Should I Listen to Recordings and Performances of Other Guitarists?

Click here for the fascinating history of "Nipper" (the dog) and "His Master's Voice"

By Douglas Niedt

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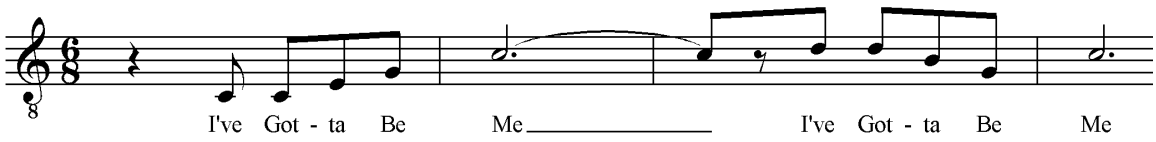
The short answer is: Of course you should. Learning to play a piece of music involves making lots of choices. Decisions have to be made about tempo, rhythmic inflections, fingerings, articulation, tone color, phrasing, and more. Making those decisions requires knowledge and experience. Why not draw upon the knowledge and experience of master guitarists by listening to how they play the piece you are learning? Pepe Romero, John Williams, and Andres Segovia just might know something you don't!

Thinking that you can make all these musical decisions yourself is almost like thinking you can go through life in general without seeking the advice and opinions of others. Should I marry her or not? Should I buy that growth stock? Do I really need that heart transplant right now? If you had important decisions such as these to make, would you make them without consulting anyone else? Would you only listen to you? Would you follow only *your* inner feelings? Would you only follow *your* intuition, ignoring the rest of the world? No, that would be shortsighted and potentially dangerous.

Granted, getting incomplete advice about a heart transplant has more dire consequences than using a bad fingering on a Sor study. But if you want to be a good guitarist, you need good information. Since we are dealing with sound, the best way to get that information is by listening to others, especially the masters.

An important caveat is that we must consult *more than one source*. To make good informed decisions, we must seek out many different sources for information and viewpoints. We want to form our opinions and conclusions from a synthesis of our own experience *plus* several others' experience and views. So it is in the music field as well. We don't want to listen to just one CD, one artist's rendering of a piece. Nor should we listen to just one teacher's opinion. Even if that teacher is a master teacher and you hang on his every word, his is still only one viewpoint. You need to have more.

Music and Lyrics by Walter Marks



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“I Gotta Be Me...I've Gotta Be Me”

I've heard guitarists say, "I don't want to listen to anyone else because I don't want to copy them. I want to form my own interpretation. I want to play it my way." Well, doing it one's own way is absolutely the correct goal. But you can still form your own interpretation without sticking your head in the sand, oblivious to history and life around you. We learn from how others succeed and even from how they fail. We can listen to others without copying them. In fact, the more people you listen to, you realize there are many more options than you had ever imagined as to how to execute any given aspect of a piece.

To paraphrase the great conductor Bruno Walter: We don't listen and study to repeat what has already been done or to learn rules. **We listen and study to free the imagination**. That is a monumentally important concept. Read it again: We listen and study to *free the imagination*.

Listening to others is stimulating, freeing, and enlightening especially if we listen to *many* guitarists play a piece. In fact, we should listen to as many as we can. When we do that, we realize they all play very differently.

For example, we may think or have been told the new piece we are working on is a slow piece. We hear famous guitarist A play it--yes, he does play it slowly. Then we listen to guitar great B--he plays it much faster. But guitar great C plays it a little slower than famous guitarist A.

Questions and observations spring up in our mind. Hmmm. I hear that the tempo range of these three guitarists is 60-80 for a quarter note. I know now that I can play it anywhere in that range. But I wonder...could I play it a bit slower than 60? What does that sound like? I bet I could play it faster than 80. I should at least try it. Why not?

Before listening to these recordings, if you had been told by your teacher or your own wild guess that 72 was "correct," you would have cut yourself off from a world of other possibilities, not only in tempo but others as well. For example, dynamics and especially articulation are often determined or greatly affected by the tempo chosen.

Again, for this type of study to work best, it is important to listen to *several* recordings or live renditions of a piece. If you only listen to one, yes you will be in danger of copying that recording, even unintentionally. The sound gets into your head and you begin hearing it only that one way, thinking that's the way the piece goes.

