

How to Maintain Pieces in Your Repertoire

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt. All Rights Reserved. This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

WHY A REPERTOIRE?

Many reasons may be cited for the importance of building and maintaining a repertoire. Here are four:

1. A repertoire builds hand strength, speed, and agility.
2. A repertoire strengthens memory.
3. A repertoire provides a stable of pieces from which to choose to perform publicly, for friends and family, or for one's own personal satisfaction.
4. Keeping a piece in one's repertoire will dramatically improve one's ability to play the piece. It will get better and better over time, both technically and musically.

Depending on the level of the player and the amount of time they have available to practice, the repertoire may consist of anywhere from a handful of short pieces to 2-4 hours' worth of concert-ready pieces.

THE PROBLEM

As you finish learning pieces and want to move on to learning new repertoire, how do you keep those pieces you just learned in good shape? How do you keep them in good enough condition, so you can play them anytime, anyplace without having to play them every day? After all, for most of us, there isn't time to practice every old piece every day, plus have time to learn new pieces.

HOW TO SOLVE IT

MAKE A REPERTOIRE LIST

First, MAKE A LIST of the pieces you want to keep in your repertoire. This becomes more important as you add more pieces to your repertoire. It is very easy to forget to practice a piece you added to your repertoire months ago.

For the purposes of this technique tip, all you need is a list of the titles and composers of the pieces you want to keep in your repertoire. You can write it out by hand or type it into a printable document. Again, its purpose is to provide focus, so you don't forget to practice the all the pieces in your repertoire.

However, I highly recommend you also prepare a MASTER REPERTOIRE LIST. This list will include far more than just the title and composer of each piece. The amount of information you include will depend on your level and goals. And again, this is not the list you will keep on your music stand. I recommend including:

1. The *complete* name(s) (formal and informal) and pronunciation of the piece.

If someone asks what you are going to play or what pieces you know, it's very embarrassing not to know the complete title of a piece or know its correct pronunciation!

Be sure to include the full title and any alternate titles or spellings of the title. For example, Albéniz's *Leyenda* also goes by the title *Asturias*. Carefully check your spelling.

2. The full name (check spelling carefully) and correct pronunciation of the composer and his birth/death dates.

Once again, it is very embarrassing to mispronounce a composer's name or not know his full name and how to spell it.

The birth/death date is good information for you to know as an educated musician, and some concert presenters require the information for their printed programs.

3. Opus numbers, catalog numbers, other info. Classical composers are not always known for the originality of their song titles! Hence, we have thousands of Andantinos, Allegros, Courantes, Sonatas, Estudios, etc. Opus numbers or catalog numbers help nail down exactly which piece you are playing.

For instance, a study by Fernando Sor may be numbered as Opus 3, No. 2.

Or, a Scarlatti sonata might be numbered as K. 139 (Kirkpatrick), L.6 Longo), P.126 (Pestelli), or S.7 (Syunzyusya)! The name in parenthesis is the name of the musicologist who cataloged Scarlatti's works.

Bach's compositions are most commonly catalogued by their BWV number. For example, the *Bourée* or *Bourrée*, or *Bourré* that many guitarists play is from the *Lute Suite in E minor, BWV 996*. BWV is the abbreviation for the *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* (Bach-Works-Catalog).

If you are playing *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz, you should know it was titled *Preludio* or *Prélude* in *Chants d'Espagne Op. 232, No. 1* but titled as *Asturias* (subtitled *Leyenda*) from *Suite Española No. 1, Op. 47 No. 5*.

I know, it can get very confusing, but still, it is good to know what you are playing! And again, most concert presenters will require that information for their printed programs.

4. The key of the piece.

This can be important if you are putting together a program to perform. You probably don't want to play several pieces in a row in the same key.

5. Note which pieces require non-standard tunings and what those tunings are.

If you are putting together a program for live performance, you need to be careful about choosing pieces that use non-standard tunings and careful about where you place them in the program to minimize intonation problems.

