

Practice Routines, Part 2

We have done our warm-up, including stretching and possibly technical exercises such as scales, slurs, rasgueados, or finger independence exercises. Now it's time to practice real music.

PRACTICE NEW PIECES

About $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of your practice time should be spent on new pieces. How many pieces should you work on at one time? That depends on how difficult they are, how long they are, and how long your practice session is. I would be cautious. It is always better to focus on one or two pieces at a time and learn them well rather than try to learn several haphazardly. But you also don't want to focus overly long on one piece—your attention will wander and the benefits of continued practice on that piece will quickly diminish. So, have enough pieces to practice each day so you stay fresh. As long as you have adequate time for each piece, you can work on more than one at a time and rotate between them to keep your mind and hands alert and responsive.

Before you begin playing, look at the music and decide what needs to be focused on first or the most. Decide exactly what you want to accomplish on that piece in that practice session. In the early stages of learning a new piece, little time should be spent on playing it from the beginning to the end. Maybe play it through once or twice, but that's it. New pieces mostly require repetitious practice of isolated passages. As those are mastered, larger chunks can be rehearsed. The difficult spots that need the most practice should be highlighted on the page of music. When you open the music, you can go from one spot to the next; bam, bam, bam. Make exercises out of problem passages. As I mentioned in Part 1, except for a few important exceptions, technique does not generalize. Rather than practice generic formulaic exercises, make up exercises from difficult spots in your piece to practice. As you master more and more of the individual difficult spots in the piece (and practice going into and coming out of those spots), you can begin playing through larger portions of the piece. But even when you finally can get through the piece beginning to end, you will still need intensive practice on the tough spots. Only after the piece has entered your permanent repertoire and has had time to "season" will the intensive spot practice subside.

It is not always desirable to practice a new piece every day. Occasionally letting a piece "rest" a day or two can be beneficial. Or you can rotate practice with another piece. Your subconscious will "work" on the piece, and when you come back to it, it will seem much clearer to you and you will play it much better.

PRACTICE OLD PIECES

When we start to learn a new piece, our natural tendency is to put all our energy and time into that new piece. It's new, exciting, challenging, and fun. But we must not forget to practice our old repertoire. Guitarists who spend most of their time practicing new pieces can only play the last one or two pieces

they have learned. Other than those couple pieces, they can't play a piece well all the way through. They may be able to stumble through bits of this piece or that piece, but they can't really play anything all the way through at a decent performance level. That is a waste of all the practice time that went into learning the pieces in the first place. The only way we can play pieces up to performance standard is to practice them that way.

Your Repertoire

It is very important to build up a repertoire of music. How many songs should you be able to play?

- The late beginner to early intermediate guitarist: 15 minutes of music is a good repertoire.
- The intermediate to late intermediate player: a repertoire of 15-30 minutes is reasonable.
- The advanced player should have a repertoire of 30-90+ minutes of music.

It is a good thing to have a body of music you can play well (preferably by memory) for several reasons. An obvious reason is so you will have music you can perform well if someone would like to hear you play. It is also very satisfying to have studied an instrument for a few years and have something to show for it. It is also very enjoyable to be able to sit down and play some good music just for yourself.

But from the standpoint of improving your technique and playing in general, the most important reason to build and maintain a repertoire is this: the ability to play many pieces well from beginning to end builds and maintains your overall technique. It keeps your hands and mind in tip-top condition. Each piece you play has thousands of very specific muscle movements. If you only practice the last piece you learned, your hands only execute those thousands of movements. If you have many pieces in your repertoire, your hands execute *millions* of varied movements. It's a very simple equation: more pieces=greater number and diversity of hand/finger movements. The more movements the hands and fingers make the better physical shape they will be in. Also, the larger your vocabulary of hand/finger movements, the better prepared you will be to tackle new pieces. Therefore, maintaining a repertoire is an essential ingredient to become a better guitarist.

How to Maintain a Repertoire

How do we find the time to maintain our old pieces at the same time we are trying to learn new pieces? You will find that some old pieces are fairly easy for you to play. Others are more difficult and high-maintenance. The easier, comfortable pieces only need to be practiced once a week or maybe once every two to three weeks to keep in good shape. You may not play them perfectly, but they will sound good overall. The more difficult high-maintenance pieces will need to be practiced more frequently. Some will need to be practiced nearly every day. On days when you have a little extra time to practice, use it to review old repertoire. Maintaining a repertoire is like a juggling act. You have a bunch of pieces that you can play, floating in the air. The trick is to practice each one in some sort of rotation so none of them hits the ground and crashes. If you find it impossible to keep everything in shape, you may have to drop one or two of your least-favorite pieces. Be comforted by the fact that they don't all have to be practiced every day or even every week. Just don't forget about them. I recommend spending $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of your practice session on reviewing old repertoire. Or, you can designate certain days of the week as days

to practice old repertoire. For many of your pieces, it will mean playing through them once or twice. For others, you may need to isolate and practice a few passages more thoroughly.

PRACTICE SIGHT-READING

Some guitarists don't know their notes above the fourth fret. Take 5-10 minutes every day to learn the notes above first position. [I have a fretboard trainer on my website](#). Other guitarists have troubles reading rhythms or sight-reading in general. If you are a poor reader, take 5-10 minutes every day or every couple of days to practice your sight-reading.

VARY YOUR PRACTICE ROUTINE

Keep your practice sessions fun, interesting, and stimulating. Vary the routine. Some days, spend more time on old repertoire. Other days, focus more on your new pieces. Or, spend more time on technical exercises or sight-reading. Maybe you could focus on memorizing a piece or two. If you are the type of person who likes a clearly planned-out routine, you could focus on a certain thing on odd-numbered days and on another thing on even-numbered days. And don't forget; take frequent breaks during your practice. Clear your head. Get up, stretch, and walk around. You will feel refreshed when you sit back down to continue your practicing.

WHEN YOU ARE DONE

Before you quit for the day, reflect on what you have accomplished and what needs to be done tomorrow. Make notes. New fingerings you discovered today or a new exercise you created may be very clear to you at the moment. Unfortunately, by tomorrow you will be scratching your head and kicking yourself because you can't remember that great fingering or the really effective exercise you created to practice a certain passage. Be sure it is all written down and clearly marked.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Practicing should be fun. Practicing should be enjoyable and rewarding. If your practice routine is leading to steady and gradual progress, you are on the right track. But feel free to change it up and revise your routine as you improve and as you tackle new, different, or more challenging music. A practice routine is never one-size-fits-all. Developing a practice routine is an on-going, evolving process. Find a routine that works for you.