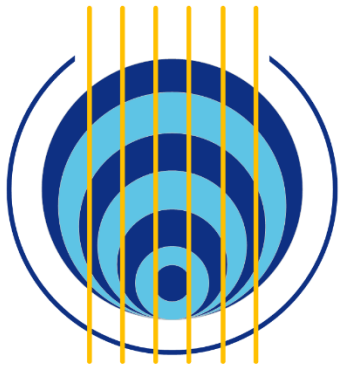


# Amateur Competition 2012

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## Amateurconcours



## Gitaarfestival Nordhorn 2012

This year, AD2012, I made the first attempt to participate in an amateur competition on the guitar. In the past I never considered myself to be a competitor, yet I wanted to go through the process just for trying and gaining experience...

I considered my competition attempt as a nice opportunity to describe my preparation towards the competition and the actual performance in a blog-format. Just to share it with the guitar amateurs on the net.

So, in the next pages I will write about my adventures in preparation of and the actual performance at the amateur competition in Nordhorn, Germany at the Kulturhaus NIHZ in April 2012. Have fun reading and if you are going to participate in a competition yourself, Happy Playing!

### 7-03-2012 Subscribed

As a listener, I attended guitar competitions at the Twente Guitar Festival from its first edition in 2006 and at the Nordhorn Guitar Festival in 2011. At these festivals, you have a Category 1 competition for conservatory students and professionals and a Category 2/3 competition for the amateurs. The distinction between categories 2 and 3 is an age limit of 16 years.

With every competition, I noticed by the reaction and sometimes the sound of the contestants that playing a competition is a quite stressful matter.

I can imagine that with Category 1. As a player and contestant, you are working on your CV with the clear restrictions that only first prizes are significant. A second or third prize only adds some weight for world famous competitions like the Guitar Foundation of America (GFA). Yet you were not the best over there either...

Competitions provide valuable *exposure* for the ambitious professional or conservatory student, particularly if you win and/or impress a Maecenas that happens to drop by. If you

win at famous competitions, doors will open that you would not have been able to pass otherwise. That's the reason why many players roam the world as competition nomads, hoping to win a position in the *Hall of Fame*. Even though the competition scene is a jungle in which the iron law *survival of the fittest* is valid.

To win a competition you have to be professional, cool-headed and ambitious and have a very high level of musicality. Additionally, you have to play the right repertoire to convince a jury. Finally, some luck with the jury adds too, given the historical fact that a guy that won the GFA in flying colours one month did not even pass the preliminaries in Sevilla two months later.

If you are playing a concert, concerning the judgment of the performance you are only dealing with yourself and the audience, and in some cases a lone critic. The audience might compare your play to the performances of other guitarists, but that is from memory only because nobody else is there on stage but you.

At a competition, the player meets a different situation. There is a professional jury on the first ranks and the remaining audience merely consist of walkers-on, they do not judge you. The jury knows the subject, exactly follows the progress of the piece in the score and immediately compares the performance against the acts of the co-contestants that played before. That is a considerable stress factor. There is little chance that slips and errors remain unnoticed, although their effect strongly depends on the performance as a whole.

At these occasions, I have seen guitarists both shining and struggling, observing moments of pure joy and deep misery. I have seen and heard how a single slip of the finger made a well started piece collapse like a house of cards. I have observed miraculous examples of recovery. I watched them leaving the stage with a great relief that they brought the piece to a satisfactory end, I have also seen them going with furious glances and stamping feet in rage because the jury reminded them that time was up.

Particularly pieces by Bach turned out to be an obstacle for many students and candidate-professionals at competitions...

The competition stress also showed with the amateurs, particularly with ages 13 and up. It looked like that the children that went there were less bothered.

Watching this stress, I developed a sense of two minds concerning participation in a competition. At one side, it provides a nice purpose for your playing, something to work on. It could inspire me to study a piece thoroughly, while in the normal guitar life I sometimes fail to add the finishing touch...

At the other side, I disliked the sense of competition. In my mind a competition is a game of "I play (much) better than you!" My guitar playing hobby has no such purpose. I'd play for the performance rather than the prize.

;-) Not considering the fact that I am a poor loser at times...

I have never participated in a competition, so my impression of competitions is not based on own experiences. Therefore, I wanted to give it a try on a moderate level. Just gingerly, to experience the preparations and playing on the competition itself.

One uncertainty in this matter is my competitive attitude. I do not have a drive to be better than others, at the most I am aiming at being different from others. Consequently, I have no

idea if this contest element will help me or bother me in the end. Well, I will experience that too!

Thus, I had a good reason to subscribe for the Cat. 2 amateur competition at the Nordhorn Guitar Festival 2012.

