

How to Master Difficult Musical Passages

by Dennis Winge

Recently I went to hear some friends of mine play in the lounge of a local inn, where they played a particularly challenging tune at a very fast tempo. It was very inspiring and since I have always loved that particular melody, even though I had struggled at slower tempos to play it well, I decided to try and learn to play it that fast as well.

Within only a few weeks, after years of grappling with this melody, I was able to play it not quite as fast as they did, but way faster than I ever had done before, and I was playing it with far greater accuracy than I ever had before! You can do this with musical passages you struggle with too. Here are the steps I recommend:

1. **Identify the goal tempo.** Play the recorded version of the song on your computer, phone, stereo, etc. and find the tempo of the song using a metronome. If you don't have a metronome, there are many free apps for both Android and iPhone. Most modern metronomes have a 'tap' feature that allows you to tap along with the beat of the song and it'll tell you what the beats per minute is. Using the 'tap' feature makes it way easier to find a song's tempo than hunting-and-pecking for it!
2. **Identify your current tempo.** How fast can you play the song comfortably with let's say 90% accuracy? Now that you have your goal tempo and your current tempo, you have created a map for success.
3. **Practice the hard parts only.** Inevitably there will be phrases within the overall piece that are more difficult to execute than others. Practice those independently first. Slow the tempo way down just for that particular phrase, and gradually bring it up to the speed that you identified in step 2.
4. **Let go of the outcome.** If it takes much longer to do step 3 than you think it should, always remember that mastering certain passages will increase your technical skills on the instrument, and as your technical skills increase, the time it takes to learn future passages will get shorter and shorter.
5. **Integrate the passage.** Once you can play a harder passage at the same speed and accuracy as the rest of the piece, play a longer phrase that has the difficult bit in it. This is called "integrating." And once you integrate the individual phrases, try playing the whole piece at your step 2 tempo.
6. **Relax.** It may be helpful here to summarize the "Practice Diamond" from Kenny Werner's book "Effortless Mastery." Always maintain your effortlessness. In order to do that, you can only pick two out of any of the following 3 items: speed, accuracy, and entirety. In other words, you generally can only stay relaxed while playing fast and accurate if the phrase you play is very small. Or, you can only stay relaxed and play the whole piece accurately if you slow it way down. A third example would be you can only maintain effortlessness and play the whole thing fast if you're not concerned with accuracy. But the key is, always maintain effortlessness.
7. **Increase your tempo.** This is actually the easy part. Getting from where you are to where you want to be is now just a matter of time. You have already done the hard work in the previous steps; but if you skip any of the previous steps, the likelihood of your being able to play the piece 'at tempo,' and without enduring

massive amounts of frustration along the way, is almost zero.

8. **Smile.** I know it sounds corny, but it works. So before you dismiss this idea, just try it once at home. Simply smile while you're practicing: the bigger the smile the better. I guarantee it'll make things easier for you in mastering that pesky section.
9. **Address root causes.** There may be underlying reasons that you can't play a particular passage well. Perhaps you have bad habits that you're not even aware of and they are preventing you from mastering that particular passage. It is very common for musicians to ignore certain technical aspects until they are forced to confront them. Having a teacher is by far the best way to help you develop new habits that allow you to play the section at hand as well as many other passages that may be even harder in your immediate future.
10. **Work in small chunks of time.** We've all had the experience of working on something for hours only to discover later that mastery was not attained. That's where frustration can really build up. Instead, work in small chunks over a long period of time. Maybe it's only 20 minutes at a time, once a day with one day off per week, for a period of 4 weeks. That equates to 8 hours total. If you do that as opposed to let's say 4 days of non-stop practicing for 3 hours each day (a total of 12 hours), your results will be much better even though the overall time is only 1/3. So, get a magnetic kitchen timer and keep in on the top of your music stand.

If you do these things, frustration will become a thing of the past. Sure, it takes time to learn things you want to be able to do, and I want that time to be much shorter for you than it was for me who had to discover them the hard way. Best of luck in your practicing.