

# A Student's Guide to Preparing a Piece for Performance

By Michelle Humphreys

Being given a new piece of music to learn and perform generally provokes two reactions: excitement and dread. We feel excitement when we imagine ourselves performing the piece with physical, technical, and artistic mastery. The trepidation comes as we recognize what it will take to achieve that mastery and wonder if we are up to the challenge.

In order to successfully prepare a piece for performance, it is essential to understand exactly what challenges lie before you. However, you don't have to be daunted by these challenges. With proper planning, you can master the demands of the piece and set yourself up for a successful and enjoyable performance experience.

The following is a process I developed for approaching a new piece of music. By having a specific plan, you can transform your concerns into excitement—which is a much more effective response to the challenge. As you increase your skills and your performing level, you should find that this process facilitates better preparation and, as a result, better performances.

## STEP ONE: ASSESS THE PIECE

A thorough assessment of the piece will give you the information you need to create a preparation timeline that is realistic and concise. For most pieces I break assessment down into two distinct parts: rhythmic and melodic/harmonic.

**Rhythmic Assessment:** To assess the piece rhythmically, begin by *singing* through the piece, vocalizing the rhythms as you pantomime the basic hand movements required on the instrument. You can do this with or without sticks or mallets, standing only a few feet away from the instrument. Use a metronome to gauge the appropriate speeds.

This process will provide you with a rough idea of how physically challenging the various sections will be. Even though this first step involves no actual playing, it will help you forecast whether or not you will need to

develop new strengths or skills to play the piece. For example:

- Do you see independent rolls?
- Are there sections for five or six mallets?
- Do you see sections where you will be pounding out double stops or block chords at fast tempi?
- Are there fast tuning changes?
- Do you see wide intervallic leaps?

These are important issues to consider early in your preparation. It is a great misfortune—and one that every player experiences at some point—to learn a piece of music for a performance on a predetermined date, only to find that getting the entire piece, or a section of it, up to tempo is more difficult than anticipated. Forcing your body to play harder, longer, or faster than it is prepared to play is a quick route to tendonitis or other painful injuries.

Making this mistake once is a tough lesson. Making it over and over again is a habit that

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will stand between you and your professional goals. If you have properly assessed these challenges and allowed for them in your timeline, you will have the time you need to develop whatever strengths are required without causing injury.

**Harmonic/Melodic Assessment:** Having identified the “chops-intensive” sections of a piece, it is time to go on to the next step. Spend time with the music, but not at your instrument. You may find that you can see the music more clearly and be more observant when you don't have mallets or sticks in your hands.

As you study the score, look for patterns in the music. Divide the piece into logical sections, marking them as you go, and try to answer the following questions:

- Does the piece have sections that repeat exactly or with variations?
- Are the melodies based primarily on certain intervals?

- Are there a lot of position changes?

Now do a basic overview or analysis of the harmonic structure:

- Where are the changes in key or tonality?
- What is the relationship between them (e.g., tonic/dominant, relative minor, etc.)?
- Are there places where the harmonies change rapidly?

Having done a preliminary analysis, it is time to develop a timeline that will dictate your process and take you to your performance goal. To do this, take into consideration all the information from your rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic analysis. You should also rely on past experience: How long does it take *you* to learn new techniques, gain note accuracy, work up fast sections, and memorize the music?

## STEP TWO: DEVELOP A TIMELINE

To ensure that the music is ready to perform by the desired or required date, I rely on having a fairly specific timeline that leads me to my goal. This schedule will be created around the following four guideposts:  
1. Learning the notes and

- rhythms of the piece;
2. Getting the piece up to tempo;
3. Memorizing the piece (if desired or required);
4. Preparing to perform.

One mistake that students frequently make is not allowing sufficient time for the fourth step. For a performance (whether a jury, a recital, or Carnegie Hall debut) it is not sufficient simply to play the correct notes and rhythms at the correct tempo from memory. To me, this is when the most important part of the process begins and where the player gets the greatest payoff. It is certainly a step that you do not want to rush through!

How much time you will need to reach the various guideposts will depend on your strengths and weaknesses, and how they interface with the information you gained in your assessment of the piece.

Most projects will expand to fill as much time as you give them, and the bulk of the

work gets done at the end of the time allowed. (Think about the last term paper you wrote.) This basic fact of human nature should be taken into consideration when determining and following your timeline.