## 8-04-2012 Pick your Piece!

If you want to participate in a competition. you'll have to pick pieces to play. Plain logic. Johan Cruyff, a famous Dutch soccer player would state: "You cannot score without a ball".

Selecting a piece has some parameters, the most prominent being level, duration, style and program.

### Level...

To start with: what you are going to play must reflect the skills and musicality that you want to demonstrate. Where to aim for? A piece that brings you to the limits of your technical skills might cost so much energy and effort that there is nothing left for musicality. On the other hand, a piece that lies well within your technical reach might lack musicality because it is too easy and does not invite you to play it well.

My technical level is not particularly high. In other words, I have worked in a wide range of musical styles and did not get in depth and complexity that much. The most difficult piece I have been playing with is the Prelude from the fourth Lute Suite by Bach. I never played it in one go until the last measure. That's why I found some consolation in the fact that this Prelude often appeared to be a killer in professional competitions.

Consequently, I do not play the top level from the guitar repertoire by composers like Rodrigo, Brouwer, Ponce, Villa Lobos and Ginastera.

An extra restriction is that I do not dare to go to the limits of my (moderate) skills in public. Maybe I am overly cautious, but I like to have some overhead because on stage I already experienced that you have to claim some breathing space. It is a fact that there is considerable difference between performances in the safe intimacy of the study and during the *exposure* on stage.

So I choose the level of my pieces such that I can manage them on stage and still can play musically interesting. Of course, I am glad that it is OK to choose! Many competitions have compulsory pieces, fortunately the Nordhorn competition leaves the choice to the players!

[I guess it's quite boring for a jury to hear a piece for the umpteenth time, yet it is a part of their jobs!]

### Duration...

The time duration of a performance at the competition is limited. In the Nordhorn Competition the time for the amateurs is 8 minutes. No more, if you exceed the time limit, disqualification follows. Of course, it is wise to use this time most efficiently, the jury will not get a well-founded impression of a player if he/she plays for four minutes and stays silent during the remaining four minutes.

How to plan this playing time? I do not play many pieces of 8 minutes or more. I do play some longer sonatas but the individual movements are usually shorter. I am a player of (relatively) short pieces, at the most two pages of score with the "small" note font in Sibelius, as you might have noticed when visiting the DOS Amigos Homepage. Consequently, I know quite a number of pieces that could make up these 8 minutes.

A sonata form would be fine, by the way. Most sonatas have fast en slow movements that enable to show off musical skills in various ways.

I selected two pieces that take five to six minutes. After consulting my guitar teacher, I decided to add a short and faster piece of about one minute. This provides a nice compromise between playing time and tempo development.

### **Style...**

Will you play works by a single composer, by different composers from the same era, or a complete mix of composers and cultural periods? Difficulty remains: what is 8 minutes compared to all those ages of music that you can play on the guitar? Anyway, much too short to travel from Renaissance to Rock!

In the past I already noticed that many players select a top hit rather than a specific style. An example of such a piece is the *Sonata Op. 47* by Ginastera. I have heard this piece on competitions so many times, that I even started to appreciate this (contemporary) piece. Other examples are the works by Brouwer and Bach. Or the Sonata by Jose. It's not surprising that this material is popular, it forms part of the education and the social world of the conservatories of music.

With amateur competitions this effect is similar, the selection of the pieces is greatly influenced by what is widespread in the guitar lesson world. A little bit of Sor and Carulli, but more and more Joep Wanders, Cees Hartog, Marcel Boelaars and the hits of modern times. Yet I heard a few pioneers that braved for instance the *Fantasia* by De Narvaez or a *Milonga* by Piazzola. Those pioneers are the amateurs with a lot of ambition or a lot of playing experience.

My guideline for selection was music I currently like to play. At this time it is music by forgotten composers from the late Romantic era in the 19th centuries, guys like Jose Ferrer, Alfred Cottin and Frederik Rung. The only risk when playing this material is that the jury has a clear opinion on why these composers are and should be forgotten!

### **Programme Composition...**

For this subject I gratefully used my guitar teacher's experience. One of his hints was contrast in the programme, both in atmosphere and tempo. If possible with a fast and swinging conclusion.

That's why I start with a slow and lyrical piece, increase the tempo to some joyful expression and conclude as he recommended: fast and swinging.

### **The Pieces...**

I selected some pieces that I already practiced in public during the open guitar stage evenings. My first piece will be *Praeludium (Albumsblade 24)* by Frederik Rung and the second one is *Les Clochettes (Gavotte)* by Alfred Cottin. I still am thinking about the conclusion: *Samba Cordao* by Joep Wanders or *Estudio Scencillo Nr. 1* by Leo Brouwer.

## 10-04-2012 Preparation

I started this operation a bit irresolutely. When I subscribed to the Guitar Festival Nordhorn 2012 in November 2011, I had not decided yet to join the amateur competition too. It was not before two months in advance of the festival date that I decided to give it a go, after a friendly reminder from the board.

