

Recovery from Focal Dystonia

BY KATHARYN R. BENESSA

I have always loved being a student and have reaped immeasurable benefits from many exemplary teachers, however, none have had more impact than Patrick O'Brien. It is no exaggeration to state that he changed the course of my life.

In the summer of 2013 I attended my first weeklong seminar held by the Lute Society of America in New London, CT. As a classical guitarist, my reason for studying lute was not merely a linear progression to expand my knowledge of the guitar to other plucked-string instruments. Rather, my guitar playing had been sabotaged 13 years earlier by a repetitive stress disorder called focal dystonia, a disorder so devastating that I could no longer perform or even play the simple pieces I assigned to beginning students. To remain in music I sought a new path, and so explored delving into early plucked-string instruments, repertoire, and technique. Patrick O'Brien's teaching not only brought me back to the guitar, but also was a catalyst in overcoming many limitations, as well as opening up other aspects of my playing on both guitar and lute. An additional benefit was the reformation of my teaching.

I am one of countless players whom O'Brien helped. The techniques he developed (and I struggle for the right word—retraining, therapy, rehabilitation—all three apply) not only had me playing again, but also altered my understanding of what constitutes a good hand position, thus making me a far more informed player and effective teacher.

This is how the whole mess started.

Development of Focal Dystonia

I began playing classical guitar at 13. I loved it more than anything, and persevered, studying music seriously through to master's degrees in guitar performance and music history. In my late thirties a problem with my playing emerged. At that point, I was enjoying a rewarding, weekly, three-hour gig at a wine bar. My repertoire included "Granados," "Cuba," and "Rumores de la Caleta" by Albéniz, most of the Bach Violin Partita in B minor, BWV 1002, Brouwer's "El Decameron Negro," Rodrigo's "Invocación y Danza," and dozens of smaller pieces. My shining technique—

and the one that undid me—was the tremolo. In addition to the Rodrigo, I played Tarréga's "Recuerdos de la Alhambra," Barrios's "Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios," and "Campañas de Alba" by Eduardo Sainz de la Maza. It was an obsession, and not a healthy one.

Achieving a satisfying plateau in my playing and aided by the benefit of a regular venue that provided the advantage of immediate feedback and improvement, I was able to learn pieces rapidly. Some works I considered gig-fillers, such as Sor's "Grand Solo," while others were closer to my heart, including anything by Julio César Oliva. This period was the most successful, comfortable, and relaxed I had ever felt about my playing. Then, out of the blue, small inconsistencies began creeping into my playing.

In March 2001 was my last real concert. I had been working up new material, including Manuel de Falla's "Seven Spanish Songs," a very challenging set of pieces requiring a fast, strong arpeggio. I felt fully up to the task. Indeed, I was proud of the fact that my arpeggios had become so fluent. However, while working on this material, something went seriously wrong. I experienced a significant and startlingly rapid decline in my abilities. Suddenly I could not play a *p-i-a* arpeggio evenly or at speed. I pushed through that concert with an uneven performance and returned to the drawing board to figure out what had gone wrong.

Attempts at Recovery

The following section gives an account of the numerous attempts I made to regain my playing ability. Through this chronicle I hope to: 1) alert those experiencing similar symptoms of an as-yet undiagnosed repetitive stress disorder; 2) connect with the focal dystonia community; and 3) educate those who have never experienced a repetitive stress disorder so that they may recognize it in others. Many advanced instructors are not aware of how symptoms manifest, and may jump to the conclusion that a student has not been practicing well, correctly, or enough, despite protests to the contrary. Here I document everything I tried. Some attempts were rational, others, just stabs in the dark. At best, I hope to save someone time lost to unsuccessful experimentation. It is important to note that many professional players develop focal dystonia and are subsequently robbed of their careers. In fact, O'Brien came to develop his process and exercises due to his own repetitive stress disorder, tendinitis. I often wonder how many of my misguided attempts to cure myself crossed paths with O'Brien's own search.

I rationalized that my practicing had become nonproductive as a result of my weekly gig. Because I was burning through many new pieces,

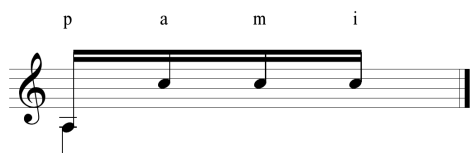
I was getting away from slow technical practice, and so I focused on the basics of technique: scales, arpeggios, and tremolo. Nothing was more problematic than the tremolo. My once shining technique had become ragged. Convinced that if I could conquer those techniques everything else would fall back into place, I initiated slow, methodical practice. In addition to inaccuracies such as missing strings and loss of control, I began to lose speed as well. Once a finger struck a string it remained stuck, curled near my palm, as if magnetized. There was no natural release of the finger. With great effort I would force the finger back to its playing position. The most problematic finger was *m*, the middle finger, but my entire hand was affected. In an effort to maintain a good position by force, my hand cramped up: the thumb collapsed in toward the palm, as did the ring and middle fingers, and this forced the index and pinky fingers to stick out farther. I later learned that the only dystonic finger was the *m* finger. It received confused and conflicting signals, causing it to not function properly. All the other problems were compensating movements, attempts by the thumb and other fingers to “help” the *m* finger do what it no longer could.

And so I continued to drill. Like any professional or semiprofessional musician, I was so well-trained that giving up or slowing down in the face of a problem was counterintuitive. Unthinkable. The tendency was to hunker down and work harder. I was a good student and this is what I was taught: more drilling! True to my training, I began working more intensively, but there were consequences to this continued and furious repetition. Little did I know that I was making every mistake in the book and insuring that my technique would continue to erode.

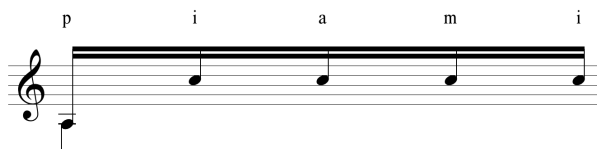
Research and Further Experimentation

With increasing frustration, and as yet no diagnosis, I pushed every possible technical button with the hope of finding that one elusive magic exercise that would steer me back to effortless playing. I tried binding pairs of fingers with medical adhesive tape; I experimented with exceedingly slow practice; conversely, I worked loudly and quickly in speed bursts; I adopted the five-note flamenco tremolo (*p-i-a-m-i*) (Examples 1a & 1b), reasoning that changing typical practice techniques and adding challenges would trick my hand into behaving; to keep *m* and *a* from sticking to my palm, I played holding the pinky in the palm, thus forcing my other fingers outward.

I was at my wit's end. The thing I loved most had slipped away, and what was worse, I had no explanation for it. The only forms of



Example 1a. Four-note tremolo.



Example 1b. Five-note tremolo.

musician's repetitive stress injuries I was aware of were carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis. I knew I was not experiencing these maladies because there was no pain or other symptoms. The only way to describe my experience was imagining that I had a stroke isolated to one hand. Searching for information in the early days of the internet yielded little: page after page of carpal tunnel- and tendinitis-related sites popped up before I finally discovered focal dystonia (thankfully, this is no longer the case). I had never heard of focal dystonia, but at last there was a condition that accurately described my experience. Still, the information was minimal. Often musician's dystonia was a footnote to other medical dystonias. Certainly, no cure was mentioned.

