

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Lesson 4

Organising your first performance

In this lesson we'll prepare for a performance

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This lesson © Derek Hasted 1998 - please enjoy!

You must be mistaken!

"Don't be daft. We won't perform."

But stop and think. What is a performance? Just playing to the cat is a performance (and they do have this habit of getting up and walking out in the middle, and the bit where they don't look behind is especially hurtful).

Playing to the partner of the player whose house you're at. That's a performance too.

And other opportunities will present themselves.

Oh yes they will!

Ask my pupils.

If you asked those pupils who join my Ensemble Workshop after some initial solo lessons at College whether, after 12 sessions, they would be playing, as a group, in a Charity Concert to an audience of 150, I think they'd split their sides laughing. They'd certainly laugh a lot more than they do at my jokes.

But it's me who has the last laugh. Well, more of a contented smile actually. Because they *do* play, as a little Showcase item, and it works!

I've already mentioned that a plain rehearsal is actually like a little performance to each other. So don't discount as irrelevant what's in here. It may help your ordinary practices too, as your ability improves.

One recent pupil of mine has played incidental music at a theatre, and I've had pupils on local television and radio. They didn't imagine they'd ever perform when they started, so don't jump to any conclusions about yourself till you've heard me out!

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Choosing a programme

Pick your best pieces. How's that for succinct advice?

But was is a *good* piece?

Ah - that's a *good* question.

- It's not your most difficult piece, that's for sure.
You see, the apprehension of playing a piece when it really matters, to people you might not know, in a place that's new to you, may well take too much polish off your most impressive piece.

- It might be a piece that everyone knows - that's *always* nice for a programme item.
- It ought to be one which can present your Ensemble well.
A nice sound, plenty of tonal and dynamic variation.
- Perhaps a catchy rhythm...

But whatever you choose, it must be resilient and must sound confident.

And look very carefully at the titles of the piece, and consider how you play the piece. I have seen what happens if you choose a piece and cannot perform it in the manner the audience expects from the title!

So rather than let me guess what is in your music collection, perhaps we can find a way to make *all* your pieces more resilient and more confident.

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Who conducts?

Another thorny issue. You don't see an orchestra play *without* a conductor, and you don't see a string quartet play *with* a conductor. Where does that leave you?

Let me explain my circumstances first...

On the one hand...

I run a Guitar ensemble which frequently tops 30 players, and most of these are, by performance standards, very much novices. So my advice to you, if you are a teacher leading an ensemble this large, at the standard where this article is, I hope, helpful, is this...

If the players are hell-bent on trying to count, trying to read, and watching their left hands like hawks, do you think that waving your arms in front of them and gesticulating wildly is going to make any appreciable difference? No. Neither do I!

In my role as teacher, this is how I "conduct"....

During play throughs and first rehearsals, I face the players, as a conductor would do, and I count in. And then I play whichever line I can hear is sounding off-colour and weak, frequently darting from line to line to prop them up, in the style of those circus acts which spin plates on sticks and get so much up in the air that it's all in danger of collapse....

On the other...

I also run the Havant Area [Guitar Orchestra](#) which has 12 players who are intermediate/advanced. And here, I *do* conduct.

Why? Because our music doesn't challenge my players quite so much, and we use that extra amount of spare concentration to add much more phrasing and interpretation, which needs a stick to coordinate it.

And so in my Orchestra, I conduct - you can hear soundclips of us playing at the [hago website](#)

Yes, yes, I know that there aren't 30 players in *your* group. My second piece of advice is more succinct still. For a smaller group, I think a conductor looks pretentious!

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Preparation Tips

Playing from memory

Don't!

Look, I'm not being arrogant, I'm addressing people who hope this article will help them. So trust me. If you are new to Ensembles, then playing from memory may well land you in a state that you've never been in before. It is the state of losing your place and not being able to get back in.

- If you lose your place in a Solo, you can retrace your steps, miss a great chunk out, or start the phrase again.
- If you lose your place in an Ensemble, how are you going to get back in?
The piece is moving like an Express Train and you're on the station. There is no convenient way to get back on board. You know your part, but wait...what's the one part you aren't hearing when you're lost? Yup - Yours!

Don't take the risk - the potential gains are minimal, the potential losses are huge.

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Getting the interpretation spot on

In some respects, a skilled solo player has an easier time here. Just pop in the CD, and hear how the rich and famous do it. Then copy them.

We're unlikely to have the luxury of a CD full of Guitar Trios, and so the first step is to take a long and considered look at the music you want to play. Study the title and the metronome mark. If you are lucky, there will be a few notes from the Composer, explaining how the piece was inspired from a deep and meaningful romance which blended the spiritual and the physical in a bond of passionate intensity, or (reading between the lines) was inspired from the need to pay the bills at the end of the month.

All the phrasing and dynamics required in the piece have to be agreed in advance. A useful tip I'd like to add here is to write them (or ring round any predefined ones) in red. In **Bright red!** In an ensemble, you may be so busy reading and listening that the niceties of a volume change will otherwise escape your eye until you realise, three notes too late, that you are still playing fortissimo while your colleagues are both pianissimo and angry. **Bright red** catches your eye, and I think I've just proved that!!

