

# Percussive Notes

The Journal of the Percussive Arts Society • Vol. 51, No. 5 • September 2013

## PASIC 2013 Preview



N. Cameron Britt



Steve Fidyk



PHOTO BY MINDY BUSH

Andrei Pushkarev



Scott Kettner



Meehan/Perkins Duo



Maria Finkelmeier



Chain Marimba Trio



John Yost



Alessandra Belloni

PHOTO BY MARQUERITE LOSIMER

# The Path to Mastery

## Practice Like the Pros

By Colin Hill

Success in nearly every field is commonly attributed to some combination of innate talent and hard work. There are those who argue that mastery is predominantly a consequence of innate talent and believe achievement of true virtuosity is only attainable for those born with extraordinary physical and mental characteristics. On the other side of that debate are those who believe that mastery is only possible for those who have a relentless drive to achieve, manifested through countless hours of hard work and dedication.

Every year that I attend PASIC, I am amazed and inspired by the incredible ability and innovation displayed by our industry's top percussionists. How do these individuals achieve such mastery? Were they born with an extraordinary level of innate talent or is their achievement primarily a result of tenacious practice and perseverance? I decided that asking the masters themselves was the best way to try to answer these questions. How do the current masters practice? How do they prepare for performances? What habits and methods do they credit most for their success?

I had the opportunity to interview many of our industry's most successful performers and educators in order to explore their personal practice habits. During the past three years, I conducted 36 interviews with percussionists at various stages of their careers and in diverse areas of expertise. This group ranges from young virtuosos to legendary hall-of-famers, and from seasoned orchestral players to in-demand soloists. By including a wide range of classical percussionists, I hoped to reveal those practice methods and philosophies shared by all great percussionists.

The 36 percussionists I interviewed were Joakim Anterot, Jason Baker, Kevin Bobo, Michael Burrirt, Thomas Burrirt, James Campbell, Omar Carmentates, Gary Cook, Christopher Deane, Brett Dietz, Matthew Duvall, I-Jen Fang, Mark Ford, Andy Harnsberger, Anders Holdar, John Lane, Julie Lacata, Frederic Macarez, Brian Mason, Payton McDonald, William Moersch, Jason Nicholson, Brian Nozny, John Parks IV, Paul Rennick, Emil Richards, Steven Schick, Robert Schietroma, Joshua Smith, Gordon Stout, John Tafoya, Blake Tyson, Michael Udow, Ben Wahlund, Eric Willie, and Brian Zator.

What I discovered was unexpected: Their practice habits are as unique and individual as their playing styles. Not



COLIN HILL  
Professional Development  
Thursday 10:00 A.M.

only were countless methods, techniques, and philosophies successfully utilized, but many of their habits and preferences were in direct contradiction with each other's. However, the closer I examined the data, one commonality did emerge. All 36 interviewees exhibited an extreme devotion to practice, a discovery consistent with other studies done on the topic of high achievement. These studies are not limited to music or to any specific field, but were collected under the umbrella topic of success.

### 10,000 HOURS

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell studied the practice trends of highly successful people. The closer he studied the habits of the most gifted and successful, the more evidence he found that innate talent routinely played a much smaller role than preparation.

In the field of music, this premise is supported by a series of studies done in the early 1990s by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson.<sup>1</sup> His team studied violinists at the Music Academy in West Berlin. The violinists were divided into three groups. The first group was comprised of the Academy's "best violinists." According to the professors, these students were most likely to become world-class soloists. The second group was made up of the "good violinists," and the third group, "music teachers," consisted of violinists from the music education department of the academy who exhibited less skill than their peers.

The individual practice hours of all participating violinists were added up, and the "best violinists" had, on average, totaled 10,000 hours by the age of twenty, while the "good violinists" averaged 8,000 hours, and the "music teachers" averaged 4,000 hours by this same age.

Ericsson and his colleagues conducted a similar study, this time comparing the practice hours of amateur pianists with professional pianists. The professional pianists were trained at the Music Academy in West Berlin while the amateur pianists were recruited through newspaper and campus ads. When the total hours were analyzed for this data, the results were remarkably similar to the violinists' data. The amateurs, on average, totaled 2,000 hours by age twenty, and the professionals had reached 10,000 hours by about age twenty.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of Ericsson's studies was that among violinists and pianists, there were no "naturals," as defined by musicians who belonged to the top group but practiced a fraction of the time. Similarly, Ericsson and his colleagues didn't find any "grinds"—people who worked harder than everyone else but didn't belong to the top category.<sup>1</sup>

These findings are intriguing, as the existence of "natural talent" seems so obviously apparent in child prodigies. To explore this idea further, consider the most famous child prodigy in music history, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Michael Howe, author of *Genius Explained*, believes that Mozart was really no different than the violinists and pianists in Ericsson's study. While Mozart started composing music at the age of

six and was widely considered a childhood genius, Howe argues that these claims are exaggerated. He points out that “by the standards of mature composers, Mozart’s early works are not outstanding. The earliest pieces were all probably written down by his father, and perhaps improved in the process.”<sup>22</sup>

Further, Howe argues that Mozart’s first seven concertos for piano and orchestra were “largely arrangements of works by other composers,”<sup>22</sup> making his first widely regarded masterwork, containing purely original music, “Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-flat Major, K. 271.” This was not composed until 1777, when Mozart was 21 years old.

