

Back on Stage



In 2007 the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos dissolved, leaving me with the challenge to play on my own after fifteen years, being a soloist again. At that time, I had no liking to find a new partner. I thought that would not be feasible before I could manage my own play.

I started digging up old repertoire. I should remember that, shouldn't I? Well after fifteen years in the closet, the memory of many pieces appeared a bit blurred, or vague at least. Besides, I had to find a method for goal-oriented working, because I was no longer satisfied with playing for myself on the attic alone.

In those days, Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn organised Open Guitar Nights. Everyone who liked it could play up to ten minutes of guitar music in front of an audience. To me it appeared a perfect opportunity to work on a programme.

I described my experiences in the On Stage Again stories. They are just a click away!

On Stage Again I

Music is for sharing, that's the motto of the guitar pedagogue Aaron Shearer. For the player, this implies a performance (from time to time). I like to do that, although the urge to perform (at all cost) fortunately has diminished quite a bit.

It had been some time ago that I performed for the last time. Since the Guitar Club broke up I had not set a foot on stage.

There was a new opportunity, however, the Open Stage at Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn. You could go there - admission free - and announce that you want to play something. In that case you had about 15 minutes on-stage time. Playing was not compulsory; however, you could just sit and listen to fellow-guitarists too.

I left home in good spirits with the score of *Sonata Ms 87* by Paganini and some other little pieces in my bag. Full of ambition to make a good performance.

The open stage evening was well visited. A group of young guitarists and about seven solo players (including me, said the old fool) would play their pieces.

The first choice to make is "when do you want to perform?" Do you go first or are you waiting for the stress to accumulate a bit? Well in this case this die was cast, the kids went first because they could not play too late.

I frankly admit that I felt some stage fright before actually hitting the stage. That surprised me, because normally it starts on stage rather than before. It's clear that I do not perform on guitar sufficiently often to obtain a basic routine and confidence, experiences are wearing off. Additionally, I felt this new audience as an insecurity.

Hence it became quite difficult for me to practice the philosophical concept *Live in the Present!* during the performance of my predecessors on stage. Involuntarily I was thinking about how I would be on stage. This unintentionally increases the stress factor.

Of course, if you sense a mood like this, you could call off with the reason *Not in the Right Mood for an Optimal Performance* or the well-known Jan Akkerman paradigm *No, sorry (and dashes off-stage)*. Trouble was, that I had come here to perform one way or the other!

So after the break I hit the stage. Fortunately, beforehand I found some opportunity to browse through the pieces in a flash. Stepping up I immediately encountered something I had not practiced at home. It was the lighting!

The multi-colour LED spotlights were quite atmospheric, yet they caused a clear disadvantage for the player. The strings and frets reflected a bright rainbow of colours, particular the treble strings, so it became quite tricky to discriminate e.g. a B string from a G string. During performances, I usually play from score. Reading, however, was a bit hampered by the backlighting.

These conditions are of no concern if you can play the piece blindly under the condition that you feel secure. However, if you are a bit visually oriented like me, this lighting aspect becomes a handicap under stress conditions.

A player that appeared after me was far more assertive at that point, he requested a floor lamp for score reading. Little disadvantage was that it shone the audience right in the face.

Because I was in Germany, I had to introduce myself and announce the pieces in German. It took some looking for the right words! Advantage is, that your story does not become too long.

I started with the *Minuetto* from the Paganini Sonata. It was a funny feeling, sensing some heavy fingers at the first notes already. I succeeded playing on without clear interruptions, yet I felt a nasty struggle within myself. It was the effect of the battle between the two players that is described in *The Inner Game of Music*.

Fortunately, I could recover a bit in the *minore* section, but it did not yield a sense of great satisfaction with me. The negative polarity from *The Inner Game of Music* almost got the better of me! I was glad that the audience had a positive reaction indeed!

