

The Art of Practice - a new approach to
improve your guitar playing by Vic Hyland

WELCOME TO THE ART OF
PRACTICE

When I first started teaching I drew upon what I had learned from my own teacher and my own rather limited experience. However, when you start to teach others, you learn a great deal about yourself as you have to ask why you do something in a particular way. The things that you have taken for granted have to be explained.

Over time I also studied various aspects of the mind using my pupils as guinea pigs and I have made a number of interesting discoveries which when applied have had very favourable results and no one died in the experiments.

The main thrust of my work is based on the belief that we are all musical. In fact, music is the primary programming of our mother's heartbeat and voice heard as a set of reverberations in the womb. This I believe is the foundation not only of our musical knowledge but also of our language.

When we hear music, we are stimulated by this pre-birth memory with the addition of our life experiences that continue to shape our appreciation of what we hear and in our cases create.

This is not a new concept. Pythagoras used music to develop the consciousness of his pupils by requiring them to play a musical instrument believing that it helped their spiritual and intellectual development, and as with many things Greek these ideas may have originated in Egypt and then down the rabbit hole of antiquity to Babylon and Sumer who is to say?

Music has long been associated with mysticism, religion and spiritual experience and what I am proposing is that because music has such an effect on the mind, if we understand the process of learning and use that to enhance our ability to play, then that in turn will enhance the mind and so on.

I believe after all these years where the academic establishment has second rated the arts including music it looks as if we are about to prove that music in fact can be far more effective in developing the mind than many academic subjects. It does this by stimulating other parts of the brain that academic subjects do not. This is also added to the fact that our education system is

almost totally left brained in its approach to learning with measurements and tests making thinking fit into a prescribed criterion.

Because I believe that the most effective learning happens unconsciously. I am going to present this information in such a way that will just require you to do it, play it, have fun, like a child or as they would say in Zen "with a beginner's mind". This unleashes the power of the unconscious. So have faith, or in the words of the Nike advertising 'Just do it!

Once you can do it **then** work it out. So why not before? Remember grammar is not effective until you can speak the language. Think of how you learned grammar as a child, you just picked it up; when you then studied the grammar at school it was easy. Compared that with learning a foreign language in which you learnt the grammar as you were wrestling with the words. How effective was that?

The same applies to the theory of learning or the theory of music; do it first than explore later.

Before we commence, I would like to make one big thank you.

In the years of study on this, one man stands out above all and I believe that in the many books that have been written on the subject that he pioneered, namely NLP, he has not even been mentioned.

This gentleman is Richard Bandler and along with the work done by Paul McKenna and Michael Breen on the subject of NLP it has been a great help to me in being able to realise what I had been doing all along!

Then said a teacher speak to us of teaching and he said
No man can reveal to you aught but that which already
Lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge
The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple among
His followers gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness
If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom
But rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

Kahlil Gibran

Practising Techniques

1. THE WORKS

We need to understand the function of the conscious and unconscious mind with regard to the practice and performance of music. When we practise we are really programming the unconscious by using the conscious mind.

Let us draw an analogy with the computer system where the conscious mind is like the working memory of a computer. To understand the differences between these different states of mind think about when you sleep at night, your conscious mind shuts down and leaves the unconscious working. This gives us an insight into the world of the unconscious, a fantastic place where anything can happen.

Continuing our analogy with the computer, your unconscious mind works like the hard disc and all the other forms of long-term storage that you have including the Internet. It is truly the vast untapped powerhouse of the mind.

Your conscious mind on the other hand is very limited by comparison but acts like a manager organising us and preparing the list of jobs that the vast factory of the unconscious will do.

Many of our problems with learning are due to us raising the conscious mind onto a pedestal. We have developed our intellectual minds without paying attention to our instinctive abilities of learning and we are spending a lot of time dealing with the weakest part of our brains, that of the conscious.

