



CGU

Classical Guitar University

# Technique

## II. Practice Methods



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### **2. Practice Methods**

**For effective and creative work**

#### **1. What practice methods have you found to give the most effective and consistent results?**

- Are there methods for practicing that you use consistently no matter what the piece or passage? If so, what are they and why do they give you results?

#### **2. How do you typically learn a new piece?**

- Are there strategies you use to learn and memorize a new piece? Why do you use those strategies?

#### **3. How do you work on difficult passages?**

- Do you have methods or strategies for practicing difficult passages? If so, what are they and why do they work?

#### **4. How long does it take you to see progress?**

- Do you see progress in one day or does it take weeks or months? What's your progress development like? Do you have any methods or strategies for progressing faster?

Many people waste a lot of time when practicing. This is because we're not often taught how to practice and end up developing our own intuitive methods, resulting in mindsets like "no pain no gain" and "practice makes perfect".

You may or may not have a great teacher and if you do then lessons are usually once per week. That means you spend most of the time practicing on your own, which can often result in bad habits ensuing. Musicians from past centuries seemed to be keenly aware of this, as indicated by Couperin.

*"During the first lessons given to children, it is best that they not practice except in the presence of the person who is teaching them. Youngsters are not focused enough to be able to pay attention to holding their hands in the position that has been prescribed for them. When I do this, at the beginning lessons for children, I keep the key to the instrument on which I teach them so that they cannot in a brief moment undo all that I carefully instructed during three quarters of an hour"*

— François Couperin, *The Art of Playing the Harpsichord* (1716), pp. 3ff.

This booklet provides twelve practice methods that can help you maintain focus and awareness, plus boost the results and efficiency of your practice. These are methods I have used myself and teach to my students. A short piece by Carcassi is used as a model (see below). These methods are explained in a way that enables you to apply them to any piece, study or technical exercise you're working on. Combining the methods together can also have powerful results.

### Andantino by Matteo Carcassi

From 'Method For The Guitar'

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece 'Andantino' by Matteo Carcassi. Each system is written on a single staff in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes fingerings (numbers 1-3) and dynamics (p for piano, m for mezzo-forte).  
- The first system starts with a double bar line and a repeat sign. It contains four measures. Above the first measure, the dynamics 'm p m p' are written above the notes. Fingerings are indicated below the notes.  
- The second system starts with a measure number '5' and a double bar line with a repeat sign. It contains four measures. Above the first measure, the dynamics 'm p m p' are written above the notes. Fingerings are indicated below the notes.  
- The third system starts with a measure number '9' and a double bar line with a repeat sign. It contains four measures. Above the first measure, the dynamics 'm p m p' are written above the notes. Fingerings are indicated below the notes.

# 1. Divide and Conquer

This is a method that I introduce early on to all of my students, whether young, old, advanced, beginner, etc. Getting comfortable with an entire piece of music is overwhelming. Breaking it into small bite-sized chunks is not.

**It's better to make a lot of progress on a little material than little progress on a lot.**

Segovia said that he would practice a single passage for weeks, "burnishing it until it sparkled."

The most common approach people use for learning a new piece is to just play it from start to finish, over and over and over again. This method is ok to do once in a while, but practicing in bite-sized chunks will give you better and faster results. So we should divide our pieces up into bite-sized pieces so that we can conquer them in every aspect.

Let's look at Carcassi's 'Andantino' and see how this applies. Here is the first line:




## 2. Practice at the Seams

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The danger of divide and conquer is that you can end up practicing small chunks and neglect the transition from one to the next. So one solution is to practice at the seams, meaning to practice the transition from one chunk to the next.

This is a very crucial method, as many difficulties often arise when transitioning from one chunk to the next. These difficulties can include changes of: rhythm, texture, dynamics, tempo, mood, harmony, etc.



