



THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

LEARNING A NEW PIECE



Table of Contents

01

Introduction

03

Step 1: Score Study

05

Step 2: Fingering

07

Step 3: Sectionalized Practice

08

Step 4: Technical Practice

09

Step 5: Solving Difficult Spots

10

Step 6: Playing Through the Piece

11

Putting It All Together



Introduction

Practicing. Why do we do it? What drives us to spend hours and hours alone developing our skills and striving for perfection on our instruments?

Now and then, it's crucial to zoom out and try to answer this question as best we can.

For many of us, the goal is simple: to play the music we love. Every bit of effort we put into practice is aimed at one thing—sharing great music with others.

In the grind of daily technical routines and countless repetitions of difficult passages, it's common to lose sight of this ultimate goal, but regularly reconnecting with it is vital.

So, how do we achieve this goal? How do we efficiently learn a new piece of music well enough to play for others? It's a question we've all considered, yet rarely take the time to explore deeply.

The truth is, there are many effective ways to learn a new piece. While there's no single "correct" method, there are strategies that can significantly speed up the process. And that's exactly what this guide will teach you!

Common Mistakes

Before we get to the strategies we *do* want to use, let's start with where most of us go wrong...

Mistake #1

The biggest mistake most people make when learning a new piece is they get the sheet music, pull out their instrument, and immediately start playing through the piece from the beginning. They get as far as they can before they have to stop and then go back to the beginning and start over. Sound familiar?

This approach often leads to mastering the first part of the piece while the rest remains shaky. To really learn a piece efficiently, playing through it should be the final step, not the first. (*More on that later!*)

Mistake #2

Another common mistake many people make is waiting to start working on their interpretation until they have the piece “under their fingers” technically.

The problem with this is that once you’ve learned the piece one way, changing it becomes difficult and time-consuming. Starting with the interpretation ensures you’re learning the piece as intended from the start, saving time and frustration later on.

The 6 Steps

Now that we’ve covered the key mistakes to avoid, let’s dive into the six-step approach that will help you master a new piece in record time:

Step 1: Score Study

Step 2: Fingering

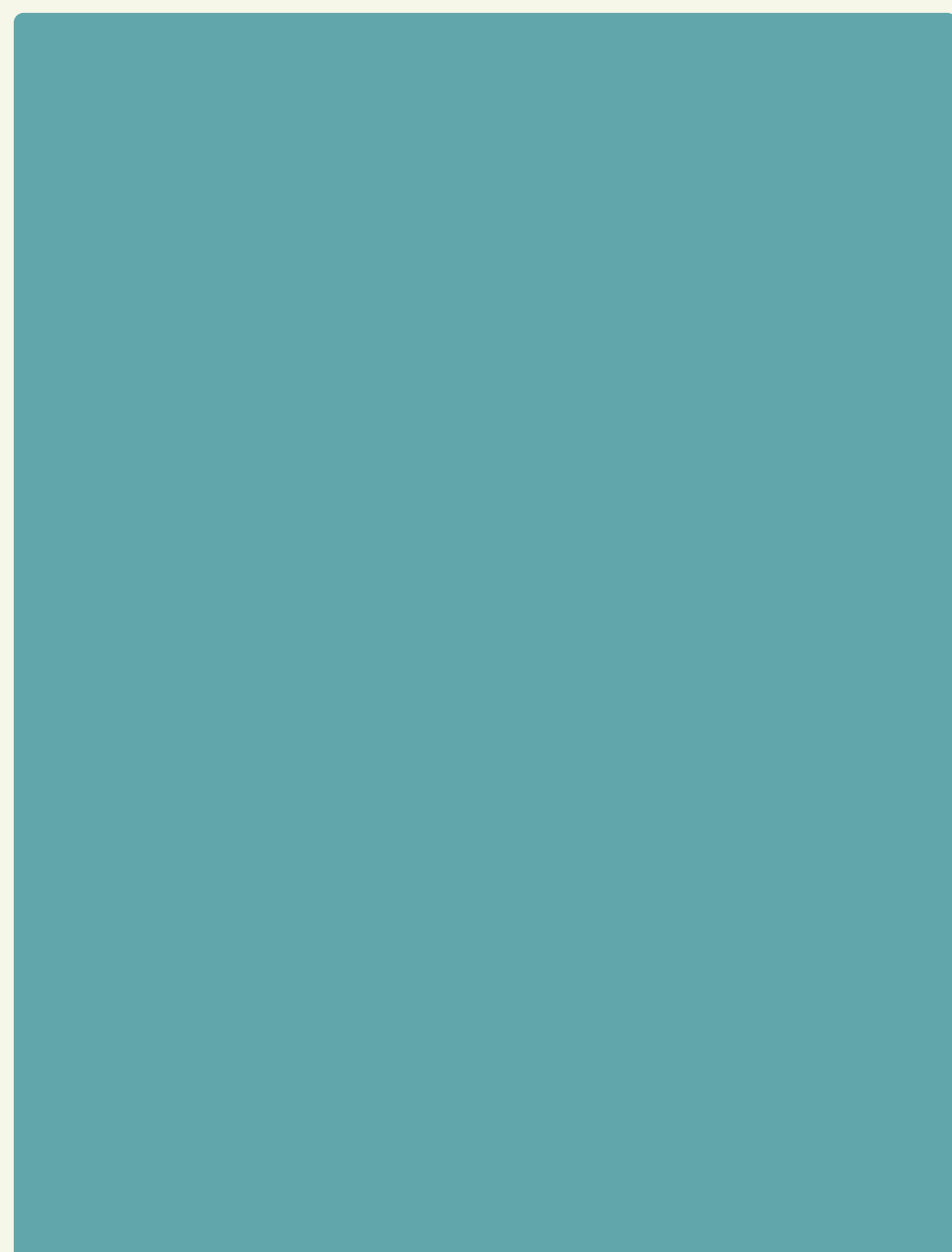
Step 3: Sectionalized Practice

Step 4: Technical Practice

Step 5: Solving Difficult Spots

Step 6: Playing Through the Piece

Let’s dive into each!



Step 1: Score Study

As we've just discussed, when learning a new piece, it's tempting to dive straight into playing with the goal of mastering the technical aspects as quickly as possible. However, your interpretive vision should actually be one of the very first things you focus on.

It's essential to have a clear vision of how you want the piece to sound before you start practicing. This is where score study comes in.

Score study is what separates seasoned musicians from beginners. Many amateurs shy away from it, thinking it requires formal music theory training. But at its core, score study is about becoming deeply familiar with the music and creating a roadmap for how you want it to sound—no specialized training required!

Here's how you can approach score study:

Listening to Recordings

Start by listening to recordings from your favorite artists and gather ideas for your own interpretation.

It's perfectly fine to borrow interpretative ideas from other musicians. No one will think less of your interpretation because it resembles that of a famous player. In fact, the goal is often to sound as good as your favorite artist, so feel free to adopt their best nuances. No matter how much inspiration you draw from others, your final interpretation will always be uniquely your own.



Playing or Singing Individual Lines

Ok, *now* you can pick up your instrument!

Playing individual lines can be incredibly helpful in shaping your interpretation. Singing the melodies or playing them on another instrument can also be beneficial. The key is to focus entirely on the musicality of each line, setting technique aside for now.

This is also a great time to record yourself. (*Recording will be a recurring theme in this guide* 😊)

Deciding on Interpretative Details

As you listen to recordings and play through individual lines, start making decisions about your interpretation.

Here are some details to consider:

- **Articulation:** Should some notes be shorter? Would a fully articulated line add character?
- **Phrasing:** How do you want to shape the melody and bass line?
- **Dynamics:** How does the line's shape influence your dynamics? Where can you add drama?
- **Color:** Should certain sections contrast with a brighter tone? Does the melody need warmth throughout, or could a different color enhance it?
- **Rubato:** Where can you push and pull the tempo for added expression?

These are just a few aspects to consider. Be sure to write your decisions into the score so you can consistently practice them. Avoid creating extra work for yourself later by being thorough now!

Step 2: Fingering

Now that you have a clear idea of how you want the piece to sound, it's time to translate that vision to your instrument. Fingering is perhaps the most crucial step in this process.

While many rely on the score editor's fingerings, it's important to remember that your fingerings should reflect your interpretative ideas and abilities—not theirs. Don't hesitate to discard the editor's fingerings and create your own.

Good fingerings strike a balance between technical ease and interpretative precision. They should help you execute your musical vision effectively, but they shouldn't be so difficult that you can only manage them three times out of ten.

Here are a few things to consider when choosing fingerings:

Prioritize the Melody

If a melody you want to play legato is disrupted by a jarring shift, it likely needs a new fingering. It's often less noticeable to make compromises in the bass or middle lines, so look to make small sacrifices there rather than the melody.

