

The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing, Part 1 of 2

By Douglas Niedt

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Do you practice a song or a passage over and over but you still don't play it right all the time? Or, do you isolate the difficult parts of a piece and practice them over and over, but when you try to play through the entire song, you blow the whole thing? Do you play it well when you are alone, but then mess up when someone else is listening? Drives you nuts, doesn't it? You practice for hours and hours, play the difficult spots literally hundreds of times, but when you try to play through the piece, it still doesn't go well. It is one of the most frustrating things we experience as musicians. These situations plague many musicians, even professionals. In music, there are no second chances. When you play a song all the way through whether for yourself or someone else, you can't stop and start over.

The crucial element you must develop is consistency. It is critical not only for musicians but athletes as well. How do the best golfers sink a high percentage of their putts? How do the best basketball players nail a high percentage of their free throws? How do the best gymnasts and figure skaters execute their routines nearly flawlessly every time?

Understand that consistency does not mean playing exactly the same, day after day. That would be boring. And, we are not speaking about achieving perfection. The problem with perfection is that if you drill deep enough, you'll see that perfection has no floor or ceiling. Our goal is to consistently make music at a high level, day after day. That is what the professional does.

When I write about playing confidently and consistently I mean:

1. Being able to nail a passage or piece 5 times out of 5
2. Knowing that when you nail a piece, it's not because you're having a good day, it's because you know exactly what you must do technically to get it right the first try.
3. Quieting and controlling your thoughts during performance (playing through a piece) so you don't interfere with the motor skills you have already carefully ingrained, allowing you to perform at a high level.

But paradoxically, achieving consistency is not about raising the bar. It is not about constantly improving your very best performances. Greek poet Archilochus wrote, "We don't rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training." In my own performing career, I have found that the bottom line of achieving consistency and a high level of performance is not to improve my best performances. Although they do improve over time, the real work is focused on raising my base level. In other words, improving my worst performances. Our goal is to improve our worst performances to the point that they are indistinguishable from our best performances—perfect consistency. Of course, that's impossible to achieve. But trying to achieve that high level of performance is very fun, rewarding, and fulfilling.

Good news! Known strategies, tried and tested, can be used to improve your consistency in playing the guitar. By the way, stage fright or anxiety can have a huge effect on consistency. But that is its own topic that I wrote about [here](#).

Practice More?

Many of us think that we must simply practice more to play a piece consistently well and eliminate or reduce the hit-or-miss quality of our playing. If we are still messing up, we think we haven't worked on the passage enough and we must do more repetitions. Guess what? That is not true. It's all about *how* you practice.

Mindless Practice (What Most of Us Do) vs. Deliberate Practice

Mindless Practice

Many of us practice on autopilot. We begin playing, hit a rough spot, stop and practice the rough spot several times until it sounds better, and move on. If we stop to ask ourselves why that spot sounded rough, we may come up with statements such as there were buzzes, the bar chord wasn't clear, the notes in the fast scale weren't clear, or the shift wasn't very good. But do we know which notes buzzed? Do we know why the bar chord wasn't clear? Do we know which notes in the fast scale were not clear? Do we know why the shift wasn't very good?

If we can't come up with specific answers to these questions, we are engaged in mindless repetition! Going through the motions of playing a passage over and over until we have done some arbitrary number of repetitions and then moving on, does not work.

This type of practice produces little improvement. If we have been practicing a piece over and over for days or weeks and it doesn't seem like it's getting any better, there's a good chance we are engaged in mindless practice.

In fact, mindless practice can do a lot of damage. If we don't know *why* something is failing and it fails more often than not, we are ingraining bad habits into our hands and muscles. They are learning to do the wrong things! That can make it very difficult for us to undo those habits even when we finally learn to practice correctly.

In mindless practice, you have not figured out exactly what you need to do to get a passage to sound good on a consistent basis. It continues to be hit or miss. When you don't really know what you specifically need to do to play a passage well, your subconscious mind knows you are clueless. This can affect your overall confidence.

It is only when you truly understand the details of the underlying mechanics required to make the piece or passage come out right, that you will have the confidence to nail it on the first try whenever you want. You will know it is not luck. You will know that the reason you sound consistently good is that you have practiced correctly and learned to do the right things. You will know exactly what to do to make every note sound the way you want it to.

DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Deliberate Practice is active and constant thought, listening, and analysis. To get good at it requires practice—yes, you must practice how to practice. Deliberate Practice lays the foundation for improving your level of skill. It is also a key ingredient to help you play more confidently and securely when you play through an entire piece.

It is not the number of hours that matters. It is the type of practice that produces results. Deliberate Practice is very efficient and will save you many hours of mindless practice.

This type of practice is totally goal-directed. It is used to focus on finding specific solutions to why a passage does not sound right. Mindless repetition is never used. The guitarist must take the time to:

1. Stop.
2. Find specifically what is wrong. Why doesn't this sound right? Is it a buzz, bad rhythm, incorrect articulation, wrong note, a note is not coming out, pulling a note out of tune, bad tone, incorrect balance between parts, something else?
3. Investigate what is causing the problem you identified in step #2. What am I doing or not doing that is causing this problem that makes the passage sound bad or not quite right?
4. Find a precise solution or combination of solutions that will consistently fix the problem. What tweaks do I need to make so I know I will always play this passage really well?

Deliberate Practice in Action

Here is an example I run into frequently with students. The problem is getting into John Williams' voicing of the high chord in measure #38 of *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz) without delay and playing it clearly:

Leyenda (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

High chord as voiced
by John Williams

If I analyze all the things that usually go wrong and how to fix them, I come up with this list:

The Problem	The Solutions
5 th -string G is not clear on chord.	1. I need to play the preceding F# and G on the pad of my 1st finger, not the tip. 2. I need to be at least in the middle of the fret. 3. Place thumb opposite 9th fretwire or 10th fret.
I'm scrambling to place the 2 nd , 3 rd , and 4 th fingers.	1. I need to practice left-hand alone with my 1st finger on the 5th-string G and teach the three fingers to land together. 2. When I play the 5th-string G, I need to be sure the other three fingers are precisely prepared above each of their strings, no more than ¼ inch above the strings. 3. Try pre-planting the 4th finger on the 1st-string high E as I play the 5th-string G.
Fingers are unstable on the chord. Some are pulling strings into other strings. Some are not close enough to their fret.	1. Use a partial bar (the 1st finger barring roughly only the 4th and 5th strings with the first finger hyperextended). 2. Use a flatter bar, barring 5 strings. 3. Use something between those two extremes. 4. Lean the fingers to the left and tuck the elbow into your side.

	5. Lean the fingers to the right and wing the elbow out to the left. 6. Change the position of the guitar. Head of guitar up, down, forward, back. Change inclination of neck in combination with changes of position of the head of the guitar. 7. Place thumb opposite 9 th fretwire or 10 th fret.
There is a pause before I strum the chord.	1. Practice both measures right-hand alone. Find the right-hand position in which you can play both the tremolo and strum the chord without altering the hand position. 2. Use the correct nail/flesh contact on the strum.
One of my left-hand fingers keeps missing its note on the chord.	1. Stare at the landing point of that finger. 2. Prepare it above the correct string and as close as possible to the string.

Deliberate Practice demands that you first determine what problems you are having. Then, each solution must be carefully tested one at a time. Each success or failure must be analyzed to determine if additional tweaks need to be tested.

Once you discover all the specific items that must be done to play the passage successfully, WRITE THEM DOWN. This is a mentally taxing and intense experience. You do not want to have to repeat it because you forgot what worked the previous day.

Deliberate Practice may seem overwhelming at first, but the great thing is that it produces results that work consistently and dependably. In the long run, you will save a lot of time and your rate of improvement will speed up considerably.

This is how you will conduct your Deliberate Practice:

1. Define the goal. How do you want this note, this chord, this phrase to sound?
2. Play it.
3. Analyze what you just played. What specifically, does not sound right?
4. Why doesn't it sound the way you imagined it would sound in step #1? What did you do wrong? What do you need to do differently to fix it?
5. If you are not sure, explore some potential solutions. What can you do to make it sound the way you want it to sound?
6. Test each solution to see which one or combination of several works best.
7. Play the note, chord, or passage several times to incorporate the solution into your muscle memory. Play

carefully and slowly (more on this later). Do NOT practice mistakes.

