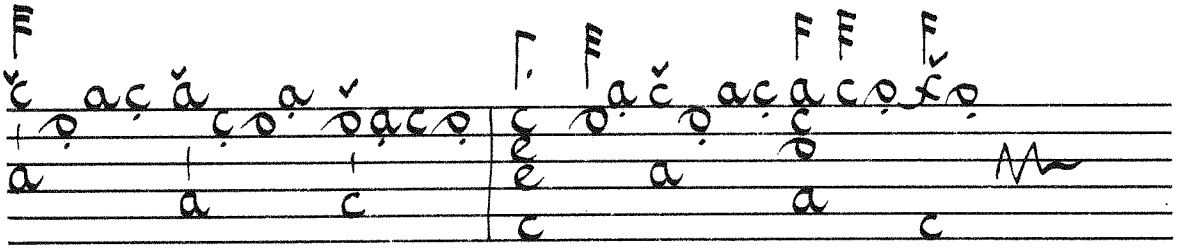
TECHNIQUE by Stanley Buetens

(Ed. note: Stanley Buetens, founding member and former President of our Society, needs no introduction to most members. He is the author of the most comprehensive modern tutor for Renaissance lute currently available, and teaches lute at Stanford and UCLA.)

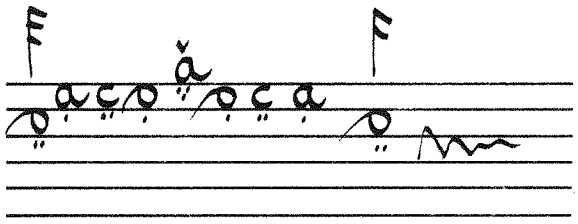
An expanded use of the third finger of the plucking hand can improve the lutenist's ability to play faster, more accurately, and more forcefully. In addition, a steadier, more relaxed hand will result from the application of the principles given below with examples. (1) The most important usage of the third finger is in fast diminution passages where there are also bass notes. The normal middle-index stroke can be altered to third-index-middle-index (∴ . .. .). This may be used continuously or as a temporary rest period for the middle finger. In example (a) the v marks indicate suggested third finger notes.

(a)

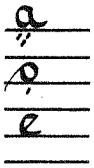


(2) The third finger can be used occasionally on the first string, as in example (b). Here, by using the third finger, the hand does not have to move out of position, thus insuring greater accuracy. Also, the third finger, being stronger than the other two, can give an accent to such a note, which is the highest point of the phrase.

(b)

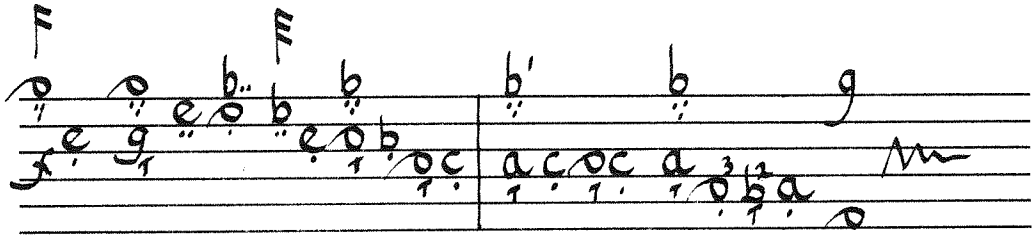


(3) The next example illustrates two additional possible usages of the third finger. When there are chords without the second string, the third finger should play the first string note, e.g.:



Example (c) shows a practical application of this. The first g in this example could be played by the index finger as well. A barre position must be used, of course, in the first measure on d and then on b.

(c)



(4) From the same example we see how the third finger can be used in conjunction with the thumb-index stroke. The thumb-index stroke is especially well suited for runs in the bass, and by using the third finger for the top note, the hand is steadier, more relaxed, and the top note will be louder.

By incorporating the third finger more into a technique, playing will become more fluent, expressive, and accurate. This underrated finger is the "secret weapon" of many fine lute players. I urge all lutenists to give it a try.

(Examples (a) and (c) are from the Hirsh Lute Book--British Museum Ms. M. 1353.)