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Playing for Life

The allure of the guitar is a lifelong motivator for professional and amateur players alike

BY MARK SMALL

By 2030, Baby Boomers (those born between 1945 and 1965) will all be 65 or older. For a huge number of them, guitar playing borders on obsession. Some became career musicians. Others, passionate about the guitar in their youth, pursued nonmusical careers but in their later years are returning to playing, determined to broaden their skills. Many others always wanted to play and are starting later in life. In this demographic, we find increased interest in music across the spectrum of instruments and musical genres, including classical.

Many players from this age group who chose careers in classical guitar continue touring, recording, and teaching. They, as well as those returning to playing later in life, have learned that it's important to adjust practice regimens or adopt new ones as their bodies age. In this feature, Benjamin Verdery, Andrew York, Stephen Robinson, and Raphaella Smits—all high-achieving professionals—share observations about how they maintain and continually improve their skills, while offering advice applicable to players of all ages and styles, including steel-string guitarists. Rick Lord, a player who made guitar his focal point after retiring from a non-music profession, also shares his experiences.

WE ARE PRACTICERS

Stephen Robinson, recording artist, recitalist, and recently retired Stetson University faculty member, says: “We are performers and musicians, but we spend the majority of our time practicing. So we have to learn to be the best practicers we can possibly be.” Robinson advocates for warming up slowly and gradually. “This is a really important part of practicing for longevity,” he says. “You need to wake up the hands slowly and take care of yourself.”

Performer, recording artist, and recently retired faculty member at LUCA School of Arts in Flanders, Belgium, Raphaella Smits [profiled in the May/June 2023 issue] lets tone quality guide her warmup. “Since I was a kid, making a beautiful sound was always important and what people noticed in my playing,” Smits says. “For my warmup, I try to make the best sonority from the beginning and spend the time to make it perfect.”

Concert guitarist, composer, and Yale School of Music's guitar chair, Benjamin Verdery [see the July/August 2020 issue], adds: “One of the ways I warm up is by sight-reading. It's great for your mind.” Verdery also cautions against sitting stationary for long practice sessions. “When I am practicing, every 20 minutes I get

up and do a little stretching,” he says. “I avoid locking into a position. It’s the locking-in that can be a problem.”

Andrew York, a former member of the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet [see September/October 2022 issue], now pursues a solo career as a performer, composer, and educator offering tips through his website, Andrew’s Den, and his YouTube channel. “I am big on stretching and hand conditioning,” York states. “I made a video of exercises given to me by a hand surgeon. I do them regularly because I have carpal tunnel and the beginnings of arthritis. It doesn’t affect my playing, but sometimes hurts.”

For Robinson, stretching exercises without the guitar are important. “We sit in a weird position for our legs,” he says. “This can do a number on your hips after 40 or 50 years of playing. So leg, arm, and shoulder exercises as well as strengthening exercises at the gym are valuable. Even though we are just sitting with a little guitar, we may sit for long periods of time and need to counterbalance that with a good, full-body workout. You can’t expect your body to sit in that position all of your life and not experience injuries here and there.”

“I have to think about my posture now more than ever,” Verdery adds. “When I sit, I tend to lean to the left and that can be a problem. Paying attention to your posture is always important and I think it’s an under-discussed aspect of classical guitar technique.” Verdery also suggests players be aware of whether the support system they use for the left leg is causing back pain as they age. He also advises scrutinizing the height of the music stand. “Placing it so that you are always looking down can bring on neck issues,” he opines. “Problems with the neck go right to the hand. Try placing the stand higher.”

Echoing Verdery’s thoughts on posture, Smits concludes, “If you have a good basic technique, play a lot, and sit in a healthy way, the body will be in harmony with what you’re doing.”

MEMORIZATION AND VISUALIZATION

Playing from memory is the ideal for most classical guitarists, but many find it takes extra effort to do it as the years go by. “If I really don’t feel comfortable playing a piece from memory, I’ll use the score onstage,” Verdery says. “I like the freedom of not having to use the score, but I’m getting better at reading in a performance. You just have to do what really works for you and not let your pride or old habits get in the way. You are changing and have to be honest with yourself and recognize things are not as easy as they were in your younger years.”

