

The ABC method of practising

The first step in practising any difficult phrase or passage is to break it down into small, easily manageable sections. Calling each section A, B, C, D, E (and so on), an efficient and organised way to practise is as follows:

- 1 First practise each section separately: A - B - C - D - E
- 2 Then practise them together in pairs: AB - BC - CD - DE
- 3 Practise three sections together: ABC - BCD - CDE
- 4 Practise four sections together: ABCD - BCDE
- 5 Play from beginning to end: ABCDE

This could be likened to making a patchwork quilt: first you have to make each patch, and then sew them together into larger groups that are themselves then sewn together. In breaking up a passage into A, B, C, etc., sometimes each section will only consist of one note. Sometimes a section will be a group of notes, or a whole passage, or even a group of passages.

Practise each section and each stage until three main goals have been achieved: every note is in tune, every note is clean, and every note is in time. One further goal is that all this should feel *easy*. Until each section or stage is in tune, clean, in time, and feeling easy, it cannot be considered to have been mastered, and it may be unwise to join other sections onto it. In making a patchwork quilt, you would not sew a finished patch onto an unfinished one.

In the bar of fingered octaves halfway down the first page of the Wieniawski Violin Concerto, each octave is a section in itself:

Concerto No.2 in D minor *Wieniawski*

Having practised each octave separately, play two together (AB-BC-CD), three together (ABC-BCD-CDE), four together (ABCD-BCDE-CDEF), and so on. Play separate bows, and also all up-bows as written in the passage:

At letter E in the same concerto, each section would be four notes long to begin with. Practising groups of four notes, it is usually better to play to the first note of the next group so that there is a rhythmic aiming point. In any case, the most important notes to practise here are the fourth of each group going to the first of the next, because of the shifts:

Concerto No.2 in D minor *Wieniawski*

While practising each section, or sections joined together, you can also apply other practice techniques. For example, each fourth note in this example typically ‘drops out’, i.e. it tends to come out more weakly than the other notes. This is partly because it is the last note of a slur, and partly because it comes directly before the shift. A good way to correct drop-outs is to play them *longer* and *louder* than the surrounding notes. Applying this to the ABC method, you then play as follows:

Other methods of practising each separate section, or sections joined together, might be: playing in rhythms (long-short, short-long); playing with the metronome, starting slowly and gradually speeding up; playing only one string of the double-stop while stopping both notes with the left hand, and so on.

The next two bars of the piece, and the next two again, can be broken up and practised in the same ways:

Having worked these three separate two-bar passages until each can be played accurately and easily, they can then be called sections A, B and C themselves. Play A many times, then B, then C; and then A followed by B, B followed by C; and finally ABC.

Now the three sections together - ABC - can be treated as one section. Having built up many large sections like this - six, eight, twelve bars at a time, or whatever - the ABC method can be applied to them as well. Joining these together gives you half a page of music to play at a time. Once these half-page sections have been gradually joined together in the same way, it is a simple matter to go on to play the entire movement from beginning to end.

All this may seem to take a lot of time, but in fact it is one of the fastest ways to learn a technically difficult piece. Anyway, it is better to spend the time than never to be able to play a particular piece. Dorothy DeLay said recently that sometimes when a student says to her: “Miss DeLay, it’s so difficult!” (i.e. a piece or a passage in a piece), she says to them: “It’s not ‘difficult’, it’s *time-consuming!*”