

MARK UP YOUR MUSIC

By Douglas Niedt

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When a new student comes for their first lesson, I ask them to bring copies of the music they are working on. I specify that I want to see their “working copies” of the music, not a new, pristine copy. I can easily tell a lot about how the student practices by viewing the working copy. If it is full of markings, fingerings, circled measures, comments, notes, etc., I know they have a good understanding of how to practice and learn a piece. If the working copy is fairly clean with very few markings, I know we will have a lot of work to do on how to learn and practice a piece.

Mark Up Your Music

As you learn a piece, it is important to thoroughly mark some or all of the following in your sheet music:

1. Number the measures.
2. Left-hand fingerings
3. Right-hand fingerings
4. Use of rest stroke and free stroke
5. Bar notations
6. Planting techniques
7. Chord arpeggiation
8. Articulation
9. String damping
10. Left-hand and right-hand position changes
11. Metronome settings
12. Notes on use of vibrato
13. Structural markings
14. Expression (dynamics, tone colors, changes of tempo, rubato, accents, fermatas, notes to linger on, etc.)
15. Spots/passages that need extra practice

Photocopy Your Music First

Make a copy of your music first, because if you do this right, it will look like a mess when you are done. Don't ruin your good copy. Here is an *extreme* example from my past. This is my marked up *Fugue* from *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* by J.S. Bach:

Don't be alarmed. I have gotten much neater in my old age. My point is that you certainly don't want to mark up the good copy of your music. Keep the original clean for posterity.

By the way, I mark up and make annotations in the books I read too. Many people, including my own wife, find this appalling. I was doing a lesson once with a student named Kathy who had a literary bent and loved to read. I pulled out a book to illustrate something about performance practice in the Baroque period. The page I turned to probably looked something like this:

88 EMBELLISHMENTS

Figure 69

7. With regard to execution we learn from this figure that appoggiaturas are louder than the following tone, including any additional embellishment, and that they are joined to it in the absence as well as the presence of a slur. Both of these points are in accord with the purpose of appoggiaturas, which is to connect notes. They must be held until released by the following tone so that both are smoothly joined. An undecorated, light tone which follows an appoggiatura is called the release.

8. Because the sign of the appoggiatura is universally known (like that of the trill) it is one of the few ornaments whose introduction is usually notated. Nevertheless, since one cannot always depend on this, it is necessary to fix the proper contexts of the variable appoggiatura, insofar as it is possible to do so.

9. In addition to the observations of Paragraph 6, the variable appoggiatura in duple time appears commonly on either the down beat (Figure 70, Example a) or the upbeat (b); but in triple time only on the downbeat (Figure 71) and always before a relatively long note. Further, it is found before cadential trills (Figure 72, Example a); before half cadences (b), caesurae (c), fermate (d), and final tones with (e) or without (f) a preceding trill. We learn from Example e that the ascending appoggiatura after a trill is better than the descending; hence, the illustration under g is poor. Slow dotted notes also take the variable appoggiatura (h). When such notes have tails, the tempo must be a suitable one.

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Figure 70

Figure 71

Figure 72

Variable appoggiatura

in triple time only on downbeat and downbeat before

relatively long note

before cadential trills

before half cadence

before caesurae

before fermatas

Final tones with preceding trill

Final tones without preceding trill

slow dotted notes take variable appoggiatura

bad because ascending appoggiatura is better than descending & is good

It was so upsetting to her she couldn't continue the lesson. I know it is sacrilege to mark up books like this, but it is very helpful when I need to find a passage in a book I use repeatedly. I also find it interesting, when I reread a book years later, to read my old comments and note how my opinions and thoughts have or have not changed through the years.

Write Everything Down

Mark everything in your music. Do not depend on your memory! I don't care if you are 18 or 80, you will forget if you don't write things down. If getting a bar chord clear requires that you move the bar finger

up or down slightly, write down in your music what you have to do. If accurately playing a sequence of chord changes requires you to tuck the left elbow in or wing it out, write that down in your music. If executing a fast scale requires you to recite a short prayer as you approach the passage, write down the prayer!

