



THE THREE MENTAL OBSTACLES LIMITING YOUR GUITAR PROGRESS

INTRODUCTION

The way you think about things affects the choices that you make and the actions that you take.

In fact, the dictionary definition of attitude is “...a way of thinking and feeling that affect a person’s behaviour”.

Wittingly or unwittingly, you hold attitudes about your guitar playing that has a direct impact on how you practice and how you perform.

You may not be aware of some of these attitudes and so might not realise how they affect your guitar playing, whether positively or negatively.

But the wrong attitudes can function as mental obstacles which we can understand as psychological, emotional and mental belief systems that you have in place that interferes with your ability to be the guitarist that you want to be.

No matter how many hours you put into practice, if you don’t have mental attitudes in place that prepare you for success, you are at risk of your mental obstacles setting you up for failure.

Here are the three most common mental obstacles that I’ve seen in my students.

MENTAL OBSTACLE #1: THE IDEA THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE INNATE TALENT

Matthew Syed in his book, [*Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*](#) provides undeniable evidence that *the idea of talent is a myth.*

The idea of ‘talent’ (or the ‘myth of talent’ as Matthew Syed calls it) pervades our thinking. The idea that superior performance is innate, a natural affinity and born rather than made is so common and so deep that it sits solidly in people’s consciousness shaping what they believe is possible for their lives.

The *myth of talent* is however one of the most poisonous lies that people have deceived themselves into believing and one of the most destructive mental obstacles to your guitar progress.

The idea that some people are born with abilities and natural capacities that you lack the power to replicate is an idea that is damaging to your musical confidence, to your musical voice and to your ability to envision your own future as a guitarist.

The research that Matthew Syed shares in his book, [***Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice***](#) provides clear evidence that the most 'superior performers' achieve their expertise through a combination of three factors that are well within the reach of everybody.

These three factors are:

1. Deliberate practice
2. The opportunity to practice in effective way(s)
3. Regular opportunities (almost like deadlines) to perform and share what has been learnt. This needn't be as serious as a music competition. It could just as well be a date with friends, an informal soiree or even a video on Youtube)

These three factors are not at all a factor of 'talent' but rather of habit and choice, both of which are well within the reach of all of us.

Think about yourself as a guitarist and answer this question: *To what extent do you believe in the notion of talent and how has it affected your idea of what is possible for you as a guitarist?*

Additional resources that you might want to look at:

- [*Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*](#) by Matthew Syed
- [*Talent is Overrated*](#) by Geoff Colvin
- [*The Talent Code*](#) by Daniel Coyle
- [*Outliers*](#) by Malcolm Gladwell



MENTAL OBSTACLE #2: IT'S TOO LATE TO LEARN GUITAR AS AN ADULT

In 1992 Galen Darrough and Jacquelyn Boswell reviewed the research on adult students of music produced between 1957 to 1993. Using the Musical Aptitude Profile test, they found that contrary to popular perception, that ***adults do not have a decreased capacity to learn music.***

Society participated in this myth by reinforcing the idea that adults could not learn music. The general assumption being that the adult student would be left far behind and that any attempt to learn music was simply hopeless.

However with adult music students more than tripling since the 1960s, more and more attention is being paid to the possibilities open to the adult music student.

REASONS WHY ADULTS STUDY MUSIC

There are many different interweaving and often complex reasons why adults study music.

In 2009 Samuel Sugawa studied some of these reasons. When I use the term adult I'm really referring to non-child (older than about 15) and so the term includes young adults in their late teens and early twenties.

Samuel Sugawa's PhD research identified four main reasons why adults embrace music learning:

1. As a way to enhance their life
2. As a form of self-directed learning
3. To regain a sense of control over their lives
4. To make sense of their lives amidst the stresses and challenges that face adults and young adults entering adulthood.

The benefits of music study to adults is similar to that of children in that it strengthens your brain capacity. Jennifer Bugos in her book [*Contemporary Research in Music Learning Across the Lifespan*](#) says that only a few weeks of music lessons can significantly improve verbal and mental processing speed.

Playing music has also been shown to make you happier. Jessica Grahn's research shows that music releases endorphins which leave one feeling happier and reduces stress. Elena Mannes in [*The Power of Music*](#) takes this further by arguing that it also has immense capacity for healing the soul and the body.



BENEFITS OF STUDYING MUSIC AS AN ADULT

Jessica Grahn, a cognitive neuroscientist and professor at the Brain and Mind Institute at Western University in Ontario and James Lenger, the founder and president of Guitar Cities have looked at the benefits of studying music as an adult.

Jessica Grahn's research undertaken with thousands of participants clearly shows the following benefits for adult music students:

- **Adults have greater awareness of their learning styles (or meta-cognition).** You are better able to reflect on ways to learn more effectively and far more able to adjust and modify your learning material to fit your more effective learning styles.
- **Adults cope more easily with complex concepts** such scales, intervals and chords and how they relate to each other. You are thus better able to locate a musical piece into its broader musical genre and find it easier to isolate a musical passage and understand it as part of a bigger musical whole.
- Life experience aids musical interpretation which ensures that **adults are able to interpret and dynamically shape repertoire** in ways that young children cannot.
- Adults have had **an entire lifetime listening to music and so have built up an internal (even if implicit and unwittingly) understanding of musical rhythm and chord and scale structures.** This allows adults to hear things in music that a child might not be able to.