8. Write down the solution in detail.

9. Monitor the implementation over a period of several days. Do the solutions still work? Do they need to be tweaked? If they fail, you will need to reexamine what is going wrong and why.

Do Not Practice Mistakes!

A very important principle of good practice is a simple one: do not practice mistakes. In repetitious practice, even Deliberate Practice, if you play a passage 15 times and 10 of the reps are bad and 5 good, you have just taught yourself to play the passage wrong. Fingers are stupid. They do not know what is right and what is wrong. They will recall whatever they have done the most times.

1. Slow down! Slow practice and extremely slow practice are both good. You will make fewer mistakes.

2. Hesitate, rather than err. Sometimes, you must forget about rhythm. You can be cruising along but when you come to the difficult spot, put the brakes on. Come to a complete halt if you must. Play the spot correctly and then cruise on. As you become more confident playing the passage, you will gradually shorten the hesitation until it is gone.

Research shows that one of the distinguishing differences between elite performers and average performers is that the elites practice very carefully (slowly with hesitations) to ensure that they always perform a *greater percentage of good repetitions than bad*.

Work on your weaknesses, not your strengths

This strategy seems obvious but many guitarists do not use it enough. It can be disheartening to work on the things that are most difficult for you. And it is hard. Working on your weaknesses requires more mental and physical effort than working on passages you play much better. The temptation is to tell yourself, "I will practice that really tough part later. First, I will practice this other part. I don't have much of a problem with it, but it could still use some improvement." Then what happens is you will run short on time and not give the really difficult passage the time needed to master it. Or, you won't get to it at all.

Elite performers always focus on improving their *weakest* spots and skills with Deliberate Practice.

Overlearning

Many of us will repeatedly practice a passage until we get it right a few times and then move on. That will produce only minimal learning. The best procedure is to do 100% Overlearning.

When you practice a passage, if it takes 30 repetitions of deliberate practice to find the solutions that work to enable you to play the passage well, do an additional 30 repetitions to seal the deal. If it takes 45 repetitions to find the solutions, do an additional 45 repetitions to fulfill 100% Overlearning.

Research shows that 100% Overlearning leads to gains that last longer than practicing up to the "good enough" point. As the passage is practiced day to day, fewer errors are made and fewer repetitions are required to play the passage consistently error-free.

A side benefit is that if you know that 100% Overlearning is based on how many repetitions it first takes you to reach proficiency, you will try harder and focus more to keep that number as low as possible:

75 repetitions to reach proficiency=75 additional repetitions for 100% Overlearning=150 total repetitions

12 repetitions to reach proficiency=12 additional repetitions for 100% Overlearning=24 total repetitions

I don't know about you, but I would focus really hard so I could get my 100% Overlearning done with 24 reps instead of 150!

Be careful how you talk to yourself

A behavior that can derail your Deliberate Practice is negative or failure-type self-talk. As you engage in the analytical and critical thought necessary for effective Deliberate Practice, it is very important to keep your self-talk or inner voice on a positive track. Negative thinking is poisonous. Ever had these thoughts or something similar when you are practicing?

Examples of Negative self-talk:

I suck.

Jeez, play it right this time.

What is wrong with me?

I will never get this right.

I've practiced this spot a thousand times and I missed it again. What is wrong with me?

The problem is that your subconscious mind listens to everything you say to yourself. It has no filter and will eventually accept repeated thoughts as reality. It doesn't matter if your thoughts are only a result of frustration and you don't really believe them. Your subconscious is completely literal. The strength of your self-confidence is determined partly by your subconscious beliefs. When you tell yourself, "I'll never get this scale to sound right," your subconscious takes that in and over time can undermine your real ability and effort to play it correctly.

Don't go there. Maintain positive thoughts at all times. Instead of "I suck", stay cool and ask yourself, "Why did that not sound right? What happened to cause it to fail?" Then, continue through your steps of Deliberate Practice and find the solution.

WHEW! That is a lot of information. Ponder, consider, contemplate, and ruminate on all of that. Test it out.

Next month I will explain more practice strategies and how to use them so that finally, you will be able to play through an entire piece confidently and consistently.