

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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🎵 You are in [Derek Hasted](#) > [Third Floor](#) > [Classrooms](#) > Lesson 3

Lesson 3

Enjoying your first Rehearsal

In this lesson we'll prepare for your first Get-Together

Contents

- Preparation
 - [Where do we meet?](#)
 - [Who sits where?](#)
 - [Who is in charge?](#)
 - [But / want the tune!](#)
 - [Tuning up](#)
- Doing it for the first time
 - [What do we do?](#)
 - [Your first post mortem](#)
 - [Now what? How to improve](#)
 - [How to interpret](#)
 - [How to tell the person on your left that they're a complete jerk](#)
 - [What do we do for next time?](#)

This lesson © Derek Hasted 1998 - please enjoy!

Preparation

Where do we meet?

In the absence of a teacher, my preferred solution is to meet at a player's house, and to rotate the meeting place each practice. There are a lot of reasons why this works well, one of which I mention later.

[Back to top](#)

Who sits where?

A tough cookie. There isn't a simple answer.

Sometimes the tune should sit near the centre so that everyone can hear it and synchronise with it.

Sometimes, the bass is best placed in the middle.

Sometimes, in "call and response" music where one part echoes another, the easiest version to play is when the part and its echo are next to each other; however, the best performance, in the audience's ears, may well come when the part and its echo are at opposite ends of the row.

You want an easy answer? Of course you do. Begin by sitting in a circle - as tight as you can manage - facing together. In this way, everyone can hear the most clearly everything that's going on. Don't sit in a line till you're ready to start rehearsing for your first performance.

[Back to top](#)

Who is in charge?

In a teacher-led Ensemble, I kind of hope the teacher is, (though when I have a set of boisterous adults, I do sometimes wonder!) But when a group of equal-standard novice players meets, then my suggestion is that the person providing the venue becomes the leader for that session. The leader isn't an autocrat, of course, but it is nice if everyone has the chance, week by week, to suggest parts and to have the experience of counting the ensemble in. A simple system like this also provides a starting point for "managing without the teacher", in which no-one feels it is their job to "be teacher", and either no-one volunteers, or everyone does.

[Back to top](#)

But / want the tune!

If I had a pound (or a dollar, come to think of it - I'm not greedy) for every Ensemble which is dogged by everyone wanting the tune, I'd have an independent income for life.

The tune is invariably the favourite line to want to play, at least initially, for a number of reasons. It is the tune, for a start, meaning it's perhaps less likely that you'll make mistakes in rhythm, or lose your place. And it is the part which an audience hears the most clearly, so it

might make you feel the hero of the hour. And of course, it is the one part which is indispensable. (Though wearing my composer's hat, I can tell you that no part is *actually* indispensable, at least if the composer has done his job properly!)

So why on earth would anyone want to play anything other than the tune? Lots of reasons. Let me spell out the two most important.

The first is to give *everyone* the chance to play the tune. Not because it is the "best" part but because each part will have a variety of technical problems and musical possibilities, and it is unwise to develop the Ensemble in a way which doesn't develop each player too. If everyone takes the tune in turn, everyone will also take every other part in turn, and this is the key to develop everyone's playing just as much, if not more, than playing the tune well.

The second applies in those cases when the players are of differing abilities and the parts of the ensemble are at different standards. Quite simply, in this case, the sound of the finished Ensemble matters much more than the pride or stubbornness of individual players. There may well be a way of allocating parts which is "the best", in which case, that's the one which the Ensemble should use to best effect. Do be careful - the number of ways of allocating parts is larger than you might think. There are 24 different ways that a quartet can allocate parts among themselves, so don't spend all day trying all possible permutations - there isn't a magic one which is 200% better than all the others!

[Back to top](#)

Tuning up

Of course you all tune up before you start. It's just that Ensemble playing imposes some extra demands on this too...

For a start, it's not enough to have each instrument in tune with itself. It has to be in tune with the others too. Yes, I know it's obvious, but checking that your guitar sounds in tune with a couple of chords isn't enough! Also obvious is that fact that you need to tune up one at a time if you are going to do it properly.

