

DEVELOPING AWARENESS IN PRACTICE: An integrated approach to maximizing your practice sessions

Over the many years that I have been teaching classical guitar, there have been numerous articles written about improving practice skills. Many of these articles used words such as concentration, focus, and coined phrases such as Aaron Shearer's "Aim Directed Motion" Although all of these share a common goal: to improve technique, these terms imply to the reader, performer, or student a sense that whatever difficulties they are having is a result of not doing something or not doing enough of it.

Obtaining proficiency on an instrument is difficult enough, any connection to negativity will have more detrimental than positive effects. Over the years I have come to realize that many, if not all, musical or technical problems can be improved through awareness. Whether as student or teacher, how many times have you encountered a situation where when asked to sing the melody of a piece you are playing can only sing the first few measures. If we were aware of how it sounded, wouldn't we be able to sing it? The same is true for fingerings, the form or phrase structure of a piece to mention but a few. In this article I will present some techniques and approaches to increase awareness when practicing or performing.

All guitarists have an awareness of aspects of their playing. Often, though, it is a limited awareness. They may be fully aware of their musical intent but not aware of the sounds coming from the guitar. Others may be aware of the technical accuracy of their playing but unaware of the musical results of this focus. Awareness of all aspects of playing is the first step in developing mastery of the guitar or any musical instrument.

Teachers know that it much easier to tell a student what to do than to get a student to figure it out. Most students prefer to be told what to do than figure things out. The first step a teacher must take in developing awareness with a student is to ask the student questions instead of telling them what to do. The next step is to show the student how to ask questions of themselves and encourage that process. In my experience, this is not an approach that student's initially enjoy and take to quickly but, with dedication, the favorable results produced by the student quickly

changes their attitude. You are transferring a good deal of the responsibility of their progress to them. The benefits, however, far outweigh the initial reluctance you will encounter the the student. The end result will be a more self-confident student who enjoys practice and performs at a high level.

In order to demonstrate how to intergrate technical, aural, and musical skills, the following table contains questions that you can ask your students or your students can ask themselves. I chose to focus on these three categories to hopefully show the connection and importance of these areas to the end result: the performance. While the list is long, I'm sure with thought you can add more items that were not included in the list.

TECHNICAL	AURAL	MUSICAL
Right Hand 1. Are you alternating fingers? 2. How is your Sound? 3. Are you using the best fingering for the situation? 4. Do the right hand movements feel comfortable?	Are you listening to what you're playing?	Are you using Vibrato?
Left Hand 1. Is it Balanced? 2. Are you using excessive pressure? 3. Are you aware of the relationship between your fingers, elbow and shoulder? 4. Are you using the best fingering?	Are you aware of the sound and the relationship to how it feels?	How much expression do you feel you are doing?

How comfortable does your sitting position feel while playing?	Are you listening to the clarity and balance of the voices?	Are you using dynamics?
Rhythm: Is it metronomic or musical? (Metronomic rhythm is what occurs when you play with a metronome. It allows us to be aware of the mechanical relationship rhythmically between note. Musical rhythm allows for the subtle variances between notes that are part of the musical expression. It also allows us to control the pulse along with the rhythm.)	Can you clearly hear and follow: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The top Voice? • The bass line? • The middle voices? • The harmonic progression? 	How clear is your phrasing?
How is your pulse? 1. Does it allow you to create a natural movement of the phrase? 2. Does it allow you to create a rhythmical shape to the line?	Are there unwanted overtones while you're playing?	Are your phrase and section endings clear to the listener?

Awareness

One of the fundamentals often overlooked in practice is sitting position. Does your sitting position allow stability in holding the guitar while allowing freedom of movement in the arms and upper body? A simple way to establish such a position is to sit on the chair without the guitar. If you use a footstool, put your foot on it. If you don't, position your feet on the

floor with your feet in a straight line with your thighs. Lean forward and place your forearms on your thighs and notice the curve of your spine. Sit upright adding the guitar but maintain the same curve in your spine. Can you easily rotate your body both left and right from this position? Is your head balanced? Are your arms and shoulders free to move while holding the guitar? If the answer is yes, you most likely have a good sitting position that will produce minimum tension while playing. If not make adjustments in how you sit.

At this point students with a good sitting position mistakenly assume that the position is permanent and will not change while playing. Unfortunately, this is rarely true. If you are working on a technically challenging passage, it is not uncommon to lose the awareness of the sitting position. If the awareness quickly returns as the passage becomes more comfortable, there is little if any problem. If, as often happens, the awareness of sitting position is lost until the next practice session bad habits begin to creep in and limit the ease of playing.

