

Getting Started on a New Piece (For the Novice and Beginner Player)



Basic hints in bold; explanation in regular type.

Whenever you start a new piece of music, whether it is 2 lines long or 2 pages long, keep reminding yourself that the wrong rhythm creates the wrong note.

What does that mean? It means that if you play all the right notes, but they aren't in the right places (because the rhythm is wrong), then the note is not correct (for that place in the music).

Percussionists... this article is written aimed at the players who have melodies as well as rhythms, but the method works for you, too. **Always speak the rhythm before you play it and ALWAYS count out loud while you play.** Yes, it is harder, but once you can count easily, it will make more advanced playing easier.

SOOOO..... start by learning the rhythm BEFORE you play any notes (or hit that drum).

1. **Look at how many beats there are in each measure and make sure you know where those beats fall in each measure** -- either write in "hash marks" over each beat, or put in the beat numbers. Marking the beat is not necessary if you are 100% positive where the beats are by just looking at the measure. For example, if it is a measure of four quarter notes in 4/4 time, you probably don't need to mark the beats. If the measure has tricky rests or lots of sixteenth notes, you probably do need to mark the beats.

2. **Set up the beat. Be your own metronome**, either by tapping your foot or by setting up the beat in your lap with your hands, marching, walking, or any other method of keeping a steady beat in your body. If you do not have a steady beat in your body someplace, you don't have anything to support the correct rhythm. A rhythm must have a beat: no beat, no rhythm. (Don't use a mechanical metronome at this point; put the beat in your body.)

2a. What? Do I hear some of you saying, "But I can play it better when I don't tap my foot; my foot messes me up." Ah! Common problem that is actually quite difficult to fix, but **MUST BE FIXED!** You will never play smoothly if you don't take the time to master that bit of coordination (notice: I did not say, "...if you *can't* do it", you can, it just takes weeks of practice). Practice speaking basic rhythms (quarter notes, half notes) while tapping your foot. When you can do quarter/half easily, add eighth. **THEN** try playing the easy ones while tapping. **PRACTICE IT!!!**

3. Speak the rhythm for the first few measures, while keeping the beat in your body. You can do that using beat numbers

(1 2 3 + 4) or syllables like (du du du de du), or any other method that you have been taught. If the first measure is tricky, do just that measure until you have it figured out. If the first few are easy, do them three-five times correctly, then move on to the next section or a tricky measure.

4. "Chunk" it and "Link" it to the next section. Work on small chunks; do not start at the beginning and plow through to the end because it takes forever to learn something that way. When you were in school and had to memorize a poem, did you do it one stanza at a time, or say it over and over from beginning to end? (Hopefully, one stanza at a time!) Work on your music that way, too. If it isn't too difficult, do 4 measures, plus the first note of the next measure (go on to that note in the next measure so that you are "linking" the two sections together). After you really get the first four measures, then start on measure 5 and do your next chunk, ending on the first note of the measure after the chunk. Link your work. If it is a very difficult section, you might work on one measure, or even just two notes!

5. Once you can speak the rhythm of the section, speak the note names in the correct rhythm (keeping the beat in your body).

In order to play a section of music well we need to be thinking about the rhythm, the note names, the fingerings, your position (hands, mouth, body, instrument), the tone, and a whole bunch of other things! So, let's break it down into thinking just a few things at a time. We worked on rhythm, now let's add note names for that section. When you are set on the rhythm and can speak the note names, "finger" in the air, as if you had your instrument in your hands. **Silent practice is REALLY effective.**

6. OK! The moment you've waited and worked for!! If you've got this section well prepared (meaning, prepared to play well), pick up your instrument and try that section. Don't go on to the next part, just do what you've worked on. Play it three-five times correctly. **ALWAYS keep the beat in your body!** (You can tap your foot, nod your head, move your arm, wiggle your ears, but keep the beat.

Percussionists, count out loud. "But I can play it better if I don't count out loud!" Jeeze... here we go again. Practice counting out loud on easy rhythms! See section 2a above. <grin> You CAN do it, but it takes practice.

7. Now put your instrument down, pick the next section you are working on, and go back to Step 1. When you get through Step 6 and you can play the new second section 3-5 times correctly, review the first section you worked on and then try to play both parts, consecutively. Remember, don't stop at the end of the measure; always link by going on to the first note of the next section (the part you haven't worked on yet).

8. Here is the frustrating part. You will find that when you practice tomorrow, you may very well totally mess it up and feel like you did all that work for nothing, because you don't remember anything! VERY frustrating, and very normal. The good news is that when you start your practicing today (chunking & linking it, of course) it won't take as long as it did yesterday. (YAY!) If it took you 20 minutes yesterday, today it may only be 12 minutes, tomorrow 5, etc. The practice does make a difference.

9. **DO NOT just plow through things.** If you play something wrong every time you hit it, your brain is building its pathways the wrong way and it takes a lot longer to unlearn and learn it correctly. **Stop and fix the issue.** When you get it right, do it correctly at least three times (five times is better!). If your body has done it wrong 10 times and correctly once, what is the likelihood of doing it correctly the next time?? Not so good. **Run throughs are important AFTER you have each section learned.**

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM: Yes, this method takes longer to learn and is a lot of work, but in the end, it is a lot quicker than trying to relearn something you've learned wrong. In the words of John Wooden (and others),
"If you don't have the time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

Slow Practice = Fast Progress
Fast Practice = Slow Progress
No Practice = No Progress

(**Advanced players**, starting a new piece is different for you. For a good example of approach, go to BulletProofMusician.com and search for "Three stages of preparation Fleisher scouting", then click on the article about "What Comes First, the Notes or the Music ... the Chicken/Egg..." (Long and involved to get to, but worth reading.)