

HOW TO START A PIECE AT THE CORRECT TEMPO

By Douglas Niedt

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One of the most common reasons a guitarist plays a piece poorly in a performance or even a guitar lesson, is that they *unknowingly* try to play the piece faster than they practiced it at home.

One of the key elements needed for a successful performance is that you begin a piece at the right speed—that is, the speed that is appropriate for your technical ability. The most common error is to begin too fast. That tempo may sound great for the opening, but then when you come to a difficult passage in the piece, you crash because you can't play that passage at the tempo you started at.

For instance, I have heard countless students and even some professionals begin *Leyenda* at MM=100+ for a quarter note (Example 1a):

Example #1:

Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz)

Example #1 shows the first seven measures of the piece. The melodic line is written in a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The guitar accompaniment is written on three staves (T, A, B). The melodic line consists of eighth-note patterns with fingerings (1-4) and circled numbers (5, 4, 5, 4, 5, 4, 5). The guitar accompaniment uses a 7-9-10-7-9-10 pattern on the B string, with the T and A strings playing whole notes (0). Measure 4 starts with a '4' above the staff. Measure 7 starts with a '7' above the staff.

But then, when they come to the tremolo section (measures #25-28), they either play it sloppily or must slow it down to play it well (Example #1b):

Tremolo Section, m25-28.

25 VII 3 7 7 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 7 7 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 9 10 7 9 9

27 VII 3 7 7 0 0 0 1 1 1 2 2 2 4 4 1 1 2 2 3 3 4 4 3 5 4 7 7 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 9 7 9 10 12 9 10 7 9 10 9

Pieces that begin with easy-to-play long note values and then progress to shorter values (sort of a built-in accelerando) can be very troublesome. For example, this *Fantasie* by John Dowland begins with half notes, quarter notes, and a few eighth notes (Example #2):

Example #2

A Fantasia (John Dowland).

Note: The 3rd string is tuned to F#!

[illegible]

Okay, these opening measures are fairly easy. But, as Dowland shortens the note values to build the momentum of the piece, an even slightly too-fast starting tempo will cause the performance to begin

falling off the rails. It will almost certainly turn into a train wreck at measures 37 through 44 (Example #3):

Example #3

A Fantasia (John Dowland).

Note: The 3rd string is tuned to F#!

And then trouble starts at m37:

37

39

Similar problems with pieces beginning in easy-to-play long notes and progressing to difficult-to-play short notes and chord changes occur in many Bach fugues (Example #4):

Example #4

Fugue from Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998 (J.S. Bach)

The fugal subject or theme at the beginning is easy to play and in long notes.

1

③ ②

T 7 6 7 9 2 4 2 3 2 2 3 2 0 3

A

B 4 0 3

Later, by measure #47, we have 16th notes and difficult passages. If you started too fast at the beginning, you will be in trouble when you arrive here.

Note: I interpret this passage as being in three voices (upper voice red, middle voice blue, lower voice black) and have fingered it accordingly which makes it more difficult to play, but it sounds great.

47

③ ② ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩ ⑪ ⑫ ⑬ ⑭ ⑮ ⑯

T 0 5 7 9 10 7 4 2 5 9 7 9 9 7 6 6 4 7 5 7 7 6 5 4 2 5 4 6 6 4

A 6 7 9 4 6 9 7 6 7 4 7 6 5 4 3 6 4

B 0 7 4 6 6 3

The problem doesn't occur only in fast or virtuosic pieces. Francisco Tárrega's beloved *Lágrima* is a good example. The first four measures are relatively easy for most intermediate players. But if a player begins at too fast a tempo, they run into trouble at measures #5-8. And, when they get to Part II, they find they must slow down quite a bit to be able to play it. Or, if they try to maintain the same tempo as Part I, Part II gets sloppy or is played with a lot less confidence. Example #5:

Example #5

Lágrima (Francisco Tárrega)

The first four measures are pretty easy.

[illegible]

But, the next four measures are much more difficult than measures 1-4.

Choosing too fast an opening tempo can even wreak havoc with slow pieces. For example, if the easy introduction of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1* is played too quickly, problems ensue in the coda (Example #6):

Example #6

Gymnopédie No. 1 (Erik Satie) arr. Christopher Parkening

The opening measures are fairly easy.

IV^③

1

T
A
B

But, the piece becomes much more difficult at the coda. Even though it is slow, it is difficult to play.

