

# Annoyances

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Maybe this is a weird subject for a column like these *Guitarities*. On the other hand: why not? It is quite relevant to the life in musical ensembles. Annoyances often are the cause of poor performance and eventual dissolution of ensembles, even though they had a lot of musical potency.

I already discussed touchy subjects like stage fright and motivation, so the subject "Annoyances" is not that weird. At times it is a very relevant topic, isn't it? Hence some scribbling about these little problems in an amateur-musician's life.

In the side menu, you will find various aspects of this matter.

## Making Music is Work of Man

I remember quite a few recitals where I was thinking: "how on earth this possible?"

On stage, you observe an ensemble which consists of *multiple* players, but what you actually hear is a *single* source of music, one idea and one feeling, in short, an ultimate unity. Is that really possible in this conflict-ridden world?

Hearing the Assad Brothers in concert was such an experience for me, those guys played together like they were *one* musician. Everything matched, both parts fit together perfectly in even the smallest details. They were breathing as one. Incredible!

Thinking about these experiences I frankly admit that I have been witnessing something spectacular. Just imagine, on stage there are two or more people with different characters,

all dealing with the music in their own way. These people are often playing with a consensus -literally this means "feeling together"- which surprises and delights the listener, sometimes even carrying him or her away.

Musicianship is Work of Man. You make music with all your joys, fears, annoyances, traumas from childhood, love, hate and many more from the range of human emotions. How on earth is a musician able to rise above this melting pot of contradictions while playing solo or in an ensemble?

Particularly fascinating to me is the way musicians are *cooperating* to obtain this result of unity, how they communicate, how they agree or disagree, and how they are dealing with annoyances and conflicts which affect the musical consensus.

As I said, Making Music is Work of Man. This implies conflicts. If your ensemble is larger than one, there is a fair chance that you will be at each other's throats someday.

You think that you will not be bothered by conflicts as a soloist (an 'ensemble' of one person)? Dream on, of course you will, although most conflicts are inside your head. Think about Segovia's historical statement about his inner teacher and pupil. He claimed that both got along quite well despite some conflicts, which of course does not imply that they lived in harmony each day. Segovia was quite aware of his internal dualism as a solo musician.

The book *The Inner Game of Music* by Barry Green and Timothy Gallwey discusses the role of internal conflicts between aspects of your personality which make or break musicianship. Apparently, it is no real solution to become a soloist in order to avoid conflicts which hamper the music.

In multi-member ensembles conflicts are interpersonal, not only with words but sometimes even with physical violence. It doesn't surprise me, because a large part of a musical cooperation is on emotional rather than rational level. This may cause a bit more passion on the battlefield.

We know ensembles from two members up to far more than a hundred. Larger ensembles like a symphony orchestra or a choir usually have a conductor for the musical leadership and coordination. Smaller ensembles without real leader, however, have to create mutual agreement on subjects like dynamics, mood, speed and remaining performance aspects.

These discussions might not end in perfect harmony. Just like in other fields, the world of music suffers from harsh leadership models, hierarchy in a pecking order, personal ambitions and such.

So many men, so many opinions. This certainly applies to musical ensembles like a guitar duo. Consequently, you will notice outstanding examples of musical cooperation as well as conflicts around the weirdest things. Conflicts which often lead to dissolution.

After the initial euphoria of the start of a musical relationship -just like other relationships- the decline may start with small annoyances. If you fail to solve them, they pile up gradually until their weight causes eventual collapse, sometimes because of reasons which seem to be completely irrelevant to the (musical) subject.

*Communication* is a major crux in coping with conflicts and enervation of annoyances. Nevertheless, it requires some courage to discuss emotional and even personal aspects concerning your musical cooperation with your (musical) partner.

For instance, how do you explain to your partner that you don't like the way he /she is outplaying you on stage, while he/she is intensely enjoying playing the music at that particular moment?

How do you react on a testy remark from your partner about your sense of rhythm, while you are glad that you are just capable to play the passage after lots of tedious practicing? Wouldn't you feel annoyed and disappointed about his/her seemingly almost arrogant criticism?

