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Differences in cortical activity related to motor planning between experienced guitarists and non-musicians during guitar playing

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ABSTRACT

The influence of motor skill learning on movement-related brain activity was investigated using electroencephalography. Previous research has indicated that experienced performers display movement-related cortical potentials (MRCPs) of smaller ampli-tude and later onset compared to novice participants. Unfortu-nately, previous studies have lacked ecological validity with experimenters recording the MRCP prior to simple motor tasks and applying the results to more complex motor skills. This study replicated previous research using an ecologically valid motor skill; recording the MRCP from a group of experienced guitarists and a control group of non-musicians whilst they played a simple scale on the guitar. Results indicated no difference between groups in early motor planning. In contrast, the later, negative slope and motor potential components were of smaller amplitude and the negative slope began later in the experienced guitarists. The data may indicate that, for experienced guitarists, a reduced level of effort is required during the motor preparation phase of the task. These findings have implications for musical instrument learning as well as motor skill acquisition in general.

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46 **1. Introduction**

Performance of most motor skills can be improved by accurate, long-term practice. What occurs within the brain to reflect this improved performance is less clear. Electroencephalography (EEG) can be used to examine movement-related cortical activity with high temporal resolution (Luck, 2005) and, as such, is a suitable technique for investigating changes in cortical activity that may be associated with motor skill learning and performance.

In the final seconds prior to voluntary movement production there is an increase in electrical activ-52 53 ity in the motor areas of the brain, known as the movement-related cortical potential (MRCP). One component of the MRCP, the Bereitschaftspotential (BP), is a slowly rising negativity that occurs 54 1-2 s prior to movement onset (Kornhuber & Deecke, 1965; for a review see Shibasaki & Hallett, 55 2006). The BP is followed by a steeper gradient negativity, the negative slope (NS'), which occurs at 56 57 400-500 ms prior to movement onset (Shibasaki, Barrett, Halliday, & Halliday, 1980). These components are followed by the motor potential (MP), the peak negativity occurring concomitantly to move-58 59 ment onset in contralateral central sites. Both the amplitude and onset times of these components vary depending on the physical and psychological characteristics of the forthcoming movement 60 61 (Birbaumer, Elbert, Canavan, & Rockstroh, 1990). As such, the MRCP may reflect the cortical activity involved in planning and preparing to perform voluntary movements (Shibasaki & Hallett, 2006). A 62 63 schematic representation of the pre-movement components of the MRCP is displayed in Fig. 1.

Several studies have investigated differences in the MRCP amplitude and onset times between expert 64 and novice performers to aid our understanding of learning-related changes in brain functioning (e.g., Di 65 Russo, Pitzalis, Aprile, & Spinelli, 2005; Fattapposta et al., 1996; Hatta, Nishihira, Higashiura, Kim, & Kan-66 67 eda, 2009; Kita, Mori, & Nara, 2001). The main findings from these studies are that expert performers show smaller amplitude and later onset MRCPs than their novice counterparts, prior to task perfor-68 69 mance. This has been shown in groups of expert and novice clay target (Di Russo, Pitzalis et al., 2005) and pistol shooters (Fattapposta et al., 1996), as well as in elite and novice kendo martial art performers 70 (Hatta et al., 2009; Kita et al., 2001). These authors have generally concluded that experienced perform-71 ers are able to plan and perform the task with reduced cortical activity compared to novices, attributing 72 73 these differences to long-term training by the expert group. This body of research is supported by several studies that have used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study skill-related differences 74 75 in cortical activity in expert and novice musicians. For example, several researchers have reported that expert pianists exhibit reduced activity compared to novices in a variety of movement-related cortical 76 77 areas when performing actions similar to those used to play the piano (e.g., Haslinger et al., 2004; Jancke,



Fig. 1. A schematic representation of the movement-related cortical potential (MRCP). Time 0 ms on the horizontal axis indicates the point of movement onset. The pre-movement components, termed the Bereitschaftspotential (BP), the negative slope (NS') and the motor potential (MP) are thought to reflect the cortical activity involved in planning and preparing to perform voluntary movement.

Shah, & Peters, 2000; Koeneke, Lutz, Wustenberg, & Jancke, 2004; Krings et al., 2000). Krings et al. sug gested that this finding may indicate that following long-term practice in a skill, experienced performers
 require fewer neurons to be active to plan and perform that skill.

