

Teaching Students *Attention to Details*

by
Steven Mauk

In my past studies with saxophone pedagogue Larry Teal, he often said, “Learn everything about a piece the first time.” Although I had heard about teachers who proposed learning first the notes and rhythms, then the dynamics, then the articulations, and so on, Teal advocated learning all aspects of a piece at once. His belief was that, while the learning process might be slower, it was infinitely more complete. Teal would argue, “Why learn a piece four or five different ways?” Once I became a teacher, I quickly found out how hard it was for students to re-learn a poorly prepared piece. I discovered what Teal already knew; the secret of good preparation was *attention to the details*.

Over my many years of private teaching, the lack of attention to details seems to be the main area of weakness in student preparation. Most students come to their lessons with the notes and rhythms generally well prepared, since the hours spent in the practice rooms are usually focused on these two aspects. The items that make music sound musical, however, are the details, such as dynamics, articulations, expressive shaping, and stylistic nuances.

Several years ago, I wrote an article for the *Saxophone Journal* entitled “Teaching Students How to Sight-Read.” In this article, I outlined the specific areas a student should visually scan before beginning to read a piece for the first time. I think a similar approach can be applied to scanning the details of a piece prior to practicing it. This way a student can identify items that need attention before they learn them incorrectly.

Listed below is a checklist of details. When first learning a piece, you should go through it with this checklist to determine what areas need special attention during the practice sessions. I even suggest making light checkmarks with a pencil to draw focus on these spots. As each area is learned, erase the checkmark. A well-learned piece will be “checkmark free.”

ATD CHECKLIST

1. *Tempo and style* – Check all tempo and style markings throughout the composition. These would also include any descriptive terms used in the body of the piece, such as *espressivo*, *stringendo*, *marcato*, and *a piacere*. Look up all unfamiliar words; don’t wait for the teacher to give you the definition in the lesson. Decide how you will perform sections differently, so you can mentally map the musical progression of the work.
2. *Keys* – Check the key signatures used throughout the piece. Are these major or minor keys? Note where the key centers change. Practice scales and arpeggios in these keys as a warm-up routine to familiarize yourself with the tonalities used.

3. *Meters* – What are the meter signatures and what unit should receive the pulse (quarter note, half note, or eighth note)? Does the initial meter signature change? What are the relationships between meters? Are there specific groupings you should consider, such as a three-plus-two pattern in 5/8 meter?
4. *Dynamics* – Carefully observe the dynamics used in the piece. Make note of the general dynamic levels of each section and pay special attention to abrupt dynamic shifts. Practice each section only at the specified dynamic levels to help memorize the effect. This way dynamics do not need to be read, but merely remembered.
5. *Articulations* – Are there standard articulation patterns used throughout the piece or major sections? (If so, practice the scales and arpeggios mentioned in item 2 above using these patterns as part of a warm-up routine.) Where do these standard patterns change? Are there unusual articulation markings that need special attention? How will you perform specified articulations to fit the musical style – for instance, the length of a *staccato* note in a fast tempo compared with the same marking in a slow tempo.
6. *Accidentals* – Where do accidentals (chromatic alterations to the key signature) occur? Do they effect other notes in the measure? (This is one of the most ignored features in lesson preparation, so seek out these musical traps.)
7. *Long Notes and Rests* – Carefully review longer note values and rests. Much time is spent practicing faster passages, but errors often occur in performing long notes and rests. Count through such passages to avoid learning the figures incorrectly.
8. *Analysis* – Analyze the work’s musical form. (You don’t need formal training in music theory for this. Just determine where sections begin and end, and if there are sections that are the same, similar, or different.) By doing a basic analysis, you can plan your breaths and phrasing better, determine where technical patterns repeat, and have a clearer understanding of the compositional plan used to write the piece. This will help you prepare the composition in a much more musical manner.
9. *Unique areas* – Look for special and unique areas in the piece, such as *cadenzas*, *rubato* passages, and sections with unusual effects. Practice these sections out of context, so they can be inserted into the music later.

This checklist is not exhaustive. There may be other aspects that you wish to review before practicing a new piece, so use this list merely as a starting point. The important thing is to pay careful attention to all of the details. You can save much practice time in the long term, make you and your teacher happier, and become a much more polished musician.