Common Problems: Their Causes and Cures

Incorrect and faulty finger placement is a shared issue for everyone who learns to play guitar. Some of the most fundamental causes and corrections are outlined below:

Buzzes

When the note you play makes a buzzing kind of sound, there are only a few causes. The cure is usually simple.

Cause #1: Left hand finger placement is too far behind the fret.

Cure: Place the finger just behind the fret whenever possible.

Cause #2: The right hand plucks the string before the left hand is set.

Cure: Wait until the left hand finger has the string firmly down, then let the right hand pluck the string.

Muted Sounds

Muted sounds are very common for the beginning player. Here are the main causes and cures:

Cause #1: The left hand finger is placed directly on top of the fret.

Cure: Move the finger back until it is just behind the fret.

Cause #2: A left hand finger is leaning against the string to be sounded. This often happens with chords.

Cure: Increase the curvature of your finger until it clears the muted string.

Choppy Sound

To transform choppy, disconnected sounds into smoother, more evenly-flowing sounds:

1. Be sure to leave the left hand fingers down for the full duration of the note. This applies especially to bass notes.

2. Alternate right hand fingers on the melody notes. Using the same finger for several notes in a row is to be avoided whenever possible.

3. Learn to anticipate the next action within the chain of successive actions. This helps eliminate sudden, uncontrolled gestures. Smooth sound can only be created by smooth physical actions.

4. Memorize the passage that is choppy. Memorization helps you organize the physical and musical aspects of playing so that the music flows in the best possible way.

How to Work on Trouble Spots

Everyone who learns to play an instrument has the experience of working on a passage which just will not come together. Before giving it up entirely, or merely repeating it with flaws and mistakes, try the following practice tools:

1. Identify the issue

The precise diagnosis of the *exact* point of difficulty is the first step towards a solution. Use a pencil to mark each spot of the music that you have difficulty with. The more clarity you bring to identifying the nature of the hard spot, the more likely a solution will be forthcoming. Here are a few of the most common recurring types of trouble spots.

  a. Not knowing the notes.
  b. Not keeping to the rhythmic design.
  c. Left or right hand fingerings either awkward or undefined.
  d. Chord with unfamiliar or difficult fingering.
  e. Difficult shift required of the left hand from one position to another.

Each difficulty is an opportunity for you to expand your musical mastery. Your musical intuition will actually identify and correct many trouble spots for you without much conscious probing on your part. However, if a spot remains difficult after you have practiced a passage for a reasonable amount of time, learn to analyze the fine details of the passage as deeply as you can. Everything you discover is added to your repertoire of problem-solving tools. And when you solve a tough problem it naturally increases your confidence that you can indeed master guitar technique.

2. Divide into small segments.

Divide the section into small units, even if they are each just two or three notes or chords. This helps you to specify the exact nature of the technical issue.

3. Slow tempos

Play more slowly than you think you need to. Often we try to play too fast too soon. When the passage is firmly established at the slower tempo, gradually increase the tempo.

4. Memorization

Memorize the passage you are studying. This will allow you to devote your full attention to the instrumental technique you are trying to solidity. When you are reading the music note by note you will not be able to concentrate fully on the physical aspects of playing.

Applying the above practicing techniques will lead to resolution of many difficult passages. If you still find the passage too difficult, it may at the moment just be too hard for you. Set it down, return to it later - after a time you will be able to solve the technical issues with greater ease.