Whilst these studies have provided a useful insight into learning-related changes in motor cortex 81 activity, they have tended to employ simple, laboratory-based tasks and applied the results to more 82 complex motor skills. This approach lacks ecological validity as the movement tasks used are far re-83 moved from the skill being investigated. For example, simple button pressing was used to investigate 84 85 clay target shooting (Di Russo, Pitzalis et al., 2005) and pistol shooting (Fattapposta et al., 1996), simple 86 finger tapping was used to study piano or keyboard playing (Haslinger et al., 2004; Jancke et al., 2000; Koeneke et al., 2004; Krings et al., 2000), and simple wrist flexion (Kita et al., 2001) and hand-gripping 87 tasks (Hatta et al., 2009) have been used to study kendo. By focusing only on the mechanical actions 88 required to perform a skill, cortical activity involved in other aspects of the skill is not accounted 89 90 for. Therefore, there is a need to assess differences in the MRCP of expert and novice performers using 91 more ecologically valid motor skills (Nakata, Yoshie, Miura, & Kudo, 2010; Wright, Holmes, & Smith, 2011). Ideally, this would be achieved by measuring cortical activity during performance of the skill 92 93 being investigated, rather than during performance of a task similar to the skill being investigated. For example, if a study were investigating pistol or rifle shooting, then recording the EEG during shoot-94 95 ing performance may be more suitable than recording the EEG using a simple button press task. Similarly, if a study were investigating piano playing, then measuring cortical activity during a piano 96 97 playing task may provide more meaningful results than recording cortical activity during a simple finger tapping action. Recently, Kristeva, Chakarov, Schulte-Monting, and Spreer (2003) recorded the 98 99 MRCP from a group of professional violin players prior to both imagery and physical performance of 100 a short musical sequence on the violin. This indicates that it is possible to record the MRCP prior to eco-101 logically valid motor skills; however, to date, no research has done so in the context of skill learning.

This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by comparing MRCP differences in experi-102 103 enced guitarists and non-musicians using an ecologically valid guitar-playing task. Based on the previously mentioned literature, we predicted that the experienced guitarists would require less cortical 104 105 activity to plan and control their hand movements when playing the guitar, compared to the non-106 musicians. Therefore, we expected that the experienced guitarists may require fewer neurons to be active during motor preparation, and so we hypothesised that the experienced guitarists would exhi-107 bit smaller amplitude MRCPs that would begin closer to movement onset than the non-musicians, 108 109 prior to playing a simple scale on the guitar.

110 2. Methods

111 2.1. Participants

Ten male, experienced guitar players (mean age 36.5 yrs. ± 13.73) and ten non-musicians (5 male, 5 112 female; mean age 24.1 yrs. \pm 6.57) participated in the study. The experienced guitarists had between 8 113 and 40 years (mean 18.8 yrs. ± 11.23) of guitar playing experience. They all stated that the guitar was 114 115 their main instrument and reported that they spent approximately $12.8 (\pm 7.35)$ hours per week practicing the guitar. The majority of the experienced guitarists played the effectric guitar as their primary 116 instrument, although one was an acoustic guitarist. Although not professional musicians, all guitarists 117 had received some form of formal tuition on the guitar, and many of them had experience of playing 118 several other musical instruments. The non-musicians had no prior experience of playing the guitar or 119 120 any other musical instrument. All participants were right-handed, as assessed by the Edinburgh Hand-121 edness Inventory (Oldfield, 1971). All participants gave their written informed consent to take part in the study, which was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (2008). The experi-122 **Q2** 123 mental procedures were granted ethical approval by the local institutional ethics committee.

