

# HOW TO PLAY FASTER ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

## Use the "Play-Fast-Now" Practice Strategy Part 1 of 2

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### The Old-School Method

Is this you? You are learning a piece that one day you hope to play at a fast tempo. You learn the basics and then start practicing slowly with the metronome. Next, you gradually increase the speed over several days, weeks, or months until you reach your final tempo goal. Sometimes, that works. But more often than not, especially in high-speed pieces or passages, you may be able to reach a certain tempo but cannot get past it. It seems as though you cannot break through that barrier or ceiling.

### The "Fast-Practice-Now" Method

Believe it or not, the solution may be to practice the piece or passage at the final fast tempo instead of gradually working it up to speed over time. The adage of first you must crawl, then walk, and then run may not always apply to playing music. In many cases, it may be more effective to skip the whole slow-to-fast process and learn the passage at the final goal tempo early in the learning process. I call this the "Play-Fast-Now" method.

As you will see, this strategy's scientific basis is that the muscles, brain, and neuromuscular pathways operate very differently at high speed than slow speed.

### Jason Sulliman

Jason Sulliman is a trombonist who has a doctorate in brass pedagogy and a master's degree in kinesiology and motor learning/control. He explains from a scientific perspective how the old-school slow-to-fast method differs from the "Play-Fast-Now" approach.

When we learn a piece of music, we develop motor movements. We form neurological pathways with synaptic connections between neurons that travel through various regions of the brain. When we practice slowly, we provide an environment where there is a lot of extra time between the motor movements. There is a large amount of neurological connection that happens between each movement. We have time to consciously think about every single note we are playing.

But as we speed up and get closer to our tempo goal, we hit a barrier or ceiling. We cannot seem to get past it. What is happening is that the neurological pathways we developed at the slow speed no longer work at the fast speed. The slow-practice neurological pathways cannot get the job done quickly enough when we try to play fast. They get bogged down by too much usage of the brain's conscious thought centers. Neurologically, the slow-practice pathway cannot physically or biologically make it from point A to point B at the fast tempo.

But when we practice at the intended final fast tempo, our brain figures out ways to streamline the neurological pathways to make them shorter and more immediate, avoiding many of the brain's conscious processing centers. We do not consciously think about every note we are playing.

Another way to explain it is that we think about every detail very carefully when we learn something slowly. We think about fingering, counting the rhythm, the notes, our left-hand position, preparing fingers, etc. We think about every decision, we experience everything, and we perceive everything. But when we play fast, those things become autonomous. When we play a rapid scale, we no longer think about the individual notes or the right-hand fingering. It becomes a "thing" that we do on command. Neurologically, we deactivate the conscious regions of the brain. The brain prunes away hundreds of individual conscious thoughts, leaving a streamlined version in place.

### In English, Please!

For the guitarist, what this means is that when we play something slowly, we use many motor movements that will not work at a fast tempo. Our teachers tell us to practice slowly to preserve good habits. In reality, when we play slowly, we are creating habits that are only functional up to a specific tempo but not effective for our final goal tempo. So, in a way, our slow practice is actually creating bad habits! We will have to unlearn the motor movements that worked at the slow tempo and then adopt new motor behaviors that work at the fast goal tempo. The "Play-Fast-Now" strategy skips the slow practice and, in the early stages of learning, develops the correct habits we need to play the piece at our final fast goal tempo.

### Speed Versus Accuracy

If someone tells us to practice fast, one of our first thoughts is, "Aren't I going to make a lot of mistakes? Shouldn't I practice slowly to learn to play accurately and avoid bad habits?" Through experience, musicians understand the concept that when we play faster, we will be less accurate. We are going to make errors.

Educators point to the landmark research study of Fitts & Posner in the 1950s that demonstrated the speed-accuracy tradeoff (Fitts' Law). For most teachers, the speed-accuracy tradeoff became a guiding principle in music pedagogy. They believe it is vital to learn a piece or passage at a slow speed and play with good habits and precision first. Then, with those habits ingrained, as we speed up the tempo, we will preserve our accuracy.

