

“I Played This Better At Home”

by Daniel Roest

“I played this better at home!” my student said. “No worries, I’m sure you did,” I replied. “Let’s slow down a bit.”

If I had a nickel for every time I've heard this at a lesson... well, it's a very common remark. It's the universal feeling of frustration one gets after practicing a piece and underperforming at the lesson. What can we do about it? Having felt this myself when I was taking lessons and at masterclasses I performed in, I can relate. But after teaching and watching a parade of students expressing this same experience, I have a few thoughts about why it happens and what we can do about it.

Welcome to the Hot Seat

If you think about it, you can't really expect your student playing for you will be the same as your student practicing at home, right? But they do. There they are at home, on their own turf, in their comfortable and familiar surroundings, playing at the tempo they feel like and calling the shots. They get multiple takes on their music, warming up and up on the tune with each pass. Then they get to the lesson, and you count off a measure for them to come in on the downbeat. For the student, there's an immediate disconnect.

Here the student has come for your wisdom and tips for great guitar playing, and his or her fingers stumble like a drunk in a sobriety test. They're disappointed in themselves, and they need your encouragement. They could also use a bit of understanding about the process of performing. After all, if they hope to perform for the public, they need to get a grip on this.

What Just Happened?

Perhaps they already know it at some level, but you need to say it once to make it official. First, it's okay that they don't play “perfectly” like they did at home the first time at their lesson. Second, you need to explain the distinction between home and your studio.

I tell them, “You know, it's pretty different here than at your house. At home, you're alone, on your own. At your lesson, you're being observed and evaluated. At home, you're alone. At the lesson, you're being given directions. At home you run the show – you play through it a few times and if there's a rough spot, you work on it as much as you want. Here, if we can't get through it easily enough, I assign it again. So it's not likely to feel the same or come out exactly the same when you're here.”

That's the main message to give them – Things are different away from your practice room – here or on stage. You might have to over-practice something to make it work well enough away from home.

Now it's time to give them tips for success, and this is an open-ended topic – it's why they come to you. Give them your tricks of the trade, pearls of wisdom, encouragement and musical inspiration.

Answer Time

Item one, of course, is to **slow down**. "It's better to play well a little slower than to make mistakes trying to play faster. Of course you want to play it as fast as you hear it in your head, but you mustn't play faster than you can play cold and in good rhythm."

Then there's teaching them **coping skills**. If they're playing along to a track that they can't completely keep up with, they need to get through it without falling apart and abandoning the rest of the piece. One of the best things they can do is to keep track of time no matter what, whether it's smooth sailing or a bumpy patch. They mustn't overload and lose track of where they are in the chart if they can't catch all of the notes or come up with a good improvisation.

Like shooting targets in an arcade game, they can't get every one, and they can't always get all the notes that go flying by. They don't quit in the arcade halfway through, and they need to hang in with the tune the same way. So they have to keep going, no matter what, and just do their best.

Another skill to keep developing is **concentration**. Sometimes I just have to tell a student to focus, because their mind is somewhere else or they don't know how to keep tracking and processing the music without getting distracted or confused. Your skills as a teacher are very important here, since you are directing the workload for your student.

There can be a number of reasons why your student can't maintain focus and play well for you, and your experience will help you guess the reasons. They could be tired, hungry, unable to relax enough to play, underprepared for the lesson, blanking on where to play a note and getting stuck on that so they can't keep the flow, or many other reasons. Again, if the tempo is just too fast for them, slow it down. I've told them, "You know how if you're driving on a windy mountain road there's a speed where it's too fast, and the road seems narrow and dangerous, but if you slow down a lot, it all gets wider and way easier to drive? Let's slow it down."

You have to be sensitive to your student's mood and stress level. Some like to be pushed, others don't – you get to know them and their moods pretty quickly, but you have to find that balance between giving them a challenge they can handle and overloading them. Some will overload because of their own reaction to small mistakes, while others don't sweat the small stuff. That's the big advantage of private teaching over class teaching – you can tailor the pace to the student. The thing is, you have to pay attention to that aspect of your lessons. Is your student a happy camper? Or is he or she thinking, "I don't need this much stress – this isn't what I hoped lessons would be like." I often ask the student, "What speed would you like to play this at?" or "What speed have you been practicing this at?" instead of just assuming they're cool with a speed of my choosing. That way, at least they get that I care what they are comfortable with.

Make it Fun

Students often view their lessons as tests, like school exams, hoping to get an A and pass on to the next tune. It would be encouraging for them to gain every advantage so that they do feel successful. They will be more successful at nailing the notes if they are relaxed and having a good time. Besides setting comfortable tempos, your familiarity with them and their personalities plays a big part in setting them at ease.

The more you teach, the more you learn how to strike the right balance of fun, realization, challenge and progress. You will always learn more as long you keep trying to be a better teacher. Definitely watch for and avoid teacher burnout from working too much for too long, as you will become apathetic enough for your students to pick it up.

To sum up, you can improve student confidence and satisfaction with their lessons by:

- setting the right tempo
- telling them not to expect it to be just like it was at home
- helping them relax
- helping them focus
- aiming to give them a good time with enough fun in the lesson to balance all the hard work.

If you have students who are practicing enough between lessons but not doing well at their lessons, they could be having performance anxiety. The more you know about that topic, the more you can help them. Student performance anxiety is a complicated issue that deserves thoughtful study and discussion. We'll pick up that part of the issue in the next column month – until then, happy teaching!

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Daniel Roest (pronounced "roost") started playing guitar at the age of seven and never stopped. Today he has performed in countless solo and ensemble events in nearly every kind of venue, and his concerts are praised for being entertaining and informative. For ten years he served as President and Artistic Director of the South Bay Guitar Society based in San Jose, CA, preparing many successful grant applications, and is now Director Emeritus. He is recognized for presenting gifted guitarists such as Laurence Juber, Peppino D'Agostino, Muriel Anderson, Jeff Linsky, Franco Morone, Michael Chapdelaine, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Proctor, Mark Hanson, Duck Baker, Sharon Isbin, Lily Afshar, Carlos Barbosa-Lima and many others. His *Great Guitars! 2004* CD received 5-star reviews.

Roest majored in guitar and earned three degrees in music performance. He participated in dozens of masterclasses, including many he produced. He taught guitar and music fundamentals at California State University Stanislaus and De Anza, Foothill and San Jose City Colleges and now maintains a full-time teaching studio in Folsom, CA. He has adjudicated several multi-instrument competitions, presented music clinics and introduced many new audiences to the art of the classical guitar. His original solo composition, *February 4th*, was selected from hundreds of submissions by the ERMMedia "Masterworks of the New Era" CD series. Last year he was selected to be a teaching artist in the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission's Artist Residency Institute. Previous columns for Guitar Sessions include **So You Want to Make a Living with the Guitar**, Parts [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#), a ten part series, **Expressive Guitar Playing – Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist: [Dynamics](#), [Tempo](#), [The Big Picture](#), [Rhythm](#), [Balance](#), [Rubato](#), [Pitch effects](#), [Tone](#), [Phrasing](#) and [Stage Presence and Heart](#)**, and **Teachers Who Can – Performing Your Own Community**, Parts [1](#) and [2](#).