124 2.2. Electrophysiological recording

Electroencephalography (EEG) was recorded continuously throughout the testing session from six, 6 mm diameter, silver/silver-chloride electrodes positioned over the motor cortex according to the 4

International 10-10 system of electrode placement (Nuwer et al., 1998). Electrodes were placed at 127 sites overlying the hand representations of the left (FC3 & C3) and right (FC4 & C4) motor cortex, as 128 129 well as over the supplementary motor area (FCz & Cz). The electro-oculogram (EOG) was also recorded from below and adjacent to the left eve to monitor both vertical (VEOG) and horizontal (HEOG) eve 130 movements. All electrodes were referenced to linked mastoids and a ground electrode was placed 131 at Fpz. Prior to electrode attachment the recording sites were gently abraded with NuPrep skin prep-132 aration paste (DO Weaver, Aurora, CO, USA). Electrodes were then attached to the scalp using Ten20 133 134 conductive EEG paste (DO Weaver, Aurora, CO, USA). Electrode impedances were kept homogenous at, or below, 5 k Ω throughout the experiment. Testing commenced 45 minutes after the electrodes were 135 attached to the scalp to minimise signal drift. After this time, the electrode impedances were re-136 checked to confirm that the impedance values remained below 5 k Ω . The EEG and EOG were recorded 137 using a NeuroScan Synamps amplifier and Scan 4.3 software (Compumedics Neuroscan, Charlotte, NC, 138 USA) with a gain of 1000 and an A/D sampling rate of 1000 Hz. The bandpass filter for the cortical 139 channels was set at 0-30 Hz, whilst the bandpass filter for the EOG channels was set at 0.15-30 Hz. 140

141 2.3. Task description

Participants were required to perform 100 repetitions of the first seven notes of the G Major scale 142 (see Fig. 2) on a Yamaha Pacifica 112 V electric guitar. The participants were seated and instructed to 143 play in time with a metronome set at 100 beats per minute (bpm). The G Major scale played at 144 100 bpm was chosen on the recommendation of an assessor from the 'Rockschool' rock and pop music 145 examination board. The G Major scale played at this tempo is a 'Rockschool' Grade 2 guitar assessment 146 piece (Rockschool, 2008). After consultation with the assessor, it was expected that this task would be 147 148 easy for the experienced guitarists to play, whilst still being achievable for the non-musicians with some practice. The metronome ran continuously throughout the experiment and participants were 149 free to initiate each performance of the scale at their own choosing. They were, however, instructed 150 to leave approximately ten seconds in between each repetition of the scale. As the non-musician group 151 had not previously played the scale, they were provided with 15 minutes of instruction on how to play 152 the scale prior to the testing session. To reduce the number of artefacts in the EEG recording, partic-153 154 ipants were asked to keep as still as possible and to refrain from tapping their feet or nodding their head in time with the metronome. Similarly, they were also instructed to try to avoid blinking imme-155 diately prior to and during performance of the task. 156

Following the 100 repetitions, the guitar was connected to an Apple Mac Mini computer (Apple, Cupertino, CA, USA) and participants performed a further 20 repetitions of the scale in time with the metronome whilst guitar performance was recorded using Logic Express version 9 software (Apple, Cupertino, CA, USA). This allowed each participant's performance to be assessed offline. It was not possible to have concurrent EEG recording as connecting the guitar to the computer introduced too much electrical interference into the EEG trace. Task performance was measured by ability to play at the correct tempo and variability in performance.



Fig. 2. The G Major scale as played on the guitar, displayed in both the treble clef and tab format. Participants played the first 7 notes, highlighted within the black box, at a tempo of 100 beats per minute. In tab format, the horizontal lines represent each of the six strings on the guitar. The bottom line represents the bottom E string (the thickest string) and the top line represents the top E string (the thinnest string). The numbers depict which fret the string should be pressed down at to successfully play the note.

164 2.4. Data analysis

The EEG trials were averaged with reference to movement onset. This was recorded by a thin elec-165 trode that was attached to the neck of the guitar, underneath the strings on the 3rd fret and plugged 166 into a 'movement onset' electrode channel in the EEG amplifier. When the bottom E string was pressed 167 down at the 3rd fret to play the first note of the scale, the string made contact with the electrode, caus-168 ing a sharp deflection to occur on the 'movement onset' channel in the EEG trace. Digital markers were 169 170 inserted in the EEG recording at the points where the sharp deflection caused by the first note being 171 played exceeded 50 µV in amplitude. An offline computerised eye-movement rejection was then run on the raw data to remove any segments of the EEG that contained artefacts in excess of 50 µV in 172 either the VEOG or HEOG channels. On average 15 trials per participant were rejected from the 173 non-musician group and 19 trials per participant were rejected from the experienced guitarist group 174 175 as they contained eye-movement artefacts. Following the automated EOG rejection, the data was visually scanned and any additional artefacts in the recording were removed. Movement artefacts were 176 very rare as only the pre-movement components of the EEG were analysed. Using Scan 4.3 software, 177 178 the EEG recording was then filtered offline with a 0–5 Hz bandpass to remove the higher frequency 179 signals. Following this the EEG was split into epochs of 3 seconds around the movement onset marker 180 (2500 ms prior to and 500 ms after movement onset). The epochs were then averaged together to produce the MRCP. Prior to analysis the microvolt values were converted into z-scores, referenced to a 181 baseline period from _2500 ms to _2000 ms. The purpose of this was to normalise the data and re-182 move any variability in the baseline data between participants. 183

