

Performance



After you have been quite busy for some time, mastering the guitar within the safe confines of your study, people will inevitably ask: "wouldn't you like to play some music for us?" A question with the hidden aspect of a negation and a maybe a premature implication that it is enjoyable to play in front of an audience. Anyway, it's a question which announces a new aspect of mastering your instrument: the public performance.

This is a nice subject for this first *Guitarity*. The table of contents below provides you with the subjects, just select and click to read.

On Stage!

Many guitar teachers and the institutes they work for consider the so called 'exercise in performance' more or less compulsory: once a year you must come on for a concert night. For many people a straight confrontation with something they would like to avoid at all cost: Stage Fright!

I must admit that a certain liking for performance by a number of class mates lured me into guitar playing myself. They played in a basement of a house in the Amsterdam Jacob Obrechtstraat, not far away from the famous *Concertgebouw* and the American Embassy. I heard *Lesson for Two Lutes*, *Drewries Accordes* and a fun performance of *Romance d' Amor*. The sheer fact that my class mates were playing it, brought artistry within reach, If they could play the guitar, why shouldn't I try to learn? Besides that, the simple fact that a nice young lady, I had a crush on, was listening breathlessly with a glance of sheer admiration, not only made guitar playing attractive for me, it also incited a certain attraction of the attention and appreciation of an audience.

There you have one of the important motives for public performance. The desire to actually present the things you are able to, with egocentric or altruistic motives. One likes to steal the show, the other plays in public to share the fun, he or she takes in playing music. In all fairness, I must admit that the show element was most important for me in the beginning. It did change over time, however.

Playing in public you get to know an effect which can be both constructive and destructive, the ill-famous Stage Fright. A sense of insecurity which can both sharpen and paralyze your mind. The notion that you are observed, analysed, judged and maybe even condemned.

I clearly remember my first performance experiences. I was on stage with a flush and a heartbeat like a top athlete during a sprint for a world record. I was continuously struggling against a trembling in my fingers which seemed to get worse, while on the other hand my movements seemed to be slowed down if I was moving in viscuous oil.

While playing, I ran through tricky passages with complete contempt for safety at almost twice the speed as would have been sensible, just to leave them behind me. I continuously suffered from my 'critical self', as strikingly described in *The inner game of Music* by Timothy Gallwey, this ill-famous personal critic who informs you of tricky passages and chances to fail at least two measures in advance, so that eventual failure is inevitable. And to add insult to injury, he or she keeps reminding you of the error in the rest of the piece.

It's a kind of stress most people can imagine when they have to go to the dentist, a stress which gradually increases on the day of the concert, reaching its peak on stage and taking hours to subside, particularly if you analyse your performance to the bone with a sense of ruthlessness, failing to remember the phrases which were all right.

If you read this, I guess you think I have been a bit of a masochist. Maybe you are right. Masochism implies pain and that was exactly what I felt afterwards quite a number of times. The sense that I did not play up to my standards...

Fortunately, something has changed since the first shaky steps on stage.

When I performed on guitar for the first time, I was about 20 years of age, hitting the stage after two years of self-education and one and a half year of guitar course. This little performance on the School of Music was the first experience in presentation after a talk on hamsters in my early years of High School.

In those days in my mind my audience was equally destructively critical like me. That's a good start for a lot of stress. I was totally unaware of the effects of stress on guitar playing, I had long forgotten the sweaty hands of the hamster talk.

After a bit of setting up I finally was on stage, safely huddled behind my scores. I must admit that these scores were of little use to me on that occasion, I did not have any reading speed,

I just knew what the symbols meant. In fact, I played all pieces by heart, memorized as a consequence of studying note by note.

I played all pieces with a casual error and catch, received the applause with a clumsy bow and felt completely dissatisfied. First it appeared a struggle to get all notes in the direction of the audience, second in my mind it did not sound at all. It was so much less than the guitar records I used to play until worn out! Well, in such moments your impossible and unfeasible expectations clearly show themselves.

It would have been useful to discuss this experience with my guitar teacher. Well, it did not happen, because I had no words to describe my sense of vulnerability, my lack of self-confidence and my awareness of failure which came upon me after this little concert. ;-)

The fact that my guitar teacher was a woman, did make it even more difficult (no offense, she was a very good teacher), a bit of hurt machismo, I guess. Well, that was a pity, because most guitar teachers will recognize the experience and the feelings about it and are quite willing to share the solution for this problem, provided they have been able to solve it themselves. Now the only comment I got was "well, it wasn't too bad, most went right" and after that the daily business.

This first experience, however, did not deter me from trying again. I had several other occasions for performance, which did not give me satisfaction either, but still got me the appreciation of the audience for my brave struggle.