Keep Your Final Tempo In Mind

A common mistake is choosing fingerings that work well at a slow tempo but become unmanageable at full speed.

When selecting fingerings, test them at your intended final tempo (without straining yourself) to ensure they'll hold up after practice. If not, they may need to be simplified.

Look For Inspiration

While finding your own fingerings is good practice, often, a solution to a tricky passage has already been discovered by someone else. There's no need to reinvent the wheel!

For this, tonebase is an excellent resource. On our platform, you'll find hundreds of lessons on popular pieces, many with annotated scores that include the artist's fingerings. It's much more effective than trying to decipher fingerings from a grainy YouTube video!

Write Them Down

Lastly, as we did with the interpretative details, be sure to write your fingerings into the score. There's nothing worse than discovering a perfect fingering and forgetting it the next day. Having them written down helps you stay consistent and build strong muscle memory.



Step 3: Sectionalized Practice

We now know that the number one mistake when learning a new piece is repeatedly playing through it from beginning to end, hoping it will eventually come together. However, even when we know better, it's easy to fall back into this old habit.

A good strategy for avoiding this is to break the piece into distinct, manageable sections and focus on them individually in each practice session. This ensures every part of the piece gets the attention it deserves, rather than just the beginning.

In fact, some players even start at the end of the piece and work backward, so their proficiency increases as they progress—unlike the typical approach where energy and focus often wane.

Here's how to apply this strategy:

- 1) Divide the Piece:** Break your score into sections, grouping phrases together. Err on the side of shorter sections rather than longer ones.
- 2) Label Each Section:** Assign a number to each section and write it into your score.
- 3) Track Your Progress:** On a separate sheet or in your practice journal, list each section number in rows.
- 4) Focused Practice:** Dedicate each practice session to a different section. After practicing, add a check next to the section to track how many times you've worked on it.
- 5) Balanced Practice:** At the start, aim to practice each section equally. As you identify more challenging sections, they will need extra attention, but initially, give each section the same amount of time.

Step 4: Technical Practice

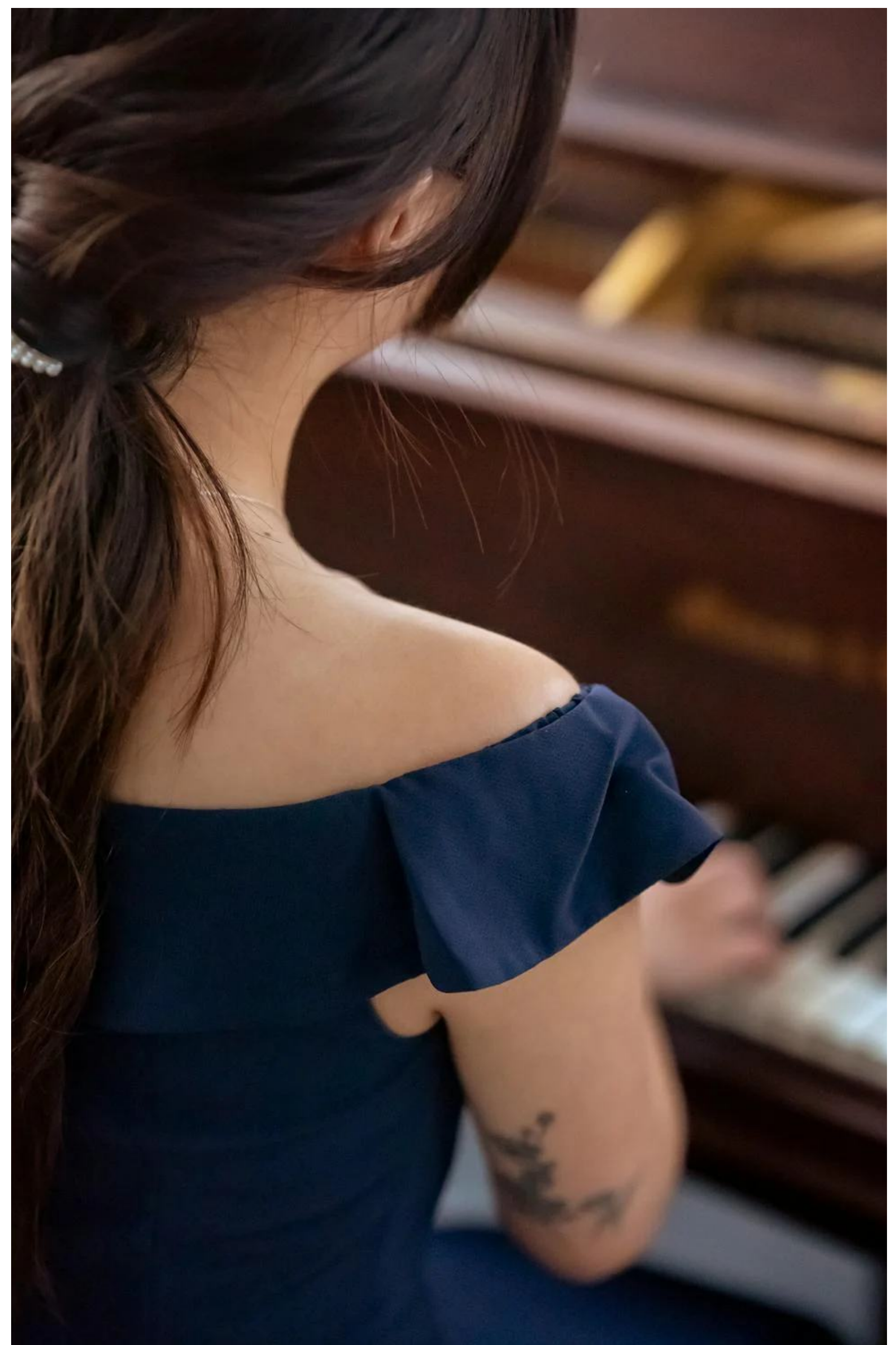
Most new pieces challenge our technical skills in one way or another and require focused technical work. However, always remember that technique is a means to an end—it's simply a path to achieving your interpretative vision. If a piece doesn't require a specific technical skill, don't waste time practicing it.

