

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: Brad DeRoche to explain the mysteries of practicing

by Mike Telin



As the joke goes: A young musician stops a man on a New York sidewalk and asks: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, the man replies. On Friday, May 30 beginning at 6:45 pm in Studio 113 at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Brad DeRoche will give a lecture titled “Acquisition of Expertise on the Classical Guitar: The Effects of Mindset, Willpower, Goals, and Practice in the Quest for Mastery.” Free and open to the public, the lecture is presented by the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival.

DeRoche, who is director of classical guitar studies at the Interlochen Arts Academy, the summer Arts Camp, as well as chair of the music department at Delta College, traces his interest in the subject of achievement back to his own desire to become a more accomplished classical guitar player as well as a better teacher. DeRoche also holds positions as instructor of guitar at Central Michigan University and Saginaw Valley State University.

“About a dozen years ago, I read an article in BBC Music Magazine by K. Anders Ericsson, a professor of psychology at Florida State University,” DeRoche said during a recent telephone conversation. “The article was about what goes into the making of a successful musician. Ericsson was searching for the X factor: what is it that makes violinist A better than violinist B.”

DeRoche explained that Ericsson’s study was done at the Berlin Music School. “He and his associates ranked the violinists into three groups: A, B and C, with A being the best. They looked at socio-economic factors as well as genetic traits like whether their parents were musicians. The only thing that linked the members of group A to one another was the amount of time each one had practiced. Group A had practiced approximately 10,000 hours at that point in their lives, Group B 8,000 hours and Group C 6,000 hours.”

Malcolm Gladwell championed Ericsson's 10,000 hour rule in his book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, although DeRoche points out that Gladwell's own research shows that it is not only the number of hours practiced but also the type of practice that is crucial to becoming a great musician.

Both Ericsson's and Gladwell's studies sparked DeRoche's interest, causing him to ask himself: are the geniuses born with an implanted genetic code or do they simply have to work? "As a musician I was fascinated and perhaps more importantly, I asked myself how will this make me a better teacher? In this lecture I am tying in several things that I think have an impact on success."

DeRoche points out that today, the number of hours it takes to be considered a world-class musician ranges from 20,000 to 30,000. "Realistically we are talking about three hours of dedicated practice every day for 20 to 30 years. If we think about time spent in undergraduate school, we have four years to turn a student into an expert, and that's not going to happen. There is no evidence that a person can become an expert much quicker than that. So basically it seems there is no shortcut."

In the lecture DeRoche will introduce other facets such as will power and self-control. "These are everyday terms that people think are all about forcing yourself to do something you don't want to do. But what I discovered is that it is a biological thing. The amount of glucose a person's brain has to use largely determines one's ability to think critically. What happens if you begin your practice late at night after working all day and taking care of children — how good is your practice going to be? I think that it would affect you negatively."

DeRoche's lecture also touches on the setting of goals. "Most people set two different types. One is the promotion goal where you try to maximize your gains and the other is the prevention goal where you're thinking of safety and minimizing loss. I'll also discuss the concept of mind set: the fixed type, where people believe in innate talent or a natural ability that you don't have to work at; and the growth type, where people believe all they have to do is work hard."

Ultimately DeRoche feels it is a combination of these other factors that determine whether or not a musician will be capable of achieving what he calls "deliberate practice". "Ericsson coined the term and defined it as deliberate work toward an end goal — activities specifically designed to improve performance. So the 10,000 or 30,000 hour rule is not the only factor in determining success."

Brad DeRoche sums it up like this: "it's not about practicing by serenading yourself, it's about sitting down to solve a problem."

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