Yet I decided to skip the *Rondo* -too risky in my current mood- and I played a concluding piece that I had brought with me as fall-back. The audience was satisfied with my performance, the reactions of some people afterwards were an indication for it.

Well, satisfaction was not exactly what I felt myself... How did that happen?

Pumping Nylon by Scott Tennant quotes a famous baseball coach John Wooden: *Failing to Prepare is Preparing to Fail*.

That's where it went wrong!

It was not exactly true that I completely failed my preparation. I had studied the piece thoroughly (I almost knew it by heart), I had played before a small audience, I had recorded it for evaluation and I even took it to a masterclass for tactical and technical hints. Yet the weak point that seemed to be "studied away" returned mercilessly. Apparently, the preparation had not been sufficient.

Evaluating this situation, I would give myself (and you if you like to read it) the following hints:

1. Deliberately make a programme. "I guess I'll play this or that piece" is not sufficient. You have to choose what to play. With encores, as well. Make working copies of your pieces. :-) If I have to look for my piece to play in a book, I tend to get distracted by other pieces: "ah, this looks like fun to play too!" Make sure you concentrate on the programme you selected!
2. Choose material that you master under stress circumstances. That requires a dose of self-knowledge. You can help yourself with the selection, recording the pieces you would like to play on stage. After about ten minutes you replay the recording while assuming the role of audience: "As a listener, would I appreciate this piece and the way it is played?"
If yes, give it a try! If no, estimate the effort required to get the piece "stage-ready" in due time. If you cannot make it, select a piece where your level of mastery is higher. A well-played "easy" piece is much more fun for yourself and the audience than a *Via Dolorosa* "on high level".
3. Study the piece until you have the feeling that you can play the complete piece without hesitation. This security prevents surprised panic during the performance. If you notice hesitations, deal with them individually during your study.
4. If you play the piece well in your study, slightly increase the stress. Record yourself and make a note of all spots where you are hesitating in some way. Again, deal with them individually during your study. If you succeed making a recording without hesitation, you have security on a higher stress level.

5. Extend your discussion of a piece in the guitar instruction from "being able to play" to "being able to perform". Usually this requires some extra sessions to complete the piece. The positive side is a greater security under performance circumstances.
6. Analyse your pieces and find out its structure. Where are the points that enable you to breathe and if necessary recover from a slip? Note these points in the score if you are playing from paper, or remember them if you are playing by heart.
7. If you want to play multiple pieces in a programme, exercise this complete programme too! Make sure that you insert short pauses between the pieces, for clear separation and for recovery if necessary.
8. Take a look at the stage where you are going to play and analyse the situation. Check the lighting, if it bothers you or helps you. If it bothers you, ask the lighting technician to change settings and if necessary, add some flood light to decrease contrast. It cannot be that "atmospheric lighting" hampers your performance as a musician. Stage lighting must help you and not counteract!
9. If you play from the score, check if there is sufficient light to read. If not, ask for some extra light (flood light or subtle spot light). Or use a small LED light that you can attach to the music stand (take care not to blind the audience). Also in this case, lighting must help you and not counteract!

: -) I'll definitely try all these points next time!

As a matter of fact, the Open Stage Kulturhaus NIHZ developed into a fun night, its guitarists brought many styles. I heard Latin, fingerpicking, flamenco, blues and (arrangements of) pop songs.

An "All Play Together Now!" of *La Bamba* (Ritchie Valens) closed a nice evening.

On Stage Again II

After my renewed confrontation with stage fright on the last Open Stage in Nordhorn, I became a bit doubtful. Luckily my contribution to the yearly recital evening of my own guitar teacher encouraged me a bit, so my pessimism decreased. Thus, I decided to attend the second Open Podium with Kulturhaus NIHZ.

This time I took the structured approach and actually applied the hints from the previous On Stage Again.

I selected the pieces of my program with plenty of time to spare: Four pieces by the French composer Alfred Cottin. He lived in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. He composed mainly *musique de salon* with romantic features, comparably to the music of Madame Pratten in England, yet a bit more cheerful.