We lose awareness (or at the very least, transfer our awareness) when technical challenges present themselves. If we are better able to integrate our practice approach, in other words, rely on the musical and aural, perhaps this unconscious transfer would not occur, or at the least, less frequently. Another equally important point: bad habits result from a narrow approach, thus the importance of having a more integrated approach.

The following are some simple things that you can do to maintain awareness of your sitting position while practicing.

1. Every five minutes stop playing and rotate your neck to the left and right.
2. Move your neck forward and back. When you play, is your neck balanced at the mid-point of the movement?
3. Rotate your upper body to the left and right. Front and back. Does your sitting position allow this movement easily?
4. Fully extend your right arm. Do you feel movement in your collarbone and shoulder? Do you feel a stretch down the right side of your torso? Now do the same with your left arm.

This is a simple way of keeping awareness of your body while playing the guitar. Adding a break every thirty minutes where you stand and stretch

will go a long way toward keeping your sitting position and body relaxed while minimizing the tension that often results from long periods of uninterrupted practice.

Developing awareness while learning a new piece of music.

There are two widely used approaches to learning new music. One is to learn the piece through reading, working out the phrases, fingerings, dynamics, etc. When that work is completed, the piece/section is committed to memory. A second approach recommends deciding on the phrases, fingerings, dynamics, etc. of a section first and then memorizing that section. When memorized you use the same approach for subsequent sections. The awareness techniques that I will present work well for either approach.

In order to demonstrate how to achieve this, I have chosen an excerpt from from J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro. (Example 1)

Prelude J.S. Bach

The image shows a musical score for the first three measures of J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro. The score is written in treble clef, D major, and 12/8 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 12/8 time signature. The music features a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with some measures containing rests. The second staff starts with a measure rest (3) and continues with similar rhythmic patterns. The third staff starts with a measure rest (5) and continues with the same rhythmic structure. The score includes various musical notations such as beams, slurs, and rests.

Start with the first phrase of the piece. Break the phrase down into the following areas (example 1):

1. Rhythmical structure of the phrase.
2. Musical/harmonic structure of the phrase

3. Musical/harmonic structure of the bass and middle voices. (if present)
4. Dynamic shape of the line.
5. Stylistic expression needed.
6. Right and left hand fingerings

We are using knowledge to develop awareness and facilitate learning and memorizing. The more we know about something the easier it is to learn.

1. Looking at example 1, we see that the phrase is five measures long. It begins and stays on the tonic for the first three measures. In the last two measures of the phrase, Bach modulates to A major. Looking at the individual motifs we find that in the first measure Bach uses a descending D major scale to arrive to a second inversion G major arpeggio. He starts by using the lower neighbor note of D (D, C# D indicated by brackets) to begin the descent. On the last eighth note of the second beat he changes the C# to C creating a half-step movement to the B on the third beat followed by another half-step motion F# to G ending the scale portion of the motif. The second measure has the descending D major scale beginning on A to bring us to a first inversion A seventh chord. This time, however, the lower neighbor note motion is a whole step rather than a half step. Similarly the connecting notes of the motif are all whole steps rather than the half-steps used in the first measure. The third measure uses the same D major scale but this time starting on F#. Bach again uses the whole step lower neighbor note motion found in the second measure but this time the scale motif last only two beats bringing us to a root position B minor chord on beat three. The fourth beat is now a descending scale beginning the modulation to A major of measure six. Measures five and six uses the neighbor note motion of the opening three measures to modulate to A major (marked by brackets).

Let's stop at this point and look at the bass line. We see that for the first three measures, the bass is composed of a quarter note D on the first beat of each measure. The last two measures of the phrase begin with a descending scale motion from D to B followed by a descent of a fifth creating a V-I cadence in A Major.

Before continuing let's go back and play the first phrase focusing on the half-step/whole-step neighbor note motion. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. How does the use of the use of the half-step neighbor note motion in the first measure as opposed to whole-step motion in the second and third measures influence the musical and dramatic effect? What impact does it have on the overall musical effect?
2. How does the use of the use of the half-step in the first measure as opposed to whole-step in the second and third measures combined with the bass note D measures influence the musical and dramatic effect? What impact does it have on the overall musical effect?
3. How does letting the bass note D ring longer than indicated influence the musical and dramatic effect? What sounds better?

The important thing to consider is how does it sound. We often unconsciously make decisions about the musical results not through listening but through intellect. Often, it is more convenient to just keep repeating the phrase endlessly hoping to get an idea of how we want it to sound. The problem with that approach is that we open ourselves to either making a musical decision based on something other than the music or, perhaps worse, making an unconscious musical decision and accepting whatever comes out of our guitar.

