

I want to play faster

Don't we all!

Remember that in an ensemble, we may produce an impressive performance from harmonic complexity or rhythmic complexity without necessarily having raw speed, so good music and fast music are not necessarily one and the same.

But if you can play at speed with neatness and precision, you have more control and legato that you can bring to slow pieces as well.

How do I play faster?

It's tempting to say "practise more", and that, of course, is part of the solution. But if you play badly at speed and you practise a lot, you simply learn how to play badly at speed with less effort. Playing with mistakes simply reinforces how to play badly.

So the most important point of all is to play for perfection and then to increase speed, not the other way round.

Why does it go wrong?

The Guitar is a cumbersome instrument - it takes two (different) actions in the two hands to make each note. If the right hand plucks before the left hand has made the note, there will be a wrong note (left hand not in position) or a muffled note (left hand in the act of pressing the string down). And so, in normal playing, the left hand arrives marginally before the right. This cuts the previous note very slightly short and follows it with a tiny period of silence until the string is plucked.

It's this tiny period of silence - imperceptible in slow playing - that becomes significant when the notes are very short.

Playing fast is all about minimising this silence.

Start slowly

If slow runs are not perfect, fast ones cannot possibly be. Slow runs give you time to hear what is not right - intelligent and conscientious listening can root out problems that are harder to diagnose at speed. It's easier to hear detail if you record yourself and listen to the recording, so that you are not concentrating on "doing" at the same time as listening.

Left hand

Human musculature is such that force and control are not natural bedmates.

Minimising the effort expended will result in much better control...

- Use less pressure - most people press far harder than is needed
- Use the right hand edge of the fret to help minimise the pressure needed and to get tactile feedback from the fretwire about where your finger really is
- Keep the fingers low - it takes time to move a finger a long way, and a lot of force to do it quickly
- Keep the fingers spread - a finger that hovers over "its fret" has to move less far than if the hand closes up when "resting"

Right hand

- Attention to the right hand nails will mean that all the fingers react equally and there is not a maverick which plucks slightly early or late
- "Planting" or feeling for the string introduces another period of silence - the fingers need to reach the string on the move
 - Think of a young child kicking a football coming towards them - they trap the ball and then kick it
 - A more experienced footballer kicks the ball while it's in motion

Brain

- The brain is very good at controlling short bursts at speed, but longer bursts require more conscious thought which disrupts the playing.
- Learning fast passages by heart can cure this.
- Many learners actually play fast notes faster than is needed because they tense up as "the hard bit" arrives - a metronome can be effective, and is a good way to chart progress from week to week.
- Before performing, practise at a slightly higher tempo than the piece requires. A 5% drop in tempo at performance seems to generate 10% more time!

Versatility

- Although it's cost-effective on your time to practise playing fast just on the notes required, that is fine for "this" piece but no help for "next time"
- Better is to dig out those old scale books and rattle through the common patterns
- Most tonal melody is scale-based, at least in the small, so rehearsing the common finger patterns produces a good pay-back in the future