

Practice With Your Eyes Closed

There's a reason people close their eyes when they kiss

By Douglas Niedt

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There is a common belief that when a person loses his sight, his other senses such as hearing, become more acute. In general, scientific studies have not supported this belief. But, we need to make an important distinction. There is a difference between having one's hearing dramatically improve automatically because of loss of sight, and *using auditory information more effectively*, which some blind people do to an extraordinary degree. So strictly speaking, blind people's other senses don't compensate for their lack of sight. But, while blind people may not have a more acute sense of smell, taste or touch, *they can use these senses more effectively*. This concept brings me to this month's tech tip: **Practice With Your Eyes Closed**.

It is an odd phenomenon that when you play something technically difficult, you tend to stop listening to the music and instead focus on the *visual*--watching the music on the page or especially, watching your fingers. Sight takes over as the guiding sense when you should be listening. I have observed this in myself and students.

In fact, a guitarist can actually experience an auditory illusion. They may believe they played a passage okay because they saw the left-hand fingers land on the correct frets. What they didn't *hear* was that the *right-hand* fingers actually missed some notes or played them at widely varying volumes. Some notes were fine, but others were barely struck or not struck at all. And they did not notice unless they recorded themselves and listened back, or another listener told them so.

To increase one's auditory AND tactile (sense of touch) awareness, I highly recommend practicing with your eyes closed or blindfolded. (Watch the blindfold thing though. If someone walks in on you, you are going to have to answer a lot of questions.)

You will be amazed at what happens. Your awareness of sound and touch will skyrocket. Your suddenly increased awareness will be like shining a bright light on your playing. Everything becomes clear, the good and the bad. (Remember, one of the primary reasons "romantic" restaurants are candlelit is so you can't see your dinner partner clearly!)

Here is a list of things that will suddenly pop into your awareness that you hadn't noticed before or didn't realize were so prevalent:

1. Buzzes.
2. Unclear notes.
3. Out-of-rhythm slurs. Usually, the hammer-on or pull-off movement will be executed too quickly.
4. Incorrect balance between melody, accompaniment, and bass. Usually, the melody won't be loud enough. The accompaniment or thumb will be pounding out too strongly.
5. Left hand and right hand will be slightly out of synch with one another on some chord changes or between certain finger combinations, especially left-hand 2nd to 3rd finger and 3rd to 4th finger. Usually the hand and finger movements of the left hand will be ahead of the plucking movements of the right-hand fingers.
6. Incorrect left-hand positioning. A passage will feel precarious or the hand will feel like it's in an awkward or unbalanced, teetering position.
7. Your changes of volume (dynamics) and tone color are not as clear or obvious as you thought.
8. Your memory is a bit shaky without the visual cues of watching the fingers and seeing the fretboard.
9. You are unable to make shifts, especially long ones, without looking. But this one you probably already knew.
10. You realize that some of your right-hand fingerings feel awkward or somehow wrong.

You should also try practicing pieces and passages with your eyes closed at *half speed* for yet another perspective on what is working and what isn't.

But practicing with your eyes closed will be very frustrating. Don't let things like missing most of your shifts or feeling totally disoriented and confused discourage you. Hang in there. You will get used to it over a period of anywhere from one day to two months. Many guitarists get used to it and actually enjoy practicing this way after a week. They enjoy it because their practicing becomes far more effective. They notice very clearly the elements that need to be fixed.

Obviously, I highly recommend this method of practice. It is one of those simple concepts that really work to improve your playing, in this case by teaching you to use your senses of hearing and touch on a much higher and intense level than usual by taking away the visual sense. After all, *there is an instinctual reason people kiss with their eyes closed*, you know.

END NOTE:

Although many scientific studies show that the blind's other senses are not more acute, they can learn some amazing skills to compensate for loss of sight, such as "echolocation." If you have an

curiosity in the difficulties and victories of the blind, watch this 8-minute video from youtube.com of how Dan Kish, director of World Access for the Blind, uses echolocation to safely ride a bicycle on the public roads and otherwise find his way in the world. It is amazing. [Watch the video.](#)