Coda

VII

61

T
A
B

65

Natural Harmonic

In more difficult pieces such as Mauro Giuliani's *Grand Overture*, choosing the wrong tempo at the beginning of the piece spells disaster for everything down the line (Example #7):

Example #7

Grand Overture (Mauro Giuliani)

Measures #16-20 are fun to play and can be played at a fairly fast tempo after a few days of practice.

Measures 16-20 of the *Grand Overture* by Mauro Giuliani. The notation shows the melody and accompaniment for guitar. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked as 'Allegretto'.

Measures 16-20 are fun to play and can be played at a fairly fast tempo after a few days of practice.

But, if you started measure #16 a little too fast, good luck with these next two measures!

Measures 21-22 of the *Grand Overture* by Mauro Giuliani. The notation shows the melody and accompaniment for guitar. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked as 'Allegretto'.

But, if you started measure #16 a little too fast, good luck with these next two measures!

You may say, "Well Doug, shouldn't I just practice the difficult parts more so I can keep up the speed?" Well yes, sure. But even when thoroughly practiced, those difficult parts usually have a *narrow range of tempo possibilities* for successful execution. So, it is still critical to choose the right tempo to begin the piece.

HOW TO DO IT

[Use a Metronome to Rehearse Finding the Right Tempo](#)

The best way to develop the ability to find the right tempo is to have a metronome or metronome app that has a "tap tempo" feature. When you tap a screen or sensor with your finger, you are given a readout of the tempo at which you are tapping. You can use an app for your phone or tablet, an app for your desktop or laptop, or a physical device.

[Phone Apps](#)

The *Pro Metronome* app for Android or iPhone is excellent but may be a little too "feature rich" (that means complicated) for some. There are hundreds of other choices. Here are a few that other people recommend. If you Google "best metronome apps", you will see other lists with totally different recommendations!

[Metronome Plus](#)



[Metronome Plus](#) (iOS – \$1.99) is a simple, elegant, and easy to use metronome app. It's accurate and loud, includes a tapping feature to gauge tempo, and allows for some customization of meters and customizations. It also has multitasking capabilities, so you could read sheet music on your iPad, while keeping the metronome going in the background. But most of all, Metronome Plus is easy to use, and has a beautifully uncluttered interface. It's about as intuitive and visually attractive a metronome app as you'll find.



[Tempo](#) and it's sibling, [Tempo Advance](#)

[Tempo](#) (iOS – \$1.99 and Android – \$.99) and its more full-featured sibling [Tempo Advance](#) (iOS only – \$2.99) is another popular metronome app. Offers the usual range of features, from a variety of time signatures and compound meters to saving of custom rhythm presents and the ability to keep the metronome going even when your device is locked or running another app. The Advance version adds additional customization options and nice little touches like the ability to control the volume of the app independently of the phone's volume.

[Time Guru for iOS](#) and [Time Guru for Android](#)



[Time Guru for iOS](#) (\$2.99) and [Time Guru for Android](#) (\$1.99) is a unique metronome app developed by guitarist Avi Bortnick. It does all the things you'd expect a metronome to do, but it's killer feature is that the app gives you the ability to selectively – or randomly – mute the sound. This can be very revealing, and let you know if you have a tendency to rush or drag. It could also help you develop a stronger internal sense of time, rather than becoming reliant on a continuous external beat.

Laptop/Desktop

If you are on your laptop or desktop, try <http://www.all8.com/tools/bpm.htm>

Physical Device

If you prefer a tap-tempo metronome you can hold in your hand, [Korg makes a good one](#). If you want to go a little higher end (that means more expensive), the [Boss DB-90 Dr. Beat Metronome with Tap Tempo](#) is an excellent choice.

How to Use the Tap-Tempo Feature in Your Practice

Step #1:

Once you have learned a piece, you should know the best tempo at which you can play the entire piece comfortably, confidently, and cleanly. If you don't, get your metronome out and find the speed at which you play the piece the best. Be sure to write down that target tempo in your music.

Step #2:

Then, *at various times throughout the day*, sit down with your tap-tempo metronome. You won't need your guitar.

Now, this is crucial. In your head (don't play it on your guitar), hear all or a portion of THE MOST DIFFICULT PASSAGE of your piece, NOT the opening measures. It may be one measure or several. *The speed at which you can successfully play that difficult passage* determines your starting tempo.

On your tap-tempo device, tap your finger *and your foot(!)* along with the music you hear in your head. It is important to learn to tap your foot. See if you hit the target tempo that you determined in Step #1 and wrote down in your music. Practice over a period of days or weeks until you can hit the correct tempo consistently within 0-5 beats. Remember, this step is done without the guitar.