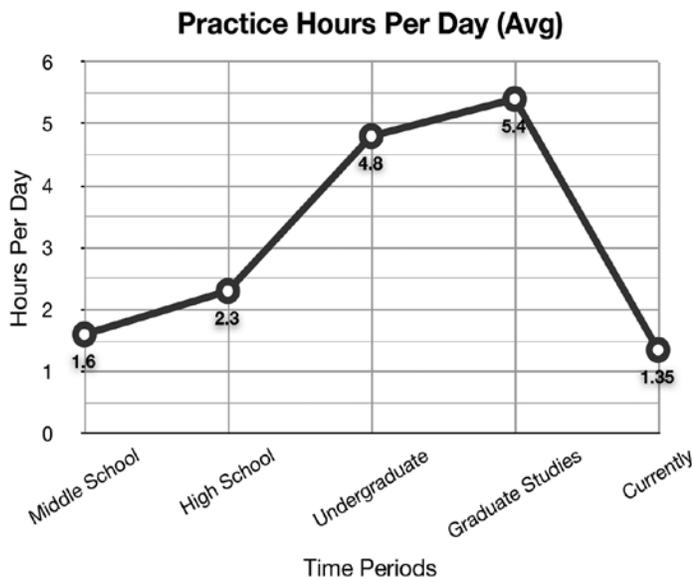
Based on this argument, Gladwell is convinced that not even prodigies are exempt from putting in the necessary practice hours. “Even Mozart—the greatest musical prodigy of all time—couldn’t hit his stride until he had his 10,000 hours,”<sup>23</sup> said Gladwell.

### PERCUSSIONIST INTERVIEWS

So how do the percussionists interviewed compare? Does the 10,000-hour rule seem to apply to mastery in this field of study as well? Each of the percussionists was asked to estimate the number of hours per day they spent practicing during various time periods of their lives, from middle school to the present time. In all 36 cases, the numbers were amazingly high, and in a few cases, the numbers were astonishing.

Figure 1 shows the average number of practice hours per day of the 36 percussionists during various time periods of their lives.

Figure 1



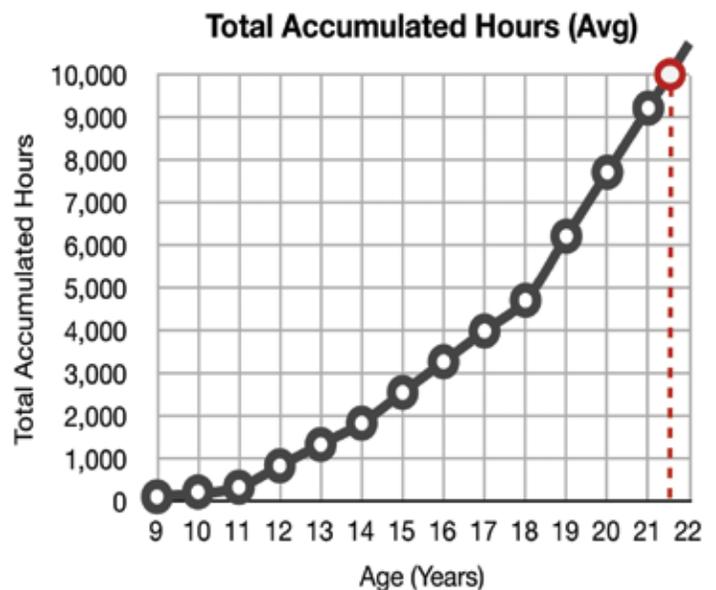
On average, the 36 percussionists interviewed started playing percussion at nine years old. When their daily practice hours are totaled, they reach 10,000 practice hours by an average age of 21.5 years. (See Figure 2)

### ENVIRONMENTAL LIMITATIONS

When comparing the statistics of Ericsson’s studies, the age at which Mozart composed his first masterpiece, and the 36 percussionists interviewed, one very interesting trend emerges. The 10,000-hour milestone is typically achieved around 20 years of age.

That is an enormous amount of time to dedicate to a single activity, especially as a child and young adult. For this reason, Gladwell believes that not everyone is capable of achieving 10,000 hours. “You have to have parents who would encourage and support you” because it is “all but impossible to reach that number all by yourself.” In addition to requiring family support, “most people can reach that number only if they get into some kind of special program...where they get some kind

Figure 2



of extraordinary opportunity that gives them a chance to put in those hours,” said Gladwell.<sup>3</sup>

Accumulation of this many hours requires extreme devotion, which may also explain why it is routinely reached at such a young age. The typical obligations of adulthood—work, relationships, and families—greatly reduce an individual’s ability to practice. For this reason, it can be reasonably concluded that if 10,000 hours are not achieved before starting a career, the attainment of mastery may never be reached because the player simply will not have sufficient time to practice.