Alfred Cottin is completely forgotten in these days; his most important feat is his name on the score of *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* by Tarrega. The latter dedicated this piece to "the eminent guitarist Alfred Cottin".

I had four pieces in mind *Barcarolle*, *Danse des Lutins* (Goblin's Dance), *Sous les Palmiers* and *Les Clochettes*. After a bit of experimenting with the level of difficulty I decided to play them in this sequence.

Relatively speaking, *Barcarolle* is the slowest piece, though the swing of the 6/8 measure must be clear, so speed should not be too low. The main challenges are a few excursions to the higher positions. Stay calm and do not accelerate, that's the trick, the last movement to the 12th fret is within a *ritenuto*, so take it nice and easy. Take a breath and play on.

Danse des Lutins is a fun piece. Goblins are no elegant creatures, so you can use the introduction to make this clear. The first line of the piece is a kind of *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, perfect to show their clumsiness. Then the waltz starts in 3/8 time. The melody includes triplets that are not quite obvious with speed, so I will not worry too much about the exact duration. In the middle section the key changes to A major. The opportunity for a clear slowdown that diminishes after some time, back to a tempo. Then there is a section that requires careful attention. The transition from 12th to first position must be deliberate, but there is plenty of time because of the *ritenuto*.

Sous les Palmiers is a bit of a weird piece, yet I will play it because of the joyful middle section. Stay calm and use the *ritenuto* in the middle section to pay the two-voice run correctly.

Les Clochettes is a fun piece to finish the recital. It also has the passages that require a bit of warm-up, that's why I play it last. The middle section shows the little bells (clochettes) by means of natural harmonics. It contains a passage with slides to the 12th fret. Do not apply too much pressure, it will prevent you from sliding easily, particularly with sweaty fingers. Playing lightly, that is the key for the complete piece, do not make your left hand heavy.

I changed the piece a bit for performance purposes, the second repeat of the fourth theme was inserted by me. A little scale run A - B - C - D bridges the gap. Take care, this one differs from the corresponding runs elsewhere in the piece!

I started to study the pieces together in the sequence that I wanted to play them. Holiday time was a perfect opportunity for this. In the meantime, I changed the sequence a bit (*Sous les Palmiers* used to be the last piece) and edited the scores. *Les Clochettes* got an extra repeat and changed layout from on page to two pages. I deliberately practiced with the new score for easy reading during the performance.

For the purpose of the recital, I made a separate print-out to be able to make tactical notes and the fingering. I put the pieces in a separate binder, I will not play from the book. The reason is that I must stay focused, if I am playing from a book I cannot resist browsing for pieces. I have put the pieces in the binder in sequence, that minimizes page turns.

I realized that I played passages that required a close look on the finger board by heart in the end. Consequentially I had to practice "the return to score reading" deliberately, to prevent losing contact with the score as a consequence. Another reason to play music by heart. Yet I do not dare to do this in concert.

At the last Open Stage I was impeded by the stage lighting, the contrast caused problems with score reading. I felt insecure as a consequence. That was the reason why I bought a MightyBright music stand light that can be attached to the stand or the binder. It is battery operated and has two heads in order to illuminate two pages. The heads with LED bulbs are flexibly mounted, so it is possible to adjust the lighting.

I practiced with it at home, because you have to attach the device and adjust it in such a way that the audience is not bothered by the light. It might cause problems on a raised stage like the one in Nordhorn. I also practiced playing with the LED light on in the complete dark. The

illumination of the score was OK. The reflected light from the paper even enabled me to see the finger board, yet it was not completely illuminated.

In the dark, I could assess which passages were a bit insecure. Looking out of the corner of your eyes while you are reading a score appears quite important. I hope that the theatre offers more ambient light. Anyway, I felt better prepared for the stage environment than last time.

