

Ten of the Worst Mistakes that Classical Guitarists Make

by Jay Kauffman

You're probably reading this ebook, in part, because the word "mistake" is featured prominently in the title.

Mistake!

The very word puts us on alert, makes us feel uneasy. And if someone tells you "you're making a mistake," you wake up pretty quickly. You usually respond with defensiveness, fear, anger, or at the very least, extremely strong curiosity.

Our hypersensitivity to mistakes is an important skill, akin to the peripheral vision that ferrets out the tiniest movement in the dark, in case it's a threat. It's also related to our social sense of appropriateness and embarrassment.

The darker side of our hypersensitivity to mistakes is our tendency to blow mistakes way out of proportion---and to live in fear of them or to live in denial of them, or both.

But your relationship to mistakes is THE key to how quickly, continually, and thoroughly you improve on the guitar.

That's why I want to say a few important things before I go ahead with my Top Ten Classical Guitar Mistakes List:

1. There are many, many more things that you are doing right than wrong, even if the one or two "wrong" things are causing a lot of problems. Be hypersensitive to mistakes, fine. **But also learn to be hypersensitive to improvements.** It's a teacher's job to be notice and be supportive of everything that you are doing right, but it's a good thing for you to learn as well.

Sometimes you improve in leaps, but most often, it's in small steps, over periods of time in a way that happens so slowly that you don't even notice it's happening--unless you're really paying attention and patting yourself on the back now and then. Learn to appreciate your accomplishments, to look back at how difficult something once was compared to how much easier it is now.

2. Don't Deny or Ignore Mistakes. Mistakes wreak havoc over time when you don't deal with them. When you read my list of mistakes, I hope you notice that I'm not getting on your case for missing notes or hitting wrong strings....I'm getting on your case about habits and blind spots that develop *when you don't take the pains or do the work to really deal with what's behind the missed notes and the wrong strings.*

4. Don't Fear Mistakes. Mistakes are the prime raw material of learning. Miles Davis went even further than this when he said : "Do not fear mistakes. There are none." He's



"bad, bad, bad finger!"

getting pretty zen, but even for our purposes here, he's right---"*mistakes*" are a matter of context. A wrong note is only wrong because you had different note in mind.

Whenever you push yourself past your edge, outside of your comfort zone---**which is constantly necessary in order to learn**---you trip, you stumble, you overshoot the mark, you splat, you buzz, you sound unpleasant in some way, you hit the 'wrong' note. You make a "mistake." And as a result you have a new, rich bit of information that you can learn from.

There's no other way to learn.

The word "mistake" is just creating a category---when you call something a mistake, you're essentially corralling it to a place in your mind. When it's convenient, you can put your wrong note or your missed string into this "Mistake Corral," but please don't build a high fence there. Leave the gate open most of the time. Don't leave any "mistakes" inside for very long. Take them out. Pay attention to each "mistake," and ask yourself what it is, what it has to show you. Look beyond the narrow label of "mistake" into whatever else it might be. Reconsider it, revel in it. Play with its edges. Experiment with it. find out what it's made of, why it's there.

4. Yesterdays solutions can become today's mistakes if you don't keep refining and expanding them.

Learning is messy. To play guitar well, your hands, mind and body have to handle many challenges simultaneously. But when you're practicing, you can only focus on one challenge at a time. This leaves all the other challenges temporarily...un-dealt with, opening you up to a cornucopia of mistakes you are powerless to avoid. Isn't that fun?

A good teacher will show you the highest leverage hand positions, studies, repertoire, exercises, that will deal with the most important challenges for your level, and even straddle several challenges at once, and will give you strategies to develop your playing along all fronts.

But as you get better, master the basics, and you embrace wider and wider musical challenges, you'll find that the solution to each new challenge will bring other more interesting and rewarding challenges out of the woodwork---you can't rest indefinitely if your goal is mastery.

For a simple example on a beginning level: it might be fine to play something with just your right hand thumb if this supports your focus on the notes in your left hand. That's a solution to an immediate challenge. But it would quite obviously be a mistake to stubbornly keep using your thumb as a solution to everything else.