How do you explain to your partner which emotion you want to play and which support you expect from him/her to achieve this, while your partner offers resistance, for instance because of a stubborn application of the traditional division in solo and accompaniment role which prescribes serfdom to the soloist?

How do you solve a conflict about unity of tone, fingering noises or the sound of a passage? There are many things to discuss or even quarrel about.

I do not have extensive experience with musical ensembles, but I think it is still sufficient to say a bit of something about a special aspect of making music together, which is *The Annoyance*. Unattended annoyances will destroy the musical result. That's why this subject deserves a place amongst these *Guitarities* just as rightly as subjects like public performance, stage fright and motivation.

My very first ensemble was an occasional ensemble for a performance at the School of Music. We had no say in the line-up, my guitar teacher had chosen the members, possibly based on the number of years of musical education. Things were ad-hoc with minimal preparation, we had about three rehearsals of an hour or so, which is quite minimal for a good result on stage. The rehearsals made one thing clear: we did not match at all! Even though, the concert deadline loomed.

My absolute minimal experience with ensemble playing at that time was not helpful either, the best I could do was playing the part in one go without bailing out ten times before I reached the end. Doing this in a musical way was almost out of the question.

Our 'cooperation' turned out to be a perfect occasion for perceptible annoyances and conflict, even on stage. I was so glad when it was all over, and I guess my partner shared my immense sense of relief.

This trauma did not prevent me from another go at ensemble playing. My second ensemble was a guitar-flute duo. We had exactly one public performance. I remember a nice anecdote from the preparations for this recital. The flute teacher of my partner showed a remarkable sense of optimism, expecting me to intonate to cancel the problems with the tune of the flautist. Well, maybe that's fine with an electric guitar (a bit of pitch-bending), but with a classical guitar with widespread chords...? I do not think so!

Anyway, we had a few year's playing fun in the living room and the cooperation encouraged me to make three books with flute/guitar arrangements which were published by Van Teeseling in Nijmegen. Finally, our duo died of exhaustion, without clearly vented annoyances. This does not imply there were none, of course: after some years, it turned out to be no enjoyable conclusion that our progress had become zero or even negative.

My third ensemble was the Granados Duo. It provided me with some hard work, because my partner played very well and had a tone which I could only dream of. We started off well, but after a year the cooperation ended quite abruptly after a recital which did not go entirely as

we hoped for. Unfortunately, the reviewer in the local paper seized this opportunity with both hands: his comments were not the best way to be in the headlines.

Alas, hard work and extra high-tension strings turned out to be insufficient to solve the slumbering issues: apparently, there were sufficient annoyances for a unilateral termination of the cooperation. It was no pleasant experience, but fortunately this did not stop me from guitar playing. 'These things happen all day' my guitar teacher commented dryly when I complained bitterly.

My most recent ensemble was the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos, the nomenclator of this website. It lasted quite long, a little over fifteen years. The cooperation started off well, with lots of repertoire, nice arrangements and a number of successful recitals.

Currently the duo is out of order as a consequence of personal conflicts and I don't think the issues will be solved in the near future. This case appeared to be a typical example of the destructive effect of some years of unspoken annoyances which piled up and caused a collapse.

Looking back, I recognize a pattern. I guess I will have to be more assertive and communicative in the future. Building up and nourishing annoyances is one thing, solving them is quite a different thing. Before enervation of annoyances is possible, you inevitably have to discuss them, which implies conflict. So, it turned out to be wrong to attempt to keep the peace, running away for conflicts. *Si vis Pacem, para Bellum* -if you want peace, prepare for war- the old Romans used to say ages ago.

Anyway, I have some issues to write about in this remarkable *Guitarity* about annoyances. In the following I will discuss some. Don't be misled by the titles (you could think that I am only blaming partners), every annoyance has at least two sides.

## Where do We go from Here?

The purpose of your musical ensemble is an important thing. Most people will say that making nice music is the purpose of an ensemble. They are quite right, but there are some possible variations on this general statement. What are your ambitions? Do you just want to play a bit together in the living for fun? Do you want to be successful on stage? Do you intend a mix between living and stage? Do you want to record a CD (they nowadays sell nice equipment for home productions)? It looks obvious to me that the way you study and cooperate strongly depends on the purpose you choose.

