

HOW TO LEARN AND PRACTICE A MARIMBA SOLO

AS FEATURED ON [THE STUDIO EPISODE 42](#)

About this PDF

This PDF outlines a 3-stage, 18-step process to learning and practicing any marimba solo. This can be used for any marimba solo of any difficulty level, and is intended for all audiences. The process will take you from knowing nothing about the piece all the way to its final performance.

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Summary

The 3-stage, 18-step process is outlined below:

STAGE 1 – ANALYSIS

1. Learn about the piece
2. Watch a video of the piece once
3. Visually analyse the score
4. Annotate the score
5. Watch the video of the piece again but with the annotated score

STAGE 2 – PRACTICE

1. Play through the piece badly
2. Work on a small section without metronome
3. Work on that same small section with metronome, slowly
4. Slowly increase the tempo
5. Memorise the small section
6. Repeat steps 2-5 above for the next few small sections
7. Run all of the small sections you have done so far in one go
8. Repeat steps 2-5 above for the next few small sections, and then repeat step 7
9. Play the whole piece once

STAGE 3 – PERFORMANCE

1. Record yourself playing the piece up to 3 times
2. Bring in a live audience and ask for feedback
3. Do supplementary practice
4. Perform the piece

The above will be explained in detail over the next few pages.

STAGE 1 - ANALYSIS

This section begins before you've even received the piece. We're assuming that you only know the title and composer of the piece, and that you plan to perform it in x amount of time. So.... let's begin!

Step 1: Learn about the piece.

One thing that makes learning any piece difficult is when you have *no contextual information on the work whatsoever*. In this day and age, information about any percussion work can be found almost anywhere, so there's no excuse! Before you even think about buying the piece, you should know a few facts about it, including but not limited to:

- Composer's background (years of birth/death, country of origin, main style of composition etc.)
- Non-musical information about the piece (what the title means, why was it written, year of composition, who it was written for (if any), whether it's a standalone or part of a collection of works etc.)
- Musical information about the piece (what form it is in, is it a particular style etc.)
- Performance-related information (what mallets are required/generally used, who normally plays this work, is it physically intensive etc.)

This will give you more context so that you have a more nuanced understanding of the work, and you'll understand why certain things in the work are the way they are.

Step 2: Watch a video of the piece once.

This one is easy – you still don't need the score for this! Find a well-known video of the piece on YouTube (if you're unsure look for the one with the most views) and watch it from start to finish. Only watch it *once*. The reason for this is because you don't want that particular person's interpretation to impact heavily on your own. If you wish to not have any prior influence whatsoever, feel free to skip this step!

While you're watching it, take notes of performance-related things that the performer is doing – what kind of mallets are they using, are they jumping around the instrument, what kind of *rubato* are they pulling etc. This will give you an idea of what a possible interpretation (not necessarily yours!) could be like.

DON'T watch it more than once though!

Step 3: Visually analyse the score.

This one is also easy – now that you have the score, find a chair, sit down and *read it*. Don't use any stationery just yet, because you're just going to visually analyse aspects of the piece that will help you remember things later on. Look out for things like:

- How many pages there are / how many bars per page? (this is a visual indicator of your progress)
- What language is used for the terminology? (e.g. Italian terms or English terms)
- Are there any sections that look like repeated patterns?
- Are there any sections that look particularly tricky and need attention?
- Are there any techniques that you are unsure of how to execute?

Step 4: Annotate the score.

Okay, now you can go ham with the highlighters/pencil/whatever preference of stationery you prefer. Make a photocopy or print your PDF out, and go through the score *marking out* anything you think is important. Examples include:

- Marking out sections with strong vertical lines
- Circling key/time signatures, dynamics and/or tempo changes
- Putting a symbol next to anything you think requires special attention in practice
- Writing in stickings/mallet changes if necessary

This step should take some time, but don't worry if you end up adding more later – that's the best part about annotations!

