

What Good Study Is and How To Organize It
by Willow Loss-Cutler-Hull

It's frustrating to practice for hours and make little headway, to play through your repertoire but still have all the same problem spots: here, that hard part where there's always at least one missed note; there, the place with the rhythm that just doesn't sound convincing; there, that moment where the music just doesn't seem to make sense. It would benefit anyone in this position—or anyone who wants to make sure they are making good use of their practicing time and producing the best music possible—to consider what good study is, exactly, and then to build a routine based on good practicing habits. Accordingly, I will begin with the basics of what good study is, and then offer some suggestions for how to go about it. Because the two topics are intertwined, I won't attempt to drastically separate them in this essay.

First and foremost, good study is analytical study. I love this passage from Eduardo Fernandez's book Technique, Mechanism, Learning:

All too often what is proposed to the student . . . is a work-method based mainly on mechanical repetition: work on the passage to be studied (by “work on” what is understood in most cases, is simple repetition) until the passage “tires” of fending off the student's efforts and “gives up”. Take note of this radical inversion of reality: the object is not that the passage “gives up”, but that the performer *masters* it (7).

One of the most important jobs any teacher has is to identify the student's difficulties, whether in technical execution or in musical expression, and offer solutions. The self-sufficient musician must work at doing this for themselves: being their own teacher. In my own experience, a spirit of curiosity and analytic inquiry is integral to learning any material, from mathematics to linguistics to music. Mastery of material begins with a willingness to ask questions.

There is a simple three-step question-and-answer process for overcoming difficulties and fixing problem spots in a given piece of music which Ricardo Iznaola describes in his thoughtful work On Practising; if you would like another perspective on all of this, I suggest reading it.

In order to begin this process, first devote yourself to observation. Play through a piece, and while doing so, listen—really listen—to how it sounds. There's a pretty common tendency to gloss over rough spots, to accept a bad sound because it doesn't seem likely that it can actually be improved. It almost certainly can, but first you need to know it exists. Is there a difficult shift which causes notes which should be connected to detach, or which makes it easy to accidentally change volume on a note in the middle of a phrase? Is there a scale which always feels out of control? It's important that you don't accept these problems as part of the way you play the piece. If you know something sounds off but you're having difficulty pinpointing what it is, it might be helpful to record yourself playing (video would be best) and watch the recording; when you aren't needing to spend all of your attention producing the sound, it's a lot easier to consider it objectively.

Once you have identified a problem, it's time to think about its causes. Play through the spot again, this time paying close attention to how your fingers move, the angles of your arms and wrists and left hand (the problem is usually in one of these), and how it feels to play the

passage (you want always to strive for a feeling of ease). Break the problem into its smallest possible segments and work on them individually, searching for the solution which will give you the most efficiency in your movements. If you cannot find a solution in a couple of days, no matter how many things you try or how much effort you put into trying to make the solutions work, you may have misidentified the problem. A common tendency is to pick units which are too large—to identify problem *measures*, say, when the actual difficulty lies in the movement between two single notes. Another common tendency is to identify problems slightly after where the difficulty really begins—it may not be the section which is difficult to play which needs to be fixed, but rather how you are getting to it.

It's also possible that you are having difficulty with the passage because there is an issue in what Mr. Fernandez calls the mechanism, the reflexes you have trained into your body which allow you to play the guitar. Your manner of playing needs to be as easeful and as efficient as possible. Issues of your underlying mechanism can be quick or laborious to sort out, but it's very important that you do so as necessary: a well-functioning mechanism will help you not only in that specific problem spot, but in any spot like it in any other piece of music. Mr. Fernandez has a lot to say about how best to train the mechanism, but at root, he suggests that it requires discovering what it feels like when something is played right, tagging that feeling, and then carefully repeating it until it is filed in physical memory.

It's helpful in general to set aside some time to focus on how your body feels when you play guitar. Feel your neck, your shoulders, your arms, your wrists, your fingers, your back, your legs—take note of how things are working, and note when they feel more precarious, or more tense, or more strenuous—and conversely, when they feel most balanced, most relaxed, and most effortless. Sometimes tension is unavoidable, but sometimes it's a sign that your sitting position, arm position, wrist position, chair height, etc. aren't quite right. Fixing those removes obstacles from your path.

