

Practice: part three – learning a new piece

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

In our previous two resources on practice (*Music Teacher*, March 2024 and April 2024), we looked at general issues surrounding practice, such as how much we can realistically expect from our students, creating a suitable environment and having a positive mindset.

In this third and final part, we'll examine the nitty-gritty of learning a new piece. The piece is a hypothetical one, and we'll imagine the various technical and musical challenges to overcome in order to play it fluently. Examples will generally be given from my own experience teaching piano and trumpet, but the general principles can be used by all instrumental and vocal teachers, so please adapt the ideas accordingly.

Top-down and bottom-up learning

My son was particularly slow to learn to ride a bike. We went through a tortuous process, working up from a tricycle to a bike with stabilisers. When we moved to two wheels, I had to explain in detail what to do and then run behind, grabbing onto him, while he wobbled alarmingly and was *terrified of falling off*.

My daughter, however, was rather different. After putting her first bike in the garden, I turned round to pick up the spanner to fit the stabilisers. But she had other ideas. When I turned back, she was already on the bike and happily cycling down the garden. She wasn't too worried about minor things like how to operate the brakes – she soon picked that up by trial and error. Falling off was happily accepted as part of the learning process; indeed, the *element of jeopardy was part of the fun*.

My son employed **bottom-up** learning – working through a painstaking step-by-step process. My daughter, on the other hand, used **top-down** learning – just *doing* it, then subsequently refining things as required (like learning how to stop without crashing). The expression 'jumping in at the deep end' encapsulates the top-down approach.

When practising, we need the flexibility to employ *both* approaches, though different people may favour one over the other. Knowing how each individual student ticks will help you strike a suitable balance and support them in their practice.

If you teach piano, for example, you might want to establish whether students feel more comfortable learning a piece hands together straight away, or whether they're happier building it up hands separately.

As a mediocre pianist, I favour the top-down approach. I generally busk my way through piano accompaniments with my brass students, without too much concern for all the right notes. If I need to accompany a student for a school concert or exam, I'll gradually bring the important bits more into focus, even if I still don't necessarily play all the right notes.

'A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new' – Albert Einstein

Some students can be overwhelmed by anxiety about making mistakes. It's really important to stress the *value* of mistakes in our practice – it's how we learn. Mistakes are integral to the trial-and-error *top-down* approach, but they are equally important when we tune in the analytical part of our brain and work through things *bottom-up*. **Learning from mistakes in a positive way is crucial to productive practice.**

Edward Maxwell is a freelance trumpet player and teaches in primary, secondary and higher education, including at Cranleigh School, Hurstpierpoint College and Reigate Grammar School. He is the trumpet tutor for Surrey County Youth Orchestra. He is a composer and arranger, and his music has been published by Boosey & Hawkes, Willis Music Company, Warwick Music and Clifton Edition, and appears on the ABRSM trumpet syllabus. He is an examiner for Music Teachers' Board



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Introducing a new piece

Do you introduce a new piece at the beginning or end of a lesson? You might want to have a quick look through it with your student before letting them loose on their own, to ensure they start off on the right track. This is a completely legitimate approach.

However, I prefer to give a student a new piece at the *end* of a lesson, so they have a week to explore it on their own, without having me telling them how it goes. We should be teaching students self-sufficiency, and a new piece is a good way of monitoring how well we're doing. They might get so many things wrong that you have to spend the next lesson unravelling all their mistakes. They may even have made such a mess of it that you deem their efforts to be unsalvageable. That's fine. You've learnt what the student needs to work on, so you can address these areas with more suitable repertoire.

First play-through

Let's assume our student has a brand new piece to try. Where do they begin? Try starting with a top-down run-through, playing it all the way through as best they can, as near enough to full speed as possible. If there's a backing track, play along to this. If they're a pianist, play hands together. We're going to get a general overview of the piece without worrying too much about the detail. This will give a general impression of:

- ▶ melodic shape
- ▶ rhythmic character
- ▶ key and harmony
- ▶ structure
- ▶ texture
- ▶ style and genre
- ▶ which bits are easy and which are hard.

We'll look at listening in more depth later, but it's a good idea to avoid listening to a recording of the piece until the student has had a go. It will sharpen their reading and expressive skills if they don't already know how it goes. If you read *Harry Potter* before you've seen the film, you'll construct your own unique imaginative world. If you've seen the film first, you'll merely visualise the characters and situations as they're portrayed on screen. Although listening is essential to assimilate different musical styles, it's important for students to find their own expressive voices, rather than just mimicking other people's interpretations.