Gradually I started to play the program on a daily basis. Once slow and easy, once on the intended tempo. In the end, I measured the elapsed time including pauses between the pieces and I ended up on about 12 minutes, quite the recital time for the Open Podium.

An extremely useful step appeared to take a deep breath in advance and "visualize" the first measures in your mind. In terms of the pulse of the piece rather than of exact count. This also helped me to regain the *a tempo* after a *ritenuto*.

Of course, I took the pieces with me to my guitar lesson. I admit the timing was not perfect, it's hardly practical to implement changes in interpretation and fingering just one week before the big day!

As a finishing touch, I rehearsed my announcement. I guess that could be better, I failed to make the little note in my binder. I was doubtful about the timing: one announcement for all, or separate announcements for the individual pieces.

I guess my preparation is pretty complete now, although I do not know the pieces by heart.

Yet at this very moment (a few hours before the concert) I am not quite sure indeed! I feel a kind of increased sense of alertness and my solar plexus is quite sensitive. So, I have a certain degree of stress. I hope it gets better after some acclimatization on the Open Podium. Just in case Erna will test and prepare a Bach remedy for me this afternoon (no don't be afraid, these are no tranquillizers).

I guess some readers will say now: "Why for heaven's sake would you want to play with a sense of insecurity?" It's hard to explain, this urge to play. Yet I will play with what I have. In this way, I'll have some material for the next *On stage Again!*

Sometime later...

After the pasta at home, my stage fright had increased to 38.1 degree Centigrade. It's soo weird, I haven't suffered from it for a long time. This sounds more dramatic than it is, I guess, a long time ago I became restless days before a recital.

The drive from Hengelo to Nordhorn appeared a perfect opportunity to practice my announcement (please stay focused on the traffic too!). I do not have a particularly loud voice, so I have to switch it on deliberately. Just like the breath support for singers. After a few attempts I knew what I was going to say. It was funny to notice that I formulated such that the audience would not know how many pieces I was going to play. Looks like an escape to use the ejection seat in case of emergency. Man's psychology has in incredible functional design!

After I passed the border at Noord Deurningen, I got a funny feeling. *Willkommen in Deutschland!*

Ooooh, Scheisse!

What did I do? Well, I practiced my announcement in Dutch. *Schnell uebersetzen! Meine Damen und Herren, guten abend.... Ich werde fuer Sie spielen...* As an advantegous side effect, this consideration distracted me from my stage worries.

I found my standard parking spot near the school and swallowed a bit of the water with my Bach remedy for a start.

Duo NIHZ opened the stage according to tradition after the gong-beat (a firm sound, it looks like if you are playing Tarkus by Emerson, Lake and Palmer)

After the performance of members of Herr Baumann's guitar school, the stage was for me. I was the only player with a classical repertoire this night, the Open Stage offers a nice and rich variety of styles.

Because everyone had his own setup and equipment, the layout of the stage was not fixed. Consequentially I needed some time for my start-up ritual. That's not too bad because it gives you time to get concentrated. I set up my music stand, put the binder on it, attached, switched on and adjusted my "score light" (the audience was suprised about this device), sat down, opened the guitar case, lifted the guitar, attached my Ergoplay and put the tuner on the headstock. All right, I was there!

Tuning required only a little adjustment. My Kwakkel guitar is quite stable if the strings are more than a week old.

It was a pity that the music stand could not be set lower, so I got a little hidden behind the binder. I guess I should try to position the stand left of me. It opens you more for the audience and I think that this visual contact is important.

The chair was a bit higher than the one I use at home. Looking back I think that I should have adjusted my Ergoplay, because my musical memory in some way uses my position too.

There it was... my announcement in German. Later that night it showed that the announcements *-Im Fremdsprache* for most of us-were a source of humour!!

Barcarolle went according to plan. The nicely coloured stage lighting blurred the vision a bit, I could hardly see the difference between my G and D string. I should consider that next time! Practicing in the dark at home bore its fruits here!