For instance, if you don't need to play fast scales in order to play a new piece, *don't practice scales*. In fact, the great part about working on a new piece is it can focus our technical practice to just the elements that we need in order to effectively play the music we love.

The first step is to identify the technical challenges in the piece. Are there indeed fast scales, difficult shifts, or large stretches? If so, focus your technical practice on these areas.

The ultimate “hack” is to turn the difficult sections of your piece into exercises. For example, if there's a challenging scale, don't just run through your usual major and minor scales during your technical practice. Isolate that specific scale and then practice it at various speeds, rhythms, dynamics, etc. Make the hardest parts of your piece the focus of your daily technical practice.

Of course, when there's a technique that is really holding you back and you don't know how to improve at it, that's when seeking help can be invaluable. [tonebase](#) offers 100s of courses on just about every technical aspect all taught by dozens of world-class teachers with unique perspectives so you can find an approach that works for you. It's the perfect resource for breaking through your technical barriers.



Step 5: Solving Difficult Spots

With every new piece, there will inevitably be sections that seem to repeatedly trip you up. Once you have the piece under your fingers, devote most of your practice time to these tricky sections.

Even though playing through the entire piece and stumbling through the difficult spots is less mentally taxing, that is only reinforcing bad habits and creating more work for later on. It's time to diagnose and solve these problems!

Chunk-It-Up

Break down the difficult passage into micro-movements and practice them in small groups. Figure out what exactly is tripping you up and put all your attention there. Dedicate an entire practice section to understanding the movements your fingers need to do in order to execute the passage. Practice the movements slowly at first and then try together in one, quick burst. Turn the movement into an exercise. If you make a mistake, don't let it go to waste – pause and ask yourself “Why did that mistake happen?”

Revisit Your Fingerings

If you're still struggling with a passage after a good amount of focused practice, it might be time to revisit your fingerings. Sometimes, adjusting fingerings for greater technical ease—even at the cost of slight interpretative changes—can make all the difference. For instance, cutting a bass note short might give your fingers more time to prepare for the next movement and completely “unlock” the passage for you.

Simplify Things

When all else fails, a very reasonable (but often discarded) solution is simply to adjust the music itself to make things easier. This of course isn't an optimal solution if you're preparing the piece for a competition or audition where you're being judged, but for all other performances, it's a good option. Your audience is more likely to appreciate a confident, flawless performance than one where you struggle to play every note exactly as written.

Step 6: Playing Through The Piece

Once you have a solid grasp on the majority of the sections, then—and *only* then—you should start playing through the entire piece from beginning to end.

As you do, make the most of each run-through by recording yourself and listening back. Pay attention to:

- **Mistakes:** Note them in your score and focus on these sections in your next practice session.
- **Interpretation:** Is your musical vision coming through? If not, analyze why, make notes, and address it in your next practice session.