The first play-through is a quick sketch, but subsequent practice will add more detail to our picture. We're employing exactly the same skills we need for sightreading – performing with a sense of continuity and keeping going at all costs.

Beware: our brains have a habit of locking in a first impression. You need to be alert to mistakes you've made in the rough draft. When you play it again, it's important to keep reading and not just play how it went last time.

If your student is incapable of even giving it a rough go, the **piece is too hard for them**. Give them something easier and consider how you can build up their reading skills. If an English teacher gives a student a text to read that's so incomprehensible to them that they don't even get the gist of the meaning, then the standard has clearly been misjudged. A good teacher – whether of English or music – will set something that's challenging but achievable. It will hopefully provoke original ideas, and the teacher will then guide students to delve below the surface to find deeper meaning, all the while expanding their vocabulary and understanding.

The main themes

Identifying the structure can help you find the main themes. If the piece is in sonata form, you'll want to identify the first and second subjects and the development section. It might be a rondo with a recurring theme. Or perhaps it's just a simple TV theme, but there might still be a main theme and a countermelody. Is there a repeating verse and chorus structure?

Music usually has a lot of repetitive elements, and it might be useful to mark in pencil (or use coloured highlighters) where the main motifs occur. Play through these sections and note whether or not the repetitions are identical. Music has a habit of setting traps – you think it'll go the same as it went before, but there's a subtle change. Keep reading it carefully.

The difficult bits

Make a mental note of the hardest-looking sections or put pencil circles around them. These will probably take a disproportionate amount of time to learn, so you and your student might as well get going straight away. Leaving them until last will delay your student's ability to perform the piece all the way through at a consistent speed – the easy bits may get faster and faster, while the hard bits remain painfully and stubbornly slow.

Working backwards

As an examiner, I frequently hear performances that start positively but become increasingly fragmented, sometimes breaking down completely. The student has obviously always started practising from the start and seldom made it as far as the end. How about learning the piece from the end? You could focus on the final section and then work backwards, to ensure uniform levels of fluency.

Singing

It's essential that students can read well enough to have a good idea of how the piece *sounds* from looking at the notes on the page. I'm always dismayed when a student says, 'I couldn't practise the piece you set because I didn't know how it goes'. This usually tells me that the piece I've set is too hard, and we need to work on improving reading skills.

By singing a piece, you're removing any technical limitations so you can focus solely on the music. It also gives a good model for phrasing.

Adding the detail

Building a large Lego model may look daunting, but each individual step is easy – you just patiently construct it, brick by brick. In the same way, each individual note or chord of a piece is usually fairly straightforward – you just need to methodically link them together until they become fluent. We'll now look at ways to construct a piece bottom-up. Select a short phrase, or even an awkward bar. Here's an example:



Identify the areas that may need work, such as the rhythm of the first bar and the note-patterns of the second and third.

Rhythmic accuracy

A solid rhythmic foundation is crucial to the success of a piece, so this is always my starting point.

- ▶ Does your student understand all the rhythms?
- ▶ Can they work them out for themselves?
- ▶ Can they subdivide the beat?
- ▶ Can they *clap* the rhythms while *counting* the beat out loud (or vice versa – vocalise the rhythm while clapping the beat)?
- ▶ Have they got the physical coordination to be able to tap a *beat* with one hand (or their foot) and tap the *rhythm* with the other?
- ▶ If learning the piano, can they tap the rhythms of each hand simultaneously on the piano lid?

Simplify the rhythms so you can see where the beats fall. In the following extract, we're adding extra notes to give a visual cue as to where the beats of the first bar lie:



If we then add ties, we can reconstruct the rhythm, but you can still see all the beats of the bar:



When you can clap the rhythm accurately, play it on repeated note. Students sometimes struggle to do this, revealing that the root of the problem may be a technical one, such as having poor coordination, rather than an innately poor sense of rhythm. If this is the case, they may need to work on some articulation exercises.

Adding the right notes

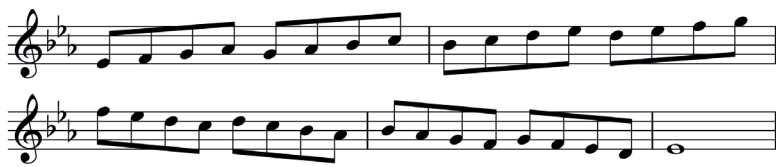
An effective way to add the note-shapes is to imagine you're a sculptor, starting with a solid block and gradually carving out the required shapes. We start with a secure rhythmic foundation on a repeated note, and introduce the correct pitches, one at a time:



... and continue through to the end of the phrase.