The best explanation I found of why focal dystonia developed suggested that the nerve impulses from the brain to the fingers were altered by excessive repetition. It seemed that after many years of fast repetitive movement, the nerves slowly rewired themselves by connecting impulses and combining functions. Rather than enabling numerous tiny, individual strokes, the brain decides to help by making all the fingers function as one, thus creating a far more efficient movement (but useless for a guitarist). This idea made so much sense to me and explained why my focal dystonia had developed when my technique had reached its peak of efficiency. It also explained why my playing worsened gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, and then rapidly, as I furiously drilled.

What was done could be undone, or so I surmised. But how? Despite enlightening knowledge of the disorder, my experimentation was no more successful than before. I obsessed over any type of repetitive motion in my right hand, oscillating between not using it at all to using the *m* finger exclusively. I considered replacing *m* with the mostly unused fourth finger, or pinky, and worked from Charles Postleware's

Right Hand Studies for Five Fingers. I questioned whether exercising the pinky finger would awaken nerve signals to the brain and rebalance my hand.

Tremolo and arpeggio techniques had disappeared first, but eventually any repeated pattern was inaccessible. Plucking four-note chords in the Milán pavans was as equally impossible as playing tremolo and scales in Rodrigo's "Invocación y Danza." I fulfilled my last small gigs, which I endured with an increasingly clenched right hand and an overwhelming sense of loss and frustration. Without tangible improvement in sight, I eventually stopped playing and teaching altogether. Astonishingly, after playing for 27 years, I had quit. The thought would have been unfathomable to me if it had not happened so insidiously.

New Ideas and Therapies

After a hiatus of several years, I renewed my search for information. By then the internet had a bit more to offer. I learned about guitarist David Leisner, who recovered from focal dystonia by his own process. An article in *Guitar Review* (#133, 2006) detailed a description of Leisner's restorative method with photos of his technique employing the larger muscles and moving the entire arm to strike the string rather than moving only a finger. Other therapies were being discussed and I experimented with many, including sensory exercises, such as playing while wearing a medical glove, or stimulating the fingertip pads by touching scratchy surfaces. I created a homemade splint to prevent the finger from curving too much. Using the splint and moving my whole hand and arm in large arcs was promising. I could play many pieces up to a certain level, and I performed a bit with a duet partner, but there was no permanent change. Upon removing the splint, full-blown focal dystonia returned. Eventually, playing with the splint felt like faking it (and created other tensions in the hand), and that brief foray back into music became a humbling, painful reminder of what I could no longer do.

New approaches and therapies continued to emerge. I learned of varying body awareness techniques that were purported to help, specifically Feldenkrais and Body Mapping. Both of these techniques are beneficial for developing awareness of a lifetime of ineffectual physical habits, which leads one to "hold" muscles and frame inefficiently. Through these techniques I gained a better understanding of how to move my body and release muscular tension, and I continue to benefit from the work done. Feldenkrais sessions were the most beneficial. As

much a mental exercise as a physical one, it is a natural fit for musicians. I learned to release how I “held” my skeletal frame, freeing it to function more efficiently. Through several months of classes I became aware of more elegant ways to move in or out of any position. The process was equally relaxing and energizing.

While Feldenkrais teaches one to move more efficiently by practical application and experimentation, Body Mapping aims to deepen one’s anatomical knowledge of how the skeleton moves at its optimum level, thereby removing inaccuracies of perception by changing the brain’s faulty “map.” While the concepts explored in Body Mapping sessions helped in a general way, there was a frustrating lack of consistency and applicability to my movement problems on the guitar. One of the issues was the practitioner’s Aaron Shearer-based approach to guitar technique, which did not convincingly coordinate with Body Mapping. About six months into the sessions, I began a detailed log of my practice. With the recommended supinated hand position (forearm and hand turned in toward the guitar), I worked on the assigned Shearer exercises, which often exacerbated my dystonic symptoms. The exercises ranged from striking a single finger on an open string to small arpeggio patterns using *p-i-m* and *p-m-a*. I was instructed to employ excessive preparation in arpeggio exercises and to play these exercises with a metronome, gradually increasing speed. Metronome practice and preparation felt counterintuitive. This was precisely the type of practice that had caused focal dystonia in the first place, but I carried on.

Four months of logging my practice sessions provided no evidence of the effectiveness of the approach. The exercises were so dull and the improvement so negligible that it was difficult to maintain the motivation to practice. Every time my practice was interrupted for even a couple days, I would have to restart at the lowest metronome setting. None of the previous work had created even the slightest degree of permanent change or improvement. After 10 months of costly sessions, I came to the disappointing realization that I still could not alternate *i-m* on one string. I quit the sessions, more frustrated than before.

Thirteen years after acquiring focal dystonia, I found that sensory retraining exercises did not help, using a splint did not help, and Body Mapping did not help. I did not pursue other available approaches—Botox, doctors, or specialists—due not only to constraints of finances and location, but to their lack of appeal, as popular as many of these are. I was in contact with several musicians who attended sessions with specialists, and they subsequently shared what they could with me, but they had no more luck in improving than I did.

Differing Methods

Focal dystonia-retraining methods are divided between two camps, physical versus emotional rehabilitation. My belief that rehab needed to be physical was based on the rationale that if physical repetition got me into this mess, then it would get me out. Perhaps this reasoning was intuitive as well, but it is why O'Brien's techniques resonated so strongly with me: his approach is based strictly on physical awareness and change, and supported by anatomical knowledge, unlike my own haphazard experimentation. As I later learned, O'Brien took an anatomy class in his pursuit for answers, a step I never considered. He learned and internalized a practical understanding about the hand and arm. This was part of his genius, his relentless pursuit of all avenues.

Practitioners specializing in emotional rehabilitation often assert that focal dystonia develops from fear or insecurity, or the loss of joy and meaning in playing music. I never believed my symptoms stemmed from this premise. Indeed, I believe some of these approaches take advantage of the insecurities that all musicians face, whether professionals or amateurs. I remained committed to the belief that the cause was purely physical, a true repetitive stress disorder. Emotional distress was the bitter condiment.

Typically, with retraining attempts, I frequently experienced immediate improvement, followed by a marked decline. So why was there no lasting improvement in any of these methods? Was I doing something wrong? The fact is that any new approach in playing can temporarily bring relief and a sense of progress. A slight change in technique is enough to temporarily trick dystonic symptoms, disorienting them long enough to take on the disguise of improvement. The relief that comes with this positive feedback gives us enough pleasure to think we've found *it*: "The Method," or even, "The Cure!" And when we hit the inevitable wall, we return to our old narrative, telling ourselves it was just a bad day in a group of good ones, or blaming ourselves for not practicing the technique correctly, or long enough. A bad day quickly becomes a bad week or month. The truth is that no lasting change occurred and no improvement was made. The sufferer has chased yet another red herring.

Realization

Around that time I made a videotape. Since I had been working on my playing through these various therapies, I wondered if there had been any improvement, even questioning if the problem was as bad as

I thought. The truth flattened me—the awfulness and artlessness was undeniable. The interruption of normal finger movement caused musical stuttering, missed notes, lack of flow, and inconsistent rhythm. The playing was stilted, without beauty or joy. The unsuccessful forays into practicing—lured by the tantalizing glimpses of recovery—reminded me how much I missed playing, how intrinsically my life was tied to it. Life's experiences were processed through daily practice: it was nurturing and inspiring. Since I could not go back to a life without creating sound, the next step was figuring out what I could do and concentrating on that.

Rasgueado was still an available technique (extensor movement was not hindered), and I could do all the great thumb work indicative of flamenco. I tried to isolate flamenco music that utilized mostly rasgueado, but this kind of playing is best suited for accompanying dancers and singers, and there were not many opportunities for that where I lived.