184 For statistical analysis the mean amplitudes and onset times of the BP and NS', together with the 185 peak amplitude of the MP were extracted from the averaged EEG prior to movement onset at electrode 186 sites FCz, C2, C3 and C4. MRCPs were not present in all participants at FC3 and FC4 and so these sites were not included in the analysis. The BP amplitude was taken as the mean amplitude from the point 187 of BP onset to the point of NS' onset, and the NS' amplitude was taken as the mean amplitude from the 188 point of NS' onset to the MP peak. The MP was taken as the maximum negative peak immediately prior 189 190 to movement onset. The BP and NS' onset times were established by visual inspection by the first 191 author. Using Scan 4.3 software, it was possible to place a cursor marker at the points of BP and NS' 192 onset and obtain an exact millisecond value at each cursor placement. These onset times were then subsequently confirmed independently, and under blind conditions by the fourth author using the 193 194 same procedure. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS for Windows 15.0 statistical package. The onset times of the BP and NS' and the mean amplitudes of the BP, NS' and MP components 195 were submitted to separate 2 group (guitarists, non-musicians) × 4 electrode (FCz, C3, Cz, C4) inde-196 pendent measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). Bonferroni's post-hoc analysis was used to interpret 197 198 main effects, whilst the Tukey post-hoc analysis was used to interpret interaction effects.

199 Ability to play at the correct tempo was measured using Logic Express software. By measuring 200 the millisecond timing error between the beat of the metronome and the notes being played, it was possible to establish synchronicity with the metronome. Variability in performance was 201 202 calculated using intra-individual coefficients of variation for each participant. This was done by dividing the standard deviation of the performance timing errors by the mean performance timing 203 204 errors. These two performance measures were then submitted to the appropriate parametric or non-parametric test. All significant effects were reported at an alpha level of .05 and adjusted 205 206 where necessary.

207 **3. Results**

208 3.1. Electrophysiological data

A clear MRCP, in which the BP, NS' and MP components were evident was found in both groups, peaking at electrode site Cz. MRCP components were slightly larger on left, compared to right hemisphere electrodes, confirming the contralateral topography of these components (relative to the participants handedness). Waveforms of the MRCP recorded from both groups at all electrode sites



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Fig. 3. Movement-related cortical potential (MRCP) waveforms, recorded from the motor cortex, for experienced guitarists (black) and non-musicians (red), whilst performing the G Major scale on the guitar at a tempo of 100 beats per minute.



Fig. 4. Mean amplitude values of the BP, NS' and MP components of the MRCP for experienced (grey) and novice (black) guitarists. Data was recorded from electrode sites FCz, Cz, C3 and C4, prior to performance of the G Major scale on the guitar. Significant differences between the groups are indicated by stars (*).

are shown in Fig. 3. Mean amplitudes and onset times of the MRCP components are shown in Fig. 4and Table 1.

Table 1

	Experienced guitarists	Novice guitarists	Significance
BP Onset (ms)	-1917 (±226)	-1794 (±281)	<i>p</i> = .22
NS' Onset (ms)	-462 (±168)	-721 (±209)	<i>p</i> = .006

Mean (\pm SD) onset times (ms) for BP and NS' components of the MRCP in experienced and novice guitarists, together with *p* values from the ANOVA analysis. A separate ANOVA was conducted for each component of the MRCP.

