

A GUIDE ON HOW TO PRACTICE A NEW PIECE OF MUSIC

MARIA RUSU

DECEMBER, 2016.

Have you ever wondered why you spend hours in the practice room and the music you need to perform doesn't get learned as quickly as you wanted to? Have you heard about the idea of practicing less hours and more efficiently, this idea of quality over quantity?

This short guide will give you some ideas on how to start practicing different and new pieces of music, how to tackle different pieces, whether it is for orchestra, chamber or solo performances. This system I put together works for all of the above, making it more approachable and more interactive on all levels.



What do you do first?

How do you start?

Where do you start from?

These are questions I ask myself every time I receive a new folder full of music that I have not played before. Whether it is a classical, romantic or a contemporary piece, each come with their challenges. I consider everything to be new music for me until I learn it and it becomes more familiar. Once I go through the process of getting to know the music better and perform it, when I retake that piece of music later on, in my mind that piece has moved from the 'new music category' to the 'known' category. If I learn a new piece right from the beginning, it will be much easier to retake the piece and perform it rather than learning it all over again. The scenarios I wrote in this guide come from my personal experiences from college, graduate school and from outside of the campus.

SCENARIO #1: ORCHESTRA MUSIC

You are in college, part of the University's symphony orchestra and it is the start of the Fall semester. You play the audition and the next day rehearsals begin. You receive a folder with new sheet music for the upcoming concert. There are five weeks of rehearsals until the first concert and you need to start practicing this repertoire. With all the details you receive at the beginning of the first rehearsal, what exactly do you do? What are the first steps in learning this music?



Let's say that the folder you received contains three pieces of music: an overture, a concerto and a symphony. Three different composers, three different musical style. How do you practice this repertoire and where do you start from?

The **First Step** is to get to know this music better. With the technology we have today, the resources are endless. You can find anything related to music on the world-wide web, from the history of that piece to multiple audio and video recordings of it. Here is a checklist of a few steps in getting to know the music better:

1. **Read about the history behind each composition.** Resources such as the Grove Music Online Dictionary, different Music History textbooks, journals and articles online about the composer and its works are all contributing to help you understand more about the piece you are performing. This gives you some insight in what the composer transmits to the audience through his/her music.
2. **Listen to multiple recordings of the same piece.** It is important to listen to different orchestras performing the same piece so you can have more than one interpretation of the piece, especially if there are solo sections that you might be playing.
3. **Follow your part while listening to the music.** You are about to spend a lot of time with this new repertoire. Making sure that you familiarize yourself with everything in that sheet music is another step in getting to know these pieces better.
4. **Write some indications in your part.** If you follow your part and hear some tricky sections that need more attention, mark your part to remember those spots.

Usually I would draw eye glasses or write an "x" mark next to that passage so I give it extra attention.

The **Second Step** in this musical journey is to mark your parts in a more detailed way. As a string player, we have quite a few things to mark in our music. Here is a checklist of what to mark in your part:

1. **Write in the bowings.** It is very important to match the bowings that your section principal has.
 - a. If you are the principal, your bowings will match with the concertmaster part. Make sure you compare yours to it and make the necessary adjustments.
2. **Write in the fingerings.** There are endless possibilities when it comes to fingerings. Write in one or two options and start experimenting. Keep in mind that fingerings should not affect the phrasing of the piece, it should support it (e.g. playing on one string to keep the color of the melodic line rather than do a string crossing and staying in a fixed position, compromising the melodic content).
3. **Mark symbols in your part.** String players might prefer to see the symbols rather than reading the Italian terminology for dynamics. Some editions have both and some have mostly the terms written underneath the staves (e.g. *cresc.*, *decresc.*, *ritardando*, *accel.*, etc.). From personal experience, it is much easier to read the symbols and react to them rather than reading the term so then you can think of what it means and how you implement it which takes more time to complete.

The **Third Step** and the most important of them all is to start practicing this new repertoire. Because there are usually only a few weeks to learn and perform this new repertoire, every minute of each practice session counts towards the level of performance that the orchestra is trying to achieve. Here are some tips on how to enhance the efficiency of practicing these pieces while reducing the amount of practice time (the idea of quality over quantity):

- Remember those passages you marked with an “x” I was talking about earlier? Now is the time to look at them in greater detail. You could start with the following:
 - **Determine the character of the piece.** Choose from one of the five basic human emotions (Karen Tuttle): love, joy, anger, fear, sorrow (see Sources page at the end of this guide).
 - **Research about the history of the composer & the piece.** Determining the timeframe or timeline of what happened in the year when that specific piece was written gives you another lens to look through that helps you understand the piece better, and the composer’s style.
 - **Posture is very important.** Feet rooted to the ground, unlocked knees, open chest, shoulder’s down, neck aligned with the back not pointing forward, looking forward (to the eye level).
 - **Score study.** Studying each piece in greater detail is something so important that it becomes an essential part of practicing and getting to know the repertoire better, especially when playing with other musicians (chamber music).

