

Staccato Practicing

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In changing to the thumb-under style of playing this year I found it necessary to return to many elementary modes of practice. One of these, at least, has proven itself many times in the past on many plucked instruments and is, I find, less known on the lute than it should be.

A large area of right-hand technique, particularly tone and fluency, depends on the ability to place the fingers of the right hand on the courses precisely. In order to clearly establish the position of the fingers and to be able to control their placement, it is extremely valuable to practice playing somewhat “staccato.”

Begin with one finger—the middle finger, for instance—and play the second course, and then deliberately stop the sound by placing the middle finger on the string again. Then pluck again from that position, again stopping the note deliberately by replacing the finger on the course. As you repeat this action, you will find yourself able to observe the placement of the finger as it prepares to pluck, and feel exactly how the tip of the finger is contacting the two strings of the course.

In developing tone and articulation, there are two principles to remember in using staccato practicing:

1. The exact position in which you mute the string should be the same position that you pluck from. There must be no re-adjustment. Muting with the side of the finger and then sliding up closer to the tip to pluck is a common fault which sacrifices speed, tone, and accuracy.
2. The position in which you mute the string must be one in which you contact both strings. The damping of the course must come abruptly, as if only a single string were stopped. You cannot get a full, lute-like

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tone unless you pluck both of the strings as evenly as possible, and the plucking position which will sound the two strings most evenly will also be the position in which they are dampened most evenly.

A problem common among guitarists like myself who change to the lute is that they prepare to play a note by placing the finger on the side of the course rather than on the top. Typically, this only sounds one string of the course, and quite often also produces buzzing in the course as the two strings are snapped against each other. You can check your accuracy in hitting both strings of a course by watching the fingerboard of the lute in a mirror. As you pluck and stop the course, you should see the two strings vibrate equally against the dark background of the fretboard. If they do not, you probably must bring the finger to a more vertical attack in order to catch both strings.

Once you have found the spot on the middle finger that feels and sounds right, try the same procedure with the index, repeating it over and over very slowly until you can mute both strings, pluck from that position without moving the finger, and see in the mirror that both courses are vibrating equally. From the time you mute until the time you pluck the course, there should be a feeling that you are pressing the strings of the course straight down toward the top of the instrument.

An added benefit of this form of practice is that by repeating one finger slowly, you must learn to let it relax after each pluck, thus avoiding one of the most common problems of novice players—the tendency to hold each finger pulled in toward the palm after it is used, not letting it relax until it is needed again. All fingers should be released immediately after plucking.

Once you can play this staccato stroke with two fingers, each taken one at a time and repeated, try alternating those two fingers:

Place the index finger on the second course,
pluck,
release the index, allowing it to return to the rest position,
place the middle finger on the second course so that it mutes both
strings at once,
pluck with the middle finger,
release it to return to the rest position,
place the index finger on the second course, and so on.

When this motion is firmly established, it can be practiced on the third and fourth courses and in patterns of repeated notes alternating

between two courses to gain fluency in string crossings. Remember, however, to proceed slowly and deliberately.

All of this may seem like a lot of trouble, I know. But your tone and articulation will improve dramatically. Be sure to feel both strings on the fingertip before plucking; watch in a mirror to see if you've succeeded. Eventually your ear will tell you. And be aware of the feeling of coming down on top of the course and pressing it into the top slightly as you prepare to pluck.

Although the thumb-index stroke depends largely on the motion of the arm rather than the fingers, some of the same rules apply. You should, again, feel both strings against the finger before you pluck, whether the impetus for the plucking is from the finger joints or from the arm. It is simply a question of which muscles do the job of placing the finger on the course and pulling it off. For the middle-index alternation, the fingers do the work. For the thumb-index technique, the arm provides most of the energy. In both cases, however, the placement of the fingers on top of the course does not vary if the tone is to be solid and clear. Try to pluck with a hard and clean tone, as Thomas Robinson says. None of this will do you much good if you mince around with it. Stick your fingers in the lute and play out!

The final objective, of course, is not that one should merely be able to play staccato, but rather that the exact contact point of the finger against the strings be exactly defined and felt with unflinching accuracy so that the greatest variation and control of articulation becomes possible.

Guitarists who have never tried this exercise will find it beneficial to their playing as well.