

## **The Process of Practicing Music**

**By John Cipolla**

Learning a new piece of music should be a process of analysis and slow repetitive practice. If we understand essentially how a composition is constructed, we can then “digest” the composition more fully and thoroughly; then as we try to play a piece of music without the score, otherwise known as “memorizing the music,” we focus on internalizing the essence of the composition.

I prefer the term “internalize” rather than memorize because the term “memorize” seems to have more of an implication of rote learning, without thinking. Having an understanding of how elements of a composition are constructed and progress give the music a more profound meaning to the performer, and with enough slow practice to work through technical difficulties, enable the performer to deliver a convincing, individual, and artistic interpretation.

The music on the page should be a guide. As one learns a new piece of music, one should commit the music to memory as quickly as possible. Doing this helps the player to not waste practice time. I like to play through a piece a few times to get a sense of how it sounds, and then I begin learning the music phrase by phrase. Rather than simply reading a group of notes over and over again to learn it, I find it helpful to deal with small enough units of music, often smaller than a phrase, which I can remember after reading through after a few times. Then as I practice, my focus is not on reading the music, but rather on listening to the unit of music I am playing. Focusing playing rhythmically even often helps me to focus on the phrase. I also find it helpful to think of the patterns that the notes

make. For instance if a passage is in a specific key, I will think of each note as a number in the corresponding scale. This helps me to transpose the passage as well. The examples below show how thinking in numbers can help to transpose a passage.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1



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The first focus should be on rhythm. Use a metronome and put it at a very slow tempo. In fact, using a metronome with a very loud beat and the ability to play subdivisions is also quite helpful. Listen to all the rhythms and focus on making all the rhythms extremely even. Once you can play evenly, you can take liberties by stretching and accelerating the tempos within a phrase. The focus on rhythm is very important.

### **Hadcock 5 in 1 method**

- Narrow problem area
- Bracket area
- Play phrase 5 times perfectly at approximately half the performance tempo
- Move metronome up 4 notches (if using a digital metronome, move up 7 numbers)
- Play passage 1 time
- Move metronome down 3 notches (if using a digital metronome, move down 5 numbers)
- Play passage 5 times perfectly
- Continue process of up 5, down 3

Peter Hadcock, former Eb clarinetist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, used an excellent method to practice technically difficult passages. He describes this method in

his orchestral excerpt book, *The Working Clarinetist*. You begin by bracketing or lightly penciling a very small unit of music. It is important to look and listen carefully to a phrase that is giving you difficulty and decide exactly where the problem area is.

Technical problems can often be narrowed to a group of two or three notes.

Once the problem area is narrowed, begin playing the passage slowly—with a metronome—at about half the actual performance tempo. Sometimes it is necessary to play it even slower. The goal should be though, to play it at a tempo that you can play perfectly. This tempo may be far slower than you have ever conceived of playing this passage, but try to have patience with yourself. Playing something correctly at a slow tempo is far more productive than playing something, with mistakes, at a faster tempo.

### **Intervals, chords, scales**

A younger player may be struggling to simply play the notes and figuring out the rhythms, but I find that we don't challenge players enough at a younger age. Learning intervals, chords, and scales should all be learned concurrently with the study of an instrument. This, of course, is how a general music curriculum is designed—music theory (intervals, clefs, scales, keys, chords, forms, phrase types, etc.), music history, private lessons, and ensemble playing (which puts all of the course work into practice).

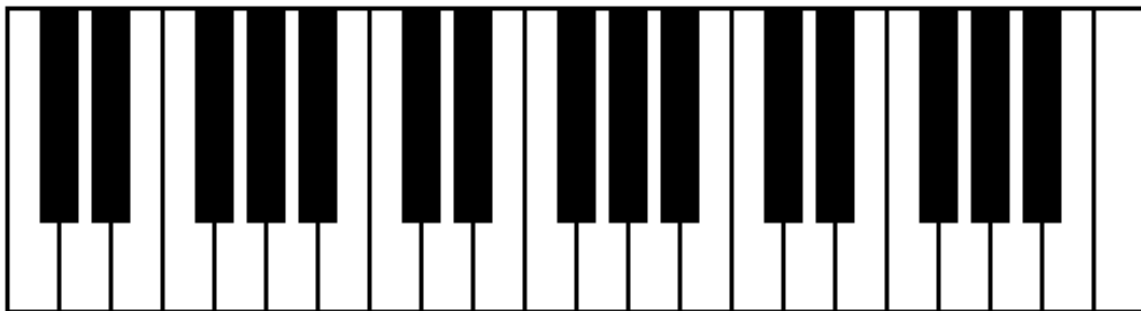
With the knowledge of the basics of how music is constructed, a player can make informed decisions about phrasing and can see the logic in the music. This will, in turn, enable them to commit the music to memory much quicker. The actual commitment to memory comes from a combination of understanding essentially why the notes and rhythms are where they are and through SLOW repetition that creates a digital memory in the fingers. Learning music is really that simple. The challenge lies in developing the

patience to work with each phrase long enough to understand it, then repeat it enough times SLOWLY and CORRECTLY, so as to engrain it fully in the fingers and mind. In a sense, the player should be making the music habitual, just a walking or talking are.