215 3.1.1. Bereitschaftspotential (BP)

The BP initiated around 1900 ms prior movement onset and was of similar amplitude in both groups until around -700 ms, when the waveform became more negative in the non-musicians. The onset times of the BP component in both groups are shown in Table 1. The ANOVA for BP onset time revealed no significant differences between groups, F(1, 18) = 1.63, p = .22, or between electrodes, F(2.4, 43.1) = 0.82, p = .46. However, there was a significant group \times electrode interaction effect for BP onset, F(2.4, 43.1) = 3.77, p = .02. Tukey's HSD post-hoc analysis indicated that the BP onset at Cz and C4 occurred later in the non-musicians than in the experienced guitarists.

The amplitude of the BP was taken as the mean amplitude from the point of BP onset to the point of NS' onset. The mean z-score BP amplitude in the experienced guitarist group was $-2.34 (\pm 2.56)$ compared to $-2.44 (\pm 2.29)$ in the non-musicians. The ANOVA revealed no significant difference in terms of BP amplitude between groups, F(1, 18) = 0.01, p = .92, or between electrodes, F(3, 54) = 2.64, p = .06. Similarly, there was no Group × Electrode interaction effect, F(3, 54) = 1.45, p = .24.

3.1.2. Negative slope (NS')

The onset times of the NS' component in both groups are shown in Table 1. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for group, with a significantly later NS' onset in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians, F(1, 18) = 9.78, p = .006. No significant main effect was found for NS' onset time between electrodes, F(1.9, 34.3) = 1.18, p = .32, and there was no group \times electrode interaction effect, F(1.9, 34.3) = 1.54, p = .23.

234 The amplitude of the NS' was taken as the mean amplitude from the point of NS' onset to the MP peak. The mean z-score amplitude for the NS' was -5.41 (±5.02) in the experienced guitarists, com-235 pared to -10.45 (±6.22) in the non-musicians. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for group, 236 237 with a significantly lower amplitude NS' component in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians, F(1, 18) = 5.43, p = .03. There was also a significant difference in the amplitude of 238 239 the NS' between electrodes, F(3, 54) = 6.26, p = .001. Bonferroni's post-hoc analysis indicated that the NS' amplitude at Cz was significantly larger than at FCz. Finally, there was no group \times electrode 240 interaction effect, *F*(3, 54) = 2.2, *p* = .10. 241

242 3.1.3. Motor potential (MP)

The amplitude of the MP was taken as the maximum negative peak immediately prior to move-243 ment onset. The mean z-score amplitude for the MP peak was -7.48 (±5.28) in the experienced gui-244 tarists, compared to -16.17 (±8.36) in the non-musicians. The ANOVA confirmed that this was a 245 significantly lower amplitude in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians, 246 247 F(1, 18) = 10.85, p = .004. There was also a significant difference in MP peak amplitude between electrodes, F(3, 54) = 7.02, p < .001. Bonferroni's post-hoc analysis indicated that, as with the NS', the 248 amplitude of the MP peak was significantly larger at Cz than at FCz. Finally, there was also a significant 249 group \times electrode interaction, F(3, 54) = 2.97, p = .04. Tukey's post-hoc test indicated that the MP 250 amplitude was smaller in experienced guitarists, compared to non-musicians at all electrode sites. 251

252 3.2. Performance data

3.2.1. Ability to play at the correct tempo

The experienced guitarists were able to play the scale in time with the metronome with an average of 46 ms (± 77) error between the beat of the metronome and the note being played, compared to 573 ms (\pm 1084) error in the non-musician group. Due to the large variability in performance by the non-musician group (see the high standard deviation value), the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated. Given this violation, it was deemed more appropriate to analyse these data using a non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test. The results of this test indicated that the experienced guitarists were able to play the scale more closely in time with the metronome than the non-musicians (U = 11, p = .002).

262 3.2.2. Variability in performance

The mean intra-individual coefficient of variation for the experienced guitarists was 0.73 (\pm 0.1), compared to 1.09 (\pm 0.41) in the non-musicians. An independent *t* test confirmed that the experienced guitarists were significantly less variable in their performance errors compared to the non-musicians (*t* = ,-2.67, *df* = 9.97, *p* = .02).