It might be fine to ignore counting for a while so you can really nail something else, like tone, or shifting, or coordination. But it's a mistake to think that you can solve all your counting problems without bothering to really count, from here on out. Keep solving, keep refining, keep expanding, and keep making mistakes and learning from them.

5. You can't attach your self worth to mistakes: simple as that. If you do, then you'll live in fear of mistakes, and since making mistakes is the prime ingredient in getting better, you will be living in fear of the most important ingredient in your growth as a guitarist and as a musician. If your self worth is attached to them, when someone points out mistakes to you, you'll do one of two things: 1.get defensive and deny, or 2.collapse and self-define. Both of these are deadly to your playing in the long run. If you want to improve artistically and technically in any field, there's no way you'll survive if you continue to take mistakes too personally.

1. There are many, many more things that you're doing right than wrong, Learn to be appreciate everything you're doing right, and be just as sensitive to gradual improvements over time as you are to the "mistakes" that help you get there.
2. Don't Deny or ignore Mistakes. Mistakes wreak havoc over time when you don't deal with them.
3. Don't Fear Mistakes: Mistakes are the prime raw material of learning. Make as many mistakes as you need.
4. Yesterdays solutions can become today's mistakes, bad habits, sticking points or blind spots—if you don't keep embracing new challenges as they arise.
5. Learn not to attach your self worth to mistakes: simple as that.

For the purposes of this Top Ten List, I'll divide mistakes into *small m* "mistakes" and **BIG M "MISTAKES."**

Small m mistakes are the ones that happen all the time, and they are actually the raw material of learning...they are what happen when you push beyond your comfort zone into your learning zone .

BIG M "MISTAKES" are the ones that happen over time, when you don't learn from the *small m* ones, and instead, through a combo of continuously denying some and avoiding others, turn them into bad habits, blind spots, or sticking points. These are the ones that I'll list below.

One more thing: don't get freaked out if you find you're making a lot of **Big M MISTAKES**. **Big M MISTAKES** are also the raw material of learning, and the difference is that they make a much bigger difference when you get them handled. **Big M MISTAKES** have **BIG L LEVERAGE!**

All of these are essential for classical guitarists who are interested in mastery, but I tried to put them in reverse order, roughly according to how much leverage they have on your playing.

Nos. 10-6 are all Big M Technical and Musical Skill-Oriented MISTAKES.

Nos. 5-1 are Big M Musical Expression and Inner-Game-of-Playing MISTAKES. I put these kinds of mistake in the top spots because I believe they have the highest overall leverage,

10. First Position--not learning to sight read beyond the first position.

This is pretty darn common. The reason I call it a **big M Mistake** is that it keeps you from exploring 90% of the territory of the guitar, and keeps you from trying 90% of the repertoire. It also makes a good portion of the repertoire you do attempt to learn needlessly frustrating, time-consuming, and slightly beyond your reach.

It wastes years of time and money--in a way, as a teacher I should be fine with this because I spend a lot of paid teaching time helping students to slowly and painfully decipher what's happening in those mysterious regions above the 3rd fret. But for your own sake as a guitarist, it's worth remedying.

I've never seen a great classical guitarist who isn't also a highly competent sight reader. Learning the notes up and down the neck of the guitar by reading music with curiosity and enjoyment is a way to unlock a treasure trove of information; it's basically learning the language of classical guitar, and not working towards that goal is, to me, a **Big M MISTAKE**.

9. Not learning to count or not bothering to count

Of course we all know how to count, but can you count while you play, and keep the tempo going while you lay down all the notes in their proper rhythmic slots? It's a **Big M Mistake** is to think that you can get away without this basic musician's skill. At some point, you will have to go through the process of internalizing the ability to count the beats while playing the notes, so you can learn to play anything that is more complex than a simple 4/4 time signature. Once you take on this challenge you find that you start recognizing patterns that commonly occur, and the music starts to come alive. Take the time to count: *"1-y-&-a 2-y-&-a 3-y-&-a 4-y-&-a 1-y-&-a..."*

Learn to conduct while you're at it! It's fun, and mastering rhythm will save you soooooooooooooo much time in the long run.