It is important to practice this at various times of day. Our internal clocks and sense of tempo tend to change throughout the day.

Also, when I say, "tap your foot", as a classical player it is probably best to only tap your toes so as not to make noise by actually tapping the foot.

Step #3:

Now, sit down with your tap-tempo device AND your guitar. Once again, hear the most difficult passage of your piece in your head. Begin tapping your toes along with the music you are hearing in your head. DON'T STOP TAPPING YOUR TOES and begin playing the piece. After 20 seconds or so, stop playing but keep tapping your toes. As you continue to tap your toes, tap your tap-tempo device and check to see if you are at the target tempo you had previously determined in Step #1 and wrote down in your music. Practice this until you hit the target tempo consistently. It will take anywhere from several days to several weeks to master the skill.

Step #4

Sit down with just your guitar. Once again, hear the most difficult passage of your piece in your head. Begin tapping your toes along with the music you are hearing in your head. DON'T STOP TAPPING YOUR TOES and begin to play the piece. After a measure or two, stop tapping your toes but continue to play through the entire piece. If you started at the correct target tempo, your performance of the piece should be very good, even the difficult parts.

A Common Error:

After hearing the piece in your head and beginning to tap your toes, be sure to immediately begin the piece. Some players stop tapping, retune or shuffle around, and then begin playing. The problem is that in those few seconds, it is very easy to lose the precise mental snapshot of the tempo.

The Adrenaline Factor

All the practice you do on Steps #1-4 is useless if the adrenaline factor is not taken into consideration. Under the stress, nervousness, and anxiety of public performance or even just playing for your guitar teacher, adrenaline is released into your bloodstream and causes you to lose perspective of the tempo at which you are playing a piece. Our sense of tempo and time can be significantly altered by the effects

of adrenaline. Anxiety makes us play faster than we intend to. What makes it worse is that **the adrenaline factor makes us unaware that we are playing faster!** For a full discussion of this, see my technique tip, [Adrenaline and Altered Perception of Tempo](#).

How to Control the Adrenaline Factor

Build a Safety Cushion

We practice in order to hit our target tempo accurately. However, to deal with the adrenaline factor, it is always a good idea to develop a "cushion" so we are able to play a piece faster than we intend to play it. That way, if adrenaline pushes our tempo faster than we realize, we can still play the piece. How much faster? That all depends on the piece. But usually the cushion will be 5-10 bpm (beats per minute).

A Simple but Effective Rule

Remember, adrenaline causes you to lose perspective of the tempo at which you are playing a piece. It's a time warp! Here is a great rule that always works when you experience pronounced performance anxiety.

1. As you're playing, if it feels like you're really cooking along and you think, "Man, I'm really smokin' ", you are playing WAY too fast.
2. If it feels like you are breezing along at a good tempo, you are still playing too fast.
3. If it feels like you are playing a little too slowly or that it is dragging a little, it is just right!

Treat Your Performance Anxiety

See my technique tip, [How to Control Stage Fright \(Performance Anxiety\)](#).

How Do I Learn to Hear the Music in My Mind?

It may be difficult for some to hear their reference passage in their head. But this can be learned and developed. I'm not going to go into detail here, but here are three ways to get started:

1. Try hearing a chunk of a distinctive song (classical, folk, pop, your national anthem, whatever) in your head and then sing it. You could even use something like *Happy Birthday* or *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* to get started.
2. With guitar in hand, play the first five notes (or fewer) of a major scale up and down. Then hear it in your head. Try singing it. Play it again. Did you get it right?
3. Play the passage of your piece you will reference for your starting tempo. Then, hear it in your head. Do it over and over until you can hear it. If you can't do it, try a shorter chunk of the passage.

It Isn't Only About Tempo

Beginning a piece successfully is not only deciding on the right tempo to begin the piece. It is also deciding on the touch, volume, articulation, and mood. Practice hearing all these elements in your head before beginning your piece.

The Moment of Truth: Take Your Time to Find the Right Speed

When the time comes for you to perform a piece or play it in a guitar lesson, don't just jump into the piece! Before you begin playing, take 10-15 seconds (that will feel like a long time to you, but won't to anyone else) to hear your reference passage in your head, find your target tempo, tap your toes in your shoes, and then begin playing. Those 10-15 seconds will be time well-spent to enable you to find the target tempo at which you successfully played the piece at home.