

Practice Routines, Part 1 of 2

Let me begin by saying this article is not about how to practice or learn a piece of music. This article is limited to the topic of general practice routines. When speaking about practice routines it is very important to differentiate between practice routines for beginners, intermediate players, and advanced players. My website is directed more towards intermediate, advanced, and professional players rather than beginners. Therefore this discussion will not apply to beginners. And again, the routine will vary between a group of intermediate players and a group of advanced players.

Bottom line, practice routines need to be tailored to each student's specific needs. I cringe when I remember when I recommended a specific practice routine for a student, neglecting to tell him this routine was for him only and didn't apply to others. He found that the practice routine worked very well and told many other people about it. He proclaimed, "This is the routine Douglas Niedt recommends." Well, that was the routine Douglas Niedt assigned specifically *to that one student*, not to anyone else. For another student the routine would be quite different.

But for this article, I will explain a few universal guidelines I believe it is smart to follow and several options for you to explore. Practice routines are important. A practice routine is a habit that determines your progress. A good practice routine can make your abilities as a guitarist grow very quickly. A bad routine will result in slow growth and little improvement. Guitarists who practice well, play well.

The Obvious

You want to have a quiet place to practice without distractions. You don't want people disturbing you, asking you questions, or attempting to engage you in conversation. Don't practice in front of the television or computer. It is helpful to be away from telephones, email, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Sit in a comfortable straight chair with no arms (not a couch). Use a music stand. Have your music or exercises you are learning on your music stand. Have your metronome, pencil with eraser, and nail filing/polishing tools readily available within arm's reach. If you are into high tech to aid your practice, have your computer and recording program ready to roll (but don't open email, Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

Determine a Schedule

Practicing every day is a nearly universal procedure among accomplished players. One of the things that impede progress the most is the lack of *consistent* practice. You must be sure to adopt a routine that fits easily into your schedule so you'll actually do it.

When it comes to scheduling practice time, everyone is different. For the bohemian "artiste", the idea of a scheduled practice routine may be abhorrent. They may claim they are better motivated by "I practice when the spirit moves me." They may prefer complete freedom unrestrained by boundaries of time or content. A music student may have a fairly open schedule and have several time slots available in the day to practice. But for the busy professional musician or busy amateur with a life outside of guitar (a

husband or wife, a job, etc.) it becomes more important to nail down a precise time for practicing. “Sometime” or “when the spirit moves me” is not a good practice time. Practice doesn’t happen by itself. You have to schedule your practice time.

You may decide you can practice only certain days of the week, possibly more on weekends. You may need to budget a precise amount of time you can practice for each day. Set specific times, write them all down, and treat those times as sacred. Keep them free. If it’s written down, it is much easier to stick to than if you keep it in your head. Don’t practice when you’re tired or exhausted. You must be mentally focused; otherwise you will practice bad habits and ingrain mistakes.

It is also a good idea to tell your spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend and children what you are planning. Having their consent makes domestic life flow more smoothly. It will also cut down on interruptions.

How Long to Practice

There seem to be almost as many opinions about this as the number of notes Paco de Lucia can play in 10 seconds. The amateur who has a job and family may be limited to 30 minutes to an hour or two each day. But what about the professional or the person who has more time available? How long should they practice?

Some professional musicians claim they practice very little, an hour or two or less a day. But when pressed, these pros confess that at some earlier time in their lives they did heavy-duty practice of six or more hours a day. Moreover, when they have performances coming up, they put in many more hours of preparation.

At the other end of the spectrum, many players say they practice six to ten or more hours a day. Advocates of putting in long hours say if you aspire to be truly great, you must put in ungodly amounts of hours on your instrument. They say this separates the true artist from the unwashed masses of wannabes. Critics of this approach say the guitarist who practices more than five or six hours is lying, wasting time, or on the road to burnout or physical problems. From my personal experience, I would disagree with that. I practiced *all day* from six in the morning till nine at night during the summers when I was a teenager. I rarely practiced less than six hours a day from the age of 14 through my 30’s. And I’m not lying, didn’t waste time, and never had burnout or physical problems! But of course, everyone is different.