I should do that better next time, just decide at subscription time, yes or no. Provides a lot of extra preparation time.

Anyway, it was different with me this time. Between my enlistment and my final choice of repertoire there was another period of irresolution. I finally selected my pieces after the open stage night of 19 March, leaving about a month of preparation time.

Obviously, I took my pieces to my guitar lessons. My guitar teacher immediately proposed a strict regimen. I should concentrate on the competition pieces only. That's quite difficult for me, because if I am browsing a book of scores, I'll try to play anything I read and I'll forget what I was looking for.

We had some discussion about the selection of the pieces. My teacher wished I had chosen some even more challenging pieces. Well, I could have done that a few months earlier. So, if I happen to start liking to play in competitions, I'll think bigger.

The individual pieces were subject of discussion too. He was a bit doubtful about the *Praeludium* by Frederik Rung. OK, it is a very contemplative piece but it has still some technical difficulties that provide challenge when it comes to a subtle and lyrical performance. This showed up when we increased the tempo and the flow a bit.

## 14-04-2012 Masterclass with Denis Azabagic

During my preparations, I came across a fine opportunity to get some feedback via a master class with the world-famous guitarist Denis Azabagic.

Denis Azabagic (\*1972) was born in Yugoslavia and became a talented guitarist in his youth. He was planning to study guitar in Yugoslavia, but his plans were thwarted by the Yugoslavian wars that broke out in 1991 when the federal republic fell apart after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Consequently, he left Zagreb, his university town, and went to Holland to finish his studies at the Rotterdam Conservatory.

During and after his student days he established a firm reputation amongst others by winning famous competitions all over the world. Presently he often performs with his wife, the Spanish flautist Eugenia Moler, they make up the Cavatina Duo. Additionally, he holds a professoriate Guitar at the Roosevelt University in Chicago.

I remember him playing in 1991 at the Waterstaatskerk in Hengelo, a town in the eastern region of Holland. His performance, particularly of the Barrios pieces *Sueno en la Floresta* and *Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios* made a lasting impression with me. Later I met him again at the master classes and on stage at the Twente Guitar Festival.

It was a lucky coincidence that he was at the Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn, Germany, to give master classes and a concert. Kulturhaus NIHZ offered a nice special arrangement for the master class, so I subscribed.

The night before the master class - this event made Friday the Thirteenth to a happy and lucky day - my wife Erna and I attended his concert, where his wife Eugenia contributed with some beautiful and musical virtuosity on the flute.

On Saturday I returned for the master class. I had the opportunity to attend some classes for other students. A few students from Fontsys, a conservatory in the town of Tilburg in the southern region of Holland, had made the long journey to Nordhorn. One of them was involved in graduating for his Master's degree, the others were at an earlier stage of the guitar study.

Denis Azabagic's attentive and to the point teaching style immediately became obvious to me. I noticed his accurate technical analysis - for instance of complex problems like a wrong position of the hand and a counterproductive posture - and his sensitive musically perceptive mind. He provided hints and solutions with the clear intention to help improving your skills (even if this might take years of study). He did not mince matters, but he always spoke in a positive sense. It made me a little curious how he reacts towards students that mess things up or perform below their level. I guess that he will not fail speaking plainly either!

I remember his plain statements from the master class at the Twente Guitar Festival that I attended with him with my then duo partner of the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos. Denis Azabagic touched a raw nerve, the balance in the ensemble. At that moment, our balance was lost and Azabagic was aware of it. We already were in the wearing-out phase that would lead to the dissolution of DOS Amigos in the end.

I had the weird experience that I began to feel uneasy about my own pieces when I heard those students playing. I recognized a nice piece by Ponce -it looked like a movement from the *Sonata Romantica*, a beautiful piece! - and a well-known work by Rodrigo. My pieces were so simple in comparison with these works! How would Azabagic feel about that?

That's an unjust train of thought, I guess, I play these pieces and I like to play them. I certainly do not want to compare myself to these players that act on much higher level. Yet I felt some diffidence.

After lunch, it was my turn and I played my pieces. I received comments in the same thorough manner like the other students this morning. A few problems seemed to be permanent (my weak fourth finger and forgetting alternate strokes at some points) and my hand posture appeared not optimal for a few passages. Apparently *Les Clochettes* formed a nice surprise for him ("*a charming little piece!*").

It was not until later that I found out that I missed a chance to discuss the competition aspects, he even wrote a book about it. It's a pity that I did not realize that, because some hints from competition practice might have been more useful for my preparation than just playing the pieces. Bad luck!

After the master class I had a little chat with his wife Eugenia Moler that developed into an interesting discussion about practice. Many people hate technical practice and rather play pieces. I suffer from this too, practicing for instance scales and arpeggios fall short with me, because my daily playing time is limited.

