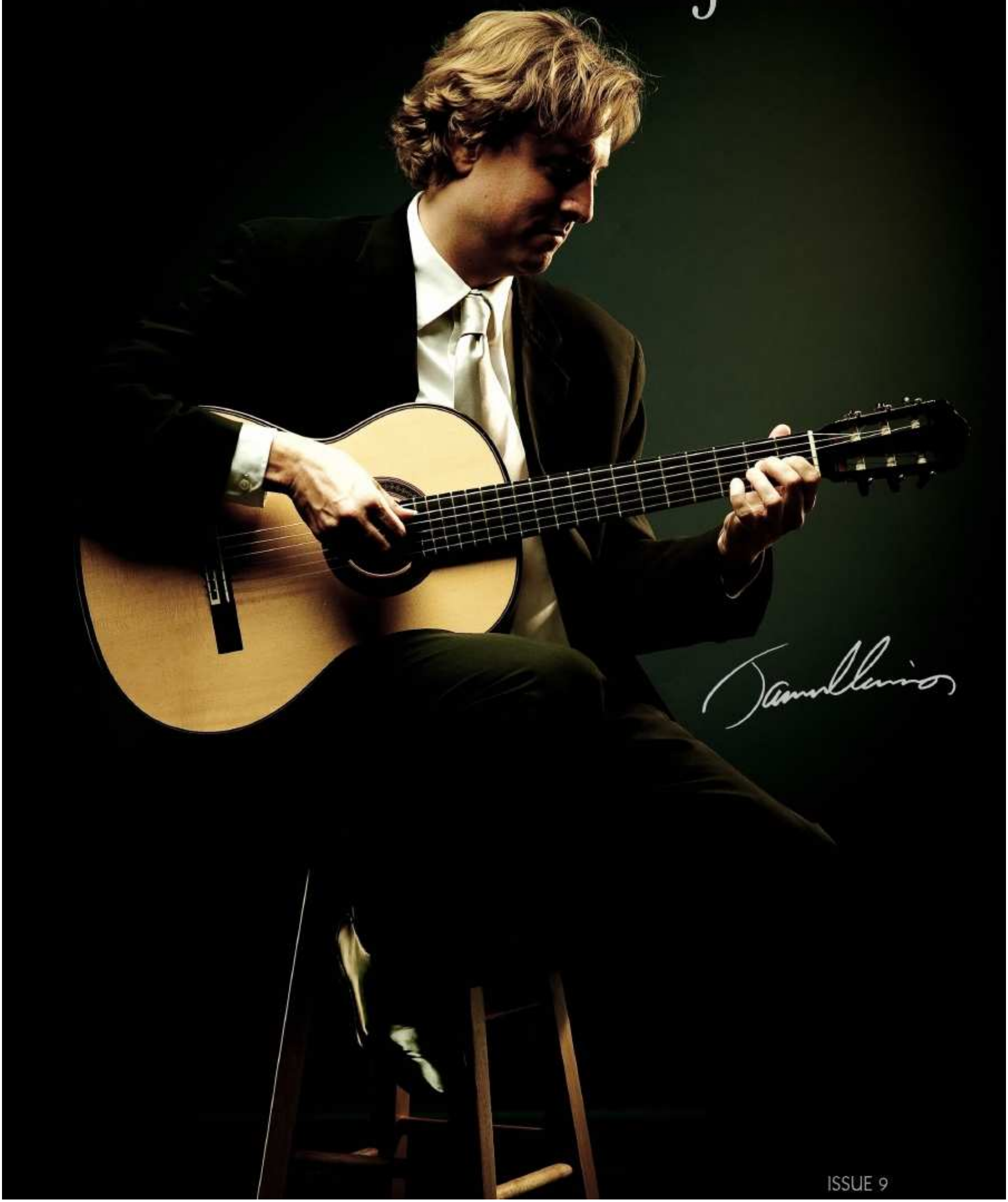
FINGERSTYLE GUITAR JOURNAL



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Editor's Letter
Remembering Dad's advice

I cannot tell you how many times I've been asked, "How do I learn to arrange, where do I start?" Typically I find out they have yet to try or have not made the long-term commitment required. Of course this long-term comment relates to every aspect of music.

Focus is a very important piece to this puzzle. I remember as a teenager my father used to say, "You go from pillar to post." In other words I had no focus. Now decades later I realize his words were spot on. Thankful this has improved for me however, I do have to remind myself often! Here I am so many years later advising others as he did me. Does that mean I'm becoming my father? In a way I guess so.

