

The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing, Part 2

By Douglas Niedt

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Deliberate Practice is Great, But You Must Go a Step Further

Even with Deliberate Practice, you may find yourself ready to throw your music across the room when the passage you practiced so carefully yesterday fails again or seems worse when you play it today.

When we use Deliberate Practice, we constantly monitor and critique what we are doing. We listen for mistakes or imperfections. We analyze and judge. We stop and start constantly and repeat passages over and over. In the early stages, this is the best way to develop our technique and motor skills to learn a passage or piece. But strangely, it is not the best way to practice to be able to *consistently* play through a passage or an entire piece successfully day after day.

Habit Strength

The development of our **habit strength** is a major requirement for us to reach our goal of successfully and consistently playing a passage or a piece all the through. Here is how habit strength works:

Day #1: You thoroughly practice a passage or piece.

Day #2: You pick up your guitar, warm up, and play that same passage or piece *one time*.

The way you play it on the *first try* on Day #2 is a measure of the *real habit strength* of your technique to execute the passage.

Yes, if you play it a few more times it will sound better. But it is the *first attempt* that counts. *That first attempt is the measure of your habit strength.*

When you practice a passage multiple times with Deliberate Practice, you are learning to make adjustments. As you have already learned, the ability to make the correct adjustments is crucial to Deliberate Practice.

But, how you play the passage on the 22nd repetition is only the *momentary strength* of the habit. It is not a true reflection of your *real mastery* of the passage. The level of your *real mastery* or habit strength, is shown on the *first attempt*.

Momentary mastery

The motor or muscle memory of momentary mastery is stored in your short-term memory which means that when you play the passage it sounds good right now, especially after a few or several repetitions. But it doesn't stick well overnight.

Real mastery

The muscle memory of real mastery is stored in your long-term memory. This is habit strength. This is the type of learning that enables you to play a passage well on the first try, day after day.

How to develop your habit strength

Let's look at the practice strategy you need to use to make the jump from momentary mastery (which resides in short-term memory) to real mastery (which resides in long-term memory).

Retrieval

When we successfully play through a piece from beginning to end, whether for ourselves or for someone else, everything is different from Deliberate Practice. We let go and play freely. We don't analyze, we don't think about mistakes, and we don't judge small imperfections. We go with the flow.

Our Deliberate Practice is about encoding the correct muscle movements and thinking into our brain through careful repetition. But, if our mind goes into Deliberate Practice mode while we are trying to play through the piece, things will actually fall apart. All those dozens of critical and analytical thoughts that can be useful in Deliberate Practice, derail the creative flow of a play-through-the-piece performance within seconds.

To successfully play through an entire piece, we must set aside the Deliberate Practice skills we used to hone our technique. We must switch over to a different type of practice in order to learn to *retrieve* the information that was encoded into our mind and fingers through Deliberate Practice. Not just retrieve it, but *retrieve it on the first try* when we try to play a passage or piece. The best way to do this is through Random Practice (some call it Interleaved Practice).

Improving Retrieval through Random Practice

If we are working on two pieces and have one hour to practice, most of us naturally will spend 30 minutes on Piece #1 and 30 minutes on Piece #2. The problem with that is we will tend to do a fair amount of repetitious practice which only reinforces momentary mastery.

Instead, use a strategy called Random Practice.

1. Practice Piece #1 from point A (not necessarily the beginning) for no more than 5 minutes. Note: there is nothing magical about 5 minutes. It can be one minute, three minutes, whatever.
2. Jump to Piece #2 and practice it from Point A for no more than 5 minutes.
3. Back to Piece #1 but begin practicing at point B.

4. Jump to Piece #2 but begin practicing at point B.
5. Back to Piece #1 but begin practicing at point C.
6. Jump to Piece #2 but start at point C.
7. Back to Piece #1 and take another shot at point A.
8. Jump to Piece #2 and go back to point A.

Keep randomizing which piece you practice and where you start.

9. Back to Piece #1 from point C.
10. Stay with Piece #1 from point A.
11. Piece #2 from point B.

Keep randomizing. Don't fall into any pattern.

