

A lot of guitarists get a bit over-obsessed with the need for speed.

For many guitarists, a better question is...

How fast is too fast?

If a piece of music is played too quickly, it's nothing more than a gabble. At the novice and intermediate stage of learning, pieces are often short, meaning that a fast performance achieves little than a sense of dissatisfaction that the piece was "over before it started".

There are other factors that make a piece sound too fast...

- As one's speed increases, the notes become shorter, and the imperceptible gaps between the notes start to become a larger percentage of the total sound - the music starts to sound rough round the edges
- At the limits of one's fluency, certain passages will cross the threshold into "I can't quite manage this"

There's a pertinent quotation going around...

"Back off a little from what your fastest tempo is so the listeners don't have to be nervous for you."

What speed is the right speed?

If you're playing for an audience, they may well know the piece. If they have an expectation that this piece goes at a certain speed, that's the right speed for it to go at!

What's the right speed for me?

A few years back, Associated Board (the exam board ABRSM) published a table of speeds they felt were appropriate for the scales in their graded exams.

For those unfamiliar with their concept of grades, each Grade represents, at least for an adult, where you could expect to be after another year's progress with guitar.

Grade	Years of playing	Notes / second	Notes / minute	Notes / second	Notes / minute
1	1	~1.5	88	~1.6	96
2	2	2	120	1.9	112
3	3	~2.5	152	2.2	132
4	4	~3	184	~2.7	160
5	5	4	240	3.2	196
6	6	~4.5	264	~3.7	224
7	7	~4.9	290	4.2	252
8	8	5.3	320	4.8	288

These figures are the speeds at which the music should still sound relaxed!

Who said that exams are getting easier?

Remember that a well-learned scale with familiar patterns is much easier to present smoothly than a piece containing bespoke, unfamiliar, shapes.

See also the Speed - How To Play Quickly article