With this focus it's important to develop the tools that will unlock *some* of the mysteries of music and hopefully the entire guitar fingerboard. The workshops in each issue are offered to help you develop these tools. Playing well and understanding what you are playing is a lifetime's work. You should be in constant pursuit of knowledge and skill. Be patient yet persistent while enjoying each small triumph.

I must go now, so much to do, so little time!

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Grammy winner **Jason Vieaux** was born in Buffalo, New York where he began his study of the classical guitar at the age of eight with Jeremy Sparks. He went on to study at the *Cleveland Institute of Music* with John Holmquist. In 1992 at the age of nineteen Jason took first place in the *Guitar Foundation of America International Competition* becoming the youngest winner in the competitions history. He has also been honored with a *Naumburg Foundation* top prize, a *Cleveland Institute of Music Alumini Achievement Award* and a *Salon de Virtuosi Career Grant*. In 1995 Jason was an Arts Ambassador of the U.S. to Southeast Asia. He followed that with a fifty-three city tour of the United States and France. *Naxos Records* released his debut recording in 1996. His solo recording *Play* was released in 2014 by *Azica Records,* winning the 2015 *Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo*. Jason has been teaching at the *Cleveland Institute of Music* since 1997 and has been the department head since 2001. In 2011 he also co-founded the guitar department at *The Curtis Institute of Music.*

It was really great to see you again at the master-class and to hear your concert. In the class you covered a wide range of musicality and technical issues.

I hope I wasn't too hard on them.

As a matter of fact I was talking with Stanley (Yates) just last night and he said that he was very pleased with the class. He went on to say, "When I tell them they don't listen. To have someone like Jason come in and confirm what I've been telling them means a lot. Maybe now they'll apply themselves."

Yeah, that's right. That's why we have master-classes. Stanley's comment is exactly what I experience and probably a lot of other teachers. Students can get very used to you and dare I say even complacent. What you're telling them you really mean but sometimes it takes a visiting artist confirming what they've been told. Then it becomes a real thing to them.

In the class you referenced what you call the three Cs.

Clarity, comfort and consistency, do you want me to expound on that?

Yes.

I have been teaching for over twenty years at a conservatory. During that time I have found that a lot of students have a tendency to approach a piece of music with a plan of getting the piece in their fingers first. Then deal with the musical details.

The idea of clarity, comfort and consistency should be a more prevalent way of working on pieces. The first C is clarity. Basically you should take tempo and memorization out of the equation. They should be the last two things you think about, if you should think about them at all. Regardless of the speed, strive to get the rhythms, notes and musical details, adhering to the composer's indications on the score. You can play whatever tempo you want to but strive for clarity. If you start from there the journey will be a lot easier. The comfort part of the equation is making sure that after achieving clarity you have a very clear model. I'm talking about a measure or even a half measure depending on your playing level and experience. A lot of students try to bite off more than

they can chew. Obviously at my experience level I can bite off and chew a larger chunk of music than a student that has only been playing five to ten years. That's something that should be monitored by their teacher. I have practice sessions with my students in their lessons. I'll have them practice in front of me. The comfort thing comes once you've established that model of clarity regardless of speed. Make sure that your muscles and body are very relaxed so it makes it easy right away. All this can be done in the very first day of learning the piece. Regarding consistency, in the beginning just try to get two good takes in a row on that little snippet of music. Try not to put too much pressure on yourself. Whether it's a measure, two measures or even half of a measure, work in that kind of way.

There is nothing wrong with reading through a piece. Sight-reading is actually a very healthy thing to do but sight-reading is not the same as practicing. Practicing is actually hard work. Sight-reading is another thing entirely and should be done at least twenty to thirty minutes a day. The investment into sight-reading is something that will pay dividends on a professional level. The ease of sight-reading is something that will give you the confidence to take gigs.

Your sight-reading of the scores at the master-class impressed me; I was surprised how musical it was. I thought, wow you could almost record that.

(laughs) My sight-reading level is very high as well as my practicing level. But you may have noticed that some of those snippets took me two or three takes to get it. Sometimes I have to tell my own students to just give me a second and I'll demonstrate what the composer had in mind. I may need a second or third take but usually not much more than that because my practicing and sight-reading are at a high level. If you invest in the quality of your practicing and the volume of your sight-reading it goes faster. Those things start to come together after about ten years.

Was your approach to practicing something instilled early by a teacher or was it developed over time through experience?

I think the building blocks of this kind of practice was instilled in me by Jeremy Sparks and later as a bachelor student at the Cleveland Institute of Music by John Holmquist.

I was putting it together on my own in a rougher form while a student in college because I needed to maximize the efficiency of my practice. In college I only had three or four hours a day to practice. I could have practiced more but then you're not getting enough sleep. Sleep is an important thing too.