Her statement was that development and maintenance of a skill like playing a musical instrument requires many hours of focused practice. Talent is useful to recognize the giftedness, but only concentrated practice helps to improve and consolidate the skills. So things never come naturally in music, despite the looks of it when you see a skilled musician playing. "Making it look easy" says more about the practicing method than about a player's talent.

From her own experience, she estimated that a few thousand hours of determined practice were necessary to develop your musical skill. Well, counting my present weekly playing hours, I started to become a bit pessimistic.

Yes, these are ;-)) harsh words in a society that requires a result to be achieved against minimal effort. So again, art is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.

A bit of consolation came from the discussion too, concentrated practice is also useful in little bits, 10 – 15 minutes a day is already helpful. ;-) So, a lack of playing time is no excuse to spend all your practicing effort in pieces alone. I'll dig up my scales, arpeggios and slurs again!

## 17-04-2012 Feedback

During the preparations, I felt the need for a clearer feedback from the rehearsals of my pieces. If you are playing yourself, you are so occupied with acts of tone production that you have no idea how the music will arrive with the listener. The solution is recording and playback for evaluation.

I have owned a Fostex harddisk recorder for about 7 years. A good recorder with a few slight disadvantages, it is hard to operate and it is not really portable. Making a quick recording is not possible, let alone copying the audio data to the computer in an easy way. Consequentially the Fostex is less suitable for an ad hoc recording during rehearsal sessions.

Present day there are portable digital audio recorders that operate on batteries, store the digital audio on SD card and communicate with a computer via a standard USB interface. This enables you to copy files rather than streamed audio as with the Fostex. In many cases the recorders have no effect processor (reverb etc.), but that is no drawback, because you can add effects on the PC afterwards.

One of my requirements is that such a device has XLR inputs and phantom supply form y set of AKG C1000s microphones, because these faithful microphones catch my guitar sound beautifully.

Finally, I bought a Tascam DR-100-II with a few SD cards of 4 GB. This is a flexible recorder with high quality preamplifiers and easy operation. Additionally, it had a remote control unit that saved me a lot of running around between guitar and recorder. By experience I found out that it got me less distracted during recording.

After some experiments on the PC, it appeared that I could make professional quality recordings with post-processing on the PC.

I noticed in the past that recording puts a bit of pressure on my play. Thus it provides a nice opportunity to observe some of the effects of performance stress on your play. And performance stress there is, with a jury in front of you!

I started with *Les Clochettes*, a piece with a reasonable tempo and a straight rhythm.

The first time required some settling-in. The first phrase was no problem until I realised myself that I was recording that piece! Consequentially I sounded hesitantly and hastily. Particularly the tricky passages were too fast.

I considered that for a moment during playback and repeated the recording. I permitted myself slightly more breathing space, yet I noticed some insecurity with certain passages. Apparently, I had not decided an approach for these spots yet. Particularly the changes in fingering that I had made on the fly were trouble spots. The third recording I could cope with that, yet there was some haste left.

I have to work on breathing space and more extensive phrasing. Particularly the commas in the music should get more space. Time is no problem, the piece lasts ca. 2.5 minutes with phrasing included.

The next piece was *Praeludium*, a quiet and lyrical piece. Again, this time the first recording was stressful, even though I managed to get to the end of the piece without major slips. The second recording was much better, some points of attention remained, however.

With this piece, I should not exaggerate too much with dynamics because they distract me at this time. A 'loud' approach makes my play inaccurate, particularly with the difficult passages, it looks like a coupling between the right and left hand that I noticed before: loud playing causes more pressure in the left hand, as if to compensate for the right hand's effort.

I'll have to create some room for dynamics, playing the softer passages even more soft, and playing the melody more on top of the accompaniment...

## 18-04-2012 Fingering

I usually play many pieces right from the score, because I do not spend a lot of effort to learn them by heart. Anyway, I would not play by heart on a competition (I have a bit of a traumatic experience with a black-out during a performance without scores at hand).

In most cases I play scores without fingerings. Consequently, I am sometimes in doubt, because I forgot the fingering. That's why I make notes on the scores for performance purposes.

If you write down left hand and right hand fingering in great detail (I've seen that with Frank Bungarten for instance), there is lack of space on the score to note all p-i-m-a- and string numbers.

So you have to filter a bit. I often only note barre's and critical left and right hand filtering. I omit things that are obvious to me.

Usually my fingering changes over time, just a matter of optimisation or hints from others. I should correct the fingering on the scores accordingly, but I do not like striking through and messing around. Consequently, I have a number of versions that should not be mixed up.



