

Surviving a Scale Burst

By Ronn McFarlane

How many times have you played a piece of music at a reasonable tempo, with everything pretty much under control, only to be thrown off by a burst of four to eight notes that are written to be played at twice the speed as the rest of the piece? It's typical of renaissance lute music. And it's easy to "stub your toe" on such a passage, even for an advanced player.

Problems:

1. Most lutenists tend to tense up when they're about to play a burst. That's understandable and human, but it's counterproductive. The fingers and hand can move faster and more accurately when loose and relaxed.
2. There is a tendency to try to play a burst too loudly, especially at the beginning of the burst.
3. There is a tendency to rush.

doesn't it? Yet, it is almost as common as "tensing up" just before a burst. The problem of rushing probably stems from the impulse to start the scale burst a little early and just play it as fast as you can, with the anxiety that you may not be able to complete the passage on time.

Often a lutenist will try to play a burst too fast and loud. It is better to begin such passages with a lighter touch, sometimes gaining firmness as the passage progresses. At the same time it often works well to begin a burst slightly under tempo, and then catch up - increasing your speed as you go. This gives your right hand and fingers a chance to get extra relaxed and set for the burst. Most mistakes occur near the beginning of a scale burst. If you can start the burst cleanly, then focus your attention on the conclusion of the burst, you will have better results. At first, it might feel a little scary to start a rapid passage slightly later (instead of rushing the beat) and even let yourself get behind in a scale burst. It will probably feel like you'll never be able to in-

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is for 'Dowland, Fantasia 1' and features a scale burst with notes c, a, c, e, c, a, e, c, a, c, e, a, c, e, f, e, c, a. Above the staff are three groups of lute tablature symbols (vertical lines) indicating fingerings for the notes. The second staff is for 'Dowland, My Lady Hunsdon's Puffe' and features a scale burst with notes a, c, d, f, f, f, c, h, f, h, f, d, c, a, d. Above the staff are five groups of lute tablature symbols indicating fingerings.

Solutions:

1. Relax. You've got to convince yourself to relax whenever a scale burst occurs. In fact, that's the time to be extra relaxed. It may take a lot of self-training to automatically relax when you're approaching a rapid passage, but it's the only way you'll be able to play a burst with assurance and elegance rather than merely surviving (or even breaking down).
2. Most of the time a scale burst or rapid ornamental passage requires a delicate touch. This is good news! It is an advantage both musically and technically, since it is easier to execute a rapid passage lightly. The louder one plays, the more difficult it becomes to play with nimble fingers.
3. It's curious that we would tend to rush a passage that already feels uncomfortably fast. That seems kind of self-destructive,

crease your speed enough to catch up. But you'll get used to it. Catching up depends on your degree of relaxation, your ability to focus your energy, and the efficiency of your right hand stroke.

This is subtle. It must not be overdone. But these techniques of "scale-burst survival strategy" can make the difference between playing a tricky burst with elan or "stubbing your toe" on the passage.

Trebles:

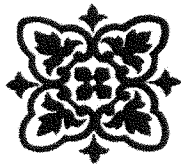
An additional thought, which is a matter of long-term development, is to play a lot of trebles in your daily practice. By trebles, I mean pieces or extended passages that consist only of a single line (usually a running line that moves rapidly). On the renaissance lute, playing trebles can be a valuable part of your practice routine. It is important not to push the speed of the trebles you practice. Constant pushing to go faster will develop habits of tension, which will block your potential for speed. Instead, play your trebles at a comfortable speed while concentrat-

ing on relaxation, fluidity and correct technique. Greater speed will come of its own accord when your technique is easy, flowing and efficient.

I find that many aspects of technique can be addressed in the context of treble playing: RH position and relaxation, LH position and relaxation and finding a solid, comfortable seating position for holding the lute. One can experiment with various angles of attack, various degrees of follow through, and tip joint flexibility/resistance. Treble playing can be your laboratory for refining your technique, establishing habits of relaxation, and developing greater overall speed.

In a nutshell:

1. Relax. Train yourself to relax. (Ironically, relaxing can be a matter of hard, concentrated work.)
2. Begin with a lighter touch, then gain firmness if needed.
3. Accelerate through short bursts of rapid notes: start more slowly, then catch up.
4. Play trebles for long-term development of speed.



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