- **Start with the harder passages.** Once you tackle them from the get go, you can play the other passages with much more ease and place the 'hard passages' into the 'easy passages' category (in your mind).
- **Always maintain a good quality of tone.** Whenever you practice a passage, the sound you produce should never sound flat. Practice as if you are performing that passage on stage with the orchestra. That way the quality of sound will never be compromised.
- **Practicing without the bow.** Focusing on one hand at a time is a good way to practice intricate passages. Try concentrating only on the passage's fingerings for the right hand and only on the bowings for the left hand, then put the two together. Hopefully, the passage will start feeling easier to execute.
- **Slow motion practice** saves a lot of time and you will avoid building unnecessary bad habits. If you can play the passage slower and with the same amount of *passion. precision. purpose* (Dr. James Allen Anderson), you can play that passage at any tempo.
- **Isolating passages.** If there is a measure that you cannot seem to play correctly (rhythm wise, intonation wise), play only that measure very slowly and with precision in rhythms and notes. Once fixed, connect it to the previous measure (one beat at a time) respectively with the next measure, one beat at a time.
- **Play the passage forward and backwards.** Knowing where the phrase is going is important. However, knowing where you started is as important as knowing where you finished. Take it one note at a time and go back and forth between the fingerings and shifts so you

know the road map where you moved from (e.g. I-III position, one string to another, extending notes, etc.).

- **Try different bowings.** By doing so, you know that the bowings won't slow your passage down or interfere with the cleanness of it.
- **Try different rhythms on each passage.** Whenever you have a passage with running eighths or sixteenth notes, apply different rhythms to the passage to make sure every note is equal to the other. Also, applying different slurs along with the rhythms help
- **Always apply the dynamics written in the part.** By practicing with the dynamics written on the page, when playing the piece up to speed, the dynamics will remain and only the speed will increase, making it easier for you so you don't have to go back and apply the dynamics later, which takes time and extra effort when you can include dynamics right from the start.



Guide on how to practice a new piece of music

- Always think of the character you are looking for in each piece.
- Read about the history of the piece and its composer.
- Listen to multiple recordings of that piece.
- Follow your part while listening to the music.
- Mark your part while listening to the music - score study.
- Always maintain good posture, rooted to the ground.
- Always maintain good tone quality.
- Practice multiple different bowings.
- Practice multiple different fingerings.
- Mark your part. Use different colors, be creative!
- Always start with the harder passages first.
- Practice without the bow (cold practicing).
- Practice in slow motion each passage!
- Isolate passages and practice them slowly, one at a time.
- Play the passage forward and backwards.
- Try different bowings and rhythms on the isolated passages.
- Always apply the dynamics written in the part.

Checklist

Maria Rusu



Happy Practicing!
I know. I can. I want



SCENARIO #2: SOLO REPERTOIRE

Let's say you have a new private lesson teacher and at the beginning of the `semester `you receive the new repertoire. For a string player, the repertoire includes a couple of movements of solo Bach, an etude, a few scales, a sonata movement and/or a concerto movement. Each of these pieces are different, covering all forms and styles of music we need to go through so we can develop our repertoire.

In terms of practicing this new repertoire, everything I have written above applies to solo pieces. Whether you are preparing this repertoire for a competition, an audition or for a school jury, I highly recommend going through the checklist I provided in this guide and go step by step. Also, I recommend starting with scales, followed by an etude, a few Bach movements and the concerto/sonata.

SCENARIO #3: CHAMBER MUSIC

In college, most music degrees require at least 2 semesters of chamber music. Even if for some reason the degree does not require fulfillment of small ensemble, I always recommend enrolling/forming a chamber group, this being a good experience for an emerging young artist. The repertoire is sometimes chosen based on suggestions from the professor/instructor or from the students themselves.

Just like the first two scenarios, when practicing new chamber music pieces, the same rules apply. Going through each step and through the checklist is something I recommend for each student to do, including myself. With so many things to consider, it is easier to have a checklist to go through rather than thinking of different ways to practice that piece which could waste a lot of your practice time.

