



HOW THE WORLD'S TOP GUITARISTS ACTUALLY PRACTICE

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Introduction: It's Not About Practicing More

Most guitarists already know *what* to practice. Scales. Arpeggios. Pieces. Problem spots.

What separates great players from frustrated ones isn't motivation or discipline – it's **how they think while practicing.**



The world's best musicians don't rely on brute-force repetition or endless hours. Instead, they approach practice as a focused, intentional process designed to remove confusion, reduce stress, and make playing feel easier over time.

This guide isn't a routine you need to copy.

It's a collection of **practice mindsets**, drawn directly from conversations and lessons with some of the world's most respected classical guitarists – shared in their own words, and translated into simple actions you can try the next time you pick up your instrument.

I. Playing Is Not the Same as Practicing

Grammy Award–winning guitarist and pedagogue **Scott Tennant** draws a clear line between two things that often get lumped together:

“There’s a big difference between playing your guitar and actually practicing.”

Playing is enjoyable and important. But it’s not the same thing as practice.

Practice is where you **solve problems**, prepare your body, and remove obstacles *before* performance. It’s where progress is built. Scott prefers to describe practice as *study*:

“In many countries, musicians say they’re going to ‘study.’ That’s probably a more accurate description of what practice really is.”

What this means in real life

If your practice session turns into running pieces from top to bottom, bouncing between favorite passages, or simply “seeing how it goes,” you’re probably *playing*, not practicing.

That’s not necessarily a problem – playing for enjoyment is one of the

great rewards of music. But if the goal is steady improvement, playing alone won't reliably move things forward.

Practice starts when you slow down and ask: *What, specifically, needs attention today?*

Actionable takeaway

Before you start your next practice session, choose one specific thing to improve and write it down.

Examples:

- A shift that feels unreliable
- A slur passage that creates tension
- A fingering that only works "on good days"

Then:

- Work only on *that* for a set amount of time – even 10–15 minutes is enough
- When you're done, *then* reward yourself by playing something you enjoy

The goal isn't to eliminate playing – it's to become aware of **when you're practicing versus when you're playing**, and to choose each intentionally.

II. The Real Limit Isn't Time – It's Focus

International concert soloist **Łukasz Kuropaczewski** is unusually blunt about how much he practices:

"I really don't practice a lot. Three – maximum three and a half – hours a day. That's it."

Why so little you might ask?

"Because my practicing is extremely focused. I don't waste even one second."

And he's openly skeptical of marathon sessions:

"If someone says, 'I practiced eight hours today,' to me it's a joke. Maybe you played for eight hours, but you didn't practice."

Together with Scott Tennant's perspective, a clear pattern starts to emerge: When it comes to improving on the guitar, the real limiter isn't your hands – it's your **attention**.

What this means in real life

The good news is you don't need massive blocks of uninterrupted time to make progress. You need **clarity, intention, and mental presence**.

A short session where you're fully engaged will almost always outperform a long session where your mind drifts, your body goes on autopilot, and repetition becomes mindless.

This is especially important for non-professional players, where energy and focus often matter more than raw availability.

Actionable takeaway

Design your practice to protect your focus – not just your time.

Try one (or more) of the following in your next session:

- **Practice in short, contained blocks:** Set a timer for 15–25 minutes and give that window your full attention. When the timer ends, stop and give yourself a mental break – then repeat. This helps keep your focus sharp and prevents drifting into autopilot.
- **Eliminate “background” practice:** Avoid practicing while watching TV or scrolling on your phone. If your attention is split, your nervous system isn't learning efficiently – even if your fingers are moving.
- **Use mental practice to stay engaged:** Put the guitar down and silently visualize a passage. If you can't imagine it clearly, it's a sign there's

mental work to be done.

- **Rotate non-playing activities into practice time:** Listen to a great recording, read about the composer, or study the score away from the instrument. These activities deepen musical understanding without physical fatigue.

The goal isn't to practice longer – it's to make sure your brain is present for every minute you do practice.



III. Slow Practice Is About Control

Award-winning guitarist and educator **Thomas Viloteau** offers a powerful insight about practice:

“Everything you do when you practice, your body remembers.”

That’s both good news and dangerous. Repetition is how we build muscle memory. But it works whether we’re repeating something *right* or *wrong*.

As Thomas puts it:

“If you repeat something that isn’t correct, you’re training your body to do it that way.”