Practising note sequences

The first thing to establish is the key. Our extract clearly starts with an E flat major ascending arpeggio and then some descending scale patterns. It will be impossible to play this fluently unless you can play the scale and arpeggio, so start with some scale practice – not only the scale up and down, but also scale patterns such as these:



Here are some more ideas for learning the note-sequence in our extract. Build up in small chunks, working from the end:



... and so on. Or work from the beginning:



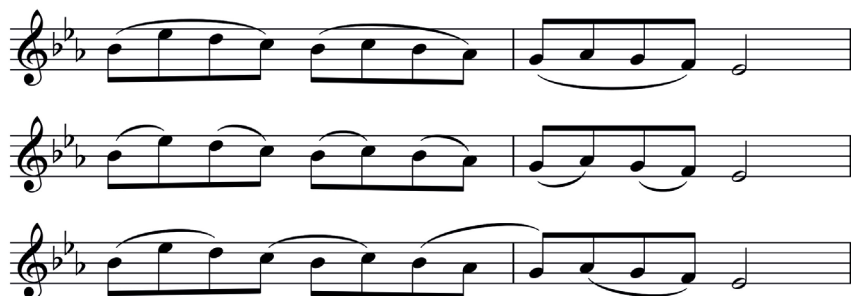
... and so on.

Playing with dotted rhythms can be very effective – essentially you're playing alternate pairs of notes fast and slow. Then dot the other way, so you swap around the pairs of slow and fast notes.



Adding articulation

The marked articulations are irregular, with slurred groups of four, three and two notes. To gain control over the articulation, you could try some different variations:



You might even come up with a pattern of articulation that you prefer to the published version. Allowing a student to overrule what's marked on the page may be controversial, but I think it's important to encourage them to make their own musical decisions. Published markings are sometimes the decision of an editor or arranger, not the original composer. If a different version works musically, why not allow a student the freedom to play it their own way? However, departing from markings due to laziness or sloppiness – because they can't be bothered to play it right, or because it's more difficult – is unacceptable.

Dynamics

Just because our extract doesn't have dynamics doesn't mean to say that you can't add your own. Experiment with different dynamic shading to discover how it affects the musical expression.

Using a metronome

All the above exercises should be played with a metronome. Unlike the top-down approach, fluency should be prioritised over speed. Find a tempo at which your student can play completely fluently, then gradually speed up the metronome. Set small targets – for example, speed up your metronome only when the student can play a passage three times in a row without any mistakes. If they do make a mistake, go back a speed. You often go two steps forward and then one step backwards, but that's normal. Eventually, students should aim to be able to play the piece *faster* than performance speed, so they have a buffer – a performance needs to be comfortable, not right at their limit.

Repetition

Repetition is crucial for building up fluency. But stay focused. There's a danger that as students become more familiar with the music, they become complacent and mistakes creep in unnoticed. Even when they feel that they've mastered a difficult passage, it's good to break it down again and again, following the steps above, in order to consolidate their progress.

Playing by memory

As students become more familiar with the piece, they may well find that they gradually memorise it. Learning a piece by memory is a good way to thoroughly embed it both physically and musically. You can transcend the notes on the page and play with a more spontaneous and instinctive feel for the music. There's a risk, however, that when students leave the notation behind, they might gradually veer off track and start making it up. It can be very difficult to correct ingrained mistakes. They should keep referring back to the written music to check that they are memorising it accurately.

Technique

Musical fluency can only be achieved with a secure technique. During practice, students should be constantly evaluating their technical fluency. Things for them to consider:

- ▶ How are you using your technique to fulfil your musical goals?
 - ▶ What technical flaws are holding you back?
 - ▶ Do you fully understand the techniques you are using?
 - ▶ Can you isolate technical flaws and work through them in a methodical way?
 - ▶ What technical exercises do you need to play, both on a regular basis and to fulfil the needs of the particular piece you're working on? Do you have a book of exercises, or can you improvise your own?
- A good teacher will write bespoke exercises for their students.

Knowing your limitations

If you were training as a sprinter, you might think you can *always* go a fraction of a second faster every time you race. If this was the case, you'd eventually break the world record. But there's a ceiling to everyone's potential.

Students need to balance aspiration with realism. However much you practise, there will always be things you simply can't physically play. The job of the teacher is to set a course of progressive learning, which may be challenging, but always achievable. If you're a beginner trying to learn a concerto, you will become frustrated and disillusioned.

