

MAXIMIZING YOUR PRACTICE

By

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Practicing is an activity that, whether you are a professional or amateur consumes a large amount of your time. While professionals have learned how to get the most of their practice time, amateurs and college students often accept the results they achieve without looking to see if more is possible. This article will examine ways of maximizing practice time.

Before you can maximize your practice you need to ask yourself two questions.

1. Do you like to practice?
1. Do you feel that you accomplish a lot during your practice sessions?

If you have answered no to either question, you need to rethink your approach to practicing. The negative answer to either question comes from two sources. 1. Your practice is not well structured, or 2. You don't have clearly defined goals for your practice sessions, which results in less than desirable results. Before getting into the details, I am going to assume that you have a reasonably developed technique and have sufficiently developed musical skills. The following quote best summarizes the process of maximizing your practice:

“Music flows more easily through the body when it flows more coherently in the mind.” Bruser, Madeline. *The Art of Practicing* Bell Tower, NY, 1997.

There are five important facts you must know about practice:

1. You can't think with your fingers.
2. You won't accomplish much without a good technique
3. You need a workable plan for practicing
4. Your musical ideas must be integrated to your technical development.
5. Continual frustration with practice increases the possibility that you will ultimately give up playing the guitar.

Some of the following ideas and suggestions may initially seem to increase the difficulty of practice. With time and perseverance, however, you will see that these ideas greatly improve your practice, performance, and enjoyment of music.

ISSUES

The following are four common misconceptions that many students hold.

1. The difference between amateurs and professionals is talent, not how, and how much they practice.
2. Technical issues resolve themselves solely through repetition and time.
3. Talent and musicality are more important than technical proficiency.
4. Technical development and control are separate and unrelated to musical development.

Certainly, talent is a major component in achieving a high level of proficiency but it is not the only component. If talent were the only ingredient, we would have many more high-level professional performers. It is the talent combined with highly developed practice skills together - that produce the Barrueco, Williams, Russell and other greats of the guitar world.

If technical issues resolved themselves through time and repetition, we would have monkeys playing the classical guitar. A good understanding of the mechanics of the hand coupled with how to practice produces quality results not mindless repetition.

While one certainly appreciates hearing a young talented student perform, it is the technical, musical, and artistic control that we value and come to expect in the best concert performers.

Finally, technical development and control often start off in younger players separately from musical development. As the students progress, they must develop musical knowledge and skills equally, while integrating them with their technique. If all that were required to be a good writer was a command of the rules of grammar, most of us would not do much reading since the content would probably not be very interesting. Technique is like grammar: we need it to express our ideas. If we don't

have and develop our musical ideas, we have little to offer the listener other than our technical proficiency.

APPROACHING PRACTICE

To make practice more productive, you must approach it with a clear focused mind and attitude. The following steps will improve your productivity.

1. Practice when you are fresh. Whenever possible, practice in the morning before you go to work or attend classes. Your mind is fresher, you are relaxed, and you are free of the worries of the day.
2. When you must practice later in the day, begin by freeing yourself from the stress of the day. You can accomplish this by doing deep breathing exercises, meditating, or progressive muscle relaxation. (See: Provost, Richard. *The Art & Technique of Performance*, GSP Publications, San Francisco, 1994.)
3. Keep physically fit. A program of daily stretching, aerobic, and weight exercises is the best way to achieve this. Also, maintain a nutritious well-balanced diet.
4. Keep technically fit. Each practice session should include some work on scales, arpeggios, and other technical material as well as repertoire. Balance between technique and repertoire is the key.

GETTING ORGANIZED

1. Start by determining exactly how much you will practice daily. Often we forget the interruptions to our practice. What starts out as an hour of practice can often end up being less than thirty minutes when you include the phone calls and other interruptions that can occur during your practice session. For one week, keep track of the beginning time of your practice. When an interruption occurs mark down the time of the interruption. When you resume your practice mark that time as well. At the end of the day add up how much you actually practiced. Often, you will find that instead of two hours of practice you may have practiced less than one hour.
2. Now you need to schedule daily practice time. This doesn't have to be the same time each day, but needs to be the same amount of time daily. Start by setting up a daily practice schedule. Aim for consistency. While practicing four hours a day may be great, if your

