

# Studying My Part

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I have played guitar duos in DOS Amigos for fifteen years. Obviously, that involved home practice of my part for the joint rehearsals. Home practice was not easy for me, you play on your own and are busy with just a part of the whole. I found it difficult to keep the complete piece in mind. Fortunately, we had weekly rehearsals together, so it was not downright unconstructive that the home study was not that affective as it could have been.

In those days, I scored all my duo pieces with Musicator and later with Sibelius, so in principle it was possible to practice my part “together” with the computer, the software even had the option of a metronome click. However, my computer was located in the living and it is not quite practical to carry the guitar from the attic downstairs and to disturb wife and kids that wanted to watch TV in the living. So, I practiced my parts on my own and we rehearsed our duo pieces weekly, that is once in a fortnight on my attic upstairs.

Later I bought a laptop as a portable platform for writing and music, but at that moment the guitar duo was long past. So, I did not use the laptop for rehearsal of my part in ensemble music.

At the end of last year, I indirectly got a request. Tanja, a guitar acquaintance from the west of the country that played recorder as well, wanted to play a piece for the master class of the Recorder Festival Nordhorn. It would be a sonata by Benedetto Marcello and she needed an accompanist. I had met her on various guitar festivals in my region, so I said yes. I contacted her and got the PDF of the score of a *Sonata* for recorder and figured bass.

The piece appeared an arrangement for recorder and guitar by Daniel Benkö. That’s a Hungarian classical guitarist that is right on his way to the age of seventy by now. I do

remember a few of his records with Hungaroton from the time that I started to play the guitar and combed record shops for material. Hungaroton was a cheap Eastern bloc label –about ten guilders in those days- with non-mainstream music by Slav composers like Valentin Bakfark. Benkö had a little bit unpolished style of playing and on the record sleeves he resembled a kind of Demis Roussos in his (young) Aphrodite's Child years (later on this Greek grew much more fat!). I was curious if this unpolished element would return in his arrangements.

There was a small hurdle for the project: the geographics. Tanja lives more than hundred and forty kilometres from my place and considering this distance she had time for a single rehearsal, just before the Recorder Festival. So, I had to be well-prepared in order to be able to practice with her with maximum effect.

I must admit that it was quite a while ago since I last played together with a flautist. Let me think, it was in the beginning of the nineties of the last century! I found the playing volume one of the biggest challenges, it was quite an effort to respond sufficiently loud on the guitar. Later I did help someone with an examination for the School of Music, but that occasion involved just three rehearsals and the final performance to complete the job. And after this time... well, one year Granados Duo and fifteen years of DOS Amigos until 2007. One would think that I had sufficient experience and routine in playing together in ensemble setting. Well, maybe it was not completely the right way, I was more of a follower than an assertive partner, but I can still listen and respond to what happens in an ensemble.

Yet this case was different from a guitar duo. Nevertheless, as a project it looked like fun to practice some ensemble playing after nine years of solos. So, I got down to work.

There my laptop with good old Sibelius came in handy. Obviously, to be able to use it, I had to enter the complete *Sonata* first. It yielded a nice addition for the flute-guitar department on the DOS Amigos Homepage. Finally, we choose two movements, a *Largo* and an *Allegro*.

I started with the dry yet very necessary homework, analysing the guitar part. How to catch the chords and how are the transitions? At times, it was dull work without any musical overall picture. The point is: is that necessary in this preparatory phase?

As soon as I had an idea about the tricks and fingering of the guitar part, I started a very slow practice with Sibelius on the laptop with the speakers turned up. The recorder part got a loud volume, the guitar part was just audible and I cranked up the sound of the metronome. I started playing along very slowly and gradually built it up to the desired tempo. A perfect method to notice the spots with timing and fingering problems, where correction and extra practice is required.

There was the first communication issue: What is the desired tempo? It's a discussion of many musicians: How fast is *Allegro* in the Baroque era, for instance? And something not unimportant: what is feasible in the time left for rehearsal?

Point of attention: How do you express the desired tempo? In ticks per minute of the Maetzels Metronome? Or using the expression "nice and easy tempo", or "let's relax a little bit, because *Allegro* is way too fast".

For a start, I searched Youtube for a performance of this *Allegro* by Marcello. I found it quickly, but... ooofff... that was incredibly fast! I would not even come close to that tempo in the few weeks that were left. So, this did not help me as a lead.

Eventually Tanja appeared to have a slightly different sense of tempo that I anticipated. At earlier occasions, I already noticed that my estimation of tempo is slower than most soloists, in particular players of wind instruments. I guess next time I should send a mp3 in the tempo that I expect to realise and take that tempo as a goal. "As fast as possible" is too much of a sliding scale.

"As fast as possible", that's actually what I tried. At home I have cranked up the tempo so far, that I got stuck in all aspects. Looking back, I would say that I was too much in a hurry. Speeding up needs to be done gradually. I found that thoughts of getting stuck became quite demoralizing when the time of the first rehearsal got near. Next time I need to be more patient with myself.

Finally, I decided to use the "Getting-stuck tempo minus about ten metronome clicks", in particular for the *Allegro*. That's a gliding scale indeed, because practicing with a computer that never interrupts the melody part can be successful after a while. Yet practice, -a living and breathing partner- is quite different.

