

MA

(間)

Six principles to play from within

German Herlein

www.germanherlein.cl

Ma (間) is a Japanese word with no exact translation. It is the space between two columns in Japanese architecture — not emptiness, but the tension that holds them together. It is the pause before speaking. It is the silence between two notes. Designers use it to talk about proportion. Actors, about presence. Musicians, about listening.

Ma is not absence. It is where everything happens.

That is what we call our mothers in my country.

—
*To those who were Pygmalion in my life.
To those who saw before I did
what I had not yet seen.*
—

*When was the last time you listened to music
and felt that the musician was truly there?*

Introduction

Some ideas don't arrive directly.
They don't come as a revelation.
They seep in.

Years ago I read a book about human connection from an unexpected angle. It wasn't about music. It wasn't about technique. It wasn't even written for artists. And yet, something in its perspective stayed with me.

Later, I came back to that idea from a different place.
From the guitar.
From the experience of playing with others.
From listening.

It wasn't a theory applied.
It was an intuition translated.

That book was Partnering, by Jean Oelwang. For more than fifteen years she studied the world's great collaborations: how leaders from different cultures and disciplines achieved together what none could have done alone, how collective effort closed the ozone hole, how the most unlikely alliances ended up changing history. She wasn't looking for the formula of individual success. She was trying to understand what makes two or more people — a duo, a band, a movement — accomplish together what none could do alone. I read it and thought: this is exactly what separates a band that sounds from a band that simply plays.

Reading it felt like recognizing something I had already seen. I lived in several countries, held very different jobs, and in each one I found myself asking the same question: why did some things work and others didn't. Not in technical terms, but in something harder to name. Over time I began to see a kind of song in all of it — a pattern that kept repeating. What Oelwang helped me understand is that this pattern had a name: principles. Six principles. And that the same principles that make a collaboration, an organization, or a friendship work, also make music work.

This book was born from something I witnessed many times as a listener: musicians who play with their head but not their heart. Not because they don't want to — but because nobody showed them how. Focused on executing correctly, unaware that music asks for something more. And at the same time, others who do it naturally, without ever having learned it anywhere. This book is an attempt to name what some people have without knowing they have it.

I understood that what connects people also connects musicians. That music doesn't begin in the playing, but in the relationship.

This book proposes no rules.

It is a map I discovered while playing, teaching, and learning — and I am still learning.

These principles serve the musician who has just played their first note. And they are a reminder for those who have been playing for years. Awareness has no minimum entry level.

Six principles.

Like six strings.

Why six?

The guitar has six strings.
Each one vibrates alone.
But none of them makes sense in isolation.

Each string is a different tension. A register. A possibility.

If one is missing, the instrument changes.
If one is out of tune, everything shifts.

Over time I understood that connection in music works the same way.

It is not about playing more.
It is about tuning invisible relationships.

These six principles are not steps.
They are strings that vibrate together.

And like any well-tuned instrument: when they all sound in harmony,
something emerges that none could produce alone.



PRINCIPLE I

Listen before you play

Respect

The first time I truly listened, I wasn't playing.

I was waiting for my turn to come in on a session. I had ideas ready. Phrases prepared. Technical tools I knew could work. I had experienced something similar before, but from the other side: as a listener, sitting in front of musicians who weren't listening to each other. Technically correct, and yet empty.

But something happened.

Instead of thinking about what to add, I stayed quiet. And in that silence I understood that the music was already whole.

Listening is not waiting for your turn to speak.

It is allowing something to exist without needing to change it.

That is where everything began.

The difference that changes everything

There is a huge difference between listening and waiting to play. When you wait to play, you use the other person's time to prepare your next phrase. Your attention is on yourself. On what you are about to say.

When you truly listen, something different happens. Your next phrase is born from what you just received. Not from what you had prepared.

That is musical respect. And respect, when it is genuine, is contagious.

Space as message

In music there is a phenomenon that any attentive listener can perceive: when two musicians truly listen to each other, the conversation between them becomes visible. Not from the stage. From the seat. What makes that conversation work is not what each one plays. It is how much space they leave for the other.

Musical respect is not passivity. It is active presence that knows when to step back.

When was the last time you truly listened, without preparing what you were going to say next?

□ Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)



PRINCIPLE II

Take up space without invading

Generosity

Some musicians fill everything.
And some musicians hold.

Taking up space doesn't mean imposing yourself. It means assuming presence without displacing others.

In a session I understood it wasn't about volume or spotlight, but about intention. When I stopped playing to stand out and started playing to support, something shifted in the dynamic. I know it from the outside too: as a listener, when a musician holds instead of shines, the music becomes bigger than they are.

The music became wider.
More breathable.

The paradox of generosity

There is a paradox in musical generosity: the more you give, the more presence you have.

The guitarist who accompanies well doesn't disappear. They don't become invisible. On the contrary: their presence is felt in every note the singer sings with more freedom, in every phrase the soloist breathes with more space.

Giving space is an active way of playing.

The trap of passive accompaniment

Many musicians confuse accompanying with shrinking. They think being generous means playing less, softer, without character.

That is not generosity. That is absence.

Real generosity is being completely present, completely committed, and at the same time completely available to the other. It is giving without ceasing to be.

A good accompanist doesn't follow the soloist. They anticipate. They don't imitate. They complement. They don't fill gaps. They hold.

What would happen if your only goal while playing was to make the other person sound better?

□ Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)



PRINCIPLE III

Rise when another rises

Trust

Silent competition is a subtle enemy.

Once, while another musician was improvising with incredible intensity, I felt the urge to respond with even more intensity. But instead of competing, I chose to accompany. I have seen that same scene from the audience many times: two musicians competing in silence, and the music losing.

