

# *Don't Remember This*

## The Art of Extemporaneous Learning

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### MISTAKES

#### Part Three of Three: Saturation

It's rational to avoid a mistake if you can, and if not, to learn from it and move on. Yet a discouraging episode could also lead you to the best discovery of your career, and that's what happened to me in June 1993 when my first child was four months old.

At thirty-seven I was so tired from pregnancy and breastfeeding that I could hardly do the housework, much less practice the cello two to five hours a day as I had been doing for the past twenty years. I knew exactly how to practice: begin with a strict warmup including open strings, slow scales, bowing variations, trill exercises, finger patterns, and other drills. Follow this with etudes to strengthen weak areas such as vibrato, tone, and rhythm. Finish up with a new piece as well as orchestra and chamber music, depending on my schedule of upcoming performances.

But that summer I was so exhausted that I never managed to get beyond the most rudimentary warm-ups: a few scales and exercises plus one slow piece, the second movement of the Boccherini Concerto in B-flat major. Although dismayed by the narrow scope of my routine, which was not even enough to maintain sufficient stamina for the 2½ hour Wyoming Symphony Orchestra rehearsals I'd be facing in the fall, I was happy to play the Boccherini every day because it is so beautiful.

I soon mastered it, and that was when I started worrying. Difficult new pieces, with their advanced techniques, stretch a musician's ability, and spending half of each practice session on music that had become so easy that I could play it without conscious thought was stagnation, or so I believed. All summer long I

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dreaded the upcoming orchestra season, certain I was losing technique as well as muscle. I expected to flounder through the year ahead.

There's something about the first rehearsal of the season that evokes the last rehearsal of the previous spring. The lighting, carpet, walls, and ceiling are the same. Again you're sitting on the oldest, most battered chair in the room, but it has a flat seat, and this is important for cellists because the right chair can make the difference between a comfortable sitting position and a backache.

Your stand partner sits two feet to your right or left, and some-

where beyond the top edge of your music, the conductor and his baton float in your line of vision. Most vivid is the recollection of how it felt to play. My bowing had been decisive; my fingers sure; my posture balanced; and my arms loose and floating; a state in which almost any motion feels and works right.

Three months later these sensations were as clear in my memory as if that last rehearsal had occurred twenty-four hours before. Everything that was good before had somehow become excellent.

I'd never felt so relaxed and comfortable with the cello. My bowing felt more secure, and all my other motions worked too, from the tiniest wiggle of my fingers in adjusting for pitch to the most sweeping shift.

As I floated through that first rehearsal on this cloud of new sensations, I began to see the source of my progress. After three months of playing the same easy piece, I was more settled than I'd ever been. Repetition had so mesmerized me that my technique responded with a sort of sleepy security and my brain released itself into cello playing as our bodies relax into an easy chair at the end of a long day.

Stagnation? Hardly. The cello felt so good that I nearly forgot I was playing it, and this is the pinnacle all musicians strive to reach.

This was only the first episode in my adventure with monotonous

repetition. Several years later I got tired of the same handful of recreational books that had sustained me for a decade, mostly novels by Dorothy Sayers and Mary Stewart.

Determined to branch out, I consulted a list of Pulitzer Prize winning novels supplied by my public library. I read *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as *One of Ours* by Willa Cather, Edna Ferber's *So Big*, and *The Magnificent Ambersons* by Booth Tarkington.

Then I wondered, This is all it takes to win a Pulitzer? With bewilderment I noted that *One of Ours*, feeble in plot, character, and setting, wasn't even Cather's best. If she had to win a prize it should have been for *O Pioneers!* or *My Antonia*.

I'd read *The Grapes of Wrath* in high school, and on that first reading had failed to notice that large sections of it are nothing but Steinbeck's opinions dressed up in characters that are types, not originals, such as Preacher Casy. Ferber's and Tarkington's stories held my interest but lacked the depth and substance that characterize perfect writing.

Perhaps my choices were the duds in a fundamentally good collection, but I wasn't motivated to dig. I decided I'd rather re-read an excellent book than gamble any more of my time on stories that might or might not be good.

So for an entire winter I read the same eight Mary Stewart sus-

pense novels and Dorothy Sayers's eight best Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries. When I completed this cycle I started again. At times it was boring, but no more so than the Boccherini had been.

As I continued to read, my attention sank below the level of plot and character, and I could simultaneously follow the story and wonder how Stewart could set me down on a lonely road in Crete and make me feel the dust, heat, and wildness of the countryside. Sayers's funny moments are incomparable, and because I knew exactly where they were, I could pay more attention to her setup, and thus figure out how she did it.

But the best discovery struck me from above like a shaft of late afternoon sunlight spotlighting a patch of sagebrush on the Wyoming prairie. I was coasting through Sayers's *The Nine Tailors* for the fourth or fifth time and wasn't even reading the funniest or most intriguing scene. But that didn't matter because suddenly I saw the purpose of the passage: why Mrs. Gates the housekeeper had to be such an insufferable snob; why she had to complain at length to the village constable; and how a minor character could play a crucial role in the plot.

Any good creative writing teacher could have told me all these things, but why would I have wanted to relinquish the fun of discovery? Besides, if a teacher had dissected this scene and presented its anatomy

in detail, my understanding of it would have been incomplete. I'd have seen the parts yet failed to capture the living organism, and worst of all, may never have known the difference.

This was why I assigned the F-sharp major scale to Anna, whose struggle I chronicled in Part Two of this series. Until then I'd spent years teaching the major scale pattern by introducing the simplest keys first: C, G, and D, then easing into F, B-flat, A, and E; and much later disclosing glimpses of the hardest scales, those lions and tigers that chase down students' confidence and devour their comprehension. Under this rigorous tedium my pupils could never achieve their own insights because I provided nearly all the information.

Although I read *The Nine Tailors* fewer times than Anna played the F-sharp major scale, I knew no more about fiction writing than she did about scales or cello playing. But saturation still accomplished more than any teacher could.

Anna quit lessons before the moment of discovery that would have revealed, from the inside of her mind, all she ever needed to know about any major scale, yet early indicators convinced me that she was moving toward it. For too many years I'd robbed my students of true learning and so I finally stopped, giving Anna only the barest hints and forcing her to puzzle out F-sharp major for herself.

When a spark of insight kindles the dry sticks of your thoughts, especially after you've been coughing on the dust for months, the fire of your vision consumes frustration's final shreds and you know you can do anything.

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**by Dorothy Sayers**

The Nine Tailors

Strong Poison

Have His Carcase

Gaudy Night

Busman's Honeymoon

Murder Must Advertise

Clouds of Witness

Unnatural Death

**by Mary Stewart**

Madam, Will You Talk?

The Moon Spinners

This Rough Magic

Airs Above the Ground

Thunder on the Right

Nine Coaches Waiting

My Brother Michael

Wildfire at Midnight