6 Methods
For Developing Speed

By Daniel Nistico
Developing speed requires your technique to be regulated and in good working order. It’s not the result of stubborn will-power, but careful regulation of foundational aspects of your technique. Improve each individual aspect and you will find an increase in your ability to play fast. Improve multiple aspects and your speed will develop at an exponential rate.

1) Soft and Light

“I will conclude... by recommending beginners never to practice forte, but constantly a mezzo voce (half your usual volume). By this means, they will avoid all constraint, stiffness of the arms and wrists, and hardness of touch. The fingers will also acquire more readily that suppleness, agility and varied ninety of touch so requisite for musical accent and expression.”

“The peculiar charm of the guitar is sweetness, delicacy, and flexibility of expression; Force should therefore be resorted to but sparingly, and only by the aid of... octaves and widely extended harmonies; never on single notes or close chords.”
— Giulio Regondi

This quote from one of the greatest guitar virtuosos of all time gives us some clues as to how he might have achieved his great skills of execution. Just looking at his compositions, you will find that any attempt to overuse your energy (i.e. play loud and heavy) will immediately create barriers. If you cannot play the following example from Regondi’s ‘Introduction et Caprice’, just simply imagining it should give you an idea of the kind of virtuosity required to execute it. (Click here to download Introduction et Caprice).

I’m using an extreme example to make this point as clear as possible. If you played this page of music loud and heavy, then you would struggle to play it. Heed Regondi’s advice and practice using at least half of your normal volume. You will avoid constraint, stiffness and hardness of touch. As Regondi points out, the charm of the guitar is sweetness, delicacy, and flexibility of expression - not force, loudness, etc.

When developing speed, practice soft and light. Apply this to scales, arpeggios and fast passages in pieces.
2) Accent

Like volume, accent is another form of energy that needs to be carefully regulated in order to allow for quick playing. If you play every note with an equal accent, then it will present another barrier for playing fast. But limit your accents and the notes will flow and organize themselves logically.

Let’s look at the way musicians from past centuries accented semiquavers (16th notes) in 4/4 time. (Click here for full accentuation chart)

The dashes represent accented notes and the U represents unaccented notes. Note that there is a hierarchy of accents in each bar:
- Beat 1 receives the strongest accent (4 dashes)
- Beat 3 receives the second strongest accent (3 dashes)
- Beats 2 and 4 receive weaker accents than beats 1 and 3 (2 dashes)
- Offbeats (i.e. notes that fall halfway between the main beats) are slightly accented (1 dash)

Apply this to scales and watch as your speed, accuracy, timing and more will quickly improve. Here is a basic scale pattern by Luigi Mozzani that you can use. (Click here to download Mozzani Method Book.)

Let’s see how this applies to one of the most notorious fast passages in the guitar literature - the opening of Etude 7 by Villa-Lobos. (Click here to download 12 Etudes)
3) Tension and Relaxation

Regulating tension and relaxation is important for your playing in general. But even more so when you want to develop your speed to new heights.

Relaxation = Freedom = Speed

Think of tension as a force that restricts freedom.

Think of relaxation as a force that enables freedom.

We often miss many opportunities to add relaxation into our playing and instead hold tension when it’s not needed.

Think of there being a choreography between tension and relaxation; a sophisticated series of movements and commands that will lessen the amount of tension you use and increase the amount of relaxation. Because this is quite sophisticated, let’s see how this choreography works when applied to just three notes (the first three notes of a C Major scale).

Play the above example and pay very close attention to your treatment of tension and relaxation. Try to hone in on your individual hands - is your left hand holding tension the entire time? Your right hand too?

Below is an attempt at describing the choreography of tension and relaxation. Try and play the three notes again and adhere to the sequence of movements and commands.

Here is the sequence:

1. Left Hand frets note (tension)
2. Right Hand immediately plucks note (tension)
3. Right Hand immediately relaxes (relaxation)
4. Left Hand lifts to get to the next note (relaxation)

You can apply this sequence to any piece, study, passage or exercise. Every action of tension is balanced out with an action of relaxation.

Practicing this sequence requires a very slow tempo but gives you great results for developing speed. It’s interesting to note that the right hand’s actions occur rapidly, while the left hand’s occur comparably slower.
4) Economy of Movement

Regulating your movements is yet another foundational aspect of playing that should be addressed even without concern for developing speed.