Writing things down helps to make your practice sessions and playing consistent. When you make conscious decisions how you want to execute a passage *and follow those decisions*, your practice and performance become more consistent. You will be more likely to use the same right-hand fingerings, the same left-hand fingerings, the same articulation, etc. every time you play. Your fingers and brain do not get confused.

Let's look at each item in the list above and see why it is important to annotate each of them in your music.

Number the measures

Sometimes the measures in published music are not numbered. Numbering the measures is very useful.

Let's say you are learning *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz. Our guitar version is a transcription of the original piece for piano. At some point you will probably want to compare the guitar and piano score. Having the measures numbered in both scores makes referencing both scores very easy. Without measure numbers it will be very confusing.

Having the measures numbered also makes it easier to compare two guitar versions of the same piece. If you do online lessons, it makes communication between you and the teacher much easier. If you record the piece and want to edit the recording later, measure numbering is essential.

Left-hand fingerings

Usually published music will contain left-hand fingerings. If you precisely observe the written-in fingerings, fine. But if you make changes to the original fingerings as most of us do, write them down in PENCIL. You will change them often. Don't erase old fingerings. Add the new fingerings and note that they are new. I even add the date I came up with the new fingering. Sometimes a new fingering you discovered that you thought would be great ends up not working. Having the old fingering still written in makes it easy to return to square one. This goes for left-hand and right-hand fingerings.

Right-hand fingerings

Published guitar music often contains minimal or no right-hand fingering. But it is just as important to write in your right-hand fingering as it is to write in the left-hand fingering. Again, use pencil. You will probably change your right-hand fingering more frequently than the left-hand fingering as you learn the piece. Definitely keep old fingerings written in and note which fingerings are new. Again, I date them. Of course, once you write in your right-hand fingerings, be sure to follow them!

Rest stroke and free stroke

Some pieces mix rest and free stroke. It is important that your right hand is clear on which notes are played rest stroke. It is also important that you think about and make a conscious decision about whether you want to use rest stroke, where you want to use it, and why. Write it in!

Bar notation

This of course is part of left-hand fingering. Write in where you want to use bars, how long they last, and especially make note of how many strings you want to bar in each instance. Some passages will sound best when you bar a particular number of strings. Write down what works for you.

Planting techniques

Make note of both right-hand and left-hand instances of planting. Make a note at the beginning of the piece which right-hand fingers can be pre-planted and which left-hand fingers can be pre-planted before you play the first note of the piece. Mark other right-hand planting techniques throughout the piece. You may discover a spot where you can plant a left-hand finger to make a shift or a chord change easier and more reliable. These are sometimes subtle events and can be easily forgotten if you don't write them down. Do not depend on your memory!

Chord arpeggiation

Too often guitarists overuse arpeggiated or "rolled" chords. One way to guard against that is to make a conscious decision on which chords to arpeggiate (and how you want to do it) and to write it in the music. Don't randomly arpeggiate chords. Arpeggiated chords are far more effective when they are used for specific musical purposes.

Articulation

Some guitarists do not think about articulation (the use of staccato and legato). If you make conscious decisions about whether to use articulation and where, it can open a whole new dimension to your playing. Sometimes the technique required to execute a passage staccato can be complicated. It will be helpful if you write down how you plan to execute it.

String damping

String damping is one of those finishing touches that polishes your final overall sound. Make a notation of every note that will be damped. Because string damping can be executed several different ways, it is important to write down the specific technique you will use to damp each note.

Left and right-hand position changes

I find I use more changes of the left-hand and left arm position than the right. Certain chord changes or passages are easier if the left elbow is tucked in, winged out, or hanging naturally. Some passages come out better when played with a left-hand-parallel-with-the-neck position. Other passages come out better with a slanted left-hand position. Usually the left-hand wrist works best when kept flat. But certain passages work better with the wrist bent or arched. Sometimes it is beneficial to make subtle adjustments to the right-hand position. Playing a little closer to the bridge can often help the execution of a fast passage. Sometimes an arched wrist is helpful, sometimes a flat wrist. Sometimes leaning the hand back helps the execution of rest stroke passages. For other passages, leaning the hand toward the floor makes the difference between success and failure. I make notes of all these things in my music. It is easy to forget these subtle adjustments.