But there's one more consideration, especially for those who rely on an electronic tuner to tune them up. It's actually fairly simple too. If some of you have travelled to the practice, your guitars may have spent different lengths of time at different ambient temperatures. When you tune them up, the guitars may go out of tune *relative to each other* as they adjust to the new room environment, because they may settle in different ways, depending on the temperature they were at as you arrived. This is much more intrusive than a single guitar coming up to temperature, where all the strings move in the same direction but the guitar stays in tune relative to itself. It can be the case, then, that an ensemble needs to tune up more times during the evening than a solo guitar would. And the rub is that you have to *listen* to know that the Ensemble has gone out of tune!

Don't be surprised if you need to tune up more often than you expect - it's not that you made a mess of it first time, it's that individual guitars are going out of tune. Indeed, if you can spot this early enough on, well done for listening in detail!

[Back to top](#)

Doing it for the first time

What do we do?

The day has arrived - you're here. You've read the section on preparation and.... and.....
That awful feeling, when you all turn up, get your Guitars out and look at each other. HELP!!!!

With a teacher in charge, there's no problem in getting going. But if you are leader-less, you might wonder how to proceed.

Far be it from me to lay down the law. To be honest, if no-one has a strong preference for how to proceed, then it's highly unlikely that what you *do* do is going to be wrong! Just don't get flustered if your dreams of instant success don't seem to come to fruition. It won't just "click" on your first meeting. Success on your first date? No, that only happens to other people!

Anyway, if it was going to be effortlessly easy on your first run-through, what else have you got to aim for?

Here's a few tips on getting started....

- Tune up
Obvious, I know, but do all tune to a common pitch reference there and then, in case Guitars have gone out of tune in transit.
- Pick something easy
Your brain and ears need to loosen up, every bit as much as your fingers!
- Pick a tempo
I've found it rather nice if the leader demonstrates the tempo by playing the opening bars, before counting in. Pick a tempo of about 80% of what you think you can manage.
- Listen
Now I know that sounds stupid, but the purpose of playing music together is to enjoy the composite sound. Don't get so bogged down in your own part that you forget to listen. If you do, you'll find the phrasing, dynamics and timing accuracy are all rough round the edges. Oh yes, and you'll find you've forgotten to enjoy it too.

[Back to top](#)

Your first post mortem

We can narrow down your first ever, ever, play through into two possible outcomes...

- It worked
- It didn't work

If it worked, move on to the next section and count yourself more lucky than naturally talented. Or stay around to find you why...

So, it didn't work quite as well as you hoped. Why not? Because maybe you were a little ambitious after all. Re-read [Lesson 2](#) where I talk about complexity and listening skills. Initially, your ears will be hearing a whole lot of notes that you didn't create. Up until now, your Solo playing has been a tightly-knit environment of your construction.

- Your eyes tell you what to do.
- Your brain tells your fingers what to do and when.
- Your fingers tell you what they felt.
- Your ears tell you what they heard.
- And your brain quickly works out if something is wrong, what it is, and how best to correct it.

But in an Ensemble, you are going to hear things that aren't on your score, from a source that is most patently not sitting on your lap, at a time that you might not have been expecting. And that's the key difference. Your rhythm mustn't be synchronised to your internal body clock, but to the composite sound. Which means that your ears and your brain have an *extra* job to do - to relate your notes to the others and correct any timing anomalies.

This is a new skill. And like any new skill, it requires patience and effort to become proficient. Oh yes, you most certainly will, but all the time you are starting, this effort is going to take a large portion of your concentration, and this in itself can take the edge off your playing.

Just try the piece again. Just play from Rehearsal Mark to Rehearsal Mark if you are unsure how to rescue a piece which has gone pear-shaped. Try it 20% slower than you were hoping for, to give everyone more time to assimilate this extra information. And you'll find it works much better.

