

James trip to Las Vegas Accordion Convention



Hi, folks!

Dave Magliozzi and I just returned from the Las Vegas International Accordion Convention. What a great week! Thanks to Tony Marini for repeatedly telling us for the past two years, "If there's ONE convention you attend, make it Las Vegas!" As

Tony had promised, we were able to meet and chat with many, many accordion industry luminaries, including Frank Marocco, Angelo DiPippo, Frank Toscano, Manny Corallo (Angelo, Frank, and Manny make up The Amazing Accordion Kings), Carl Fortina (who played accordion on over 550 movie scores, including "The Godfather", played along with Frank Marocco on the Beach Boys' "Pet Sounds" album, and has worked with Elton John, Elvis, Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, and many others), Peter and Mady Soave, the phenomenal Russian bayanist Alex Sevastian, Mario Pedone, Mary Tokarski, Gina Branelli, Jerry Cigler, Sylvia Marie Barber, and many, many others. We also heard an excellent concert each night featuring some of these performers.

During Angelo DiPippo's master class, he mentioned the following phrase (with his unique flair, stretching his arm upward and pointing to the heavens like a Roman emperor): "There are many paths... to GREATNESS!" For Dave and me, that expression became a catchphrase for the rest of the convention, and it even came up several times in other master classes.

A friend on Facebook ventured that one of the paths to greatness is "practice, practice, practice", and another is "perform, perform, perform" -- but asked if I knew what some of the others are. Well, Angelo DiPippo didn't spell them all out for us -- I think he was trying to say that if you don't buy into his particular method, there are many other ways you can become a great musician. But my friend's question motivated me to jot down some of the great tips we heard from these masterful musicians at the convention. I'd like to share these notes here, for those of you who may not be on Facebook:

What are "the paths to GREATNESS"? It depends upon whom you ask. Let's see... Vince Lombardi said, "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect." That axiom was stated in various ways by almost all of the workshop leaders. It is not the quantity of the practice, but the quality. How you practice - and practicing daily - will give you the best results. Simply running through pieces you already know or just doodling around on the keys does not count. Effective practice consists of whatever you are doing to advance your skill level. Consistent, daily practice (preferably at the same time) is required to build muscle memory and maintain your progress. Of course, when you add up all the things that most presenters said you should be working on, the time required is substantial. But even 20-30 minutes a day, if used effectively, is better than skipping a day here and there, or spending four hours a day practicing the wrong way. Certain common themes did emerge from all the workshops this week. The list of items to incorporate into your daily routine includes the following (these ideas some from different people; this is not a list endorsed by all the presenters):

* Practice all 12 scales, harmonic and melodic scales, arpeggios from each inversion, and chords in each inversion.

* Do the exercises in the Hanon books daily. Play the exercises in both hands. Build on the exercises you have already worked on; do all of them each day, not just the new ones.

* Learn the circle of fifths inside and out.

* Resist the urge to play an entire piece at once; learn it in small sections.

* Slow down. Each note must be articulated cleanly. If you are playing sloppily, you are playing too fast. Reduce your speed to the point where you can play the exercise or passage cleanly, and play it at that speed until there are no mistakes.

* Use the entire range of your instrument. Practice your exercises not as written, but from the lowest note of the range to the highest.



* Play musical phrases as you would sing them.

* Use a metronome. Buy a small digital one that you can take with you everywhere.

* Practice in front of a mirror, so you can observe your form.

Another good tip (not required daily)

is to record yourself, either on video or audio recorder, and listen to your performance. Playing a piece and observing it being played are two distinct activities.

* Oh, and then work on whatever pieces you are learning. Peter and Mary Soave said, no matter how much you practice, it is never enough. (This is not to imply that our practice will never measure up to some impossible standard; rather, that there is always more we could work on.) The amount of time you spend each day is what will propel you toward GREATNESS more quickly, if you are practicing effectively during that time.

Many approaches offered this week appeared to contradict one another:

* "Practice with the football game on, to build your ability to ignore distractions."/"Practice in a quiet, isolated environment."

* "It's OK to look at the keys before an important passage, so you will hit the right notes."/"NEVER look at the keys -- you should play the instrument as if you were a blind person."

The "many paths" refers to the myriad methods, books, and approaches advocated by different teachers.

Each of the performers this week is great in his or her own way, and each has a unique history.

I hope you find these suggestions useful. As I was leaving Las Vegas, I certainly felt highly motivated to practice with renewed vigor, and now I have some excellent direction on how to make my practice more concentrated and effective.

Best,

James

Editor's note....James article from Las Vegas was re-formatted to fit the newsletter columns by the editor. Great piece James, looking forward to future articles....Bob