The image shows a musical score for the piece 'm i m i' in 4/4 time. The score is written in treble clef and features a melody of eighth notes. Above the first few notes, the letters 'm i m i' are written, with a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking below each. Three red boxes highlight specific transitions in the music, labeled 'Seam 1', 'Seam 2', and 'Seam 3' below the staff. Each seam is marked with a vertical dashed line. Seam 1 occurs after the first measure. Seam 2 occurs after the second measure. Seam 3 occurs after the third measure.

What changes and challenges do you observe at these seams?

Perhaps the most challenging seams are no.s 2 and 3, as your right hand must change the strings it plays.

At the first half of seam 2, your right hand is playing on the 4th and 2nd strings. Then at the second half it changes to the 5th and 1st strings - quite a jump! Seam 3 also displays a similar challenge. (Refer to '8. Right Hand Only', page 8 for another method that's useful for tackling a spot like this.)

Similar challenges can often be found on a larger scale at the transition from one section to the next. The excerpt below from *Lagrima* shows a few examples.

- a) Tempo change: having to slow down towards the end of the A section and then resume tempo at the start of the B section
- b) Rhythm: The note values change from quarter notes to eighth notes
- c) Modulation: The key changes from E major to E minor, dramatically changing the overall mood of the piece

*Lagrima* by Francisco Tarrega ([click to download score](#))



The image shows a musical score for 'Lagrima' by Francisco Tarrega. The score is written in treble clef and features a melody of quarter notes. Above the first few notes, the letters 'C: 9<sup>a</sup>' and 'C: 7<sup>a</sup>' are written. The score is annotated with three red circles and labels: 'a) rit.' (ritardando) is circled in red, indicating a tempo change; 'b)' is circled in red, indicating a change in rhythm from quarter notes to eighth notes; and 'c)' is circled in red, indicating a modulation from E major to E minor. The score ends with the word 'FIN.' and a final chord marked 'C: 2<sup>a</sup>'.

# 3. Mix n' Match

The more effective practice methods tend to be counterintuitive. Many people practice using intuitive methods, most commonly by practicing the piece from start to finish over and over again.

We know through experience that our minds only have a limited attention span. This means that the first thing you start practicing will be given the best treatment, while the last thing you practice will be given the worst. So if you constantly practice a piece from the start, then you will find yourself improving a lot at the start, but getting progressively worse until the end.

This method can combat the symptoms of a regular practicer. It can apply to both a large scale and a small scale (divide and conquer). **Just simply start your practice at different points.** Maybe on Tuesday you can start at one place and on Wednesday start at another. The more you mix it up, the better you will get at the whole piece of music.

## Large Scale Mix n' Match

The Large Scale Mix n' Match section consists of three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a first ending bracket over the final two measures. Fingerings (m, i, m, i) and dynamics (p) are indicated above the first two measures. A red arrow points to the start of the third measure, with the text "Start here" below it. The second staff starts at measure 5 and has a first ending bracket over the final two measures. Fingerings (m, i, m, i) and dynamics (p) are indicated above the first two measures. Two red arrows point to the start of the first and third measures, both with the text "Start here" below them. The third staff starts at measure 9 and has a first ending bracket over the final two measures. Fingerings (m, i, m, i) and dynamics (p) are indicated above the first two measures. A red arrow points to the start of the eighth measure, with the text "Start here" below it.

## Small Scale Mix n' Match

The Small Scale Mix n' Match section shows a single staff of musical notation in 4/4 time with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). Fingerings (m, i, m, i) and dynamics (p) are indicated above the first two measures. Four red arrows point to different starting points within the piece, labeled 1 through 4 below them. Arrow 1 points to the start of the first measure. Arrow 2 points to the start of the second measure. Arrow 3 points to the start of the eighth measure. Arrow 4 points to the start of the ninth measure.

# 4. Slow Practice

This is one of the intuitive practice methods, but it is often done with cruise control on. Instead of practicing in a state of boredom as is usually done, you can take advantage of this method by engaging your mind.