This happens frequently when guitar students unconsciously copy the rubato of another guitarist. They come up with a very distorted rhythmic sense of the piece because they are unconsciously playing what they hear in their heads from listening to that one guitarist play the piece.

Listening to or even copying *a lot* of different guitarists is healthy, because then you are experimenting with *many* different sounds, inflections, and colors. The result will be very different from listening only to guitarist A and basing ALL your musical judgments on what he or she does.

Much can be learned by listening to recordings and live concerts. For example, when we listen to other guitarists, we can listen to their phrasing, how they use tone color changes, dynamics, tempo changes, and rubato. We can listen to the overall tempo of the piece. We can study their use of vibrato. We can analyze their fingering--for example whether they play a passage on the first string for a brighter sound or on the third string for a darker or warmer sound. We can listen for where they shift in a fast scale passage to discern what fingering they are using.

Listening to other guitarists for their overall sound is also important, especially for the beginning and intermediate guitarist. Listening to the tone quality of great guitarists helps cultivate a beautiful tone in one's own playing. If we don't have a clear idea of what a good sound is, we can hardly expect to develop it in our own playing. I grew up listening to the sound of Andres Segovia--that voluptuous, beautiful tone quality. That sound remains in my mind to this day as something to aspire to. I also hear the clarity of John

Williams. I hear the color of Julian Bream. All of them (and many others) meld together in my mind and fingers to produce the sound of Douglas Niedt.

As Always, Timing Is Everything

Another important aspect to all this is timing. *When* should one begin to listen to recordings of a piece on which one is working? That will vary with the individual.

In my case, I listen early on. Sometimes I listen before I begin to actively learn the piece. Other times I begin listening to recordings of the piece within the first two weeks. Rarely do I wait longer than that. I am listening not only for the musical aspects others bring to the piece, but also fingerings. Fingerings are a crucial element in the early stages of learning a new piece. I don't want to wait too long to explore every possibility I can discover. I have often "stolen" John Williams', Segovia's, or others' fingerings.

Again, I emphasize that all this listening stimulates more thinking and discovery. I hear things I had never thought about before. I find more options to consider in almost every aspect of the piece. Yes, perhaps I will steal an idea from Julian Bream. But that one idea stimulates seven new ones. ***It is an inspirational process, not an imitative one***.

But for others, it may be best to wait from a few weeks to several months to listen to other guitarists' renditions of a piece. The argument for waiting is to force the person to depend totally on their own judgment and experience to learn a new piece. The downside is that once the piece is firmly set in their fingers and mind, any other version sounds foreign or wrong to them. They lose the ability, flexibility, and objectivity to realize that another version or another way of doing something is better than theirs. Or if they do realize it, because their conception of the piece is so strongly embedded in their fingers and mind, it is difficult to change it to something different. They tend to resist change or improvement because it is physically and mentally difficult to make changes, even simple ones such as new fingerings. It's easier for them to stick with the familiar and how they already play it.

Deciding when to begin listening to other guitarists can be a difficult decision. Try different approaches and see what stimulates you the most and fits with your style of learning. If you find yourself imitating others because that's easier to do than to come up with ideas of your own, wait longer before listening to others. Just be careful not to wait too long and get into the rut of, "Well, I've been doing it this way for a while and it's just too much trouble to change."

Learn Faster

The Suzuki method of teaching musical instruments to children is based upon how children learn their native language. It is sometimes called the Mother Tongue Method. From birth, children learn words (and how they are used) as they hear them spoken hundreds of times by others. Shinichi Suzuki, the inventor of the music method, believed children should learn music the same way they learn their native language. Music itself is a language. It has its own syntax and grammar. Just as we could not expect to learn our native language without hearing it, we cannot learn the language of music without listening to it. Suzuki believed children should begin listening to music at birth. The more the child listens to live music and recordings, he asserted, the more quickly the child learns. A core part of the method is daily listening to recordings of the lessons on which they are working.

The Mother Tongue idea can be applied to anyone learning a musical instrument, not just Suzuki method students. For a beginner or intermediate guitarist, listening to others play a piece can be an important way to get the piece into their head. By hearing it over and over they learn "how it goes." As Suzuki discovered, recognizing what the piece sounds like greatly enhances and speeds up the learning process.