This is where **slow practice** comes in.

Slow practice isn’t about dragging things out or staying comfortable. It’s about playing at a tempo slow enough that **control becomes possible**, so you can be certain that what you’re repeating is actually what you want your hands to remember.

“When you practice, you want it to be very safe. You want it to be perfect.”

Not perfect in a performative sense but perfect in the sense that nothing is rushed, unclear, or accidental.

What this means in real life

Many guitarists repeat passages that feel “almost there,” hoping that more repetitions will eventually fix the problem.

But if a passage feels tense, unreliable, or unclear, repeating it – slow or fast – only reinforces that uncertainty.

Slow practice is valuable only when it gives you enough time to:

- Prepare every finger
- Feel what’s happening in both hands
- Eliminate guesswork

In other words, slow practice is where you **take control** of the passage.

Actionable takeaway

Use slow practice as a tool to eliminate uncertainty – not just to reduce tempo.

Try this with a passage that feels unreliable:

- 1. Slow down until you feel completely unhurried.** Choose a tempo where you can prepare every movement without rushing.

2. **Ask one simple question as you play:** *Do I know exactly what my hands are doing right now?* If the answer is no, slow down further.
3. **Only repeat what feels clear and controlled.** If something feels tense, fuzzy, or accidental, stop and adjust before repeating.
4. **Repeat fewer times – but with full awareness.** Ten careful, controlled repetitions are far more valuable than fifty unfocused ones.

Think of slow practice as quality control. Its job isn't to make things easy – it's to make things *certain*.



IV. Decide on Fingerings at Full Speed

While Thomas is a strong advocate of slow practice, he also points out a subtle (but extremely common) mistake many guitarists make when learning new repertoire:

“A lot of people decide on fingerings at a slow tempo. Then they get stuck when the tempo increases.”

The issue isn't slow practice itself. The issue is **locking in fingerings that only work when time isn't a factor.**

As Thomas puts it:

“Everything you do when you practice, your body remembers.”

Fingerings that feel comfortable at a slow tempo don't always survive contact with real speed.

What this means in real life

At slow tempos, your hands can often “cheat.” You have time to:

- Make extra micro-adjustments
- Pause slightly before executing

- Recover from awkward movements

But when the tempo increases, you don't have those same luxuries.

A classic example is a fingering that includes a large shift which feels manageable at a slow tempo, but at full speed becomes a tight, stressful jump that never quite lands cleanly.

That doesn't mean the passage is "too hard." It usually means the **fingering choice isn't doing you any favors.**

The goal is not to find fingerings that feel easy at slow speed, but fingerings that feel **inevitable** at full speed.

Actionable takeaway

Before committing to fingerings, briefly test them against reality.

When learning a new passage:

- Play just **1–2 measures close to the intended tempo** (not perfectly – just fast enough to expose problems)
- Notice how your body reacts:
 - Do you feel rushed or tense?
 - Do shifts feel predictable or desperate?
 - Does your hand "know where it's going," or is it guessing?

- If something feels awkward, tight, or unreliable, **change the fingering immediately** – before slow practice locks it in.

Then return to slow practice with fingerings you trust.

Think of this like choosing a route before a long drive: It's much easier to change directions early than after you've gone miles in the wrong direction.



V. Practice What You Actually Need to Play

Renowned guitarist and educator **Carlos Bonell** approaches practice from a very practical place: your repertoire already contains everything you need to practice – if you know how to look at it.

Rather than separating “technique practice” and “piece practice” into two unrelated worlds, Carlos encourages guitarists to **extract technical challenges directly from the music they’re working on.**

As he explains:

“A really important part of improving as a player is learning how to create technical exercises out of the pieces themselves.”

In other words: Don’t practice technique in the abstract. Practice the *exact skills your music demands.*

What this means in real life

Many players warm up with scales, arpeggios, or popular exercises that feel productive but don’t always translate cleanly into their repertoire. Carlos flips that approach.

