Douglas Niedt's
GUITAR TECHNIQUE
TIP OF THE MONTH

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"

I subtitled my Tech Tip "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!

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BE SURE TO VISIT DOUG'S "SECRET VAULT" of Dirty Little Secrets.
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Making It Work in Real Life

By Douglas Niedt

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How many times have you worked on a difficult passage in a piece over and over and played it very well, only to have it fail when you play the entire piece—especially in a performance? Drives you crazy doesn’t it? Here are some steps you can take to nail those difficult passages in the context of the entire piece and even make them work in high-pressure, real-life situations.

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This article assumes you are playing the passage well when practiced on its own. If it isn’t coming out perfectly almost every time when practiced by itself, there is no way it will come out reliably when you play the entire piece.

Rushing
One of the major reasons a difficult passage fails in context is that the player begins the passage a split second (or more) too soon. Jumping into the passage or a fast scale just a tenth of a second too early throws off the body’s neuromuscular system and the fingers get tangled up. Think about it. You are cruising along in a precise rhythm but suddenly you begin a passage ever so slightly ahead of the beat. It is a jolt and total surprise to your hands that you started the passage early (unlike the hundreds of times you executed the passage correctly in practice). Now they have to scramble to readjust. With a difficult passage, they can’t adjust that quickly and fail.

You may not even be aware you are starting the passage early. One cure for the problem is to tell yourself to wait a split second before starting the passage. Try breathing out right before the first note. In cases where you are starting much too early, practicing with a metronome will help. Focus all your attention on the right hand, plucking the first note precisely on the metronome tick.

In some situations, I have found that even delaying the start of the passage by a split second can mean the difference between success and failure. Unlike rushing in too soon, slightly delaying the start of a passage does not confuse the hands. Giving the hands that extra bit of time helps them prepare, allowing them to play with confidence and precision. This delay is a
very small amount. Your listeners will be unaware of it and will not hear any change in your overall rhythm, tempo, or groove.

The Mental Game
Many times, the hands are perfectly capable of playing a passage in context or in high-pressure situations, but you lose the mental game. Imagine, you are playing a piece and begin thinking, “Uh-oh. Here comes that difficult passage. Oh my gosh, I hope I play it right. Here it comes. Here it comes.” There is just no way you will nail it. You have defeated yourself mentally.

Of course, if you have practiced the passage correctly and can play it on its own, there is no reason why you shouldn’t be able to nail it in context. Knowing and believing that is most of the battle. In high-pressure situations, continually reminding yourself that you were able to play the passage perfectly well at home or for friends, can give you the edge.

Here is another strategy you can use to win the mental game. Believe it or not, if you distract yourself from thinking about the “difficult” passage as you approach it, your neuromuscular system will come through on its own. In other words, your hands, reflexes, and muscles have rehearsed the passage hundreds of times successfully. If you eliminate interference from your judgmental and doubting thoughts—if you allow the hands to do their thing on their own—they will perform flawlessly. As you approach the passage, think about anything but playing the passage. Think about lunch, your dog, the weather. Think about it through the entire passage, and then bring your mind back to the music. This technique also works well when beginning a piece, or having to play a difficult passage after a measure or more of rests. It helps prevent over-thinking or getting uptight about beginning a passage successfully.

Practice in Altered Rhythms
I wrote an entire tech tip about how Itzhak Perlman’s accompanist used this technique. Read it again. Use this technique to practice a difficult passage in context. In other words, play the entire piece, but when you come to the difficult passage, play it in one of the altered rhythms you have used when you practiced the passage by itself. It works wonders. It solves most problems with hand synchronization, shifting, and rhythm.

Easy Fixes
We know playing a piece in its entirety is quite different from practicing individual sections or passages. One reason for that is when we play in context, sometimes we don’t use the same techniques we consciously or unconsciously use in practicing individual passages.
One of these is a very basic, almost-too-simple-to-be-true technique. It’s called looking where you’re going! Sometimes a difficult passage is preceded by a shift. If you eyeball a point on the string you are shifting to, you will nail it nearly 100% of the time. Read my tech tip devoted to this topic—it solves many problems.

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The element of body english and positioning of the hands is very important. Once you are able to play the difficult passage successfully by itself, take careful note of your body position and position of both hands. Look at how you are sitting (centered or leaning left or forward, hunched down or sitting up straight), the position (forward or back) and angle of the guitar neck, whether you are holding the guitar vertically or leaning back against you, and especially, position of the left elbow.

Examine your right-hand position. Is it leaning back, leaning forward, tilted right or left? Are you contacting the fingernails straight-on or on the left sides? Examine your left-hand position. Is it parallel with the neck or swinging away from the neck? Is the left wrist flat, arched out, or sunken in?

Take a mental snapshot of all these variables. Then, when you play the passage in context, be certain you assume this precise position of the body and hands as you approach the difficult passage. Don’t wait until you hit the first note of the passage. Be in position at least a second or two before the passage hits. Otherwise, you’ll find that playing the passage in context bears little resemblance to how you played it when you practiced the passage over and over by itself. Incidentally, I discuss positioning of the elbow in this previous tech tip.

**Final Thoughts**

1. If a passage fails when practiced over and over on its own, it will fail when played in the context of the entire piece. It must be practiced correctly on its own until you achieve near 100% accuracy. Once you can play it perfectly about seven times in a row, you have it.

2. At least 90% of making a passage work in real life, especially in a high-pressure situation such as public performance, is dependent on being on top of your mental game.

3. Use the basic techniques of anticipating body and hand position, looking where you’re going, and practicing with altered rhythms.

4. When the preceding elements are in order, DON’T RUSH into the passage. Exhale or delay slightly, then nail it!

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