Most people naturally work under the "50/50 principle": we divide our time equally among the various parts of any given task. Consider instead operating under the "80/20 principle," first put forward by the Italian economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto.

Pareto's 80/20 principle states that 80 percent of any task is accomplished with 20 percent of the total effort. The remaining 20 percent of the task takes 80 percent of the overall work.

What does that mean for you? It means that you need to determine which parts of the process will be the greatest challenge for you, and allocate the bulk of your time to those steps.

If you do not feel that you have a very good grasp of what your strengths and weaknesses are, following this process through from beginning to end is a great way to learn that vital information. So let's jump right in!

## 1. Learning the notes and rhythms of the piece

Why do I call this section "learning the notes and rhythms of the piece," rather than "learning the music"? Because they are not the same thing! For example, I could recite a monologue from Shakespeare, with all of the words correctly pronounced and the poetic accents in the right place, but it would still be a long way from an artistic reading by a trained Shakespearean actor.

When we learn a new piece of music, we begin by simply learning the notes and rhythms. Only then can we go on to make them into music. Both steps are critically important to a successful performance, but they must be approached in order.

The process of learning notes and rhythms will be laborious for some and relatively easy for others. Either way, the process will be made infinitely easier by your preliminary analysis. Here are some things to consider in selecting an amount of time to budget for this step:

- Are broad sections of the piece fairly static harmonically, or is the reverse true?
- Does the composition have many repeats, or is it through-composed?
- Based on what you already know about yourself as a reader, what is the shortest amount of time needed to absorb what is on the page?

Avoid allowing any more time than absolutely necessary. Do not waste time during this step on playing the easy parts over and over again. (It's amazing how tempting it is to do this.) Get on with the task at hand and digest the whole thing. To be successful in this first step, spend the least amount of time on the things that come easily to you.

## 2. Getting it up to tempo

To be successful in accurately establishing a deadline for this step, it is vital that you know yourself as player in the most physical sense. As I mentioned before, the costs of pushing your body too hard or too fast can be too high to sustain. There are many sad stories of promising musicians who are sidelined by injuries related to overuse.

Depending on the piece and your skill level, this step may not be particularly challenging. Your piece may be slow, or it may be that there are no technical demands that are new to you. But if sections of your piece require strength or skills that you do not yet have, this strength

needs to be developed intelligently and gradually.

Use the information gathered in your rhythmic assessment to estimate how much time you will need for this step. Did your initial look at the piece reveal physically challenging elements, such as double stops or chords at extremely fast tempi?

Keep in mind that you can't cram strength or speed. There are physical limits to how quickly your muscles and tendons can respond to training. As a general rule, consider limiting your focused strength-building or speed work to one hour a day out of your total practice time. Allow your muscles time to recover between ses-

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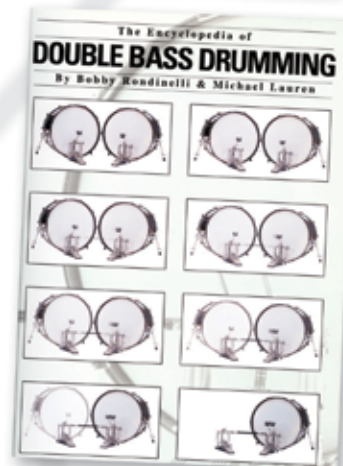
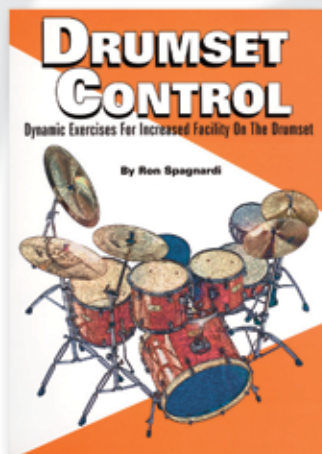
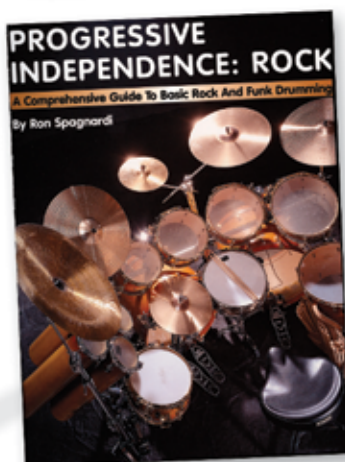
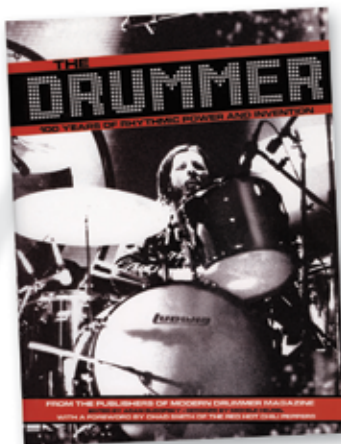
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sions. If you feel pain, it is a sign that you are pushing too hard; immediately scale back your efforts in that arena and use the time for other work.

