



Thomas Viloteau - On How to Learn a Piece

"Although it's obviously really good to practice slowly with a metronome, it's not always very useful." - Thomas Viloteau

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Starting tempo

In the first stages of learning a new piece, a common approach is to practice slowly with the metronome. While this can be helpful, it is important to also **practice new fingerings at the final tempo**, especially for fast pieces. This way, you can know immediately if your fingerings will be practical at faster tempos.

Time frame

It is also important to **know your available time frame** for learning a piece. If you have a long time, you can experiment with more challenging fingerings. However, if you are learning a piece for a competition and only have a few weeks, you should choose fingerings that you know you can play at tempo.



Fingering choices

Avoid uncomfortable fingerings

For right and left hand fingerings, **avoid choices that are not comfortable for the hands**. Left hand fingerings that repeat one finger to play a scale or right hand fingerings that use a-m-i are two examples that might work for some guitarists but might not be your best solution.

Choose fingerings that feel natural

Choose fingerings that are **natural for your hands**. Also a little hint: make left hand shifts on the beat, since the natural accent of the shift helps the musical accent of the beat.

Segovia fingerings

Many editions of guitar pieces are edited and fingered by Andres Segovia. It is helpful to not use his fingerings because he made choices that were individual to his own playing style and might not be relevant to the music. Rather, **decide on fingerings based on what you want to do with the music** - this will also lead to the best technical solutions for your playing.

Fingering patterns

Try to keep the right and left hand fingerings the same for the repeated musical patterns. This way there are **fewer fingerings to learn**, speeding up the process.



Guidelines for practicing the fingerings

Practice phrases in a row

Practice multiple phrases in a row to see if the fingerings work in context. By playing a section of music early on, you can find awkward fingerings that should be changed.

Danger of starting slow

If you start with only slow practice, you can look at your fingerings in the wrong way: they may work at a slow tempo, but when you try to increase the speed, you find that **the fingering doesn't work at a faster tempo**. You then have to change the fingering, wasting a lot of time practicing the wrong way.

In other words, the slow practice tempo can be a **"a mask that hides the truth"** of how good the fingering actually is. Rather, if you practice the right fingering from the very start, you don't waste any time.

Metronome use

After finding good fingerings for fast tempo, begin using metronome at a slower tempo so you can **practice with good, controlled finger movements**. If you have a problem, you know it is not because of the fingerings, but the way you use the fingerings.

In general, focus on good right and left hand technique. Also, focus on natural left hand shifting patterns that do not force the fingers into place.



Memorization

When you think carefully about comfortable fingering choices and you know the musical details of the piece, it is much **easier to memorize the piece early on**. Think about what patterns are in the music, and what patterns are in your fingering choices.

Tone

When trying the fingerings fast, check to see if you can **consistently produce a good tone**. If the tone is not consistent, consider adding rest strokes to create a more comfortable right hand fingering.

Tips for getting faster

Increasing tempo

Gradually increase the speed of the metronome to keep control over the finger movements. Also, do not repeat simple passages more than you need to, which wastes practice time.

Dotted rhythms

There are two dotted rhythm patterns that one can use to speed up a passage. The first is **“long-short-long, long-short-long”** and the second is **“short-long.”** These rhythmic changes are exercises for either hand to improve difficult passages.



Thinking in fours

When there are four notes per string for a fingering, **think in groups of four notes** to make the passage easier. Even when the fingerings are different, make sure to still play with the musical groupings in mind.

Hints for the right hand

Picking your tone

Decide on what kind of tone you want because this influences your right hand position and also the right hand fingerings you should choose.

Planting

Adding slurs in the left hand can give the right hand time to plant the next note, which can make the right hand fingerings more smooth.

Isolate

You can also practice the right hand on its own to see if the fingering is comfortable or if there is a better solution.

“Fake” rest stroke

When the thumb is planted on a string, you can play a rest stroke that falls into the thumb instead of the next string. This keeps the finger closer, and creates smoother right hand fingering.



Barre and the left hand

When including a barre, try to **“prepare” the barre ahead of time**, so the shift to the barre is easier. Find the specific point where it is convenient to form the index finger in the shape of a barre. In general, it is important to find left hand positions for the fingerings that make shifts as easy and natural as possible.

Final thoughts

Don’t practice to perform metronomically: use the metronome to make sure the fingers are in the right place at the right time. There are points in the music where you don’t want to be metronomic, such as certain chords are given a better musical effect when played with more time.

As a student, you shouldn’t be faced with a piece where you have to face too many technical problems, such as increasing finger speed, accuracy, scales, or tremolo. Instead, there should be **only a few problems that you are solving**, so that you can focus on the finer details of your playing when learning a new piece.

Additional Resources

Try incorporating Thomas’ approach the next time you learn a piece. In the meantime, check out the additional resources to this lesson below or ask Thomas a question by emailing us at team@tonebase.co!

1. [Thomas Viloteau’s lesson on learning **Lagrima in 7 Days**](#)
2. [Tengyue Zhang’s lesson on **Performance Preparation**](#)