

## THE LUTE, GRAVITY AND YOU

Rick Wheeler\*

Playing the lute or guitar involves a high degree of manual dexterity and skill. The focal point of almost all instruction on these instruments is one of hand to eye coordination. This is so emphatically the case that traditional musical notation for these types of instruments is a precise choreography for both the right and left hand, tablature. Tablature tells you what you do to play the instrument.

But are the skillful hands, talent, and the ability to read music all that is involved? There is a skill that is almost never taught, not written in tablature, too often taken for granted and left up to the student. This is the skill of sitting and holding the instrument, not as simple or intuitively obvious as it might seem. To quote from a recent letter from Donna Curry, an experienced performer and teacher:

"The more lute players I see (and guitar players, too) I am more and more appalled by the positions they assume to play their lutes in. They are deforming themselves miserably and the serious ones that practice four to eight hours a day are going to have serious physical difficulties as the years go by."

The task of holding the instrument involves two factors that must relate harmoniously if lute playing or any other form of human endeavor is to be enjoyed: The human body and the force of gravity.

The human form is designed to function most efficiently when it is well balanced in gravity. This means that if the body is not well organized around a vertical line, gravity will stress the whole structure in direct proportion to the extent that it is not well balanced. To consider the profound implications of this idea, let's look at the body as a set of blocks stacked one on top of the other. These blocks (feet, lower and upper legs, pelvis, torso and head) are poorly balanced if they are not stacked vertically. A poorly balanced arrangement places a great deal of stress in the overall structure and renders it unstable. Visualize the individual who has his head in front of his body, chest dropped and knees locked back. He is putting a great deal of stress on his shoulder and back muscles just to hold his head on and expends a lot of energy simply to maintain his position in gravity. We have all met individuals who cannot stand or sit comfortably for long periods of time. They need to get up or move around every so often to relieve the muscular stresses involved in fighting gravity. The lute player who plays his instrument with his body wrapped and twisted around it is spending the majority of his time and energy conducting a war with gravity.

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\* Rick Wheeler, practitioner of Rolf-Aston Structural Patterning presently teaches patterning privately in North Hollywood and at the California Institute of the Arts, School of Dance, Valencia. Mr. Wheeler is, in addition, a well-trained and accomplished dancer (ballet and modern), and has had three years of experience playing the lute.

Everyone's body structure and their understanding of the way they move differs so much that no set of instructions could be published that would tell one man how to sit and hold his instrument more efficiently. The same instructions would hopelessly foul up someone else. My own work in Rolf-Aston Structural Patterning involves teaching efficient movement patterns to individuals involved with all types of movement. This can be done regardless of the discipline an individual is involved with because of the way the body is designed to work in the field of gravity: There is one most efficient pattern of movement and organization and education towards this goal renders all movement easier and more enjoyable.

There may be no set formula for solving every person's problem with gravity but there are some kinds of questions and ways of thinking that will encourage a greater understanding of the problems involved in lute playing:

How long do you practice before you have to get up and move around? Why? What could you do to make sitting easier? Adjust your chair height, obtain an adjustable chair, what about foot stool height, the music stand, lighting, etc. Rate on a scale of 1 to 10 the amount of tension you experience while playing various pieces and at various times and find a way to relieve some of it. Experiment with the arrangement of all the physical objects necessary to your art so that they conform to your needs for bodily ease, rather than having to insert your body into an uncomfortable situation. Does the way you hold your instrument constrict your body? How can you relieve the problem? The instrument doesn't weigh 50 to 100 pounds. Do you cling to it as though it did?

Playing music of any sort should be a joyous experience and process. I hope that this short article has brought some awareness into a much neglected area and will help some individuals towards a solution of their problems. Should readers desire more information on the Rolf System of Structural Integration, a manipulative system designed to balance the whole body in gravity, or on Rolf-Aston Structural Patterning in Stillness and in Motion, a system for educating the individual towards a more efficient use of his body, should write:

the Guild for Structural Integration or  
the Guild for Structural Patterning  
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