Exploring the lute and the art of continuo playing for early music ensembles was another option. I knew, or was reminded by the last experience, that I was still musical. In fact, my faculty for expression and phrasing felt more assured, despite not having physically played for so long. The technique required to play accompaniment seemed attainable since it requires astute and sensitive listening more than the virtuosic skills of fast arpeggios and scales.

Lastly, to cultivate past passions for music history and theory, I returned to school to pursue a doctoral degree, thus broadening the subjects I could teach. Moreover, fostering competence in early music performance aligned with a degree in music history. For these reasons, I attended my first Lute Society of America summer seminar in New London, CT, no longer a guitarist, but somehow still a musician.

And I met Patrick O'Brien, lutenist and pedagogue.

Patrick O'Brien

Before the seminar, I wrote director Dr. Jason Priset about my circumstance as a once-advanced guitarist with focal dystonia, asking him to advise me on what classes to take. While my intentions were to gain more solid footing with the lute and period instruments, Dr. Priset informed me that faculty member Patrick O'Brien was a specialist in hand problems. Frankly, by this time I did not place much stock in the efficacy of any method, but I appreciated the gesture. Once there, after the first evening's introductory remarks in the concert hall, O'Brien approached me, and in his first few words, offered to help. I had no idea what was to come, but O'Brien's cut-to-the-chase introduction turned out to be a

game changer. The help he offered was real, immediate, life-changing, and gratis. Generous of spirit and with his time, O'Brien was a true and inspiring teacher and gave me one of the grandest gifts of my life.

PATRICK O'BRIEN'S DISARTICULATION THERAPY

The Exercises: Instruction and Practice

The following exercises are those that O'Brien taught me at the LSA seminar in 2013, including all the handouts he subsequently sent. I have included texts from our correspondence, which further define the exercises and offer support, as well as an additional lesson he taught via skype. I repeatedly offered to pay him for these lessons and the additional advice—he always changed the subject. Later I wrote him that I wanted to help others and share what he taught me, and I asked his permission to use the handouts. He replied, "Catching up on some e-mail a little late. Please share anything you want with anyone" (email, November 5, 2013).

So here it all is.

Preliminary Exercise: Moving from the MCP Joint

While sitting with O'Brien in a concert hall during a lute band practice break, he shared a bit of his own history with repetitive stress disorder. He was personal, intimate, and tearful, and I knew then that he had been through what I had, that he had been as heartbroken by it as I had, and that his intent and ability to help was genuine. From that moment he took every opportunity to instruct me, starting with my first lesson that afternoon.

It should be carefully noted that this and all subsequent exercises are not exercises to master and then move past, returning to the old ways of playing after achieving results. These exercises establish a new hand position, finger movement, and sense of looseness. They should be played daily as the way to set up the main hand position.

The first exercise is done away from the instrument and establishes the basic finger movements required for subsequent exercises on the guitar. O'Brien illustrated the finger movement against the velvet chair backs in the concert hall. Allowing the fingertip joints (called the distal interphalangeal [DIP] joints) to collapse or give fully, brush your fingertips against a cloth surface such as an upholstered chair, couch cushion, or against the knee of your jeans (i.e., a textured, rather than a slippery material). Extend your fingers and brush them gently as a group against

the surface in toward the palm. Allow the DIP joints to completely relax like the bristles of a paintbrush, then release the fingers back to the neutral position from the large knuckle joints where the palm meets the fingers (the metacarpophalangeal [MCP] joints). Complete this movement slowly and deliberately several times.

Next, execute this movement one finger at a time. While the other fingers remain out, move the index finger slowly in toward the palm, allowing the fingertip joint to relax fully and release out from the MCP joint. Continue with the middle finger, then ring finger, and even the pinky, several times for each finger. This exercise is about creating a relaxed, soft move, allowing the DIP joint to fully give, or collapse. I still do these exercises often, returning to the image of a paintbrush and the softness and flexibility of the bristles. Another helpful image is to imagine petting or even picking up a fluffy baby chick. It is this soft, giving-way of the fingertip joint and relaxed follow-through and release that can be continuously cultivated and improved. There is no stress or “work” in this movement.

First Exercise on the Instrument (Handouts 1 and 2)

Of these first handouts, O’Brien entitled one “Disarticulation Therapy,” a name I find myself returning to frequently as it perfectly demonstrates O’Brien’s clever, pithy wit, as well as the basis of his revolutionary approach. I will return to this concept at the end of the lessons (Examples 2a & 2b).

For the first exercise on the guitar, rest the thumb on the 3rd string. This will place your hand in position over the treble strings with the *a* finger hovering over the first string. Place the index finger against the first string in preparation to play, touching the string, but not playing it. What the rest of the hand is doing now is equally important: allow the remaining fingers to dangle or hang loosely. The fingers should not curl or curve into the standard C-shape playing position. Now observe what the index finger is doing as it rests against the first string. Players with dystonia may experience mild to severe shaking at this point. They are instructed not to play yet, nor to hinder or control the shaking in any way. As the finger rests against the string, allow the DIP (tip) joint to fully collapse (which may further increase the shaking—that is okay). The player should not release the stroke until the shaking completely stops, *no matter how long it takes*. This is the first step to playing without dystonia. Once shaking stops, let the finger play with a large follow-through toward the palm, then release the finger *straight back* from the MCP joint

First Steps

i and a fingers must remain completely relaxed throughout,
 m must reach complete passive extension of the tip joint before plucking,
 follow through as deeply as comfortably possible on each pluck,
 m must relax completely, in one smooth motion, between plucks.

I a

p may remain resting on third string

I b

m and a fingers must remain completely relaxed throughout

p may remain resting on third string

I c

a finger must remain completely relaxed throughout

p may remain resting on third string

I d

i and m must remain completely relaxed throughout

p may remain resting on third string

I e

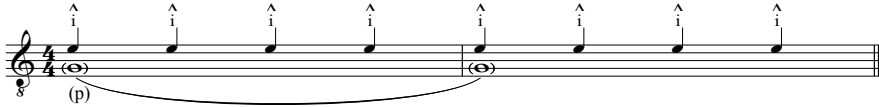
i and m must remain completely relaxed throughout

p may remain resting on third string

Example 2a. Disarticulation therapy handout by Patrick O'Brien: First steps.

Rest Strokes

Ia Index plays rest strokes without disturbing the surrounding fingers, relaxing promptly in one smooth motion beginning from the MP joint.



Thumb rests gently on third string, which keeps you MP joint roughly over the top strings.
Continue on inner strings down to basses:



I b and c Go on to m and a fingers.

II Index plays free strokes, without disturbing the surrounding fingers, relaxing promptly in one smooth motion from the MP and PIP joints.



Thumb rest on the second string

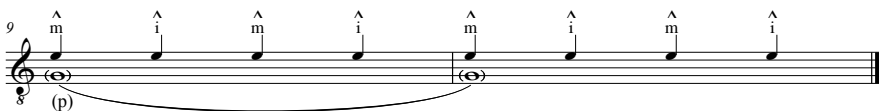
Continue on inner strings:



II b and c Go on to m and a fingers.

III & IV

Go on to simple alternations of fingers, whichever work best at first, rest or free, again whichever is working better at first, don't try for everything at once. You are untying a complex knot, beginning by freeing the loosest end first.



Example 2b. Disarticulation therapy handout by Patrick O'Brien: Rest strokes.

without pulling or popping up, even minutely! When O'Brien gave me this instruction I thought, "Well, obviously! I have *always* released out, not up." I considered it a basic tenet of my technique, reinforced early and often in my studies.