Agreeing them in advance isn't enough of course - they need to be rehearsed. And the best way to rehearse them is to do them, always. Nag each other if anyone doesn't do the full set.

You see, if the musical effects are to be an integral part of your performance, they can't be left out of the rehearsal, can they?

Volume and tone changes can be agreed in advance and rehearsed singly at home without a problem. Rallentandos are more difficult, because each player may have their own view on just how hard to put the brakes on. You need to follow one player. They might conduct using the neck of the guitar (just raising the left heel a little on the stool in time with the music is enough to make the neck of the guitar beat time at eye level); or they may have a clear tune to follow. There is a lot of merit in studying the score carefully. Generally, if one part has quicker notes than the others, this should be the part which leads in any tempo changes, since it is easier for the slow parts to synchronise with a changing fast part than vice versa. You'll see that the player who "owns" the tempo change might be different from phrase to phrase.

It goes, I hope, without saying

Ah - it doesn't! It needs to be said then! OK, I'll say it!

If, during the ralls, you are going to be watching the neck of another guitar, or straining your ears to hear the subtle tempo changes in a Guitar two seats away from yours, then you need to be able to play that section standing on your head. You need to be well rehearsed at all the tricky spots.

At get-togethers, play the tricky sections over and over - you will make far better use of your time together like this, instead of playing easy bits and learning nothing.

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Rehearsing

There's no substitute for preparation.

Bit of a pity, really, in these modern times, that the only way to achieve what can be achieved by hard work is by working hard.

So do it.

Hard work on the Guitar isn't as tiring as pumping iron or painting the house or reading "War and Peace". In the right company it is positively enjoyable. So unless you think the audience deserves second best, do the preparation.

Further down this page, I'll show you some tricks of the trade to make the preparation more effective.

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Performance Tips

Performance anxiety

Performance anxiety. That indefinable feeling inside that all is not well.

From "butterflies in the tummy" to the feeling that, if I may paraphrase a well-known saying, "the world's about to fall out of your bottom".

This isn't the place to cure your performance anxiety. There are websites, books and publications which tackle the issue at any level from Doctoral Theses down to little pep-talks for children.

Instead, let me highlight one two *extra* issues which might impact on any anxiety you feel in "going out the front" in an Ensemble.

- Ask yourself what is the worst that can happen.
 - You die and are carried off in a body bag?
I think not.

- A blackmailer turns up with photos and threatens to expose you?
Unlikely. Unless you have an unusual lifestyle.
- Your teeth fall out and you find you have no trousers on?
Come on - that's just a nightmare. It never happens for real!
- In fact, the worst that can happen is you don't play as well as you hoped. The audience are not going to throw tomatoes, and they aren't going to break chairs over your head.
If the worst that can happen is that you make a few mistakes, then ask yourself this. "Can *they* do any better?"
Right. Which is why *you* are playing and they had to *pay* for their ticket. So put thoughts of disaster out of your mind.
- You are in good company.
In particular, the people performing with you are going to feel the same. Learn two things about nerves.
 - Firstly, people feel worse than they look.
So when you see the others in your Ensemble, they look a bit nervous. You feel like death. So you convince yourself that you're feeling the worst.
Except that in *their* shoes, *you* look a bit nervous and *they* feel like death.
So you are in good company. There is unity in the face of adversity...
 - Secondly, people are ashamed of nerves.
Some people (and it seems to be men in particular) are embarrassed to say that they feel nervous. Meet one of these and they come across as brave and tough. They're not, of course, so don't let their brashness make you think that you are the only nervous one there.
- You are not alone.
In a solo, a memory lapse or a disastrous position change can cause the music to stop.
In a quartet, nothing you do can have more than 25% of an effect.
Once you accept that even a memory lapse or a disastrous position change will not break the music, the reassurance that you get in return is often enough to make you play better and kill the nerves.

Laugh if you like, but I'm not wrong, and it's to your advantage that I'm telling you....

That should have helped just a little - you see, you will feel much safer in an Ensemble than you do alone. So enjoy playing for real applause!

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But what if it goes wrong?

That question hardly fits my strategy of positive thoughts and encouragement, but what if it *does* go wrong?

Suppose you were playing a solo. If, in your performance, your legs turn to jelly and your fingers turn to bananas, you have a limited selection of handy alternatives.

- You could whip up rather a nice trifle. You seem to have the major ingredients.
- You can stop and start again.
- You can plough through, hoping that eventually things might fit back into place before the audience thinks you've arranged a well-known piece in the style of Schoenberg.
- Or you can adopt a more radical tack, by walking off stage, and coming back on again, muttering that you'd left your car lights on, or something similar.

Things are no different in Ensemble work except that the choice *you* want to make might be over-ruled by your fellow players. It really is no good stopping if everyone else decided that your mistake was so minor as not to notice. Getting off the train while it's moving tends to preclude getting back on again!