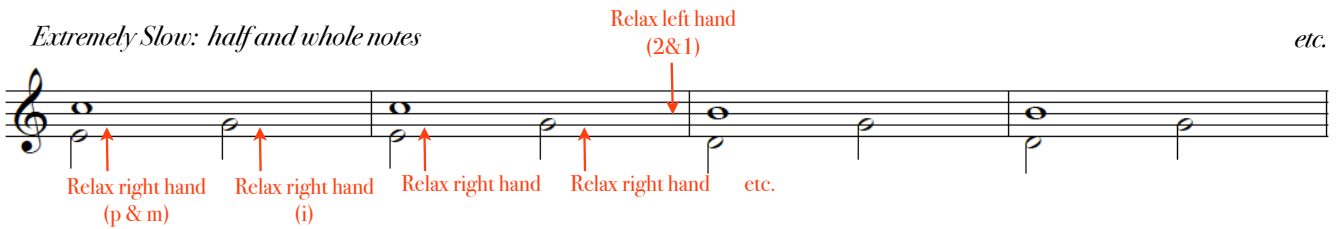
The first thing to consider is, exactly how slow is slow?

Thinking of the music in different note values can help us to *really* slow down. Play the different “versions” at the same tempo and this can also help your understanding of rhythmic proportions.

*Original note values: eighth and quarter notes*



*Extremely Slow: half and whole notes*



*Very Slow: quarter and half notes*



### **Play and Release**

A slow tempo is ideal for one of the fundamental concepts behind technique, that of controlling tension and relaxation. I have marked in the example above places where you can release tension required for playing notes. Relaxation can be thought of as a reflex that's just as powerful and tangible as tension. Build in this choreography of tension and relaxation into your playing and you will find more endurance, grace, strength, control and command.

### **The Tai Chi Method**

Tai chi is very slow martial arts, where every movement is very deliberate and intentional. Movements flow gradually from one posture to the next, creating a beautiful choreography. Anticipating the next posture and flowing into it is very important.

Apply these ideas to your slow practice. Slow your movements down so that every movement of each finger (of both hands) is very deliberately controlled. You want your fingers to look like they're moving underwater in slow motion.

What are some things you can focus on when practicing slow?

- Exact and precise control of your:
- Movements
- Tone
- Dynamics
- Rhythm

Think of more for yourself!



# 6. 80/20

Music, by its nature, contains much repetition. By identifying the repetition, we can figure out ways to eliminate unnecessary practice time. Eventually we can be so efficient that roughly 20% of our work will reap 80% of our desired results. Think of it like you can practice roughly 20% of a piece in order to learn most of the piece.

Again, this method works on both a large and small scale.

- **Large scale** involves phrases and sections that repeat.
- **Small scale** involves bars and individual notes that repeat.

*Large scale repetition: Learn 2/3rd's of the piece by learning the first line*

The image shows three lines of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with a treble clef and a repeat sign at the end. The first line starts with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains four measures of music with fingerings (0, 2, 0, 3, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 0, 1, 3) and dynamics (m p, i p, m i). The second line starts with a key signature of two sharps (F#, C#) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains four measures of music with fingerings (0, 1, 3, 2, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 0) and dynamics (m i, p m, i p). The third line starts with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains four measures of music with fingerings (0, 2, 0, 3, 1, 2, 3, 0, 1, 0, 1, 3) and dynamics (m p, i m, i). A red arrow points from the first measure of the first line to the first measure of the second line, and another red arrow points from the first measure of the second line to the first measure of the third line, illustrating the concept of learning the first line to cover the rest of the piece.

*Small scale repetition: Subtract repeating notes*

The image shows three lines of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with a treble clef and a repeat sign at the end. The first line shows a sequence of four measures with notes G4, A4, B4, and C5, each held for two beats. The second line shows a sequence of four measures with notes G4, A4, B4, and C5, each held for two beats, with a sharp sign above the notes in the second and third measures. The third line shows a sequence of four measures with notes G4, A4, B4, and C5, each held for two beats.

# 7. Left Hand Only

This method is fairly straightforward and self-evident. Play the notes with just your left hand fingers.

What's the main advantage of this? You can now pour all your focus and attention to your left hand fingerings, technique, movement, etc. But some further details can make this method more valuable.

