

Chapter 7

The Art of Practicing

The quality of your practice, and the amount of time you invest, combine together to help you grow into the kind of musician and guitarist you wish to become.

Fine musicians - just like top athletes - develop and maintain their skills in a comprehensive and systematic way.

As you begin to develop your guitar technique the task of just getting your body to physically carry out basic guitar skills is daunting enough. Nevertheless, it is rare that guitarists are defeated by their physical limitations. Much more common is that guitarists do not nurture themselves with the gift of becoming good musicians. Guitarists who have not developed their musicianship can only sporadically transcend the mere physical transmission of sounds and really appeal to the hearts and spirits of the people they play for.

The great English guitar virtuoso Julian Bream, in introducing his master class in San Francisco in the early 1980s, said "I am *not* a guitarist. Rather, I am a musician who plays the guitar."

There are many who play the guitar with excellent skill, but far fewer who, when they play, transmit and share a charismatic vision of the music they are performing.

As you begin the journey of learning to play guitar, it is deeply influenced by your intention to delve into the all aspects of music and instrumental technique. With this in mind, consider the following guidance and problem-solving tips for your practice. Many of the questions that will arise as you are learning to play can be addressed by applying what is offered here.

1. Play your guitar every day. Even if only for a few minutes. Your musicality is activated *every* time you play. Just getting your guitar out and playing a simple piece or a scale stimulates your musical subconscious to work for you, and your musical mind will continue its processing later on, even when your thoughts and activities are on other matters. Think of your musical subconscious as an ally that can be easily turned on, like a light switch. Just taking your guitar out of its case essentially flips the switch on. Please don't forget to do it!
2. Work in short time periods, rather than marathon sessions. For each fifteen minutes of playing, take a short rest. This clears your mind and lets your muscles relax after being worked.
3. Take small and easy steps. For example, it is better to work for a time on a few of the chords in the key of C major, rather than on the whole set of chords presented in the chapter on basic chords. If you get tense or frustrated during practice, maybe you are trying to do too much too soon. When that happens, consider how to reduce your point of focus. You will be able to sense when the scope of your work is about right.
4. Establish a specific goal or focus for each day's work. For example: "On Monday I will work on memorizing the D minor scale. On Tuesday I will then sight read in the key of D minor, using the scale memorized on the previous day."

5. Design and follow a practice plan. There are many approaches to the design and content of daily practice. Here is a sample one-hour session:

- a. **Warm-up** (10-15 minutes)
Scales
Right hand exercises
Left hand hammer-on and pull-off exercises
- b. **Sight Reading** (10-15 minutes)
Single-note melodies
Chord progressions in a given key
Arpeggio studies
- c. **Repertoire** (20-25 minutes)
One new piece
One older piece, with a focus on memorization
- d. **Review** (10-15 minutes)
Technical materials such as scales of thirds, natural harmonics, etc.
Previous repertoire

6. Vary your routine occasionally, yet keep a balance in terms of what you cover. It is neither possible nor desirable to cover every exercise and piece during each session. If you find that your mind wanders when you approach a particular subject matter, perhaps let it go for a while. Substitute another element you wish to explore, and then after a time return to what you have set aside. Usually the mind, after a break, is more than willing to get back to work and the old resistance will have disappeared.

7. Learn to evaluate your own practice. If something you are doing is yielding good results, expand that activity. If something you are doing seems to be leading nowhere, set it aside with the intention of returning at a later time when you may be more ready for that subject.