

# Guide to Step Practice for the Classical Guitarist

By Douglas Niedt

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This month I demonstrate a practice technique that can help you learn almost anything, from sophisticated pieces like the Bach *Chaconne* to the guitar part of Peter, Paul, and Mary's *Puff the Magic Dragon*! Some call it "step-practice". It is a simple concept, but effective.

I will use the very popular *Cavatina* by Stanley Myers as an example. This is the solo version as arranged by John Williams, not my version as recorded on my CD, *Pure Magic*.

Watch me demonstrate in this video:

If you don't see a video, refresh your browser.

Be sure to watch the video on full screen. Click the symbol to the right of "HD" in the lower right-hand corner after the video begins playing. Hit escape "ESC" on your keyboard to return to normal viewing.



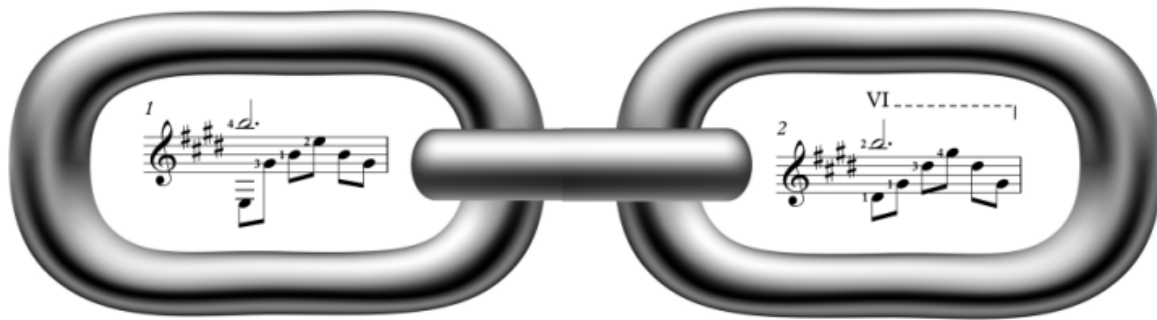
**CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on [douglasniedt.com](http://douglasniedt.com)**

Tech Tip The Step-Practice Method

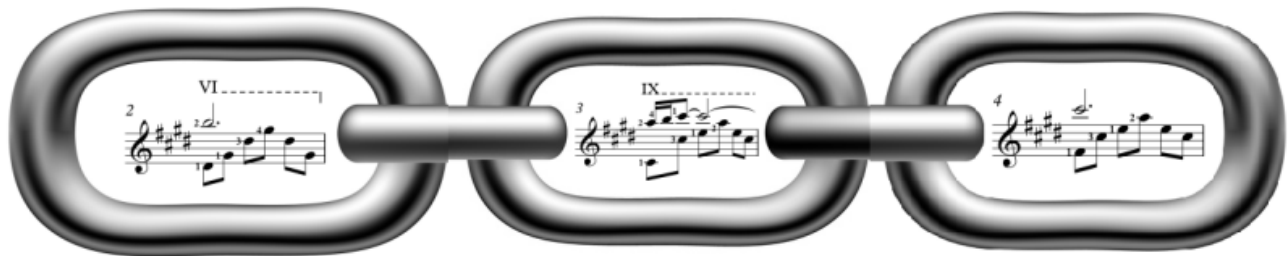
## CHAINING

One thing I didn't get into in the video is the concept of "chaining". Practicing small segments such as two measures at a time using the step-practice strategy is a great idea. But you have to connect those segments together to form larger phrases, groups, sections, etc. Think of a metal chain. It is made up of many links. The entire chain is your piece of music. Each link is a small part of it, say 1-4 measures.

