

A few thoughts about HTMA Meetings – For New Members and Visitors

by Jerry LeCroy

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Maybe you are considering going to an HTMA meeting, but you are new to the arts of music performance and feel a little uncomfortable with the prospect of playing music in front of a bunch of people you don't know. Or maybe you are a seasoned performer, and just want to know what to expect. Either way, this note is for you.

For the less experienced musician:

I totally understand how it feels to be new at music and considering playing in front of people. For the first year or two I went to HTMA meetings I was close to panic every time I had a chance to play. I don't think I'm alone in that fear. Even some seasoned musicians who make a good living a music are affected by stage fright – it's a reasonably normal reaction to stress, and it isn't just you.

What I have found, though, is that HTMA members are a pretty thoughtful and caring audience, and remarkably supportive of people who are at the front end of the learning curve. I have been grateful for that a hundred times, at least. You can expect that people in a meeting will pay attention to you when you play a tune, but you can also trust that no one in the room is going to shame or belittle you when you make a mistake.

Most HTMA members started learning how to play music later in life, so we can remember the difficulties of learning new skills, and we have all had the experience of getting halfway into a tune and just losing it, and having to quit. Having been in that position multiple times, I came to appreciate that the only comments I ever received were either a suggestion of what the next chord/note/lyric might be, or asked whether I might like to start over. Those people were all so kind to me, and I want to maintain that culture of kindness to learners/beginners today.

Of course, no one ever HAS to play. When the turn comes around to you, it is always perfectly acceptable to just say PASS. Doesn't matter why you want to pass and nobody is going to ask. Might be you need to retune, or have a cold, or haven't prepared any more tunes. But the why never matters.

As a new musician, HTMA meetings can be an excellent opportunity to meet other people at similar positions on the musical learning curve. It's great to find someone at the HTMA meeting who you will be comfortable practicing with. My experience is that I really never have improved my skills much except when I was playing for and with other people. I can play the same tune at home and make the same mistakes over and over. When I play it with better musicians, they help me figure out better approaches to the music, and help me polish off the rough spots. In fact, I've often thought that the biggest benefit that HTMA offers new members is the chance to play with musicians who are more advanced, and learn from them.

One thing you might do to take advantage of the situation in meetings is to make it easier to get help. How? If you are playing a piece from sheet music or charts, make a few extra copies to hand out to folks in the room, so that they can follow what you are doing and maybe play some supporting music.

On the other hand, if you are working on a new piece that you would like to play in a meeting, but it's still a little shaky, don't be shy about asking others to NOT play with you. I had many cases where having

other musicians play along really made life hard for me, because they knew different (maybe less simplified) arrangements, or kept steadier time. Really experienced accompanists will stick with the lead musician like glue, but many HTMA members are amateurs, and won't have so delicate a touch. Our normal convention is that if you want to have other people in the meeting accompany you, you indicate that by announcing what key you are playing in. If you want to make sure you aren't going to be overwhelmed by too much assistance, please feel comfortable asking us to all keep quiet while you take your turn. It's your turn, your song, and you get to choose. I promise you that no one in the room will be offended.

For the more experienced meeting attendee:

If you read the paragraphs above, you probably got the picture that HTMA meetings are intended to be warm and welcoming for people at all levels. One you have that, the rest is pretty easy.

If you'd like to have accompaniment on a piece, all you need to do is tell the members what key you play in, and maybe warn of any chord progressions that might be a surprise to one or two people. The meetings generally work as a jam session, and it's almost always fun to have people play along. But if you don't want help on your song, all you need to do is NOT mention the key. If you want to discourage the occasional member who appears unable to NOT noodle along, just ask for folks to listen while you play solo. That works every time.

If you decide to request accompaniment, please be sure that your instrument is tuned to A/440. If you have an instrument that cannot be tuned, or a banjo, we will understand.

What music is considered acceptable at HTMA meetings? I'd have to say "most of it". It may be easier to outline music we generally do not share at meetings.

By general consensus we try to avoid pieces that we would not want children to be exposed to (the children's section of the library is right outside the meeting room door). That might rule out some adult or scatological lyrics. Since we are all playing mostly acoustic instruments, HTMA meetings are likely not the best place to try out a screaming electric guitar solo. I think a few members have brought small drums (bodhran?) to meetings, but a full drum set would likely be over the top.

Although there is not so much room for electric instruments, we have had members occasionally bring in an electric piano, and I think that was pretty well liked by the members. I'd also welcome a tasteful bass guitar player who need an amplifier to be heard.

Although we are the "Traditional" music association, probably only half the music you will hear at the typical meeting will actually be folk or traditional. You might hear a jazz standard, a bluegrass tune, or a mazurka. If it's acoustic, and played well, the members will like whatever you do.

For the non-instrumentalist:

If all you want to do is sing or dance, that's fine too. Members occasionally sing a 'Capella at meetings, and that works fine. Some members like to sing with accompaniment, and bring

charts on the songs they want to sing to help members support the song. HTMA members are not, in general, session musicians, but these experiments usually work out pretty well.

For the total non-musician:

If you just want to come to a meeting to listen, please do it. Most every member who is at the meeting to play enjoys having an audience. You will be totally welcomed.