Rick Lord



COURTESY OF RICK LORD

York, who typically plays everything from memory, found he needed to do more work to prepare for his first post-pandemic concert. “During the two and a half years of the pandemic, I was playing a lot of new music and had to make sure everything was completely memorized,” he says. “I thought keeping the music on the stand as I practiced would make it rock-solid in my memory. That didn’t happen. I hadn’t practiced this way before. I would always memorize things quickly and put the music away, only taking it out for reference, but never keeping it in front of me. That’s like sitting in the passenger seat of the car when someone else is driving. I wouldn’t be able to find my way back because I wasn’t paying attention in the same way.”

All of these players spend time sans guitar visualizing their hand movements while playing their repertoire mentally. “Visualization adds security to your playing,” Robinson says. “When you don’t do it, that’s where the nerves come from. [Visualization] takes care of nervousness for me. After preparing that way, I can walk onstage confidently knowing what my hands are going to do.”

Smits likes reading through her scores when taking long flights, but also visualizes the

guitar neck. “I will close my eyes and see my left hand in my imagination and hear the music,” she says. “That’s when I really know the piece. The left hand moving on the fingerboard is in my memory, so if I read through the music without the guitar, I feel what my left hand is doing.”

York visualizes the geometrical shapes the hands make and the arc his fingers form as they move. “Proprioception, or muscle memory and awareness of your hands in space, enables us to play,” York says. “Muscle memory glues the geometric progression together.” He’s found that visualizing a written page in the mind can add complexity. “It’s a notational system that has to be converted to the geometric shapes on the fingerboard,” he says. “That’s one step removed from reality and uses more processing power in your brain. The visual centers in the brain are huge and predominate; we are visual creatures. I want to pull my attention away and put it in the audio center.”

ADULT STUDENTS

All of the pros interviewed here have noted the different goals of older learners they instruct in master classes or as private students. “I teach a lot of adult students now and they are all

different,” observes Robinson. “Some have no desire to play for anyone; they love the music and are playing for themselves. I try to figure out what’s important for each student in their study of the guitar and how we can make the guitar fit comfortably into their lives. Everybody has different responsibilities and hours to practice. We tailor the repertoire according to the amount of time they can practice.”

When Smits teaches older students in master classes, her priority is to share the standards and esthetics of professional performers. “Some have gotten used to sounds and habits that are not so good,” she says. “They can start to think buzzing notes or a poor sonority are normal. I try to open their ears to the problems and help them to improve by making a good sonority, balancing voices, and showing them fingerings that will make things easier.

“As you get older, you should know what you can play well and what you don’t play well,” continues. “Give what you can with the

Jason who took an interest.” He subsequently completed guitar grades seven and eight with Simon Powis’ Classical Guitar Corner Academy. “For people coming back to the guitar or beginning at this stage of life, many online curriculums are outstanding. I’ve used online platforms for years and my technique and playing are at a level I wouldn’t have achieved before.”

Lord gives a few recitals yearly and often plays at worship services, but making YouTube videos of introspective music including classical repertoire, hymns, carols, and movie themes is his main focus. He regularly posts

videos he produces in his basement studio and has received positive comments from such international players as Laura Snowden and Uros Baric.

“Posting videos offers a chance to get your music out there, especially if you don’t play live much,” Lord says. “I feel that while I have time and my motor skills, I want to do as much as I can. There will come a time when I can’t. Making videos is one way of leaving a footprint for the future. People I know who are of my generation are turning to music. It’s great for our brains and well-being.” **AG**

‘We sit in a weird position for our legs. This can do a number on your hips after 40 or 50 years of playing.’

—BENJAMIN VERDERY

music you are good at, not what you are struggling to do.”

Verdery always encourages his adult students to maintain a sense of joy and curiosity. “The joy is the most important thing,” he says.

Rick Lord echoes the sentiments of Smits and Verdery. “If you choose repertoire that’s within your reach, things go better,” he says. “If you can play a simple piece well, people love it and you’ll feel more confident.” Lord earned a music degree with classical guitar as his principal instrument while in his 20s. He later entered the seminary to become an episcopal priest. He served various congregations for four decades, but always played a bit. He returned in earnest to guitar study in the later years of his career after venturing into a master class with Jason Vieaux. He then enrolled in Vieaux’s ArtistWorks online guitar school.

“I went through his materials and got a lot of good feedback,” Lord says. “Mostly I got inspiration knowing there was a player like