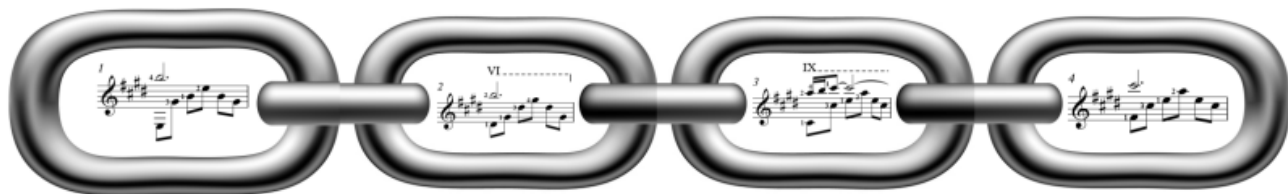
In the video, first we played measure #1 (call it link #1) to the first note of measure #2, then the 2nd note, the 3rd note, etc. until we could play measures #1 and #2 (links 1 and 2). We have now begun to build our chain:



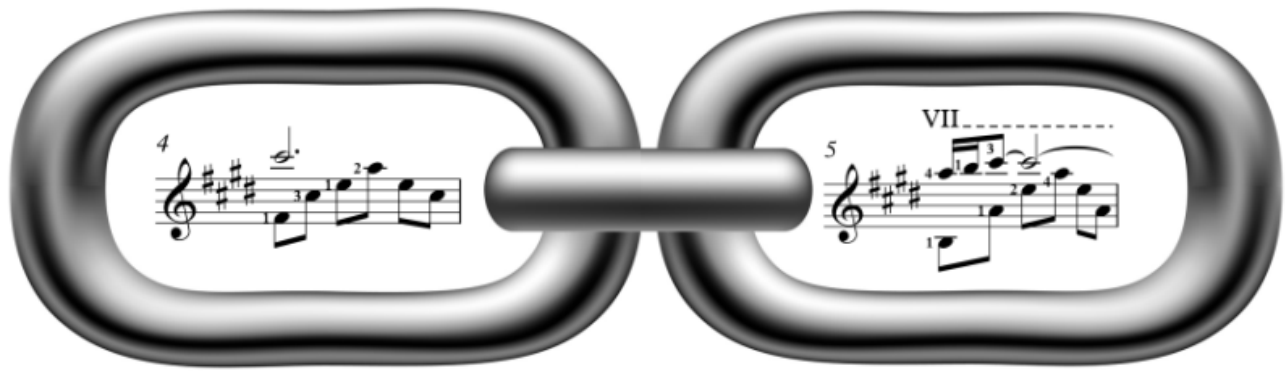
Then, we started with measure #2 (link 2) and learned measures #3 and #4 (links 3 and 4).



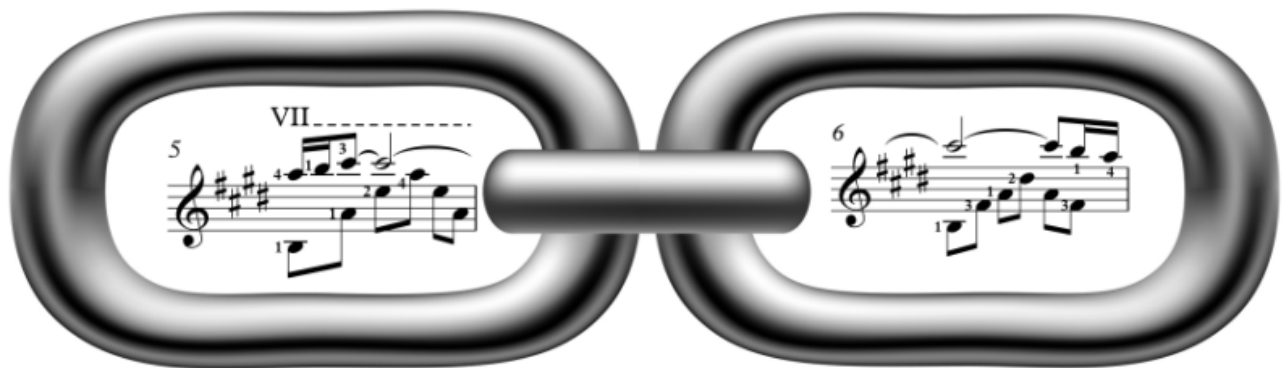
The next thing we must do is connect links 1 and 2 to links 3 and 4. So, we practice measures #1 through measure #4. We now have a section of chain made up of four links:



Next, we practice measures #4-5 (links 4 and 5).