If you don't know your own or your partner's ambitions with the ensemble, annoyances may be on the lurk. So be aware of each other's ambitions, if necessary agree on the purpose of your ensemble and adjust ambitions by mutual agreement whenever necessary.

Do you wish to play "for fun" (the expression is a bit poor, I must admit, because a fair deal of fun is *always* necessary when playing together), do you want a casual recital or are you aiming for (semi)professionalism? Discuss your ambitions and consider the (im)possibilities! If you don't, there is a fair chance that you'll meet some annoyances because of the mismatch in your ambitions.

Quite important: find a mode in which you *both* can cooperate satisfactorily. Willingness for the sake of peace will be bugging you sooner or later. Be absolutely clear about your wishes and intentions.

Extremely important: find a mode in which both of you *enjoy* playing music together. The concerts in which I could see and notice that the musicians were very motivated and were enjoying the music -you can even hear that in an intensely sad piece- did impress me most. Don't attempt to start an ensemble if you have the feeling that it will never be enjoyable.

Be openhearted to each other with reference to possible personal interests which are valid for you when you hit the stage as an ensemble. If a personal presentation for whatever purpose plays a part, be sure to prepare yourself thoroughly as an ensemble and adapt the repertoire if necessary: a tricky piece at the limits of your capabilities provides a less dazzling and much more risky presentation than less demanding material which sounds well nevertheless.

What to do if you cannot agree upon the purpose and ambitions of your ensemble? Well, it is better separating in (relative) harmony than tumbling off the stage in complete disharmony *en plein public*.

## Unbalance in Playing Skills

Sometimes it's a striking thing: your partner plays the most complex passages with ease, produces a tone which you only can dream of and does not have to study on material which takes you weeks of sweating away attempting to master it. At times, it drives you crazy and sometimes it even makes you envious.

This annoyance is a matter with a few aspects:

- How do you appraise or -more pessimistically- judge your own play?
- What is your view on your partner's play?
- What are your thoughts (fears) concerning your partner's judgement about your play?

The major issue in this matter is the (realistic) judgement of your own play. The other aspects are closely related to this judgement. All aspects influence the way in which you are performing, which at its turn influences the performance of the ensemble.

How do you consciously or subconsciously appraise (or deprecate) your play? Think about that!

Uncertainty about your playing capabilities affects your contribution to the ensemble. Even if your play sounds very well in the ears of the audience, you will keep hearing a less optimal result yourself as a consequence of your nagging doubts about your play. This will be even worse when you listen to a recording which enables you to replay the experience time and time again.

If you feel confident about your musical capabilities and forgive yourself the casual playing error, you will give yourself the free rein for the ensemble. Afterwards, you will recognize *that* in the result anyway!

If you are deprecating your own play, acceptance of the better play of your partner becomes hard, specifically if you fear that you will never reach his/her level while you consider that more or less absolutely necessary for the balance and performance of the ensemble.

If you make things hard on yourself this way, you are prone to overestimation of the ease which your partner is playing with. Don't be mistaken, your partner has technical problems with the music just like you, but you will not notice them because of your own trouble getting your part to work.

Even worse: If you underestimate the quality of your own play, it is hardly likely that you think that your partner has a more positive judgement about it than yourself. That further affects the way you think about your partner's better play.

If you are doubtful about your performance in the ensemble, it is wise to discuss this with your partner in order to try to find a way to set or restore the balance. Yes, talking about personal feelings and (un)certainly is quite scary, but it is necessary. Playing together well requires a sense of consensus which is thwarted by feelings of insecurity.

As ever, there are a number of possible solutions. You can adapt the musical functions in the ensemble such, that everyone can play on his/her own level. Sometimes the music supports this by default, sometimes you will have to arrange some. For example: moving notes from one part to the other or cancelling double notes which do not contribute to the effect may appear to restore the momentum in a difficult part, which brings back the swing in the ensemble.