That became quite apparent when we rehearsed together for the first time, on the Friday before the festival. We started with the *Largo* and played it a number of times to get used to each other. The difference with practising with the computer is quite obvious: A computer does not breathe. Further I noticed a little bit of performance stress with myself, despite the fact that I was playing a home match. Of course, I noticed something similar with my partner, but that's logical with a first time. Gradually we played better, be it a bit faster than I was used to. That was only uncomfortable for the E chord in the fourth position.

The *Allegro* was up. That appeared quite a different matter. We had a bit of a dilemma: a relatively slow tempo takes a lot of air with the flautist, so she got out of breath, and if we played at a comfortable tempo for her, I could not get the fingers at the right spot in time at some points. Finally, we both gave in with a few metronome clicks and gained a few important breathing points in the ensemble. A computer will not help you finding out!

After a few hours, we concluded the rehearsal and hoped it would be sufficient for the master class.

I must admit that I found it a bit tense, I do not have such a routine that I can play together perfectly with anyone right away. Initial preparation and the actual ensemble appeared very different, which required quite a lot of concentration with me. Fortunately, after dinner I could have a nap on the sofa with a nice flute-guitar CD on my headphones. I had not played that CD for a long time, but it was a good appetizer!

In one way or another the higher tempo had remained in my system. I noticed it the next day when I wanted to take a quick look at my parts. It became a depressing experience; it looked like that I did not make any advance with the pieces. High time to stop and let it go!

The master classes were on a Sunday, the first one at nine o' clock in the morning. I don't like barging in at the last occasion, so I took off at eight towards Nordhorn, Germany, and had a pleasant trip without being bothered by carnival floats with breakdown around Oldenzaal (yes, it was carnival that Sunday and Oldenzaal is renowned for its carnival parade).

The Recorder Festival Nordhorn is an initiative of Kulturhaus Niet In Het Zwart (NIHZ) (this translates as Not Dressed In Black (NDIB)) that is held at the same location as the renowned Guitar Festival Nordhorn. The Recorder Festival had its sixth edition. Every year the

organisation committee, consisting of Bobby Rootveld en Sanna van Elst to invite famous players from the recorder world for concerts and master classes. Additionally, the recorder competition for various categories gains influence and participants.

Tanja had master classes with Michala Petri and Sabrina Frey. Michala Petri is a famous and experienced recorder player from Denmark. She visited Nordhorn together with her accompanist Lars Hannibal, who plays guitar, lute and theorbo. Sabrina Frey is a famous German recorder player who is specialized in Baroque music.

I am not quite acquainted with the recorder scene, but after some Internet investigation it became clear to me that these people were famous stars in the genre. So, it was not surprising that Kulturhaus NIHZ was completely crowded during the concerts.

After a cup of coffee with a maximal slop into the saucer (that's the result of pressing the wrong button on a Senseo coffee machine) it was time, so we positioned ourselves in the class room, the studio of Sanna van Elst.

Michala Petri entered the room, followed by her accompanist that was pleasantly surprised to see a guitarist (that was me) in the master class. That added a nice element to proceedings!

The recorder master class became an interesting mix of instructive matters for the woodwinds as well as the plucked strings, even far beyond the official duration of the master class, because Lars Hannibal continued off-line after the following player came in for the master class with Petri.

Both musician/teachers appeared very strong in an intuitive and instinctive approach of for instance performance stress, enabling us to let it go and start making music. I was surprised about their perception! Yes, I admit, I had some performance stress indeed! Lars Hannibal had a fine solution for that: *Take it Easy!* That applied to the non-functional notes from Benkö's arrangement too. That took the sting out of the nasty E chord, because three E's in one chord were not absolutely necessary. That made such a difference for smooth performance!

In this way, I learned a bit how to make music from the heart, how to pick up the flow that takes my attention away from the slips and hitches, so that I started to play more secure. We also learned not to spend too much energy to exuberant movements. We went back to the basics for a while, the figured bass and learned that the additions and the colour of the sound depend on the arranger, but that the bass line is the basis. In the meantime, I got playful yet instructive hints against the stress in my thumb and hand position, and I got instructions how to play without sheltering away with frozen shoulders.

Yes, the pieces made progress and growth, the *Adagio* got a wave movement and the *Allegro* achieved a tempo that I would not have thought possible in the morning! It is great to be motivated to such achievements!

I had the opportunity to discuss the best way to study a part of an ensemble on your own. The answer was quite simple: Just as detailed and meticulous as the study for a solo piece. That requires real effort and not a sense of "I am just an accompanist, nobody notices me". Hannibal was reluctant about the role of the computer as I used it for study. Maybe he is right, if you master your part, you do not need a synthetic duo partner before you rehearse in real life.

In the afternoon, the master class with Sabrina Frey was scheduled. It was a good thing that we were well played-in after the master class in the morning, because in that way we were

better prepared for what she could teach us. We worked on the swing in the music (yes, there is, why would jazz musicians like to play Bach?) and the dynamics and on our mutual support in the ensemble that would serve the music. Thus, the pieces made additional progress. Our last performance in the master class was way better than we did at our first rehearsal the Friday before.

Summarizing as the conclusion: Our project ended with a tremendously positive experience. Ensemble playing is fun!