- work, life, or class schedule realistically limits you to two hours daily, planning for four hours will just create frustration. If you only have two hours to practice, build your schedule around two hours.
3. Maximizing your practice begins with consistency. While this sounds like a simple step, depending on the current level of structure you have in your practice, this could prove to be quite challenging.
 4. Each day, keep track of how much time you spend practicing each piece, scale, or study. At the end of the day how much improvement did you make? Use a scale from one to ten, ten being the best to rate your practice results. When you work on the same material the next day, evaluate how much of the previous day's improvement carried over. If there is little carry over, that is usually a good indication that the way you are practicing is not the most productive. This is the time to discuss your practice approach with your teacher.
 5. Next plan on what you will work on. Decide how much time you will spend on each piece or study. While it is important that you have a realistic practice schedule you must also come up with a realistic limit to how much material you can practice in the allotted time frame. At the end of each week evaluate your progress using the same one to ten scale. Are you satisfied with your week's accomplishments? Do you feel you are spending too much time on one piece or study and too little time on something else? If so, adjust the time and evaluate the results at the end of the next week. To get the most out your practice you must constantly be evaluating your results.
 6. The last, but equally important part of your structure is physical. Practicing the guitar is physically and mentally challenging. You need to recognize this and prepare for it. Every five minutes take what I call a breathing break. Often we are so focused on trying to achieve results that we fail to recognize how tense we have become. Stopping every five minutes to take a breath will also encourage you to take a moment to think about what you have been practicing and evaluate your progress.

7. Every fifteen to thirty minutes put your guitar down stand up and stretch. This will allow you to relax your muscles and clear your mind and body of unnecessary tension. (See Klickstein, Gerald. *The Musician's Way*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2009 for some excellent stretching exercises.)
8. Finally, limit each practice session to no more than one hour. Studies have shown that going beyond one hour of practice without at least a fifteen to thirty minute break significantly lowers the results of your practice. Physically our muscles need to relax. Mentally we need to allow our mind to process and absorb what we have been working on.

WHAT WILL YOU WORK ON?

Determining what you need to know to play a piece well is the first step to improving your practice. The following list, though long, contains many but not all of what needs to be completely learned to play a piece well. This list is not intended to intimidate you but to help clarify your goals.

1. Each phrase of the piece.
2. The sections of the piece.
3. Right-hand fingerings.
4. Left-hand fingerings.
5. All rhythms.
6. Harmony.
7. Dynamics.
8. Sections as isolated units.
9. Be able to sing the melody, bass line, and middle voice.
10. Be able to start from any section of the piece and play it well.

While this is a great deal of material, it is required for any piece of music. Failure to recognize this and to learn each item properly will often result in confusion and possible error both while practicing and when performing.

Next, establishing daily, weekly, and monthly goals. If this concept is new to you, don't worry: with daily practice, you will become not only good at it but, more importantly, be able to determine what order the various issues in the piece should be worked on.

Start by writing out what you expect to accomplish daily in each piece or etude. Limit yourself to three goals and limit the amount of time you will spend achieving the goal to ten minutes on each goal. While this may seem to be too little time to accomplish much, this limit forces you to evaluate and examine your achievements rather than practicing endlessly. This also helps to eliminate mindless practice. After each ten-minute session, examine your results. Did you achieve your goal? If not, why? If your goal was not achieved, what was the cause? Did you underestimate the difficulty of the passage and the time needed to achieve your goal? Were you clear on what you wanted to accomplish? Do you possess the necessary knowledge to successfully achieve your goal? If you are studying with a teacher he/she will be able to help you determine these answers.

The following section will discuss some of the more important skills that need to be acquired in order to maximize your practice.

THE NEEDED SKILLS

While there are many valuable skills needed to successfully learn and perform a piece, the following, are probably some of the most important:

1. The ability to musically sing through a piece.
2. The ability to easily identify motives, phrases and form of the piece.
3. The ability to easily identify harmony and counterpoint
4. The knowledge of various musical styles and performance practices.
5. Good technical command of the instrument.

Why do we need to sing?

Singing is the most natural form of musical expression. Even if you have difficulty singing, with practice, you can develop the skills to use your voice as an effective learning tool. Singing also confirms that you are hearing what you are playing. (This assumes that you play what you are singing rather than singing what you are playing.) More importantly, it allows you to hear exactly how you want each phrase, section, and the entire piece to sound. With time, this will develop a greater awareness of what you are actually doing as opposed to what you think you are doing. Furthermore, singing allows you to hear the piece without “finger

prejudice.” Often, when playing difficult passages, we speed up or slow down to allow us to get through the difficult section. This is not necessarily the best musical solution but is a solution based on what our fingers allow us to do. Singing also allows us to try different musical solutions to the phrase without the technical limitation of our hands.