But that study and others that followed had massive holes behind their methodology for musicians. In the experiments, there were only two choices. Researchers told the subjects to execute a motor movement as fast as possible or as accurately as possible. They did not measure accuracy within a time constraint—a specific speed goal. It was only "as fast as possible." But for musicians, we are not interested in "as fast as possible." We are interested in specific goals, such as a metronome speed of 100

or 160. Sulliman points out that this is a game-changer for how we should practice. As I will explain, there is a way to practice fast at the goal tempo AND maintain accuracy.

The "Play-Fast-Now" method recognizes that there are learning stages where you will have to slow down for your neuromuscular system to grasp what is supposed to happen. Sometimes the fingers must be told they are to do A, then B, and then C. Conscious thought is brought back into play at these stages to make the hands aware of every detail. But as soon as possible, the player returns to fast practice to move those conscious thoughts into the unconscious to be sure that they work at high speed.

If you are trying to replace a physical habit, you also might have to play slowly and methodically. If you go on autopilot, the hands will default to the old habit you are trying to replace. I will demonstrate this in Part 2.

### "Fast-Practice-Now" Detects Flaws Early in the Learning Process

A benefit of the "Play Fast Now" method is that it makes it easy to detect flaws and weaknesses in your technique early in the learning process. These may include items such as a lack of independence between the "m" and "a" finger, lack of left-hand finger independence, incorrect hand positioning, flawed fingering, etc.

For example, if we learn a piece solely by practicing it slowly for several weeks, we will know that the fingerings we have chosen (both left and right-hand) work fine at a slow tempo. But what happens a month later when we begin to speed up the tempo? We discover that some or many of the fingerings do not work at fast speeds. That is a bummer because then we must change the fingerings. We must retrain the fingers and relearn the passage. That wastes a lot of time which can be demoralizing. It can also be difficult to do if the old fingering is entrenched in the fingers and brain.

With "Fast-Practice-Now," we detect the unworkable fingerings early in the learning process and can change them before the habits settle into our neuromuscular system.

Another negative aspect of slow practice is that you can play a passage reasonably well, even with bad technique at a slow speed. For example, your left-hand fingers can fly around with significant excess movements or even be out of position, but you can still play the passage because you are playing slowly. You are not getting any feedback to tell you that the way you are playing it is terrible. You will not discover that until you speed up. Then, the passage begins to fall apart, you feel a lot of tension, or you cannot get past a certain speed. Once again, you have wasted a lot of practice time because you must start over and undo all the bad technique before you can move forward.

In the "Fast-Practice-Now" technique, the procedure is to first spend enough time on a passage at a slow speed to get the basics of a passage under your fingers. Guitarist and bluegrass mandolinist [Andy Wood](#) explains that the passage is not polished, but it is playable. Then, you "floor it." Go for the gold, the final tempo. See what your body does. He explains that the feeling is like learning to ride a bicycle. You learn the basics with your training wheels (slow practice for the guitarist). But then, you take off the training wheels and go for it. You let nature take its course and allow it to direct your body to do the right things, so you do not crash to the pavement. In guitar playing, if you do crash, you reverse-engineer the problems (I will explain how to do that in Part 2) and test again at high speed.

## Will It Work for Me?

Some educators think this is a terrible way to learn. They still believe in the old-school strategy of increasing the speed gradually, often with a metronome.

For other educators and many performers, it is the holy grail. I have found its success depends on the player's level, the piece/passage, the point in the learning process at which it is introduced, and the player's physical capabilities. I find it works best when you combine it with other practice methods. I explain several different practice methods on the [Subscribers Page](#). Scroll down to the "Practicing Strategies" section.

But even with those caveats, I find that the "Play-Fast-Now" practice method is beneficial for most players.

## The Ugly Truth: A Guitarist Has Got to Know Their Limitations

Unfortunately, we must face the facts. It may be that you will NEVER be able to play a piece as fast as guitarist "X" because of genetics. You may not have the neuromuscular speed and response that they have. But many believe that the "Play-Fast-Now" method will help you attain the fastest speed of which YOU are capable. It will help you accomplish that more efficiently and quickly than the old-school slow-to-fast-practice approach.

Stay tuned. 😊 Next month I will demonstrate how to use the "Fast Practice Now" method on real pieces.