If you have more practice time available, you could work on more pieces at once. Or, if you are working on 26 difficult passages from several pieces, you can randomize the practice of those 26 passages. Depending on the length of each of the passages, you may want to limit the practice of each to no more than 1-3 minutes, jumping randomly from one to another.

If you are working on passages, gradually reduce the practice time you are spending on each passage until you are randomly playing each passage once. You are now experiencing your real habit strength—how you play something on the first attempt. You should see a definite improvement.

If some passages are still not going well, continue your Random Practice, but go back to spending more time on each passage. Instead of 1 minute, do 3 minutes. If a passage is still giving you trouble, you may need to step back to Deliberate Practice to fix weak spots. Then, return to Random Practice.

As you see improvement in short passages or small sections, expand your Random Practice to focus on larger sections and entire pieces.

For some passages or for entire pieces, you may find a combination of Deliberate Practice and Random Practice works best. They may be combined in one practice session or randomly alternated from day to day. Experiment.

Why it works

Paraphrasing Dr. Christine Carter of the Manhattan School of Music, she explains that "our brains are hardwired to pay attention to change, not repetition. If you show a baby the same object over and over, they will gradually stop paying attention. It is called 'habituation'. Change the object, and the baby's attention returns full force. The same goes for adults. We all know that mindless repetition (not Deliberate Practice!) is boring and our brains disengage from the activity."

Dr. Carter further explains, "when we engage in Random Practice, we keep restarting different tasks. When we come back to a task after an intervening task, our brain must reconstruct the action plan for what we are about to do. It is at this moment of reconstruction that our brains are the most active. More mental activity leads to greater long-term learning. Random Practice consistently produces superior retention the next day or several days later."

Limiting the practice time of any single element prevents us from falling into a repetition loop. It also keeps us fresh, engaged, and alert. In Random Practice, our fingers and mind are undergoing constant change of movements and thoughts. The elimination of rote repetition wakes up the parts of the brain responsible for the *retrieval of information* previously encoded by Deliberate Practice.

The intentional practice of retrieval through Random Practice is what increases our habit strength. Retrieval of the habits strengthens our long-term muscle memory of those habits, resulting in real mastery that sticks day after day.

If you practice retrieval through Random Practice, playing things correctly on the first try will happen far more frequently. Consistency will finally make its appearance in your playing!

You may struggle a little with Random Practice. It can feel a little odd to practice this way. We are used to the improvement we experience by practicing something over and over. But it is by using retrieval practice that we train the brain to retrieve the correct sequence of finger movements and thoughts from the millions of incorrect ones on the very first try.

The Mental Game

Training the fingers to consistently execute the correct movements is only part of the key to playing consistently. Your mental game is crucial. *How you react mentally from moment to moment as you play a piece, is one of the primary elements that determines the consistency of your playing.*

Studies show that musicians play the worst when they are thinking critically or analytically. Those who think, "Here comes that hard chord" or "@#\$%&! that sounded horrible" or "Man, I messed that up again" or "Arch my wrist, plant my fingers, use the correct fingering" do very poorly. Analytical and critical thoughts are only useful during your Deliberate Practice (and remember, those thoughts should only be positive). **When you are trying to play through a piece, analytical and critical thoughts must be banished from your mind.**

It is also very important that what we are thinking about as we play is consistent from one repetition or performance to the next.

So, What Should I Think About?

In your mind, hear what is coming next

Those who focus on the general sound of what they are playing, anticipating the sound of the next note, or chord or phrase and focusing on the general feel and enjoyment of playing, do very well in successfully playing a piece all the way through.

A key element is to learn to hear *before* you play. You must learn to hear in your mind, a clear aural image of what you are about to play, before you play one note.

To learn how to do this, start by hearing just a short phrase or passage in your mind before playing it. Hear every nuance and detail exactly the way you want to play it. If you are unable to hear it in your head, cue up Segovia, Williams, or whoever you want to emulate, and listen to them play the phrase or passage.

