

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Rehearsal Session 2

Warm-Up Suggestions

How to get down to it efficiently

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This practical session © Derek Hasted 1998 - please enjoy!

Why Warm Up?

Why warm up? Well, the benefits of warming up prior to any vigorous exercise are well known and well documented. Many guitarists therefore find a session of scales or arpeggios are very good way to warm up, if only because they tend to be of uniform technical difficulty and can be taken at a variety of speeds. There are no sudden ungainly stretches to catch a "cold" hand unawares.

How is Ensemble warm-up different?

Every word of that paragraph applies here - of course it does. But there are some extra things to think about...

- **Temperature**
Many of the Ensemble players will have had to have travelled to the get-together, and, in winter at least, may be quite chilled. Warm-up time allows the players to thaw out.
- **Tuning**
For the same reason, the warm-up period will allow much-travelled guitars to come to temperature and hold their tuning. Guitars which go out of tune can be a particular distraction once the serious work of putting together a new piece is underway.
- **High Tension**
A rotten journey in heavy traffic, or trying to make up for lost time to get to the get-together on schedule can leave players stressed. A warm-up period can ease the tension before the rigours of the practice proper get the tension back up again!
- **Equal Temperament**
An Ensemble works best when the players "connect" and a warm-up with a simple piece will help this process. A difficult piece tends to make all the players isolate themselves with their own areas of challenge, and a group in which the players are not "in tune" with each other (never mind the guitars!) is one in which the music is not "in tune" either.

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How to warm up

I can't think of anything more awful than a quartet warming up by all playing a C major scale in unison. Yes I can. It's a quartet warming up by all playing different scales at the same time.

My suggestion on how to warm up is quite simple. It's to play something really quite easy. No - this isn't becoming yet another advertisement for my easier pieces, it's a very powerful suggestion. Let me try to explain...

There are a number of aspects to Ensemble playing which are over and above "getting the notes out". All through my pages, the message is omnipresent, but let's summarise...

In addition to all the aspects of Solo Guitar, Ensemble playing is about

- The result being greater than the sum of the parts
- Greater dynamic range than a solo Guitar
- Different positions on repeats, more vibrato, tone and volume variation

- Listening carefully
- Playing co-operatively

You can see that a warm-up based on scales does not address any of these "extras"

A Warm up Suggestion

Ensemble time spent warming-up in isolation is Ensemble time wasted, and time together is often very precious. I suggest you take a simple Ensemble piece and use it as a warm-up, to address all these extra skills, over and above getting the fingers going.

One excellent idea is to play "Follow-My-Leader", and it's by no means a childish game, it's an ideal way to warm up. Allocate a "leader" - it doesn't require any particular attribute to be "leader", and the job should be rotated amongst the players. Sit in a circle and play through a simple Ensemble piece, but follow the tone, volume and speed changes of the leader.

This is a lot of fun, and it quickly raises a smile and breaks the ice. It stops players being insular - one has to keep an ear and an eye out for the leader (which is why the piece has to be simple!).

When the group functions well, any increase in volume by the leader will be followed within a couple of notes by a similar change from the others in the Ensemble. Provided everyone is committed to the warm-up, you'll find that the resulting change in volume will be so dramatic as to encourage everyone to emphasise the change. Let me explain - suppose the leader suddenly doubles the volume of his playing. As everyone follows, the resulting change in volume can be so dramatic that everyone in the room responds to the louder sound by playing their own guitars even louder. This "power-assisted" change in dynamics is very dramatic and is proof that the Ensemble is working as a unit.

Already in our warm-up, we've tackled "The result being more than the sum of the parts".
And we've tackled "Greater dynamic range than a solo Guitar"
And we've tackled "Playing co-operatively"

Now suppose the leader drops in volume. This is very different. This time, your only clue is that their line has disappeared, and you'll only be aware of this if (but only if) you are listening carefully.

Now we've tackled limbering up your ears! Yes - they need a warm-up too.

And suppose the leader changes right hand position or articulation - well you can see that if you follow these changes, you'll have filled in the one missing gap in the list above.

If you choose a new simple piece each time you meet, there is an element of sight-reading too. What a way to get started!

A simple variation

Play the piece you warm up with over and over without a break, changing leaders on each repeat.

Another simple variation

If the music has Rehearsal marks, agree a set of tone, volume, articulation and speed changes which are undertaken at each rehearsal mark. Don't write anything on your copy. Now play. This time you are keeping your brain thinking, and so you'll help your brain warm up. And any mistakes in interpretation you notice will be found quickly if your ears are working well!

A complicated variation

If the piece is simple enough (ie first position only), and if the players are confident enough, then it's fun if the leader shouts "Fifth", and everyone tries to play in the fifth position, or as close as they can get.

Obviously, things like the open B are a problem (not available as a stopped note in the fifth position), as are the lowest two fingered bass notes, but it's an excellent way of feeling at ease with the fingerboard.

Am I entitled to a commercial break yet?

OK - I'd recommend one of my Tiny Trios as a suitable piece if you think you have the fingerboard knowledge to try, because virtually everything there is single line music in the first position with a typical range of about an octave and a half in each part.

If you are confident, the leader needn't shout a position change; instead, you use your peripheral vision to see when the leader goes up the neck, and you do the same. And no - this really is possible, and a wonderful way to put real enjoyment into your playing.

Eye Contact is no bad thing, and even if you are naturally shy, eye contact is something which will prove easy and rewarding.

Which reminds me of the joke - the difference between a shy accountant and an extrovert accountant is that the shy accountant looks at his shoes when he speaks to you. The extrovert accountant looks at *your* shoes...

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How long?

In a practical Ensemble session, how much time should be spent warming up?

What a difficult question! Just long enough to feel that the fingers are working well, the guitar is staying in tune, the brain is still alert and clock on the wall says there's plenty of time left.

From that point on, it's perhaps best to go through the pieces you've been working on, before picking something new or different to analyse. But it makes a great deal of sense to finish with something satisfying again - it's good to have a good "wrap" on the whole session. There's nothing better than rounding off a long evening's Ensemble work with something which sings with joy.



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