267 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate possible differences in the pre-movement components of 268 269 the MRCP between experienced guitarists and non-musicians in an ecologically valid guitar-playing task. To the best of our knowledge, this study provides the first account of differences in the MRCP 270 between two groups of differing skill levels, prior to performance of an ecologically valid motor skill. 271 We found no group differences in the amplitude of the BP component, although the BP was found to 272 273 start earlier in the non-musicians at Cz and C4. The amplitude of the NS' component was significantly smaller and began significantly later in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians. In 274 275 addition, the amplitude of the MP peak was significantly smaller in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians. Previous research has reported the BP, NS' and MP components of the 276 277 MRCP to be of smaller amplitude and later onset in elite performers compared to novices (Di Russo, 278 Pitzalis et al., 2005; Fattapposta et al., 1996; Hatta et al., 2009; Kita et al., 2001). Therefore, only the 279 NS' and MP findings in this study support those of previous research. Deecke (1996) suggested that negativity in the EEG indicates increased activity in the area of the cortex under study. Based on this 280 281 suggestion, we propose that the lower negativity prior to movement production in the experienced guitarists, compared to the non-musicians, indicates less activity, and possibly a reduced effort in-282 283 volved in cortical motor preparation. Furthermore, the later onset of this activity for the NS' provides evidence to support the idea of a greater efficiency during motor preparation in experts. 284

It is interesting to highlight that, as predicted, the reduced cortical activity during motor prepara-285 tion in the experienced guitarists was also accompanied by superior performance in the task. The 286 experienced guitarists were able to play the scale more closely in time with the metronome than 287 288 the non-musicians and the significantly smaller variability coefficient in the experienced guitarists 289 suggests that their performance was more stable than the non-musicians were. This finding is consis-290 tent with the study by Fattapposta et al. (1996), who reported that expert pistol shooters produced 291 smaller amplitude MRCPs than a novice control group, and also performed better in a shooting-based task. We believe that this performance data strengthens the claim that lower amplitude MRCPs in ex-292 293 pert performers are skill-related. Where possible, to corroborate this claim, we encourage other crosssectional MRCP comparison studies to include a performance measure. Also of interest is the finding 294 295 that the NS' and MP values were significantly larger at Cz than at FCz. This finding was to be expected, as the MRCP is typically maximal at the vertex (Shibasaki & Hallett, 2006). 296

Previous research in this area has tended to use relatively simple motor tasks and then extrapo-297 lated the findings to more complex motor skills. For example, simple button pressing has been used 298 to study clay target or pistol shooting tasks (Di Russo, Pitzalis et al., 2005; Fattapposta et al., 1996), 299 finger-tapping has been used to study piano playing (Haslinger et al., 2004; Jancke et al., 2000; Koe-300 neke et al., 2004; Krings et al., 2000), and hand gripping or wrist flexion tasks have been used to study 301 kendo (Hatta et al., 2009; Kita et al., 2001). Recently, there has been a call for more ecologically valid 302 303 motor skills to be used when studying skill- and learning-related changes in the motor areas of the brain (Nakata et al., 2010: Wright et al., 2011). This study addressed this need as it investigated the 304 MRCP prior to an ecologically valid motor skill on a guitar, as opposed to a more simple motor task. 305

306 The smaller amplitude and later onset of the NS', together with the smaller amplitude MP in the experienced guitarists compared to the non-musicians indicates that the experienced guitarists required 307 308 less cortical activity, and possibly less effort, to plan and perform the task. This finding is consistent with the research that indicates experienced athletes (Di Russo, Pitzalis et al., 2005; Fattapposta et 309 al., 1996; Hatta et al., 2009; Kita et al., 2001) and musicians (Haslinger et al., 2004; Jancke et al., 310 2000; Koeneke et al., 2004; Krings et al., 2000) require reduced cortical activity during motor planning 311 and preparation. The fact that we replicated these findings using a more ecologically valid motor skill 312 313 extends the current literature base and adds support to the claims made in earlier studies that the re-314 ported differences are due to training in a particular skill.