Let's review some of the basics: intervals, scales, harmony, phrases, and forms. These will help us to recognize patterns in the music, see the logic in the music, and then ultimately to commit the music to our conscious and subconscious memories.

### **Basics**

Intervals are the basic building blocks of music. Two notes, played consecutively or simultaneously, form an interval. The quickest way to learn to recognize intervals is to look at them on the piano keyboard. Below is a picture of a piano keyboard. I listed the basic intervals below. A student should practice recognizing intervals on the keyboard diagram or on a real keyboard. Remember that a *half step* is the interval formed by any two notes that are directly next to each other on the keyboard. Sometimes a half step can be a black note and a white note next to each other or sometimes two white notes next to each other, but two black notes are never next to each other. Study the keyboard diagram, then look for the following intervals on the keyboard.



Half step—two notes directly next to each other

Whole step—2 half steps

Minor third–3 half steps

Major third–4 half steps

Perfect 4<sup>th</sup>–5 half steps or a major 3<sup>rd</sup> and a half step (there are no major or minor 4ths)

Augmented 4<sup>th</sup>/diminished 5<sup>th</sup>, tri-tone–6 half steps or a major 3<sup>rd</sup> and a whole step

Perfect 5<sup>th</sup>–7 half steps or a major 3<sup>rd</sup> and a minor 3<sup>rd</sup>

Minor 6<sup>th</sup>–8 half steps or a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and a half step

Major 6<sup>th</sup>–9 half steps or a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and a whole step

Minor 7<sup>th</sup>–10 half steps or a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and a minor third

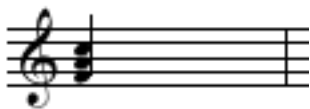
Major 7<sup>th</sup>–11 half steps or a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and a major third

Octave–12 half steps or a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and a perfect 4<sup>th</sup>

### **Scales and keys**

A scale is a group of notes played consecutively, in step-wise fashion (mostly in half and whole steps). Assigning numbers to each note of a scale helps us to recognize what kind of the scale it is and how the chords below the scale relate to the scale.

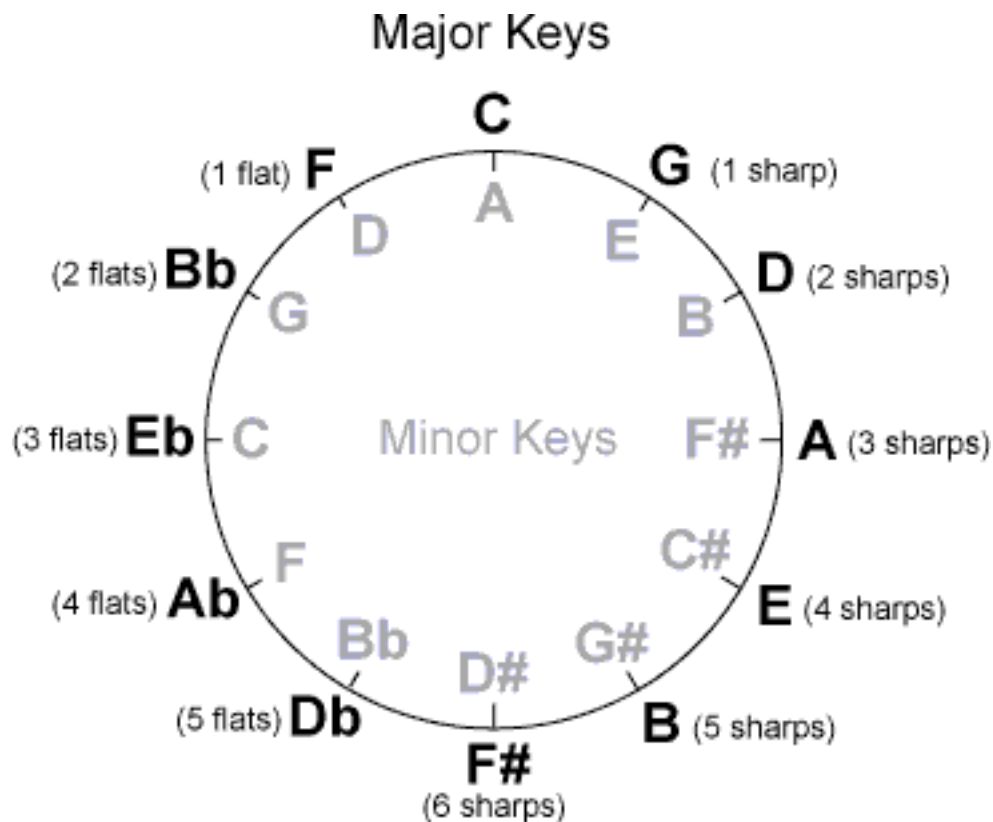
A chord is a group of notes played simultaneously consisting of every other note of the scale (root-1<sup>st</sup> note of the scale, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> ).



