

# Background Music

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Music has an important role in today's everyday life. You can listen to your favourites on the radio, TV, home hifi set, MP3 player, smartphone or Internet radio. Or you can experience it live in concert halls, jazz café's and pop temples.

Sometimes you are swamped with music. It is everywhere, in shops, restaurants and public places. In TV programs and movies, often so loud that any spoken word is drowned out. Or you are more or less forced to listen because construction workers have a boom-box on the job or the neighbours have a predilection for loud music in the middle of the night.

One of the causes of this swamping is that people consider music to be an atmosphere creator. People identify themselves with music. Shopkeepers, TV producers and the music industry put this effect to massive use. Adding the modern facilities (synthesizers, samplers and computers) that make music productions for all kind of purposes relatively cheap, it is no surprise that we have a world that is filled to the brim with music in order to suppress the dreaded silence.

This identification with music works perfectly to achieve commercial success. Youngsters, for instance, come across a clothing shop where they hear their favourite music on the speakers. In this way, the shop seems to be part of their sphere, so they are inclined to take a look inside. Something similar applies to shops where Mozart and Beethoven are played on the background, for another audience, of course. Many papers have been written and lots of concepts have been designed to use music to create the atmosphere for increased sales.

In restaurants, you will see the same mechanisms for atmosphere creation. In a pizza restaurant, they will play Italo-rock, because many youngsters like to get a pizza. The sound of Italian opera's will not help here, because most of the target group considers this music dull, boring and overdone, even though operas used to be a hit in the nineteenth century. In supermarkets, they play easy-listening tunes that are also called *muzak*. Almost meaningless, definitely not too complicated and perfect for a quiet reassuring atmosphere that invites people to buy a lot!

All this music has the common factor that people are not consciously listening to it, it merely forms part of a background that is considered to be pleasant and nothing more. People do miss the background music if it is not there, but they hardly listen if it is playing indeed! Maybe they will hum along if they almost subconsciously recognize a tune, until they notice the disturbed glances of their table-companions, signalling that the whistle was out of tune or out of rhythm.

Being an active musician, do you want to join the circus of background music? At times, you just will have to, particularly if you make your living with music.

One of the most important and motivating aspect of a performing musician is the interaction with a living audience that has concentrated attention for his or her performance. If you appear as a background musician, this attention is virtually absent. I can imagine that this is the reason why some musicians dissociate themselves from this practice. Moreover, a CD player of hard disk with MP3s is patient, plays whenever the button is pressed and is much cheaper than a living ensemble.

At some occasions, however, there is a definite need for a live-musician for the background music. I got some experience in this matter when I played there as a background-musician. A nice subject for a *Guitarity*.

On a certain day, someone found out that I played the guitar and he asked me if I would be willing to play at a festive dinner party, a Sylvester celebration in early January that was held in an atmospheric party centre in my neighbourhood. He expected about sixty guests. I agreed to play.

Spin-off of that occasion became another dinner party for a slightly smaller group. The next year I was invited again, because they liked the first time. The group was even bigger this time.

For every project, particularly the ones that you are inexperienced in, a good preparation is half the effort. The moment that someone asks you to play, the price becomes a matter of discussion. That's tricky because you face the question How do you value yourself? Organisations of professional musicians often use a recommended price that takes into account the hours for preparation. The Dutch musician's unions NTB and KNTV advise an all-in price of 850 Euro for one evening playing as a soloist. This price applies to professional musicians that have to earn a living and pay taxes from the revenues.

For amateurs, these prices usually are way lower. To be fair, I would feel a little insecure with a price of 850 Euros. Consequently, I choose a low-end compromise that enables me to play reasonably relaxed while I still get some reward for the effort. It is quite clear to me that the amount does not pay a living, well, that's why I have a regular job.

First subject of the preparation is the selection of pieces for the programme. Attending a dinner and being involved in casual conversation, people are not inclined towards complex or experimental serious music, unless they ask for it. So it is wise to inquire which kind of repertoire is expected. I did ask, so I could stick to some easy listening music from my collection of latin, folk and pop tunes. Every audience likes to hear something familiar, so I did not forget my Evergreens. *Romance d'Amor* is very effective, *Lagrima* is a hit and if you are able to, you will please most audiences with *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*.

