

# Practice Effectively: Go Slow to Go Fast

Dr. Brad Meyer

**There is more to life than simply increasing its speed.**

**—Mahatma Gandhi**

Two of the most beneficial tools to help young students learn music more quickly and with a higher level of quality are slow practice and gradual increases of music difficulty. Often times, young musicians are focused on learning music quickly, which can develop a strong sense of motivation; however, the drive to learn music quickly usually causes several downfalls. Here are some issues many young students face in the learning process and ways we can help navigate them towards more efficient and effective practice.

## **Extremely Challenging Music**

Many students pride themselves on moving to solos that require new skill sets, advanced techniques, or superior dexterity. Students enjoy learning pieces with new challenges because it provides them with a sense of progress; however, many students do not realize that progressing to significantly harder solos will require much more time in the practice room and more attention to detail than prior pieces.

There are two ways to solve this problem. The first is to give students pieces that are only slightly more challenging. Further, I recommend it be in a completely different style/genre from the last style/genre they learned so there is an increased feeling of change. Often times, students will bring in a piece (let us call it *Piece X*) and you as an instructor know will

take at least 4-5 months for them to learn. In these cases, I recommend you use their enthusiasm for *Piece X* as a long-term goal. Instead of immediately moving them to *Piece X*, tell them to play through one or two pieces in between where their skill level is and where *Piece X* needs them to be. I call this the “stair method.” I describe the “stair method” by envisioning the stairs leading to the top of a football stadium. The reason why there are so many small stairs between the bottom and the top of the stadium is because all those individual stairs make it easy to reach the ultimate objective through steady, gradual progress.

The other way to solve the problem of taking on *Piece X* is to break the piece into several smaller solos. Most pieces have three to four large sections, so treat each section like its own solo. Work only one large section at a time, and do not let the student start working on the next large section until the first large section is performance ready. This process allows the student to take his time, which results in learning the music with high quality. The student will not be overwhelmed by the length of the piece, and can focus on all the basics of music such as pitch, rhythm, AND dynamics. Often times, students wait to learn dynamics until they have learned all the pitches and rhythms of the piece. This style of learning results in

students not knowing dynamics and will reinforce the idea that dynamics are not important. Lack of dynamics is one of the most cited problems in student performances at solo and ensemble competitions.

## **Practicing Too Fast**

I have found the following to be an all-too-common occurrence when students first enter college. Many students will view a piece as impossible because of the written tempo. This issue always reminds me of one of the most valuable lessons I learned as a freshman in high school. The senior section leader at the time told me, “every piece is easy if you take it slow enough.” This taught me I could play anything if I take it at a slow enough tempo, which is usually half tempo or slower, to fully understand the rhythms, pitches, and dynamics of a piece. Many students believe practicing at a significantly slower tempo than written means they will never be able to get the piece to the written tempo; however, what they need to understand is if they do not turn the tempo down to where the piece is easy to play and understand, then they will never build the essential foundation needed to perform the piece with a high level of quality when they get it to tempo. I define the foundation of every piece of music as pitch, rhythm, and dynamics. Unless a student can play those with consistency (approximately four out of five times) at the tempo they are working, then they should go much slower (approximately 15-20 bpm).

## Practice Effectively: Go Slow to Go Fast

**We don't have to be fast; we simply have to be steady and move in the right direction. Direction is always going to trump speed.** —Toni Sorenson

### Example:

Recently, I have been working with some students on “2” from Jacques Delécluse’s *Douze Etudes*, which is a snare drum solo marked at 100 bpm. Students will usually drop the metronome down to around 70 bpm when they first start practicing, but going that fast makes them struggle with achieving quality ruffs and also causes them to stumble over three bars: mm. 20, 24, and 30. (Side note: we use Rob Knopper’s sticking guides for *Douze Etudes*, which is why some of the students struggle with m. 20.)