Chords can extend higher than the 5<sup>th</sup>. They are typically built using every other note of the scale, but can also be built with other notes as well.



A tonality or key is expressed through scales and chords. There are twelve major keys and twelve minor keys. The circle of fifths is a standard diagram that is handy to keep on your music stand to refer to until the keys and scales are memorized.



Once intervals are understood, scales and chords are more easily understood. Recognizing intervals simply takes practice. Simply look at any piece of music and practice reciting the intervals between each consecutive note.

## Harmony

The concept of harmony is really not that difficult to understand. Chords have a similar numbering system as do scales, but Roman numerals are used for chords instead of Arabic numbers, which are used for scales. Here is where the keyboard comes in handy. If we play every other note (1, 3, 5) in the key of C major, beginning on C, we form a C chord (C, E, G). This is called the I (one) chord in the key of C major.

Every chord relates to a specific key. If we stay in the key of C major, no sharps or flats, and play a chord (root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>) on the second note of a C scale, a D, we get a ii (two) chord (D, F, A). We can continue this pattern up the scale, building a three-note chord on each note of the scale.



As we look at the chords, we can see differences between them. The differences are in the *intervals* usually between the bottom two notes. Some of the chords have the interval of a minor third (these are the minor chords) and some of the chords have the interval of a major third (these are major chords). The chord built on the seventh scale degree has two minor thirds, which forms a diminished chord.

Therefore, if we build a chord on each note of a major scale, we get seven chords. Within these seven chords, there are three types of chords—major, minor, and diminished. Once we can begin to recognize chords, which as we said are derived from the root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> of a scale, we can begin to see how chords tend to move from one to the next. Chords tend to move in patterns rather than haphazardly, so if we know how they tend to

move, we can recognize these movements more quickly and this will help us to remember our music more readily. Here are some frequently used chord movements:

- Up a whole step
- Down a whole step
- Down a perfect fifth (it doesn't matter what octave you are in, just the root of the chord matters)
- Down a minor third

## **Phrases**

Phrases are musical sentences. They are constructed with little units of music called ideas or motives. Very often, phrases can be divided into two halves, a question (the antecedent) and then an answer (the consequent). There are numerous names for each half and there are many theoretical concepts to describe how phrases are constructed, but until these are studied, it is helpful to simply remember that these two halves make a phrase or complete musical sentence. Not all phrases will have an antecedent and consequent, but many do, so this will provide a good starting point from which to examine phrases.

## **Form**

Form in music is the “structure” of the music, the logic behind why phrases and tonalities occur where they do in the music. A group of phrases can help define the form of a piece of music. A periodic return of certain motives or phrases throughout the piece

is usually what helps create the form of the piece. The delineation of sections in musical compositions is often done with changes in tonalities.

Labeling phrases with a letter is a standard way of analyzing and discussing form. For instance, if there are four phrases of music, with the first, second and fourth phrases being similar, and the third phrase being different, we can call the form an AABA form. Understanding forms is easier once the concepts of intervals, scales, and harmony are understood.

The understanding of harmony, phrases, and forms will grow deeper and more mature as the musician learns more and more music throughout their lives. This is why it is imperative to begin understanding these concepts from the beginning of the study of music. With this comprehensive approach to music, a player will then perceive music more fully from the beginning of their studies. This will help them make more informed decisions about how to interpret and recreate what the composer intended.

### **The Understanding is understood...now the SLOW repetition**

A musician uses analytical skills in the preparation of a piece of music. But, once the essence of the music is understood, the player will, at some point, have to commit a fair amount of time to learning the music through slow repetition. There is simply no other way.

