THE CLASSICAL GUITAR HANDBOOK

Dr. Simon Powis

The Art of Practice

a chapter, with my compliments

Classical Guitar Corner
classicalguitarcorner.com

PREFACE

When we study music, we step into a river of ideas, traditions, and insights that have flowed from one musician to another over centuries. As students in the twenty-first century, we are the fortunate inheritors of a rich musical culture shaped by generations of passionate and curious artists.

This book offers a collection of ideas and insights that I've been privileged to learn over three decades of musical study. From supportive institutions and inspiring teachers to my work at Classical Guitar Corner Academy, I've had the joy of sharing this journey with thousands of students who share a deep love for music. Drawing on these experiences, I've gathered thoughts on the topics that arise most often in lessons, festivals, and masterclasses. My aim is to present these ideas with clarity and practicality in a way that is accessible to every classical guitarist.

This handbook is written in my voice and shaped by my experiences, with the hope that it becomes a helpful and approachable resource for your own journey. Many of the concepts here have been generously passed down to me by exceptional educators and artists, and I am honored to share them with you.

A handbook for reference, not linear reading

This handbook is not meant to be read from cover to cover like a novel or traditional textbook. Instead, it's designed to be a resource you can return to whenever you need guidance, inspiration, or a reminder of essential principles. Each topic stands on its own,

allowing you to explore the sections most relevant to your needs at any given time.

Why repetition and recursive learning are intentional

You may notice that some ideas—like the difference between practice and playing, the importance of mindful repetition, or the role of feedback—are revisited throughout the book. This repetition is intentional. These foundational concepts are central to learning and mastering the classical guitar, and their presence across different contexts reinforces their significance. By encountering them multiple times, you'll gain deeper insights into how they apply to every aspect of your playing, from technique to musicality to habit formation.

This reflects the principle of recursive learning, where revisiting key concepts at different stages of your journey deepens your understanding and skill. Just as a guitarist might return to a familiar scale or piece with new technical or musical goals, reading and applying these ideas in various contexts helps you see their nuances and applications more clearly over time. Each encounter allows you to approach the material with fresh ears, hands, and perspective.

A living resource for your journey

This handbook is intended to grow alongside you. As your skills and understanding evolve, you may find yourself revisiting certain sections with fresh questions and a deeper perspective, uncovering new insights in familiar concepts.

Let this book be a steady source of encouragement and practical guidance as you navigate the challenges and rewards of learning the classical guitar. It is my sincere hope that it serves not only as a resource but also as a source of inspiration, helping you play with confidence, artistry, and joy. Welcome to this river of ideas—may it guide you forward on your musical journey.

CHAPTER 1
THE ART OF PRACTICE

The ability to practice effectively is the most important skill you will develop as a musician.

The time you spend practicing your instrument will dwarf any other musical activity. Lessons and performances will comprise far fewer hours than the hundreds and thousands you will accrue in solitude, practicing. Teachers may guide you and experiences may shape you, but the progress you make as a musician will come from practice.

Practice requires discipline, focus, and grit. It is not necessarily fun, and often resembles work more than play. In order to sustain such an effort over a long period of time you will need to avoid frustration and seek out the joy of achievement. This joy is ultimately what fuels your motivation, and in turn, more practice. It is this virtuous cycle we seek to create.

Ten thousand hours

You may have heard about the "ten-thousand-hour rule": the idea that it takes approximately ten thousand hours to achieve mastery in any given pursuit. This concept is misleading on several fronts.

First, that conveniently round number was cherry-picked by Malcolm Gladwell, who undoubtedly saw its storytelling appeal, for his 2008 book *Outliers*. The now-famous study conducted by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson (cited by and often erroneously attributed to Gladwell) estimated the number of practice hours accrued by violinists at different ages. By age eighteen these violinists had logged, on average, approximately seventy-four hundred hours of practice. Ericsson posited that by the age of thirty a competition violinist might have accrued twenty- to twenty-five thousand hours. Furthermore, these hours change for different instruments. Gladwell's number came from the estimated hours logged by study participants at the age of twenty. Ten thousand hours is a memorable amount of time but not a magic formula for mastery.

Second, Ericsson's study was not looking at "masters," but rather advanced violin students at the Universität der Künste Berlin.

Third, and most importantly, the study fails to communicate *how* participants' time was spent. Yes, it was spent practicing—but what kind of practice was it?

One thing the ten-thousand-hour rule does convey correctly is that mastery is achieved over a vast amount of time. However, it is not enough just to put in the hours; you will need to learn how to practice purposefully and deliberately.

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> *… two things were strikingly clear from the study: First, to become an excellent violinist requires several thousand hours of practice. We found no shortcuts and no "prodigies" who reached an expert level with relatively little practice. And, second, even among these gifted musicians — all of whom had been admitted to the best music academy in Germany — the violinists who had spent significantly more hours practicing their craft were on average more accomplished than those who had spent less time practicing.*
>
> Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak*

Let's get uncomfortable

Our mind can be understood as operating in two distinct modes: fast thinking and slow thinking. Daniel Kahneman's seminal book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, explores these concepts in depth. When our brain is in slow-thinking mode, it engages in conscious, critical decision-making, though this process requires considerable effort and energy. In contrast, the brain's fast-thinking mode allows for quick, automatic decisions that are energy-efficient but less deliberate.