This notion was widely supported by the percussionists interviewed, with most indicating that once they finished their education and started their careers, practice became an activity of maintenance, not improvement. The quantity of time they were able to spend in the practice room was barely enough to sufficiently prevent them from *getting worse*. Most indicated they were no longer getting better at their instrument, but simply maintaining the skills they had acquired through college. This can be correlated to the immense drop-off in practice when comparing their average practice hours during college to their current practice hours. To put in perspective the severity of the drop-off, the percussionists interviewed currently practice less per day than they did when they were in middle school.

It is a common misconception among young musicians that they have their whole lives to get better. The truth is that players likely reach their greatest skill level when they complete their education. Once careers are underway, only a fortunate few are able to avoid a long, slow decline in their playing abilities. Students often take the attitude that “I’ll practice it later” or “after I graduate I’ll learn to do that.” The harsh reality is, they won’t. High school and college is the time to practice and improve their skillset, and once that time has passed, the opportunity to get better is likely gone forever.

The irony of this realization is that many of the percussionists interviewed confessed that they did not discover how to most efficiently practice until later in their careers, when time was truly at a premium. While finally mastering the art of practice is a tremendous accomplishment, the window in which this skill would have proven most beneficial had long expired.

It is clear that in order to be a successful percussionist, one must put in the practice time. Statistics strongly indicate that there is no substitute for putting in at least 10,000 hours of practice early in life. However, *how* these hours should be best spent is much less certain.

Developing an ideal practice method is a highly personalized process that requires years of fine-tuning. Every individual learns and functions

differently, and declaring any single method “the best” is wishful thinking. Finding that unique combination of methods and philosophies that is ideal for an individual may take years. One may feel certain that the system he or she currently utilizes is ideal, but until other preferred, proven techniques are investigated, that belief is almost certainly self-limiting.

The findings from these 36 interviews with world-renown percussionists should be very useful to players, helping them acquire methods and techniques that may otherwise take a lifetime to develop or discover. The interviews explore all aspects of the practice process. Topics such as planning practice sessions, warming up, learning new music, practicing problem spots, memorizing music, self-critiquing, and preparing for a performance are thoroughly discussed.

These findings will be presented in my 2013 PASIC clinic, “Practice Like the Pros.” This clinic will cover a wide range of methods and philosophies that have each led to highly successful careers, exposing the audience to wide-ranging practice ideas that could prove ideal for them and their students.

#### ENDNOTES

1. K. Anders Ericsson, et al., “The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance,” *Psychological Review* 100 No. 3 (1993): 363-406.
2. Michael J. A. Howe, *Genius Explained*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University press, 1999, 3.
3. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2008, 42.

**Dr. Colin Hill** is Visiting Percussion Instructor at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky and Adjunct Percussion Instructor at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, Tennessee. Colin performs regularly with the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, BluHill Percussion Duo, and XPlorium Chamber Ensemble. He holds degrees from the University of Kentucky, Indiana University, and the University of North Texas. **PN**

## ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCES

**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE**  
Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Thursday 10:00 A.M.

**ENSEMBLE EVOLUTION**  
Ensemble Showcase Concert . Thursday 12:00 P.M.

**CONCORDIA COLLEGE—MOORHEAD**  
New Percussion Literature Session . Thursday 4:00 P.M.

**SCIENCE HILL HIGH SCHOOL PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE**  
Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Friday 9:00 A.M.

**INDIANA UNIVERSITY PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE**  
Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Friday 10:00 A.M.

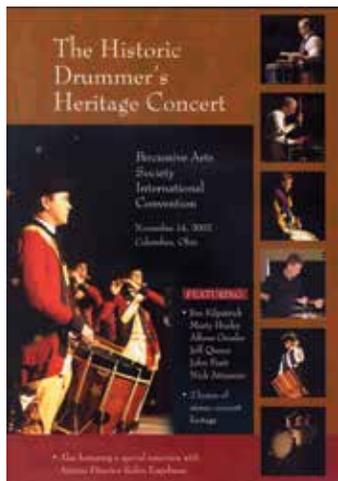
**TAK-NARA PERCUSSION TRIO**  
Ensemble Showcase Concert . Friday 11:00 A.M.

**UNIVERSITY OF IOWA EAST WEST PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE:  
STEEL BAND AND CHINESE PERCUSSION**  
World Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Friday 12:00 P.M.

**LOS ANGELES PERCUSSION QUARTET**  
Ensemble Showcase Concert . Friday 2:00 P.M.

**COPPELL HIGH SCHOOL PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE**  
Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Saturday 9:00 A.M.

**EASTMAN PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE**  
Ensemble Competition Showcase Concert . Saturday 10:00 A.M.



## Drummer's Heritage Concert DVD

*Filmed at PASIC 2002, the Historic Drummer's Heritage Concert celebrates the power, pride and glory of field drumming.*

**Order Online: [www.pas.org](http://www.pas.org)**

\$30 non-members . \$24 members plus S&H