Giant Steps are what you take
Walking on the Moon

Sting

2. SHORT CIRCUIT

What we are going to do is short circuit the process of learning so that the conscious part of the mind is actually doing what is required and no more, as one of the problems of playing a musical instrument is that the more you think about what you do, the more you interrupt the programming by the over use of the conscious mind. This leads to you making more mistakes than you would otherwise make.

The unconscious mind stores the programmed information, it is like flicking the switch and letting it run. Whereas the conscious mind focuses and manages the process and details of what is required. So let's have a look at how we need to work on this.

Until you try you do not know what you can do

Henry James

3. SMALL BITS

The conscious mind is slow and it is limited, because of this we need to take small bits of information. If you are playing your first melody, take three or four notes, no more than that and play them three or four times very slowly (so you can think about what you are doing), making sure that the information is accurate. Then as you have got each section start to put them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

It helps to place another piece of paper over the music so that you can only see the part you are working on. This prevents you from wandering off and keeps you focused on the part that you are learning.

You are recording the music into your mind and the practice develops muscle memory.

To the full-voiced quire below,
In service high and anthems clear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes.

John Milton

4. JIGSAW PUZZLE

Now you have got section A (three or four notes that you have played) then you get the next section (three or four notes), which we will call, section B and then put A and B together. At this point you really need to be listening very carefully so that what you are playing makes musical sense; these sections are like computer files.

Playing from one section to another helps to overlap the files. This is why if you have learnt a piece it is sometimes difficult to play from a point other than the beginning without going back to the start of the section. We need the trigger points to help us remember.

When I first started learning the guitar I used to transcribe solos from records and I was intrigued that sometimes I could not remember the beginning of the piece until I had heard the end of the preceding track. This was obviously the trigger that my mind was using for me to remember the music.

The best will in the world when forced achieves nothing
The best righteousness when forced achieves nothing
The best good-form when forced does not come out right

Lao-Tzu

5. LAYERING INFORMATION AND THE LIBRARIAN

SEE where the notes are as you are playing them and FEEL it in your fingers and LISTEN. This idea of layering information of the senses is very important to the learning process. Now I always draw an analogy with the unconscious mind to a librarian who is locked away in their library. They do not see the light of day and all the contact that they have with the outside world is through the data that they receive.

Think of the amount of information coming from your senses. This is why the more you practise and use all of your senses the more important this practise seems to be to the librarian and therefore your unconscious mind will put it in an accessible place for you to be able to get hold of it again.

It is as if the Librarian finds a place on the shelf for the guitar playing because it is important.

This enables you to learn faster later as the mind automatically adds the new information to the material already learnt now it has a 'place'.

A musician, if he is a messenger, is like a child who hasn't been handled too many times by man, hasn't had too many fingerprints across his brain.

Jimi Hendrix

6. CHUNKING

Let's go back and look at why we have to play three and four notes and why we need to repeat them three or four times.

The three or four notes chunking is a bit like remembering a shopping list. The conscious mind seems to create files for the unconscious mind to use, but each file has only got three or four bits of information in it. This is almost like it is the reverse of the fight/flight syndrome. You can imagine one of your ancestors coming out the cave to find he is face to face with a Sabre Tooth Tiger and his mind would have opened up the file that said Sabre Tooth Tiger and he would have had four options,

1. Scream,
2. Fight
3. Run
4. Do all of them at the same time.

So when we are creating a file it is like we are filling up those 4 bit files. Next we overlap the files so that they trigger one another off.

Have you ever tried to remember a shopping list? As soon as you get over four items, you are going to forget something unless those items break down into memorable patterns, for instance, say you had to remember bread, butter, jam, sugar, margarine, self raising flour, eggs, tea bags and milk. Well as a list that would be quite difficult to remember unless, of course, you realise you have actually got three different sets of items, one set being the ingredients for making jam sandwiches, that is your bread and butter and jam, and then the margarine, sugar, self raising flour and eggs are for making a sponge cake then finally tea bags and milk to make a cup of tea.