At this stage of listening, there is little analysis of how a particular artist is playing the piece. Instead, we are hearing the overall picture. We hear what the melody is and we hear the harmonies and rhythms in total context rather than as fragmented elements we are trying to "program" into our fingers. We still must laboriously work our way through the piece, learning a lot of notes and fingerings and taking in a lot of information. That work happens in a very slow and perhaps disjointed fashion. But because we have been listening to the CD, suddenly we are able to recognize and hear the sounds and assimilate them into a bigger picture. Therefore, as we learn, we are already seeing (and hearing) the forest as we are trudging through and even planting the trees.

Having the sound of the piece clearly in your inner ear also prevents the practicing of wrong notes. For example, if you have really internalized what the melody sounds like, if you make a mistake, your ear will immediately tell you it is wrong. But if you don't really know what the melody should sound like, you may not recognize incorrect notes when you play them. You are likely to practice the wrong notes until you are corrected days, perhaps weeks later. Then you will need to unlearn whole passages and learn them again correctly.

I Want To Learn Something New

Listening to other guitarists is a great way to find new repertoire. Sure, you can rely on your teacher to feed you new material. He will give you pieces that help your musical and technical development. But he doesn't know your personal tastes. YOU may not know your personal tastes. You must listen to lots of repertoire to discover what you like and what you don't like. Plus, what you don't like at first, you may discover you love later on after listening to more of it! Listen to recordings and live performances to find pieces you really like. Believe me, if you choose to learn a piece you really love, you will learn it much faster, spend more time practicing, and play it far better than a piece you are only lukewarm about.

Enlarge Your Universe

You want to broaden your awareness and musical knowledge as much as possible. If you are working on the *Bouree* (or *Bourree*) from Bach's *Lute Suite I (BWV 996),* don't just listen to 12 recordings of the *Bouree*. Be sure to listen to the ENTIRE SUITE to gain a feel for how the piece fits into the suite as a whole. If you are playing *Prelude #4* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, listen to many recordings of *all five* preludes by different guitarists, not just *Prelude #4*.

When the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz began work on a new piece, he not only worked on that piece, but *sight-read* through ALL the works of that composer. Those that could not be played on the piano, he listened to or studied the scores. Talk about looking at the big picture.

If you are learning a study by Fernando Sor, listen not only to his other studies, but also his other larger works. When you're done with that, listen to works by Mauro Giuliani, one of Sor's contemporaries, to hear how his music is similar and different. But don't stop there.

Some guitarists only listen to guitarists. We also need to listen to other musicians. The classical guitar is a very very small niche in the world of classical music. If you are playing Bach, listen to the larger world of baroque music in general. After listening to Sor and Giuliani, listen to the piano music of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Listen to how Sor's style of writing is different from theirs, and how Sor fits into the larger scheme of things. You can also pick up great ideas from pianists on how to use dynamics and especially articulation to bring an authentic classical style to your playing. Sometimes, studying how other instrumentalists produce certain effects can inspire you to adapt those techniques to your guitar playing.

When you follow this approach of looking at the big picture, *you learn the language of the era and therefore can better speak the language of the particular composers whose music you are learning*.

Yes, I Know You Have Excuses

1. You don't have time. You barely have time to practice.

   Well, if you make the time to listen to others, you will save far more time learning your music (see Suzuki above). You will also play much better. Simple as that.

2. You can't afford to buy bunches of CDs.

   Try the library. Try used CDs on Amazon.com. They have great deals. I rarely buy new CDs. Used CDs are just fine and often cost less than $5. And absolutely positively try iTunes. Buy ten versions of Albeniz's *Leyenda* (*Asturias*) for 99 cents each! It doesn't get any better than that.

One More Thought

Finally, here is one more reason to listen to great artists. It is a reason that goes beyond just gaining practical ideas on interpretation, sound, and fingering that otherwise might not have occurred to us.

Ask yourself what inspired you to take up the guitar in the first place. Chances are you began playing the guitar because you heard it played by someone who touched your heart and soul with their music. They may not even have been a great player.

By listening to others, we gain inspiration. Master artists fuel our desire to work harder and improve beyond what we thought possible. We gain insights into the capabilities of our instrument.

We discover that when playing our guitar, there are no limits; only more possibilities. I think that's fabulous.