It is possible to select suitable (i.e. not extremely difficult) music, even though you will have to make sure that all partners come into their own. Lack of challenge might become an annoyance too.

Lots of people will comment that it is best to avoid these problems *before* you start your activities as an ensemble in earnest. If you want to do that, it is necessary to estimate any difference in musical capabilities in advance and discuss the possible consequences. Just like in a friendship or even love relationship you need a suitable partner for the best results. Sometimes differences are too great to achieve a well playing ensemble in the end.

If you can predict this, it's fine. It might prevent some troubles. If you can't, it will be an endeavour with the hope that love on first sight will not turn into a split after the first problems.

One thing is important: You should not feel limited in the ensemble. As a (technically) less capable player you should *never* have the impression that you are *tolerated*. On the other hand, as the more capable player you should never have the impression that your foot needs to remain on the brake pedal all the time. If this appears true, again, it is better separating in (relative) harmony than tumbling off the stage *en plein public* in complete disharmony.

Another thing is important as well: (on reasonable grounds) you will have to see *yourself* as a suitable partner too. If you have the feeling that you are a member of the ensemble by the Grace of God only, in eternal gratitude that the others permit this, just don't start this ensemble. Start working on the way you see yourself in (musical) life instead.

All these things seem to be quite obvious, I know. Be aware, however, that it is quite tricky to estimate the effect of differences in level. One of my experiences is that I could not cope with it (even extra practicing, extra hard tension strings and an impending tendinitis did not help

me), the other was that it caused no trouble at all. The latter appeared no guarantee for a lifelong cooperation, though.

## Always this Criticism

As an ensemble, you strive for at least a satisfactory musical result. Preferably it should be better than satisfactory, of course, like good or even perfect. Normally you will not achieve this all at once, some pieces require years of study and practicing before they resemble music when performed. In the meantime, things proceed as with every cooperation, you do something and the group provides feedback on your actions.

There are many ways of feedback, criticism being one of them. Mostly criticism is constructive in a friendly tone. There are situations, however, in which criticism comes across sharply and testy. In that case annoyances cause the message to be distorted or lost, or start a huge argument.

I remember being annoyed by grumpy criticism, specifically when it looked like a personal attack or when it concerned aspects of playing capabilities which could not be solved by miracle while the criticism implied that immediate solution was nevertheless expected. It is true, sometimes you find out after many years that you have neglected some technical aspects. Negative criticism on these aspects is definitely no source of joy.

Annoyance can and must NOT be the aim of (constructive) criticism. So, keep your composure in check if you are playing in a bad mood. Don't blame your partner if you have problems with playing yourself.

On the other hand, it is necessary to help each other achieving the best result. If you interpret every remark as negative criticism which should be rejected beforehand, you won't advance quite a lot.

When you receive criticism on your play, it is important to answer it in terms of problem solution. Try to find out if the issues can be corrected short-term.

If someone would criticise me on my (at times) sloppy slurs, particularly the ones with my pinkie, he can be sure that it will take a lot of time to correct. I have neglected the subject slurs a bit in the past few years. I will work on it in future, but it will not improve greatly within one month. So if someone criticizes me time and time again on these slurs, I will get annoyed, because it is quite unpleasant to be tackled on subjects which take time to solve.

The mood of the criticism is important as well. Mary Poppins used to sing it in the movie of the same name: *It's a spoonful of sugar which lets the medicine go down*. Grousing each other for dear life will not solve anything and will definitely deteriorate the cooperation.

If the feedback *remains* negative, it is high time for a good talk. What's the cause of this persistently negative feedback? Is it hidden self-criticism or a clear statement concerning yourself as a player or even as a person? Does your partner make high demands on your playing capability, or are you doing this yourself, one way or another?

Use your emotional sensitivity and make sure that you clear things if necessary. Better be clear. Don't allow conflicts to escalate gradually while you are hoping for a positive outcome

in silence. Black clouds of annoyance during rehearsals and performances obscure your view on the music.

## Insufficient Practice Time

In order to be able to play well in an ensemble, you will have to study the music meticulously, sometimes even more than with solo material. The freedom of interpretation in ensemble music is usually less than in solo pieces, so extra practice is needed to prevent inaccuracies.

