

Experiences of a flute teacher

How to start practicing a new piece of music

Some useful tips

Adult amateurs often want to master a new piece at first site. And could be disappointed if this is not so easy as they had imagined.

They might have noticed that they lack the patience to approach a new piece step by step. They set themselves too many goals at once and thereby get in their own way. When taking lessons your teacher can help you slow down and coach you, but when you work on your own the hurdles could seem too high to even try starting something new. A pity, because mastering a new piece through slow and easy practicing is so rewarding.

For these real amateurs (= music lovers) the following tips can be useful.

Do not start your studies by listening to someone else performing *your* piece!

The image that gets into your mind - especially after repeated listening to the recording - is not useful at this stage. It may enlarge your appreciation of the piece but the difference in performance between the professional and yourself can be very discouraging.

First just *look* at your piece of music, 'read' it.

- How many sharps or flats does it have
- Is it in a major or a minor key? (Important when besides flats in the time signature you see accidental sharps.)
- What time signature is it in? (It is important to know whether the beat should be the quarter or the eighth.)
- What does the tempo indication tell you? (the tempo indication gives you a first clue tot the character of the piece. A slow movement should never be practiced in a fast tempo.)
- Is the piece concentrated in one register or does it have many leaps from one to another?
- Which rhythmic figures do you notice?
- Can you find lines of melody that are repeated or does the melody change constantly? (In a rondo, for instance, the main theme is repeated several times.)

Now start playing

Always keep in mind that your brain registers everything you do, so play notes and rhythm correctly from the start. Wrong notes or rhythms will be remembered and have to be changed again if remembered wrong.. Double effort!

- Play the first section, for instance until the repeat – *slowly*!
- Listen for the musical sentences and where they end.
- Write in breathing marks at the end of sentences. (rather too many than not enough at first)
- Play until the end of the movement; listen if you can divide the movement into sections (key changes or minor-major changes) and sentences (breathing marks)

Now play the whole movement again – correct notes, correct rhythm – *slowly*!

Make an inventory of difficulties

- Read out loud (*slowly*) the notes of the difficult runs and move your fingers accordingly on the flute.
- Make markings in pencil over difficult rhythms and tap the beat – *slowly again*!
- Pay special attention to intonation (c#!)

Articulation, dynamics, breathing

If you can play the whole movement – slowly – with the correct notes, correct rhythm and (perhaps too many) breathing points, then you can start paying attention to the articulation. Practice some (double)staccato. Be careful to play the slurs exactly as they are written. Ask your teacher or look up in a book why the slurs are written as they are.

After the slurs start adding dynamics. Play them distinctly and take care of the intonation. (*forte* must not become higher, *piano* not lower!)

Now try skipping some of the breathing marks in this slow tempo. It will make it easier when you start increasing the tempo.

Tempo

Increase the tempo until you reach the beat that gives the correct character to the piece.

If any bar in it is too difficult in the faster tempo (let the metronome help you to find these places) bring down the tempo of the *whole* piece again until all ‘cracks’ are repaired.

Some of the breathing marks will be superfluous now. At this stage the phrasing (the arranging of musical sentences) should be made more important than your breathing.

Listen to where a new phrase starts in the music. Timing is important at these places. The musical movement should start to ‘breathe’ by itself, not by the metronome.

Tone

Now that you know the piece you can start playing with nice tone colours. Think of the different phrases and give each its own character of tone. Should it sound harsh or full, dark or light, and will you play it with or without vibrato. Tell your own story.

Playing with accompaniment

Before playing with accompaniment compare your flute part with the one that is written above the piano part. Play the piece from that part once. In baroque pieces ornaments are sometimes added to the flute part by the publisher. In the piano part you can see the original version by the composer. Read the preface to the piano part (if there is one).

Look at the role you play in each of the sections. Mostly you will be the soloist, but sometimes you play the 'second part' and you must let the piano come out.

When a note is out of tune, check its function in the harmonic context. A third needs another intonation than a fifth.

Listening to recordings

Now that you know the piece well you can listen to one or more recordings. Compare them to the picture of the piece that you have formed for yourself. They might give you new ideas or they might tell you that your own interpretation isn't bad at all!

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