Consider this example: deciding what type of car to buy is slow thinking, while opening the car door is fast thinking. Staying with the car analogy, we see how slow thinking can transform into fast thinking over time. Learning to drive is initially overwhelming—balancing road rules, car operations, signs, and merging lanes can feel draining and chaotic. Yet, through repetition and familiarity, these actions become second nature, handled seamlessly by our fast-thinking brain.

In music practice, a similar process occurs as we transfer skills from slow thinking to fast thinking. Developing technique through repetition allows us to embed movements into muscle memory, freeing our minds to focus on musical interpretation. For example, reading music begins as a slow-thinking task, where each symbol must be painstakingly decoded. Over time, pattern recognition enables the fast-thinking brain to process music fluently, chunking large amounts of information into familiar patterns.

However, practicing with the slow-thinking brain requires deliberate effort, which humans naturally tend to avoid. It's far more comfortable to play music we already know, to play without critical listening, or to abandon a piece when it feels tedious. True progress, however, comes from consistently stepping out of this comfort zone and embracing the discomfort of deliberate practice. In musical terms, this is the difference between playing and practicing.

Playing vs. practice

Imagine this: you've committed to practicing for two hours every day. You diligently carve out time in your schedule, showing up with consistency and discipline, month after month.

So why do you still feel frustrated with your progress? Why do the same mistakes persist, even after countless hours with your instrument? The answer lies not in *how much* time you spend, but in *how* you spend it. Are you practicing, or are you playing?

As a fellow guitarist, I have no doubt that you and I share the same passion for, if not obsession with, the guitar. Its tone, touch, and challenges bring a lifetime of joy and inspire us to play endlessly. But playing is not practicing, and the distinction between the two is crucial.

Playing: The flow state

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who pioneered the concept of "flow," describes it as a state of effortless focus and enjoyment, where time seems to disappear. Playing the guitar often brings us into this state. Whether we're playing through a favorite piece, improvising, or simply enjoying the sound of the instrument, playing immerses us in the music and reinforces our love for the guitar.

Here's what playing often looks like:

- Playing pieces from beginning to end for sheer enjoyment.
- Randomly playing parts of pieces without a clear goal.
- Repeating passages mindlessly or while multitasking.
- Revisiting favorite exercises or warm-ups in an almost meditative state.

Playing is essential—it sustains our joy and connection to the music. It's where we fall in love with the guitar again and again. But as Csikszentmihalyi's work shows, flow is about maintaining what we already know, not about pushing the boundaries of skill develop-

ment. Without conscious intention, playing risks reinforcing bad habits and ingraining mistakes.

Practice: The discipline of deliberate practice

Anders Ericsson's research on deliberate practice highlights that true skill development comes from effortful, structured work aimed at improving specific aspects of performance. Unlike the effortless immersion of flow, deliberate practice demands focused attention, problem-solving, and consistent reflection.

Here's what effective practice looks like:

- Setting clear goals with specific outcomes.
- Identifying and resolving technical or musical challenges.
- Breaking passages into manageable parts and working systematically.
- Using deliberate repetition to reinforce accuracy.
- Seeking feedback from self-recording or a teacher's guidance.

Deliberate practice is not always enjoyable, but it's where real progress happens. It requires planning, perseverance, and the willingness to work just beyond your comfort zone. After an effective practice session, you might feel tired or even frustrated, but you'll have made meaningful strides toward improvement.

Finding Balance

Both flow and deliberate practice have their place. Playing immerses us in the joy of music and reminds us why we began this journey, while practice pushes us to grow, achieve mastery, and unlock new levels of expression. By recognizing when you're in a state of flow versus deliberate practice, you can make more intentional choices with your time, balancing these approaches to ensure both progress and fulfillment as a guitarist.

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Currently, my view is that the primary motivation for doing effortful deliberate practice is to improve your skill. You're concentrating one hundred percent, and you've deliberately set the level of challenge to exceed your current level of skill. You're in "problem solving" mode, analyzing everything you do to bring it closer to the ideal—the goal you set at the beginning of the practice session. You're getting feedback, and a lot of feedback is about what you're doing wrong, and you're using that feedback to make adjustments and try again.

The motivation that predominates during flow, in contrast, is entirely different. The flow state is intrinsically pleasurable. You don't care whether you're improving some narrow aspect of your skill set. And though you're concentrating one hundred percent, you're not at all in "problem solving" mode. You're not analyzing what you're doing; you're just doing. You're getting feedback, but because the level of challenge just meets your current level of skill, that feedback is telling you that you're doing a lot right. You feel like you're in complete control, because you are. You're floating. You lose track of time. No matter how fast you're running or how intensely you're thinking, when you're in flow, everything feels effortless.

In other words, deliberate practice is for preparation, and flow is for performance.

Angela Duckworth, *Grit*

This is one chapter from

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You can find the full book here:

classicalguitarcorner.com/books

I will be sharing more of these ideas with you over the coming weeks.

Simon