The specifics about what they tend to mess up is not important, what is important is that those three bars are significantly more challenging than the rest of the piece. So, students struggle to play through those bars with poor quality at 70 bpm, while the rest of the piece is rather good at that tempo. The problem here is students think that if they slow the metronome way down for a few specific bars, then they will never be able to play those bars at the tempo when performing the entire solo; however, it is crucial to show them that if they turn the metronome way down (somewhere around 40-45 bpm), those three bars become easy. Then, I make them play one of those three troublesome bars three to four times in a row. If they play them with a high level of quality, I then bump the metronome up by 5 bpm. I repeat this process (unless they stumble at a certain tempo, then we will work it at that tempo or a couple of bpm’s slower) until we reach about 90 to 100 bpm. This total process usually lasts about 10-15 minutes. In the course of this short period of time, students realize that something they thought would be unplayable at tempo (or maybe more specifically: playable with low quality) is not the insurmountable challenge they had initially thought. This type of extremely slow practice with

small, incremental increases in tempo is by far one of the most valuable methods for practicing challenging sections of music.

### Learning Too Quickly

The last problem I would like to discuss is when students learn music too quickly. This is somewhat of an expansion on the first section of this article, “Extremely Challenging Music,” but it takes a slightly different form. I find this happening when there is a barrier or track-style of curriculum. Students often see that if they can pass off a piece, they will get to move on to the next portion of the track. This causes problems because the focus becomes learning the pieces quickly to get through the track, rather than learning pieces well to absorb the new techniques, styles, challenges, etc. a piece has to offer. I find this especially happens if a piece is marked as an “etude.” In this case, I try and reorient my students’ way of thinking about music by talking to them about what an etude is. An etude, in my opinion, is a small piece of music. It is not a study that is done to advance a small skill set, but instead, is a short piece of music that allows the student to be extremely musical and expressive without having to learn a lengthy solo.

**It is a mistake to think that moving fast is the same as actually going somewhere.** —Steve Goodier

### Example:

This problem usually occurs when students start working on multi-percussion solos for the first time in their sophomore year at SFA. When students think of multi-percussion, they typically envision huge set-ups resembling Terry Bozzio’s drumset or pieces that are aggressive and exciting like Iannis Xenakis’s *Rebonds*. So, when students have to start on a piece for two toms that is only a page and a half long (Michael Udow’s “1” from *The Contemporary Percussionist*), they tend to either

## Practice Effectively: Go Slow to Go Fast

rush through it and play wrong rhythms, stickings, and dynamics or they get disheartened because they find the piece boring. That is when I will perform the piece for them and show them how exciting, theatrical, and musical a piece for two toms can be. Hopefully, they will then see there are quite a few small steps that need to be taken before they can attack the challenging pieces they yearn to play. After experiencing the piece performed well, I always remind them of the fact that percussionists do not start playing Andrew Thomas' *Merlin* as their first four-mallet piece. There is a reason why everyone knows Mitchell Peters' *Yellow After the Rain*, because it is a great piece of music that is appropriate for percussionists just starting out on four-mallet marimba. Plus, I always add that I still love hearing performances of *Yellow After the Rain* when it is played well with expression, dynamics, and musicality. To prove it, I show them Jisu Jung's fantastic performance of *Yellow After the Rain* on YouTube. It may not be the hardest or the fastest marimba solo, but I would much rather watch her great performance of a less technically challenging piece over someone playing Joseph Schwantner's *Velocities* above tempo and poorly.

## Conclusion

Speed, in regards to many aspects of learning and performing music, can hinder students from reaching their maximum potential. It is our duty as instructors to show them how important slow practice and the gradual advancement of musical difficulty will benefit them the most in the long term.

*Dr. Brad Meyer (www.Brad-Meyer.com) is the Director of Percussion Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University (Nacogdoches, TX). He has upcoming clinics The Midwest Clinic, Texas Music Educators Association's state convention, and Percussive Arts Society's International Convention. Dr. Meyer is a proud endorsee of Yamaha Instruments, Zildjian Cymbals, Vic Firth Sticks and Mallets, Evans Drumheads, and Tycoon Percussion.*