

## Roadblocks

**I have problems breathing while playing—shortness of breath, gasping, loud breathing. Can you recommend any solutions?**

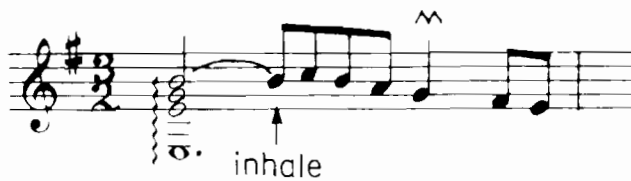
Breathing is the most tangible physical link we have between ourselves and the music. Musical and natural breathing can guide us along the slopes and contours of phrasing, melodic line, harmonic tension and resolution, and rhythmic intricacy. It allows the music to enter deeply within our bodies and to resonate with our own life force. Singers and wind and brass players are well aware of the need to nurture this relationship, for without breath they cannot even produce a sound. It is a constant challenge, because if they breathe improperly or in the wrong place, the phrasing, articulation, legato line, rhythm, intonation, and tone are often destroyed.

Guitarists, on the other hand, can ignore their breathing and still produce pitches, even if it means gasping or turning blue in the face. No matter what the instrument, however, one still needs to integrate breathing in order to play musically.

How can you accomplish this? First, study the music so that you have a clear knowledge of phrasing. Think of the beginning of each major phrase as a landmark where you will plan to inhale (either just before the phrase, before the upbeat, or with the upbeat figure, depending on the situation).

And don't forget to continue breathing within each phrase! Allow yourself to find that inner rhythm organically. Techniques like yoga and meditation can be useful in developing good breathing skills.

Some rests, tied notes, and syncopated rhythms can also serve as breathing landmarks. In the following example from measure 1 of J.S. Bach's Saraband, Suite BWV 996, inhale on the tied-over eighth note:



In measure 1 of Sor's Air #2, Op. 19, inhale on the eighth-note rest:



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There are also melodic and harmonic landmarks for breathing, but these are best demonstrated on the instrument.

Always remember to keep your chest, neck, throat, nostrils, mouth, tongue, and lips relaxed so that the air can flow freely. Breathe either through your mouth or nose, or both, whichever is most comfortable and quiet. Once you have connected your breathing to the music, you'll be amazed at how much more enjoyable it is to play and how much more expressive your music will be.

**My teacher has told me to stop making faces when I play. How important is this?**

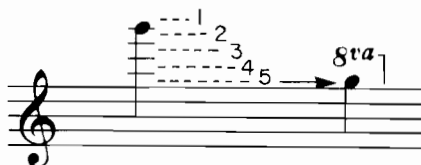
If your facial gestures are genuine and natural expressions of mood and feeling, they can be an organic part of your performance. More often than not, however, facial grimaces are a product of tension and reflect awkward hand motions and strained technique. Such gestures only worsen overall tension and call attention to a player's discomfort. They can even fragment phrasing and impede legato playing since both require relaxed technique. When facial tension affects throat and ear muscles, breathing and hearing become constricted.

The visual impact of strange facial expressions is also terribly distracting for an audience. It's hard to take players seriously when their tongues are sticking out or they appear ready to sneeze at any moment! When in doubt, videotape your playing and see for yourself. The bottom line: if the image is not compatible with the music, it will detract from the performance. Practice with attention to relaxing your lips, jaw, tongue, eyebrows, ears, and neck. The natural emotive expressions will then emerge.

**How do you determine the pitches of notes written high above the staff?**

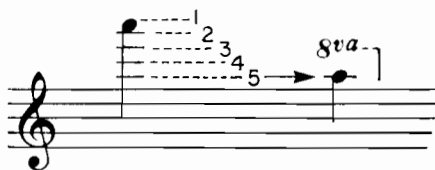
It can often be a bit daunting to decipher the innumerable lines and spaces above the staff that indicate the highest notes. Most guitars reach up to B, or sometimes even C, more than an octave above the first string when it is tuned to E.

To facilitate reading, uppermost pitches that occur in groups of four or more are sometimes written an octave lower and bracketed by *8va* above the notes to indicate their actual position. But when the written octave has not been changed and you are faced with a page that looks like a row of fire-engine ladders, there is an easy solution: If the note falls on a line, count five spaces downward from the adjacent upper space. The space you land on will be the desired pitch, an octave lower.



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Similarly, when the note falls on a space, count five lines downward from the adjacent upper line.



**My left hand becomes tired when I play full barre chords. How can I get a clear sound without a lot of finger pressure? Do you recommend any hand exercises or changes in the guitar's action?**

Excessively high action will force your left hand to work harder than necessary. Adjust the bridge and nut to a level that just barely allows you to play loud rest strokes midway between the soundhole and bridge without buzzes.

Once the action is set, build your barring stamina gradually by practicing such pieces as Fernando Sor's Study #19 and Villa-Lobos' Etude #1. When barring, apply downward as well as perpendicular pressure, and roll the flesh upward, distributing it throughout the fret. Place your barring finger carefully so that the strings are not lodged in any joint crevices. Flatten the finger so that contact with the strings is solid. Always remember to use the least amount of pressure necessary to produce a clear sound.

Release the barre if you feel any pain or significant fatigue. It is better to stop and shake out your hand each time it becomes tired than to force your way prematurely through an entire piece. Your stamina and strength will gradually increase until fatigue is no longer a problem.

When either of my hands does feel tired after playing, I use a fabulous technique that Rosalyn Tureck shared with me some years ago. Run your hands under hot water for a few seconds (long enough for the heat to penetrate), then under cold water for a few seconds. Repeat about ten times, ending with the hot water. The expansion and contraction created by the alternating temperature extremes has a wonderfully relaxing effect on the muscles and may also serve to release toxins.

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**I have just been through a prolonged period of numbness in my right hand during which I couldn't play the guitar. Now my hand is better, but atrophy seems to have set in. Do you know of any neat tricks or exercises I can use to limber up and strengthen my hand?**

The safest way to regain your strength and dexterity is to practice on your instrument. However, since your muscles have lost much of their tone and stamina, work to regain your technique gradually. Sudden overuse could lead to new problems, such as tendonitis. If the fingertips of your left hand have lost their calluses, too many vigorous slurs could result in burst blood vessels. Practice arpeggio exercises, Villa-Lobos' Study #1, scales, slur exercises, and simple pieces. Return to more demanding repertoire only when your technique is up to the challenge.

If you wish to explore the possibility of supplemental hand exercises apart from those with the instrument, consult a reputable physical therapist who is affiliated with a hand doctor and who has experience working with musicians, including guitarists. The selection and application of such exercises should be based on the nature of the injury and on an analysis of the weakness and function of the muscles involved.

Finally, be sure that you have a clear understanding of how your numbness evolved in the first place. A faulty hand position; tension in the hand, arm, shoulder, neck, and/or back; a physical predisposition to carpal tunnel syndrome; and compressed nerves in the forearm can all lead to injury.

Few people realize how damaging the constant pressure of the forearm against the guitar's hard, sharp edge can be to delicate nerves. Those who aren't endowed with ample layers of fat or muscle padding are particularly vulnerable. If your forearm feels uncomfortable, you may have an unconscious tendency to lift your arm ever so slightly, causing tension throughout. An even more serious consequence would be nerve damage. You can avoid both problems by resting the arm on a bit of padding. What I use is a washcloth folded into a thickness of about five layers. I either attach it to the outside of my sleeve with Velcro or wear on my arm a cylindrical cloth with a pouch that holds the pad. If you wear the pad on the outside, match its color with the sleeve of your performance garment. You can also create removable slipcovers for different outfits.