Metronome settings

If you are working on a piece or passage with a metronome, write down your settings and progress. For instance, if you are working on speeding up an entire piece such as the *Etude No. 1* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, you can write down your progress at the top of the page (or better yet, a separate sheet of paper).

a André SEGÓVIA

10.03.13 80-112
10.09.13 80-116
10.12.13 80-120
10.14.13 80-126
10.21.13 80-132
10.25.13 88-132
10.31.13 88-138
11.07.13 88-144
11.11.13 92-144
11.15.13 92-152
11.27.13 100-152
12.16.13 100-160

12.23.13 108-160
1.07.14 112-160
1.21.14 116-168
2.16.14 120-168

DOUZE ETUDES

(12 ESTUDOS)

POUR GUITARE

Etude N° 1

Etudes des arpèges
(estudos de harpejos)

H. VILLA-LOBOS
(Paris, 1929)

Allegro non troppo

The musical score consists of six staves of music in G major, 2/4 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Allegro non troppo'. The first staff has a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking and a 'simile la main droite' instruction. The second staff has a 'p' marking and a '67' annotation. The third staff has a 'p' marking. The fourth staff is marked 'V' and has a 'fin' annotation. The fifth staff is marked 'VII' and has a 'simile' annotation. The sixth staff is marked 'VII' and has a '4' annotation. The seventh staff is marked 'IX' and has a 'VII' annotation. The eighth staff is marked 'VII' and has a '4' annotation. The score includes various fingerings, such as '1 2 3 4' and '1 2 3 4 5', and dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f'.

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TOUS DROITS D'ÉXÉCUTION
RÉSERVÉS POUR TOUTS PAYS

If you are working on speeding up just one passage in a piece, you can write in the settings above that passage or again, on a separate piece of paper. The point is, write down and keep track of your progress. If you are trying to gradually increase the speed of a passage, it is important to know the precise starting speed and ending speed of each day's practice to gauge your progress. Again, do not depend on your memory. Write it down.

Notes on the use of vibrato

Like chord arpeggiation, vibrato is one of those techniques we use haphazardly with poor results. A good player makes conscious decisions on how they want to use vibrato in a piece. It is not only a matter of deciding where you want to use vibrato. You must also decide what kind of vibrato you want to use. You must decide what speed and amplitude you want to use. And yes, you guessed it, you need to write it down.

Structural markings

These are markings of the structural form of a piece and how it is put together. This may entail marking where the main sections of the piece are. Perhaps marking where the exposition, development, and recapitulation of the piece are, if applicable. If the piece is a fugue, marking where the subject and countersubject appear. It could mean marking which notes are the melody notes, which are the bass notes, and which notes form the accompaniment. It is always good to mark that a passage is a repeated or altered version of its previous appearance earlier in the piece. Marking the beginnings and endings of phrases is helpful in the interpretation phase of learning a piece. For visual clarity, sometimes it is better to mark these elements on a clean photocopy of the piece instead of the copy already marked with fingerings, articulation, string damping, etc.

Expression (dynamics, tone colors, changes of tempo, accents, fermatas, notes to linger on, etc.)

As your work on a piece progresses, the music may become very crowded with markings. When it is time to work on expression (dynamics, tone color changes, tempo changes, etc.), I recommend making a clean copy of your music for marking in these elements.

Be sure to make your markings in pencil. These are definitely decisions that will change over time. Marking all these elements in your music is not to say you will adhere to these instructions when you perform the piece (although that is likely). Taking the time to consciously make decisions on how you want the piece to sound and to write in these markings is the first step toward freeing your emotional imagination to play spontaneously.

Here is a page from one of Mauro Giuliani's *Rossiniane* in which I marked my dynamics, tone color changes, tempo changes, and other items. I probably should have used pencil but at the time, I used different colors of ink to make it easier for me to read.