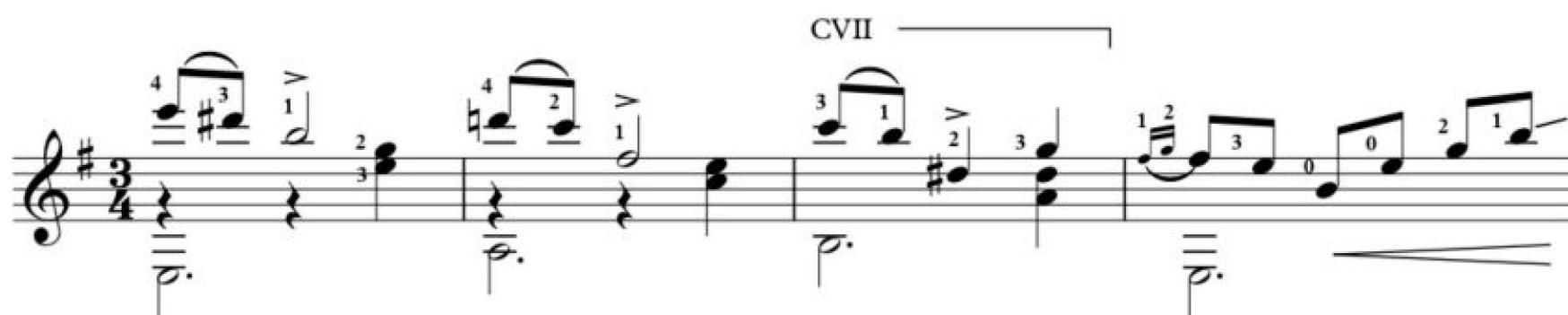
Instead of asking: “*What exercises should I practice today?*”

He asks: “*What is this piece asking my hands to do and how can I train that directly?*”

When you do this, technique practice stops being generic and starts becoming *targeted*.

A concrete example

In his tonebase course, Carlos demonstrates this idea using the opening of **Tárrega’s Adelita**:



On the surface, it’s a lyrical, expressive phrase. But underneath, it contains very specific technical demands:

- Descending slurs
- Finger independence
- Left-hand support and hand position

Rather than repeating the phrase over and over, Carlos suggests extracting the technical elements and turning them into exercises.

For example:

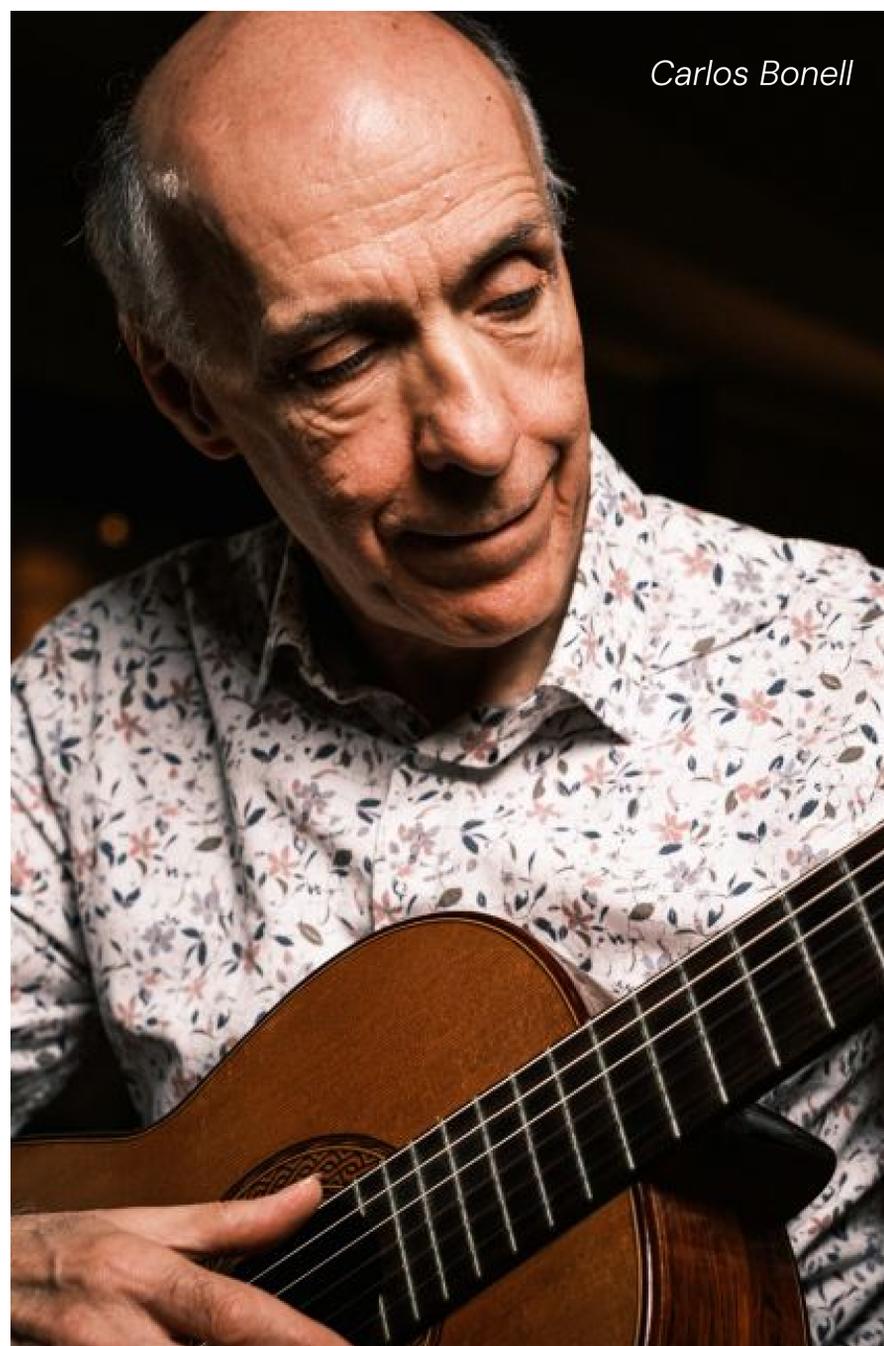
- Take the slur pattern and practice it using **every finger combination** (4–3, 4–2, 4–1, 3–2, etc.)
- Practice the slurs in a more comfortable position on the neck first, then gradually move them to where they appear in the piece
- Experiment with subtle changes in arm and hand angle to support the motion