Having a system and following steps is the best way to have an efficient practice session.

In conclusion, I would like to extend my gratitude to all my professors, starting with my mother, Teodora Rusu, followed by Vasile Beluska, Matthew Daline-McBride, Esme Allen-Creighton and Sheila Browne for guiding me throughout all these years of studying the art of music. Also, I would like to thank all my students for inspiring me to write this practice guide! They helped me form it and finalize the structure of it and I am very grateful for their help and support!

Below you will find Karen Tuttle's list of Five Basic Human Emotions. Choose one word to associate with the character of your piece. You can go even deeper and choose a word to go with each phrase. I highly recommend doing some research on Karen Tuttle and her Coordination Technique and Vasile Beluska's book of laws (book getting published in the nearest future).

Below is an exercise my mother taught me when I was younger. This exercise is good for independence in the left hand. I recommend playing each column on each of the strings, two to four notes on a bow to start with. Also, applying different articulations is always a great idea. After playing this exercise on each string, the next step is to play with accidentals. For example, on the D string the pitches for the first column first row would be E-F-G-A. The next set would be E-Fsharp-G-A followed by Eflat-F-G-A and Eflat-F-G-Aflat. Practice each of these sets on each string. The last step for this exercise is to play them in first through fifth position, including the ones containing the accidentals. This would give you a good start for defining each position.

Left hand finger independence exercise (violin and piano)

Violin

1234		2134		3124		4123
1243		2143		3142		4132
1324		2314		3214		4213
1342		2341		3241		4231
1423		2413		3412		4312
1432		2431		3421		4321

01234		02134		03124		04123
01243		02143		03142		04132
01324		02314		03214		04213
01342		02341		03241		04231
01423		02413		03412		04312
01432		02431		03421		04321

Piano

12345	21345	31245	41235	51234
12354	21354	31254	41253	51243
12435	21435	31425	41325	51324
12453	21453	31452	41352	51342
12534	21534	31524	41523	51423
12543	21543	31542	41532	51432

13245	23145	32145	42135	52134
13254	23154	32154	42153	52143
13425	23415	32415	42315	52314
13452	23451	32451	42351	52341
13524	23514	32514	42513	52413
13542	23541	32541	42531	52431

14235	24135	34125	43125	53124
14253	24153	34152	43152	53142
14325	24315	34215	43215	53214
14352	24351	34251	43251	53241
14523	24513	34512	43512	53412
14532	24531	34521	43521	53421

15234	25134	35124	45123	54123
15243	25143	35142	45132	54132
15324	25314	35214	45213	54213
15342	25341	35241	45231	54231
15423	25413	35412	45312	54312
15432	25431	35421	45321	54321

Karen Tuttle, Five Basic Human Emotions:

Love:	Joy:	Anger:	Fear:	Sorrow:
Lust	Frank	Torment	Torment	Whist
Longing	Rollick	Bitter	Urgent	Tragic
Flirt	Capricious	Morose	Anxious	Torment
Amiable	Naïve	Stormy	Ominous	Sad
Nostalgia	Peaceful	Frenzy	Shock	Longing
Languor	Tickle	Complain	Agitated	Stark
Tender	Boisterous	Agitated	Mystery	Cry
Tease	Inner Joy	Vetch	Ghostly	Supplicant
Abandon	Luminous	Rage	Evil	Despair
Quiet	Whimsy	Snarl	Pain	Doldrums
Passion	Exaltation	Madness	Beg	Plead
Sentimental	Ecstatic	Frustrated	Timid	Wail
Forthright	Mischief	Crouch	Apprehension	Shriek
Noble	Gay	Fury	Suspense	Heartbreak
Majestic	Buoyant	Sarcastic	Terror	Lost
Cry	Twinkle	Grim	Awe	Bleak
Plead	Spritely	Tortured	Reverence	Pensive
Supplicant	Vigor	Anguish	Uneasy	Yearning
Frolic	Comic	Irritated	Depressed	Agony
Innocent	Sassy	Violent	Panic	Melancholy
Comfort	Caricature	Vehement	Cold	Tortured
Genial	Frolic	Fierce	Startled	Death Toll
Content	Effusive	Restless	Ophelia	Bell
Frank	Buffoon	Crotchety	Insane	Passion
Prayer	Mimic	Crank	Eerie	Noble
Magnificent	Elegant	Hate	Grind	Prayer
Peace	Wonder	Peevish	Menacing	Stagnant