Study consists of practicing at home in your own and playing together on the ensemble rehearsal. The ratio between these two is a question of balance.

You have to practice at home, that's no point at all, although at times it is no great fun playing incomplete music. During practice on my own I found it sometimes difficult to imagine the other part while playing my own. For difficult duos, I used the computer to play my counter-part in order to keep track of the music. That's the advantage to have the music in electronic form.

I used to have a fixed weekly schedule for the guitar duo: one session practice at home and one session rehearsal together. For difficult parts this is not sufficient (my home sessions are about an hour a day, the ensemble rehearsals were about two hours). Being an amateur, however, the time you can spend on playing remains a compromise. Particularly when you have guitar lessons which involve solo material as well.

Preparing and practising at home has the advantage of a better progress during the ensemble rehearsal, specifically if it helps you solving your own technical problems with the music before they can affect the ensemble play. Of course, that is a rule of thumb, many musicians practice in ensemble only. It's just what you are aiming for. I can imagine that studying together provides more motivation than a struggle on your own.

If the preparation has been less optimal, the result of the ensemble rehearsal might be affected too. That's why the degree of effort that you or your partner spends on practice at home may become an annoyance. Just imagine: even though you have been practising - your fingers off' to master your part, the result of the ensemble is quite poor because your partner keeps making errors.

Before you let your annoyance get the better of you, be aware that no superior preparation of your partner will solve your own problems with the piece. Also bear in mind that your partner is not completely responsible for the fun of playing together. So just make the best of it.

Mind, I do not say that you should not criticise him or her for the continuous messing around cause by the lack of practice. Keep in mind the things I said about criticism...

Whenever necessary, just truthfully admit that you haven't had time for preparation at home, that you were not in the mood (there are quite some things which can occupy you apart from guitar playing), or that you had physical problems of some sort. That's far better than pretending that you have prepared yourself, just to save your face.

In case of poor preparation: forget about it, just start working and make the best of it. That's far more enjoyable than muttering under your breath that your partner is spoiling the rehearsal with his or her messing around.



Being honest has another side: you might meet the annoyance that your partner never practices at home and comes up with an excuse every week. Well, in that case it is high time for a fair discussion about motivation.

## I never hear about the Results

Anyone who plays recitals hopes for a certain degree of positive feedback. If you never get any, uncertainty strikes hard: *Did I perform well, or didn't I?* Uncertainty sooner or later affects your playing fun.

Getting feedback is not the only thing. Particularly in an ensemble it is important to *give* an opinion about how things have been too. In one of the previous topics I discussed criticism, which is particularly tempting when the ensemble performs less than hoped for. If it did, don't be too hard right away!

On the other hand, if things went far better than expected, do not have reserves telling your partner so. If you restrict yourself to problems and negative feedback, you are undermining the cooperation sooner or later.

Make sure to share both success and failure. Do not neglect to evaluate (public) recitals or recordings: they are a measure of the performance of the ensemble and provide useful information for improvement.

So, don't hide yourself in an anxious silence or wait for the review in the newspaper after a poor performance. Show the courage to discuss what bothered you and try to cope with the experience in good harmony as an ensemble. Just don't *blame* anyone, that's completely senseless!

## Outplayed or no Response

The balance is something which is immediately obvious when you listen to an ensemble with the same instruments. Aspects of balance are uniform tempo, dynamics and phrasing. If the balance is not there it unfortunately is obvious as well: one plays too fast, leaving the other abreast of things, one plays much louder than the other or the partner's phrasing is out of sync.

You can balance playing speed relatively(!) easily: while studying a piece you agree on a tempo and you stick to it. If necessary you practice together with a metronome until the tempo is firmly settled. Mind that I call this relatively easy, because the tempo may fluctuate as a consequence of sheer enthusiasm or the complexity of specific passages. I found out that every piece has got a kind of "resonance" tempo, an optimal tempo in your mind. It is very difficult to study at a lower tempo once this optimal tempo has fixed itself.