Writing fingerings on scores is tedious. You have the guitar in playing position and get an idea about the fingering. To write things down, you have to put away the guitar (else you have to do some acrobatics that are dangerous for your top). Doing so you almost forget your idea, so you have to pick up the guitar again. And so on...

I did not attempt to put the fingerings in the Sibelius scores directly. Switching between guitar and computer is even more tedious, even though the result looks much better.

I must admit that fingerings are not optimally supported within Sibelius. You need to insert individual string numbers as symbols, string numbers with ledger lines are in the "lines" palette and fingerings are a variant within the text menu under the right mouse button. The result is nice, but takes quite some work.

So, I stick to my pencil and a fresh print-out of the score.

Whether it is tedious or not, I see that I have to make a clear choice with respect to fingering. At the moment, I have too many alternatives and I notice that as insecurity at certain points in the music. Next time I should choose fingerings earlier and stick to them.

What can be done last minute indeed is writing down the mood of the piece. Additionally, I will note breathing marks and hints for relaxation. If I read these hints just before playing in a glance, it will help me focusing on the piece.

## 19-04-2012 Blues

*When I woke up this morning...*

That's the starting sentence of quite a number of blues songs. And then the singer presents his deepest thoughts of misery with quite a lot of O Yeah's.

I got up with a kind of bluesy feeling: How will I get ready in time? I did not like this sense of hurry, I must admit.

First there is the Nordhorn festival with the competition. Then two weeks later I have an open stage evening that I don't want to miss, I'll also have to complete a little arrangement for harp and guitar for that occasion. In the same week is the Twente Guitar Festival with the festival ensemble for which I was planning to rehearse three out of five parts for reasons of flexibility. Trouble is that the music is much more difficult than last year.

Considering this I wondered: How will I get ready in time?

That caused me the morning blues. It looks like struggling with deadlines, Imagine, for a leisure activity!

It already started nagging yesterday. I was puzzling for a fingering and I was not satisfied with the result. Additionally, I was not content with my nail shapes. Since I bought a better nail file and a polishing stone I have been striving for a better and more reproducible nail shape, particularly to remove the sharp edge from the tone of my middle finger.

I wonder if I am expecting too much. If you have to stretch too far to achieve a level, stress is inevitable. The funny thing is that I am having these expectations, well almost requirements, myself. Nobody orders me to reach a level that I might achieve if all conditions are optimal!

Maybe I should treat my musical leisure activities like work for a moment. Selecting priorities and make a little plan. Else I will continue drifting about. So choose and stick to it.

I guess I should go to sleep early in this week (late ones that are caused by agitation are a source of a bad early morning mood).

Else I will have a morning Bluesette for every morning this week.

## 20-04-2012 Change Focus

Concentration is OK, it helps you focusing your mind and giving the right attention to the things you want to achieve. Over-concentration is bad, it causes a tunnel vision that enlarges the wrong things.

Last weeks I was quite busy with the pieces for the competition indeed. Every day I rehearsed them, repeated them and changed them until I got the blues of it.

I was over-concentrating. I enlarged all things that did not go right far too much. In this way your pieces start wearing out even before you performed them...

Apparently, this wearing out was audible on my guitar lessons, because my teacher suggested to change focus in the coming week. I should play a few pieces that I could play even if I were asleep. I should try to detach the problems of the pieces using exercises rather than repeating the piece for the umpteenth time. Else in my mind I would connect the problem to the piece during playing.

Looks like a good idea to me. I don't want to start hating the pieces at the moment that I am going to perform. I guess that will not sound good anyway!

## 21-04-2012 Fingering Again

I have made a new print-out of my three competition pieces and changed my fingering again. Now I stick to the points where I need recollection of particular left- and right-hand movements.

Doing so, I have made up my mind about what fingering is practical out of all the alternatives. More important, I made my final choice. I will use this fingering during the competition. No changes any more.

In the meantime, I received the competition and master class schedule from Nordhorn. Guess what? My master class is AFTER the competition. How can I get some good advice for the competition now?

After the first surprise, I saw the positive thing about this schedule. It is no use to get all kind of friendly advice just an hour before the competition, particularly not if you get change proposals for fingering and performance. You will not digest that within a short time, it will cause uncertainty only. So now I can go to my master class in good mood and with less nerves!

Today I followed the hint of my guitar teacher. I rehearsed my pieces at a slow tempo with focus on sound quality. I changed focus by means of a meeting with old friends: The first set of *Estudios Scencillos* by Brouwer. After all these years, I notice the quality of their composition and the effort it takes to play them accurately and according to the score. *Scencillos*? Easy? Relatively Speaking!

## 21-04-2012 Stress Analysis

Today it was time for some test recordings with the Tascam. I already noticed that recording causes a bit of performance stress, so I could analyse which passages were affected most by my nerves. A kind of stress analysis.

