

## Self-Managing Your Reading Studies

by Dennis Winge

If you are learning to read standard notation on your instrument, this article contains steps that can make the whole process much easier and faster.

1. **Get the goal tempo.** Play a recording of the piece from a play-along audio track that many reading books come with. Use the 'tap' feature of your metronome. (First of all, if you don't own a mechanical metronome, you should definitely get one. Secondly, even if you don't have one, you can download free metronome applications on your smartphone. If you don't have a smartphone, there are free metronomes online you can use.) The tap feature is where you press a button in time with the music and it displays how many beats per minute that rhythm is. This is much easier than turning your metronome dial to hunt and peck for the right tempo while the song is playing. Once you get the goal tempo, write down "Goal = \_\_\_ bpm" at the top of the sheet. Bpm = beats per minute.
2. **Get your current tempo.** Play a bit of the piece at your own natural pace, where you can play most of it correctly without struggle. Keep the tempo in your mind and tap that tempo into your metronome as you did for the goal tempo. Record this tempo under the goal tempo with the date as in "January 1 = \_\_\_ bpm"
3. **Take inventory of troublesome areas.** Now it is very clear where you are and where you want to get to. Play the piece at your current tempo a few times, and take note of where the mistakes are. If they are always in the same place, go back and work on only those. You may need to slow the tempo down just for those passages and your goal at this point is to get those glitches up to the same tempo as your overall current tempo. It may also be helpful to create a 'loop' of the passage. Let's say the passage is 6 beats long. Add 2 more beats and you create a 2-bar cycle in which you can repeat the passage over and over.
4. **Gradually increase your tempo.** It is helpful if you have a timeframe as part of your goal. Sometimes deadlines are dictated by outside forces such as a performance date that you are practicing for. In the absence of such outwardly-dictated deadlines, create your own. If the goal tempo is 120 bpm and you're at 50 bpm, first decide how many clicks you think you can increase per week. Even if it's only 5 clicks per week, you can be at tempo in 3 or 4 months. If that seems too long, increase it to 10, 15, 20 clicks per week. You may be surprised how much faster it becomes to increase your tempo as you become more and more familiar with the piece. It is usually not a linear progression. So if your current tempo is nowhere near your goal tempo, do not despair. You will gain momentum.
5. **Re-assess using the original recording.** Once you get to tempo using the metronome, play along with the original. You may find that there were certain spots that you hadn't been playing exactly right or at least not with the right

articulation or expression etc. If so, you can use technology to loop the passage that needs correcting. For example if you have an mp3 of the music, you can bring the file into an audio editing program, find the passage, and make a loop of it that you can practice over and over. For that matter, you can also slow down the piece or any section therein. Technology is a wonderful tool that can make practicing much easier than it ever has been before. However, it can also be a distraction to play around with audio files on your computer, burning away valuable practice time. So if it's taking too long or if for some reason it's not working the way you wanted it to, consider going back to just using the metronome.

- 6. Play with the original recording in its entirety.** Once you have worked out the kinks and can play the recording at tempo, enjoy playing along with it. You have now mastered that piece!

Reading can be a very rewarding experience, and the most potent form of reward is in the performing of the piece. However if performing the piece for an audience is not immediately practical or appropriate, then playing along with a recording can be the next best thing. If no recordings of the piece you are working on are available, you could a) ask your teacher if you can record him/ her playing it b) estimate the tempo based on tempo markings in the score or your own intuition and record yourself playing the chords or accompaniment part if there is one, thus creating your own backing track c) partner up with someone of your overall reading level.