What if you can't sing?

Start by matching pitches ten minutes daily.

When comfortable, sing with your favorite recording

Sing the top voice while playing the piece.

Sing without playing.

Things to remember:

1. This will take time.
2. Just because you can now sing the piece doesn't mean that you will automatically play what you are singing. You will have to practice to be able to play what you sing.
3. Initially you will think you are playing what you are singing. Since singing involves developing our ability to musically hear better, it is not uncommon to miss many of the musically valid things that are occurring when we sing. Some of the more common items are: articulation, breathing, dynamics, and vibrato.

INCREASE YOUR MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE AND SKILL

Start by listening to good recordings of music you are studying. Make a copy of the score. With the score, listen to the recording and mark out all the musical things the performer is doing in each phrase. Areas to look at include, but are not limited to the following:

- What is the tempo of the performance?
- What is the musical effect of that tempo?
- Where does the performer begin each crescendo?
- Where does the crescendo end?
- How much vibrato does the performer use?
- Does the performer use rubato? If so, where does it begin and end?
- Does the performer follow the musical expression written in the score?

- If not, does it improve or diminish the overall effect?

If you are capable, play along with the recording using headphones.

Questions to ask yourself and areas to listen to while doing this:

- Are your dynamics as much and as clear as your model?
- Is your expression as clear as your model?
- If you are using rubato, is it as clear and controlled as the model?
- Does your vibrato match the recording?

While it may appear that I am asking you to copy a recording, this is not my intention. I am asking you to evaluate all of the musical ideas your performer model presents and to compare it to what you are doing. What musical impact do these ideas and the recording have on you? Record yourself. What musical impact do you get when you listen back to your recording? The more you do this the more you develop your hearing, musical ideas, and execution.

Read books on music and interpretation. Several good sources are:

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| Chase, Gilbert. | <i>The Music of Spain</i> , Dover Publication, NY, second revised edition, 1959. |
| Donington, Robert. | <i>The Interpretation of Early Music</i> , W. W. Norton & Company; Revised edition (April 1992) |
| Harnoncourt, Nikolaus. | <i>Baroque Music Today: Music As Speech</i> , Translated by Mary O'Neil, Amadeus Press, Portland, Oregon, 1982. |
| Heck, Thomas. | <i>The Birth of the Classic Guitar and Its Cultivation in Vienna Reflected in the Career and Compositions of Mauro Giuliani</i> , PHD Dissertation, Yale University, 1976. UME# 71-16249. |
| Keller, Hermann. | <i>Phrasing and Articulation</i> , Translated by Leigh Gerdine, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973. |
| Little, Meredith & Jenne, Natalie. | <i>Dance and the Music of J.S. Bach</i> , Indiana University Press, 2001. |
| Neumann, Frederick. | <i>Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque</i> |

- Music with special emphasis on J.S. Bach*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1978.
- Essays in Performance Practice (Studies in Music, 58)*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1982.
- Ophee, Matanya. *Luigi Boccherini's Guitar Quintets, New Evidence*, Editions Orphee, Boston, MA, 1981
- Santos, Turibio. *Heitor Villa-Lobos and the Guitar*, Translated by, Victoria Forde and Graham Wade, Wise Owl Music, Gurtnacloona, Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland. 1985.
- Sor, Fernando. *Method for the Spanish Guitar*, Translated by, A. Merrick, Da Capo Press, NY, 1971.
- Turnbull, Harvey. *The Guitar from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, Charles Scribner & Sons, New York, 1974.

REINFORCE YOUR SKILLS

While it is important that you make and continue to make progress, it is equally important that you stay at a given level long enough to reinforce the skills and knowledge you have just acquired. After successfully learning a challenging piece, find another piece with similar technical and musical challenges. Learn that one rather than moving on to a more challenging piece than the one just completed. This will allow you to become more comfortable with your recently acquired technical and musical accomplishments.

While there are many more areas that you can work on to maximize your practice, this is a good starting point. Perhaps the single most important idea to remember is to constantly ask yourself questions. While asking questions can at times lead to frustration, this is the frustration that produces musical and technical progress.

Finally, there are many books on the subject of practicing that will go into this subject in greater depth than this article. Two that my students have found helpful are:

Bruser, Madeline. *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*, Bell Tower, New York, 1997.

Provost, Richard. *The Art & Technique of Practice*, GSP, San Francisco, 1992.

I wish you good luck and musical success.

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