It sounds a bit rational, maybe, but I just want to experience how it feels. Additionally, I can make some notes in my scores that deal with hurry, caused by this stress. That really became obvious with me: stress expresses itself as hurry.

Intentionally I will not make "caution!!!"notes in the scores, just markings that indicate that peace of mind and composure are necessary. I just hope that these signs will not excite me nevertheless, causing me to sprint along these points breathlessly...

Playing *Praeludium*, I came across haste with the free style bridge passage that connects the main themes. It's not more than a scale fragment, yet it is quite necessary to be aware of the natural flow of the piece at that point. Take it easy!

Playing *Les Clochettes* I noticed a strong hurry with the passage that answers the harmonics. If you hurry the shift upwards, accuracy is lost. Take it easy!

In *Samba Cordao* the connecting runs appeared to be the culprit for haste. Additionally, the last section was much faster than the corresponding first, I guess out of relief! So, take it easy!

I had the weird experience that it looked like that someone was chasing me during playing with remarks concerning the passage of trouble spots. *Personality 2* from *The Inner Game of Music* is present with me too! Which is quite useless, because I play solo, so I don't need an extra player!

For your information, the author of *The Inner Game of Music*, Tim Gallwey, calls this *Personality 2* a jammer, a part of your personality that either out of some kind of malice or out of the best intentions brings you off-balance during playing. Everyone has an inner voice like that, the result of many years of parenting, self-judgement and unbalance between what you think you should be able to achieve and the actual result.

All right, with this realization I will try to concentrate on those pauses in the music that will help me remain on track. Additionally, I will try to silence my *Personality 2* during playing. That's a concentration exercise indeed!

## 23-04-2012 A little bit of Irritation

Today I could not get around to rehearsal of the competition pieces. OK, that looks like changing focus. I played a few studies by Carcassi, but I went a bit too far with that.

The purpose of changing your focus is de-stressing. To this end you play what you have mastered. Yet amongst these "relaxing" studies I came across a piece that I did not remember quite well. That annoyed me a bit and there it was, the at this time senseless drive for perfection. Plus, a bit of irritation

Don't do that! It is no use growing irritation. At this time, it is wise to remain positive. Stick to the things you are mastering and not to things you ought to have command of in your mind. You'll have time for that after the competition.

Well, I threw away the Carcassi pieces and worked a bit on the haste passages in *Les Clochettes*. I need to make the shifts intentionally but without hurry.

My mood was not optimal to gain positive results. I had difficulty tuning and I suspected a worn-out E-string. Yet it does not have an incorrect tone (the harmonics and the actual tone on the 12th fret was in tune). I'll check out tomorrow if it still sounds bad. If so, I'll have to change a single E-string. (Too bad, another open package!)

Apparently, I am experiencing a bit of stress indeed!

## 24-04-2012 Bluesette

Last night, I noticed some competition stress. That's a nuisance, because if I am unquiet, I go to bed too late. The consequences arise the same day and the day after. In this case tiredness, a nagging headache if I am unlucky and a low morale for next Saturday, the day of the competition.

I have no idea why, but being unquiet costs me some night's rest. Either I stay up too late, or I am turning about half a night. Both activities are counterproductive, with a dozy head I won't play like the best player. The same applies to other activities.

The cause of this disquiet? Well, all kind of things. Yet I guess the idea of having to perform. It is a drive that quite easily becomes an overdrive. It makes me a bit feverish. Not only during rehearsals, but also with other activities of mine. I have an urge to keep moving continuously, without a rest.

For instance, yesterday I made long hours to get my music publication for this year right, quite some edit and layout work in Sibelius. Actually, I should stop work like this in the early evening, because it is exacting indeed, causing me to stay unquiet.

So now it is time for some discipline. The following days I will go to bed strictly in time and will shut down the computer at the time of the evening alarm at 22:15 (yes, at that point I have arrived in my battle against computer addiction).

I'll take it easier with all things. Just chill a bit, play a piece, read some pages, relax on the couch with music on my headphones. Easy, so the strings won't break! (O yeah, before I

forget, I should put a spare package of Hannabach strings in my guitar case. I already have broken three D strings for no reasons with this brand!)

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I was able to follow my good intentions in the evening indeed! I relaxed on the couch with a nice piece of Irish Harp music and I only did a few things on the PC. Yet I got an impulse to send a fragment of one of my fantasy books to a publisher. I was glad that I could do it via email, saves me a lot of printing. Consequently I started playing a bit later than planned.

Rehearsal of the pieces was OK, just like changing focus to *Estudios Scencillos*. Even the high E-string sounded better today! That's why today was more like a *Bluesette* than a *Blues*!

## 25-04-2012 All together now

Today looked like a good opportunity to record all competition pieces including the concentration pauses straight off the top. The total programme duration was slightly more than 7 minutes. That's well within the time limit.