We are not just using the conscious part of the mind now instead we are also using the unconscious mind because these are pre-programmed files of information, a memory pattern.

Pavlov's advice on how to succeed 'Passion and gradualness'. Even in those areas where we have already developed a high degree of skill, it sometimes helps to drop back, lower one's sights a bit and practise with a feeling of ease.

Maxwell Maltz

7. PATHWAYS TO GREATNESS

Playing notes three or four times.

Obviously memory is laid down just like we lay down a pathway.

If you walk across a field and look behind you, you can see where you have been.

If you walk backwards or forwards across that you will see a very clearly defined path, so that is why we repeat it. We have got to do it slowly because we are using the conscious part of the mind. We must programme the information correctly, so we need to be using the correct fingers, obviously you have to be playing the correct notes and correct hand position and make sure that it sounds right.

Life is like playing a solo violin in public and learning the instrument as one goes on.

Samuel Butler

8. SENSE JUGGLING - YOU KNOW IT MAKES SENSE.

Now that we have got this far and we have started putting it together like a jigsaw puzzle, and we are using lots of different senses which we have already said, now we get to a point when we can start anywhere in the piece to do our practise. We do not go back to the beginning and play from the beginning every time. That would just mean that the beginning becomes really good and the ending is lousy as it will not have been practised enough.

We just start from the part that we need to work on. We learn that section, memorise the next part then put them together. Go on to the next part and learn it and perhaps the next phrase and then put them together and so forth, fusing them together in little couplets.

In this process we also use the 'sense juggling' from the visual cues, such as visualising the notes mapping out the fingerboard then feeling them in your fingers, then by listening and returning to visual then auditory and so on.

Here it is right now. Start thinking about it and you miss it

Huang - Po

9. CHANGE YOUR MIND - WATCH TV. CONSCIOUS-UNCONSCIOUS

We have learnt the notes and our fingers seem to be working for us automatically we now have to 'run the programme'. The easiest way to do this is to sit and watch the television whilst playing what you have learnt.

This technique enables you to take your conscious mind away from your fingers. This is a form of self-hypnosis.

If you study children whilst they are watching TV or playing on a computer they are often oblivious to you when you talk to them. They often do not hear you as they are mesmerised by the pictures on the screen.

It seems to be that once the eyes are focused on something your conscious mind seems to follow, this allows the unconscious mind to run unimpeded.

This is a great technique for learning how to play scales faster and putting everything together. Remember this is not for learning new information only for running the programme and making the learnt information smooth.

You can tell whether a person plays or not by the way he carries the instrument, whether it means something to him or not.

Then the way they talk and act. If they act too hip, you know they can't play shit.

Miles Davis

10. OUR MAN JIMI

There are lots of other techniques, you could read a book, hold a conversation or you can, like Jimmy Hendrix, get up in the morning and put your guitar on, then go downstairs and cook your breakfast whilst playing the guitar.

Hendrix was also known to take his guitar to the toilet with him! I am not suggesting that you go that far but you can see that the guitar became part of the man.

It is the concept that your guitar is an extension of yourself. You are not just setting aside time to practise just for half an hour a day; it has become part of your life.

Every Guitarist has a special quality of sound. The best ones will use a good ear, much sensitivity, and a thorough knowledge of music to prepare the nuances and colours of sound.

Andres Segovia

11. BE LIKE A CHILD

A lot of the ideas that I have collected over the years have been formed by the study of children learning to talk, learning to walk etc, and that they take ideas and play with them metaphorically and literally running with those ideas.

A child doesn't sit down for half an hour a day to learn to talk; they are doing it all the time. They play with words and are continually experimenting in their games.

This is really how we should learn to play a musical instrument it should be done subliminally a lot of the time with a little bit of tidying up required from the conscious mind, we need to be doing other things when we are practising wherever possible!

You have to persist and out of the sheer frustration of what you've been doing or have not been doing you just come out the other side. Of course when you come out the other side you find that there's an even bigger hill to climb than the last one.