I was glad to notice that my stress did not increase in the progress. I did not pass the trouble spots completely free of failure, yet I went on without self-reproach. I kept going despite the little slips.

Danse des Lutins, Sous les Palmiers and *Les Clochettes* followed without major problems. Thus, this recital developed into a much more enjoyable experience than last time. After a rewarding applause (and a few nice reactions in the break) my motivation to reappear the next time was boosted.

My experiences with the Mighty Bright "score light" were quite positive. It helped me focusing, it increased my concentration.

After my little recital, an enjoyable mix of styles unfolded on stage. A singer made a nice performance with 75% music and 25% talk while he accompanied himself and enjoyed the company of a motivated solo guitarist. Guitar School Baumann was in the race with a few well-known songs with assistance of Eddie *-Are you Ready, Eddie-* on the Congas. A father-daughter ensemble on steelstring brought us back to the time of the songs of an early

Boudewijn de Groot. Another solo guitarist played a potpourri of *Classical Gas* and *I Needed You* as a try-out for his performance on the wedding of an old friend. The old blues singer was there again with some striking examples of this rich repertoire. The man with the flamenco style combined his Spanish songs with some nostalgia a la Bob Dylan with his blues harp.

The Open Stage went on until ten o' clock, in accordance with the regulations (yes, there are quite a number of regulations for a music establishment and the late-night rest after ten is one of them).

Time for the *après-musique*! This On-Stage Again deserves another issue!

On Stage Again III

The last Open Podium evening in Nordhorn (see *Back On Stage II*) encouraged me in a positive way. The preparation routine served me well. Time for the third edition of my performance practice!

A theme performance around an individual composer - last time it was Alfred Cottin, a late 19th century French composer - appeared a useful concept. It provides a bit of consistency in the programme and it's a nice opportunity to present relatively unknown composers.

This time I selected works by the Spanish composer/guitarist Jose Ferrer (1835 - 1916), romantic music in a friendly style. It's no dead easy music, but it is not so difficult that it causes cramp in your fingers. The only criticism from my guitar teacher is, that the music is rather predictable. On the other hand, complex contemporaries that are hard to understand will not entertain a general audience either. Moreover, I like to play these "predictable tunes" myself.

I had three pieces in mind, in sequence of advancing difficulty *Tango Nr. 3*, *Gerbe des Fleurs* and *Charme de la Nuit*. The advancing difficulty was a hint from the past, start with something easier to get used to the stage pressure and warm your fingers.

Tango Nr. 3 sounds typically tango! Outer movements in A minor and a middle section that flees into the warmth of A major. The triplet - two eights structure is often used. I had to keep in mind to stretch the triplet a bit in relation to the eights and to play these constructions consistently throughout the piece because they are characteristic features. To keep things exciting, the piece has a few nice position changes.

Gerbe des Fleurs - the *Flower Basket* - is a little suite with the movements *Cantilene Espagnole*, *Pavane*, *Mazurka* and *Berceuse*. All pieces are spiced up with the characteristic romantic grace notes.

Cantilene Espagnole is a dansant piece in 6/8 measure. The characteristic Spanish harmonic modulations make the piece quite familiar. Ferrer often composed in a strict almost rigid structure. Just like this piece: Theme, little excursion, clear transition and back to the theme. This clarity works well with a performance.

Pavane might cause some dispute concerning the tempo. With a Pavane I am thinking a bit in terms of slowly and stately, but that did not fit this piece. So, I'll play it light-hearted and a

bit quickly. Doing so, I must take care to put the emphasis on the leading note rather than on the grace notes.

On paper, *Mazurka* looks the easiest piece. Appearances are deceiving indeed; this piece is tricky in its own way! The first phrase resembles a Viennese Waltz, the Mazurka character does not show up before the second phrase. Because the piece must be played fast, slurs are a good solution. Unfortunately, they are hard to play smoothly on specific positions. A fast tempo has a disadvantage, the piece is over before you know it. So, I add a da capo after the repeats.

