

Three Steps for Learning a New Piece

BY TRACY WIGGINS

Does this sound familiar? You are rolling along in your lesson and everything is going fine. You get to the end and your teacher hands you a new piece of music and says, “Learn this for next week.” You look down at the music and think to yourself, “Now what?”

The following is one way to answer that question. It is a three-step system I use for learning a new piece of music, be it a solo, ensemble, orchestral piece, or conductor’s score. While every musician has his or her own way of approaching a new piece, this system has always worked well for me.

STEP 1: STUDY THE PIECE AWAY FROM THE INSTRUMENT

Composer: Who wrote the piece? When did he or she live and/or die? What do you know about the composer? If in doubt, look it up.

Date: When was the piece written? Put it in a historical context by looking up world events that occurred during the same time, as well as other art forms (visual, written) from the same period.

Title: What does it mean? Is there a historical or personal significance? If it is in a foreign language, look up the meaning.

Musical Terms: Look through the music and be sure you know what all of the foreign and musical terminology means.

Repeated Figures: Look for musical and/or rhythmic figures or sections that occur often. Finding these will keep you from relearning them every time.

Tonality/Harmony: Is the piece tonal or atonal? Does it revolve around any particular notes, chords, or scales? Is it in a key? Does it modulate? Sing the musical lines to yourself or play them at a piano to begin getting them in your ear.

Form: Find the large structures of the piece. Look for breaks in the piece, including, but not limited to, cadences and fermatas. Key changes can also be a sign

of a structural change. Is the piece written in a one-, two- or three-part form? Is it a theme and variations, or is it through composed?

Note all of these observations in your music so that you can refer to them as you practice. Also write in preliminary stickings, pitch tendencies, or other projected problems that you are aware of so you can learn them correctly as you go.

STEP 2: PRACTICE AT YOUR INSTRUMENT

The first two parts of this step are interchangeable. Decide which to do first based upon whether you find pitch or rhythm easier to learn. Start with whichever comes most naturally and then go on to the other. Always use a metronome when practicing at the instrument.

By practicing slowly, your muscles will learn where they are supposed to go for every note and phrase.

Learn the rhythms, dynamics, and articulations out of context: By taking pitch out of the learning process you can increase your sense of rhythmic accuracy in a piece. Work through the piece using a metronome, performing the rhythms, dynamics, and articulations only using a practice pad. By doing this you take out, what is for some, the scariest part: the changing pitches.

Learn pitches out of rhythm: In this technique, your muscles are learning the motions between notes without having to be concerned with rhythm. Concentrate on the movement your muscles have to make from note to note. Be very deliberate so the motion has time to register in your brain. For percussionists, dead strokes can be a useful tool here as they give the muscles a bit more time to register. This is also a good way to see if you have awkward stickings to work out. If you do, write your sticking choices into

the music so you practice them the same way every time.

Work slowly and methodically: Set the metronome at a very slow tempo when first learning a piece. This way you do not have to worry about rushing through the piece and can concentrate on accuracy. This will keep you from having to relearn parts of the music later.

Focus on kinesthetic learning: This is your muscle memory. By practicing slowly your muscles will learn where they are supposed to go for every note and phrase. Memorize the motion between notes and focus on staying as smooth as possible at all times.

Make written notes in your music: If you have a sticking that needs to be used for a particular passage, write it in so that you practice it the same way every time.

Make a record of your pitch tendencies and write those in. Mark passages that give you particular problems so you know to come back to them.

Practice in short phrases:

When you are beginning a new piece do not try to learn it all at once. Using the information you gained from your score study, break the piece into smaller sections. Be realistic about how much you can learn accurately in each practice session. Learn one phrase at a time and then go on to the next one. After you have two phrases learned, connect them into a longer phrase. Play the long phrase three to five times in a row accurately before you move on to new material. If you can do this, you will know that you “have it down.”

A good technique is to set up two jars—one empty and one filled with three to five coins. After you play the phrase correctly, move a coin from one jar to the other. Move a coin every time you play the phrase correctly. If, before all of your coins are moved, you make a mistake, put all of the coins back in the original jar and start again. Before you begin

again, make sure you are aware of what the mistake was and how you need to correct it. If you need to practice that phrase again, this is the time to do it.

If you are memorizing the piece, memorize one short phrase at a time. Then you won't have to worry about memorizing the entire work later.

Pay particular attention to the transitions between phrases and work them out if necessary: Transitions are where some of the most awkward moments in music can occur, from rhythmic errors to memorization mistakes. Be sure they are smooth, both rhythmically and musically.

STEP 3: PERFORM THE PIECE MORE THAN ONCE

Nothing is more frustrating than spending a lot of time on a work, performing it once, and then putting it away. Look for additional performances on studio recitals, departmental recitals, at churches, or just for friends in a practice room. Not only will the piece get better the more you perform it, but you will also become a better performer in the process.

A NOTE ABOUT LISTENING TO RECORDINGS

I think there are two times to listen to a recording of a piece you are learning. First, when you are deciding whether or not to learn the piece, listen to it and decide if it is worth your investment of time. This will also get the piece into your ear for when you start doing your score observation.

Once I start learning a piece, I avoid listening to recordings until after I have completed the work. The second listening comes after I have completed learning the notes and rhythms. Then I will listen to as many recordings as I can get. This way, I will have formed my own opinions about phrasing without being influenced by someone else, but if I hear something in someone else's performance I like, I can incorporate it into my own performance.

PREPARING FOR ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCES

The steps above can also be followed when learning an individual part to an ensemble piece. At the same time, however, listen to as many recordings of the piece as you can. This enables you to hear different approaches to the part, and you can use this information to inform your own musical decisions. You

should also look through the score to see how your part lines up with the rest of the ensemble. Locate those parts that align with yours to help you keep track of where you are and so you know what instruments to be listening for as you play the work.

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