Nevertheless, after careful examination I was extremely surprised to discover otherwise in one specific and telling instance. All of my fingers released out properly, as I had expected, *except one*: my *m* finger (the dystonic one!) released by pulling up, very slightly, and then out, creating a subtly circular motion. To clarify, this technical flaw of pulling up occurred because I was not getting clearance on the release. As the longest finger, the back of the nail of the middle finger would have grazed the string on the release, and so I developed, unknowingly, a slight lift to clear the return. Imagine repeating this tiny pulling-up movement thousands of times during tremolo and arpeggio practice. I believe that movement was the origin of my dystonia. Observing this, I adjusted my hand. You may find you have to lower the hand (over the treble strings) and perhaps arch your wrist *slightly* more.

The idea of collapsing the DIP fingertip joint is an adjustment not easily accepted in modern guitar technique. It is something trained out of our technique from the beginning of study. Simply, it is not permitted. However, it is an essential part of O'Brien's method and not optional. Even if the player does not have dystonia, I recommend experimenting with this technique. Believe me, nothing bad will happen to you, or your fingers, or the guitar! Unless you are a young player, you may be surprised by how little the fingertips now actually yield. As you execute this type of movement, see if you can notice a difference in tension, not necessarily in the finger, but in the tendons of the wrist and along the forearm.

Repeat this exercise with the same finger several times without rushing to "master" the exercise or attempting to "practice" it. Then proceed to the middle finger on the first string, always allowing the tremor or dystonic shaking to completely stop before playing. For these exercises, never use a metronome or attempt to maintain a regular rhythm. As I said, it was working on this exercise slowly and deliberately that showed me that I did in fact pull up very slightly with my *m* finger only. Another sensation that will reveal itself when playing slowly and fully attentive to every movement, is that some fingers feel more fluid than others. I found that my *a* finger felt the loosest with the least sticky release. Indeed, when isolated for this exercise, the *a* finger felt almost like how I remembered normal finger movement to be. It became the exemplar of the feeling I endeavored to regain in the rest of my hand, and I constantly referred back to it.

One challenging aspect of this exercise was allowing the fingers that were not playing to hang loosely rather than curving into a nice hand position. I asked O'Brien for verification of this position, and the following is our exchange:

KATHARYN BENESSA: While playing one finger and keeping the other fingers completely relaxed . . . that means the relaxed fingers remain “hanging” and slightly, naturally curved, and do not move sympathetically with the finger that is playing, right?

PATRICK O'BRIEN: Yes. For now I want the unused fingers hanging completely limp with no attempt to hold any kind of normal playing position like an arpeggio or chord shape where they each aim at their respective strings. Right now the hidden tension which might be in their tips when you hold them over the strings is to be avoided. Eventually you can trust yourself to hold such a position from the middle joints of the fingers and not the tips.

BENESSA: And with the arpeggio pattern *imia*, should I be preparing/planting at all?

O'BRIEN: No planting. The default position of an unused finger has to be relaxation “for the duration of the emergency,” as they used to say in WWII.

Mostly, you have to be able to monitor the complete relaxation of the idle fingers right now and memorize a new standard for relaxation (email, July 24, 2013).

Relaxation is discussed in other retraining therapies, but in a more general way. Being instructed to relax while maintaining one's old hand position is quite different than allowing the fingers to hang loosely. Again, even if you do not have a repetitive stress disorder, try this technique of playing with a collapsed fingertip while allowing the rest of the fingers to hang loosely. It is not easy. You may be surprised by how the fingers want to hold (or push) themselves into a trained, curved hand position and how that physical expectation translates into excess tension.

O'Brien sent me two handouts with various versions of this exercise. Obviously, he altered and adjusted his exercises over time as he further refined his approach, and made allowances for each student's different issues. One exercise employs rest stroke and moves to the

second string, leading quickly to alternation of fingers. The second version, which is the one I primarily worked from, keeps whatever finger that is playing on the first string and uses free strokes. On page two of that handout, he offers additional instructions on variations of these exercises:

At some point it might be valuable to attempt adjustments in this basic format:

- 1) rest strokes,
- 2) moving the thumb to rest on lower strings,
- 3) plucking the fingers simultaneously with a rest stroke [on the bass notes,
- 4) what is perhaps the most difficult alternation, *m* and *a*,
- 5) alternation of fingers on separate strings, as in an arpeggio.

Further, O'Brien explained that it is not important to work diligently through each exercise and variation. "Of course none of these have to go in this particular order. Everyone is different. The key is totally relaxing your tip joints. Once upon a time most people played this way. You may have to shift your palm further out over the trebles and almost certainly broaden the arc of your nails" (email, July 22, 2013).

This is not the type of practicing that sets up a goal of mastering each combination before proceeding to the next. The player must learn to observe and listen carefully and let go of striving to accomplish anything. Rather than focusing on what is most difficult, the instruction is to first work on whatever is easiest, proceeding only when ready.

In the correspondence above, O'Brien mentions broadening the arc of the nail. He demonstrated to me how to find the best nail shape for this new hand position. Place the finger against the string and let the dystonia subside. Look closely at where the nail contacts the string and notice if there is any hook, curve, or point of the nail protruding. Shape a broad, flat surface so that the largest amount of nail makes contact with the string. With this technique I find I keep much shorter nails, especially for the *m* finger, which is beneficial because that slightly compensates for its length.

Exercises Coordinating for Fingers and Thumb

The next lesson is titled "basic right-hand exercise" and advises that "this will help establish your optimum right hand position" (Example 3).

basic right hand exercise

this will help establish your optimum right hand position

all finger strokes free

thumb rest strokes on fifth and sixth strings

alternative preliminary exercise

use this only if you need it for developing the main exercise above

5 free

rest

9

another alternative approach

again, use this only if you need it for developing the main exercise above

13

17

It sets up the hand and coordinates finger and thumb movements for both consecutive and simultaneous strokes. On O'Brien's handout I added letters A, B, and C for clarity. A, at the top of the page, is the end result. Most players with focal dystonia will need to lead up to that, and therefore should start with C or B. I started with C. For *all* of these exercises, the thumb will play *rest stroke* while the fingers play *free stroke*. This is not an optional step, but an intrinsic part of the setup for a solid hand position.

The first exercise above placed the hand lower, hovering over the treble strings. From that vantage, add rest stroke thumb, which means that the thumb will explore a wide range of movement at its largest joint near the wrist to reach up to the bass strings without moving the fingers away from the treble strings. Many players may find this challenging if they were previously stretching the fingers to the treble strings while moving the thumb less.

Whether playing notes consecutively as in Exercise C or B, or simultaneously as in Exercise A, the thumb plays a rest stroke, starting on the sixth string, while the index finger plays a free stroke on the third string. Continue the exercise with *m* on the second string, then *a* on the first string. Again, the fingers that are not playing must hang loosely, as before. Playing this simple exercise without dystonic tremor required patience. It was almost two weeks of working on these exercises before I experienced a release of tension from my hand.

When I first started, I practiced these lessons several times a day for no more than 10 minutes at a time. Once I noticed some improvement with Exercise C, I moved to Exercise B on the handout, using the same approach, and finally, several days later, to Exercise A, in which the thumb and a finger play simultaneously. Overwork and over-practicing are not going to help. In my experience, not rushing this stage was vital to my progress.