Berceuse is a lullaby in 6/8 measure. Here the atmosphere and the tranquillity is important. So, I should not cut 16th notes, but give them time to sing.

The final piece: *Charme de la Nuit*. This is the most challenging piece, so I'll keep that as the last one. As we are used from Ferrer, the piece has a clear structure. An *introduction* leads to a *Cantabile* phrase that must be repeated once. Then we arrive at a middle section that starts easily but gets more excitement on the run. A *cadenza* forms the conclusion and the intro to the repeat of the *Cantabile*. Then the piece gets an appropriate ending with some nice broad chords.

Charme de la Nuit has more technical issues. Tranquillity is important, do not hurry the *Cantabile*, even though you climb up the fingerboard and slide down again. Do not accelerate in the *Cadenza* either, if you do so, you are bound to fail.

I practiced this programme like last time. I put the scores in the binder in sequence and rehearsed them including page turns. Once every day and if a piece was not satisfactory in my opinion, I gave the relevant passages some extra attention.

Of course, I practiced in the dark with my Mighty Bright again.

As an extra, I wrote down my announcement for the pieces in German and put it in the binder in front of the pieces. Last time the announcements in this foreign language did not go very well, so a little A4 with some remarks would spare me the tedious search for the right words.

At a certain moment, I noticed that my motivation for the daily rehearsal dropped a bit. Maybe that was the point to take it easier. I started again the last weekend before the open stage.

This time an extra addition to the programme emerged. Sarah Rootveld plays the Celtic harp and would like to hit the open stage as a surprise for her brother. Because life on stage is more pleasant in ensemble setup, we decided to play a piece together. So I made an arrangement of a harp song - *Love for Ever More* - a song with the sound and atmosphere of an Irish folk song. I would play the melody with some variation and I would abbreviate the piece slightly because five stanzas were a little bit too long.

It has been quite a while for me for serious ensemble play! After two rehearsals and some adaptations we were ready for it.

On the Open Stage evening I noticed that more and more players had found the stage. This time my wife Erna went with me. That's a good thing because normally she rather stays home than seeing me "suffer" on stage (she recognizes that much better than the average person from the audience).

I was scheduled right after the first break, so I had all the time to get in the mood in a positive way.

The advantage of the schedule was that I could do the ritual of getting seated and tuning in the break, the concert hall was almost empty. That was a nice opportunity to move the fingers a bit. Obviously, I did the warming-up with other pieces than the ones I was going to play, just to keep the element of surprise.

The cooperation with Sarah on her harp was excellent. The ensemble sounded beautiful and my guitar appeared sufficiently loud to play a convincing melody.

Sarah left the stage and there I was, all alone! The sheet with the announcements in German appeared quite useful, I was not at a loss for words.

The Jose Ferrer programme went well. I had just a few glitches and I kept my balance sufficiently to be able to phrase. That brought me a bit of tranquillity. With dynamics, I did not as well as I liked. At times, I had the impression that I overloaded my Kwakkel. I guess it is psychological, because the instrument has a lot of power in its sound, reaching the back rows should not be a problem. A practice spot for the next time, I guess I have to exaggerate more and start my crescendo's much softer.

My right-hand fingers showed me, that I was not playing completely stress-free. As a consequence of sweaty fingers, the string contact became a bit fuzzy at times, so it seemed I could not play full power. Compare it to yelling with a hoarse voice. Luckily, I left my finger nails long enough to protrude above my (slightly swollen and sweaty) fingertips. A point of attention, keep nails sufficiently long, even if it looks uncomfortable at home!

The audience was quite satisfied and so was I! A nice step towards playing on stage more easily!

Thus, I was able to enjoy the rest of the programme, and the *après musique!*