

DEALING WITH EXAMINATIONS OR PUBLIC PERFORMANCE NERVES

by Steve Marsh

Each year, many guitar students are entered for practical examinations and a large percentage of them have had no previous experience of this kind at all. This article is an attempt to help you become aware of some of the problems connected with taking examinations and, hopefully, enable you to go some way towards overcoming them by an analysis of your own personal areas of difficulty. I am not suggesting however, that reading this article will enable you to pass your examination with Merit, Honour or Distinction, but it may make you feel a little less uncomfortable when the big day comes. Obviously many of the suggestions given below can be used not only for the practical examination situation but also for public performances too.

The ideas and suggestions in the article are not to be taken as definitive; rather, I should like to think that they will stimulate you into thinking of new ideas relevant to your own situation. If you are still studying with a teacher, then he or she will most likely have gone over most of the area covered by this article, but there may be a few points raised which have not been touched upon.

Depending upon whether or not you pass or fail, examinations can be uplifting or distressing experiences. Quite simply, if the necessary work has not been put in, the whole exercise will probably be a waste of everybody's time.

There are three areas I should like to discuss and lack of attention to any of these could contribute to a poor performance:

- PREPARATION OF THE MUSIC
- WARMING UP/RELAXATION
- NERVES

PREPARATION OF THE MUSIC

When deciding which pieces you will study, you must choose music which you judge to be well within your capabilities when performed at the correct tempo. Also, choose music you actually like - do not necessarily pick on the easiest ones in each of the groups; bear in mind that you will be spending a great deal of time on these pieces and it is therefore important that you find them attractive in the first place.

Make a determined effort to memorise the piece you have selected. This is of course, optional, but it can be a great asset. If you have the music 'within you' then hopefully the playing will be a performance and not just a reading, as it may appear to be if the music stand is between you and the listener. Obviously there is now the possibility you may have a memory lapse and lose your place, so certainly have the music there 'just in case'. In practice, when the piece is fully memorised, try suddenly stopping in unlikely places (in the middle of a phrase for example) and then try and pick up the thread of the music again by jumping to the next phrase. Also, mark the phrasing on the score so that you can see at a glance where the beginnings and endings of the phrases are. I would point out that there are of course those students who find memorising impossible no matter how hard they try. Students who are very good at sight reading sometimes find the 'easier' pieces difficult to learn, possibly because

they do not have to put too much effort into working out how to play them. If you find that the music really cannot be learnt, then at least try to memorise the more difficult sections, such as big position changes where you may need to watch your left hand and then put a coloured marker on the score where you are due to look back to it; this should ensure that no continuity is lost whilst you search for your place in the music. Placement of the music stand can be a critical factor in not losing your place if you have to keep looking back and forth to the score. Try placing the stand by your left side (right side for left-handers), ie, underneath the guitar neck. This way, only your eyes need move from score to guitar neck and back again, whereas having the music stand directly in front of you means you will have to turn your head as well.

As you work on the piece, try to find out as much as possible about it. Begin with the composer: where he/she was born, dates, who were the composer's contemporaries, etc. Find out what the form of the music is (sonata, rondo and so on) and make sure that you fully understand what this means by asking your teacher or using a reference source. Check the key of the piece and mark in all the phrases and cadences. If it is possible (and if you have enough musical experience) try using different fingerings to the ones given by the editor (or indeed, by your teacher), and listen to, and become aware of, the difference these changes can make to the phrasing of a piece. Try exaggerating the dynamics given in order to draw a clearer graph of the whole composition, and then reduce these exaggerations down to a more musical level.

Work on specific phrases and/or difficult sections until they become as easy to play as the easiest part of the piece. Of course there will always be the part which is more difficult to perform than the rest, but the gap between 'easy to play' and 'almost impossible to play' must be decreased. The ultimate object is to make the music sound, look and feel easy in performance.

It is a waste of time and energy and a pointless exercise to keep playing the whole piece through over and over again in the hope that it will be 'all right on the night'. If there are any risky parts which have not been sorted out individually then things will not be 'all right' - in fact they will most likely be worse because you will be worrying about the difficult part coming up which may then create tension in your playing and cause you to make errors in the simpler sections.

If you are aiming for memorising your pieces and when you feel that all the preparatory work has been sorted out and you're satisfied that you have the music learnt, try playing it at a much slower tempo than is called for (at least half speed) using a metronome, this will really test whether or not you have the music firmly in your head. This is usually more difficult to execute on faster pieces of music where the fingers can be acting in an automated fashion and you are not really aware of what is actually happening. If you cannot perform this exercise satisfactorily then it's back to the drawing board (music stand!).