But what if it comes apart and you just don't know why. Simple - just tape record your efforts, and listen to the whole sound, no longer distracted by the need to move fingers, count and play. You'll hear the overall picture much more clearly.

[Back to top](#)

Now what? How to improve

There are a number of ways to proceed, but I'm only really interested in those which can help you improve steadily.

- Swap parts by rotating
It can sometimes help you keep in step if everyone is familiar with all the parts.
- Locate and work on the trouble spots
A few seconds' work on each difficult entry point, each awkward piece of counting, each shaky *rall* will be worth its weight in gold. If playing from parts which have no bar numbers or Rehearsal Marks, put some on - it'll save loads of time!
- Agree on some phrasing and dynamics and try again
Repeating a piece because "it wasn't good enough" isn't satisfactory. Try to add a new goal to aim for each time the piece seems to hang together. Continuous improvement requires continuous goal setting and continuous small steps.
- Tape record your efforts
If you can't agree on what you heard, or where it fell apart, tape record yourselves and follow the Full Score so that you can concentrate on "the big picture" instead of on playing your own part.
- Help each other
If the overall sound isn't what you want, perhaps it's because one player is using free stroke and everyone else is employing rest stroke. Or one player's part has been marked up wrongly. Take an active interest in each other's efforts, but not to the point of trying to outdo each other! A round-the-table discussion can be the best way to stride forward.
- Don't do the impossible
Don't try to correct faults that require a week's practice. That's what the week's practice is for!
Work on issues of "togetherness" rather than technical issues on a per-part basis.

Don't forget that there are two things to improve upon. Technical issues and Musical issues....

- Technical Issues
Here, I'm talking about buzzes, missed jumps, springs and general cussing and swearing. These take hard work to remedy, but they can nearly all be tackled in private, in solo practice. Don't ever make the mistake of assuming that Technical Issues will come good at the get-together. They won't!
- Musical Issues
Here, I'm talking about phrasing, tone, articulation and togetherness. These can only be practised for real at a get-together.
I need to make an important point. One person can wreck the collected efforts of the rest of the Ensemble by unsympathetic or

tactless playing. This has to be dealt with straightaway. Just remember that playing with the right volume is no more effort than playing with the wrong volume. That poor phrasing is no easier than good phrasing. That playing musically is actually no harder than playing mechanically.
So do it!

I'm envious of Confucius. In a simple and concise sentence he could impart more wisdom and insight than I've probably achieved in this whole article.

But that's perhaps because I really believe that there isn't a magic sentence that will solve all your problems.

It's also because I'm convinced that so much of Ensemble technique is common sense. Obvious. So obvious, though, that you might just miss it.

If the person who leads the Ensemble can (to use lots of big words in one sentence) act not so much as a leader, but as a facilitator, you'll find that all the problems are ironed out easily.

[Back to top](#)

How to interpret

Interpretation is, of course, the *je ne sais quoi* which turns a pile of notes into a piece of music. Most of the stock techniques - phrasing and contrasts, for example - are not only well known, but part and parcel of any good Guitar teacher's kit of lesson bits and pieces.

So what I'll do here is concentrate on a few extra comments which are really only applicable to Ensemble work. Because of this, they really are quite important.

Let's imagine for the moment that we're a trio, and let's concentrate on that type of music I've already identified as being mainly single-line. Not that my remarks only work with trios, of course, but I can use that to compare and contrast (as it used to say in those awful School Essays when I was a kid...) with Solo Guitar.

At any one time, then, your listeners (and you if you're doing your job properly!) are going to hear three notes at once. Not so very different from a solo, actually. So how can we exploit that fact that we have got six hands, rather than two, to make the music sound better than a solo. If we can't, two of us might as well go home now!

Well, it starts with having a really good piece to play, and a good arranger will be able to capture the sound he wants, free of many of the constraints that burden a solo arranger. You really can have a first fret note and a tenth fret note at the same time if you share the load. And you can have such polyphonic gambits as contrary motion, which is so much harder than parallel motion (for example, parallel sixths) on a Solo guitar, but for an Ensemble is just as easy! It means that a good arranger can paint his musical picture on a bigger canvas, and even with a small number of parts, can bring into it techniques which a soloist can't readily manage. One reward, then, is that the parts in an Ensemble have greater freedom and a bigger life than the component notes in a Solo.

