

Guitar Lessons



If you have been engaged in guitar studies for over thirty years, looking back sometimes is inevitable. Not too often, of course, because the Dutch singer Boudewijn de Groot quite rightly sings “If you keep looking back, you will hit your face.”

Anyway, if I am in a retrospective mood, almost immediately the people come to my mind who have taught me to play guitar. Unfortunately, now this mood applies to guitar lessons in general, because I have no teacher at the moment.

I started playing the guitar at an age of seventeen, completely autodidactic, teacher-less so to say. It did not even come to my mind to follow lessons. Armed with a chord book, complete ignorance about music theory, but well provided with unbounded enthusiasm I tried to press my fingers against the frets, just like I noticed on photographs of guitarists or on the occasion of a live recital.

My first skill came to *playing in E minor*, which came to a bit of *rasgado* on loose strings. After that I started to play along with the radio and my records, starting with fingering a single string and finding out that the solos could be more extended, using multiple strings.

After I left my home to study elsewhere, I got a certain urge to take guitar lessons, because my self-teaching offered little progress. Mr. Knoop, owner of a music shop in Enschede, without knowing it gave me a major instigation. In his music shop at the Noorderhagen, I was browsing a bit through scores, hoping to find something which could help me out. I had bought some didactic material of Ilja Knoop, but his method did not appeal to me. Examining a pile of scores, I came across a series of books by Frederic Noad.

Nice guitar scores with pictures and comments on performance.

Noad had compiled three volumes: *The Renaissance Guitar*, *The Baroque Guitar* and *The Classical Guitar*. Later on, he would add *The Romantic Guitar*. Once, in Amsterdam, I had seen one of my class mates using it, he played *Andante* by Carulli from it, but the book itself did not ring a bell with me those days.

Anyway, I literally pried *The Baroque Guitar* from the pile and started browsing passionately. Much to the annoyance of Mr. Knoop, who did not like someone messing up his piles. In a stern tone, he announced that customers were not permitted to examine the merchandise themselves. Well, that was quite something in the era of self-service! The end of the story was, that I bought the book more or less out of shock. It was quite expensive for a poor student.

At home, it showed that Noad's remark about ordering pieces in increasing difficulty caused some frustration... already on the first page I attempted to play, which was Minuet in G. At that very moment, it became clear to me that there was only one thing to do: attending guitar lessons to be able to play all that beautiful music in the end.

I got some information from the Enschede School of Music and enlisted as a student. The School of Music charged income dependent fees. Even though I was a poor student with a net income far below the lowest on the form, I did not get the lowest fee, because I was a student. Apparently, they judged that just drinking and feasting less would compensate sufficiently for the fee. Anyway, for 350 guilders a year (we did not have Euros those days) I had a full season of individual lessons, excluding the school holidays. Those days it was quite an amount of money, nowadays this amount in euros is not even sufficient for group lessons. Another fixed inroad on the budget...

There was a tiny stipulation for admittance, though. The School of Music would gladly accept me, however only if I passed the intake test. Thus, on a beautiful Saturday morning I went to the office of the musical director Mr. Dekker, who took the intake test in person. He asked me about my motivation, checked with the piano if I could discriminate the tones sufficiently accurate and asked me to clap a number of rhythms to check my sense of beat... Later on, I received the judgement *rhythmically a bit sloppy*, a statement which would haunt me for many years, particularly with Latin rhythms. But the final result was positive, I was officially admitted to the school.

Thea van der Meer was my first teacher, she just started there as a guitar teacher after her conservatory training. We spent the first lessons with a tentative approach. Initially I even experienced some stage fright, I had to get used to be taught in the first place and to play in comparative public to enable teaching.

I had to change my musical approach, I used to play strictly in private, but if you want to be taught effectively you more or less have to permit the teacher in this privacy so that he or she can notice your playing problems and puzzles and provide solutions and playing hints. Well, how do you do such a thing if you hate to be a let-down during playing? It took me some time in the music lessons before I felt a sufficient basis of trust to have the courage to make errors and have them corrected. I must say this process reappeared with every new teacher, I had.

One of the first hurdles was the study method to follow. Thea used the system of her own teacher Louis Ignatius Gall. Despite the fact that his system has clear merits, I just did not see them in my young and foolish days. In my opinion the guitar lessons served the purpose of teaching me how to play those beautiful pieces and not to struggle through instructional pieces which did not appeal to me at all. I believed passionately in the fuzzy and hardly structured method of trial and error with performance pieces.

Thea did comply, but she incorporated in a very smart way quite some exercise material for arpeggios, scales, slurs and a bit of music theory in her hand-written notes to the scores.

Another aspect which I only noticed after some time was playing in the lesson, to be specific by the teacher *for* the student. One movement in guitar didactics encourages it: the student hears how things are supposed to sound and even may get discouraged from it. The other movement strictly rejects it because it does not encourage the student to search his/her own interpretation of the music and does not stimulate to solve technical problems yourself.

Thea did play every piece but that did not mean that she liked every piece, I choose. Her heart was with Latin and popular music rather than with the classics of guitar literature. She sometimes used to sigh on the memory of all those difficult pieces by Bach which were compulsory for the study on the conservatory. Much later I read in the paper that she was playing guitar, bass and saxophone in a Latin band and was having a great time.

Under her guidance, I made my first shaky steps on stage, a subject I already covered in the section *Performance*. She also tried to found ensembles for the occasion of for instance student recitals. Unfortunately, that was no success with me, you cannot turn two soloists into a duo when you have not practiced the essence of playing together. The student recital concerned was no great hit, my duo partner and me almost hit each other on stage. Would have been sort of a hit, wouldn't it?