Others practice two to six hours a day. They recommend moderation and very focused practice to maximize efficiency of practice and avoid injury.

But certainly, successful practice is a result of regularity and quality, rather than mere quantity. Quantifying our efforts to improve by counting hours is not a good idea. Instead, the emphasis should be on having goals and making sure our practice routine is working efficiently to enable us to reach those goals. The famous violinist Nathan Milstein wrote: “Practice as much as you feel you can accomplish with concentration. Once when I became concerned because others around me practiced all day long, I asked my mentor Professor Auer (Leopold Auer was one of the most important violin teachers of all

time) how many hours I should practice, and he said, 'It really doesn't matter how long. If you practice with your fingers, no amount is enough. If you practice with your head, two hours is plenty.'" It must be pointed out that in reality, the demands Auer placed on his students could not possibly have been met with two hours a day of practice.

The amount of time one practices will also be determined by their physical condition and abilities and their mental focus and stamina. One way to reduce the possibility of physical injury or strain and maintain mental focus is to take frequent breaks or split practicing into two or more sessions in a day.

When I was fourteen years old I remember reading about the great Andrés Segovia's practice routine. He would practice in fifteen-minute sets with a short break between each set to stand up, stretch, have a drink of water, etc. After three sets of intensive practice he would take a longer 15-minute break. This went on through the morning. He would have his main meal of the day around 1:00 or 2:00, take a siesta, and then resume practicing in fifteen-minute sets in the late afternoon or evening. As a young teenager, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to take a nap in the afternoon when they could be playing the guitar, so I followed his advice except I skipped the nap and kept playing all afternoon too!

I think the major point to learn from Segovia is to take frequent breaks even in short practice sessions and to take long breaks somewhere within long practice sessions. And if your schedule permits, break up your practice into two or more sessions so your mind and body stay fresh and don't become stressed. Mindless practice without focus is a waste of time and as I mentioned before, can be counterproductive if one learns bad habits or ends up practicing mistakes.

Warming Up and Technical Exercises

I know that some players are able to sit down and play difficult, fast music well and with no ill effects. I envy them. But, for the vast majority of guitarists, it is important to warm up to prevent hand and finger injury. Your warm up may vary from day to day depending on the amount of time you have to practice. It may also vary according to the needs of the repertoire on which you are working. Some players warm up by playing through some of their repertoire very slowly. Very, very slowly. They say it is far more interesting than playing scales, arpeggios, and stretching exercises. If the slow playing is attempted by memory they say it is extremely helpful for maintaining and solidifying memorization. They also say it helps increase accuracy because if the tempo is slow enough, very few mistakes are made.

When I say "warm up" I am also including technical exercises. Most players warm up with scales, stretching exercises, and arpeggios. Sometimes slur and rasgueado exercises are included too. **All exercises should be done very slowly at first, putting zero strain on the muscles.** Speed can be increased as the session progresses.

Scales

I recommend beginning your warm up with scales. They are easy on the hands and excellent for improving many aspects of basic technique. ([See my Technique Tip](#)). Also, they are one of the few things

that most players have the possibility of playing perfectly. Think about it. It is extremely difficult to play a piece absolutely perfectly. But a scale can be played perfectly if played slowly. I think playing something perfectly and confidently (or close to it) is a great way to set the tone for the rest of your practice session. Play them with variations in tone and volume. Practice crescendos and decrescendos. Play them very quietly. Play them loudly. Practice changes of tone color. Always keep your practicing interesting. Don't play your scales monotonously. Your neighbors and family will thank you.