**Muscle Memory**  
Mute the strings with your right hand.

**SelfCheck**  
Use a mirror to carefully check your left hand technique.

**Less Tension**  
Feel the depression of the strings onto the fretboard by pressing gently and gradually.

**Aural Memory**  
Hear the notes in your mind while playing left hand only.

**Increased Security**  
Anticipate your movements towards the next position (think and move ahead).

**Refined Technique**  
Use this technique for your basic technical work (scales, slurs, etc.).

**Fix Tough Spots**  
Save this technique for particularly difficult left hand passages.

*Difficult spots for left hand only practice (circled). More movement required.*

Try practicing left hand only on a basic C Major scale. This one is from my book, [Major and Minor Scales by J.K. Mertz](#).

# 8. Right Hand Only

This method is a tad less straightforward than left hand only, because it takes more thought to do.

Now you will practice an “open string version” of the piece or passage, exactly replicating the right hand fingerings you would use if playing the music as written with both hands.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for guitar. The first staff has a red oval around a difficult passage. Fingerings and dynamics are indicated above the notes. The second and third staves show the same passage with different fingerings and dynamics.

For a short piece like this, it’s probably ok to do most or all of it using this method. But never go into “cruise control!”

You can also divide and conquer the more difficult right hand passages, as circled above. That would be best for longer pieces especially.

It’s also worth sometimes **writing out** the right hand version of the difficult spot onto manuscript. This method can be quite abstract, as you’re only playing open strings with little reference.

Some things you can focus on:

**Tone**  
Consistency? Colors? Beautiful?  
Projecting? Clarity?

**Dynamics**  
Crescendo? Decrescendo?  
Sudden

**Rhythm**  
Correct values? Consistent tempo? Metronome?

**Hand Position**  
Excess movement? Unnecessary tension?  
Movements across the strings?

# 9. Separate Parts

Guitar music is rarely ever just guitar music. It's almost always inspired by some form of ensemble music, like a string quartet, band, or orchestra. Knowing the stylistic background of the piece can help you know what parts are what. For example, if you're playing Bach, then it would be useful to listen to his Cantatas, Passions and Concertos. If playing Piazzolla, it would be useful to listen to Piazzolla's band.

In any case, it's very important to make the distinctions of the parts clear and practicing them separately is the best method to do so. It also helps you internalize the piece on another level. The more parts there are in the piece, then the more difficult and sophisticated this process will be. Carcassi's Andantino is a good starting place to see this work in action.

Carcassi's Andantino two voices - a melody and accompaniment. To me, this texture suggests a keyboard-like texture, with the accompaniment being played by the left hand and the melody by the right hand.

The image shows a musical score for Carcassi's Andantino. It consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled "Melody - right hand of keyboard" and the bottom staff is labeled "Accompaniment - left hand of keyboard". The melody is written in treble clef and the accompaniment in bass clef. Both staves have a 4/4 time signature. The melody starts with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The accompaniment starts with a sequence of notes: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4. The score includes fingerings (m, i, p) and dynamics (p) above the notes.

Here is what the parts look like when notated out separately - an exercise I thoroughly recommend you do in order to understand the constituent parts of a piece!

The image shows three separate musical staves. The top staff is the melody, the middle staff is the accompaniment, and the bottom staff is the melody again. Each staff is in treble clef and 4/4 time. The melody starts with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The accompaniment starts with a sequence of notes: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.

Melody part  
How would you play this if it were your ensemble part?

- Dynamics?
- Phrasing?
- Fingerings?
- Rubato?

Accompaniment  
How would you play this if it were your ensemble part?

- Dynamics?
- Articulation?
- Rubato?
- Fingerings?

The image shows three separate musical staves. The top staff is the melody, the middle staff is the accompaniment, and the bottom staff is the melody again. Each staff is in treble clef and 4/4 time. The melody starts with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The accompaniment starts with a sequence of notes: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.



# Task 1

- Apply 2-3 practice methods to passages from piece you're working on
- Record a video that quickly demonstrates these methods being applied. Share on Slack.