

A SKILL YOU MUST HAVE TO PRACTICE EFFICIENTLY: Learn to Start Anywhere in a Song

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There are many skills and strategies we must use to practice efficiently. One of the most important is the ability to begin playing a song from any point in the music.

In every new piece, there is always a chord change, a rhythm, a scale, an effect, a new technique, a problematic measure, or part of a measure that requires specialized repetitious practice. Here is an example in *Andantino*, by Ferdinand Carulli. Example #1:

Example 1.

Andantino (Ferdinand Carulli), measures 1-10.

The musical score for Example 1 consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a treble staff with notes and rests, and a guitar-specific staff with fret numbers (0-4) and fingerings (1-4). The first system contains measures 1-4, the second system contains measures 5-8, and the third system contains measures 9-10. A red box highlights measures 7 and 8 in the second system. The score is written for guitar in 3/4 time, featuring a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The guitar-specific staff uses fret numbers (0-4) and fingerings (1-4) to indicate the correct fingering for each note.

Even though the problems occur in measures #7 and #8, I have observed beginning guitarists attempting to learn those problematic moves by starting from measures #5 and #6, which are the same as measures #1 and #2, which they have already learned. Example #1a:

Example 1a.

Andantino (Ferdinand Carulli), measures 1-10.

Flawed practice procedure.

[illegible]

1. The guitarist begins here with measures 5 and 6.
2. The guitarist already knows these measures because they are the same as measures 1 and 2.
3. They are not relevant to mastering the problems in measures 7 and 8.

The difficult area we want to master is **HERE**.

[illegible]

The second system of the musical score, labeled '10' at the top. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody continues with notes G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and C5 (quarter), followed by a double bar line. The bass line consists of whole notes: G2, F#2, E2, and D2. The system concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

If the guitarist wants to master measures #7-8 but starts each time at measure #5, they will probably need to practice the line at least 50-100 times, which is not efficient and not very useful. Starting every

time from measure #5 is a colossal waste of time. Remember, they already know measures #5-6 (they are the same as measures #1-2). Why practice these easy measures 50-100 more times!

Imagine a student driver learning to parallel park a car. He finds an empty parking space. All he needs to do is practice pulling into the space over and over until he gets the hang of it. But instead, he decides to drive around the block after each attempt to pull into the parking space. Or at the extreme, he drives home, parks the car in the garage, and then drives back out to find the same parking space and practice pulling into it again. Over and over! That is the automotive version of the way many guitarists practice their pieces.

Instead, the efficient way to practice is to start practicing where the problems are, break the problem down into smaller pieces, and repeat only the essentials. Here are the steps I would instruct a guitarist to take to master the passage in the Carulli *Andantino*. Example #2:

Example 2.

Andantino (Ferdinand Carulli). How to master measures 7-8.

Do NOT begin at measure #5!

Begin HERE

5

7

8

4

7

1 0 0 1 0 1 3 0 2 1 0 5

2 0 1 2 0 2 2 1 0 1 2

0 0 3 0 2 2 0 3

The steps to master measures 7-8.
Practice each chunk multiple times.

Step #1:

7

1 4 0 4 1 2 0 4

0 3 1 3 0 3 3

1 3 0 1 0 5

0 2 1 0 1 2

0 2 2 0 3

Step #2:

7

1 4 0 4 1 2 0 4

0 3 1 3 0 3 3

1 3 0 1 0 5

0 2 1 0 1 2

0 2 2 0 3

7 **Step #3:**

1 4 0 4 3 3 1 2

0 . 3 . 0 3 0 3

1 0 2 0 1 0 0 5

0 1 1 2 0 3

Step #5:

7

Step #6:

1 4 0 4 3 1 0 2 3

T 1 3 0 2 1 0 0 2 3

A 0 2 2 0 0 2 0 0 0

B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

7

Step 7:

1 4 0 4 3 3 2 0 4

T 1 3 0 1 0 5

A 0 2 1 0 1

B 0 2 2 0 2 3

Step #8:

7

1 3 0 2 1 0 1 3

TAB

7

Step #9:

1 3 0 2 1 1 0 5

T 0 3 0 2 1 1 0 5

A 0 3 0 2 1 1 0 5

B 0 3 0 2 1 1 0 5

E 0 3 0 2 1 1 0 5

Step #10:

The musical notation for Step #10 is shown. The treble staff has a red box highlighting a sequence of notes: a quarter note (1), a quarter note (4), a quarter note (0), a quarter note (4), a quarter note (3), a quarter note (1), a quarter note (2), a quarter note (0), a quarter note (3), a quarter note (7), and a quarter note (4). The bass staff has a sequence of notes: a quarter note (1), a quarter note (3), a quarter note (0), a quarter note (2), a quarter note (1), a quarter note (2), a quarter note (1), a quarter note (0), a quarter note (3), a quarter note (7), and a quarter note (4). The notes are numbered 1 through 7, corresponding to the fret numbers on the guitar strings.