If there are any uncertain areas where you cannot decide how best to play a phrase, then try singing the part through several times. When you have arrived at what you consider to be the best way of singing it, imitate this as closely as possible on your guitar. This may involve drastically changing the fingering of the whole phrase, so decide upon the phrasing before committing the piece to memory.

Finally, when all the above points have been gone through, try to listen to a good

recording of the music and compare phrasing, dynamics, etc. Don't necessarily copy what you hear on the recording, just listen and compare, and if there are one or two places where a *rallentando* or a *forte* etc. might be an improvement, then add these to your performance.

WARMING UP

Obviously this should be done **BEFORE** entering the examination room. You will not make much impression if you walk unsteadily to your seat, dripping perspiration, hands shaking uncontrollably and whisper "Good Night" when you actually mean "Good Morning!". No, all the preparation must be done in the 'waiting room'.

Arrive at the place of examination in plenty of time to allow yourself to go through a warming-up session (everybody should have their own, personal warm-up system, so if you do not already have one, read on and begin to think about developing one). I suggest that you begin with a few scales and arpeggios, played very slowly and precisely with no hesitations or buzzes. After a few minutes, try some left and right hand exercises which are within your technical capabilities: slurs, stretches, bar chords, arpeggios etc. The arpeggio from Villa-Lobos's *STUDY NO. 1* is excellent for loosening up, even if you do not play the actual piece, learn the arpeggio and play it on some easy chords.

If there is enough time, go through the more difficult sections of your music, very slowly. I do not recommend going through the whole of your pieces at this late stage - firstly because there will probably not be enough time, secondly because, if you do happen to make a few mistakes, this will put you in the wrong frame of mind before entering the examination room, and thirdly, you do not want to tire yourself out! Experiment with different methods of warming up and relaxation and, when you have found one which works for you, try to go through the procedure every day before you practice.

One final word on this subject: try acting out the actual examination. Ask a friend (preferably a musician but not necessarily another guitarist) to act as the examiner. Retire to a different room and go through your warming-up process for about fifteen minutes. Enter the 'examination' room and get the 'examiner' to shout out a few scales and arpeggios for you to play. Now perform your pieces and, if there is a piano available (and providing your friend can play it) go through the aural section. If you have a friend who is also taking an examination, then take turns at being the examiner. Do not attempt to mark each other - this process is intended only to familiarise you with the examination situation.

NERVES

How many times in a day does a guitar teacher hear, "I just can't understand it, I can play it all right at home"? The idea of actually playing the guitar to someone and sharing your musical enjoyment, ranges from a little scary to terrifying for many players (mostly of the adult age-group). There are, of course, the lucky few who do not suffer from nervousness at all, but this article is not intended for them.

The old adage of 'pretend you are playing to a row of cabbages' is nonsense. How on earth can you put all you have into the music if you think of your audience as completely unresponsive? Surely there must be a better mental approach than that.

Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this problem. The plain fact is that the only way to get through this difficult barrier is to begin performing in front of other people, whether it be just a few friends or family or part of an amateur concert. If there is a guitar society in your area, then go along and join it, and when the opportunity arises for you to get up and play, then take it. Remember it can sometimes be more difficult to get up and play just one piece than to play several. With just one very short piece, there is not time to get settled down, so try playing a group of say, three short pieces. Choose fairly simple works which are well within your capabilities and begin with pieces which you know very well and have been playing for some time. Perhaps introduce a common link between the chosen works (e.g.. all by the same composer or all from one country) and then you could give a short introductory talk about the relationship of the pieces to one another. Talking to the audience can also contribute to the settling down process. One important point: no matter how uncomplicated the music you have chosen to perform, put as much as you can into performing it. Whether you are playing a simple two-liner by Aguado or a complete movement from a Bach lute suite, you should play with as much conviction as you can muster. **MAKE ALL THE PIECES YOU PERFORM AS IMPORTANT AS EACH OTHER.**

Before starting to play the piece, make sure that you are comfortable; it is not just a matter of sitting down and getting it over with as soon as possible. Once you are settled into your normal playing position and ready to begin, try to 'hear' the first bar or two in your head at the speed at which you normally play it, and then begin. Making the audience wait that extra few seconds while you compose yourself can add a lot to the performance. It is more professional to wait for silence before beginning a piece than to start while one or two in the audience are still chatting. Also try to project the music; do not just play to yourself - let those at the back hear you. Half the battle is having confidence in yourself and what you are doing; when you walk to the chair in front of the audience, do it with confidence.

