

Slow Practice Ain't Chicken Soup

“Slow down” may be the most common thing a music teacher says to students. And rightfully so. Humans are wired to run when threatened, and to music students nothing is so reliably threatening as a hard passage they’re trying to bulldoze through. So “slow down” has a venerable place in music instruction.

By itself, however, “slow down” doesn’t tell us much. When we’re doing something wrong, slowing down is only part of the solution. What do we do once we’ve slowed down? If we don’t know, we might keep doing the wrong thing we did when playing faster. After all, bad practice slowed down is just slower bad practice. And if we don’t know the crux of effective practice, then we don’t know how slow to go or how gradually to speed up.

First things first: effective practice isn’t the result of slowing down—rather, slowing down is the inevitable consequence of effective practice.

To explain further, let’s look at some obvious characteristics of good practice:

- Solve all rhythmic problems.
- Know all pitches and, if applicable, chords.
- Work out all fingerings for both hands.
- Begin running reps.

These steps are familiar to anyone who takes practice seriously. And we could have 100 different guitarists carry out all these steps. Each guitarist would assert that he or she is doing what needs to be done. Yet inevitably, maybe only one out of 100 will eventually play at a very high level. The rest fall short.

Why?

The likely answer is that although all guitarists can go through the same steps, not all carry out the steps with sufficient rigor. Most of us move to the next step before thoroughly mastering the one before it. We’re impatient. Time is short. We want so badly to already be there. So we cut corners. We don’t mean to, and we never realize we’re doing it. But we are. And it shows in our playing.

The one out of 100 who plays at a high level is the one who stays with each step until he or she has it down cold. This person accepts nothing less than perfection. (If I can’t do it five times in a row without error, then I’m not ready to move on.) This person does every step as if onstage, in front of a discerning audience. This person knows that any indecision or nervousness in the practice room is exponentially magnified onstage. This person knows that the best time to grapple with problems is during practice, not onstage. This person grasps the immense power of slow but sure improvement.

Slow practice isn’t the crux. It’s a consequence of the crux. The crux of effective practice is this: accept nothing less than perfection.

And who are those who dismiss perfection as pie in the sky? Well, that would be everyone who’s played for a long time but isn’t a virtuoso. We’re sensible, or so we think. We believe perfection is an impossible dream. So we putter along, vaguely hoping we’ll get better without embracing the exacting standards of the virtuoso. Fortunately, however, we don’t have to be permanent members of the mediocrity cult. (I don’t want to stay there. Do you?) We can at any time join the rarified ranks of the virtuoso practicer. We just have to tire, at long last, of cutting corners. Once there, we may not rise to the heights of those who made that decision at a tender age. But we may catch a glimpse of the promised land.