You may say, "But Doug, that is a lot of steps, and practicing each of those will take even more time." It won't. By practicing smaller, manageable units, each chunk will require fewer repetitions to master. It also allows the guitarist to focus clearly on one problem at a time. By focusing on a smaller unit, the guitarist will make far fewer mistakes, leading to better mastery. Plus, the guitarist can also memorize each unit as he proceeds, providing even stronger mastery.

Some guitarists may be able to skip a few steps by combining some of the steps, which will save time. The point is, they should not waste time practicing measures they already can play. They should not have to start practicing at measure #5 to learn measures #7 and #8. They should be able to start at measure #7, where the problems begin.

Let's look at a more challenging piece. In the famous *Romance* or *Romance de Amor* or *Romanza*, we have a difficult chord change from measure #20-21. Example #3:

Example #3.

Romance or *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* (Anonymous)
Measures 17-22

The musical score for Example #3 shows measures 17 through 22. The melody line includes slurs and triplets, with lyrics 'a m i a m i a m i' above measures 17-19. The guitar accompaniment is shown with fret numbers. A red box highlights the difficult chord change from measure 20 to 21, labeled 'VII'. The text 'The difficult chord change we want to master.' is written in red above the box.

Even though the problematic chord change is the transition from measure #20-21, I have observed guitarists attempting to master the change by starting to practice at measure #17. Example #4:

Example #4.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous) Measures 17-22.

Disadvantages of starting practice at measure 17.

These measures have no relevance to the difficult chord change.

This is another difficult change. Including it to master the difficult chord change in measures 20-21 is distracting and taxing to the hand.

Holding the bar in this measure and the first two beats of the next measure will quickly tire the hand.

The difficult chord change we want to master.

There are three big problems with starting at measure #17.

1. Measures #17 and #18 have no connection with the difficult chord change. Playing these measures over and over is a total waste of valuable practice time.
2. There is another problematic chord change from measure #18-19, which will distract one's attention and tire the hand.
3. If we start at measure #17, we must hold a challenging bar in measure #19 and most of #20. If we try to do numerous repetitions, our left hand will fatigue very quickly. Overpractice could lead to injury.

Other guitarists start at measure #19. Example #5:

Example #5.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous) Measures 17-22.

Disadvantages of starting practice at measure 19.

[illegible]

The bar in measure 19 and the first two beats of measure 20 will quickly tire the hand. These beats are not directly relevant to mastering the difficult chord change.

The difficult chord change
we want to master.

The musical score is for a piece titled "the difficult chord change." It is written for guitar, featuring a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a 2/4 time signature. The score is divided into three measures, numbered 19, 20, and 21. Measure 19 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps. Measure 20 is marked with a Roman numeral II. Measure 21 is marked with a Roman numeral VII. The score includes a guitar tablature (TAB) line at the bottom, which shows the fret numbers for each note. The tablature for measure 19 is: 5 2 4 2 4 2 4. The tablature for measure 20 is: 4 2 4 2 4 2 4. The tablature for measure 21 is: 9 7 8 9 7 8 9. The score also includes a treble clef staff with notes and fingerings. The notes in measure 19 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The notes in measure 20 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The notes in measure 21 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The score is a transcription of a guitar piece, likely from a video or a book, and it includes a guitar tablature (TAB) line at the bottom. The tablature for measure 19 is: 5 2 4 2 4 2 4. The tablature for measure 20 is: 4 2 4 2 4 2 4. The tablature for measure 21 is: 9 7 8 9 7 8 9. The score also includes a treble clef staff with notes and fingerings. The notes in measure 19 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The notes in measure 20 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The notes in measure 21 are: G4 (1), A4 (3), B4 (4), C5 (4), D5 (4), E5 (4), F#5 (4). The score is a transcription of a guitar piece, likely from a video or a book, and it includes a guitar tablature (TAB) line at the bottom.

The musical notation for the guitar solo in "Hotel California" is shown on a grand staff. The treble clef staff contains the melody, which is a sequence of eighth notes: G4 (labeled 3), A4 (labeled 1), B4 (labeled 2), C5 (labeled 4), B4 (labeled 4), A4, G4, and F#4. The bass clef staff contains the bass line, which consists of a single eighth note G2 (labeled 1) followed by a dotted half rest. The fret numbers 9, 7, 11, 7, 9, 7, and 8 are written below the bass staff, corresponding to the notes in the melody.

Starting at measure #19 is a little better since the guitarist is not repeating measures #17 and #18, which are unrelated to the difficult change they need to practice. But holding the bar chord in measures #19 and #20 will severely tax the hand.

And many guitarists begin at measure #20. Example #6:

Example #6.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous) Measures 17-22.