One unexpected finding in this study was that there were no differences between the two groups in 315 the amplitude of the BP component, and the onset time of the BP occurred later in the non-musicians 316 than the experienced guitarists at sites Cz and C4. This finding is in contrast with previous research 317 318 that has reported smaller amplitude and later onset BP components in expert, compared to novice per-319 formers (Di Russo, Pitzalis et al., 2005; Fattapposta et al., 1996; Kita et al., 2001). It is possible that the contradictory BP evidence presented in our study could be due to the sound generated by the metro-320 321 nome, which ran continuously throughout the experiment at 100 bpm. Although participants were free to initiate each repetition of the scale at their own choosing, they were also instructed to try to 322 323 keep their playing in time with the metronome. The result of this may have been that the decision to begin each repetition was governed by the metronome, rather than being self-initiated. A study 324 by Di Russo, Incoccia, Formisano, Sabatini, and Zoccolotti (2005) compared components of the MRCP 325 prior to index finger flexion actions that were either self-initiated or externally triggered by a tone. 326 327 The authors reported that the BP component was present prior to self-initiated movements but absent 328 prior to the externally triggered movements. It could be argued that the presence of the metronome in 329 our experiment acted as an external trigger for the participants to begin playing the scale. Therefore, in this experiment, the decision to begin a repetition of the scale may have been partially internally trig-330 331 gered and partially externally triggered. The external trigger element may have reduced the BP amplitude and had a confounding effect on our results. As such, it is not possible to speculate as to the cause 332 333 of the later BP onset at Cz and C4 in the non-musician group. Removing the metronome would have 334 made measuring performance differences between the groups difficult and more subjective, and so it 335 was important to include the metronome in this study. However, had the metronome not been present we would have anticipated that, consistent with previous research, the amplitude of the BP would 336 337 have been smaller and may have begun later in the experienced players, compared to the non-338 musicians.

Alternative explanations for the NS' differences reported in this study could be the result of age and 339 sex differences between the groups, rather than being skill-related. The non-musicians sample con-340 tained five males and five females with a mean age of $24.1 (\pm 6.57)$ years. The sample of experienced 341 guitarists contained ten males with a mean age of 36.5 years (±13.73). However, regarding age differ-342 ences, a study by Singh, Knight, Woods, Beckley, and Clayworth (1990) compared amplitude and onset 343 time differences in the MRCP between young (20-40 years) or old (54-78 years) participants, prior to 344 unimanual and bimanual button pressing tasks. The authors reported that there were no differences 345 between the groups in either the amplitude or the onset times of any components of the MRCP. Fur-346 347 thermore, and of relevance to our study, the younger group was sub-divided into two further groups; one with an age range of 20-29 years, and one with an age range of 30-40 years. Again, no differences 348 were reported between these groups in any components of the MRCP. It is therefore unlikely that the 349 differences reported here are age-related. 350

There is no published data regarding sex differences in the MRCP. However, comparison of the MRCP of the five male non-musicians with the five female non-musicians in this study revealed that there was no difference in the MRCP in terms of sex¹. Therefore, whilst we acknowledge that not match-

¹ Sex differences in the MRCP of the non-musicians were compared using separate 2 sex (male, female) \times 4 electrode (FCz, C3, Cz, C4) independent measures ANOVAs. No differences were found between sex for the onset times of the BP (p = .10) or NS' (p = .89) components. Similarly, no differences were found between sex for the amplitudes of the BP (p = .08), NS' (p = .67) or MP (p = .93) components.

354 ing participants for age and sex is a limitation to the study, we do not think that these factors had a confounding effect on the results. 355

356 The differences reported in this study indicate that less cortical activity, and possibly less effort, is required during movement preparation in a group of experienced guitarists compared to a group of 357 non-musicians. It is possible that these differences are brought about by training in the experienced 358 guitarists. However, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow us to verify this claim or 359 speculate as to the time course of these changes. It is possible that short-term practice lasting only 360 361 a few hours could bring about a change in the MRCP, whilst it is equally possible that such changes 362 could take many months to develop. To better establish if the differences that have been reported using cross-sectional designs are due to training in the expert group, future studies should investigate 363 MRCP changes within the same participant group (Nakata et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2011). Research 364 should focus on studying changes in the MRCP over both a short-term practice period and a longitu-365 dinal learning period of weeks or months. A reduction in cortical activity after either a short-term 366 practice period or a longer learning period would provide a stronger indication that the differences 367 reported here are due to training. Research is currently in progress in our laboratory in an attempt 368 369 to address these issues.

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