

Practicing

When you're warming up before a concert, do you play the music that you're about to perform or do you play other music so that the program remains fresh?

That's an interesting question because there are so many different answers depending on the situation. If I'm playing solo music from memory, I prefer not to play any of it just before the concert. I warm up with scales and exercises and music that is not on the program.

If I'm playing a concerto and it's the first of several performances, I might choose to play through the piece again very softly an hour or so before the performance (playing softly, no matter what the repertoire, keeps the hands relaxed). If it's a world premiere, I'm even more likely to play through the piece an hour before the performance. When I premiered *Troubadours*, the beautiful concerto John Corigliano wrote for me and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the ink was barely dry. I had memorized it in a short amount of time, and this approach helped to reinforce my focus and concentration.

I'd like to take more vacations without my guitar, but I'm torn between a desire for recreation and a fear of losing my chops. How long can one safely take off from playing without compromising ability?

You've spelled out a dilemma every musician faces: how to balance the discipline of playing an instrument with the desire to enjoy life away from your instrument too. It's pretty tough to backpack in the Rockies, cross-country ski in the Alps, or trek through exotic lands with a guitar slung over your shoulder. Does that mean a serious musician has to give up such pleasures? No, but one must choose time off wisely and be attentive to the ramifications.

I've found that when I don't play for a short period of time—up to three weeks—it takes an equal amount of time to regain what was lost. For example, if I don't touch the guitar for a week, I can expect to practice three or so hours a day for a week to regain my usual dexterity. To recover complete right-hand stamina may take even longer. I haven't taken longer than three weeks off, but if I did I assume it would take a proportionately longer time to get back up to speed, because the more time off, the more gradually one must return in order to avoid injury.

The telltale signs of deterioration are clear. Within a week, calluses diminish, stamina drops, and general muscle response becomes less controlled. To regain your skills as quickly as possible, practice scales, slurs, arpeggios, and technically demanding studies or short pieces. Don't pursue anything to the point of pain, however, because that will only provoke injury.

Another alternative is to set aside a little bit of time during your vacation to keep your chops up. An hour or even 45 minutes a day of vigorous scales, slurs, and arpeggios can significantly reduce the loss of technique. Since I love to take vacations that involve snorkeling, cross-country skiing, and trekking in remote wilderness areas, I've always dreamed of designing some type of practice fingerboard to accompany me.

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To my great delight, someone finally created a brilliant device for guitarists that is even better than the portable electronic keyboards that pianists use. It's called the SoloEtte Travel Guitar (available from Wright Guitar Technology, 3724 Gilham Dr., Eugene, OR 97408; phone/fax [541] 343-0872), and when disassembled for traveling, it's only 33 inches long and no wider than a guitar neck (see the "Travel Guitar" page on my Web site, www.sharonisbin.com). In less than a minute, you pop on three aluminum tubes designed to re-create the shape of an actual guitar. Your friends can't hear you practice, but you can by plugging earphones into a jack powered by a nine-volt battery. Since the nylon strings are tuned to pitch and the neck is identical to that of a real instrument, you can practice anything and experience the physical sensation of an actual guitar. A second model even plugs into an amplifier or sound system should you need to play a few gigs in between hikes. My first stop with the SoloEtte? I brought it to the Galápagos Islands and the Ecuadorian rain forest, and I am pleased to report that it worked wonderfully, surviving the rigors of dugout canoe travel, high humidity, and ravenous insects.