Allen Holdsworth

12. THE MORE YOU DO IT THE BETTER YOU GET AT IT AS THE ACTRESS SAID TO THE BISHOP.

Frequency of practise is more important than the amount of time taken in one go. The conscious mind gets bored and shuts down and goes to sleep. The unconscious mind doesn't get bored otherwise we would be dead.

So to keep the interest running with the conscious mind, you will need to break the practice up into different sections so you have one part which is informative learning and then have an experimental section and just run backwards and forwards between these sections. Work like this for 20/30 minutes then have a break for a few moments, go and do something else then pick up the instrument again later.

One of the most important things that you must remember is never put the instrument away in its bag, keep it out, you need to keep coming back and experimenting, playing a bit, as each time you return to the instrument the mind is fresh and if the instrument is out of sight, it is out of mind.

Such sweet compulsion doth in music lie.

John Milton

13. SO WHAT ABOUT BEING IN CONTROL?

I mentioned comparisons earlier with the conscious and unconscious mind being like a computer and I said that the conscious is similar to RAM on a computer. The unconscious is like the hard drive and all the other storage devices including the Internet as well.

Tony Buzan the respected writer on the mind says that we use less than .001% of our brainpower! So how do we control this beast?

A good way of looking at it is to say that the unconscious mind is like a factory and the conscious mind is the Managing Director. He is the one in his office with a phone who gives directions to the factory, tells them what he wants and when he needs it. When he gets it right, they produce the right thing and when HE gets it wrong they do exactly what they are asked.

The factory is not just any old factory, it is the entire planet and probably the entire universe. Such is the power of the unconscious mind that we need to get it into perspective that the role of the conscious is that of managing, and one important aspect of this is that we should set ourselves targets and goals.

Now it is a good idea to have different levels of goals some of them being very long term and these can be almost incredible targets a wish list in fact. We then can work back from these so that you can achieve something today in the form of another list of short term goals. These targets on the other hand must be achievable and measurable.

They can because they think they can.

Virgil

14. SAIL AWAY

Imagine two crews of yachtsmen. The first crew get on board the boat and they set sail. The wind blows them one way, the wind changes and they go in another direction and there is a storm they go somewhere else and eventually after a period of time they end up back where they started.

The second crew by contrast sit down and plan where they are going to go, they make allowance for which way the wind is blowing and plot their course accordingly they set off and the wind changes and they change to compensate. They are always responding to influences, but keeping in mind the course of action that they have got to take to achieve their objective.

This is where the real power of the conscious mind lies in its ability to manage and guide us.

Now I would suggest that when you goal set, say for instance you have got a long term goal to get to grade eight on a particular instrument and then you have to work back to what you have to do today from that point. So today you may have to practice your scales, you may have to practise arpeggios, your pieces etc.

It is not the mountains that you have to climb that wear you down but the pebble in your shoe.

Mohammed Ali

15. MAKE TODAY'S GOALS ACHIEVABLE AND MEASUREABLE

Instead of saying I'm going to learn this piece (which might not be achievable today) set a goal to play various sections of that piece a certain number of times. As an example, play a scale five times, or play bars x, y z from that piece ten times, these aims are achievable and measurable.

We need to get the motivation behind us making us feel good because the problem with practising is that there is nothing to see when you have finished, not like painting a picture, there is nothing tangible to show for your effort. In this approach we are able to 'see' what we have done by simply crossing off the tasks from a list.

Learning is a process that takes time and according to research we have to sleep in order for the brain to make these raw connections between our brains and our muscles. That is why there may be times when you will be slogging away at something never seeming to be getting anywhere but the next day when you pick the instrument up you suddenly can play the offending section of music. Therefore the process is to have achievable aims, measurable on a day to day basis that build up to objectives that are very high. Push yourself with the long-term goals but do something today that is achievable and remember to be patient.