The brilliant effectiveness of this lesson compared to other retraining methods is that every problem within the hand is addressed in one exercise: the dystonic finger, the compensatory movements of the ring and pinky fingers, and especially the compensatory movement of the thumb, all balance out and begin to work independently. For myself, and I know for many others, the compensatory movement of the thumb created issues eventually surpassing the problem caused by the dystonic finger. O'Brien's exercises completely erased the problem with the thumb. Although I am still working to gain finger speed for some arpeggio patterns, the issue with my thumb completely disappeared after the first couple weeks and *has never returned*.

To summarize, the major points to follow are:

- 1) relaxing the tip joints like a paintbrush,
- 2) playing with a large follow-through,
- 3) releasing straight from MCP joint without any circular lifting,
- 4) keeping the fingers that are not playing loose and extended,
- 5) keeping the hand position low over the 1st string,
- 6) shaping the nails to create a broad flat surface.

Timeline

There are many expectations and outlines for how long one can expect focal dystonia retraining to take. I have seen videos claiming improvement in a couple hours. The therapists releasing those same videos also say that the player can expect treatment to require one year, and that they should expect setbacks along the way. I have also seen practitioners tell clients that they are now cured, even though they have not gained back many skills. There are certainly many ideas out there that work, but dubious procedures and therapies are abundant. Of course, I do not know the success rate of O'Brien's method or if he kept records. I also do not know if one ever fully recovers from focal dystonia, but I know that regaining most of one's skills is possible, and after navigating through a labyrinth of different approaches for many years, the progress I experienced with O'Brien's exercises was relatively rapid and has been long-lasting.

After only a couple weeks of playing these simple exercises (and nothing else), I was comfortable enough to try my most challenging techniques. With considerable work left to do, I refrained from returning immediately to repertoire. Continuing to work slowly, carefully rebuilding technique and stamina, I suffered no setbacks. Within four months I returned to working on repertoire, and two years later I continue to see improvements in coordination and speed.

This is how my condition progressed:

After three days of working on the exercises, I experienced increased shaking of *m* and *a*. I wrote O'Brien asking about this new development. He asked, "How much are you doing in a session? That is, how much time are you spending?" (email of July 29, 2013).

I explained that I was doing short 10-minute practice sessions four to five times a day, starting with the exercise away from the instrument, then building from the first exercise with one finger alone on a string, and finally on to the thumb and finger exercises.

He concluded, “You are likely in a “research and development” phase rather than a production phase. Sometimes the shaking is your body trying to separate crossed wires and decide which method of motion is the right one” (email of July 29, 2013). His patience and straightforward explanations responses always calmed me.

After one week of the same practice, I experienced some muscular twitching in my right upper arm, like electrical jolts. It was an odd sensation, but not at all painful. My interpretation of the sensation was that these new movements were causing the fascia—the tissue surrounding muscles—to release their old way of “holding” my muscles in certain positions. If that is accurate, this indeed was leading to real rehabilitation.

It took about 10 days of this same manner of practicing before there was a reduction in the tremors and a decrease in tension or resistance from the fingers that were hanging loosely. The freedom and openness within the hand was new and so encouraging (after 15 years of extremely inhibited playing) that I was tempted to try a piece. I got out the Bach Double, which had been my go-to piece since I was an undergrad, and I played the A section (Example 4). I could play and *locate* all the strings and notes without tremors, which seemed nothing short of miraculous. Resisting going further, I returned to O’Brien’s exercises, which I now loved and appreciated for their ability to treat the entire package—hand, fingers, and thumb—with one all-encompassing technique, thus creating a completely balanced machine.



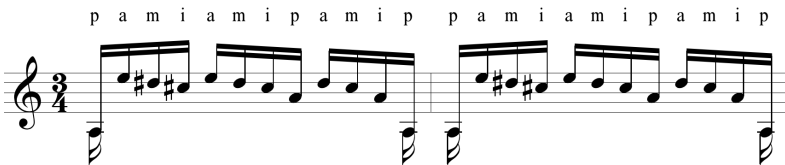
Example 4. Bach Double.

I wrote to O’Brien telling him of my success. He responded: “GREAT! Finger alternation slowly becomes slow scales whenever you are ready [so] stay slow, smooth and independent in your right hand, relaxing each plucking finger before you engage the next, and do all that while the left is busy.

“Arpeggios are harder at first. Remember how far out over the treble you have to place your hand for the first free strokes? You have to do that for arpeggios in this way: place the hand way out over the trebles for a really loose free ‘a’ finger on the first string. That means you aren’t placing the right hand just for the index’s convenience or even the middle. You have to be all the way out for the ‘a’ on first string and stay there. That means your thumb is going to have to reach back to the basses from there and thus play mostly rest strokes on the bass strings” (email of August 6, 2013).

He later reminded me to keep the fingers that are not playing loose and hanging: “and the flexed index fingers with no effect on the middle fingers” (email, August 12, 2013).

The main difficulty lay in resisting the temptation to return to old repertoire and practicing too much. There was instant gratification in picking up a piece and making music, like a diet of candy and potato chips, but playing too much created pain the next day. My hand was out of shape. To regulate myself and gradually build up technique and stamina, I pulled out the Julio S. Sagreras *Guitar Lessons*, Books 1-6, and resolved to work through it, page by page, careful not to complete more than a few pages a day. The Sagreras method was my own idea and chosen because it contains many small exercises or pieces that increase in difficulty very gradually. Since most of the material was unfamiliar, no old habits could creep in. By week two I was up to Lesson 19 in Sagreras, Book 2. Since I had barely been able to play two consecutive notes cleanly for 15 years, my hand was out of shape and tired quickly. When the lessons became more challenging, I returned to Book 1, page 1, and started again, watching that my hand remained loose. In this way I continued carefully building skills and stamina with a new hand position. I began incorporating other études, including those with previously problematic patterns, such as the descending arpeggio in Brouwer Étude #6, one of the most challenging patterns for players with dystonia (Example 5).



Example 5. Descending arpeggio in Brouwer Étude #6.

I did not practice the études in the traditional way. I did not attempt to play even remotely correct rhythms. I executed a stroke only after the required finger or fingers were completely relaxed, tip joints collapsed, and other fingers loose. I definitely did not use a metronome. The point of this practice was in *building skills* by executing the different finger combinations required for each exercise, with the added benefit of creating pretty sounds and not being bored by tedious repetition. There was no attempt to create a cohesive, flowing piece of music. With the fingers hanging loosely, it can feel like there is no control and the tone may not be what it was. Do not try to manipulate that result. Remember that O’Brien named his approach Disarticulation Therapy—I did not attempt to articulate the stroke or line of music at all. As the looseness got easier, I found

I did not need the level of control I once thought I did, and eventually my tone began to improve. I was committed to the process, proceeded slowly, and enjoyed holding the instrument and moving my fingers.

I did not advance to the next step until after doing the above exercises as well as working on simple études. This took two months, as I waited until the dystonic symptoms declined significantly. I did not try to replicate a proper hand position. Encouraged by the looseness of my hand, I attempted more challenging techniques such as tremolo and crossed-string trills, two techniques I never thought I would regain because of the finger independence required, and yet now I found them completely accessible, albeit far from strong. Thrilled by my progress, I videotaped myself playing these techniques and sent the files to O'Brien. Ever the perennial teacher, rather than focusing on my accomplishments, he saw only what was left to improve.

We skyped approximately three months after I initiated working on the lessons, but because it took a while to coordinate our schedules, it is likely I could have moved on to the following step at two months. I was now prepared to relearn how to play with a normal hand position, allowing my fingers to curve without the trademark compensatory movement of the pinky, and sometimes the ring finger, popping out.

