

When Learning a New Song, “Slow is Fast”

by
Marty Jourard
www.martymethod.com

When learning any song on the piano, each hand needs to master three things: the notes, the fingering, and the rhythm. This requires a lot of brain activity!

When you learn a song for the first time, the best approach is to practice the song at a slow “learning tempo.” a tempo that allows you to play with complete accuracy. This will be slower than the song’s “performance tempo.” Here’s why.

When reading music, you receive information from your eyes first (reading the notes) and this information is relayed to your fingers (playing the notes). Your brain then retains the memory of what your fingers have done. If they have played the right notes, no problem. But if they have played the wrong notes, then your brain remembers the wrong notes. Then you have to “unlearn” these notes, and that takes more time...

By trying to learn the song faster than you can play it *accurately*, your brain receives inaccurate information, i.e. mistakes. However--and this is an important point—your brain doesn’t know what is a mistake and what is not, it only knows what you feed it, which is the activity of your fingers, which is based on your eyes reading the music. So if you are learning a song at a tempo that is too fast, you can’t read the notes accurately and you play mistakes. Your brain accepts whatever you present it with as “correct,” so playing it too fast gives your brain all these different versions of the song, none of them right. This is inefficient and confusing for your poor brain!

In today’s fast world, speed is considered a positive trait—faster computers, faster internet service, faster cars, faster service at restaurants, etc. Don’t use this approach to learning a song because it doesn’t work. It actually takes you *much longer* to learn a song fast than to learn it s-l-o-w-l-y, because when you learn it slow, you provide your brain with accurate information. Once you have learned a song slowly and accurately, it is ridiculously easy to speed up the tempo to performance level. In fact, this will happen naturally because playing it at the slower tempo will be boring and you will naturally speed it up to the correct tempo. For this reason, we say, when learning a new musical composition, “slow is fast.”

How do you know the correct tempo to learn a new song? If you keep making the same mistake in note, fingering or rhythm, you are trying to learn it too fast.

Another way to learn a song more efficiently is to only practice the parts you haven’t figured out yet, don’t keep playing the parts you have mastered. So don’t go back to the beginning when you make a mistake in the middle. Fix the mistake. Work on sections of the song and when each section is figured out, connect them all by starting at the beginning and playing the song through, slowly. Then gradually bring the tempo up to performance speed. Remember, “slow is fast.”