Stretching Exercises

Stretching exercises are best started in the upper region of the neck in 9th position or thereabouts where the frets are close together. The stretches can be gradually increased by moving down the neck ending in 1st position. Use common sense. Stretching exercises should be done slowly and gently. They should never hurt. Exercises such as "spider" exercises or a chromatic octave scale (in first position) are excellent for warm up. I highly recommend practicing stretches from old and new pieces in your repertoire. The formulaic exercises are fine ([see these](#)), but stretches from real pieces obviously are more to the point.

Arpeggios

Many players use the venerable 120 arpeggio patterns of Mauro Giuliani for their arpeggio practice. The Carlevaro arpeggio patterns are also excellent. I take a different approach. [See my Technique Tip](#). No matter what exercises you choose, *begin at a slow enough tempo that there is zero stress in the right hand*.

If your time is limited, practice arpeggio patterns from pieces you currently play or are learning. Instead of Giuliani arpeggios, practice an arpeggio pattern from a piece by Villa-Lobos or Albeniz that you are trying to learn or want to learn. That way, you are warming up plus you are learning a new piece or improving an old one. However, if your arpeggio technique is not very strong, also practice some Giuliani, Carlevaro, etc. I remind you, if you are playing arpeggios from real pieces, *begin slowly and gradually speed up*. Don't practice them at tempo when you are beginning your warm up.

Slur Exercises

Slur exercises are excellent for improving left-hand strength, speed, and precision. However, they are very stressful on the joints and tendons. Be sure you are well into your warm up session before practicing them. For more information, [see my Technique Tip](#). As with arpeggios, you can also use slur passages from repertoire for warming up instead of formulaic exercises.

Rasgueados

Many people find that the practice of rasgueados is very beneficial to their right-hand finger independence and speed. However, rasgueados are very stressful on the right-hand tendons. Like slur exercises, be sure you are well into your warm up session before practicing them. Space out their practice throughout your practice session. I wouldn't do more than 2-10 minutes at a time.

AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT

An important concept to remember is this: **except for a few important exceptions, technique practice does not generalize.** For example, practicing the Segovia scales for two hours a day for a year does not mean you will be able to play the fast scales in Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*. It means you can play the Segovia scales. That is not to say the Segovia scales are not worthwhile. They or other scale patterns are very important to learn for many reasons ([see my Technique Tip](#)).

My point is, choose your exercises and how you practice them carefully. Otherwise, you will learn and master a bunch of exercises but little else. We all have our favorite exercises we enjoy practicing. If they make you and your hands feel good, by all means practice them. And of course, exercises for warming up (scales, stretches) are always worthwhile.

But for other exercises, ask yourself, "What precisely am I going to gain from practicing this that will help me play real pieces of music?" For instance, if an exercise provides deep focus on improving independence between the right-hand "m" and "a" fingers or the left-hand 3rd and 4th fingers (weaknesses we all have), it is absolutely worth practicing. If you are questioning the value of an exercise, ask yourself, "Is there a passage from a real piece I could practice instead of this exercise?"

How Long Do I Warm Up?

The answer to this depends on how much time you have to practice and the nature of your hands. As I mentioned, some people do fine with very little warm up with no injury. But most players need to be more careful and should do a good warm up before diving into repertoire.

I recommend that up to one third of your practice session be devoted to warm up and practice of technical exercises. If your entire practice session is 30 minutes, spend 5-10 minutes on warm up and technical exercises. If your practice session is one hour, do 15-20 minutes of warm up/technique practice. If your practice session is two hours, spend 30-40 minutes on warm up/technique practice.

If you split your practice into more than one session, especially if the sessions are spread apart by an hour or more, be sure to warm up again for each session. You won't need to go through your entire warm up. Just do enough to get the hands stretched and relaxed. It would be helpful and more interesting to practice different exercises before each session. The reason it is important to warm up for each session is to prevent hand stress or injury.

Now that you are warmed up and have practiced some technique exercises, what do you do next? Stay tuned for Part 2, coming up next month.