Why do we need to develop this level of knowledge? **Simply stated: without knowledge, awareness is impossible. Without awareness change is impossible.**

2. If we look at the rhythmical structure of the piece, we notice two things. 1. It is in 12/8. 2. The phrase is built over continuous eight notes. At first glance simple. No rhythmical problems. Are you sure? Should the eighth note or the dotted quarter be the basic pulse? When developing awareness, it is important not to make assumptions. Even though you may feel you know the best pulse to use, play the phrase several times using the eighth note as the pulse and then the dotted quarter. What is the musical result of using the eighth note for the pulse? What is the musical result of using the dotted quarter? Which better conveys the musical intent of Bach?

3. What is the musical/harmonic structure of the bass? Looking at the phrase we see that the bass, in the first three measures, creates a

recurring pedal that establishes varying levels of tension/release with the upper voice. In the final two measures, the bass is a descending line creating a modulation using E7, A, Bm, E7, to finally arrive at A major.

4. What dynamic implications does the line suggest? Again, we have many possibilities. One would have the first three beats of the first three measures decrescendo slightly with a crescendo on the fourth beat leading into the next measure. The final two measures of the phrase could crescendo to the arrival of A major. Whatever the decision, one must be made and, more importantly, you must be aware of the musical results of that decision.

5. What are the stylistic demands of the musical period of the piece? Do we need to use specific articulations? More vibrato? Less vibrato?

Now that you have listened and made musical decisions based on what you saw and heard, it is time to examine your right and left hand fingerings.

Since there are many good right and left hand choices for playing this opening phrase we are not looking at one possibility. You want to look at the fingering that will best allow you to express Bach's musical intent. Questions you might want to consider are:

1. Does the fingering allow me to create a flowing line?
2. Is the phrase better expressed using free strokes? Rest strokes?
3. Does it allow me to create a musical and dynamic shape?
4. Does it allow me to play the phrase both technically and musically consistently?
5. Does it create a consistent musical texture?

Continue working through the piece in this manner. At the end of each major section, go back to the beginning and repeat the process as if you are working on the piece for the first time. This will help you to continue to develop your awareness of the technical, physical, and musical aspects of the piece. Students often think that when they have completed a task once, that is it for the piece. For a piece to grow technically and musically we need to continually develop and refine our awareness of all of the components that make up the work.

Setting Goals

We can also use goals to increase our awareness. There are two types of goal setting that I find particularly effective in practice. The first is used when learning new music and the second is used when refining technical, interpretative, or consistency issues. In order for goal setting to work, the goal must be clear and simple. An example of goal setting when learning a new piece is: I will learn the first four measures today. Another important aspect of goal setting is to set a time limit and the last is to write down everything that is happening during this practice period.

Using goals to develop awareness when memorizing

As I discuss in my Practice Book (The Art & Technique of Practice, GSP, San Francisco.), it is important to work in a thirty minute session when memorizing. Spending less time slows down the process and leads to frustration. Spending more time leads to sloppy habits and the results don't justify the extra time.

Start with a ten-minute session. Using one of the memory approaches discussed in my book or one recommended by your teacher, establish your goal. Your goal may be as simple as: How many measures can I memorize in ten minutes? Can I learn the first four measures in ten minutes? Remember be clear and keep it simple. (Use The Kiss Principle: Keep it Simple Stupid.)

Step 1: Practice for five minutes trying to achieve your goal.

2: After five minutes stop, and in a diary, write down

- How much have you learned?
- How solid is it?
- Can I play it in time slowly?
- Do I know what my hands are doing?

Examine your answers. If you are happy with the results, continue what you are doing for another five minutes. At the end of that five minute session ask yourself the same questions. Establish a new ten minute goal and repeat steps 1 & 2 for that ten minute session. At the end of that session, establish a new goal and repeat the process.

It is important that if, after the first five minute session, you aren't happy with the results you try a different approach. By writing down your observations you are beginning to establish a list of things to try that

work and a list of things you tried that didn't work. Don't discard what didn't work. It may be that it wasn't appropriate for the situation you applied it to but will work in a different situation. Do not worry if initially you can't think of other ways to achieve your goal. This comes by following the above steps. As, hopefully you can see, this approach greatly increases your awareness of how you memorize and what works and doesn't work.

Using goals to develop awareness when refining a piece or section:

Of the two goal setting approaches this one is perhaps the most complicated and time consuming to learn. It is important to continue using a diary to record your experiences. By diary I mean some kind of book (loose-leaf or spiral bound) as opposed to a bunch of pieces of paper that you are constantly losing. I deliberately chose to use the word diary instead of log because, the word diary denotes a more personal connection to the content than log. Done well, you will have an excellent resource for what techniques work the best for you.