If the problem you have found is interpretative (if your interpretation just doesn't sound natural to you), rather than deciding that the music must be odd (though it might be), consider how else you could play it. Ask yourself about dynamics, articulation, tone color, and, most importantly, phrasing (where do phrases start? End? Could you make a longer phrase-grouping than you first decided on? How can you best show how one phrase leads to the next?). Have you brought out the melody enough? How about the bass—should it be driving the section? Try to figure out what that part of the music *means*. I think of music as a language, and consider pieces of music in terms of what they communicate; well-written music is like a well-written story, in that it forms a cohesive, expressive whole. However, if you know how you want the music to go, you've tried several ways of getting it there, and it isn't working, it may be a technical problem after all.

Regardless of whether the problem is technical or interpretative, ask yourself questions and give yourself space to find the answers. If you're not sure what questions to ask, an excellent (and reasonably exhaustive, on the interpretative side) source is Ralph Kirkpatrick's book [Questions and Answers about Playing and Interpretation](#).

Once you've found the solution to a given difficulty, then (and *only* then) is it time to do what many people think of as practicing—that is, repeating the section until the movements in it become second nature.

Remember that when you memorize something (which can be done as easily as repeating that thing several times), your memory doesn't care if it's good or bad; it stores what it is asked

to. So before you begin the repetition phase, make sure (as best you can, that is; no one can be right all the time) that you really have found the solution first, by playing it a few times slowly, and then a few times more quickly, and seeing how well you can execute it and how much sense it makes, both to your mind and to your fingers, hands, arms, etc. Some passages have no easy fingerings, but often enough there's a fingering which is noticeably easier than all the alternatives.

On that topic, it's important not to automatically assume that you're the problem if a passage is difficult to play. Sometimes you have work to do, yes—but also, sometimes there might be a better fingering. Some fingerings will never work smoothly no matter how often you play them, and a bad fingering won't become a good one by virtue of repetition; it will simply become an ingrained bad fingering.

Finally, please note that it is often helpful not to repeat too many times, certainly not until your mind starts to wander; you'll only be able to focus on what you are doing for a finite amount of time, and it's best not to repeat beyond that, lest mistakes creep in and get memorized instead.

Following these steps may make your progress seem very slow, but this is an illusion. It's more effective to *really* solve one difficulty, so that it never occurs again, than it is to play repeatedly through three pages of music but not really be happy with what is coming out.

Speaking of slow being faster, slow practice is absolutely essential to identifying difficulties, solving them, fixing music in your memory, and really exploring the depths of a piece. Rushing through a piece to get through it as quickly as possible, or consistently trying to play it at performance tempo before it's ready, is going to accomplish two things: it's going to help you memorize mistakes, and it's going to help you become accustomed to how it feels to play the piece when it is shaky and out of control. This is not helpful. Yes, some textures cannot be motivated unless they are at a good speed, and pieces of music often sound completely different at different tempos—but first comes your slow practice. Most people need more than they think they do.

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Good study involves quests for increased ability: for the broadest possible technical and interpretative palette, the deepest understanding of a given piece of music, and the most ease of execution. Not everything is a problem to be solved; there are possibilities to explore, too. There are many strategies for studying a particular piece of music. Let's talk about a few of them.

Singing something in a piece is not just fun but also extremely helpful. When you sing, you're removing the technical difficulties of playing a passage on guitar from the equation, allowing you to just listen to how you would like the music to go.

When you sing the melody, it's a good idea to listen to how it rises and falls—where its high points are, where its low points are, where you wish it to be disjunct, and where you wish it to be connected. Where are the steps, and where are the leaps? How does it build and ebb?

Singing the bass line is one of the best things you can possibly do to understand the harmonic movement, and therefore the fundamental structure (in pieces written in traditional tonal harmony), of a piece—the bass line has for centuries been deeply important to the

compositional process. Listening to the bass line will tell you a lot about how your phrasing should go.

Singing any given voice from beginning to end of an idea will give you a deepened understanding of the piece, and is essential to pieces written partially or entirely in counterpoint.

Clapping may be necessary to rhythmic understanding if playing a rhythm on an open string isn't helping. Clapping is a very physical response, and so it helps make rhythm more plain, as rhythm is a very physical thing. You can clap a basic metric pulse and count the rhythm over it, tap the metric pulse and clap the rhythm, clap the rhythm by itself, clap a metric pulse and dance to the rhythm—whatever works best for you. When you do, once you have understood the rhythm, try to put feeling into your clapping. Emphasize some parts more than others. Make it talk to you.