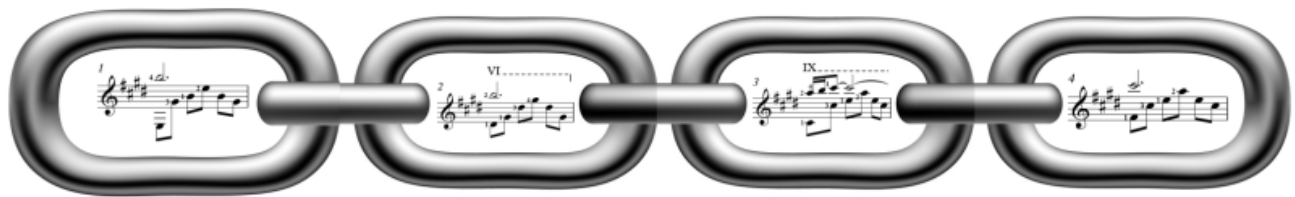
Then we practice measures #5-6 (links 5 and 6).



Then, we put that section together by practicing measures #4-6. We now have this second section of chain consisting of measures #4-6 (links 4-6).



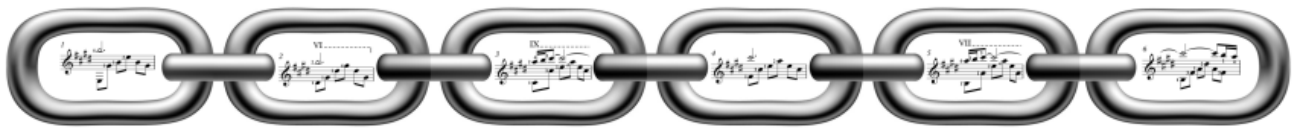
Finally, we go back to the beginning and put everything together. We connect the first section of chain consisting of measures 1-4 (links 1-4):



PLUS



# Equals:



We keep adding additional measures (links) and continue to incorporate them into a larger chain.

As the chain lengthens, do not practice every time from the very beginning. For instance, on *Cavatina* I would chain together measures 1 through 8 as a segment. Then, I would start fresh from measure 8 and learn measures 8 through 16, always building the chain from measure 8 rather than from measure 1. Then, after I mastered the segment of measures 8-16, I would connect the first segment (measures 1-8) and the second segment (measures 8-16). My new chain would now cover measures 1-16.

The number of measures in a link or segment will vary according to the piece. It will even vary within the piece. Some links will consist of one measure but others may contain several measures. But the concept is the same. We work on small segments and then connect them together into larger parts. Then we connect those larger parts into even larger sections.

## Building a stairway from the cellar to the penthouse

The step-practice method is used by many musicians--guitarists, pianists, violinists, etc. It is nothing new but is under-utilized in general. As I mentioned in the video, you must be disciplined and make yourself stop at each new step. But that is the magic of the method.

Think of yourself as being in the cellar of a building when you begin to learn a piece at measure #1. You want to build a staircase to the next floor (in the case of *Cavatina* the next floor might be measure #8 or measure #16. In fact, you eventually want to get all the way up to the penthouse (the end of the piece)! Once you make it from the cellar to the first floor, move on to master each section of the piece to take you upward, floor by floor. The step-practice strategy focuses your attention on building each step completely and solidly, one at a time. You don't skip over any steps or hammer in six nails in some but only two in others. Each step

is solid. You build each staircase (each section of the piece) step by step and before you know it, you are securely up in the penthouse suite! The entire piece is mastered.

