

PROCESS ANALYSIS

PERFECTING A CONCERTO

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(1) As a musician I have developed my own unique process for perfecting a piece of music, without even realizing that I had fallen into a set pattern. My bassoon teacher pointed this out to me as I was working on some technical studies at my lesson. Evidently I approached the music he had set before me very methodically, taking the studies apart piece by piece and putting them back together again like a jigsaw puzzle. As I became more aware of my personalized method of practicing, I could identify three major steps of the process: analyzing, correcting, and summarizing. First I would play through the piece to get an idea of the sound and to spot potential problems; then I would go back through and identify the specific passages in the music that needed work. To correct these passages I would repeatedly practice the passages and overcome all the technical difficulties so there weren't any kinks in the music. To summarize I would play through the whole piece to fit everything together into one melody; adding dynamics and shaping phrases was the icing on the cake. After gaining this knowledge I decided consciously to apply it to the Vivaldi concerto I had to prepare for that semester's student recital.

(2) With my bassoon assembled and the music in front of me, I plunged right into the beginning of the concerto, disregarding any missed notes or inaccurate rhythms. My goal here was to get the sound of the music in my ear, but more

importantly I wanted to spot the potential problems that could be taken care of immediately. As I plowed through the music, I discovered that it was very demanding technically and that I didn't have the appropriate reed to play on. The reed (which you blow through to produce the bassoon's distinctive sound) was made of cane, and obviously my reed was too thick and sluggish to be playing such a demanding piece of music. I proceeded to scrape some of the thick cane from both sides of the reed, making it thinner and more responsive to the quick attacks. I ran through a little bit of the music a second time solely to test the adequacy of the reed. I adjusted and tested the reed repeatedly until it was perfect for the Vivaldi concerto.

(3) After familiarizing myself with the music and taking care of preliminary problems, I made a second run through the music, but instead of plowing through it, I stopped frequently to make note of the difficult passages. The Vivaldi concerto was very challenging technically, and I found myself drawing many pairs of eyeglasses on the music to indicate trouble. There were a lot of sixteenth-note passages that were especially frustrating because my fingers often became tangled in them (sixteenth-notes are usually the fastest notes used in writing music). Another difficult aspect of this Vivaldi concerto was the frequent jumping between octaves, or pitch levels. When octave-jumping and sixteenth-note passages occurred simultaneously, I marked them twice since they would be the most difficult passages to master. The correcting stage of practicing is by far the most important because skills are acquired that will last throughout a musician's playing career.

(4) Once I determined what I needed to work on in the Vivaldi concerto, I went back to the beginning of the music and worked on each motif individually. With a clearly defined

passage in mind, I would play that particular passage very slowly so I would not miss a note or rhythm. If I did make a mistake, I would repeatedly play it at that tempo, or speed, until it was perfect. Then I would turn the tempo up another notch in my mind and perfect the passage at that speed until I had a step-by-step procedure that facilitated this process of "repeat until perfected." Personally, I find this kind of practicing strategy difficult and tedious, but I have found it to be the best way to avoid bad techniques. Some musicians find it helpful to go back through the whole piece of music after perfecting one passage to hear how it sounds within the context of the music, but I prefer to master all of the difficult passages before I put them into their context.

(5) After I practiced the difficult passages and had good control of them, I went back to the beginning and put the whole piece together. At first I played the concerto slowly so I could get through it without any errors. Satisfied with the first complete trial, I played it again and made sure that the transitions between the phrases flowed smoothly. For trials three through five I paid attention to the dynamic markings and gave the melody a logical shape by manipulating the dynamics. At that point I felt I was very close to perfecting Vivaldi's Concerto in A Minor for bassoon. All I had to do now was to practice it about fifty times!

(6) Taking the time to analyze, correct, and summarize a piece of music gives me a great sense of accomplishment because I know I've mastered a new skill that will benefit me in the future. But I realize that perfecting a piece of music is not limited to analyzing, correcting, and summarizing, as I discovered in the Vivaldi. There are many steps to perfecting a piece of music, but the steps will vary with every concerto or sonata that I encounter, with analyzing, correcting, and summarizing as the basic guidelines.