Assuming, though, that the music has already been purchased, I presume that you want to improve the piece that's now sitting on your music stand.

Here are some good areas to address...

- **Long notes**
The use of vibrato to add warmth, life, and, by illusion, to add length, to a long note is a well-known technique. In melodic Ensemble work, it becomes possible to introduce vibrato into parts of the composite sound that would be impossible if all the notes were on one Guitar. Seek out where to do this to good effect, and do it!
Vibrato, however, is a little like a cooking spice. In moderation it can turn the otherwise bland into something very special. If overdone, it promotes only nausea and leaves a nasty aftertaste.
Decide when to do it, when not. And then enjoy the fact that, unlike a solo player, you are able to apply it with a uniform consistency, since the left hand has a more modest workload.
Vibrato? Do it!
- **Repeats**
The use of echo (a quieter and more rounded repeat) to emphasise, rather than conceal the fact that you are serving up the same phrase for a second time is another well-known trick. We have an ace up our sleeve, though.
We needn't just go sul tasto on the repeat, we can take our melodic part up the neck on a lower string. The combination of
 - Thicker string
 - Shorter string
 - Plucking nearer the centre (it happens automatically as you go up the neck!)
 will give a tremendous variation in tone which will apply to all the parts in the Ensemble - something which a solo player is unlikely to be able to achieve, since his music is probably only playable in one position.
Be careful, however, as you go up the neck not to end up moving from the third to the fourth string, because the added brightness of a thin overwound string will take away some of the gain.
Position change? Do it!
- **Sustain**
In solo work, the length of the notes is dictated partly by harmonic requirements and partly by the need not to break the player's fingers.
In Ensemble work each part can have a degree of sustain which is exactly what the composer wants, not an approximation. For this reason, be sure to sustain all the notes for their full length, and be very, very careful to do all the rests indicated. Musical effect depends on this.

Sustain? Do it!

- **Open strings**
Open strings are a lifesaver to much solo work, giving the chance to change position, or produce a rich chord, while freeing up the left hand. The need to play more notes soon ends up with the string being reused for a subsequent chord. In Ensemble work, it can often be the case that an open string is not used again for some time. It is important to damp the string (or replace it by a duplicate at the fifth fret) if subsequent harmony is to be blur-free.
Damping? Do it!
- **Countermelodies**
Sometimes a composer will share the tune between players at different octaves, or will develop two independent themes before bringing them together for the final climax. There is an example of the latter in the [Springtide](#) Suite in my [Shop](#). The ability to pull a tune out from the middle of an ensemble (in the way that a cello can take the melody formerly played on the violin) is a rare thing, guitar-wise, and will delight an audience.
Emphasis? Do it!
- **Contrasts**
One thing that an Ensemble can do is to mix soft and loud easily within each chord. Something even more special is to mix tone within each phrase, so that the tune, say, is sul ponti, and the supporting lines sul tasto. This is a tone palette which is very easy to do and very exciting to hear.
Contrast? Do it!
- **Tone production**
The "trick", if that's the word, of playing chords free stroke (tirando) and melody rest stroke (apoyando) hardly deserves a mention, does it?
Or does it? You see, in an Ensemble, we can play chords rest stroke too, if we share the notes out.
Or not. Our choice.
It's certainly the case that an Ensemble can get a degree of warmth and roundedness out of a chord that would have a solo player rushing out to polish his nails again. And again.
Tone production? Do it!
- **Smile**
What? You heard! Impressive Ensemble music needn't be so gut-wrenchingly difficult as an impressive Solo. So enjoy it.
Enthusiasm is infectious. It can add a swing or a lilt to lively piece, and it can add a warmth and a solidity to a slow piece. And it can add enjoyment to a practice.
Smile? Do it!