Ed Westerik was my first guitar teacher who integrated the techniques and aspects of performance in his lessons. In the first years he limited himself to practical hints when I was preparing for performance. Later on we discussed psychological and emotional aspects of performance, but this was not possible before we integrated the subject of emotion, both in the music and in the player, into the lessons.

He presented a few eye-openers:

- Preparation is half the effort.
- The audience is not your enemy.
- Put off self-judgement till after the recital.
- Concentrate on music.
- Enjoy yourself while playing.

Those will be the next subjects!

Preparation is half the Effort

Preparation is a perfect start for a performance (hence it represents half of its effort). It is completely obvious, though ignored by many a player. It is very tempting to count on Divine Inspiration which should descend upon you as soon as you walk the stage. Alas, no investment, no return!

A few points of preparation:

1. Do not select a piece for performance if you do not master it in full.
2. When studying, aim for performance. This is a process in two phases:
 - Practice: You study the piece and solve all problems concerning tricky sections.

- Playing: You aim for performance of the complete piece. It is not permitted to stop and repeat failed spots.
3. Make sure that you know where to go (movements, position) in the next measures at every instant.
 4. Aim for cohesion of the piece. Often you just know how you want to hear the music, you enjoy. Elaborate this idea in a fluent performance.
 5. Learn the piece(s) by heart.
 6. Make a recording of yourself when **playing** (not practising) and evaluate afterwards.

The Audience is not your Enemy

Most people attend recitals to listen to the music and to enjoy it, apart from a few reviewers who like to approach matters critically and sometimes put a looking glass on things that go wrong. Most of the people come in unarmed, without rotten tomatoes and eggs. The largest part of the audience attends without a score to enable them to exactly locate every note you play.

The audience is no enemy you need to entrench yourself against behind your music stand. Make sure that you have contact with your audience. This means: put your music stand as low as possible, such that the audience can see you and your sound can enter the concert hall freely. If possible, try to play without music stand, namely by heart.

It is not necessary to deliberately look at the audience. That kind of presentation will distract you for sure.

Put off Self-judgement

One of the most important tips is "Put off self-judgement till after the recital". It is all right to evaluate your performance, but it will affect your play destructively if you start evaluating during playing.

I noticed a weird psychological effect at work during a performance: the battle between two parts of your personality, bluntly said the constructive part and the destructive part. Well, I guess this is bluntly said, because I indicate a *result* rather than a *motive*. The reason that your destructive self-whispers at you might be the perfect valid motive of musical survival.

The constructive part aims for the perfect musical performance and expression, the destructive part tries to prevent this or even tries to give you a flash in the pan. It looks like the traditional myth of the angel and the devil who both try to whisper in the ear of an innocent soul.

One of the tools of the destructive side is the casual evaluation. "Watch out for that tricky bar!" , "Hmmm, it almost went wrong", or "You fool, I did warn you for that measure, and now listen what you have made of it!" , "Last time it was much better..." Well, guess what effects these kinds of interferences will have on your concentration, performance and last but not least your morale.

Evaluating will interfere with your play. So, wait evaluating at least until you have walked off the stage.

Easy said? It is definitely not easy, but it is worth trying!

Concentrate on Music

This tip includes two important aspects for a successful performance: the concentration itself and the purpose of this concentration.

Concentration is a major point with a public performance. Before you play the first note of your piece, just try to pinch a short meditative moment to start your concentration. Think about the piece itself, about its story (historical or personal) and aim for it.

The purpose of the concentration is making music. It's not the playing technique, that's just your tool for making music. **Music is over technique**. When playing hard passages, I find this "law" extremely difficult, because you are working so hard to overcome the technical problem. The sad thing is true: once you start concentrating yourself merely on technique, the music will suffer. So, on stage concentrate on what you want to achieve (music) and not on how to achieve it (technical skill). Concentration on technical skills is homework!

Enjoy yourself while Playing

I have had some trouble with this hint, specifically with recitals with a more or less masochistic background. With such a background you are not *allowed* to enjoy things, isn't it? Even if you are not masochistic, overreacted self-criticism will bring little enjoyment either.

Fortunately, I remember one recital full of enjoyment: the first "Concert with Candlelight" we (Hans and me) played in Delden, many years ago.

There it was, sheer enjoyment and pleasure on stage. The result? You notice how beautifully the Inventions of Bach are composed and how well the parts sound together. You notice how helpful the acoustics of the beautiful old church can be for the breathing in an Aria by Johann Adolf Hasse. And the most surprising: I cannot remember any fatal faults in the performance on that specific occasion. In this way, you have enjoyed your musical performance as least as much as the audience did.

So that is very important: ENJOY yourself while playing music!

Just one caveat: If you are playing before an audience, you're not there for yourself alone. So, don't let your enjoyment distract you too much!