Its acronym is SHMRG, asks you to describe:

S-How does this piece of music Sound? What does it start with?

And then, discussing the three building blocks of music:

H-During the piece, what happens with its Harmony?

M-Its Melody?

R-Its Rhythm?

Finally, discussing the form or structure of the piece:

G-Overall, how does it Grow? And how does it end?

LaRue's premise is that like a recipe, each piece of music is made up of a particular combination of elements. There's usually one, fundamental generative element, like flour in a cake. It's flavored by the others.

Want an example? What's the generative element at the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth? Would you say melody? I'd say it's rhythm. Without that distinctive rhythm, the melody isn't half that effective.

For a piece with a melodic foundation, how about "Bali H'ai"? Or maybe Bernstein's "Maria"? One with a harmonic foundation might be Pachelbel's Canon, based on a repeating bass pattern that gives shape to the melody.

In most pieces all three building blocks are there, just in different proportions. There are exceptions; a Gregorian chant has very little rhythmic element, a drum circle has little melody or harmony.

That's probably enough of an introduction for now. Yes, it's an over-simplification, but it cleans up good. In a few weeks, David McGowan and I will put up a video on the Practice Project page showing how the different elements of SHMRG function in a piece, and what they tell you that help you make performing decisions about tempo, articulation and phrasing. Once you have performance goals and start working towards them, you'll come up against those problems that need solving. There we are, back at our practice hacks.

Tina