Imbalance in playing volume is much harder to cure. An impression of loudness often is subjective. You may experience the playing volume of your partner quite differently from the audience. Still psychologically it is a deadly blow to the security of your play if you have the impression that your partner is outplaying you loudly.

I -"suffered" from this myself. With the Granados Duo, it was quite evident: my partner had a tone as solid as rock, so she did most of the melody parts. That is no real problem, but at times her play was so powerful that I lost contact with my own part.

In those days, I lacked assertiveness to ask her if she would play a little less loudly, to solve the problem I started to play more loudly myself (and hence more stressfully) and when this did not cure things, I started to use extra hard tension strings in an attempt to come closer to her dynamics. If you can handle this physically, it's no problem. Stress combined with the need to apply lots of force to get a decent sound is no successful combination, however, specifically when you are performing on stage. I should have mentioned it, but foolishly I did not (dare to). Consequentially the psychological effects of the imbalance caused the end of the cooperation at last.

Here you see a good point: imbalance is caused by both partners, not merely the one who is ruling the roost. If you feel outplayed and you don't mention it, in fact you are the cause as well. So, speak up when necessary!

After a start-up phase I encountered the same problem with DOS Amigos. I experienced imbalance in playing volume even though no member of any audience ever reported it. Recordings showed otherwise, however, despite the fact that the microphones were slightly out of balance as well.

At a certain moment after a floppy concert, I felt completely miserable about it. We started to experiment and changed guitars during a recording. It became clear that my Contreras was less suitable for ensemble playing, its projection was far away (that's why the audiences never complained) but its feedback was too soft, I was drowned out by my partner's play. We decided to buy other guitars which were more equally matched: we changed to Bernabe guitars.

This solved the problem for most of the time, but not for all situations. Apparently, you can get carried away by the music despite all agreements. If the imbalance seems permanent, however, the sense of being outplayed becomes an annoyance.

To phrasing the same story applies as for speed: agree on it during rehearsals and try to stick to it. It's the grand question how much remains of the phrasing agreements if you are playing under pressure, for instance with a public recital. Stress might cause you to hurry while the phrasing requires an almost tranquil approach.

Specifically, with phrasing it is important to stick to the golden rule *Out Together Home Together*, so use your sense of improvisation to keep in sync.

To cut short: Balance in the ensemble requires a lot of attention. The psychological effect of the sense of being outplayed is quite destructive for your performance in the ensemble and your playing fun. So regularly check the balance by means of a -soundcheck' by others, or by analysis of a recording.

Outplaying your partner on stage may have a merely human cause: everyone has a certain assertiveness or ambition, it is just great to show off brilliantly at times. Nothing bad, except if it affects the coherence of the ensemble and the playing satisfaction of your partner.

I remember an occasion of such an imbalance. Some time ago I was recording the performance of a new guitar duo as a kind of amateur sound engineer. This duo consisted of two professional guitarists. One of them had been a student of the other long ago. They had

met recently and decided to give it a go for some time. Together they had worked hard and diligently to study the material for this performance.

At a certain moment in the recital they played a piece by Giuliani which was quite challenging and had required a lot of practice.

As the sound engineer with my headphones on, I sat virtually right in between them at a distance you will normally see no audience. I was in the position to observe every nuance of their play.

For some reason their balance started to shift after the first phrases of the piece. One partner -the one who had been the teacher- came to the fore more and more, outplaying the other, pushing her a little to the background. The other partner apparently sensed what happened and some insecurity crept in her play. It was if the old role pattern teacher-student got integrated in the performance of the piece which was written by the composer for two *equal* players. The insecurity caused some errors and soon the piece which would have been beautiful in balance became a quest for the last measure.

At these moments, it's hardly any fun to be a sound engineer. Playing ensemble, myself, I recognised the imbalance and the subsequent insecurity all too well! Anyway, the effect of over-assertiveness (for a reason I could not understand) turned out to be disastrous for the result.

Probably the partner who suffered from insecurity sensed it too, because after the recital they stopped playing together.