6. The length or timing of the piece. **THIS IS IMPORTANT.** Time how long it takes *you*, (not Segovia or John Williams), to play the piece. Be sure you know the length of the piece in minutes and seconds, not, "Oh it's about 4 minutes long."

This bit of information is critical for performers. Obviously, if you are putting together a program, you need to know how long it will be. If there is an intermission, you need to plan how long each half will be.

Timings are also important if you are putting together a CD or streaming your music. Cataloging systems of Allmusic.com Pandora, Spotify, Amazon, SoundCloud, etc. need this information. Having it at your fingertips saves you from having to play through pieces just to know how long they are every time you need the information.

If you should be so lucky to perform live on radio or television, the host or director/producer will want to know the length of the pieces you are going to play. Or, the host or director/producer might ask specifically for a two-minute or three-minute piece.

7. The date you began learning it and "finished" it. Good for keeping track of your personal accomplishment.

8. Date of publication. This is less important but nonetheless, good to know. If you play or publish your own arrangement or transcription of a piece, it is critical to know its date of publication to avoid copyright infringement. If you are recording the music, it is important to know so that you only pay the mechanical license fees required by law.

Depending on your needs, all this information may be written out by hand, or typed into a document. Some people like spread-sheets, so they can sort the info by the date they learned the piece, by title, by composer, by length of piece, etc. Whichever way you decide to keep track of the information, keep it up-to-date and readily accessible.

HOW AND WHEN AM I GOING TO FIND THE TIME TO DO THIS?

No formula exists for how much time must be devoted to maintaining a repertoire. The time spent will vary with how many pieces you want to maintain in your repertoire, how difficult they are for you to play, whether or not you want to have them memorized, and your level and proficiency.

Tiers

Good news! Pieces fall into tiers of:

Level 1. High maintenance. Pieces that need to be practiced weekly or more often.

Level 2. Medium maintenance. Pieces that can be maintained by practicing them 1-3 times per month.

Level 3. Low maintenance. Pieces will only need to be practiced once every month at the most.

Remember, all of this is relative according to your level. A concert artist only needs to practice Francisco Tárrega's *Lágrima* once a year to keep it in tip-top condition. An intermediate player may need to play it weekly or certainly every two weeks to keep it in good shape.

So, the pieces in your repertoire will fall into one of those tiers of maintenance. This means as your repertoire grows, you will not need to practice everything all the time.

How Do I Determine Which Pieces Fall into Each Tier?

This is very straightforward. Gradually reduce your practice time on a piece until the quality of your performance suffers.

For example, say you have learned the famous *Romance* (*Romanza*, *Romance de Amor*).

1. Week #1. Play through the piece twice every day.
2. Week #2. Play through the piece twice every two days.
3. Week #3-4. Play through the piece twice every three days.
4. Week #5-6. Play through the piece twice every four days.
5. Week #7-8. Play through the piece twice every five days.
6. Week #9-12. Play through the piece twice every six days.
7. Week #13-16. Play through the piece twice once a week.
8. After that, play through the piece twice once every two weeks. Then three weeks.
9. Then once a month.
10. Once every two months, etc.

If you follow this timeline, the point at which the piece begins to suffer will tell you how often you will need to practice the piece.

Know Your Limitations

There are limits. And again, everything is relative. Depending on the amount of practice time you have, there will be a limit to the number of pieces you can keep in tip-top condition. People who have six hours a day to practice can keep 2-4+ hours' worth of music in performance-ready condition. But, if you can only practice ½ hour a day, keeping 10-15 minutes of music in performance-ready shape is an admirable accomplishment.

And, as you learn more pieces that you want to add to your repertoire, you may need to drop a few of your least favorite pieces. If your practice time is limited, you just cannot keep everything in good condition.

Let's Be Honest

All the pieces in your repertoire will not be in performance-ready condition. Thankfully, they do not need to be.

If you are an aspiring performer, the pieces in your repertoire list will fall into these groups:

Group A: The pieces you maintain in concert-ready condition.