### 3. Memorizing the piece

It is not always necessary to memorize a piece, but it can be helpful to the process of working on musical expression. Some people find that by the time they have mastered the notes and rhythms, the piece is almost memorized. Others find memorization difficult. Remember that the stress of performance can make your memory significantly less reliable than it is in the practice room or studio. When choosing a deadline for this task, the following information from your analysis is also pertinent:

- Is the piece through-composed?
- Are there large repeated sections?
- Did you identify organizational patterns that will aid you in faster memorization?

Try to identify what the biggest challenges will be in memorizing the piece, and set a separate time limit for these sections.

If you choose to memorize a piece, try to maintain a good working relationship with the printed page; never stray too far from it. Return to the music by spending time studying it while you are not at your instrument. This might provide you with fresh insight as to the composer's wishes, help you detect details that might have escaped you initially, or inspire you to try new ideas about articulation or phrasing.

### 4. Preparing to perform

Depending on your level of experience and what type of learner you are, you may feel ready to perform your piece by the time you have completed the first three steps of preparation. But your performance will be infinitely more enjoyable and successful if you allow sufficient time to really make the piece your own.

Having achieved technical and physical facility, you now have the freedom to play expressively and musically. Once you are able to play the piece without concentrating all your attention on hitting the right notes, you may hear new aspects of the piece that might lead to specific interpretive choices. Playing through the piece repeatedly after it is thoroughly mastered technically can allow the piece to "reveal" itself at deeper levels. Use this time to experiment with different phrasings, articulations, or tempo and dynamic adjustments. I think of this process as "breathing" yourself into the piece, or getting the piece into your blood.

Now is also the time to ask yourself the following: Do you see this piece as a unified whole? Do its parts make sense to you, and have you connected them to each other in a cohesive, convincing way? If the piece doesn't make sense to you, it will unlikely make sense to your audience.

Once you have brought the piece to this

level, you are almost ready for your performance—but not quite. Being able to execute a piece of music beautifully and well is not the same as being ready to perform the piece in front of an audience. Most students—and, to be honest, many professionals—find performing to be a nerve-wracking experience.

One of the ways I have my students gain familiarity and comfort with the special stress of performing is to require them to invite other musicians, friends, or passers-by into their practice rooms, and perform their pieces for them. You might be surprised at how affected you are by even one or two audience members. Licks that you can play perfectly in the practice room may become train-wrecks. Your own body may feel like it has been taken over by aliens. A piece you know backwards and forwards may suddenly look completely unfamiliar on the page (or fly out of your head, if you have it memorized).

Desensitize yourself by taking every opportunity to perform your piece for other people. I cannot over-emphasize the benefit of making this effort. Build this into your allotment of time for this task. If possible, allow one month for the final phase of preparation. If the total preparation time available to you does not allow for this, challenge yourself to master the first three steps of preparation as quickly as possible to allow as much time as possible for the last step.

### STEP THREE: CREATE A WRITTEN SCHEDULE

This final step may seem obvious or unnecessary. Trust me when I tell you that it is neither. Take out a calendar and circle your performance date. Then, using the estimated time frames you have established, and working

backward from your performance date, pencil the target date for reaching each guidepost onto your calendar. Now, move each target date up (earlier) by one week, to accommodate the inevitable colds, term papers, and other things that will come up.

Having gone through this analysis, you may find that the scheduled performance date is too close for you to adequately prepare the piece. If it's close, you may simply need to push yourself to be ready a little sooner. But if the discrepancy is great, it is a sign that the piece is too difficult for you to prepare in the allotted time. Depending on the situation, you may be able to change either the piece or the performance date. Although this may be awkward, it is far better to recognize the reality sooner rather than later.

More likely, you will simply find that you need to get working right away! With your plan in place, you can take on your new piece with confidence and excitement. At each step of preparation, you will know that you are where you need to be, and when your performance date arrives, you'll be ready.

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