Guitar

Turning a Tear Drop into Satisfaction

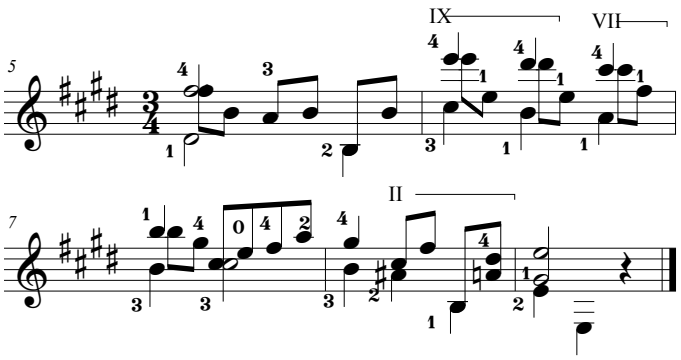
by Jason Vanselow

Recently, while listening to a student perform Francisco Tárrega's piece *Lágrima* I was reminded how a handful of details can really bring a student's playing to a much higher level.

Lágrima (which is Spanish for "tear drop") is a beautiful piece of music, and at first glance not very difficult to play. The melody in the first four measures soars up the fretboard in easy tenths with the bass voice and a lazy pedal tone in the alto. But when one gets to bar five, one encounters a much more technically challenging phrase.

Bars 5-8 (which are printed below), are usually the place where a late beginner/early intermediate player stumbles and quickly puts the piece away before their teacher finds out what they've been up to. But these five measures offer lessons that can last for as long as that person plays guitar.

The first challenge, once we've finished the arpeggiated B7 chord cadence in the first bar of the example below, is that we need to get to the ninth fret where the second phrase begins. What many students do in that spot is to lift up all of their left-hand fingers and shift up to the ninth fret.



While, yes, that is where their hand needs to go, lifting the whole hand, shifting it down the neck, and finding the next chord can be a difficult task. Part of the problem here is that there is a lot of geography to cover between the second fret and the ninth. Another issue is that once they've gotten to the correct position, they need to correctly place three fingers in a chord shape that requires a barre in the time allotted for that shift.

This is a lot of complex choreography. One of the biggest challenges here is getting all three fingers to land in the right spot on the first try. But one strategy can make it quite a bit easier.

In the B7 chord in the first measure of the example, fourth finger plays the F♯ on first string second fret. In the chord that begins the next phrase, fourth finger stays on the first string and is transported up to the E on the twelfth fret.

What we're going to do is make fourth finger into a guide finger. Instead of lifting fourth finger off the fretboard as the hand moves to ninth position, we're going to keep fourth finger on the string and slide it up to its new spot on the twelfth fret, guiding the rest of the hand.

In some cases, like this one, a guide finger does not keep pressure on the string so that you can't hear the slide to the new position. All we need to do is keep the finger touching the string so it literally guides the way to the next position. In other cases, it's perfectly acceptable to hear the glissando that the guide finger makes.

Whether you leave the sound or not depends on the piece or the style of music that you're playing. In rock and blues playing, for example, it's often part of the groove to leave the glissando in. And frankly, in some of Tárrega's other pieces it's perfectly acceptable as well.

A guide finger offers stability for the rest of the hand. Without using the guide, a player's hand often lifts too high off the fretboard during the shift and loses the basic hand shape that they will need to reform once they arrive at their destination. When we use the guide finger, we have the opportunity to keep a good left-hand shape and therefore can better prepare our other fingers for the chord we're going to need next. While fourth finger is sliding, third finger can hover over the fourth string and land on the C♯ with much less difficulty and first finger can form the barre over during the shift and land on ninth fret.

The next thing that you might notice is that once you get to the ninth fret, the next measure and a half feature moving melodies and harmonies using barres. This is a step beyond the basic static barre chords that we've all used in playing folk and rock songs.

Difficult shapes like these can be a huge challenge for any player. And many of us (myself included) have a tendency to learn these shapes at the same tempo that we learn the rest of the piece. This can create an ugly situation where over time your hands hurt from the tension and effort of playing these difficult spots and you're frustrated that it doesn't sound very good.

John Holmquist, who is a wonderful guitar player and teacher, preaches long and hard about these spots. His method with any difficult spot is to remove the element of time from the spot that you're working on. This allows us to simply get the fingers to move to where they need to go in as comfortable a manner as possible.

Once you can accurately and comfortably get your fingers to do what they need to do without time, you can start to play the challenging spot (in this case, the series of chords in the second and third measures of the example) at a very slow tempo. I often tell students that at this point in the process, they should play so slowly that can actually play it well.

This means that you are creating accurate muscle memories much earlier in the learning process than you would if you tried to bulldoze your way through those hard spots where you make a million mistakes before you get it right (if you ever do). And in the long run, it takes far less time to learn these challenging moments than it would otherwise. Thanks, John, for saving me so many hours…

In this one phrase there is such a great opportunity to invest in a lifetime of healthy playing habits. Enjoy!

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