Or to get more practice you neglect your music history class.

Exactly, or you're neglecting your classes. My classes were very important to me. Not just because I wanted to keep up a good academic standing but also because I saw sight singing, history, ear training, theory, keyboard, etc. as essential to my musical development. I studied and took it seriously. If you listen to my playing closely you will hear an understanding of these things. It's ingrained; it's not just a mystery.

The classical guitarists that I most admire have those attributes in their playing as well.

It's a foundation that their musical choices are built on. They don't just throw the fundamentals away. A classical musicians job is not to do whatever they want to do.

I assume you agree that there is a difference in playing the classical guitar mechanically and being a classical musician.

Exactly! Whether you're playing the guitar, flute, piano or whatever. The experienced teachers can hear it in ten seconds. I've had so many conversations about this with many of my colleagues around the world.

You could probably hear four measures and know if you want to accept them as a student.

Yeah, pretty much. (laughs) Well, maybe more than four measures. When I audition students at CIM I allow fifteen minutes of playing. You can figure out what their experience and playing level is within fifteen minutes, even if they're nervous. It's harder to tell, but you still can pretty much see where they're at.

Nerves can be overcome. I talked about that in the master-class. Nerves are not entirely a mystery. They are a result of a lack of confidence. Their confidence was not established in the practice room through good practice patterns. Nerves are not often touched on as a subject and it's a very difficult subject to breach. You have to really get in there with the student and figure out why they're getting so nervous. I do think nervousness can be lessened with structure in their practice routine.

Preparation added with performing experience ought to smooth things out.

Now that's the mystery part of it. You've got to just get out there and do it, performing is hard. Sometimes you have to jump into the deep end of the pool.

I encourage my students to be like scientists. I tell them they have to use our seminars like a laboratory. Don't joke around; don't tell us, "Wow this is really new." Don't quantify or make any excuses in advance. Make it like a performance and play it at whatever speed you want to.

I've done this myself in front of my students with a newer piece like "Jongo." On the first run through I played it at seventy percent of the tempo. I didn't say anything before playing, just tuned and played. Then I collected the data from it. Every performance can be a helpful vehicle to collect information on how you can improve.

By the way your concert could have been a live recording. I didn't hear one note out of place, a buzz or bad sound, nothing! It was an amazing performance.

Wow, thanks Bill. I really appreciate that.

You get such a big sound out of the guitar. You may take it to the edge but you never over play.

I try to find where that edge is in the practice room so I don't over play too much. I've definitely overplayed some notes in concerts, for sure (laughs). If the composer has indicated fortissimo in a specific passage you've got to go to the edge to see where the sound breaks up in order to control it or if you're trying to create a high peak within a phrase. If you want to make the largest decibel impact possible on the audience you have to find where that is. Playing softly is also very important. The more you can control your sound at the softest level the more you can accentuate the dynamics in your playing. Again, the players I admire the most do that very well, Zoran Dukic for example. We're different players obviously but he's a player that really gets that.

You won't remember it but there used to be a commercial in the 1980's that said, "If you want someone's attention whisper."

(Laughs) Exactly, that's great! Another guitarist that is a good example of that is Colin Davin who's teaching with me at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He's a master of dynamics, color control and poetic playing. He's a complete musician. To find all those qualities in a guitarist is a rare thing.

Would it help guitarists develop a broader concept of color and dynamics if they listened more to other instruments?

They just have to listen to a lot of music. I listened to a ridiculous amount of music when I was in college. Orchestral, string quartet, piano, mixed ensembles, and composers from the late eighteenth century to the current time. I listened to a lot of jazz as well.

It's also good to listen to different interpretations. When a student finds a piece of music they really connect with I encourage them to listen to as many interpretations as possible. Listen to as much music as possible while you're still in school because you're not going to have that time later in life. I realize

that now having a family, wife and two kids. Even before I was married, my career got so busy twenty years ago that my music listening time was taken away from me. Being busy is the goal. Obviously it's a great thing to have a lot of work but now I'm taking steps to get some listening time back.

One of the things I admire about you is that you appreciate a wide range of music. You even perform and have recorded music by Jobim, Duke Ellington, Pat Metheny and Keith Jarrett. I remember a time when classical guitarists tended to be closet performers of popular music.

Yeah, well it's not unprecedented. After John Williams ran through the standard guitar repertoire he began to do a lot of pop music and was in a jazz-fusion group. Manuel Barrueco one of my big heroes did a Lennon and McCartney album in the '80s. He also recorded the *Children's Songs* by Chick Corea. It's not unprecedented but they are two of the supreme artists on our instrument. They were blazing a lot of trails. All I've really done is take it to another place.