Group B: The pieces that you could have ready with 1-2 weeks of practice.

Group C: The pieces you could have ready with a month of practice.

Or, if you are not an aspiring performer, your list may look like this:

Group A: Pieces I can play right now in public for friends and family well enough that no one leaves the room.

Group B: Pieces that are rough but can be back in good shape in one to three weeks.

Group C: Pieces I have neglected but can get through, but not without a significant amount of swearing or kicking the furniture. But I can get them back in shape in one to two months.

It's a Balancing Act

The trick is to be sure you revisit each piece in your repertoire often enough that you do not lose it entirely. You must also balance the amount of time you devote to each piece to keep it at the level of quality you wish to maintain. It is obvious. Pieces you like or are likely to play for someone must be given more practice time than those you do not care as much about.

HOW TO PRACTICE

The following practice principles apply to all the pieces in your repertoire, whether they are Tier #1 high-maintenance pieces, Tier #2 medium-maintenance pieces, or Tier #3 low-maintenance pieces. They also apply to the pieces you want to keep in pristine condition, average condition, or those you have neglected.

First, play through the piece, beginning to end.

The purpose is to identify what needs to be practiced. Is the piece too slow? Is your memory weak? Are you having problems with specific passages or chord changes?

Unfortunately, when you are strongly focused on playing the piece (as you should be), by the time you get to the end of the piece, it can be difficult to remember exactly what went wrong or specifically where the problems were. Or, you may not even notice the problems.

If you do not have a teacher who can mark the problems in your music as you play, I strongly recommend that you record the piece. You do not need fancy equipment. You can use your cell phone. Listen back, pause/play as necessary, and clearly mark all the problem spots in your music. I like to use colored markers to annotate the score. I find it useful to also date the spots. When you return to the piece days or months later, it is helpful to see if the same problems recur. If they do, refer to my technique tip, [The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

A FANTASTIC PRACTICE TOOL: Make another list, this time of all the passages and spots that need specific practice.

Okay, so you played through the piece and annotated the problem spots in your music. But what happens if you have several pieces with many problem spots? It will be a hassle to have to page through the scores of several pieces to find the spots you need to practice.

Instead, make a master list of all the problem spots and passages from all the pieces from your repertoire list.

You could hand-write the passages out on manuscript paper. For example:

Sor study #5 (Op. 35, No. 22)

Lágrima

Work on A.H. arpeggio of Villa-Lobos Prelude #4

Bach Bourrée

Or, use a music notation program such as Sibelius or Finale:

Passages from Repertoire Pieces to Practice November 2017

Sor Study #5 (Op. 35, No. 22)



Bach Bourrée



Work on R.H. arpeggio of
Villa-Lobos *Prelude No. 4*.

Or, you can Xerox the annotated pages and then literally cut out the passages from the sheet music and paste (tape) them onto a separate sheet of paper.

Son Study #5 (Op. 35, No. 22)



Lágrima



Bach Bourrée



Work on R.H. Arpeggio of Villa-Lobos Prelude #4.

Strategy: Use your list of difficult passages and spots to incorporate repertoire maintenance into your daily practice:

Be sure to use the random practice method. [Read my technique tip on how to use random practice.](#)

1. Practice the weakest or most difficult spots every day or few days using random practice.
2. Practice the easier spots occasionally using random practice.
3. Or, maintain a regular rotation so you hit all the spots every few days or once a week. Again, use random practice.

Strategy: Use your list of difficult passages and spots for your warmup and technique practice:

- 1 Use the difficult spots and passages as part of your warmup every day. Or rotate different ones each day for your warmup.
2. Practice technique using passages from your pieces. For example, if you need improvement in your arpeggio technique, use arpeggio passages from your repertoire. If you need work on hammers and pulloffs, use passages from your pieces. If you want to work on scale speed, use scale passages from your repertoire.

Practice passages or sometimes entire pieces with altered rhythms.