You'll see some of these general ideas and a few specific ones too, applied directly to a simple piece of music if you come and join me at a [rehearsal](#)

[Back to top](#)

How to tell the person on your left that they're a complete jerk

In any Ensemble which is playing at a modest level, some poor player will end up making more mistakes than everyone else. With the right frame of mind within the group, this really isn't a problem, but what if one person seems to be holding you up. There are a number of strategies, and each of them has to be a delicate blend, a mix of explaining how to cure the problem without making anyone feel a failure.

It might seem self-evident that an ensemble is only as good as its weakest player, but in fact the whole is more than the sum of the parts. For a start, a misfingered note in a quartet doesn't carry like a misfingered note in a solo, because a misfingering in a solo often brings down a whole chord all at once - the famous "hand full of fresh-air" syndrome. And so a good ensemble can encourage a weak player to improve much more effectively than solo work ever could. Bear this in mind before reading the riot act to anyone.

Here are some tried and tested strategies for lifting a weak player....

- Be sure the player has the part they feel most at ease with.
The best ensemble sound comes when each player is working well. Allocate the parts to best *joint* effect.
- Be sure the player hasn't misread the key signature.
A "bum note" can upset the flow of what follows, especially if the player is trying to scan the Full Score to work out whether it was his fault or something else which caused the odd chord he's just heard.
- Be sure you all know where the repeats are
Not as stupid a comment as you might think - believe me!
- Try sitting in a different arrangement
Sometimes, it is easier to play a difficult rhythm if you are in the middle of the players, and surrounded by "the beat".
Sometimes, it is easier to play a passage if you are on the end of the line where your own guitar sounds louder to you.
- Try allocating the *other* parts differently.
It may be that the phrasing might be more lyrical and easier to follow if the allocation of the other parts in the ensemble were to change. Some people are naturals in phrasing, others are naturals in accuracy.
Sometimes, a weak player relates very strongly to how the music sounds while the piece is improving, and might favour a regimented approach to rhythm while they find their notes.
Sometimes they might favour a lyrical approach to phrasing while they find the shape of the music, as it can be easier to rejoin if they

lose their place.

So, how do you tell the person on your left that they're a complete jerk? You don't. You help them. Because one day, they may find that they have a complete jerk on their right....

[Back to top](#)

What do we do for next time?

If the group is working actively, there will be two jobs which require solo practice at home, before the next "get-together"

- Brushing up the technical issues uncovered in the Ensemble practice
We've talked about this already
- Learning a new piece
First job is to decide on which part each player is to take away. If the music and the players' aptitude permits, then it makes sense for everyone to have a lot at each part, at least until the next Ensemble practice. If not, then the skills of the player and the needs of the music have to be married up in the way that is best for the whole group, and that will inevitably mean some compromises somewhere along the line.

An Ensemble only sounds like an Ensemble when you play together. I know that's obvious, but it makes it hard to rehearse at home with what is, in effect, just one piece of a jigsaw - a piece which, by itself may not convey the whole picture, and yet without it, the whole picture is not complete.

So....

Consider sequencing the music onto a computer so that each of you has a technically correct (albeit rather wooden) version to play along with.

If you can, you might be able to sightread and tape record your first efforts so that you can hear the whole piece at home - it's important that you approach your part at home with a view about what you are trying to achieve as a whole next time.

At home, if you have Full Score, run through the other parts so that you know what you expect to hear while you play your part, particularly so that you are familiar with any awkward entries.

Do remember that Ensemble playing can be tiring, because you have to do all the normal things and you have to listen and constantly re-appraise your part in the context of what you hear. You may also end up doing more playing in your get-together than you'd ever normally do in a single session at home. Probably, your concentration will give out before your fingers, so if clumsy mistakes seem to be on the increase, maybe it's time to call a halt and go home on a high.

By the same token, Ensemble playing can be exhilarating. You may find time flies by. Check out some suitable [excuses](#) for arriving home late!

Finally, and no, I'm not trying to mother you, do double check that you know where and when you are meeting again!



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