

Driving Through Union Town

The fastest, cleanest way to learn a piece of music is by making your body perform endless repetitions of small bits of material. Your mind may be smart, and understand the music immediately, intuitively, but your body is stupid and must be trained like a baby, taking many many small baby steps.

I like to play this game when I teach this concept: I tell the student I'm going to read him/her something and he/she is to repeat it back to me. "I say, you repeat." Then I proceed to read a random paragraph from a catalog, or something, as fast and for as long as I can in one breath. The student laughs, and I say, "Why can't you do it? Too fast, too much." Then, I explained that the brain doesn't like big bits of information, it likes small bits of information which it then links together into one single complex of many interconnected memories. Only if all the little links are perfect, will the big links be perfect. Many children kid themselves into thinking that the playing faster is better, but this is just because they haven't learned to listen fast enough. To play fast is to hear fast.

In teaching students to accelerate their playing of demanding passages I have settled on these three methods or procedures:

- 1.) play so slowly with the metronome that you cannot make a mistake, and gradually, metronome mark by metronome mark, accelerate.
- 2.) subject the rhythm to a sequence of rhythm variants,
- 3.) use the additive practice method of playing through a passage many times starting with one note, then going back again and again, adding one at a time to the sequence.

Initial Step: Learn Perfectly with Metronome

The first procedure, playing slowly with the metronome, is the most basic, and the most important. You must choose it was small passage, one to four measures at most, and just work on that one passage. I have further divided the procedure into these preparatory steps:

- 1.) Learn the right hand notes—no rhythm; just play the exact right notes, no wrong notes. This is where you decide on fingering; there must be a finger number on every note.
- 2.) Learn the right hand rhythm by setting the metronome on the fastest rhythmic value in the passage, creating, of the longer notes, groups of these fastest notes. Clap with the metronome. When you can perform the rhythm perfectly go on to the next step.
- 3.) Learn the right hand notes in rhythm. No mistakes. If you make a mistake, stop do not fix the problem and go on (that habit leads to stuttering which is the most maddening sound you can make)—stop and go back to the beginning of the region. If you make another mistake, it does not mean you are stupid and should give up music, it means you were trying to play the passage too fast and you must turn the metronome speed down.

4.) Learn the left hand notes—no rhythm; just play the exact right notes, no wrong notes. This is where you decide on fingering; there must be a finger number on every note.

5.) Learn the left hand rhythm by setting the metronome on the fastest rhythmic value in the passage, creating, of the longer notes, groups of these fastest notes. Clap with the metronome. When you can perform the rhythm perfectly go on to the next step.

6.) Learn the left hand notes in rhythm. No mistakes. If you make a mistake, do not fix the problem and go on (that habit leads to stuttering which is the most maddening sound you can make)—stop and go back to the beginning of the region. If you make another mistake, it does not mean you are stupid and should give up music, it means you were trying to play the passage too fast and you must turn the metronome speed down.

7.) Learn hands together notes—no rhythm; just play the exact right notes, no wrong notes. Play the fingering you wrote in.

8.) Learn the hands together rhythm by setting the metronome on the fastest rhythmic value in the passage, creating, of the longer notes, groups of these fastest notes. Clap with the metronome. When you can perform the rhythm perfectly go on to the next step.

9.) Learn the hands together notes in rhythm. No mistakes. If you make a mistake, do not fix the problem and go on (that habit leads to stuttering which is the most maddening sound you can make)—stop and go back to the beginning of the region. If you make another mistake, it does not mean you are stupid and should give up music, it means you were trying to play the passage too fast and you must turn the metronome speed down.

10) When the passage is set, perfect notes, perfect rhythm, you can start speeding it up a little bit at a time until it starts to sound like something.

Second Step: Rhythm Variants

I tell the story of driving through Union Town to illustrate how rhythm variants work.

Union Town is a two-building town you have to drive through on the way to Lewiston. You have to slow down to 35 miles an hour for about two blocks, then you can speed up again.

Now, imagine that you are driving through Uniontown at midnight—there are no cars, there are no cops, why slow down? As you whiz by a street light at 65 miles an hour, you see, you see, what was it? There is a woman there. What is she doing? There is a blue thing there. I can't see it—it's too fast.

Let's slow down to 35. Now we can see that the woman under the streetlight is the standing next to a blue mailbox. What she is doing out there so late we don't know, but now we have a clear 35 mph picture of her in our memories mailing that midnight letter.

Now, let's speed up to 65 again. This time when we pass by, we match up the picture of the woman in our memory with what we see before us, and we can see clearly because of what we remember.

This is how rhythm variants work. You take really clear 35 mph pictures of some notes, and go 65 on other notes. Altering the rhythm in this way creates a highlighted picture of every note in the

sequence you are learning, thus making it possible for you to think through the passage at 65, as if he were playing it at 35.

Rhythm variants are generally practiced in multiples of 2 or 3.

A two-note variant goes:

long-short (1 2 1 2) or

short-long (1 2 1 2).

A four-note variant goes:

long-short-short-short (1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4),

short-long-short-short (1 2 3 4 1 2 3),

short-short-long-short (1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4), or

short-short-short-long (1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4).

And so on.

Third Step: Additive Practice

The idea of stopping to take slow clear pictures of notes, in your memory, is what the rhythm variant practice method is all about. This approach is taken to its logical extreme with the additive practice method. With this method, you begin with one note.

Play the first note very strong.

Then play the first two notes, as fast as you can, very strong.

Then play the first three notes, as fast as you can, very strong.

Then play the first four notes, as fast as you can, very strong.

Then play the first five notes, as fast as you can, very strong.

And so on.

There can be no doubt that step one, using the metronome to get the basic picture, is essential. Thereafter, it may become a matter of taste which of the more advanced techniques for accelerating music you prefer. I have found using rhythm variants to be the most reliable way of setting a passage strongly in memory, and that the additive practice method is most usefully brought in as a kind of an emergency measure when you're trying to play something really fast and you have a speed barrier blocking you. On the other hand I have taught many young people to play complicated harmonic passages (lots of chords) using the additive method to build sequences of shifting hand positions.

The key to the problem is to install in your memory a complex of powerful mnemonic devices which lead to fluid transitions from note to note in flawless sequence.