Rise when another rises no es opacar.

It is amplifying.

That day I understood that trust generates expansion.

Playing without needing approval

Trust is not demonstrated with speed. It is heard in every note you choose to hold.

There is a particular moment every guitarist knows: you are in the middle of an improvisation, and something inside wants to retreat toward the familiar. A comfortable lick. A figure that always works. A pattern that has already been applauded.

That impulse doesn't come from the music. It comes from fear.

Musical trust is not arrogance. It is not believing that everything you play is brilliant. It is something more subtle and more difficult: it is staying with what you are hearing, even when you don't yet know where it is going.

Trust is knowing that silence is also music. That one long note says more than ten fast ones. That you don't need to justify your presence with noise.

The internal monitor

Many musicians play with a constant monitor running: Am I sounding good? Will they hear me? Will they think I'm good?

That monitor consumes energy that should go to the music. And worse: it distorts what you play, because you start making decisions based on what you think others expect of you, not what the music needs.

Real trust is when that monitor turns off. Not because you don't care about the music. But because you trust that if you are present and listening, what comes out is valid.

What note did you not play today out of fear that it wouldn't work?

□ Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)



PRINCIPLE IV

Hold your intention

Courage

*It is not the daily increase, but the daily decrease.
Eliminate the non-essential.*

— Bruce Lee

There are moments when playing less creates insecurity.

In a recording session, I repeated the same figure for minutes. I added nothing new. I just held it. As a listener, that kind of decision is felt immediately: there are musicians who change because they have something to say, and musicians who change because they can't tolerate silence. The difference is audible.

I felt doubt. I thought I should vary it.

But when the take was over, I understood that the constancy was the axis.

Hold your intention requires coraje.

Not changing out of anxiety.

The trap of the technical ego

There is a trap that many advanced musicians fall into: the trap of the technical ego. They already master their instrument. They already have resources. And so every note becomes an opportunity to show what they know.

That is not music. That is a resume.

Real courage — the kind that costs the most — is daring to play simply when you could do something complex. It is holding a silence when you could fill it. It is playing one single note with full intention when you could play twenty.

The ego and music

The ego has a function in music. It gives us presence, voice, and the courage to get on stage.

But when the ego makes musical decisions, the result is always the same: music that speaks about the player, not about what is needed.

Musical maturity is not the absence of ego. It is knowing when to set it aside.

When was the last time you held something simple without needing to change it?

Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)



PRINCIPLE V

Play less, say more

Curiosity

La claridad viene del silencio, no del ruido.

— Shi Heng Yi

For years I accumulated resources. And I heard others accumulating them too, from the audience: musicians who deployed everything they knew into every note, and yet left the listener with a strange feeling of distance.

Scales. Speed. Variations.

Until I discovered that what people remembered most were the spaces.

I tried something simple: removing a note.

Then another.

The phrase breathed.

Curiosity no es agregar.

It is exploring what happens when we remove.

The discomfort of space

Curious musicians don't repeat comfortable patterns. They ask what happens if they play less, if they change the intention, if they listen differently.

What if I play this progression with fewer notes? What if I change the rhythm but not the pitches? What if I play this ballad like a blues? What if I add air between each phrase?

Questions open doors. Certainties close them.

The error as a door

Curiosity also changes our relationship with error. A musician who is not curious sees the error as a failure. A curious musician sees it as a signal: something unexpected just happened. What is there?

Some of the most memorable moments in music were born from errors that someone chose to explore rather than correct. As a listener, those moments are felt before they are understood: something shifts in the air, something that wasn't in the script becomes the most truthful thing of the night.

What happens in the music when you remove one more note?

Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)



PRINCIPLE VI

Disappear into the music

Purpose

I compose for the music, not for the audience.

— Astor Piazzolla

There was a night when I forgot who was listening. And there were other nights, as a listener, when I felt the musician on stage had forgotten too — and those were exactly the nights when something extraordinary happened in the room.

I didn't think about approval.

I didn't think about the outcome.

I was just present.

Disappearing is not erasing yourself.

It is letting the music pass through without interference.

There I understood that purpose is not in the applause, but in the shared experience.

Playing with intention

Purpose is not an abstract concept. It is a concrete experience that happens note by note.

When you play with purpose, every musical decision has a reason. Not necessarily a reason you can explain in words, but a reason that comes from being completely present in what is happening.

Without purpose, technique becomes decoration. With purpose, even the simplest note becomes something the listener remembers.

Purpose beyond the stage

Musical purpose doesn't end when the song ends. It extends into why we play, what we want to say, with whom we want to connect.

When purpose is clear, music stops being a demonstration and becomes an offering.

Who are you playing for when nobody is watching?

Ejemplo sonoro

A fragment played by the author that illustrates this principle in action.



[Listen to fragment](#)

Closing

The six principles are not formulas.
They are reminders.

Like the six strings, they can vibrate alone. But when they tune to each other, something greater appears. Thanks to the inspiration that came to me through the six principles Jean Oelwang explores in her work.

Respect — escuchar antes de intervenir.

Generosity — sostener sin invadir.

Trust — elevarse cuando otro eleva.

Courage — hold intention without yielding to anxiety.

Curiosity — explore what happens when you step back.

Purpose — disappear into the music.

These six principles are not exclusive to music. They are the same ones that make any deep connection between people real and lasting. They are at the origin of every relationship that transforms.

If you ever felt that playing wasn't enough, perhaps it wasn't technique that was missing.

Perhaps it was connection.

And connection begins before the first note.

It is not what you play. It is where you play from.

German Herlein

www.germanherlein.cl
youtube.com/@germanherlein