Studying the score without instrument in hand is a good way to solidify your understanding of the musical material in a piece. First, it presents an opportunity to go over any dynamics, phrase markings, tempo markings, and articulation markings, and to make sure that they are where you think they are. Opinions on the sacredness of the composer's intent as captured in the written music vary, but it is absolutely necessary to know what that intent is, even if you decide to depart from it. Second, the score is composed of a wealth of musical material, and the more you understand it, the better you will play it: harmonic analysis, linear analysis, and rhythmic analysis are often integral to presenting a convincing rendition of a piece. Studying the score is also a good memorization technique as it can help to fix the meaning of the music in your mind, not just the movements you make while playing it.

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Let's address practice sessions briefly. I'd recommend that you set goals for your sessions—that is, that you have an idea of what you'd like to accomplish when you sit down to play. These goals should be both long-term and short-term. An example of a helpful long-term goal is: “In this semester, I will learn these three pieces to play in a concert at the end of the term and also make my two-octave scales more controlled.” An example of a helpful short-term goal is: “In this week, I'll fix the run in measures 2-6 of my first piece, practice one of my other pieces for performance, and start work on a finger independence exercise.” Mr. Iznola proposes that the time-unit of practice be the week, not the day, and I think this is an excellent idea: distributing your materials for study throughout the week can give a more accurate read on your progress than considering a single day—which may or may not be as productive as you would like—in isolation.

Speaking of goals, it's important to allow for a certain amount of slack in your goals, and to be realistic when you set them. If you're able to do more than you originally thought in a given time period, then great—but if you do less, as long as you gave the matter your best work and focus, you can feel confident that you are learning as quickly as you can. It can be difficult to accurately judge ahead of time how long a particular problem will take to solve, so please try not to get frustrated if something does take longer than you thought.

A state of emotional detachment is helpful in the practice room. I don't mean that you should play like a robot (no!), but that you should try not to take challenges too personally. Yes, of course you want to play your music well, and you're motivated to achieve that—otherwise,

there's no way you'd be reading this essay in the first place! However, everyone makes mistakes, everyone needs to work hard at something, and everyone learns things at different rates. If you always work to do your best, then you've done your best: you will learn at the rate which is natural for you, and you will play music when you are ready to play it. Some pieces of music will be easier and come more quickly than others, depending on where your current strengths and weaknesses are. What aids progress is an honest and as unbiased-as-possible consideration of one's technical or interpretative mechanisms, and the determination to fix what needs it.

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Next, let's talk about how to approach a specific practice session. Before you open your guitar case each day, you should know what you are going to work on, and what the focus of this particular practice session is going to be. Are you going to solve problems? Are you going to work on memorization? (An in-depth examination of memorization techniques is beyond the scope of this essay—if you need assistance in this area, I suggest reading [The Musician's Way](#) by Gerald Klickstein.) Are you going to practice performance and play through your repertoire just as you would in a concert situation? Are you going to noodle? All of these are good ways to spend a playing session (don't overlook noodling—we all need to make time for fun), but it's important to have an initial goal in mind so you can start with your best work.

Short practice sessions are often better than long ones. How short, exactly, will depend on what you find to be best. In [The Natural Classical Guitar](#), Lee Ryan writes that it's important to give yourself a short rest at least once an hour (and preferably more frequently than that)—good study is intense and takes a lot out of the mind (even if playing guitar wasn't an intense physical activity, which it is). I find it helpful to have practice sessions of about forty minutes in length—but to have four of them, usually arranged in groups of two. It's important that you maintain your ability to focus; if you find your mind wandering, take a break. If you find you're just too tired to get good work done, go to bed; if you really feel like playing the guitar regardless, then make your playing session a short one, and dedicate it to noodling. Yes, it is important to practice an average of at least three hours a day if you want to play at a high level, but this needs to be good practice; it isn't helpful to practice just so you put in your hours. If you follow this advice, you'll find that your practice session the next day will be much more productive.

It's also good to make your practice sessions as regular as possible. This doesn't mean you should practice the same number of hours every day, or that you must practice from 10:00 AM-1:00 PM every day—but I do find it helpful if I practice at approximately the same time every Tuesday, for example, for approximately the same number of hours. When I have a routine, I automatically put myself in the mindset for good work.

I hope you've found this helpful! There's more to say, of course, but this essay is long enough as it is.

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