Now you're no longer "hoping" the passage improves – you're **training the exact movement it requires.**

Carlos applies the same idea to other repertoire:

- Adapting ornamented turns in Sor into movable exercises
- Isolating string crossings in Bach and extending them into repeating patterns
- Even improvising short etudes based on difficult figures

The piece becomes the source material. The exercise becomes the solution.



VI. Warm Up Your Ears & Mind – Not Just Your Fingers

Legendary concert guitarist **Pepe Romero** approaches the start of a practice session very differently from your average player.

Before scales, before technique, and before repertoire, his focus is not only on “getting his fingers moving” but on **reconnecting with the instrument**. As Pepe describes it:

“When I tune the guitar, I’m not only tuning the instrument – I’m tuning myself.”

That might sound poetic at first. But there’s a very practical approach behind it.

A shift in how we think about warming up

Most guitarists think of warming up as a purely physical task:

- Get blood flowing
- Loosen the fingers
- Avoid injury

That’s important but it’s only part of the picture.

What Pepe is doing goes further. He's using the first few minutes of practice to:

- Recalibrate his sense of sound
- Reestablish physical sensitivity
- Reset his mental state before demanding anything from himself

In other words, he's preparing the inner *listener* and the *decision-maker* – not just the physical muscles.

Without this reset, many players:

- Start practice already tense or distracted
- Carry outside stress directly into the instrument
- Push the guitar instead of listening to it

Pepe's approach creates a small pause – a moment to arrive mentally and physically – so the rest of the session is more efficient and less reactive.

Actionable takeaway

Use the first few minutes of practice to reset your ears and your attention.

Before scales or repertoire, try this:

- 1. Tune slowly and deliberately.** Listen to the resonance and sustain – not just pitch accuracy.

2. **Play single notes, melody lines, or chords.** Focus on tone, balance, and how much pressure you're using.
3. **Adjust before you proceed.** Experiment with a lighter touch, different hand angles, or arm weight until the sound feels responsive.
4. **Take one breath and set an intention.** Ask yourself: *What kind of work am I doing today – problem-solving, refinement, or exploration?*

Only then move on to technique or repertoire.

This small ritual helps separate the rest of your day from your practice session and often makes everything that follows more productive.



VII. Use Recording as Feedback, Not Judgment

Many guitarists avoid recording themselves for one simple reason: it can be uncomfortable.

But for **Łukasz Kuropaczewski**, recording became one of the most valuable practice tools – not for self-critique, but for clarity. As he puts it:

“What I thought I was playing was not what was coming out of the guitar.”

That realization fundamentally changed how he practiced.