Spots/passages that need extra practice

I like to use highlighter pens in different colors to circle or box passages that are troublesome and need extra practice. I might use green for weeks one and two of learning a piece. By week three, hopefully I will have fixed most of those spots. If some of them are still causing me problems or new ones appear, I will mark those in a different color. By week five or six I would hope to have fixed most of the problems. But if a spot is still giving me problems or new ones pop up, I will choose yet another color to mark those. This way I can tell at a glance if my practice methods are working and I am getting things fixed. I can immediately see recurrent problems because they will have several different colored rings or boxes around them. This might look something like this:

LÁGRIMA

See Notes, p. 107

FRANCISCO TÁRREGA

R = rest stroke

little gliss.

No squeak

connect

Lift 2 note

Fine

damp 6 back of thumb

No squeak

damp 5

D.C. al Fine

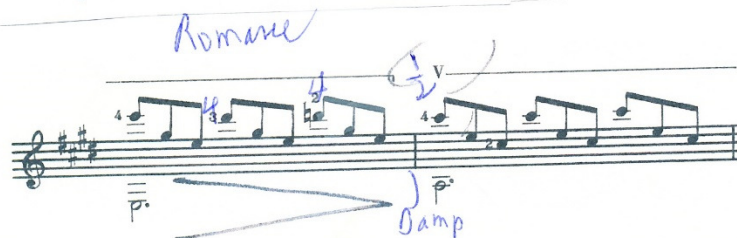
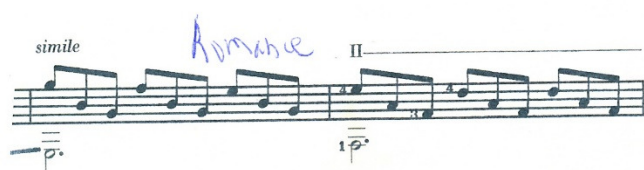
These colored markings can be used to guide your practice. In many situations, if done carefully and thoroughly, you can just practice each of the circled/boxed spots and you are done practicing the piece. No need to practice things you already can play well.

Make a separate master list of difficult spots in all your music to practice as daily exercises.

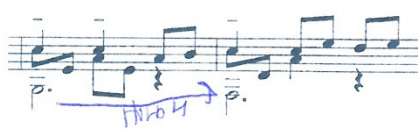
If you are working on two or three new pieces and/or trying to keep old pieces in shape, this is a great tool. Instead of fishing through all your music to find the passages that need extra practice or daily practice, you put them all on one or two sheets. This may also include some passages that are good for stretching or other exercise, or passages that will always cause problems and will have to be practiced for eternity!

You can copy these by hand onto this master list or photocopy your music and with scissors, cut out the problem passages and tape them on to your master list. You will want to write in metronome settings if that is relevant.

Here is what one of these lists might look like:



Un Dia de Noviembre



The list could certainly be made fancier or neater, but you get the idea.

The Bottom Line

Marking up your music is all about practicing efficiently. It helps you keep track of *everything* and all the changes you make as you are learning a piece. I can't say it enough: do not trust your memory. You make many decisions every day you practice. If you do not write them down, you will not remember all of them the next day.

One time, I came up with a great fingering that solved major problems with a piece. The next day I couldn't recall what it was. Fortunately, after about 20 minutes of work, it came back to me. But what a waste of time! A similar thing happened again a couple times when I was arranging some of the songs for my Christmas CD. I came up with some beautiful harmonies and was going to write them down. But I was on a roll and told myself I would write them down in a few minutes. I got carried away with continuing through the piece and didn't write them down. The next day I couldn't remember them and I had to struggle for an hour to reconstruct them. I finally learned my lesson. Write everything down and write it down *immediately*.

Marking up your music has another wonderful benefit. If you drop a piece and decide to relearn it months or even years later, it will be much easier to relearn if your music is clearly and thoroughly annotated. It saves many hours of frustration. You won't be asking yourself over and over, "How did I do that?"