When you are sitting out there in front of the audience, try not to worry about what people are thinking of you - it doesn't really matter if you go wrong, or have a memory lapse, or look down and discover that you are wearing odd socks! If you 'dry up', forget your place and have to stop before reaching the end of the piece, do not treat it as a disaster; everyone in the audience knows what it is like at first and they all realise what you are going through. If you cannot pick the music up again when you have gone wrong, try to laugh it off and have another go later. Keep trying until you can do it. Above all, **DO NOT GIVE UP**. I think that one of the reasons for drying up in the middle of a piece can be that the performer is trying too hard. Do not think about whether the next note is C # or an F natural or whatever, just try to relax and listen to yourself playing. Hear the music inside your head - even sing along mentally with it as you travel through the music. Don't remain too static, move with the phrases and, if the music conjures up a picture when you are playing it at home, then let it do the same for you when you're playing it in public.

When you think you are ready, try playing your examination pieces to the society. If

anyone else has already had experience of playing the same pieces for exams, listen to any comments they may have on the interpretation and then decide afterwards whether you consider these points valid for your performance.

If there is no guitar society in your area, then try a local folk club. They are usually more than happy to see new faces and the odd 'bit of classical stuff' usually goes down well. Choose something suitable, a dance tune perhaps, or an arrangement of a traditional folk song. (After enjoying themselves and singing along with chorus songs for half the night, the audience might be excused for becoming hostile if you were to present a Bennett *Impromptu* or a selection from Henze's *Royal Winter Music* - so be selective!).

If there is no guitar society or folk club in the area - then you could perhaps start your own small group. Get together with a number of like minded guitarists (ask your guitar teacher if they know of anyone who might be interested) and meet at one another's homes. The important point is to obtain experience of playing to other people.

When the day finally arrives for your guitar examination, remember that the examiner is used to hearing all standards of performance and will realise that you may never before have had the opportunity to play to someone other than your teacher and that you may be very nervous. Examiners are usually considerate and will try to put you at your ease.

If you do happen to dry up part way through one of your pieces, try jumping to the next phrase if you possibly can. You could practice this at home - try beginning from any given phrase in the piece. If you are only a few bars into the piece, then perhaps you could begin again, but do not keep repeating the same phrase if you cannot get it right. The last thing the examiner wants you to do is waste time; the fact that you have gone wrong somewhere in the music does not necessarily mean that you will fail.

As I stated at the beginning of this article, the examination will almost certainly be a failure if you have not put in the necessary amount of work. This means thorough preparation of the music - technical difficulties, phrasing, dynamics, memorising (if possible), background to the music, finding a relaxation method which suits you (by trying out the various ways suggested earlier in this article, or thinking of some new ones yourself), and finally, trying to overcome the problem of nerves.

One practical area which probably receives the least attention of all (especially in the early grades) is sight reading. I am a firm believer in the development of this art and personally believe that students cannot get enough experience in this field and a good proportion of practice time ought to be devoted to it.

The main problem for beginners with regard to sight reading is that there are not nearly enough books available on this subject. In recent years several excellent books have been published on sight reading, but they seem directed more towards the higher grades and do not contain enough easy pieces which could be worked through by a Grade One player. However, these books are helpful for the more advanced student who wishes to increase his/her ability to read in the higher positions and get used to using more complex rhythms.

Easy duos, trios and quartets make the ideal start for anyone beginning to sight-read in earnest. When the music has been played through once or twice and it becomes too familiar (and therefore no longer really being sight-read) then get together with any interested friends and use the music in playing together as a small ensemble group. Try to collect as much material as you can afford and do not restrict yourself to guitar music; recorder or violin music can be used, the absence of guitar fingerings making you read the music and not the fingers! When you feel capable, and if it is practical, play all the single melody lines in at least two different positions.

Before playing through any new sight-reading music, try to work out the correct rhythm by tapping it out or singing it. Do not attempt to play through the piece unless the rhythm in every bar is correctly understood. More advanced players could perhaps ignore this advice and attempt to work through the music sorting out the rhythms at the same time as reading the notes. When playing through the music, keep going. **DO NOT STOP TO PRACTICE ANY DIFFICULT BITS.** If there are any notes which you do not recognise immediately, just play an open string in their place. Similarly, if there are any chords you do not recognise straight away, just play the top or bottom note; above all, keep the rhythm going. When you reach the end of the music look again at the notes or chords you had trouble with, work out how to play them and then go on to another piece. After a day or so, go back over the same piece and see if it has improved, but remember, do not sit and practice it.

The ultimate aim in sight-reading is to be able to play one note whilst looking ahead, and working out, the next one or two notes, or to play a group of notes whilst looking at the next group, etc. In effect, exactly the same process as reading words, with the eyes always several steps ahead, the continuity unbroken.

There are many other ways of approaching the topics covered in this article and I hope that, having read this far, you will be encouraged to read further articles and books on the same subjects. Ask at your local music shop or library for further information.