Doing Nothing

"It is awfully hard work doing nothing."

- Oscar Wilde

Practice without doing anything. We are always compelled towards doing something on our instrument but there are many beneficial ways we can practice, sometimes just by holding our instrument, other times without even touching it.

Let's start in the mind. There are many ways we can practice mentally. We can visualize what we are practicing before we actually play it or between repetitions. This pause can help clarify the steps involved, reinforce our memory and bring new insights rather than the bulldozer approach which is to just play something over and over, sometimes playing it correctly, often not and hoping for the former. We can also use this as a way to process our practice after we've finished or as an excellent substitute for counting sheep. Another highly practical use is memorizing chord progressions. If we have to memorize a 16-measure progression, we might try memorizing 4 measures a day until we can recite all 16. I recommend reciting them to the beat. For instance, G, 2, 3, 4, Em, 2, 3, 4, C, 2, D, 4, G, 2, 3, 4. If you can recite the chords, you will have no problem remembering their order while playing them. On the other hand, you could play the chords while reading a chord chart and still not have them memorized after 100s of repetitions.

Transcription can help us accomplish many of the same goals as visualization. In transcription, we bring the processing out of our mind and into the physical world. It is worth the time to transcribe what we are learning, again and again. I almost always go through multiple drafts. Each draft helps me more, not just in getting a nice, clean transcription but in gaining a deep, thorough understanding. Sometimes, I get mental flashes of something I've transcribed as I'm playing. I've also noticed that the music I can play the best, I can also sit down and transcribe without using my instrument as a reference.

Listening seems obvious but I am shocked by how often students don't listen or play along to the source material of what they are trying to learn. Sometimes, I have to

mention it for weeks to get them to and even then, it doesn't always happen. We should be listening again and again to the source material. It has so much to tell us about our practice. Even if it is a song you are convinced you know perfectly because you've heard it thousands of times, I can guarantee that you will hear it differently once you are engaged in actually learning to play it. You will notice things that never stood out to you before and you will find how untrustworthy your memory actually is. There have been so many times that my memory was telling me something was supposed to sound a certain way but then when I sit down and listen closely, I realized my memory was misleading me. If it's a song with no direct source material as far as having one definitive version, listen to all the versions of it you can to hear the different ways musicians have interpreted that piece. Deep listening is practice but it has to be focused, uninterrupted listening. You can't be doing the dishes, driving or some other accompanying activity. Put on the headphones, close your eyes and really listen. Music is so much better like that anyway!

Another area in which this approach can serve us is in relation to posture. First, choose a good seat. A chair with no arms where your legs are resting at or near a 90 degree angle is ideal. The couch might feel more comfortable but it will actually make playing harder and be worse for your body. Next, sit in that seat without your instrument. Get your body as aligned and comfortable as you can and take note of the result. Now, pick up your instrument and hold it but don't play. The goal is to rest in that same aligned, comfortable state while holding your instrument. Now you know what that baseline is and you can make an effort to return to it when you stray. If you don't know what a good posture feels like, it's impossible to become aware of a state of bad posture and even worse, impossible to know how this might be affecting your playing.

Likewise, it is very hard to develop a relaxed feel in your picking hand while in the act of playing. Instead, first allow your hand to become totally relaxed. Then move it towards the strings and ready it for playing but don't actually play anything. Instead, just notice. Is it still relaxed? Does the thought of playing add tension? What does it feel like when it is relaxed? Now you know what a relaxed picking hand feels like and so you will be far more likely to notice when you are carrying unnecessary tension while playing. When you do, try to relax while still playing. If you can't, pause and return to that restful

state of relaxation and near readiness before beginning again. The more you can remind yourself what that state feels like, the more you will be able to embody it while actually playing.

Lastly, you can do the same with the fretting hand. This may seem too basic for experienced students but I think a check-in of this sort will always have insights to offer us. First, you might try fretting a note with each finger, one at a time. Place your fingertip right behind the fret wire and attempt to sound a pleasing note with the least amount of pressure as possible. Notice how the note becomes muted if you are on top of the fret wire and notice how much harder you need to push if you stray far back off the fret wire. This, of course, will involve a very minimal amount of playing. However, with chords this "do nothing" approach can be very helpful. The idea is to work only with the fretting hand and never sound anything with your picking hand. This allows all your focus to be on the fretting hand. Start by just working on getting your fingers in position with a given chord that you're trying to learn. I've noticed an almost universal tendency to build a chord from the bottom up (not in terms of pitch but starting on the string closest to the floor). Instead, try starting with a different finger each time as you work towards all the fingers fretting in unison. Don't just lift your fingers on and off. Get them disoriented and make them do the work of finding the notes again. This will help with memorizing the chord and finding it quickly. Next, try switching between two chords. Don't lift your fingers off the fretboard to get a clean look at things but imagine an invisible force field keeping your fingers within an inch. Focus visually on finding the shortest path from one note to the next and start by doing so one finger at a time. Sometimes, fingers may not even need to come off their notes so make sure to keep these anchored. Watch your fingers travel with maximum efficiency. Let this leave an imprint in your mind that proves what is possible. It will serve you better in the long run if you go slow, focusing on efficiency of motion rather than a quick flurry of activity that lacks intention but hopes for a good result.

So stop wasting so much energy doing something and start working hard at doing nothing.