PRO TIP: Courtesy of my teacher Mr Tim White – if you don't want to lose a whole bunch of pages that you've photocopied/printed, sticky tape them together along the edges to create one long 'music train' (folded in zigzags) so that you never have to search for a missing page again. This is especially good for ensemble music!

Step 5: Watch the video of the piece again but with the annotated score.

Now you get to watch the video again but this time with your pretty (or not-so-pretty) annotated score. Don't be afraid to watch the video multiple times, or go back to a certain section numerous times so that you can see what's happening. This is your chance to be detailed about watching the video and comparing it to your freshly annotated score.

If there are any more changes you can make after matching your annotations to the video, now is the time to do them!

Once you've completed the above 5 steps, your analysis is done and we can finally start playing on the marimba!

STAGE 2 - PRACTICE

This stage begins once you've done all your research and preparation in Stage 1. It forms about 85% of your work on the piece, as it is how you are going to learn the majority of your notes. So find a marimba and let's roll (hahahaha oh man)!

Step 1: Play through the piece badly.

I mean like *super, super badly*. Don't even try to get it right.

This is the most fun part of the whole process because you are basically just 'trying the piece'. You aren't trying to get it accurate or nice sounding, you are just seeing what the technical requirements of the work are by testing out everything in the piece. This is meant to help you boost your kinaesthetic memory of the work, as you'll start to remember where certain techniques appear in the piece. So, spend an hour or two just bashing through slowly and absorbing what you can. It's quite refreshing...

Step 2: Work on a small section without a metronome.

Okay, you had your fun in Step 1, it's time to actually do some work!

Find yourself a small section in the piece. Note that the definition of 'small section' depends on how difficult the work is and/or how many notes are in each bar. For example, when I practiced *Rainbow* a small section was about 4 to 8 bars, but when I practiced *Lemuria* a small section was literally one bar at a time. So choose your section – it should only be a few seconds long, and it can be from the beginning, or maybe even a specific section you'd like to work on first.

Now take this small section and play it *EXTREMELY SLOWLY* (like 0.1x speed). You're not using a metronome, so work it out properly and make sure you're getting all the right pitches first. Do *not* attempt to play it super fast at this point – now is the time for you to learn all the notes, not race! Once you can play this small section with 100% note accuracy and reasonable rhythmic accuracy at a *VERY SLOW* speed, then you can move on to the next step.

Step 3: Work on that same small section with a metronome, slowly.

Switch your metronome on and use the 'tap' feature (or guess) to ascertain roughly how slow you were going in Step 2. Once you've found that tempo, try and play your small section again with the metronome on. Make sure it's 100% correct.

Yes, you might be playing a work that is *rubatissimo* in nature, but you still need to know what the rhythms are, so playing with a metronome slowly will ensure maximum accuracy. Once you can play this small section at a slow speed, 100% accurately with a metronome, you can move on to the next step.

Step 4: Slowly increase the tempo.

Now do the same thing as Step 3, but slowly increase the tempo. Try and increase it by 5 BPM at most, or 10 if you're feeling confident, but no more than that. Each time you increase it, make sure you can play the same small section at the new tempo with no problems. Once you can do that, continue to bump up the tempo until you have reached the actual tempo required.

Once you can play this small section at the correct tempo, metronomically, with 100% accuracy, you can move on to the next step.

Step 5: Memorise the small section.

Now, you might want to perform this piece with the music on a stand on the day. That's fine. But, you'll find it much easier to play confidently if you memorise the music and are able to play just by looking at the marimba's bars. Even the best players in the world (e.g. Nancy Zeltsman)

who play with music stands still memorise the majority of the work and only have it there for reference. So don't be too reliant on your music!

Start by attempting to memorise the work *with* the metronome, and then once you can do it turn the metronome off and do it *without* the click. Once you can play this small section at tempo, with no metronome on, memorised, you have officially learned this small section to 100% perfect status! Congratulations!

Step 6: Repeat steps 2 to 5 for the next small sections.

