

Master Classes



In the performing arts, specifically Music, the Masterclass is a special form of education. One student gets a one-on-one lesson by a professional, in most cases a well-known musician or another authority in music. The special thing is, that a Masterclass is often open for an audience. In this way, it is possible to learn something as a listener too.

I guess that some people while considering this concept will get memories of their school days, of that poor single victim who was selected by the teacher to be tested and almost interrogated about the homework in front of the class. Yes, I remember that I could take in something as a listener too: a sense of luck that I was not selected, a sense of sympathy for the poor student on stage if things went bad, or even a sense of fear that I would be next, while I did not master the Pythagorean Theorem yet!

Fortunately, in most cases this reminiscence does not fit the musical Masterclass, except maybe for another Pythagorean Theorem. The old Greek philosopher Pythagoras used to be occupied with music theory too, particularly the scales and intervals. The ill-famous Pythagorean Comma -which implies that it is impossible to tune an instrument perfectly for all keys- is named after him. Fortunately, Bach came up with a feasible compromise, which he strikingly demonstrated with the preludes and fugues of his *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*.

With a Masterclass, the atmosphere is quite different from the test in the high school days. A student who steps up is usually very well prepared. This gives the Master, the teacher-

musician, the opportunity to add some extras to the session, which makes it quite useful and entertaining for the audience which often consists of fellow-musicians.

As an amateur guitarist, I knew about the occurrence of Masterclasses, at times I heard that they were organised at far away guitar events. Masterclasses? They are intended for professionals, or the ones who try to become one, I used to think. In fact, I did not know what a Masterclass was about. I sometimes read funny stories about an explicit and harsh judgement. Or I overheard a remark about the high prices for a Masterclass with a phenomenon like John Williams.

With the first Twente Guitar Festival, the Masterclass came within the reach of amateurs. Amateur guitarists like me.

Initially I was hesitating. I considered that I had to be able to play extremely well before I could bother a highly talented musician with my own amateuristic interpretations. To add insult to injury, you are there on your own, in front of an audience!

Well, playing before an audience is not that bad (you always have the option of an escape to the dressing room afterwards). But, eh... what about playing a piece first and getting a well-founded review of your playing capabilities? How would I react if my playing was considered rubbish?

On the other hand, I was curious. How is it like? What can I learn from it? Which useful hints does a Masterclass yield? How are the professionals in a teaching situation like this?

Well, I succeeded in suppressing my diffidence and my biased contempt about my playing capabilities, so I subscribed.

After completion of the subscription, I received the acknowledgement in my mailbox and could start working. With a simple dilemma: How do you prepare for a Masterclass? Which repertoire is suitable for that?

Roughly speaking there are four directions: Dead-simple, Easy, Intermediate and (too) Hard. From your own perspective, of course, because man is the measure of all things.

Dead-simple seems the most risk-free choice. With a fair chance that it benefits little. You would be done with the well-known *Andante* by Carulli pretty fast, unless the master suggests to play this piece like the pianist Uchida plays the well-known "simple" Mozart Sonata. In that case, even this simple piece by Carulli turns into a musical challenge.

Talking about easy... inside in your study pieces are easy soon, but in the fresh air of the musical performance there is some more to it.

With Easy level, you have more options. Some guitarists consider *Lagrime* by Tarrega an easy piece. With an "easy" piece like this you can learn quite a lot. That's why I took up *Lagrime* after all these years, together with some other old musical friends. It is a mix of frustration (it's not that easy) and satisfaction (you find solutions which had not occurred to you before), yet the result is better than it was. Study has its rewards!

Well, what about "Intermediate"? You'll learn even more from that! I decided to leave out "Hard", because I did not dare to venture that. Yes, the real diehard would say that you should play your most difficult piece. I've got some problems with that, I did not complete my hardest piece yet. I guess that on a Masterclass you'll have to be able to play a piece at least to the end, isn't it?

It is a funny merry-go-round which is put in motion with the question: "which piece provides the most benefit in a Masterclass?" It requires a quality judgement of your own repertoire. Of your playing capabilities, too!

On my first Masterclass, I decided to play what I liked. Two Dutch Renaissance pieces: *Fortuna Anglese* by Joachim van den Hove and *Onder een Linde Groen* by Nicolas Vallet. I considered them suitable, not too easy, not too difficult either.

In the progress of preparing these pieces, I gradually got a sense of anxiety which is quite similar to what you feel with on-stage performance. It's different kind of stress, I must say, because in your mind an audience reacts differently from a Masterclass teacher, who will recognize more details and issues of improvement in your play.