The pressure of the recording showed some other haste spots. Even in a slow piece like *Praeludium*. Maybe it is a good idea to start this piece a little bit faster in order to obtain more flow. My wife Erna said after listening to the recording that I played it too slow and sedate. I found that she was right.

Tomorrow I will play the set on my guitar lesson for the last time and then my preparation is finished. I will play with what I have, then.

While we were listening to the recordings, Erna and I discussed about the necessary attitude for a competition.

I did notice that the preparation for a competition differs from the one for a recital. I guess the jury and the judgement are the cause.

I did not take competitors into account. At this moment, I do not consider me a match player, my focus is on the best performance and not on winning. That corresponds to a recital rather than a competition.

I guess it should remain so. I am not sure that I enjoy beating opponents in this case. Moreover, it is not possible, like with sport matches, to exploit the weaknesses of your adversaries.

So, I will play my own game and nothing else. I guess that's sufficient challenge for the moment!

## 26-04-2012 Now for something completely different

Today I had the last guitar lesson before D-day. To be fair I had no mood to chew up those pieces again. So, I played some old acquaintances from the first set of *Estudios Scencillos*.

It is remarkable that I got to a point that I stopped rehearsing. Apparently, that's the point where you start destroying the piece if you go on practicing it.

Or it might be a method to postpone competition panic!

## 27-04-2012 First Day in Nordhorn

The Guitar Festival Nordhorn 2012 has started. I did not touch any guitar today, because there was a lot of work to do. I was active behind the scenes and during the Cat. 1 preliminaries, as a reporter.

That was nice. Nerves did not get a chance to develop today.

Again, it was fun to hear the battle between the professionals at close range. In the practice rooms downstairs it was a true *Simfonica Kakofonia*, and a few participants were nervous, pacing to and from outside the door with their cigarettes.

I met my fellow-contestants. I already met Agnes last year and I recognized Johann as a listener during one of the Nordhorn concerts last year. The three of us formed a modest but just sufficient number of competitors for the amateur competition.

"Everyone's a winner!" you could say. Yet I did not feel it that way, the nerves were still there. Anyway, today I did not even consider them!

## 28-04-2012 D-Day

*I woke up this morning...* no, not with the blues this time. I did sense, however, a clear pressure around my *Plexus Solaris*! That's my stress antenna, as a kid I already noticed it when I had to go to the dentist.

Today is the day! The memory is that clear that I switch to present tense now!

I arrive quite early in Nordhorn, so there still is a practicing room available. The finalists of the conservatory student competition are not in yet, so I can practice without being bothered.

Thus I go down to the basement after drinking a quite necessary cup of coffee and start filing my nails. Attention, not too much! My fingertips slightly swell when I am playing under some pressure, leaving less nail for sound production.

I tune the guitar and put the scores on the stand. The first time *Praeludium* by Rung is not bad. Going over the trouble spots separately is worse. Apparently, I play better if I concentrate on the piece as a whole. *Les Clochettes* by Cottin suffers from the same effect. The passage with the harmonics is OK in the whole piece but it is hesitant when I play it separately. In the end *Cordao* by Wanders keeps suffering from lack of speed in the runs between the passages. I decide to accept it.

I feel a bit of nervousness. I have to focus away from these pieces for a moment, so I browse my music. A piece by Brouwer, maybe?

All of a sudden I hear someone rehearsing the first *Estudio Sencillo* behind the door in another practicing room. I put away the Brouwer scores. Suppose it is one of the contestants playing a competition piece. In that case, I should not interrupt his or her play with the same piece, that would be quite confusing and maybe discouraging.

; -) I wonder what happens on professional competitions when competitors have to play compulsory pieces. I guess the duel start in the practicing rooms, then.

So I pick up a piece of Carcassi. *Non Piu Mesta* with some runs, I play them easily, at least as relaxed as I can...

It is time to put away the guitar and make a grab in my bread bin. Time flies towards two 'o clock, my playing moment...

The competition has a strict planning that is necessary to keep the timing discipline. Report with the competition manager 13 minutes before, practice for 8 minutes and go to the concert hall, escorted by the competition manager.

I report and go for 8 minutes' practice. I go down in the basement, tune my guitar and play the pieces again.

Looking back, I found it a bit stupid, because you are replaying and reminding the trouble spots that you cannot change any more. Great for extra performance stress! I should have played some scales and warming-up exercises instead.

My *Plexus Solaris* behaves like a radio transmitter, it is throbbing. What would I transmit at the moment? SOS maybe?

Sarah, the competition manager, comes in to escort me. I follow her to the hall, with an encouraging wink she leaves me in. I am welcomed by a warm applause! I sit down on stage, get prepared and make my announcement. Loud and clear! Apparently, I put some of my speech therapy exercises into practice.