'Remember that music is not the notes they are only the brown paper bags that
the music is in'

Allan Billanie

16. MUSIC IS FOUND IN THE SILENCE BETWEEN THE NOTES

I was very fortunate to have had a most inspired guitar teacher named Allan Billanie. He was a true inspiration to me and many others of whom he taught. I would say that it was his ability to create memorable images that were infused with emotion that made him so special. The opening quotation probably came from the great Andre Segovia but Allan said something to me that was in the same vein and was even more evocative and perhaps more Zen in its profoundness.

Whilst I was learning a piece once, he looked at me and said 'Remember that music is not the notes, they are on the brown paper bags that the music is in'. This idea that music was an ethereal force that was infused in the notes was mind blowing to me at the time and along with the other things that I learnt whilst studying with him gave me a very deep understanding of expression.

So let us look at how we can use music to relax us. Instead of intellectualising the music, let us be connected to the feeling of the music, connect with the spaces, feel the essence with the spirit of the piece or should I say peace.

Let the music take you somewhere and just let the journey guide you wherever you wish. Let the troubles and thoughts of the day disappear for a while.

Let the music take you to feelings of happiness as this releases endorphins that heals us and makes us feel good and happy and connected.

We also know that when we are relaxed, we produce brain waves that are better for us, giving us fresh ideas from our unconscious minds.

Don't be in too much of a hurry to solve all your doubts and problems. As the masters say 'Make haste slowly'

Sogyal Rinpoche

17. A NEW EXPERIENCE EVERY TIME, Jimi, float on.

Another interesting aspect in the performance of music is that it is different in every performance that is the true nature of music; it is an energy that is constantly changing like everything in the universe.

Many of our problems are caused by trying to hold on to something as it is and not allowing it to change or even helping the change to happen, perhaps coaxing it a little to go in the way that you would wish.

I have often observed that when we stick our flag in the ground and profess that this ground is ours, or this is 'the way things are' etc, we then have something to defend. Perhaps the course of the guerrilla fighter is the best, being able to be flexible with life's problems.

With the performance of music let every performance be different, do not compare it with what came before, let go and free yourself from the anxiety.

Let the music set you free by helping you to relax, just imagine the music floating away from you taking your problems with them and bringing with the new notes the answers that will take root in your subconscious and bear fruit as ideas in the coming days.

The most important thing I look for in a musician is whether he knows how to listen.

Duke Ellington

18. A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES

With practise we also have to be very patient as I have previously pointed out as there are chemical reactions that go on within the brain and the nervous system that actually makes it possible for us to achieve those things that we have practised.

This reaction actually happens when we dream and it is almost like our filing system is being re-evaluated, reinitialised or whatever the computer term is for it.

We have to be very patient with our progress, in fact it is probably not a good idea to actually look for achievement from that point of view, only just do what is required and it is the case of the Chinese proverb that 'the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step' and the Indian proverb 'the way that you eat an elephant is one bite at a time'.

The great aim of education is not knowledge but action

Herbert Spencer

19. CREATIVE? JUST IMAGINE THAT!

Try to visualise the piece of music that you are playing creating a scenario of placing yourself in a video.

This internal video relates to the music like a promo. Think about what the music means to you, imagine the pictures and feel the emotions of the piece through this visual medium.

Imagine if you are playing a classical guitar piece and it makes you think of a Spanish village, feel the heat and experience the passion of the people, make it real and those emotions will feed through to the way that you play. It will also help you remember the dynamics of the music as well.

Weave them in and you will find that this is a very, very powerful way of practising the emotional undertone of the music.

Action is eloquence

William Shakespeare

20. THE END

Well, I hope this little set of notes has been interesting and informative to you, whether this is a new instrument that you are playing, or even your first instrument, or whether you are using these practise techniques on an instrument that you have already been playing for a while. I hope that it has given you an insight into something that works and that you enjoy the instrument, making you learn much faster.

May I wish you all the best for the future.

Thanks. Vic Hyland

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