Using a Thimble

To facilitate the adjustment to a normal hand position, O'Brien recommended I acquire an accountant's thimble, which is a plastic tip that fits over the finger. (I found mine at an office supply store, and they are called "Rubber Finger Tips." Do not use a sewing thimble—they are made of metal and will scratch your guitar!) Placing the thimble on my *a* finger made it longer and allowed the finger to stand on the soundboard. Resting the finger on the soundboard creates stability, while the thimble adds necessary height to the length of a finger, allowing the basic hand position to remain unchanged. Finding the thimble too loose I put in it some cloth to prevent it from falling off. O'Brien then assigned the following studies: the Aguado arpeggio étude in A minor (op. 6, Lesson 19) and the Carcassi Étude #7 (from the 25 *Études*, op. 60). The Carcassi étude has a three-note repeated pattern, like a tremolo; however, O'Brien instructed I play it *i-m-i*, rather than *a-m-i* in order to keep the *a* finger in the thimble.

Being assigned the little Aguado piece was an unexpected and satisfying surprise. Most guitar teachers who develop focal dystonia have one piece that is the harbinger of the demise of their playing. These pieces are typically for beginners and are taught often. For many it is the descending

arpeggio of the anonymous Spanish romance (Example 6). For me it was the Aguado étude. (Example 7) I had been teaching it to a student, and during the lesson I realized I could not play the simple arpeggio pattern for even one measure.

Example 6. Descending arpeggio of anonymous Spanish romance.

Slowly practice the Aguado with the ring finger in the thimble resting on the soundboard. The finger may want to pop out in compensatory movement but should eventually settle down and tension will leave the entire hand. After the Aguado becomes comfortable (several days), add the more challenging Carcassi étude (Example 8). I found it was sufficient to work only on the A section. As the *a* finger began to feel comfortable in that position, I moved the thimble to the pinky finger, working on the same études, but that was my own variation and not part of Pat's instruction. Moving the thimble to the pinky may not work as well for all players since the pinky is typically a significantly shorter finger and the hand position could be altered (I added more cloth padding to make the pinky longer).

There is most assuredly a relationship with this thimble exercise to lute technique in which the pinky rests on the soundboard, and it is one element particular to O'Brien's approach. If he did not have a background in lute, he may never have arrived at this option. Classical guitarists have long rejected planting the pinky on the instrument, lumping it with what are considered mediocre folk techniques. It may be time to rethink this viewpoint.

After four months of retraining and sticking to the exercises described, I started working on repertoire in earnest. Favoring short pieces that did not rely on constant arpeggios or scale work, I aimed for modest successes.

End Results

This is not a miracle cure that will have guitarists playing Villa-Lobos études at breakneck speed in five months. Perhaps that result

Arpeggio Study

Dionisio Aguado

The musical score for 'Arpeggio Study' by Dionisio Aguado is presented in a single system with 15 measures. The notation is as follows:

- Measure 1:** Treble clef, 2/4 time. Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 2:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 3:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 4:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 5:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 6:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 7:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p . Marked **Fine**.
- Measure 8:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 9:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 10:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 11:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 12:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 13:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 14:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p .
- Measure 15:** Chord: i (finger 1), m (finger 2), i (finger 1). Dynamics: p . Marked **D.C.**

Example 7. Aguado arpeggio study typeset by Patrick O'Brien.

Allegro.

f

f

Poco ritentto.

p

f

mf

mf

mf

res.

f

mf

Poco ritentto.

p

11425.

Detailed description: The image shows a page of musical notation for Carcassi Étude #7. It consists of ten staves of music, each beginning with a treble clef and a common time signature. The piece starts with the tempo marking 'Allegro.' and a dynamic of *f*. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, such as sixteenth-note runs and eighth-note chords. There are several dynamic markings throughout, including *f*, *mf*, *p*, and *res.*. A tempo change to 'Poco ritentto.' is indicated in the third and tenth staves. The score includes fingering numbers (1-5) and breath marks (z). The page number '11425.' is centered at the bottom.

Example 8. Carcassi Étude #7. Matteo Carcassi. *25 Etudes Mélodiques.* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, n.d.[1852]).

is possible for some, but I have not yet achieved it. What I have accomplished is the ability to play again in a tangible way, unattainable only a few years previously. Currently in the final stages of my doctoral degree, writing a dissertation, and teaching 10–14 credit hours a semester, I have little time to practice. Many days the only time I play is when I teach, but focal dystonia no longer hinders my playing of students' repertoire at all. That, in itself, is a tremendous breakthrough.

My own assessment of my level of recovery is this: in many works I have regained 80–90 percent of my previous skills, while in works that focus on arpeggio or tremolo I play at about 60–70 percent of my previous abilities. I do not have tremendous speed yet, but even that is improving. Frankly, speed is no longer a focus of my practice. I am diligent about bookending each practice session with Pat's Basic Hand Position Exercise, ensuring that looseness and ease are always cultivated, and indeed, expected. Over the course of this long journey my musical goals have changed, so the attraction of returning to repertoire I was proud of 15 years ago has not been a compelling factor. I have been so contented to *just play* that my priority is more on phrasing and expression rather than technically flashy works. Certainly, I am no longer interested in filler pieces for long gigs or wedding receptions. Concentrating on small gems that require less investment of time, but considerable rewards of charm and beauty, has led me to Llobet's Catalan folk-song arrangements and lots of Torroba. And I am playing Bach again, one significant hold-over from my past. From the B minor Violin Partita (BWV 1002), the allemande and the sarabande pose few problems, while the more arpeggiated doubles require careful attention to remain loose and untangled. I have tried my hand at tremolo in a short piece by Torroba and the technique is there, but I am patient in building up speed and no longer "woodshedding" tremolo.

Why it Works: Back to O'Brien's "Disarticulation"

Increasingly, I forget I ever had focal dystonia. I do not experience a loss of skills if I cannot practice for a few days, and a long warmup is not needed to get into real playing. There have been no setbacks or backsliding, but when I do miss too much practice or notice any stickiness of movement, I return to O'Brien's exercises, making adjustments, playing slowly and deliberately, and then after a day, or even a session of this slow, careful work, I am back to playing repertoire at the same level. This all feels like a normal practice session, unlike the experimental practice sessions I was doing before. There have been no tricks involved—mental

or physical. There have been no expensive treatments, nor the heartbreak of thinking I have improved, only to lose it again, as frequently occurs in other treatments. I am not questioning my mental state or wondering if there exists some emotional trauma I need to overcome, as many practitioners assert. In fact, the more I practice, and practice properly, the more my symptoms improve. No matter what is going on in life or how I am feeling, I know that I can pick up my guitar and practice, in many ways just as I did before the onset of focal dystonia, only now with newly refined skills.

Other available treatments—splints; playing different permutations of arpeggio patterns while employing techniques such as moving other parts of the body so that one is distracted from thinking about the hand movement; doing metronome work as a gauge to measure improvement; or sensory exercises (like playing while wearing a surgical glove)—may have the wrong end of the stick. I consider splints and sensory exercises as “tricks,” to a certain extent. Not that these approaches may not work for some people, but success seems arbitrary; practitioners and students *think* these ideas *might* work, although they are not entirely sure how, so they throw all the techniques in a bag, shake them up, and dump them on the player to see what sticks. Furthermore, these techniques are means to an end and are discarded once symptoms wane and the player returns to regular playing. If there was any aspect of their technique that caused focal dystonia, it may not have been identified or permanently changed. After several months of recovery via these techniques, it is not unusual for players to experience a renewed onslaught of dystonic symptoms. This occurs because they do not know what aspect of their technique actually was altered, and therefore cannot maintain it without the external trick.