Thus, in the first years of my study I learned to read scores and extended my repertoire in magnitude and complexity. I would have gone on for years in this way, if nothing had come between.

At a certain moment, I moved from Enschede to Hengelo. Immediately after my address change had arrived at the School of Music, they replied with a letter in which they told me to leave the school because the municipal subsidy for students did not apply to people outside town, and Hengelo (fortunately in the opinion of the Hengelo folks) is no part of Enschede.

So I had to say goodbye to Thea and to go on the search for a new teacher. That was no easy task, I did not know anyone. Fortunately, someone just opened a new guitar store a few blocks away from my home, called *La Guitarra*. These guys offered guitar lessons, they hired conservatory students to give them. Their classroom? Well it was a bit of a makeshift solution, so to say in the backyard of their small office between all folders, bills and files with scarcely sufficient space for a music stand.

I had about three lessons over there before fate struck: *La Guitarra* burnt down completely. Direct consequence: no lessons anymore, so I was on the move again.

A visit to Wagenvoort's guitar store on the Anninksweg in Hengelo provided a solution. A certain Rob Wagenvoort could give guitar and saxophone lessons. I paid him a visit and we agreed on price, time and place.

Rob was a trained saxophone player who could play the guitar fairly well. It was a great time for my technical development, playing the complete Op. 60 by Carcassi and numerous other studies by Sor, though this did contribute little to my solo repertoire. Well to be fair, some studies do play well as performance pieces, so it was not too bad!

The most important contribution by Rob was duo playing! He appeared to be a great enthusiast for classical guitar duo's and he was glad to have a student to play them with and got interested as well. Thus, we learned and played duo pieces like the Williams/Bream hits *Duo in G* by Carulli en *L'Encouragement* by Sor plus a host of less well known duos from renaissance to classic.

Playing together appeared to be great fun!

Unfortunately, fate did something nasty: I suffered from a tennis elbow, well it was called like that in those days. Nowadays they call it a mouse arm, because I sustained it behind a screen in a time when mouse devices were so expensive and rare that your boss expected you to be grateful for the *privilege* to work with such a MODERN and totally UNERGONOMIC thing. After examination, the doctor advised strictly against activities like guitar playing and prescribed physiotherapy. It took more than nine months before I got far enough to start guitar playing again.

I wanted to resume my lessons, but alas, no way. Rob appeared to be overstrung as a consequence of domestic problems and had stopped all his music lessons. So, there I was again!

I did go back to Thea for some lessons, but in fact it did not present a practicable situation. Fortunately, she had a good hint: "just try Ed Westerik, he wants to start a private guitar music practice at home."

I called Ed and had to come over for an audition. Well, that was a funny thing I had not experienced before, no school of music does that. Later on, it became clear why he did that, the private practice was a hobby for him (he had an abundance of students on various schools of music) and he wanted to enjoy that. So, he wanted well-motivated students with a few years of playing experience, so that both student and teacher would benefit from the lessons. We met, the audition was successful and I could start right away.

This became the start of a musical relationship of many, many years, which not only covered musical technology for the guitar, but also many aspect of musicianship itself.

Aspects like "what do you feel when you are playing?", "what are you trying to pass on when you are playing?", "do you want to pass on anything anyway?", "how do you communicate with an audience via music?" and many other things which possibly appear a bit soft, but which do touch true musicianship, an incredibly interesting but also quite complex matter.

A few things I already described in the section *Performance*. Sometimes the guitar lessons were quite confronting, but I always enjoyed the trusty and friendly atmosphere which enabled true communication. I learned a great deal from Ed's lessons, not only about music but also -it may sound weird- about myself. Music and Musician happen to be intertwined, isn't it?

At a certain moment, I found out that I had reached the best of my technical capabilities. Well, that's not the end of the study, feel reassured that you can be busy with *musicianship* till the end of your earthly existence.

I must say I expected guitar lessons to go on until that stage, until my retirement at least. Unfortunately, Ed wanted to stop before that, because his life became too busy for his private guitar practice. To my grief and sorrow (which you do not show as a man, but it *is* there!) he stopped his lessons in July 2004.

The well-known Dutch soccer player Johan Cruyff made it a popular statement: *Every disadvantage has its advantage*. The (sad) advantage was that I noticed what happened to my guitar playing without lessons. At the moment one function of the guitar lesson is quite clear to me, it is a regular occasion to aim your guitar study at. An occasion for evaluation and to solve problems. Sometimes I just cannot crack a puzzle of a fingering or a way to play on my own.

It almost is a bit of a test: what does guitar playing actually mean to me? I frankly admit that the loss of lessons has caused a loss of regularity and a bit of structured approach in my play as well. I have been a bit dwelling for quite some time.

To cut a long story short: I should take lessons again, the major question now is: who would like to do so? Well I did find out, the first Twente Guitar Festival yielded me a new teacher, who is Robert Horna.

So now I am having fun with details of musicianship which I did not think about the last years. One of the major points is playing accuracy, with notes as well as rests. Very useful for the further development of my play!

Unfortunately, this year (2008) Robert decided to return to Poland. Luckily, I found a new teacher, Jaap Majoor, to help me keeping up the good work!

This lasted until 2014, then I decided to play some time on my own. As a matter of fact, I did, yet the lesson-itch came up again. So currently I am taking lessons with Annette Kruisbrink.