Disadvantages of starting practice at measure 20.

17

a m i a m i a m i

4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 2 0 0 0 1

0 0

II

20

VII

21

The difficult chord change we want to master.

Even practicing these two extra beats of the bar chord will quickly tire the hand.

5 2 4 2 4 2 4 4 2 3 2 4 2 4 9 7 8 7 8 7 8

2 2 4

3 4 4

9 7 11 7 9 7 8

7

Starting here is even better since the guitarist is narrowing their focus. But they still must hold the bar chord for two extra beats before the actual chord change occurs. Once again, numerous repetitions will quickly tire the hand.

The best place to start is on the 3rd beat of measure #20. Example #7:

Example #7.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous) Measures 17-22.

The 3rd beat of measure 20 is the best place to start practicing.

17

a m i a m i a m i

4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 4 0 1

0 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1

START HERE: The difficult chord change we want to master.

II 20 VII

1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4

1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

5 2 4 2 4 2 4 4 2 3 4 2 4 9 7 9 7 9 7 8

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 7 8 7 8 7 8

The bar at the 2nd fret must be held for only 1 beat.
This conserves strength for numerous repetitions.
The focus is totally on the difficult chord change.
No time is wasted practicing non-relevant notes.

II 20 VII

1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4 1 3 4 4

1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

9 7 11 7 9 7 8 9 7 8 7 8 7 8 7 8 7 8 7 8

7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7

Now, the guitarist only has to hold the bar chord at the 2nd fret in measure #20 for one beat. The hand will still tire with numerous repetitions, but not as quickly. And, the guitarist's focus will be entirely on the chord change. They are not practicing extra notes or chords that have no relevance to the problem they are attempting to master.

The Advantages To Being Able To Start Anywhere In A Piece

1. **SAVE TIME.** When we want to master a specific problem, we usually have to practice the problem area over and over. Frequently, we must do 50-100+ repetitions over several days or weeks. Even practicing a few extra beats or measures that are not relevant to the problem will waste a huge amount of valuable practice time.
2. **FOCUS.** Practicing extra beats or measures that are not relevant to the problem distracts us from the spot we are trying to master. Practicing larger chunks usually results in more mistakes. We do not want to practice mistakes!
3. **SAVE MONEY.** In a guitar lesson or master class, the teacher will ask us to start at a particular place in the music. If we don't know where that spot is, and have to go back several measures or lines to figure out where we are, we are wasting time playing irrelevant material. We are paying the teacher for that lost time. It adds up quickly, especially over many lessons.
4. **PERFORMANCE CONFIDENCE.** It is bad enough to have a memory lapse in a performance. It is even worse to have no idea where you are or where to start to continue. If you have the ability to start anywhere in a piece, you can pick it up from the memory lapse. If you maintain a "poker face," often the audience will not even realize something went wrong. Knowing that you can do this will boost your confidence and lessen fears about memory lapses. It will also dramatically reduce the frequency of memory lapses.
5. **MAKE BETTER RECORDINGS.** Few guitarists can make a flawless recording of a difficult piece in one attempt or "take." "Flawless" recordings usually consist of multiple takes. But the artist does not play the *entire* song more than three to ten times. Instead, if the guitarist makes a mistake in measure #233, he will select a spot a few beats or measures before the error. From that point, the guitarist will record multiple takes (sometimes 30-50 attempts) until he gets it right. That saves time and, in the case of a commercial recording, money.

Okay, I'm Convinced. How Do I Learn To Do This?

The way to learn to start anywhere in a piece is to dive in and do it. The logical places to dive in are at significant structural points in the music. Pieces consist of units of structure such as periods or sentences, phrases, semi-phrases, motives, and figures. Fortunately, you don't need to know the definitions of these units. You can usually see them on the page.

Begin at the prominent large sections

For instance, let's look at an easy piece, an *Allegretto* by Fernando Sor. Repeat signs are always conspicuous clues to the structure of a piece. Example #8:

Example #8.

Allegretto (Fernando Sor)

1 2 3 4

5 6 7 8 Repeat sign

Repeat sign 9 10 11 12

13 14 15 16 Repeat sign

These repeat signs give us a clue that measures #1-8 and #9-16 are significant sections of the piece. In this case, the repeats happen to divide the composition into structural units called periods or sentences. Example #9:

Example #9.

Allegretto (Fernando Sor)

Period #1

Measures 1-8. The score is in 4/4 time. Measures 1-4 are labeled 'Period #1'. Measures 5-8 end with a repeat sign. The guitar tablature is shown below the staff.

Period #2

Measures 9-16. The score is in 4/4 time. Measures 9-12 are labeled 'Period #2'. Measures 13-16 end with a repeat sign. The guitar tablature is shown below the staff.