8. Ignoring your Fingernails

When you're starting out, dealing with right hand fingernails can seem like a lot of fuss and trouble, so you might need to let that aspect of your playing get by with only a basic level of attention--you might even choose to keep them short and play with the pads of your fingers. But if you want to have great tone, projection, consistent technique, consistent scales and phrasing...basically if you want to be able to really rely on your right hand, you will have to deal with these fussy things. I rank fingernails as the most irritating and frustrating aspect of playing classical guitar.

But trying to play with one glitchy, broken, catching fingernail does not make your playing catchy...it's like playing violin with a knot in your bow. or singing with your teeth clenched....it just gets in the way. of everything.

As you get better and better, if you don't learn to become pretty fussy about your fingernails, lots of problems start to kick in: that's when this becomes a **Big M MISTAKE**.

7. Left Hand Habits: Tension, straining, bent wrist, violinist's grip, claw hand

The left hand has a lot to do, and there are a whole bunch ways it can learn to do these things wrong. (For a detailed tutorial on how to identify them, become conscious of them and teach the hand to develop into its most natural and powerful technique, check out my Ebook on *Keys to an Awesome Left Hand Technique*).

Here's a laundry list: *Bending the wrist too much* as a matter of habit causes tension, straining, and *small m mistakes*. Ditto for what i call "*violinist's grip*" which is the type of grip that works for violinists because the fingerboard is small and close to your body, but doesn't work for guitarists because of the size and spread of what's required. Ditto for "*claw hand*" which is what happens when you try to solve all the problems with your finger joints rather than by understanding and feeling into the natural mechanism of your hand as a whole system.

6. Right Hand Habits: bouncing hand syndrome, flat knuckle syndrome, right-hand-fingering-attention deficit disorder

Classical guitarists, especially if they haven't had enough proper tutelage, will often spend much more energy on the left hand, at the expense of the right hand. The left hand is the dancer, the work horse, the action hero---it holds things together, or so it seems.

But the right hand is your voice.

For the most part, it is what actually is responsible for the quality of tone, the volume, the subtleties of expression. Not paying quality attention to the mechanisms necessary to achieve this usually leave you *sounding* mediocre no matter how awesome and athletic your left hand *looks*.

Laundry List: *Bouncy hand syndrome*--self-describing, this causes a steady string of missed notes and inconsistent tonal control. *The flat-knuckle syndrome*: this leads to an inability to switch freely between rest and free stroke, and a lack of solid sound, a lack of expressive range. *The Right-Hand-fingering-attention-deficit-disorder (R.H.F. A.D.D)* If your fingers are choosing their own new fingering path each time they play a passage, or favoring one solution for everything, or favoring one finger over all others as a matter of habit.....because you just don't want to bother thinking things out for them...it's fine as long as you are content to peck away awkwardly at the strings hoping you hit the right one. It's also fine if you don't really want much speed, dexterity, or reliability to your playing,

5. Letting Tension and Expectations sabotage Self Expression: The Note Police vs. The "Self-Expression-or-Die" crowd.

A lot of mistakes can be paired with each other, and I've done that here as an example. These two **Big M MISTAKES** are opposites, polarities, and often a guitarist will have either too much of one tendency or too much of the other. The solution is getting a healthy flow between the two.

One one side of this particular dichotomy are the **Note Police**, who are so concerned with making sure the rules are followed correctly, and "just saying NO" to mistakes---that musical expressiveness is relegated to some hopeful time in the future---which can basically become "neverland." There might be few mistakes, but playing is usually *timid, and brittle, and flat*.

At the other extreme, are the “**Self-expression-or-Die**” crowd---those who are so impatient to just play and express themselves they ignore any rule they can get away with, even if it smacks them in the face---gravity doesn't exist, principles of natural leverage, and so on. Paradoxically, this also causes a lot of tension, a lot of mistakes, bad habits, and playing comes across as frantic and choppy and mannered.

You actually need both of these. They have the potential to balance each other out and that's why I put them together here. If you tend to reside at one end of the spectrum, you **NEED** explore the other extreme, and vice versa. Getting a handle on this **Big M MISTAKE** will open up a whole new world of self expression for you, whichever side you lean towards.

