



VIOLIN

Starting off Strong: Strategies for Introducing a New Piece

by Katie Gustafson

I love the feeling of starting work on a new piece of music. After practicing for weeks or even months on something until it is perfect, it is refreshing and motivating to start something new. Students, no doubt, feel the same way. Over time I have learned how important and valuable the start of a new piece can be. As teachers, we can set our students up for success by giving them a good and thorough introduction to the piece before they take it home to practice. If we do this, it will make their practice time more enjoyable and effective as they work from a position of confidence. It will also help to prevent them from practicing incorrectly, which can lead to a difficult process of unlearning mistakes and reteaching over the following weeks.

For anyone who uses the Suzuki Method, this process is well defined. There are specific goals associated with each piece in the Suzuki repertoire, as well as techniques and strategies that prepare them beforehand. But for teachers using the traditional note-reading method, no such preset plan exists. There are, however, some simple strategies you can use to get your students off to a good start.

1. Pre-teach.

In the lessons leading up to a new piece of music, plan ahead to teach or review some of the concepts they will need for it. If the piece is in an unfamiliar or insecure key signature, teach them the corresponding scales beforehand. If the piece uses rhythms or bowing techniques that are new, use those in scales as well. For example, whenever I teach *The Happy Farmer*, I find that students tend to stumble over the first few measures. The dotted quarter note rhythm with hooked bows sits on top of string crossings, which many students find awkward. To help with this, we practice the

rhythm together in their warm up scales. First with alternating bows, then with hooked bows. This way, the concepts are fresh in their mind when they first see the music for *The Happy Farmer*.

2. Introduce the piece with a performance of it.

Students are generally more excited to practice a piece if they have heard it and liked it. Also, it gives them an idea of what it should sound like when they play it, and they are more likely to learn it correctly from the beginning. If you use Suzuki repertoire, you can play them the recording that comes with the books, although not everyone gets the CD. I like to find a good YouTube video with accompaniment that the student can watch as part of their practice during the week. If these options are not available to you, at least give them an expressive performance of it yourself, and play passages for them again at the next few lessons.

3. Help them identify the key

...and the finger patterns that go with it. Then there will be *no* excuse for them to come back the following week and say, "Ohhhh, there are *flats* in this song??"

4. Select a couple of tricky passages

...to help them work through. If there is a difficult rhythmic section, help them write in the counting, and clap it together. If there are difficult shifts or odd fingerings, walk them through the passage so they will remember the correct way when they get

home. I have had many intermediate students who will habitually play everything in first position until the melody gets out of range. Even if fingerings suggest that they shift up earlier, they won't always notice. It can be helpful to go through and have the student mark the positions with Roman numerals so that they won't gloss over the fingerings. Even if none of these challenges are present, reserving a little bit of time to play through part of the piece together on the first week can help you identify early on what the student will need help with.

5. Depending on your personal approach,

...you may also ask the student to limit their work to a certain portion of the piece if it is long, or at a specific metronome marking. These parameters can help the student focus their work, and helps them understand the concept of quality vs. quantity.

This strategy for introducing new music can be easily tailored to specific students or different ages. For beginner students who are very good at note reading, they might only need a demonstration and a side-by-side play through to get them going. Other students who tend to be fast and sloppy about their practice might need more pre-teaching and micro managing. Advanced students who have walked through this process with you already will begin to do this sort of work on their own, looking up recordings, identifying difficult passages and marking important reminders in their music. Regardless of the age of the student,

over time they will begin to learn what it looks like to start a new piece with a careful plan and learn well from the beginning.

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