Through pattern recognition, mental cueing can help you play complex parts, and learn them faster to boot. By Norman Weinberg

FOR YEARS I’ve been looking for the source — some sort of mental magic trick that will make playing percussion instruments easier. My students seem to want to find it, too, and I’ve always wished I could tell them something like, “just think about ‘red feathers’ during this difficult passage and the music will automatically play itself.”

Well, believe it or not, I think I’ve found the answer, and while it’s not quite as easy as just thinking about “red feathers,” once you grasp its concept it’s very easy and it does work. This secret was first pointed out to me several years ago during graduate school. There I was, sitting on the window ledge in the lobby, doodling flams on a practice pad, when a fellow student came up and gave me some advice. He told me to pay attention to the up strokes. He said that if I concentrated on getting the “up” strokes up, the down strokes would take care of themselves. I tried it — up, up, up, and to my surprise, the tempo of my turns increased about 20 percent instantly! This experience led me to believe that if you now approach a certain passage mentally it’s just as important as how you play it physically. All I did differently was look at the performance of flams in another way.

You too, know the secret. Maybe you’ve never given it much thought, but you see it all the time — when you learn a new word, a broker’s commission, or your next door neighbor’s name. Since the process doesn’t really have a name, for our purposes let’s just call it “source.”

Cueing is a word stowed directly from the world of drama. When actors learn their lines, they’re still not quite ready for the performance — they must also learn the cues. For example, imagine being some of the actors in a play and you’re supposed to yell “all your money in this paper bag!” When does he actually say the line? How about after the lineseller says, “Why help me!”? The sentence “May I help you?” is the cue for the actor to vocally utter the rehearsed lines. No matter how much the lines are said, if they’re said at the wrong time there’s bound to be trouble.

Let’s apply this same technique of cueing to a musical situation. Imagine you’re playing with a band. You’re in the worst band, but the chorus is coming up and you’ve been practicing a certain fill that will lead the group from the verse to the chorus of the song perfectly. You know that the fill is exactly one measure long, and you’ve practiced it so many times you know just how you want to play it. How do you know exactly when to begin the fill? The cue is to see it on some musical notation within the song.

For example, if the song has lyrics, you might cue on a word which falls on the last beat before the fill and then begin the fill on the next beat. If you’re aware of the structure of the song, you may decide that you’re more comfortable counting the bars that make up the verse leading into the chorus, and begin playing the fill on the eighth one. Perhaps the bass player or guitarist plays a signature lick that cozies up your ear before the fill. In this case, you would play until you heard your musical clue.

The cueing technique is something that all symphony percussionists are familiar with. It’s not uncommon for them to have to sit through sixty or more measures of rest before an entrance. Rather than count all those bars of rest, most players only count during the first several. If they notice the drum kit entering an overtime measure into the rest, they mark their parts in syncopation to indicate that entrance. Then during the other measures, they just keep on rocking and wait for the crystalline. Once they hear it, they can begin counting from measure forty-three.

But you don’t have to be playing in a symphony to take advantage of this technique. No matter what the musical situation, cueing from other musical factors can help you realize a better playing of a passage.

Oh, so now you’re going to use mental cueing to help you play a passage at the proper time. But how about using it to help you play the passage in the first place?

I’ve had students who fidget and slagger over a measure, then believe it’s too late to practice this same measure again. Incidentally, it’s a little like someones trying to exit a room by walking through the wall. When their nose brushes against the surface, they back up and call themselves. “Oh, maybe I’ll go faster,” I’ll make it.” After a running start, the wall is still stronger than they are, and their nose takes another beating. “Now I’ve got this idea! I’ll get a running start, tuck up all my muscles, and make a funny face. Then I’ll get through the wall.” Well, guess what’s going to happen? How many times will they try to get out of the room by using the wall before they try another route? Perhaps a door might be a good idea. Maybe the room only has three walls and they could leave by taking another direction. If that’s no good, perhaps they could crawl over a wall. There’s always an easier way to get out of the room than breaking your head against the wall.

Look at example #1. You might recognize this as pattern number 3 from page five of George Lawrence Stone’s book, Stock Carroll.