The first piece: *Praeludium* by Rung. (If you want to follow the music on score, you can download it elsewhere on this site).

The first melody note is successful. Then I arrive at the crescendo passage and slip in measure three. No problem, I say to myself, there is a repeat. What is happening here? The second time I miss again. I start noticing my nerves.

I continue playing, against a slight trembling in the fingers of my left hand. Oddly I do not feel stress in my right hand. Yet the tension in my left hand might be interrelated to the right-hand fingering. My stomach feels weird.

Staying the course, however, helps. After the start of page 2, I recover sufficiently to play the free runs in measure 14 – 16 satisfactory. Only the second harmonic is too soft...

In my mind, I make maximal use of the pause between measures 16 and 17. Here there is a tension between the musical duration of the silence and the urge to take time to recover.

The remainder of the piece approximates what I was intending to play in the first place. Yet the last chord is a relief. My sense of reality bites at me: *this performance definitely is not worth a first prize. If it were worth even a second prize, the other contestants would have played quite poorly indeed.* With an angry frown, I silence my *Personality 2* (See the Inner Game of Music).

Silently I notice that Gallwey was right concerning the destructive and condemnatory aspect in your mind. Yet I don't want to let myself bullied around.

Piece Two: *Les Clochettes* by Cottin.

All right, troubles out of my system and play on! I take more time for concentration and visualize the first theme. That is quite helpful, I play the first 17 measures with a sense of satisfaction. OK, slow down a bit for the change of atmosphere in the piece. That's successful. Now I can play the position changes until measure 21 with greater security. Also the parallel section up to measure 24 is successful. Now the "bell-sound" with the harmonics and the answering sections. The left-hand shifts in the measures 26 – 28 are all right.

The answer in measure 31/32 almost fails. Fortunately, I proceed and make it up to measure 41, the end of the first page.

On the second page, I start enjoying myself. The warm sound is effective and my fingers reach their position without fail. Out of joy I play the repeat of the first theme as I intended to play it in the first place.

Afterwards my *Personality 2* is slightly more charitable in his judgement, but it is not much. In his view, I drop to the fourth position if it would have been there. Fortunately, my mood has become much better, I actually enjoyed playing the piece.

Piece Three: *Samba Cordao* by Wanders. I decide in advance to sacrifice the accuracy of the intermediate runs in behalf of the swing of the piece. The train must go on, even with crunching wheels. With this attitude, I play the piece at the correct swinging speed, mess a bit with the runs indeed, but end the piece in a good mood.

My reward is a warm applause (fortunately...) and I leave the hall with a sense of great relief. I frankly admit that it also is a relief that I made it in the end.

I did not hear any of my fellow-contestants play, so I did not have a sense of classification. Yet I start thinking about the final result. At a certain moment, I hear that Johann had played *Caprico Arabe*. That must be the first position, I thought, the jury will give more points for a difficult piece like this. I did not hear, however, *how* he played it.

After the end of the competition, I had a warm and positive experience. I got heart-warming reactions from audience and jury members. One of the participants of the professional competition came to congratulate me with my performance of *Les Clochettes*, and the good choice of repertoire. Of course, I also heard that my nerves with the first piece were quite obvious, but that did not bother me.

The evening brought the classification. I became third, Agnes had won and Johann followed. Good job, Agnes. It was a nice opportunity to give away some volumes of the *DOS Amigos Homepage Collection* to my fellow contestants.

For a brief moment, *Personality 2* revolted. Now in an opposite direction to its reaction during playing. I should have had a second place, it stated. Well, I had a quick answer to that: obviously not! The first piece was not worth a prize (the reaction of *Personality 2* indeed), so discussion closed.

Besides the encouragements, the jury report briefly mentioned the issues to be elaborated: alternating stroke and taking time to concentrate. Clear instructions!

Finally, the result I achieved became *Third Prize with Distinction* as a consequence of all nice reactions. That's worth a lot for me!

Next year I will be in again!



## Conclusion

Now the stress has vanished, I have a nice opportunity for some evaluation.

The first hint: Decide as quickly as possible that you want to join the competition. Hesitation takes time and brings extra stress because the deadline is closer. Only people that are inspired by deadlines should ignore this advice.

The second hint: Decide on your repertoire as soon as possible. Try to study it as new material. A fresh approach gives a better result. I did select known pieces for security reasons indeed, but I could not completely avoid the trap of complacency because I already knew the pieces. A performance like this deserves complete and unbiased attention for success.

The third hint: Live with your *Personality 2*, but don't allow him or her to take over. My *Personality 2* has been both helpful and bothersome during my preparation. You are the player that pulls the string and not your built-in personal hair-splitter.

Last but not least the fourth hint: Enjoy the simple fact that you clear the hurdle of competition!