**Unnecessary movements**
Movements that are unnecessary can negatively affect your musicality by adding all kinds of pauses, hiccups and delays. Obviously these movements will affect your ability to play fast!

- Pay careful attention to the parts of your hands that are not required to play. Are those parts moving? If so, to what degree can you minimize it?
- Generally, you only need to move your hands, wrists and arms in special circumstances (for example, when shifting).

**Large movements**
Large movements result in slow playing. The larger the movement, the slower the playing.

- Pay careful attention to the part/s that are required to play. Could those parts move more efficiently?
- Each action of the finger involves two motions - a backwards stroke and a forwards stroke. Ensure that each motion is carefully regulated and not moving more than necessary.

**Simple exercises**

- Use movements that originate only from the knuckle joints of the fingers.
  - No hand movement, arm movement or wrist rotation.
- Ensure that each individual finger moves independently.
  - If one finger is working, ensure the remaining ones are not moving or being affected.
- Ensure that the trajectory of every movement is minimized.

**Left hand economy**
- From Mertz’s ‘School for Guitar’ ([click here to download](#))
**Right hand economy**
- From Pelzer’s ‘Instructions for the Spanish Guitar’ *(click here to download)*

When practicing these exercises, remember:

1) **Avoid unnecessary movements**
   - What parts of your hands/wrists/arms are not required to play?
   - Movements of the hand, wrist and arm occur in special circumstances.

2) **Avoid large movements**
   - Can the parts that are required to play move more efficiently?
   - Minimize the forwards and backwards stroke of each finger.
5) Chunks and Bursts

Chunks refer to breaking down rapid passages into smaller pieces.

Burts refer to practicing fast in short periods of time.

Combining these together makes a powerful way to develop speed.

1) Chunk out the piece into small bits
2) Practice those small bits in fast bursts

Let’s say you have a passage like this one, from Tango en Skai by Roland Dyens.

Break it down into two chunks and repeat each chunk at the fastest speed you can muster. Repeat each chunk multiple times until it feels second nature to play it. Keep in mind the previous methods.

Play the chunks:
- Soft and light
- With a regulated hierarchy of accents
- With a careful choreography of tension and relaxation
- With economy of movement
6) Hands Separate

Difficulties usually contain many problematic elements, so subdividing them is very useful. For many fast passages out there, it is often only one hand that is required to play with great speed (the main exception would be fast scale passages). Practicing hands separate can unlock extra speed very quickly.

This passage below is again from Tango en Skai.

Here is how you can practice it to achieve greater speed:

1) Chunk and burst it. Keep in mind the hand that speed is required.

2) Practice each chunk hands separate, again keeping in mind the hand that speed is required.

Again, also play the chunks hands separate:
- Soft and light
- With a regulated hierarchy of accents
- With a careful choreography of tension and relaxation
- With economy of movement

Same but no plucking
"When I first started playing the guitar, I dreamed big. I totally fell in love with a recording of Asturias and wanted nothing more in life than to play it."

- You probably have similar dreams of playing some of the guitar's most treasured pieces.
- You want playing to be easy so that you can focus on the music and move people's hearts.
- But the journey is rough and you can't find a clear path to realizing your dream.

**Practice time is wasted**
- You either just noodle around or get frustrated at your lack of progress

**Learning new things is tough**
- You've used all the books and videos out there, but nothing seems to help you progress like you want to

**Performing sucks**
- Every time you perform is a disappointment. You just want playing to be easy like it was at home!

“The gap between playing at home and in performance is always a great disappointment for me. I can work up a piece to reasonable fluency at home and then in performance even with a small friendly audience it all goes pear shaped. The difficult bits fall apart and completely new errors creep in.”
You can change now and become the guitarist you've always dreamed of

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- Understand the meaning and purpose of every single note you play

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"Lagrima "... It was the first piece I heard from Daniel.. it was very moving, dynamics, emotion, it was all in there.

So I decided to take online lesson with Daniel and I'd like to say that he's truly an incredibly great teacher and player.

From dynamics to intonation, to rhythm... he improved it all just by putting the right words together and in 2 lessons.

One more thing I can say is that, he really cares. Daniel takes time to make sure you get it right so.. If you're looking for a teacher, I highly recommend him!”

— O’Bryan, Montpellier Conservatoire