

Lesson #11

How to Practice

Classical Guitar Pro

with Brandon Acker

Practice Mode vs Performance Mode

One of the most common mistakes among musicians is to only perform pieces and never really practice them.

Practice Mode: A type of practice where one only plays small sections of the piece at a slow tempo and many times. In this mode of practice, the music will not sound enjoyable because that isn't the point. Rather, the goal here is to actually improve spots that are difficult, too slow, or full of errors. If an error occurs in this mode, we should stop and fix the problem.

An easy guide to practicing well is the following:

Step #1: Diagnose a problem spot. Where exactly is the problem?

Step #2: Repeat that spot at a very slow tempo until it feels easy.

Step #3: Try it in context.

Step #4: If it goes well, you're done. If it doesn't, go back to step #1.

Performance Mode: The mode we use when playing for an audience. In this mode, we ignore errors and continue no matter what happens until the end of the piece. The goal here is to allow the listener to enjoy the music. Going backward to try something again is very disturbing for the listener. Instead, stay calm, smile, and enjoy giving the gift of music to others. After performing, if you aren't happy with how it went, it means you need to go back to practice mode to work out the issues.

My top 10 tips that guarantee you'll improve faster:

#1 Use a metronome

In my experience, all classical musicians who have good rhythm have spent many hours with a metronome, and those who haven't used a metronome do not have a good sense of rhythm. Remember that music is 50% pitch and 50% rhythm! Therefore, using a metronome is necessary and one of the best practice tools for improving on the classical guitar.

#2 Avoid distractions

This rule seems simple but in reality, it is easy to fall into this trap. In short, avoid things that take your attention away from a focused practice session. Distractions can include things like TV, podcasts, radio, a noisy environment, work stress, etc...

#3 Have a good chair and practice space

As a classical guitarist you'll spend all of your time playing sitting down. Therefore, it's paramount that you use a good chair. The wrong chair can lead to bad posture which leads to tension and bad habits. A chair need not be expensive to be ergonomic. Do not sit on a bed or a couch. Use a semi-firm chair without arms that is the right height for your proportions. Choose a quiet place to practice which is free of any unnecessary distractions and in a room that encourages focused insightful practicing.

#4 Decide when you will practice

All of us function well at certain times of day and less so at other times. Do not choose the most stressful time of day to practice or a time in which you are generally too tired to focus. Find a time that you can commit to every day. Consistency and quality are better than quantity. I recommend a minimum of 30 minutes a day at least 5 days a week to see major improvement. More is always better if it is a quality practice session and you are doing it in a healthy way that doesn't cause an overuse injury.

#5 Print out your music

It is necessary that we often write in helpful hints, circle trouble spots, and add extra fingerings to our sheet music. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to either print out your music or use a tablet. Reading off of a computer or phone is a poor substitute.

I also recommend using a music stand as it encourages good posture.

#6 Practice with your music

I've noticed that many of my students learn the notes as quickly as possible and then abandon their sheet music to play from memory. They often do this much too soon and then have trouble starting from specific spots or they accidentally play wrong notes/rhythms without realizing. I believe guitarists will be much better sight-readers and musicians if they use their music all the way up until a concert. Whether one uses the music in the concert or plays from memory is a personal choice.

#7 Create easily achievable goals

Imagine you sit down to practice with the goal "Become a great guitarist!" Precisely what does that even mean? To ensure faster progress, it is essential that we create clear and easily achievable goals for each practice session that can be accomplished in one sitting.

Good examples of easily achievable goals could be:

- Improve measure six of Greensleeves because I always make a mistake in that measure
- I can't play Malagueña as fast as I'd like so I'll use my metronome to help gradually increase the speed.
- I can never arrive at the E major chord in Malagueña fast enough so I'll just practice preparing that chord 10 times.

#8 Practice in front of a mirror

While sitting with a guitar, one is a poor observer of their own posture. Using a large mirror while practicing allows one a more objective view of their sitting position, how they are holding the guitar, and many other small but important details.

#9 Record yourself

Similar to the mirror example, while playing guitarists have a distorted view of how they sound. Playing requires one to multitask and often our listening skills diminish. Record yourself and listen back often with video on your phone. When you listen back, I guarantee you'll notice many details that were unknown to you while performing.

#10 Use a practice log

My own practice was revolutionized the day I began using a practice journal. Simply record the date and your goals for that practice session before starting and then after practicing, write down exactly what you did along with any discoveries you made.