The moral of this story: The balance of an ensemble is a matter of (musical) life and death! Make sure that your balance is well maintained. If you appear on stage as an ensemble, no any outplaying is permitted!

## Poor Progress

It's such a nice feeling that you are performing well as an ensemble while building a comprehensive repertoire. It provides a sense of achievement if after a while you can play some pieces without preparation as an ad-hoc recital.

As an ensemble, you usually start a new piece in good spirits. The first rehearsals seem to provide a lot of progression, but then slowly the piece bites the dust. Some sections appear to be obstacles, or the final result is less than hoped for.

Lack of progression may cause annoyance. The extent mostly depends on the stakes.

If you are preparing a recital, it is stressful that you cannot complete a piece before hitting the stage. The date is fixed and time flies. At a certain stage, it becomes clear that you will not meet the deadline. Which results in uncertainty and possibly a poor performance in the recital.

During recital preparation, it is extremely important to make a fair estimation of your progress in order to trim your sails to the wind if necessary. Mind, even professionals change their programme without notice if they think a programmed piece is not ready for performance. If you detect the lack of progress in time, you have the opportunity to brush up old repertoire in order to achieve a good result.

If you have no concerts to play, the weight of the deadline is less. It remains annoying, however, if completion of the piece seems too far away. In this case, you can do four things:

- Stay the course against the annoyance of the lack of progress.
- Take a break and analyse the problems.
- Suspend the piece and start another piece.
- Remove the piece from the repertoire.

I would not recommend the first option -stay the course- because choosing it, you include the annoyance in the piece. If you want to go on with the piece, you must execute option two at least: analyse the bottlenecks, adapt them or subject them to slow and deliberate effort.

Adaptation of the parts may solve problems, it is not necessary to stick to the ideas of the composer or arranger literally as long as you do not stretch the musical idea. Specifically with arrangements of piano pieces or with music for other ensembles you can make subtle and effective adaptations which make the piece run smoothly. Examples are moving notes between parts and skipping double bass notes in the most complex part.

Option three may be refreshing: pick up some other repertoire and let the -problem' piece mature a bit in your mind. After a while your attitude towards the piece may have improved such, that you will be successful in the end. Don't be so optimistic, however, to expect that the problems will have disappeared automatically if you continue with the piece after a few months. I found out myself that this unreal expectation is the source of a huge annoyance!

Option four -leaving the piece alone- is *no* admission of weakness! Sometimes you will have to admit that the piece is too demanding, or that it just bores you to death. Mind -as a consolation- that the experience you have gained with the attempt to master the piece, will benefit others in your repertoire for sure.

## Always another Excuse

As an ensemble, you play together. Plain logic. That's why you are rehearsing as an ensemble. Preferably regularly. I will not give a firm period for the sessions together but playing and rehearsing together *regularly* is absolutely necessary. We rehearsed once a week in my guitar duos, with the flute-guitar duo the frequency was much, much less. Never mind, our level of ambition was much lower as well.

Naturally, there must be an opportunity for it, you will have to allocate time. Time which is a rare resource in this busy life! Even if you agree on specific rehearsal dates there may be numerous occasions which foil your agreement. Just think of the contemporary -work ethic' of flexibility and unsocial hours.

As I said before, regularity is quite important for an ambitious ensemble, because after you have prepared your rehearsals at home it is just annoying to find out that a session together must be cancelled.

It is even more annoying if you don't know exactly when the next rehearsal will take place anyway. If each time it becomes more or less of a gamble if the session will be held in the near future. At a certain moment this annoyance will kill your motivation: what's the use of

preparation at home if there is no opportunity to see the results of this effort? Decrease of motivation decreases progress and may cause the ensemble's wearing out.

So, choose a firm date for your ensemble rehearsals. Select days on which you are the least disturbed by social obligations. Of course, it cannot be prevented that you have to cancel at times. If cancelling becomes the only regularity, however, it is wise to find another date.

If there is no other date? Well, in that case you will have to adapt your ambitions by mutual agreement. If you don't, annoyances will emerge automatically.

## Things are getting worn out

I mentioned it before, just after the establishment of an ensemble there is ample energy and ambition. You set to work with many pieces, you hit the stage if you can and have clear goals in mind.