What this means in real life

When you’re playing, your brain is doing a lot at once:

- Controlling movement
- Anticipating what comes next
- Monitoring sound in real time

Under those conditions, perception isn’t always reliable.

If you rely only on how something *feels*, you’re missing half the information.

- Something can feel smooth but sound uneven.

- Something can feel controlled but lack clarity.
- Something can feel tense but actually sound fine.

Recording allows you to separate **sensation from result** which is essential for efficient, confident problem-solving.

And thanks to smartphones, this feedback tool is always within reach.

Actionable takeaway

Use recording as a short, targeted feedback loop during practice.

Try this in your next session:

- 1. Choose a very small section:** One phrase or even a single bar.
- 2. Record 15–30 seconds:** Don't aim for a "good take." Just play normally.
- 3. Listen immediately:** Don't try to analyze everything. Ask one question:
Is this doing what I think it's doing?
- 4. Identify one adjustment:** Something specific – tone, timing, clarity, or balance.
- 5. Focus on fixing that one thing, then move on:** No spiraling. No self-judgment.

Used this way, recording saves time, reduces uncertainty, and helps you practice with far more confidence without turning your practice session into an audition.

VIII. Close Each Session with Clarity

After hours spent refining fingerings, isolating passages, and working through details, it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture.

That's why Scott Tennant emphasizes planning away from the instrument:

"If you sit down and don't know what you're going to do, you've already lost time."

At first glance, this might sound like simple time management advice. But it's really about something deeper: maintaining a clear sense of direction over days and weeks.

What this means in real life

Good practice often lives in the details. Great progress depends on how those details connect.

You might spend an entire session:

- Finding the best fingering for one bar
- Solving a single shift
- Cleaning up one slur passage

That's time well spent.

But without stepping back, it's easy to:

- Forget what you've already improved
- Lose momentum between sessions
- Start each day by re-orienting instead of building forward

Elite players constantly zoom in and zoom out, switching between problem-solving mode and overview mode.

A simple habit that supports this

One of the easiest ways to maintain that perspective is to briefly reflect at the end of each practice session.

Not to judge your playing. Not to plan your entire week. Just to create continuity.

This can be as simple as a few lines in a notebook or notes app.

Actionable takeaway

End each practice session with a 2–3 minute check-in.

Write down:

- What you worked on today: Be specific – passages, fingerings,

exercises.

- What improved or became clearer: Even small wins count.
- What the next session should address: One or two clear priorities.

That's it.

The next day, you start practicing by executing – not deciding – and you reinforce a sense of progress instead of starting from scratch.



Closing: What Great Practice Really Looks Like

Across very different personalities, careers, and teaching styles, the guitarists featured in this guide are remarkably aligned on one thing:

Progress doesn't come from practicing harder or longer. It comes from practicing **with clarity and intention**.

Scott Tennant reminds us that practice isn't about running pieces over and over – it's about *study* and problem-solving.

Thomas Viloteau shows how control and concentration – not repetition – are what actually build reliability.

Carlos Bonell demonstrates that the most effective technical work comes directly from the music itself.

Pepe Romero reframes the start of practice as a moment to recalibrate sound, attention, and intention.

And Łukasz Kuropaczewski ties it all together by showing what focused, honest practice looks like over time.

None of them describe practice as a grind.

In fact, Łukasz puts it very simply:

"I love to practice."

That's not because practice is always easy and effortless but because it's **effective, purposeful, and engaging.**

A more realistic picture of great practice

Great practice isn't always easy. But it is sustainable.

It's the kind of work where:

- You know what you're working on and why
- You can feel uncertainty gradually disappearing
- You leave the session with clarity instead of confusion
- Each day naturally leads into the next

This is why elite players don't burn out on practice. Their work produces feedback, progress, and a sense of forward motion.

That's *enjoyable*.