I was one of those '90s recording artists that the industry told you to release a recording by one composer. So I did an all Ponce and an all Albeniz recording. After that it was kind of like, what to do from here? I had all these Metheny arrangements and when I talked with the record company they were really into the idea of an all Pat Metheny album. At the time I was only playing the heads of the tunes. It was the prospect of doing an entire album that prompted me to stretch each of them where there was either a solo over the changes or in the case of the baroque suite I took five different tunes and made them into something that was outside of Metheny's sound world. I remember the reaction from some people who thought it was crazy for an established classical guitarist to do an entire record of one jazz artist. Though Pat is a great jazz guitarist I actually think of him equally as a composer. I'm a big fan and was excited to do the project.

I'm a fan as well. He's not just a guy that writes a tune every now and then, he's diffidently a serious composer.

Oh yeah and the guitar is really just his vehicle it's not the primary focus.

The Metheny album was quite an accomplishment and I was impressed that Pat wrote the liner notes.

It was really nice of him to do that and I still appreciate it. It was wonderful. Eventually I would like to do another project of his music but right now I'm really focused on learning more Bach. It sounds sort of cliché for a classical guitarist to say that but it's really the finest music we play on the instrument. In my view no one has ever surpassed him as a composer, albeit my limited knowledge of what it means to be a composer, I find that everything you need in music is there.

Yeah, like in eight bars! I once saw a film composer accept an Academy Award and he said, I accept this in humility knowing I'll never be as good as Bach.

(Laughter) Yeah, it's impossible!

I watched a video you did for GFA (Guitar Foundation of America) on ornamentation. I really enjoyed that video.

Oh, yeah, I love that video! That was a very

inspired video. Matt Denman filmed it at the college he teaches at in Oklahoma City. I believe he's the director of education for GFA. When I went to do my concert he asked if I would film a lesson video. I don't remember if he picked the topic or I did. I just did one of my lessons like I might do in a seminar or private lesson. I thought it turned out really well. It really encapsulates how I approach ornamentation.

You talked about left hand and cross string trills but you also talk about melodic ornamentation, which is a subject musicians rarely address.

yes! I think it's important. That's something I recognized even when I was a kid listening to musicians ornament on the repeats. Whether it was a guitarist, harpsichordist or pianist I recognized it. Early on I started to form a personal opinion on what is either too much ornamentation, too little or just right. As I said in the video, I don't consider myself any kind of an expert but my own taste is my own taste. I'm not getting paid to be an expert on Baroque ornamentation. It's just my own thing. It involves a bit of composition and that's the composer inside of me. There is a composer in me though I'm not a professional composer. It's the composer inside of you that tempers it.

You don't want the ornamentation to become predictable.

That's right. It's so obvious when the ornamentation becomes a vehicle to celebrate the performer. That's fine because there is definitely an audience for that but for me personally I don't want it to be a reflection of me. I want it to be something that augments the music. Sometimes joking with my students I'll take it to the extreme and play ornaments in every measure. (laughs) Of course you can go nuts but that's taking the attention off of the music.

I admire that in the class you said, "Hey guys I have to work at this stuff. If I don't work on my tremolo for a month I suck. I then have to go back and work on the details."

Oh yeah, for sure! That's absolutely one hundred percent true. Also, I show students how I practice. Then they know I'm not just prescribing something like a doctor. I actually do this stuff. I'm fond of saying; "I can tell you're not doing what I asked. I recommend that you be a maniac like me." (laughs) I use that word because you need kind of a maniacal bent. You have to want it so bad that you're willing to get down to the nitty-gritty and that's who I am.

Most of the time a musician is not going to solve a problem or develop a technique in one day. Knowing when enough is enough for the day can be an issue.

I agree and that's another thing I talk about in master-classes and in my teaching in general. That goes back to the three Cs. Consistency is a very difficult thing to achieve. It involves a lot of patience. If you're impatient with this art form you're going to have a long row to hoe. I think I had the right mix of patience when I was a kid. I'd get frustrated but I wouldn't get so frustrated that I was willing to cut corners. You have to have that stick-to-itiveness that people talk about but you also have to give yourself a break. You can't put to much pressure on yourself. You can't climb a mountain in a day. You have to take one step at a time.

In A Sentimental Mood

Duke Ellington
(arr. Jason Vieaux)

6 = D

♩ = 48-58

Keep Time w/Bass Notes

10

12

III

14

X

16

V

18

20

III

I

VI

22

IV

VIII

I

VI

IV

24

I

IV

IV