This practice method will help keep pieces or passages clean and break old habits that produce mistakes. [I explain how to use the method in this technique tip.](#)

Occasionally practice your repertoire pieces (especially the fast ones) extremely slowly.

Practice slowly enough that you do not make any mistakes. Play the piece through at this extreme tempo and do not worry about playing the correct rhythms. Hesitate, rather than make a mistake. Then, set the metronome at approximately the same extremely slow tempo (so you do not make mistakes) and play through the piece in rhythm.

This is especially important for keeping fast pieces in good shape. If you practice a fast piece fast all the time, the definition of all the micro-movements of the fingers can break down and the piece can get worse and worse.

Memory problems

First of all, not all the pieces in your repertoire have to be memorized. It is your choice. If you do want to keep a piece memorized, revisit the spots where you had lapses. Practice with and without the music until the spots are clear in your mind again. Mental practice is very helpful. [See my technique tip on memorization.](#)

Also, practicing the piece extremely slowly can be very helpful in fixing memory problems. Practicing VERY slowly ensures you are not just using muscle memory.

Loss of speed in specific passages

If you find you struggle to play a particular passage or chord change up to tempo, relearn the passage with speed bursts or reflex practice. See my technique tips [How to Use Reflex Bursts to Learn a Fast Scale](#) and [How to Use Reflex Practice to Master Fast, Difficult Passages Other Than Scales.](#)

Adjust your practice schedule to accommodate the practice and maintenance of repertoire.

1. If there is a day in the week when you have extra time to practice, use it to review old repertoire.
2. Or, one day a week practice only your old repertoire and no new pieces.
3. Or, inject the random practice of old repertoire into your daily practice.

Even if you have a piece memorized, occasionally play through the piece reading the score.

Play at a slower tempo than normal so you can truly focus on and carefully read the score. This will ensure you are remembering everything correctly, not changing notes or rhythms, or leaving anything out.

And finally, a totally different, kind of "out there" strategy. WARNING: I have no experience with this method.

From a piano blog out in the galactic bit bucket of the internet:

"This learning strategy applies only to pieces you have just learned. After you learned your piece, drop it for a couple of months. If you forget it, it is even better. Now go back to it, and learn it again from scratch. Pretend it is a complete new piece. There is a huge temptation to cut corners, since you already know the piece. Don't. Really relearn it as if it was the first time ever. The learning will be faster, but you may notice that certain passages are actually as difficult as the first time around. Concentrate on these passages. Once you have re-learned the piece, drop it again for a couple of months. Then relearn it again. By the third or fourth time you do this, you will not be able to forget it anymore. It will be yours forever. And if you paid attention to the passages that are problematic, by the third or fourth time they will be as easy as the rest. The problem with this strategy is psychological: No one wants to do it. But it is definitely worth it."

If any reader wants to try this method, let me know how it works (or doesn't) for you!

Summary

1. Make a repertoire list. Keep it readily available and up-to-date.
2. You do not have to practice all your pieces all the time. Some high-maintenance pieces will require more practice. Others can be practiced once a month or less and stay in reasonably good shape.
3. You do not need to maintain every piece in pristine shape—the ones you like or will likely perform, yes. But others can be left in medium to medium-low condition and brought back into better shape as needed.

4. I recommend incorporating the practice of old repertoire into your daily practice. But it must be done with the random practice method. For others, reserving one day a week for practicing through their repertoire can also work well.

5. Make a master list of all the trouble-spots and difficult passages from your pieces that need extra practice. Try to incorporate these into your daily practice using the random practice method and/or incorporating them into your warmup.

6. According to the needs of the piece, use specialized practice techniques such as: Practice with Altered Rhythms, Speed Burst Reflex Practice, Extreme Slow Practice, Mental Memory Practice.

7. Eventually you will reach a point where you simply cannot keep everything in shape. Sure, you could find more practice time by quitting your job or stop doing chores around the house for your significant other, but it would probably be a better idea to drop a few pieces off your list.