4.Sabotaged Communication: Blocking the emotional impact of the music, or, the other extreme, Wallowing in it.

Another common set of **Big M MISTAKES** that go together: These are about how you allow the music you play to impact you. What is the quality of your connection with the meaning and emotional impact of the music **AS YOU PLAY IT?**

On the one hand, there's **Blocking the Impact**: the tendency to fixate on anything but the feeling and meaning of the music: technique, or on your fixed ideas of how a piece should sound. The result is...*uncompelling, precious, or stale, emotionally deadening playing, with very little presence or communication.*

If you want your technique to serve more than just a mechanical purpose, *you have to open yourself up to feeling the music and allowing it to truly impact you*

On the other hand, there's the opposite tendency...**Wallowing in the Impact** of the music you play---but without challenging yourself to really live up to its expressive potential. This is extremely lazy version of “self-expression or die.” Once again, the music comes out *uncompelling, precious, and/or stale, and the emotional impact of the music is barely communicated---even if you feel it, no-one else does.*

If you want to truly communicate, you'll have to develop an *expressive technique*. In other words, *you'll have to get yourself out of this trance, and experience the dissatisfaction of realizing that you don't sound as good as your complacency wants you to believe, and actually do the work.*

Getting out of the extremes and developing a healthy flow between these two polarities is the real solution to being stuck on either side.

3. Giving up too soon: Calling yourself hopeless, untalented, believing you have some flaw that keeps you from being any good...

If there ever was a truly debilitating **Big M MISTAKE**, this is it. We all have areas in life where we use excuses to convince ourselves not to do the work, and often this takes the form of convincing ourselves that we are not cut out for it in some way. Classical Guitarists often compare themselves to some perfect world class paragon, or their teacher who's been playing for 20-40 years and makes it look easy, or to anyone else who seems to have it more together....and this often does the trick.

One big shift can be achieved simply by taking yourself seriously as a guitarist, and learning to trust yourself to fully become yourself as a guitarist. Talent is a mystery, but one thing for certain is that it takes work to develop it. There are ways around almost all limitations. As a

teacher I've seen people of all ages waste endless time and energy convincing themselves that they can't do something on the guitar before they actually got around to doing it.

From my perspective it tends to be a pretty transparent phenomena: the amount of energy that goes into generating excuses----not to try something, not to do the work, not to develop the patience required.... is usually 10 to 100 times more than the energy it actually requires to actually do the thing. I've seen people with large, flexible hands explain to me, lesson after lesson, why their hands are not big enough or flexible enough, or talented children protest in exactly the same way every time some new demand is made of their hands ("it's too hard!") only to be grinning sheepishly by the end of the lesson when they actually are playing the "too hard" thing,

2. Forgetting that you have a body: not paying attention to the simple sensations of playing.

I've noticed that this **Big M MISTAKE** holds the key to solving so many of the other ones.

Laundry List: Tension, lack of natural posture or hand position, lack of responsiveness, suppleness, lack of ability to adjust and trust your hands to do the work and your fingers to hit the notes, lack of ability to feel into what needs to be done, lack of ability allow the music to impact you, or to realize that your are lost in your feeling for the music, or lost in a frantic-self-expression-feedback-loop, lack of awareness of your own anger or frustration and hence a lack of ability to work with it, lack of ability to develop a comfort level with your nervousness and jitteriness...this laundry list goes on and on.

We are a very mental culture. We simply avoid cultivating the ability to listen to the cues from our body. Our body is often screaming at us, but we treat it like an errant child. We have no idea what it really wants because we're not really listening.

Your sensations hold the key your natural guitar mastery.

1.Fear and Denial of small m mistakes, which lead to "Big M MISTAKES,"

I have talked about this all along, and I'm putting it at the number one spot because **your relationship to "mistakes" is THE key to how quickly, continually, and thoroughly you improve on the guitar.** Re-read the entire ebook if you like, for further explanation on this one.

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Interested in learning more or taking lessons from me? Visit me online:

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"Go ye forth and make ye many mistakes---got that?"

