

I can't play that run... yet

Tips and tricks to get that run under your fingers, in your brain, and up to speed.

Introduction

We've all come across passages that seem impossible. But how to practice them? Just keep running them and hope for the best? Do them a few times slowly then hope for the best? Or are there practice techniques we can use to help ourselves learn?

There are two stages to learning runs:

1. Note familiarity/fingerings
2. Speed

Note familiarity/fingerings

We can't allow ourselves to be surprised at what note is next. We need our brains and fingers to work at warp speed without our conscious thoughts getting in the way and slowing us down.

- **Chunk things down and put them back together.** A common technique is to break up each run by beat, adding the next beat once you have mastered the one before. In 4/4 time with sixteenth notes, we would play beat 1, then beats 1 and 2, then 1, 2 and 3, then the full measure. This can also be done backwards, so beat 4, then beats 3 and 4, then 2, 3 and 4, then the full measure.
- **Rhythm techniques** (see attached page). Changing the rhythm of the original helps catch all transitions between notes and beats, beyond doing beat-by-beat alone. It also forces your brain and fingers to "see" the passage in different ways.
 1. Long-short (dotted eighth, sixteenth) and short-long (sixteenth, dotted-eighth)
 2. Triplet or 16th, depending on original (turn sixteenths into triplets or vice-versa)
 3. Eighth, two sixteenth and two sixteenth, eighth
 4. Five-note shift: play notes 1-5, then 2-6, then 3-7, etc.
 5. Back and forth: Eighth, triplet sixteenths, eighth, triplet sixteenths, eighthThese can be applied to almost any passage, though some passages may require more creativity. Sometimes just one or two of the rhythm techniques is all you need, and sometimes you need all of them. Consider creating your own, too!
- **Memorization.** Even if you won't be performing from memory, having yet another brain-finger connection for that passage is helpful.

Speed

- Slow to fast metronome work
 - This is often how we're first taught to bring passages up to speed, and it can be quite helpful. The metronome keeps us accountable and shows us where we're varying in tempo. But we're often confronted with an upper limit of what we think we can do (i.e. Sixteenth notes at quarter note equals 120 is now great but going to 121 causes everything to fall apart). That brings us to the next point...
- At tempo, but chunked
 - Sometimes you just need to go for it! But instead of forcing the entire passage at full speed, break it into smaller chunks (even as small as two notes at a time). As you get more comfortable with those small chunks in tempo, you can add more.

Further thoughts

Practicing runs can be difficult and tiring, and we can keep a few things in mind when it gets tough. First, consider practicing these problem spots in five- to ten-minute sessions, then switching to practicing some contrasting music. Next, have some practice sessions where you don't look at that run at all. And finally, don't be surprised if it feels like you've made no progress the next time you try the run – it's all part of the process. Keep going, you can do it!

Rhythm Exercises for Better Runs

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Original (Rose 32, #6)



1a. Long-short



1b. Short-long



2. Triplets (or use straight sixteenths for original triplets)



3a. Eighth, two-sixteenths



3b. Two sixteenths, eighth



4. Five-note shift



5. Back and forth