Musicianship

When your Lego model has been constructed, you no longer need to think about each brick you've painstakingly put together. You can look at, and admire, the bigger picture. So how do you look beyond a mere sequence of notes you have painstakingly threaded together, to create a meaningful work of art? This is rather less tangible than the physical nuts and bolts of the piece.

Listening

Once students have created their own interpretations, it's enlightening to listen to other versions. Spotify and YouTube (other platforms are available) are useful resources. Listen critically to as many different versions as you can find. How do their interpretations differ? Hearing a famous player perform something in a different way from you doesn't mean they're right and you're wrong. You might want to try to copy certain aspects of their performance, but don't feel obliged – there is no definitive version. It's perfectly legitimate to dislike a performance, even if it's by a well-known musician.

Style and genre

Listening to other pieces by the composer will give a sense of their musical language. Also explore music by other composers from the same period. If the piece was written for an older incarnation of your instrument, compare and contrast 'modern' and 'historically informed' performances. If it's an arrangement for your instrument, listen to the original version.

Research the wider background of the piece. A general sense of the historical and social context can shed light on the music. There are often parallels to be drawn with art, architecture and literature from the same period.

Be sure that students understand any tempo or expression markings, especially if they're in a foreign language.

Telling a story

Why was the piece written? What is it trying to say? Students can try to make up a story that fits with the narrative of the music. What mood are they trying to create?

If the music is written for a religious ceremony, they might want to inject a sense of gravitas into their performance. If it's a bawdy song from the tavern, however, they'll play with a sense of reckless abandon.

Exams

When preparing for an exam, make sure that students read and understand the assessment criteria. These reflect the different aspects they should be practising. Trinity examiners break down a performance into three sections: fluency and accuracy; technical facility and communication; and interpretation. Similarly, Music Teachers' Board gives marks for accuracy, expression and technique. Examining is not an exact science. If a candidate plays out of time, it may be hard to tell whether this is due to a technical difficulty, a poor sense of rhythm, or even a well-meaning but ill-judged attempt at rubato. ABRSM examiners judge a piece a more holistically, giving a single mark for the overall impression, but still judging the following categories: pitch, time, tone, shape and performance.

When selecting a new exam piece, don't impose your choice on a student. Offer different options from each syllabus list. Send the student away with several pieces to try for a week or two and allow *them* the final decision about which will be performed in the exam.

Final thoughts

Building consistency

There's a saying: don't practise until you get it right; practise until you can't get it wrong.

Imagine you're a snooker player and you're practising a difficult pot. If you achieve it once, you won't think, 'Okay, I can do that now. I'll stop there'. You'll want to build up the consistency to be able to do it on a more regular basis. Even if your successful pot is a fluke, it proves that you can do it. Similarly, even if you play something correctly more by chance than design, that can give you the confidence to know that you *can do it*. With patient repetition, you'll gradually gain more control and get things right more often.

Ensemble playing

A skilled ensemble director can give an excellent model for individual practice. You'll probably start with a complete run-through – the carefree top-down approach, where you play through as best you can without worrying about any mistakes. This gives an overview of the piece. You probably won't get everything right, but you'll develop the invaluable skill of keeping going without getting lost, and learning to bluff the difficult bits. The conductor will then carefully break passages down and reconstruct them, working through all the details: the more circumspect bottom-up approach.

Your teaching style

Do you always take the lead in lessons and tell students what to do? Or do you observe them to see how effectively they can solve their own problems? If they rely on you to point out all their mistakes, and then you always show them how to fix them, it's unlikely that they will develop the skills for self-sufficient practice. Of course, it's fine to guide them through a model practice-routine in a lesson, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they'll absorb the techniques for effective and imaginative practice on their own. Indeed, it might make them more reliant on you. You may need to explicitly teach them how to practise.

Planning your practice session

Some advice for students: before you practise, take a moment to think about what you want to achieve and how you want to achieve it. This might include formulating both an overview of the session and a plan for each step of the way – for example, deciding in advance whether you're going to play a piece in its entirety, or focus on a small section. If you falter in your play-through, resist the temptation to stop (though make a mental note to revisit the problematic area). If your small section goes fluently, you might be tempted to continue to the end. But that wasn't the plan, so you may be wasting time in playing through a bit that doesn't need the practice. Be disciplined and stick to the plan.

Reading

Apologies for repeating myself, but this is super-important: keep **reading** accurately!