The expected duration of your programme obviously influences the choices of your repertoire. Personally, I don't like it to have insufficient music to fill-in the time. I prepare music for about twice the expected duration. Ample room for encores!

My first time I would play two blocks of 20 minutes according to our agreement, but in practice this time was way longer. As I already noticed, I was happy to have music for twice the time. My second time was more awkward, we did not agree on playing time and I was in the dining room all the time. I failed to take breaks myself, so at a certain moment I had played all my prepared repertoire. I had to improvise and insert some tactical repeats.

If you don't have a vast repertoire at your disposal, you will have to use some smart repeats. Play your pieces with slightly improvised repeats to make them longer, or play the same piece again after some time, in a slightly different tempo. And don't forget a casual break for a drink!

Background music requires rehearsal and preparation, just like a concert where you are at the centre of the attention of the audience. Don't forget this preparation, with background music people can hear that you are making errors or playing insecure too. Additionally, a thorough preparation is a sure sign of professionalism. I made sure that I mastered the complete programme and did some rehearsal of all pieces in a row. You need to develop your playing muscles if you are playing for a long time.

It is important to anticipate on the location where you are going to play. Consider amplification, playing spot and lighting.

Sixty guests in a good mood with some wine and dine will cause an awful lot of noise. This sound level surprises me every time and to be fair it is the reason that I avoid these happenings if people expect me to share the conversation. My voice is insufficiently powerful for meaningful communication in that ambiance.

Being a modest acoustic classical guitarist, you don't stand a chance against this barrage of noise, your playing volume is too low. Even worse, there is a fair chance that you will not be able to hear your play yourself. That is really annoying, because this feedback is necessary to keep going! So, a bit of amplification is quite necessary. Not too much, because people are inclined to talk louder if the background noise increases in level, so in that case amplification becomes counterproductive. You are there to enhance the atmosphere and not to wage a sound war.

I do not have a guitar amplifier myself. An amp will be quite expensive if you want to have a good one, and I make too little money with my sidelines to pay for it. I feel no reason to buy such a thing just to have it. Never mind, usually the restaurant has an amplifier for PA and background music, so you can use the speakers of the dining hall to play. Unfortunately, in that case you depend on the quality of the equipment of the restaurant that often does not reach the level of quality of a good guitar amp. Well, it's better than nothing at all!

Amplification will be of little use if you don't have a signal to amplify. A guitar with built-in pickup is best because of the feedback in a location with lots of background noise. However, I do not possess a guitar like that, and I guess the top of my Kwakkel guitar will not like a stick-on pick-up.

So I only could use my microphones. I have a stand with two AKG C1000 microphones that are quite satisfactory for my recordings. They are reasonably directional, so I enjoy a little

cancelling of background noise. The AKGs operate on battery or phantom supply. If you want to work independently, you will have to stick to batteries.

Microphones will be of little use if you cannot connect them. The first time the restaurant owner declared that I could connect my microphones without problems to his mixing table. I did mention the kind of connector and further requirements, but apparently, he did not want to admit that he did not know about XLR connectors and phantom supply.

Consequently I could not use my own microphones, they simply failed to connect, and I had to use a weird microphone for public announcements that could not be attached to my stand. The quality was so poor that after a while I put it away and played unplugged. A sound lesson from this situation: check everything yourself, even if it means that you must take a look in the kitchen!

For my recordings, I have a portable Tascam recorder. This device has built-in microphones that appeared to be quite sufficient for demo recordings. Additionally, it had an adjustable line output. After a little try-out, I found a practical solution for my microphone problem, put the recorder on a tripod and play via the PA of the restaurant. Most PAs will accept line level signals.

Unfortunately, this more versatile solution did not solve communication problems with the restaurant owner. As a reply to my questions he let me know that he had cinch-type connectors on his mixing desk, the well-known 'tulip' connectors. So, I bought a cable in order to connect my mini-jack line output on the recorder to the mixing desk. When I arrived there, it appeared that he had meant mini-jack. No Go again? Fortunately, one of the waiters dug up a reasonably wobbly adapter cinch-to-mini-jack. Again, a clear lesson, check everything in advance!

If you play with amplification, a soundcheck is always necessary! The first time this went wrong, because I could not connect my microphones. The second time it went wrong too, because the restaurant personnel turned the wrong potentiometer, my music was loud and clear in the hall, and hardly amplified in the dining room.