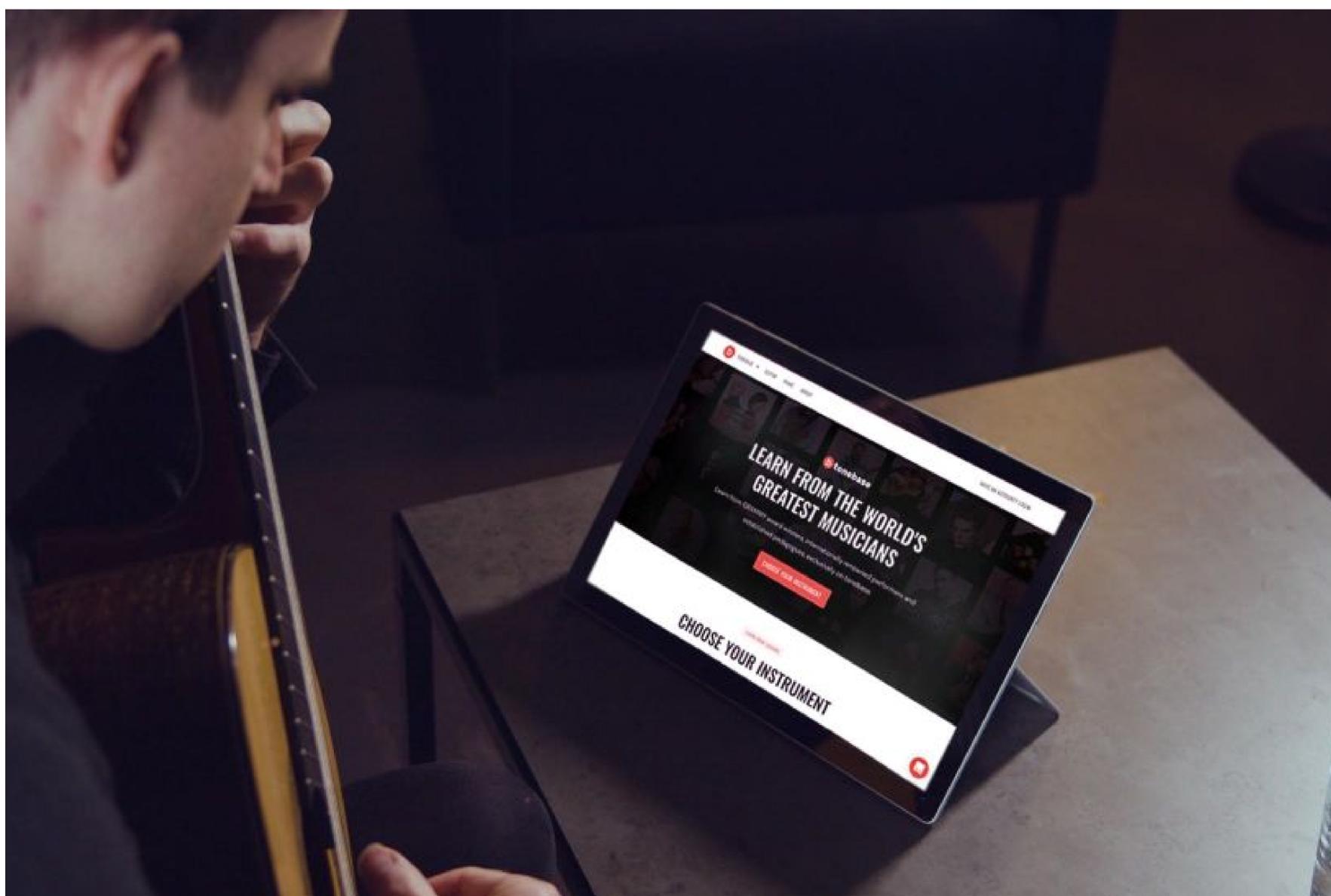
One final thought

You don't need more discipline. You don't need more hours. And you don't need to copy, minute-by-minute, the routines of a professional

musician.

You just need an intentional process, one you trust and can return to tomorrow.

That's how the world's best guitarists actually practice. And it's something every guitarist can learn to deeply enjoy.



About tonebase

All of the insights and quotes in this guide were taken directly from courses and live sessions in the **tonebase Guitar** library, where world-class musicians share not just *what* to play, but *how* they think about practicing, learning, and making music.

tonebase is an online learning platform built around one simple idea: **real progress comes from learning directly from the best teachers and performers in the world.**

As a tonebase member, you get access to:

- In-depth courses from elite guitarists and educators covering technique, repertoire, musicianship, and practice strategy
- Structured learning pathways that help you focus on what matters most for your goals
- Regular live workshops and masterclasses where you can learn in real time and ask questions
- Access to a supportive community of dedicated musicians navigating the same challenges

Whether you're working toward a specific goal or simply want to make the most of your time with the instrument, tonebase is designed to support thoughtful, sustainable progress. **Visit tonebase.co to learn more and start your 14-day free trial.**