

Thinking On Our Feet

Making assumptions about how the next project will manifest is always a mistake. Every performance project unfolds in different and often surprising ways. All we can do is prepare to step into the process with an openness and good will, and respond as the project requires.

We need to be able to think on our feet, literally and figuratively. "The Seven Assumptions For Work In The Group" is the clearest delineation of what the Orchestra requires of us.

ON OUR FEET, LITERALLY

I put these suggestions out there last year and they resonated for a number of people. As simple as it seems, going from sitting to standing is not a small thing, and going from standing to moving is yet another order of magnitude. And if we are going to be prepared for whatever presents itself in May, waiting until we get there is probably not the best strategy. In short, this requires practice.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Walk around the room, the house, the rehearsal space, wearing your guitar. This may seem obvious, but it is surprisingly not. It may seem silly, and it probably is. But it is remarkable how uncomfortable, and sometimes downright goofy, people can look as they walk with their instrument. So, walk down hallways, negotiate corners, turn around in tight spots, all without banging the headstock on something. *Grace and presence are required for even this simplest of tasks.*
2. Spend part of your practice time standing on your feet. Address primaries, play scales, practice arpeggios, work through the available repertoire, standing in place. How long before your back gets tired? Do you start shifting your weight around? Shuffling? Twitching? At what point does a balanced, relaxed and easy uprightness begin to turn into a stiff standing "attention"?
3. Practice while walking around the room. How independent is your playing from your feet? How much sound does your moving and your footsteps create? How does the sound of your instrument change in different locations. How far away from your metronome can you go and still maintain contact with the pulse?
4. Practice in the clothing you are considering for gigs. How well chosen are they? Do they allow freedom of movement? How do they affect your playing, and the sound you make as you move? Remember to include your gig shoes! Can you remain on your feet for an hour or more, comfortably.

ON OUR FEET, FIGURATIVELY

This is probably the toughest thing, especially for those of us not fortunate enough to have a group of guitarists nearby who are available to work together. Finding ways to practice group skills and improvisation can be a challenge when we are on our own.

What we CAN do is to ensure that we bring our best self to the project. We begin where we are, and as we approach the project we can work to hone and improve our guitar skills. Primary exercises! Scales! Ear training! All of the obvious basics. Can I be in the best shape possible for me, at this stage of my development, the moment I arrive? Can we hit the ground running?

A word about repertoire:

Learning repertoire is never a waste of time, but approach it with a little perspective. Playing repertoire is excellent work in terms of our personal skills and musical acumen. What does this music require? Can I play this part excellently and reliably? How do I judge the musicality of my performance of this piece? How does my guitar sound? These are all important things to be in contact with, whether we are playing a composition or improvising with the group.

1. Practice the repertoire you know best. Be able to play it excellently and reliably, so that should the question, "Who can play this part?" comes up, you will know that you can raise your hand. Or not. Arrive at the project with no expectation that you will be playing a particular part, but be prepared should the opportunity arise.
2. Learn new repertoire. Quickly. The skill of learning parts is an important one. Between now and the project, you may or may not have mastered the new parts sufficiently to dive into performance with it. No matter. The skills required when addressing unfamiliar material are directly relevant to the group, and they are worth cultivating: to swiftly apprehend what is going on around us, and respond.

AND FINALLY

Lest we get bogged down in guitar... Remember that our presence is our primary contribution. Whatever your personal practice is to cultivate this, sitting, meditation, listening, observing, a game you created for yourself that increases your volitional attention, if you do nothing else between now and December, do that.