

Advice from Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh

On Practicing:

1. Visualization: once you have a piece memorized, go somewhere quiet, close your eyes, and visualize yourself playing the piece, looking at every note carefully. You'd be surprised to find out that you may have thought you had it memorized, but you really aren't 100% sure of each note.
2. Practice performing: go through the whole performance like it is the real thing. (Details are in the article on my website.) Do not stop for anything, unless the house catches fire. Then run.
3. Give yourself enough time to prepare! Cramming is very unreliable.
4. Don't skip over the technical practice!
5. If you have to be away from the harp, exercise to keep your muscles in shape so that you don't get injured when you go back to a full practice regime.
6. Always stay relaxed when practicing, and practice breathing deeply as you start new phrases.
7. If this performance is for an audition, know what the rest of the orchestra is playing. Be aware that there are some standard practices that are not marked in the music, so listen to several recordings of those pieces to get a sense of this. Sing the melody to yourself when practicing accompanying figures (but not in the audition!).
8. Try out several fingerings to get the best one. The fingering has to bring out the pulse and rhythm of the phrase and still be comfortable for your hands. If this is for an orchestra, it is best if it allows you to look at the conductor.

On Preparation for Performance:

1. Relax between every note!
2. Do lots of slow, methodical practice.
3. Learn your music 200%.
4. Do at least 10 repetitions of each segment that you are learning.
5. Learn new pieces in small sections.
6. Label each section and be able to start from each "repair point."
7. Record yourself at home and listen to yourself to see where you can take more time, make more dynamic contrasts, etc.
8. Know the style of the composer and period and stay within it, even while expressing yourself.

On Assembling a Successful Recital Program:

1. The program must have contrasts. Usually this means several different composers from different time periods and styles.
2. Start with a piece you are comfortable with, if you have a choice.
3. Make sure the program is suitable to the intended audience and venue. A program for a wedding is very different than one for a concert hall.
4. At least one or two pieces should show off your technique, but do not choose anything that stretches you beyond your limit. Don't torture yourself and the audience with an uncomfortable performance. If you have no choice, you could either simplify an overly difficult piece somewhat or play it a bit more slowly. If you can't play it at home, you can't play it in performance.
5. Time each piece exactly, and then leave extra time for going on and offstage, clapping, etc. An hour's recital should be about 45-50 minutes of music.
6. Choose pieces you love to play.
7. Don't say something generic like, "This is a really fun piece to play," but rather give the audience an interesting anecdote about the piece or composer. The performer should understand the time period and how it shaped the composer, what led to the writing of the piece, anything of interest. If you aren't able to do introductions, have the interesting educational tidbits printed in the program.

Some references: Judy Loman; Carrol McLaughlin (*Dr. Carrol's Power Performance*; see www.integrityink.com); Philip Johnston (*The Practice Revolution*; see www.practicespot.com)