

(ed. note: Pat O'Brien is a professional guitarist and lutenist in New York City, and is Secretary of the Society. The principles and exercises below were developed for the guitar, but they are equally appropriate for the lute, since the left-hand technique on both instruments is substantially the same.)

Here is a series of exercises which is designed to make you a faster, more accurate player. Some are my own ideas, some come from old guitar methods, many from my friend and teacher Alice Artzt, and, in turn, from her friend Sergio Abreu. I have adapted many from guitar to lute, and added my own observations on muscular usage, isolation of motion, and so on.

The basic idea is that we save time by practicing all the possible motions of the hand carefully, rather than just trying to drill those few which come up in one piece only to find we can't do those in the next piece. Even playing scales only offers a very limited number of motions when compared with pieces, so we must find a short method of practicing each motion of fingers each day until our fingers move in small, relaxed, well-balanced ways. The answer I propose is called, among many guitarists, chromatic exercises. We use each of the twenty four permutations of the four playing fingers of the left hand to promote the independent motion of all fingers. The effects on dexterity are amazing!

### Observations and Instructions:

#### Left Hand

- 1) Line up all four fingers just behind their respective frets, each about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch above the string. Keep the fingers as close as possible to the strings at all times, even when not in use, so they can be put down quickly, with a minimum of motion, when needed.
- 2) Only the very tip of the finger should come down on the string, as much leverage is lost if the last segment of the finger is not perpendicular to the fingerboard. It is leverage, not strength, which will make difficult positions easy. This will also decrease the chances of muting an adjacent string with the side of the finger.
- 3) Try to land straight down, particularly on the first and fourth fingers. There is a great temptation to land on the outside edge of these two fingers, but giving in to this only causes unwanted tension in the sides of the palm, which, in turn, constricts the free motion of the tendons which move the fingers.
- 4) The thumb should point straight up at all times, and should support the hand behind the second finger, (roughly,) for best balance. Take care not to bend the first or second joints of the thumb, as this also tightens the palm and keeps the tendons from moving freely.
- 5) Try to move each finger individually, with no hint of sympathetic motion by the other fingers. Slow down and concentrate on moving only the finger required, while the others stay relaxed. This is the single most important aspect of this whole project, saving time and effort by isolating motion is the key to speed and dexterity.
- 6) Keep the wrist relaxed. It should not bend any more than is necessary, because the resulting distortion of tendons makes moving fingers more difficult. When passages move from treble to bass the thumb should follow them upward, remaining below the fingers, rather than staying stationary and letting the wrist become distorted, and tense.

## Right Hand

1) Move the thumb from its third joint, the one hidden in the wrist. Bending either of the first two joints, again, tightens the palm and slows the fingers.

2) Be sure that the forearm is still when the thumb plays. It should not be "helping," because this will displace the fingers and make it difficult to place them on the strings consistently. Often, time is lost while we wait for our forearms to return from this motion.

3) All strokes should be as short as possible, to save recovery time for the next stroke.

4) Concentrate here also on the independent motion of fingers. Try to keep the tip joints relaxed, as this promotes relaxation of the palm and isolation of motion. Again, go slowly and concentrate on moving one finger with the others relaxed. If one finger moves with another it will not then be available for its own subsequent motions.

Permutations of Left Hand Fingers

1) groups of four, non-repeating:

bcde	cbde	dbce	ebcd
bced	cbed	dbec	ebdc
bdce	cdbe	dcbe	ecbd
bdec	cdeb	dceb	ecdb
becd	cebd	debc	edbc
bedc	cedb	decb	edcb

Try playing each of these permutations in the forms below:

bcde		bcde	//	bced	
	bcde		bcde	//	bced
		bcde		bced	etc.
	bcde		bcde	//	bced
		bcde		bced	
	bcde	bcde			
		bcde			

Right Hand = thumb, index, thumb, index; or  
middle, index, middle, index; or  
thumb, index, middle, index.

Each permutation should be played in several positions before going on to the next. I personally play each one from the first through ninth positions and then change to the next and come back down the neck changing again at the first position. The individual program each player devises depends on the speed he can manage, and the amount of time available.

Many players find it easier to begin the exercises in the higher positions and only progress down to the wider frets as the stretches become easier. Most players achieve their best hand position and balance in the fifth or seventh positions so I recommend that all beginners start there.

When first beginning the exercises, it is best to hold down all fingers as long as possible, to become accustomed to the stretches. Later, it is useful to practice lifting them as soon as possible. Lifting is more difficult for the hand than putting them down and needs more practice.

(To be continued in the next Newsletter