The exercises and process that O’Brien developed are elegant and easy to replicate on one’s own. The entire hand is balanced, with fingers and thumb playing together, but working independently. Other than exercising the patience to not go too quickly or skip steps, or to quantify improvement by means of a metronome, the main challenge to the player is to be willing to give up old habits and ideas. Months of expensive sessions are not required. In my case I received a handful of short one-on-one sessions over the span of a week, followed by written feedback to my questions, and one skype follow-up session.

Consequently, while I was retraining I wondered whether the hand position exercise would work for my students. Its ability to set up the optimum right-hand position is important for all players. I asked O’Brien if he recommended the Right-Hand Position Exercise for regular students:

“Yes, I do use that same exercise for guitar. When combined with a rest stroke of the thumb on guitar it moves the hand out over the treble strings a bit and produces a hand position which looks and functions like the best of Segovia’s playing. That usually convinces the older players to try it” (email, May 21, 2014).

He elaborated later the same day: “In old film of Segovia when the camera views him from the front his fingertips are well under the palm of his hand as he plucks” (email, May 21, 2014). I now teach this to all my students and it successfully creates a good hand position, with the hand nicely curved, the fingers close to the strings and loose, and it is simple to return to when the hand goes astray. Ultimately, I believe O’Brien’s therapeutic approach can lead to a reevaluation of how guitar technique is taught.

From Articulation to Disarticulation

Articulation is a term often employed to suggest bringing out or expressing a musical line. It suggests added emphasis, whether that is accomplished by using rest strokes for the sumptuous melody of a Spanish romantic piece, or differentiating polyphonic lines in Bach. Often articulation implies a stroke that requires some kind of preparation or planting. This means that while some fingers are playing, others are anticipating what comes next and moving into position. Navigating multiple signals and sensory feedback simultaneously is what a musician does, many hours a day for 10, 20, or 30 years. It is not difficult to see how confusion can develop between the impulses the brain sends to the fingers that are playing versus those that are not (and hence the development of focal dystonia). Pat’s Disarticulation Therapy retrains the fingers to work independently, and without residual or compensating movements occurring in other fingers.

I now avoid a lot of planting or preparation in my playing, and it is not easy. That technique is ingrained! All those years of training taught me that planting was synonymous with articulation, offering a higher level of control. However, I have found that I do not need to prepare as much as I thought I did. Using only the fingers needed the moment required and not anticipating the next move is very difficult to get accustomed to: it feels out of control. Furthermore, much of the desire to plant for articulation has to do with the tone we expect to produce from a very precise stroke. I had to give up that expectation as well. When I began working on the first Sageras exercises in this loose manner, my tone was not what it once was and I had to fight my expectations. The good news is that after

I became comfortable with the loose hand and the unprepared stroke and began trusting my fingers to play the right notes at the right time, my tone returned.

O'Brien's idea of allowing the rest of the fingers to hang loosely is one of his exceptional concepts. Many other approaches, especially the use of splints to maintain the typical curved hand position, attempt to retrain the hand based on that central position. The problem is that because we have trained the entire hand to function as a unit, it is difficult to retrain independence from this same base. Allowing the fingers to dangle is one step in recovering independent, unconfused movement between fingers. Eventually, the playing of one finger will not cause the other fingers or thumb to act or react. That is how dystonic symptoms will be trained out of the hand and new, clear nerve impulses developed.

I am assuredly *not* advocating to not teach preparation or planting. It is a vital part of our technique and gives players, beginners especially, a basis for creating a stable, reliable hand position. The negative impact of preparation arises after long hours of intense practice for many years, as tackled by professionals and semi-professionals. O'Brien touched on this point. If you have ever taken one of O'Brien's classes, you look forward to his seemingly wandering, yet ultimately focused, analogies. One day he talked about how some people develop writer's cramp (which is also a form of focal dystonia) and how some typists acquire tendinitis. He explained how the development of the ballpoint pen led to writer's cramp. Before the invention of the ballpoint pen, people used an ink pen with a nib that had to be filled. With a nib you cannot press too hard or ink splashes out and paper is torn, so the hand had to be more relaxed to write and the writing had to be slower to not create any of the above problems. With the development of the ballpoint pen, people could write faster and the grip could become quite tight. He said that it was the combination of tension and speed that leads to writer's cramp. Likewise, early typewriters had a slower response, and the QWERTY keyboard layout was developed to slow down the typist to prevent the machine from jamming. When the electric typewriter was introduced, jamming became less of an issue, to the point where speed tests were developed. One can understand how this relentless typing "virtuosity" for many hours a day can lead to tendinitis.

Likewise, playing with relaxed fingertip joints also gives, at first, a feeling of lack of control to articulate or shape tone. However, this technique aids the release of tension in the entire hand. O'Brien's explanation as to why it is important for the release of a stroke straight out from the MCP joint rather than pulling up and creating a circular motion, is that the pulling up is a kind of flinch or fear response, which stems

from tension and is not a healthy movement to repeat excessively.

All of these tenets establish finger movements that create and result from the least amount of tension possible. You can experiment with all these movements away from an instrument: pick up small objects with the fingertips rigid, then again with them relaxed; move the fingers freely from the large knuckle, then conversely pull them up in the flinching motion. Observe changes of tension. The place I feel the greatest difference in tension between these two movements is in the tendons of the wrist and the forearm, but I can also feel a difference up to my shoulder blades.

O'Brien's therapy simultaneously addresses the balance of the entire hand and the developed glitches of each finger. His approach develops a hand position that he advised for everyone, not only for those afflicted with a repetitive stress disorder. The metronome is not used; one's gauge for progress is . . . progress. The problem for many players with this approach is developing patience. It is not that the process takes long to result in improvement—it is relatively fast—but to stick with it, to not be distracted into moving too fast, to commit to the new hand position as a permanent change to one's technique—these seem to be the areas where players lack patience. In the end, O'Brien's method taught me to get away from mindless drilling and the pursuit of virtuosity over style, beauty, and freedom of movement.

Conclusion

The best teachers inspire their students with both facts and new perspectives. Pat O'Brien, like many of his generation in the early music field, was an autodidact and therefore imparted not only inspiration, facts, and perspective, but his process and journey. His knowledge was less filtered through previous teachers and arrived at via his own queries and conclusions. He would have been the first to say that this is not always the most direct or efficient path, and dryly noted, after discussing a litany of failed ideas and experiments, that it is always the last idea that is the successful one.

Thanks to his sacrifice to the process, he developed an unequalled knowledge about plucked-string instruments, early music, and, specifically to this article, a highly refined approach to the technical aspect of playing. And as he taught himself, he became uniquely suited to teach others. Pat's genius—well, one of its facets—was to never stop questioning and to never settle, even if he found good answers. He continued to question, explore, and refine. He gave me a real solution with almost immediate improvement and consistent progress, and I

have been able to continue improving because of the process. It is a tremendous gift.

How serendipitous it was that, after accepting the loss of my ability on guitar, I headed to Connecticut to study lute, and found the guitar once again. The force was Pat. He taught hundreds of people to play lute and recover from technical problems. And yet, I felt like I had discovered him, like Indiana Jones cutting through the brush and coming upon a hidden treasure. I imagine all his students feel like that. And as with all wonderful teachers who treat their students as peers, he became a dear friend for the brilliant short flash of time I knew him.