This method also keeps your practicing organized and purposeful. If you think of the sections of the piece as staircases to the succeeding floors (the following sections of music) you will be able to see how your focus on securely building each step of each staircase is going to eventually take you to the penthouse (the end of the piece). To put it another way, it helps you see the forest while you are working amidst the trees.

### **An extra benefit**

As with any repetitious practice, the step-practice method will help you memorize individual passages and even entire pieces. You will find it is easy to memorize the individual links. Once the links are strong and securely memorized, it is relatively easy to combine them into longer memorized chains.

### **Reminder**

Finally, remember that fingers are stupid. They cannot differentiate right from wrong. They “remember” what has been repeated the most times. Therefore, if you use the step-practice method and practice a particular step wrong 7 out of 10 times, you have taught your fingers and neuromuscular system to play it wrong! Ideally, you want to play each step right 10 out of 10 times, or something close to that. If that isn't happening, try the following steps:

1. Look where you are going. Figure out which finger is messing up the passage. Focus on the *point* (not a general area) where that finger is supposed to land. This is crucial. [See this technique tip for a full explanation.](#)
2. Make sure the left-hand fingers are positioned close to their destinations (above the appropriate fret and/or string).
3. Check the position of the left arm and elbow. They should be in the position required by the notes or chords you are *moving to*, not the ones you just played.
4. Make sure the right-hand fingering is appropriate for the passage. Try a different fingering.
5. Your hand may be getting fatigued from repetitious practice. Take a two-minute break and try again.
6. Play with a metronome at tempo.
7. Play with a metronome, but slow down the tempo temporarily.
8. Try a different left-hand fingering.

9. Ask a teacher for guidance.

Practicing is very rewarding when you get positive results. Try the step-practice strategy on the difficult passages from your current repertoire or on your next new piece.

Below are the excerpts I used in the video. Copyright law prevents me from including complete versions of the pieces. John Williams' arrangement of *Cavatina* is published. I have not seen an accurate version of *Puff, the Magic Dragon* but there must be one out there somewhere. However, the intro I give you here is most of the song.

**Cavatina**

STANLEY MYERS  
arr. John Williams

The musical score for *Cavatina* is presented in four systems. Each system contains a treble and bass staff. The first system (measures 1-4) features a treble staff with notes and a bass staff with fingerings (0, 6, 4, 5, 4, 6). The second system (measures 5-8) includes a treble staff with notes and a bass staff with fingerings (7, 9, 10, 9, 7, 7, 0, 7, 9, 10, 7, 9, 8, 8, 9, 6, 4, 3, 4, 4). The third system (measures 9-12) shows a treble staff with notes and a bass staff with fingerings (0, 2, 2, 2, 2, 5, 4, 2, 2, 2, 4, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 3, 2, 0, 0, 2). The fourth system (measures 13-16) displays a treble staff with notes and a bass staff with fingerings (2, 4, 2, 0, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 1, 2, 1, 0, 0).

# Puff (The Magic Dragon)

(Introduction)

Peter Yarrow and Leonard Lipton

Use the lilting rhythm  
in measure #1 throughout

2 II 3 4

This block contains the first four measures of the introduction. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody with eighth and sixteenth notes, including triplets and a fermata over measure 2. The bottom staff is a three-part guitar accompaniment with staves labeled T (Treble), A (Acoustic), and B (Bass). Measure numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are placed above the top staff. A dashed line with a double bar line and the Roman numeral 'II' spans measures 2 and 3.

7 OR: 8

This block contains measures 5 through 8. Measure 7 is marked with '7 OR:' and shows an alternative melodic line. Measure 8 continues the main melody. The notation follows the same format as the first system, with a treble staff and a three-part guitar accompaniment. Measure numbers 3, 4, 7, and 8 are placed above the top staff.