When refining a piece, I believe it is important to resolve technical issues first. While it is always more fun to work on musical things, if you can't consistently hit the notes you will not be able to assess the results of your practice.

Start with the first page of the piece. Play the page three times. What have you missed all three times? Write this down. These spots become your goals. If there is only one spot you missed, all three times great. If you missed several spots those are the first things you work on in the sequence they occur on the page. If you only missed one spot three times but two other spots two out of the three times those other spots become goal two and three. Again keep it simple.

The First Goal

Identify the first goal.

Step 1: How many measures is it? If it is more than four measures work only on the first four measures. When you've reached that goal move on to the next four measures until you've covered the entire problem

2: Establish the fastest tempo you can comfortably and consistently play each of the four measures. Can you play each measure comfortably and consistently at the same tempo? If the answer is no, determine possible reasons that are preventing this from happening.

Possible reasons:

- Poor or inaccurate fingering choices.
- Faulty rhythm
- Not clear on how it sounds
- Tempo is too fast
- Memory is not as solid as you thought.
- Does the music, phrase, section imply a slight slowing down?

The possibilities are endless. Don't let the large number of possibilities create inactivity. Jump in and look for answers. Once you have identified possible causes, practice the measure/measures for five minutes. Again write down your observations. If you think you found the answer, continue with this approach for another five minutes. If you aren't sure, try another solution for five minutes. Again write down your observations. Has this choice produced better results? Are the results worse? About the same?

It is now time to move on. Spending more time will produce nothing but frustration. When you return to this goal tomorrow you can either repeat one of the approaches you used today or if you're not happy try a different one. When you've met your goal go back to this same area and determine your awareness of the following points. It is important to develop your awareness of these points one point at a time.

- How does it sound?
- How does it feel?
- Are you comfortable with all of your right hand movements? How about your left hand movements?
- Do your right hand fingerings seem smooth and natural? How about your left hand?
- Does your sitting position allow you to comfortably hold the guitar and freely move as you play?

As I'm sure you see, this approach always goes back and includes all areas of awareness needed to successfully perform. Does this take time? Of course, but just as the Mona Lisa wasn't painted overnight producing works of art take time and commitment. If we look at Da Vinci and many

other artists, we see that they made careful and methodical studies of their subject before creating the 'final' canvas that we often identify as the 'masterpiece'. At this point you can move on to what you identified as your second goal. Each goal that you identify will be worked on using the approach presented always working in ten minute blocks.

This is the approach I use as I refine a piece or movement. Once I've solved the technical issues I use the same approach for musical and finally consistency issues.

If you write your observations down, you will find after several weeks you are establishing a collection of appropriate techniques that you can apply to different learning situations.

Sometime the technical issue turns out to be nothing more than you were playing faster than you could control. If that's the case, then each day you may try increasing the tempo slightly until you reach the desired performance tempo.

Other times the issue involves lack of clarity on your part regarding fingering, rhythm etc. While other times, the problem was caused by not being aware of what your hands were doing or how the passage should sound. Lack of clarity seems to be to be the root cause(s) of insecure performances. By making better choices in our practice sessions we can translate this into a more confident performance.

You will find by using goals that, at worse, you will resolve three issues weekly. If at the end of the week the issue is not resolved, it is imperative that you bring it to your teacher's attention at the lesson. You have missed something, and more importantly, you, at this time in your development, may not possess the necessary skills and knowledge to solve the problem. Having your teacher help you with this process will help you develop the needed knowledge and skills. Over time you will find that you can resolve many technical, musical, and consistency issues weekly without the aid of your teacher. It is important to remember that until you reach a high professional level there will always be musical or technical problems that you may need help solving.

Some of you reading this article will find very little new information and will have a relatively easy time incorporating this approach to your

practice. Others, however, will find that this approach is very different from the one you are currently using. Rather than incorporating this approach to everything you play, start simply. Begin by learning a short new piece (no more than three pages in length) being aware of your sitting position and using the memory approach discussed in my book. When you get comfortable with this approach, incorporate the use of goals in refining the technical, musical, and consistency issues found in the piece. When you've learned the piece with this approach, you will be better able to see if the results warrant using this approach instead of the one you are currently using.

Learning to use goals and developing awareness is as much of a skill as learning to play scales. Using the approach presented in this article will, over time, increase your awareness and understanding of the intricacies of music while significantly improving your playing skills.

Good luck and musical success.

© September 2011

Richard Provost is the founder and Chair of the Guitar Department of The Hartt School, University of Hartford, W. Hartford, CT