Now, we see an obvious place to learn to start anywhere in the piece. Begin practicing from the pickup note to measure #9, which is the beginning of Period #2.

Find the large structural points in a song that you play and try starting at the beginning of those sections. Indications of fundamental structural points in a song include items such as:

1. Changes of tempo
2. Changes of time signature
3. Changes of key signature
4. Double bar lines

Next, find the phrases.

Music also consists of phrases. Phrases are natural units of complete musical thoughts. An important thing to know is that phrases are usually four measures long. In commercially-printed music, they often (but not always) take up a full line. Example #10:

Example #10.

Allegretto (Fernando Sor)

The phrases.

The image displays a musical score for a guitar piece, specifically Example #10, 'Allegretto' by Fernando Sor. The score is divided into four phrases, each highlighted with a colored box and labeled accordingly. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tablature (TAB) is provided for each phrase, showing fingerings and fret numbers.

Phrase #1 (Red box): Measures 1-4. The melody starts with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The tablature shows fingerings: 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3.

Phrase #2 (Blue box): Measures 5-8. The melody continues with a half note D5, followed by a quarter note E5, a quarter note F#5, and a half note G5. The tablature shows fingerings: 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3.

Phrase #3 (Teal box): Measures 9-12. The melody starts with a half note A5, followed by a quarter note B5, a quarter note C6, and a half note D6. The tablature shows fingerings: 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3.

Phrase #4 (Purple box): Measures 13-16. The melody continues with a half note E6, followed by a quarter note F#6, a quarter note G6, and a half note A6. The tablature shows fingerings: 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3.

Note that the *Allegretto* begins with an upbeat. Because of that, each phrase starts on the 4th beat of a measure rather than the usual 1st beat.

Therefore:

Phrase #1: starts with the upbeat to measure #1 and continues through the first three beats of measure #4.

Phrase #2: starts with the last beat of measure #4 and continues through the first three beats of measure #8.

Phrase #3: starts with the pickup note to measure #9 and continues through the first three beats of measure #12.

Phrase #4: starts with the last beat of measure #12 and continues to the end, the first three beats of measure #16.

Because phrases are complete musical thoughts, if you start at the beginning of a phrase, it is easier to recognize where you are in the piece than starting at some random point. Therefore, the beginnings of phrases are excellent starting points to learn how to start anywhere in a piece.

Try to find the phrases in a song that you play or are learning. Mark the phrases in pencil. They are usually four measures long but could also be 2, 8, or 16 measures long. Then, practice starting at the beginning of each phrase in order—play phrase #1 only, then play phrase #2 only, phrase #3 only, etc. Finally, practice starting at random phrases—phrase #3, jump to phrase #1, jump to phrase #6, etc.

Find the semi-phrases.

Phrases usually are constructed of two semi-phrases. Since a phrase is usually four measures, a semi-phrase is customarily two measures. In the *Allegretto*, we would choose the second semi-phrase of each phrase and start practicing there. Starting at a semi-phrase will be a bit more challenging since you are essentially starting in the middle of a musical thought. But since you already learned to start at the beginning of each phrase, finding the second semi-phrase will not be overwhelming.

Again, begin practicing the semi-phrases in order, so you are not totally lost. Then, progress to starting at random semi-phrases.

Drill down to individual measures

Once you can start at the beginning of any semi-phrase, it is a small step to start at the beginning of any measure. Begin by going phrase by phrase. For instance, begin with phrase #1.

Phrase #1 (sequential measures):

Practice playing measure #1 only

Practice playing measure #2 only

Practice playing measure #3 only

Practice playing measure #4 only

Phrase #1 (random measures):

Practice playing measure #3 only

Practice playing measure #2 only

Practice playing measure #4 only

Practice playing measure #1 only

Next, continue the same procedure with phrase #2. Then, continue through the piece using the same practice method, phrase by phrase.

Next, try the same process on random phrases. Start with phrase #10, then phrase #3, then phrase #6, etc.

Finally, ignore the phrases and practice starting at random measures on the page.

The Ultimate Challenge: Start at random points

Close your eyes and point at a spot on the page of music. Open your eyes and start playing from that point. With practice, it will be almost as easy to begin at random points as it is to begin at a phrase or semi-phrase.

Be Practical

Spend about 15% of your total practice time on learning to start anywhere in a piece:

1. If you have 30 minutes a day to practice, spend five minutes on this routine.
2. If you have an hour a day to practice, spend ten minutes a day on the routine.
3. If you have two hours a day to practice, spend twenty minutes a day on the routine.

If you practice more than two hours a day, stick with twenty minutes a day on the routine. Any more than that will become tedious. Lord knows we don't want our practicing to be tedious!

Final Thoughts

Whew! Yes, this will take time to master. But spending a hundred hours now to learn to start anywhere in a piece will save you thousands of hours in the coming years. It is one of the most important skills a musician should have.