It was quite surprising how many aspects were covered by this little piece. Yes, only one, the first. Analysis, correction, a good laugh and a lot of fun took almost the complete hour of the Masterclass. Genuine musicianship requires undivided attention. From *Zen or the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* I remember the quotation from a Japanese motorcycle repair manual "*repair of the motorcycle requires a free and clear mind.*"

The master guitarist Yves Storms became an important factor for the creation of a free and clear mind by means of his relaxed and convincing style of teaching. He created a state of mind which was open for learning. I learned something about breathing, peace of mind, cheerfulness and funny jokes in music. I even got acquainted with the thumb-apoyando, a technique I had never used, as I learnt with *Melancolie* by Napoleon Coste in one of the years to come. In this way, I got a very pleasant impression of the Masterclass.

The second year we went as the duo DOS Amigos. The advantage was that we could follow two Masterclasses, because the subscription included one Masterclass per person without restrictions concerning participation as an ensemble. You could go alone, you were allowed to come with a quartet as well.

The game of the repertoire selection started again. This time we selected one of our hardest pieces at the time (*The Flatt Pavin*) and a piece of intermediate difficulty (*Modinhas Brasileiras* by Celso Machado).

The preparation stress was there again, but now even worse. It was definitely more than the sum of the individuals. Maybe we considered the Masterclass a kind of evaluation or even judgement of our duo, I have no other explanation for it. Even though we performed before audiences many times, we had never been evaluated by a professional player.

Our first Masterclass was with Denis Azabagic, a celebrity in the classical guitar world and an experienced ensemble player. With a clear analysis, he exposed some aspects of inherent unbalance in our ensemble. Because we were too focused on the *judgement* aspect of the Masterclass, we only "learned" that we lacked balance in sound and interplay. Thus, an old psychological problem came to the surface again, a problem which even buying new guitars of identical build had failed to solve.

During the Masterclass Denis Azabagic showed his teaching qualities, because he did not leave us alone with his analysis. He had some quite personal remarks concerning our roles in the ensemble, stressing that communication between the partners is vital. Not only within the scope of the music, but also in aspects which are seemingly not related to music. Communication, cooperation and a bit of giving and taking for the benefit of the end result.

These were aspects which touched the personal and emotional sphere. I guess you can imagine that our minds got a little less open and free because of that. We instinctly knew that our inherent (lack of) communication affected the result of our interplay.

I guess, Mr. Azabagic is a specialist in these aspects indeed, because he has an ensemble (flute/guitar) with his wife! So, in this case you have to communicate on stage, because you cannot complain about a poor concert at home after the show.

Our second Masterclass took us to Ulrich Steir, the guitar professor of the Artez Conservatorium. He enervated the myth that a soloist in an ensemble must rule the roost, which is quite a challenge with single string melodies if you are not such a loud player, like I am. This eased the tension and allowed dynamics to develop more naturally. Again, we got the advice to attune the playing volumes to restore the balance.

Yves Storms gave us our third Masterclass. He accentuated matters quite differently, he departed from the requirements of the music and style period concerning the skills of the duo partners. This context determined his remarks. At times just as confronting as with Azabagic, but framed differently.

In the end my experience with these Masterclasses were quite different from my solo ones. They yielded an analysis we had failed to make ourselves, so we had a bit of a sense of failure. A little grime, so to say.

The next year -the third time- I went solo again, because the guitar duo DOS Amigos had met its end in a sad way. Another Masterclass with Yves Storms was a nice way to return to my solo repertoire. I was quite used to Masterclasses by then, so I learnt more from it.

In 2009, I subscribed for a Masterclass with Pavel Steidl, a phenomenon in the realm of nineteenth century guitar music. I found it a great opportunity getting acquainted with a fine guitarist and musician with an unbridled enthusiasm and passion for music. It was a delightful hour full of fun in music and its performance. Steidl accepts you as an amateur musician as you are, which is a pleasure, I must say. There was no hint of an atmosphere which sometimes shows from stories of Masterclasses by for instance Segovia (well, I guess you were not quite welcome there as a humble amateur guitarist).

As an extra, I had a Masterclass with Johan Fostier, again a passionate musician who used funny illustrations in the score of *Cancion del Imperador* to bring forward the necessary emotions in a quite constructive way! As I could see, sometimes the emoticons from Internet appear in written music!

Summarizing, even if you are an amateur, just try to attend Masterclasses. It is refreshing and encouraging to be introduced to the musical vision and teaching of great guitarists!