Then, let go. Don't analyze, don't micromanage, don't think about minutiae. Without thought, just play the phrase or passage. Focus on the big picture of how things feel and sound overall. Again, don't analyze. Remember, this is VERY different from Deliberate Practice.

Work your way through the piece continuing with short phrases. Each time, hear the passage in your head first, or listen to someone play it, and then *enjoy playing it without critical thought*. In time, you will be able to work with longer and longer passages until you maintain this stream of thought through the entire piece.

This type of playing results in mental quietness and far less tension in the hands. Having established the correct physical movements with Deliberate Practice and having learned to retrieve them with Random Practice, you can now play without worrying whether your solutions will work. You know they will.

Hearing what you are going to play before you play it and then playing it without critical thought, must be practiced and turned into an automatic habit, just like everything else you worked on in the Deliberate Practice and Random Practice stages of your learning.

Again, the goal is to quiet the analytical part of your mind. Otherwise, it will begin speaking to you, distracting you, and causing you to doubt whether you will play the passage or piece well. If you can quiet the analytical self, the neuro-muscular system that you have trained so carefully with Deliberate and Random Practice will take over and perform flawlessly.

Mental imagery

Many top artists use mental imagery to keep the analytical and critical mind quiet. They focus on mental images of things the music makes them think of. They focus on a story they have put together, kind of a mental movie that the music inspires within them. They may focus on a person the music makes them

think of as they play the piece. Or, they may recall a special or meaningful event or memory evoked by the music.

It is important to immerse oneself in the mental imagery. It must be very clear and detailed. Otherwise, when you approach a difficult technical spot in the piece, your analytical mind will force its way in, break the flow and possibly derail the performance. Remember, you have already worked out all the technical problems through Deliberate Practice and trained yourself to retrieve them with Random Practice. You WILL play them correctly if you keep your critical mind quiet. The tough spots don't require any special attention as you are playing through the piece.

To demonstrate to my students how to use mental imagery, I use a simple example: "A Walk in the Woods on a Summer Day". I explain that in using mental imagery, it is important to use as many of our senses and include as much detail as possible. As I play Federico Moreno Torroba's *Romance de los Pinos* (*Romance of the Pines*), I describe to the students the things I am experiencing:

1. I see the trees
2. I see the sunlight coming through the trees
3. I smell the humid woodsy and earthy air
4. I hear the leaves rustle, the birds sing, animals scampering in the bushes
5. I hear a running stream in the distance
6. I feel my feet trod on the woodland floor
7. I smell the scent of pine or flowering shrubs
8. I feel a breeze on my face
9. In a clearing, I feel the sun on my face
10. I feel the bark of the trees and the textures of the leaves
11. I taste the honeysuckle at the edge of the woodland

I could go on and on. The point is, detail is very important. This type of mental thought is great not only for keeping the analytical mind quiet, but is also extremely helpful in playing the piece expressively with feeling and emotion. The closer the mental imagery is to your personal experience, the more real the emotion will be. When you play a piece for someone and think of deeply personal thoughts, your listener will feel those emotions too. It's a key ingredient of connecting with an audience.

For more on this, read my technique tip: [Performing with Energy, Passion, and Excitement: What do Yo-Yo Ma, Christina Aguilera, and The Pussycat Dolls have in common?](#)

Summary

1. Avoid mindless repetition at all costs.
2. Use Deliberate Practice in the early stages of learning a piece.
3. After you achieve consistency playing individual passages and small sections with Deliberate Practice, begin the process of retrieval using Random Practice.
4. Use a combination of Deliberate Practice and Random Practice to continue to improve your consistency on passages and small sections.

5. Use a combination of Random Practice and Deliberate Practice as you proceed to practicing larger sections and finally, entire pieces.
6. Always be aware of your Mental Game. No negative thoughts. Ever. Only use positive analytical and critical thought during Deliberate Practice. In Random Practice, hear what is coming next and/or use mental imagery to quiet the mind and silence critical and analytic thought.
7. In playing through a piece and especially in performance, use detailed mental imagery.