And there is a second level of complexity. The mistakes might not be yours. You may find yourself party to a piece in which your neighbour is, for the first time in your life (and in his) proudly producing something, the like of which you've never heard, with all the flair and grace of a tightrope walker who is solely concerned with not disappearing from view. In short, you might find it hard to know whether someone else is about to exit the Ensemble suddenly. Or not.

And all this means is that you have to have a view, a strategy, for what to do if it *does* go wrong. When you're good, going pear-shaped will seldom happen, but I do know professionals who've started on the wrong foot, and the players to the left and to the right of the poor player in the middle have peeled away from the straight and narrow like an aeronautical display team, or like the two halves of a zipper. It's not obvious what to do at this point, except to restart. It's also happened to my Orchestra in a Concert. A restart is embarrassing, but it's not nearly so embarrassing for the audience as resolutely continuing and trying to pretend that it's *meant* to sound like that.

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How can we stop it going wrong?

That's better - a more positive view.

There are three ways I strongly recommend.

1. Firstly, tape record your efforts and listen to where the parts don't seem to be quite as precise as you'd hope. It's much easier to hear the detail of the piece if you are freed from the efforts of making the music. And don't read your own part as you listen to the tape - you're not doing this to hear how good *you* are, you are listening to the accuracy of the Ensemble. Full Score might help, but anything else is a distraction.

By the way - make sure the microphone is fairly distant. It will probably not give you a technically good recording, but the *balance* you hear on the tape will be the one that the audience hears. It's all too easy with a close mic to unbalance the sound because the mic is directional - this will have the effect of making you change your individual volumes when there might be no need.

I've heard the results of a trio that I instructed to rehearse this way. It works.

2. Secondly, play to an audience of family and friends first, in the familiar surroundings of your normal rehearsal venue. Don't ask them how they thought it went - that's a loaded question, especially if it's your spouse you are asking.

To wit...

Scenario A - honesty isn't the best policy

"How was it dear?"

"It was, um, oh it was OK, really"

"And what does that mean.... OK really..."

See - an argument is going to happen after your fellow players have gone home.

Scenario B - taking sides

"How was it dear?"

"It wasn't bad. It's getting marginally better but *you* did ever so well, darling"

See - an argument is going to happen after your spouse leaves the room.

Scenario C - seeking the quiet life

"How was it dear?"

"Oh - it's so much better. It sounds lovely"

But if your spouse was simply trying to avoid argument A and argument B, you're going to end up with Argument C just after your leave the stage with your under-rehearsed music in tatters.

Avoid all these arguments - criticise yourselves as a group, and never, but never criticise a single player. He doesn't want to play like a jerk, you know, and he doesn't want to be told that his earnest efforts only amounted to a musical insult to the rest of you!

Emphasise what can be done to make it better. In general that will involve all the players anyway.

3. Thirdly, and please don't laugh till you've tried it, sit in a circle facing outwards, away from each other. You may have learned to watch each other, rather than listen. That advantage, that trick, will disappear if you have to perform on stage, in a straight line. Vision relies on the object you are studying being in front of you, but, and again it's so obvious, hearing doesn't.

You *can* hear sounds behind you, and playing like this will teach you the proper emphasis on self-appraisal. What you hear *is* more important than what you see. This technique will also teach you how to distinguish more carefully sounds at different positions, adding a new way to "focus" on the sounds you hear while playing.

I've heard the results of a sextet that I instructed to practise this way, and I'm convinced that it's a simple and powerful way of preparing a piece for performance. So are they.

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The day is here

And on the day of your performance, what little tips will help?

- Firstly, don't rely on lots of little tips.
Anything which is a distraction is a potential source of losing your concentration.
- Rehearse getting on and off stage
Have the confidence to calmly adjust your music stands, and get your line of sight right. It's not a race to start playing within 0.3 seconds of sitting down!
- Don't let your attention wander.
The new sensations of dimmed lights, audiences unwrapping sweets, babies crying and twenty rows of whites of eyes can deflect your concentration.
- Indulge yourself
If you want to explain why you've chosen the piece, do. I detest those Concerts where there is an oppressive silence between numbers. If you have a message to pass across over and above the music itself, do it!
- Smile

Do you want the audience to enjoy your piece or detest it? Right!
So why won't *you* look as if you are enjoying it?
Give them a hint that it's meant to be nice to listen to!

After you've played, never try to hold a post-mortem while you are still in the Hall. The audience probably doesn't want to see a fight break out, and shouting is so demeaning...

With the adrenaline of a live performance still coursing your veins, don't do anything other than savour the atmosphere and magic which is always present when you have left the stage (*with* your teeth and trousers, and not in a body bag - see, I *was* right!)

Instead, promise me one thing.

Keep the Concert Programme in a safe place, so that you can look back on it in years to come with a deep sense of pride, and fond memories of the day that you first did something you never, in your wildest dreams, ever thought you would.

Remember too, that I had confidence in you....



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