

WHY ETUDES?

BY ANDY HARNSBERGER

For something that is so intrinsically linked to our musical studies and lessons, it is amusing to know that there are still students who are afraid to ask what the word “etude” even means. To some, it might be a word used to describe their “boring” lesson material. To others it might represent a steady pathway to success. So, what is an etude and why are musicians expected to play them?

WHAT DOES “ETUDE” MEAN?

If you’ve been playing an instrument for any length of time, you’re probably familiar with etudes. There are two types of etudes, and they are very different from each other.

The word “etude” is French (*étude*) for *a study*. It is also found in other languages such as German (*Etüde* or *Studie*), Italian (*studio*), and Spanish (*estudio*). Etudes generally focus on overcoming specific technical difficulties. Here is a definition taken from *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*: “A composition designed to improve the technique of an instrumental performer by isolating specific difficulties.”

One type of etude is strictly an exercise. These etudes are generally fairly short, and their main purpose is to develop technique on an instrument. Most etudes focus on only one specific technique, style, or concept and can be simply a series of repeated patterns or gestures. Etudes are usually published in groups (in a book) and are ordered systematically, progressing from easiest to more difficult, covering a wide range of techniques the performer might face. They are valuable for younger students to develop strength and control on the instrument. However, some of them also prove to be quite enjoyable to listen to.

The other types of etudes are what

I like to call “musical etudes.” Some of these etudes are extremely complex and can be daunting for beginning, intermediate, or even advanced players to attempt. They can present a variety of technical features but also many musical challenges that may not be present in “technical” etudes.

The good news is that percussionists have etude repertoire that provides really nice pieces of music to help develop a good foundation of technique yet provides beginners and intermediate level students with music that is rewarding to play. We also have musical etudes that are specifically for the advanced or virtuoso performer and are suitable for the concert hall. In today’s usage, a typical etude in the percussion repertoire probably falls somewhere between an exercise—a short excerpt that is unable to stand alone as a formal composition—and a concert etude—a piece of music that is intended to stand alone as a self-sufficient composition.

For many of today’s aspiring percussionists, etudes are a critically under-utilized part of the curriculum. Warm-ups, exercises, ensemble parts, and especially solo literature dominate the regimen. So why, with everything we already are cramming into our practice time, should etudes be prioritized in the course of study?

WHAT IS AN ETUDE GOOD FOR?

You can get ahead of the music practice game by taking your etudes seriously and realizing that they are far from a tedious add-on. In fact, there are a huge range of benefits. Those who think etudes are boring are on the track to slow progression. Technique is key on any instrument, and realizing the potential that etudes have to improve your technique will put you in the fast lane.

Not convinced? Here are some reasons why etudes should be an integral part of your curriculum.

1. Tone Quality: Etudes are a great way to check the tone quality of every note. Critical listening is important here. How do you want to sound? How is your mallet placement on the bar? Is it consistent from one stroke to the next?

2. Coordination: During practice sessions we have many things to remember, and the really difficult thing is to remember to do them all at the same time (relax, stand up straight, rotate, piston stroke, elbow shifts, etc.). Etudes give you an opportunity to focus on bringing all of those elements together. Once you have learned the notes of an etude, you can make sure that everything else happens just at the right moment to make the technique perfect.

3. Dexterity: One part of learning a keyboard percussion instrument involves training parts of the body to do new things, to repeat them, and then to do them very quickly. Etudes are a great training partner. They will help you refine and improve your speed. Slow careful practice of your etudes at the outset will have you mastering all the techniques of the instrument in no time.

4. Muscle Memory: This is a critical benefit of practicing etudes. When you have perfected a technique in an etude, you will begin to “just get it,” and it will flow naturally from your hands. What you have done is begin to develop muscular memory. This is very useful because when you see this technique or a similar one later, you will be able to rely partially on muscle memory to help you play it correctly.

5. Listening: If you can’t hear what is wrong, you can’t correct it. This is true of all of your practice sessions. Learn to listen carefully and critically when you

practice your etudes and you will start to hear areas where you can improve your other playing. Pay attention to tone quality, articulation, phrasing, nuance, etc.

KEYBOARD ETUDE COLLECTIONS

Here are some examples of some of my favorite collections of etudes for keyboard percussion, both technical and musical. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it could give you an idea of where to start, and how to incorporate etudes into your regimen.

- *Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone* by Morris Goldenberg. This text has been used by generations of orchestral mallet players to develop their skills. Along with the studies and etudes, this book includes excerpts of major orchestral repertoire for keyboard percussion instruments. The latest edition, edited by Tony Cirone, includes phrasings that were inherent in the music but not specifically written out. Stickings are also addressed: the original stickings are in uppercase letters, and the added stickings are in lowercase. This book is a primary source for keyboard percussion players to learn technique and orchestral repertoire.

- *Technique Through Music* by Mark Ford. This is a collection of etudes and also a method. Ford wrote this book for his students at the University of North Texas to be able to focus on one stroke concept at a time. It includes an accompanying DVD.

- *Impressions on Wood* by Julie Davila. This collection of 10 etudes for marimba has an accompanying CD and mini-lessons on YouTube.

- *Three Etudes* by Kevin Bobo. This collection includes three advanced works that focus on different technical aspects: "Tori's Waltz" focuses on single alternating strokes; "Lament" focuses on traditional and one-handed rolls; "Pendulum" focuses on small interval control single alternating strokes.

- Etude Books 1–4 by Gordon Stout. Stout's *Etudes for Marimba, Book 1* includes short, technically challenging pieces for marimba. Each etude is based on a specific technical problem, and this book includes four-mallet and two-mal-

let etudes. *Etudes for Marimba, Book 2* is exclusively for four-mallet marimba. These pieces are lengthier and more difficult than those of Book 1. Exclusively for two-mallet marimba, *Etudes for Marimba, Book 3* is full of moderately difficult to difficult pieces. *Etudes for Marimba, Book 4* contains six etudes: Bartok Seminar Etudes (1, 2, and 3), Zeltsman Seminar Etudes (1 and 2), and Stevens Seminar Etude. These should be playable by almost any college-level marimbist or younger and are scored for 5-octave marimba.

- *Vibes Etudes and Songs* by Ney Rosauro. This text contains dampening studies, pedaling studies, and solo pieces for the development of basic vibraphone technique. It is also possible to practice improvisation with some of these pieces, as some of them have an extra part with chords only, to be performed by a second mallet player (marimba).

CONCLUSION

Etudes are a link from practice to performance. They provide a musical application of the techniques we drill in our exercises. They also provide the opportunity to create and execute your personal interpretation of an entire musical work. A wealth of etude literature is available to cultivate almost any technique or other aspect of keyboard percussion playing. I encourage all to explore that repertoire and its benefits, and to tap into the motivation and momentum that this musical pursuit can provide.

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