Of course, unfortunately the piece has more than just a couple of bars of music, so you'll have to repeat steps 2 to 5 (using the metronome and playing slowly, then increasing the tempo, then memorising) a few times for the next few small sections. You might find that it gets easier after conquering the first small section, which is common in works that have similar material throughout. Or, you might find it harder because the next section is completely different. Either way, you *must* do this for all of the small sections.

Step 7: Run all of the small sections you have done so far in one go.

Okay, so you have a few small sections prepared to 100% standard now. Play through all of them in one go, as you would in performance. If you chose small sections sporadically and not sequentially, then just play those small sections one after another. You'll find there may be some challenges in joining these small sections together, so this is the time to fix those challenges! Once you can run all of the small sections you've done in one go with no problems, you can move on to the next step.

Step 8: Repeat steps 2 to 5, and then repeat step 7 for the next small sections.

Now you are well and truly in the grind – keep repeating the above for the next small sections until you have covered the whole piece. If you get this far, you have done very well and I congratulate you on sticking to your guns.

Step 9: Play the whole piece once.

Finally, you can play all of the 'large' sections you have just completed in one whole chunk. This is essentially the same as performing the piece, except you've never played it before, so this will be new! Don't be afraid to go slightly under tempo, as it is your first time playing the piece in full.

You only get to play the piece once, which will tell you whether or not you need to work on certain sections. If you do, revisit steps 2 to 8 for the appropriate sections. If not, you are able to play the whole piece! You should be very proud, because it is now time to move on to the *final stage* of this process...

STAGE 3 - PERFORMANCE

Do NOT attempt this stage until you are sure you have all of the small sections learned! This stage is only for polishing and finishing the piece off to a performance standard.

Step 1: Record yourself playing the piece 3 times.

Self-recording is important (just ask Rob Knopper)! You will feel pressured in performance from stress, nerves and the like, so start simulating it with a camera barrel pointing at your face.

Choose your weapon – phone, webcam, DSLR, compact, whatever it is – pick a recording device of choice and film yourself playing the piece 3 times. Now I know a lot of you guys already record yourselves with Zoom recorders and the like, but these are *only audio*. Remember, in performance, people *watch* you as much as they *listen* to you, so you need the visual as well as the sound!

So record yourself playing through the whole piece 3 times. Only 3 times, because if you give yourself too many opportunities, you will not value the recording process as much and this step will take far too long. Anyway, if you did Stage 2 correctly, you won't need to record this more than 3 times. Watch your videos that you've recorded and see if there's anything you'd like to change.

Step 2: Bring in a live audience and ask for feedback.

Let's assimilate you further to the pressure of live performance by bringing in a live audience and asking them to give you feedback after! Live audience can literally be anyone – your teacher, your friend, your enemy, your family, your significant other, your entire percussion studio – sometimes I think having just one person is much tougher than having 100 because you have nowhere to hide when someone is sitting right in front of you!

Tell the audience to give you feedback after. Remember, feedback is how we get better at doing things in life, and as percussionists we should be receptive to all criticism, regardless of whether we agree with it or not. Of course, while all opinions are equal, not all opinions are *correct*, so choose your feedback wisely. If you're unsure, ask someone who you know has significant experience, such as your teacher or another leading professional.

Step 3: Do supplementary practice.

Okay so now you've played it in front of audience and camera, you have all the notes and you have all of the interpretative features down pat. Therefore, this step is NOT for learning notes any more. You should have already learned all of that by now.

Now is your time to practice little corners of the work that you think might need additional polishing, and to maybe run through the piece once a day leading up to the performance. You are almost there!

Step 4: PERFORM THE PIECE!

You made it to performance day! Now that you've put in all the hard work and played in front of many test audiences, it's now time for you to go out there and have fun. All the preparation that you did means that you can now just *play the marimba* and share your ideas with the audience. Congratulations, you've just learned and practiced your marimba solo, growing it from absolutely nothing to an outstanding performance!

**IF THIS HELPED YOU PLEASE GIVE THE VIDEO A THUMBS UP AND
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