- **Adult learners are choosing to learn.** Unlike children who are frequently coerced into musical study by their parents and teachers, you actually want to learn guitar and have decided on your own that you want to do so. In fact, you want to play it so much that you are prepared to push past the stereotypes that adults can't learn music and all the other challenges that face adult music students.
- Having learnt and matured, **adults have much more patience and understanding of the importance of process versus product** and are able to rest into the process in ways that children struggle with.

Think about yourself as a guitarist and answer this question: *To what extent has the belief that 'IT IS JUST TOO LATE FOR ME' affected your idea of what is possible for you as a guitarist?*

Additional resources that you might want to look at:

- [*The Power of Music*](#) by Elana Mannes
- [*Special Needs, Community Music, and Adult Learning*](#) edited by Gary McPherson and Graham Welch

MENTAL OBSTACLE #3: IT'S GOING TO TAKE AN IMPOSSIBLY LONG, LONG TIME

In our culture everything has to be fast and without too much effort. We send instant messages, access the information that we get almost instantly on the internet and warm our food in microwaves in seconds.

In our culture, results need to be NOW. As a result, it's easy to begin to believe that if you don't get results immediately that you are unmusical, that you'll never achieve your guitar goals and that you might as well just give up.

Not only is this assumption completely wrong, but it is deeply damaging to our wellbeing. Our life spans are getting longer and longer and we need to learn to live at age 16 and 20 or for that matter at 50 and 60 in ways that make living at 80 a happy and fulfilling prospect.

The reality is that not all results come quickly or easily, but that short-term attitudes hold people back from significant progress in areas that matter over the long term in at least THREE ways:

1. It causes guitar students to feel **frustrated and disheartened** which in turn discourages people from moving forward.
2. Having a short-term attitude about results **places pressure on guitarists that significantly slows progress** as guitarists take short cuts that build into their playing bad and detrimental musical and technical habits.
3. **It potentially risks injury** as guitarists focus on a rapid output rather than intentionally watching that they are feeling happy and calm and that their hand position and posture is comfortable and safe for their body. Tendonitis is a major concern for guitarists and there is no easier way to suffer from this curse than to impatiently push yourself way beyond what is comfortable and reasonable.

DELIBERATE PRACTICE IS THE ANSWER

But it doesn't have to take as long as the 10 000 hours that Malcolm Gladwell suggests.

Since Gladwell published [*Outliers: The Story of Success*](#) in 2008, the idea that it takes 10 000 hours to achieve excellence has been frequently cited.

Despite this, there is a growing body of research that argues that Gladwell's argument is flawed and based on very unstable foundations.

Gladwell based his book on Anders Ericsson's research. Working as a Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, Ericsson went on record to clarify that Maxwell's argument was both an over simplification and a misrepresentation of his research findings.

The notion of meta-cognition (or meta-learning as Tim Ferris calls it) has been around since the 1980s. Meta-cognition is really learning that is about learning. ***In the idea of meta-cognition (or meta-learning) we focus not only WHAT we are learning, but also on HOW we are learning.***

The idea is that once we understand how we learn, we can determine which ways of learning works best for us and that this knowledge will amplify our learning.

Tim Ferris in his SXSWi presentation went as far as to suggest that ***“you can become world class in any subject in less than six months”***.

While I wouldn't go as far as Tim Ferris when it comes to guitar playing, the three steps that he suggests for shortening the learning time have great value.

These three steps for accelerating learning are:

- Introducing feedback loops where you review and revise your practice.
- Designing your practice and ensuring that all practice is deliberate practice targeted towards specific micro and macro goals.
- Paying close attention to how you use your practice time.

Remember to that to accomplish big goals you have to THINK BIG, but ACT SMALL!

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While Gladwell was focusing on what it takes to be a complete expert in a particular area, Tim Ferris's argument makes sense when you consider that 80% of what you need to learn to be proficient (at intermediate level) takes about 20% of the time. The remaining 80% of the time is spent mastering the 20% that it takes to shift to maestro or expert level. The logic here is that the gains are rapid at the earlier stages of learning but that the time and effort to make gains past the point of intermediate level proficiency increases.

If your focus is on the intermediate level, these gains are achievable in a much shorter time frame than Gladwell's highly contested 10 000 hours.

If you take an intentional and mindful approach to your practice, learning to be patient will become just as important as learning a technique or a piece of music.

In a strange way, you will understand that human character development is exactly what will make your beautiful character and heart shine through your music.

By being patient you will be content (and even enjoy) allowing yourself to develop at your own pace, you will actually have better outcomes and you will almost certainly perform better and be injury free.

Think of it this way, imagine if you'd started playing five years ago, and if you had practiced daily for those five years, where would you be as a guitarist today?

Then think about this, in five years time you will definitely be five years older. The only choice left to you is whether you will be a better guitarist in five years, or if you will be exactly where you are today.

The choice is this, do you want to be a better guitarist in five years or is today your best version of yourself as a guitarist?



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