Now time has passed and bit by bit you sense wearing out and fatigue in the cooperation. Rehearsals are less successful and less frequent, you fall back on old and well-known repertoire -the heritage of your past-, you fail to start new projects and you stop performing on stage.

What are you going to do if (one of the) ensemble members point out this (lack of) development? How do you deal with a common past if the future of the ensemble seems dim as a consequence of the signs of wearing out? Will you proceed until dissolution? Or will you start a discussion with possibly bad news as an outcome?

Sensing this, I experience the same feeling of indecisiveness as with changing guitar teachers. At a certain instant, you achieve a situation -a status quo if you want to define it this way- you are used to with a person you think to know. It is almost a piece of stability in a hectic world, a sense of (relative) comfort opposed to the uncertainty you feel when you are searching a new teacher or ensemble partner (assuming you are able to find one).

I am not the one to leave behind security as quickly as possible -not to say that I am rather sticking to it- even despite the fact that I intuitively sensed what I described above: wearing out and slowly adding annoyances.

It is very, very difficult to admit that you have had it after many years of cooperation. To admit that in the musical sense you have nothing to say to each other anymore.

Sensing this is the perfect opportunity to attempt to bring back the élan you seemed to have forgotten in all those years. True, it is far more difficult to discuss this than to grumble in silence about it. If you want to proceed with the ensemble in this situation, however, discussion is *absolutely* necessary. Your playing satisfaction and fun is at stake!

If you fail to do so, you open the gates for annoyances to creep in. Annoyances which will disable your ability to cooperate in the ensemble. Annoyances about the fact that your partner gets a hidden agenda, or that he/she is starting up another ensemble and makes no effort for the one which you are part of any more.

Mind, if you do discuss these matters it might appear that it is true: the ensemble has worn out and is at the end of the life cycle. Well, in that case you have done what you could do. At least you are not stuck, *wondering* what has happened to the once fruitful cooperation.

## Tactical(?) Replacement

I guess it's the nightmare of many a musician: being disposed of in a more or less sneaky manner, causing you to have to face the unexpected while your successor cannot wait to take your parts.

I guess this happens in professional ensembles where performance is money: musicians who show a poor performance in the opinion of fellow-players or management will be removed by persuasion or pressure (i.e. fired) while the succession has been arranged. *The Show must go On*, isn't it?

This "Shining Example"... Do you have to apply this with amateur ensembles as well?

Well, if I found out that my fellow players were attempting to have me replaced on the sly, I would experience it as a complete breach of trust. Mutual trust which is essential for a musical cooperation to achieve a positive result. The same mechanism as in other relationships. In that situation, this would be the last annoyance I went through in an ensemble.

So, if possible, do not play sneaky games. Terminate the cooperation in a decent way and go one's way. No sooner you are free to establish a new ensemble.

## Conclusion

If you read this *Guitarity*, I guess your heart will sink into your boots when thinking of establishing an ensemble. All those things which can go wrong while you do not sense them! All those annoyances which spread in secret!

I don't think that you do not sense anything: in many cases, you sense more than you talk about or even want to know. In that case you are up to a real problem: do you feel sufficiently safe in the ensemble to say what's on your mind? Are you possibly afraid that you will lose an activity you love -playing together is real fun!- if you speak up about an obstacle or annoyance?

Merciless practice is, that unspoken annoyances do far more damage than the ones you have talked over. Unspoken annoyances tend to grow with time.

My conclusion is that inside an ensemble communication *around/outside* the music is equally important as communication *inside* the music. This is -for me at least- a sigh around the saying *It's too late to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted*.

As a musician, never keep yourself from establishing or participating in an ensemble: its price is fabulous, a whole which is more than the sum of the participants!

Be assertive and communicate in a respectful manner about the things which are bothering you in the ensemble, and cooperate to correct them. Playing together is more than playing your part like you are the soloist. In order to do that right, you will have to communicate both *inside* and *outside* the music. This implies both speaking and listening carefully!

This will prevent most annoyances and will render this *Guitarity* obsolete!