In general, recording yourself every time you play through the whole piece gives you an opportunity to gather feedback and figure out how you can improve. Don't miss out on that!

The frequency in which you play through the entire piece can increase as you progress. For instance, after playing through the piece the very first time, you might wait a week to do it again and in the meantime go back to sectionalized practice of the passages that you messed up. Then, when you play it through again, you may only need a few days in between before you feel ready to give it another go.

Once again, it's tempting to play through the whole piece as early and often as possible. After all, the reason we're putting in all this work is to be able to do just that! However, to learn a piece efficiently and thoroughly, resist this urge.

Playing through the entire piece should really be the last step in the learning process.

Putting It All Together

Congratulations! After following these six steps, you should be able to play through the piece with minimal mistakes and in a way that reflects your interpretative vision.

From here, you can optionally move on to memorization and stage preparation, but those aren't always necessary or desired. (If you are interested in those topics, please see our courses and guides on [Memorization and Performance](#))

To summarize here are the six steps once more:

1. Score Study
2. Fingering
3. Sectionalized Practice
4. Technical Practice
5. Solving Difficult Spots
6. Playing Through the Piece

The time you spend on each section will vary depending on your skills and the difficulty of the piece, but if you follow those steps in that order, you will be amazed at the speed in which you can learn a brand-new piece!

Give this approach a try the next time you pick up a new piece. Happy practicing!



90-Day Practice Plan

Use the plan below as a rough guide for learning a new piece in just 90 days (or 13 weeks). The actual time for each step will vary depending on the length/difficulty of the piece you are working on as well as the time you have to practice each day. For example, if you can only practice 30 minutes a day, it might be best to choose a simpler piece if you would like to stick to this 13-week plan. But if you have 3+ hours, go nuts!

Week 1 Step 1: Score Study

Dedicate the first week to thoroughly studying the score. Avoid rushing this step; it's crucial for building a solid foundation.

Week 2 Step 2: Fingering

Take time to explore various fingering options. Don't just settle for the obvious choices; push yourself to find new, better ones.

Week 4 Step 3: Sectionalized Practice

Once you have your fingerings, start doing sectionalized practice in the fourth week. Continue utilizing this type of practice throughout your learning process.

Week 5 Step 4: Technical Practice

By now, you should know what specific techniques need work. Integrate these into your daily technical practice in week five.

Week 6 Step 5: Solving Difficult Spots

After two weeks of sectionalized practice, the particularly difficult spots will start to reveal themselves. Identify and address them starting in week six.

Week 10 Step 6: Playing Through the Piece

Begin playing through the entire piece after about five weeks of sectionalized practice. Gradually increase the frequency of play-throughs until you feel confident by week thirteen.

Week 13 Congratulations – You Did It!

Take a moment to celebrate your achievement and reflect on your journey! Continue refining your interpretation by regularly revisiting steps three through six.

6-Step Checklist for Learning a New Piece

Use this checklist to guide your practice when learning a brand-new piece.

Step 1: Score Study

- ☐ Listened to various recordings and noted interpretive ideas in the score.
- ☐ Played/sang individual lines and made notes on phrasing each line.
- ☐ Developed a clear vision of how I want the piece to sound.

Step 2: Fingering

- ☐ Chose fingerings that support my interpretive vision and are technically feasible.
- ☐ Verified that the fingerings are achievable at the final tempo.
- ☐ Consulted resources like tonebase for fingering solutions.

Step 3: Sectionalized Practice

- ☐ Divided the piece into sections and numbered them for practice tracking.
- ☐ Focused each session on specific sections, avoiding the urge to play through the entire piece.
- ☐ Identified and prioritized sections that need extra attention.

Step 4: Technical Practice

- ☐ Turned difficult sections into exercises for technical practice.
- ☐ Explored new techniques by consulting resources like tonebase or my teacher.

Step 5: Solving Difficult Spots

- ☐ Used the “chunk-it-up” method to tackle the trickiest sections.
- ☐ Experimented with new fingerings for stubborn spots.
- ☐ (*Optional*) Simplified challenging passages as needed.

Step 6: Playing Through the Piece

- ☐ Played through the entire piece only when confident in each section.
- ☐ Recorded each run-through, taking notes on mistakes and interpretation for improvement.



Daily Practice Checklist

Practicing consistently during these 90 days will be crucial to hitting your goal of learning a piece in three months. Use the checklist below to stay consistent and keep your motivation high!

Week 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 7	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 8	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 9	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 11	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 12	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 13	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	