I begin a new piece by playing through it slowly a few times to get a general feel for it. I may also listen to a recording of the work once or twice also to hear how it sounds. Then I begin the dissection process. I often begin at the end of the work. I take the last phrase, and sometimes I work with a group of notes that are smaller than a

phrase. I look at the phrase and decide what key it is in-sometimes it is not in any key. I ask myself: does it contain scales, arpeggios, a combination of the two, if there are arpeggios, what are they? If there are scales, what are they? If there are combinations of different scales and/or arpeggios, how do they relate to each other? These are all very important questions.

### **The Actual Playing**

I begin by playing the phrase very slowly so there are no mistakes. I think about it as if I am actually playing it for an audience in a live performance. I do this with a metronome until I can play it five times perfectly without a mistake. If I make too many mistakes, then I know my tempo is too fast to begin with, so I'll slow it down even more. I then move the metronome up a notch and try to play it again five times perfectly. Again, if I find myself making mistakes, I slow the tempo down.

The most efficient way to learn music is to simply engrain the correct digital memory in our fingers. This is done only through playing something correctly, not incorrectly. As the practice session continues, and the tempo gradually increases to the actual performance tempo, you will find that you will have played the passage CORRECTLY anywhere from 80-100 times...PERFECTLY. This process may take 10-30 minutes for a single phrase of music. Though this may seem like a long time, remember that once the phrase is learned correctly, it is never a problem again. The most you'll ever need to do is to practice it slowly again for a little while to work it back up again, but the digital memory habits will already be ingrained.

## About finding the time to practice

Divide your practice sessions up throughout the day. Don't wait for that 1 hour time slot to be available in your day, because it usually won't be. Have the instrument out throughout the day and take advantage of those few minutes throughout the day. They really add up. Use all those little moments throughout the day. Even go so far as to have your instrument with you while you are watching TV. The "constancy" of having the instrument in your hands throughout the day will make you a better player. Here are a few practice suggestions:

1. Practice with the instrument in hand, blowing air, but not making a sound. This can be good for early morning or late night when you do not want to disturb anyone.
2. Squeeze in a 5 minute practice session, by the clock, the moment you get out of bed in the morning. Do the same just before you go to bed at night. Find other moments throughout the day to squeeze in these 5 minute "power practice sessions."
3. Plan your practice sessions, for the next day, before you go to bed at night. Remember to break up the practice session throughout the day. The "5 minute" sessions really add up throughout the day...and you'll find that 5 minutes often turns into 10-15 minutes. This is not so bad; just be aware of limiting your time. We have a tendency to get more done when under pressure.
4. Don't try to do too much in one session. Be happy if you chipped away at one problem—even if you don't think you mastered it. Difficult passages take time to learn and slow, consistent repetition is the only way to approach them. A difficult

passage may take a month to engrain, but slow repetition of the correct finger patterns and embouchure feel can really do wonders.

5. Always use a metronome. Always use a metronome. Always use a metronome.

6. Pay careful attention to the rhythm and pulse. Rhythm means to play the correct subdivisions and pulse means to play at a given tempo without slowing down or speeding up unintentionally.

7. Not all practicing can be planned. This is why consistent, daily practice is needed. Sometimes we begin a practice session, intending to accomplish something, and we make a little discovery about something else. Let yourself explore these discoveries. This is one of the exciting parts about playing music.

8. Start pieces months ahead of the performance or audition. This cannot be stressed enough. When learning new music, I like to start about 9-12 months before the performance. My goal is usually to have the music under my fingers and in my ear, ready to perform about 2 months before the actual performance date. Then, I can let the piece stew a little and settle inside me. Working in this manner also gives you time to test the piece out in a small performance or two before the actual performance. This is quite helpful. Beginning a piece a few weeks before the performance deprives the performer of the pleasure of enjoying the “process” of experimentation and exploration that goes along with learning a piece of music. The performance is NOT the goal. The process IS the goal!

## **Review**

Learning music is a process of analysis and slow, correct repetition. The quicker a player can approach learning music in this fashion, the more music they will learn. And,

the more music a musician learns, the better and more mature player they will become.

Analysis and slow repetition are the only way to learn music thoroughly and completely.

Gradually work your way through a piece from the back to the front, learning the music through analysis and repetition...and without the written music in front of you throughout the process of repetition. Let the fingers engrain the habits of moving from each correct note and rhythm to each next note and rhythm. Throughout this process of practicing, be sure to always concentrate and focus as if you are playing for an audience.

The biggest problem with practicing is patience. We tend to want to learn the piece all at once and be able to play it in a week. We must remind ourselves that playing through music, with mistakes, only engrains incorrect digital habits, which are very difficult to unlearn. Therefore, having the patience to do SLOW REPETITIVE practice is really the most efficient, quickest, most thorough, and best way to learn a piece of music.