I booked a flight for the following year's LSA seminar in Cleveland to continue lute studies, and was looking forward to further instruction from Pat. He suggested, "We should probably take a moment to look at your dystonia progress. Perhaps set some further goals." But he was unable to attend that seminar and died shortly thereafter. Sadly, I will never know what other pearls of wisdom he had to offer.

It is my hope that this article will do several things: educate others about focal dystonia, encouraging discussion and reducing the stigma often associated with repetitive stress disorders—it is an epidemic in the plucked-string world and significantly underreported; encourage other recipients of O'Brien's tutelage, especially well-known teachers and performers, to talk of their struggles, ideally filling in any gaps in my lessons or elaborating on further instruction O'Brien may have offered; and finally, to honor Pat O'Brien and his revolutionary approach to playing.

ADDENDUM A

The Throes of Guitardom

Although *JLSA* is a scholarly journal devoted to the lute and period instruments, many lute players come from the guitar, which is often the gateway instrument to early music, and some keep a foot in both worlds through teaching. Moreover, O'Brien once intimated that many players delved into period instruments due to developing focal dystonia. As explained in this article, O'Brien strongly recommended his right-hand position exercise as a basis for all guitar players. To that end, I share the following correspondence we exchanged about the guitar, its size, strings, and wood.

At one point I tried some new carbon fiber guitar strings. I was distressed as dystonic symptoms returned, and I suspected it was due to

the change in the strings. Their texture was so glassy and slippery that I was not receiving any sensory feedback, causing my hand to tense in order to produce results. I asked O'Brien about strings recommendations for guitar:

"Wow. I forget you're still in the throes of guitardom. I hate the tendency toward bigger is better in modern life, which extends to longer string lengths, heavier strings and higher action. Many of the very clear, far-projecting guitars of previous times were shorter. Old Hausers we hear so much of were often 63.5 or 64 cm. They were played with lower action and thinner strings. Super-heavy strings have fewer upper overtones and thus do not project as well but seem to tolerate more and more aggression from the right hand so we think we're playing louder. Carbon fiber, being of considerable higher density than nylon or even gut, has to be made thinner, leaving us with less string to grip. Also carbon fiber is very smooth, meaning it slips loose from our fingers unless we tense up and hook our fingers into it even more.

"A recipe for disaster, that!

"I would use a medium-ish nylon string, which is usually brighter and thicker and gives more of a sensation of friction against the fingertip as you seek to relax the tips. (This problem was much less common when people played gut strings partially because tensing the tips would tear up gut strings very quickly.) I might even use Savarez strings, the roughness of which originated in an attempt to make them grab your fingertips like gut. They make a little whistle against the nails which people make a big deal about despite the fact that the audience doesn't hear it. (More about that another time, running to the subway right now.)" (email of Jan. 16, 2014, 7:05 am).

And later that same day:

"At work now ... I love what you say about the glassy tone (and feel?), of the carbon fiber strings. Something of my model is the responsiveness of the gut I play on 19th century guitars and early instruments but on modern guitars I grew up on nylon and will probably stick with it. Carbon fiber actually works on the inner strings of some lutes and theorboes but I have never liked it as a treble. It seems metallic in sound and affords no grip with which to control the tone and articulation" (email of Jan. 16, 2014, 8:41 am).

After this conversation I decided to experiment with nylon strings on my guitar because of their texture and tension, and have been very happy with them.

Regarding instruments: I had previously been playing a cedar-top Ruck built in the 1980s, which had a rich, warm, caramel sound that I

loved. I commissioned a second Ruck more recently and debated a long while before deciding on spruce, so I was curious about his opinion and asked what wood he recommended for classical guitars.

“Always spruce! It has the upper overtones you want to play with. Cedar does not or loses a lot of them pretty fast. Smaller, lighter, spruce . . . all things that have been largely lost in recent guitar generations. ob” (email of Jan. 16, 2014, 12:00 pm).

ADDENDUM B

Basic Lute Technique

For my first LSA summer seminar, I was unsure of what classes to take. I was apprehensive about signing up for the beginning lute class, since I am far from a beginner on guitar and had played some lute and vihuela repertoire. I had even briefly played lute (as a guitarist under duress) in collegium for an ensemble requirement as an undergraduate under the supremely patient Robert Castellano. I knew I could step into any of the classes offered at the seminar, but I value a solid foundation and decided to take the Beginning Lute Class before I ever met Pat O’Brien. What a treat it was.

I understood quickly how invested O’Brien was in teaching a proper hand position. He described the hand in detail and began with a discussion of problems that can arise, including focal dystonia. I was suitably impressed.

In other classes I met more guitarists, some of whom were doing what I initially had planned, which was to play lute employing guitar technique. I am ashamed to say that as a classical guitarist, I may have considered the thumb-under, pinky-on-the soundboard, renaissance lute technique as a somewhat *lesser* technique. And for that reason alone I am so pleased I took O’Brien’s class. His description of renaissance lute technique, the rationale for it, the beauty and the ease of it, and how the technique serves the music, was absolutely convincing and made me think of lute repertoire differently. It was a wonderful revelation.

Playing with thumb-under technique does not take as much adjustment as one might think. Guitarists with focal dystonia often find themselves limited to using only thumb and index finger anyway, so the transition was natural. Planting the pinky on the soundboard was another issue altogether.

In the lute class we practiced different permutations on open strings, moving from the elbow with a hand-shaking motion from treble

to bass strings. The exercises he gave for this first step, I still practice. In fact, it was not until many months later, as these exercises became more comfortable, that I realized when I played lute I had *absolutely no dystonic symptoms at all*.

Apparently I was not the only one. In preparation for the following summer's seminar, I wrote the LSA director and included a carbon copy to O'Brien: "I am doing well retraining from focal dystonia, thanks to Pat. And I'm finding that focal dystonia doesn't seem to affect lute playing AT ALL!" To which O'Brien replied: "Many people find this, especially with renaissance lutes and thumb under playing" (email, June 7, 2014).

Moreover, there is the connection to his thimble exercise for focal dystonia retraining. Without a background in lute it is unlikely he would ever had developed this exercise, which created the perfect transition from playing with the fingers hanging loosely back to a curved hand position. I wonder what he learned in his study of anatomy that suggested the planted pinky was a healthy hand position for lute, and one enabling a healthy hand position on guitar, rather than being a crutch?

I see now how maintaining a "guitar hand" can be inelegant on the renaissance lute. Due to the closeness of the strings to the body and the covered sound hole, it is difficult to play *into* the strings as one does on guitar, or to strike both strings of a course with consistency.

All the pieces he shared with me in class and later via email are now quite easy. Anyone who studied with O'Brien will recognize all them: "Robin Reddock," "Bergamask," and "Passing Measures" from *William Ballet Lute Book*; "Soet Oliver," "Calleno," "Llantero (the Boar's Dance)," "Bonnie Sweet Boy," "Grienslvis" from the Folger manuscript; "A Dump," "Willson's Wilde," and the duets "T'w lesons to be plaid with tw lowtes" and "Bergamask" from *M. Board Lute Book*, the latter also arranged as a solo. I am now turning to Francesco da Milano pieces, which I first learned on guitar. I also soon hope to play vihuela and French baroque pieces on their intended instruments, which I have commissioned from luthier Alexander Batov. My main obstacles are not related to hand position, but in dealing with the mirror-image presentation of Italian lute tablature, and being able to mentally translate tablature into notation. These obstacles are the typical ones every musician faces, and I am thankful that I can explore them like a normal student of music without physically limiting issues. Taking the plunge with O'Brien's beginning class was one of my better decisions!

Note to all guitarists: it is worth it to learn the lute and to learn it properly.

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