When first looking at this exercise, you can quickly see that there’s a pattern play four strokes with your right hand and follow them by four strokes with your left hand. This is an easy pattern to see, an easy pattern to memorize, and therefore an easy pattern to perform. When playing this particular exercise, your speed of performance will not, be limited by this exercise, but instead will be limited by your ability to play four successive strokes with each hand. When playing you won’t be thinking of sixteen individual strokes, you’ll be thinking of the pattern of four or four/left.

In example #2, the pattern of RILLRILLRILLLL (number 11 from Stock Carroll) can be approached as a right hand on counts one and three. Count the syllables for eight notes ("i" and "a") and "i" and "a", put your right hand on counts one and three, and fill in all the holes with your left hand. Again, you’re not playing sixteen notes; you’re playing a single idea.

For a comparison, look at example #3 (number 24 from Stock Carroll). Is there a pattern in this exercise tool? For some reason, almost every one of my students thinks that the
particular exercise is the most difficult one on the page. When I ask students to tell me what's going on, they usually tell me: "right, right, left, right, right, left, etc." In other words, they're looking at this exercise as sixteen individual strokes. Bad idea, they've already hit the wall. Just like examples #1 and #2, let's look and see if there might be an easier way. Can you turn these sixteen different strokes into just a couple of ideas? Looking at the first four groups of example #3, you see a set of doubles (RILL) or "double, double." The next set of four notes (LRLL) happen to be one of the standard twentieth-century rudiments, and is called the parachute. Ok, now try playing the first measure by thinking to yourself "double, double, parachute." While these three ideas may not be the most efficient way of looking at this pattern, it will be easier to perform than thinking about sixteen different strokes. For one thing you won't have to worry about starting the first measure with your right hand and the second measure with your left hand because the parachute automatically reverses the leading hand. Try it, it works.

You've all heard the question: "Is the glass half full or half empty?" Both answers are correct. One answer is not better than the other; each is simply a different way of looking at the same thing. Let me make a visual example. Notice the pictures in diagram #1. When you look at the first one, do you see two waves with a circle in the middle, or a circle with a square on top and bottom? Both answers are correct—some people may see one thing while others see something different.

Even though both answers are correct, I'll tell you the wrong answer: If you don't see two plane figures consisting of four equal length sides and four 90 degree angles, beware which was someone to you a single curved line from every point of which is usually discussed the drawing of "that exactly what I saw, Norman ... Ed." These things aren't "plane figures," they're squares and circles.

It's been said that the human brain contains the best pattern recognition system in the world. Before you can recognize a pattern, however, you must have a certain amount of knowledge. This is where these drumsticks come in handy. You can't cut off a paradiddle if you don't know what a paradiddle is. You can't find the door if you don't know what one looks like.

Do you want to have some fun? Copy some of the other figures in the diagram, then show them to a few friends. Let them look at one of the figures for exactly one second, and then ask them to draw the picture. Since these figures are fairly simple, they probably have no problem. Then, ask them how they remembered the picture so fast. Different people are going to see them in different ways.

Could there be another way to look at example #3 which would be just as valid as "double, double, parachute?" How about thinking that the two doubles (RILL) are part of a five stroke roll? Now, instead of three ideas, you can perform this exercise by thinking about a five stroke roll connected to a paradiddle. "Double, double, parachute" now becomes "five, paradiddle." Try playing the example using the last one.

It's even possible to look at it in yet another way. Consider that a paradiddle is nothing more than two single strokes and a double. Now, the entire example consists of double strokes except that it counts "three," "three" and "five" single strokes. Try playing only double strokes, and cut off exactly three for two consecutive single strokes. Again, you've broken down sixteen individual strokes into something that can be more easily handled. Which of these methods works the best for you?

So far we've talked about three different methods of using this example. We've used all the types of strokes being played (double, double, the name of familiar patterns (paradiddle, five stroke roll), and we've cut off a particular physical action on a particular corner of the bar (the phrases "1" and "3" are single stroke). There is at least one more method of using from the sound that it produced when you play.
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