A suitable playing spot is quite important for the contact with the merrymakers. If people see you playing, it has effect on their perception of the music even though your playing volume is low. A suitable playing spot usually is a problem in a restaurant where all space is dedicated to commercial use. There is no stage and the spots where you are not disturbed by running waiters and strolling guests are pretty rare.

The first time I was squeezed between buffet and wall, the second time I had to take a stand near the exit because my cabling of five meters was too short to sit close to the audience without the possibility that somebody tripped over the wire. In fact the buffet place was the best, in that case people notice you at least when they are collecting food. In brief, wait and see and make the best of the spot where you are allowed to play.

Lighting is an absolute necessity for a guitarist that depends on reading scores during playing. You must be able to keep an eye on the sheet music and on the fingerboard. Unfortunately, in restaurants they love dimmed atmospheric lighting that comes close to twilight. Fortunately, I have a solution for that: A MightyBright LED lamp that can be attached to the music stand.

Not only rehearse your music, also practice your playing environment! At least once I have played the complete programme with only the MightyBright switched on in a dark room. The

MightyBright enabled me to read the music and to see the fingerboard sufficiently. In this situation, it's also handy to practice playing blind, i.e. without looking at the fingerboard.

After my preparation, I felt ready for the performance. At this point, consider my advice: Be aware that you are only a background musician. That prevents disappointment and irritation. If the audience responds, you are just lucky. Background playing is quite an exercise in modesty if you are used to play on a classical stage with full attention of the audience!

My playing was successful. Of course, I needed some time to run in, but nobody noticed because of the exuberant sociability around me. The first time I sat close to the guests, so I did get some nice responses. Without amplification, at least the first rows of tables could hear me.

Out of necessity, the second time I sat further away from the company and many people only noticed me when they were leaving the party. I found it frustrating, considering that for them there was no difference between playing a CD and a playing human being. Technically speaking I could play my own recordings without anybody noticing. I was glad that in the end I got some positive reactions nevertheless.

I remember another aspect concerning the playing spot. At one of these occasions somebody asked if I could regularly change position from one room to the other. I did so, but I advise against it now. It is quite awkward, particularly if there are a lot of people in the room already. I was quite scared for an unintended collision with my tender top! So, stay in position and don't move.

How did I experience playing at these occasions? In the end, I found it less stressful than a concert or competition. I felt a little bit easier with slips and casual errors (you have to be quite a sensitive listener if you notice them in that incredible noise) and I was more inclined to experiment in tempo and performance. If you have the impression that there is no one in the audience that virtually reads along your sheet music, you feel freer during playing.

Nevertheless, the noise and the fact that you cannot hear yourself is an important restrictive factor. Additionally, with a lot of background noise you don't have to consider dynamics, just play everything *forte* or *fortissimo*. Doing so, I did sense some strain in my muscles on the long run!

Summarizing I found it to be a nice experience to be a background musician, but you must be able to stand up to it. I'll conclude the experience with the following tactical hints:

1. Work out for yourself if you can stand that everybody talks despite your play, even tries to shout down your music and ignore you as a musician and a person. If that affects your balance, making background music is not for you.
2. Think about how much you value yourself in relation to your hourly rate. A high price creates a stressful sense of obligation, a very low price seems reassuring but spoils the market for people that make a living with music. As with everything, keep the middle of the road.
3. Agree on your playing time, the composition of your programme depends on it. Make sure that you can fill-in more time if necessary.
4. Prepare yourself like you would do for a concert recital. Practice and master your pieces and practice the performance under realistic conditions, such as poor lighting conditions.

5. Examine your options for amplification, inquire after everything (wiring, interfaces, etc.) and test in advance.
6. Make sure that you have a suitable playing spot. Visual and audio contact with the company is essential. On the other hand, the spot must be such that you are out of the way of the restaurant personnel.
7. Mind the lighting. Playing blindly is annoying. A lamp on the music stands works miracles.
8. Take care for your safety. Keep people away from your instrument and make sure that cables and stands do not present safety issues.
9. Take a break regularly. A musician is a human being too!
10. Dare to experiment and improvise in the music. Spontaneity is recognized!
11. Don't feel annoyed at background noise and running personnel. If you cannot hear yourself any more, it is time for a break. Playing louder or pumping up the volume of the amp is no solution, people will try to shout you down nevertheless. Start again if the noise level has dropped sufficiently.