

TECHNIQUE

by Catherine Liddell and Robert Strizich

(ed. note: Catherine Liddell and Robert Strizich are currently in Basle, Switzerland, where they have studied with Eugen Dombois. Both have concertized extensively in Europe and the United States.)

"THUMB-UNDER" POSITION

As Deborah Minkin pointed out in her contribution to the Jan., 1975 LSA Newsletter, many players here in Europe have been experimenting with the "thumb-under" position for the right hand. The current interest in this hand position has been inspired by the playing and teaching of the German lutenist Michael Schäffer, who teaches in Cologne. We have recently adopted this technique, and thought Newsletter readers might be interested in a more detailed discussion of the matter.

The basic characteristics of this position are as follows: the little finger rests on the belly, between the bridge and the rosette; the right forearm is held at an oblique angle (almost parallel) to the strings; the fingers are somewhat stretched out, and the thumb plucks behind the fingers (in other words, everything your classical guitar teacher told you not to do!)

As far as we can tell, the thumb-under position seems to have been the predominant one throughout most of the 16th century. Matthaues Waissel says in his Lautenbuch of 1592: "The right arm will be placed not too high but almost in the middle behind the bridge, so that the hand is somewhat stretched out and is guided by the little finger (which is placed on the lute and must be held immobile), and the forefinger will pluck over the thumb and the thumb will pluck into the hand." In the School of Musicke of 1603, Thomas Robinson states that one plays "...striking with your thumb behind your fingers...with your forefinger before your thumb, that is, houlding downe your thumb behind your fingers..." (cf. CNRS edition, Pl. VI). Jean-Baptiste Besard offers his readers a choice of either the thumb-out or the thumb-under position, saying: "Yet they which have a short Thombe may imitate those which strike the strings with the Thombe under the other fingers, which though it be nothing so elegant, yet to them it will be more easie." (in Dowland, Varietie of Lute-Lessons, 1610)

There are countless paintings, engravings, and woodcuts from the late 15th through the early 17th centuries that show this hand position. Some of the most interesting of these are: "Concert" by E. de Roberti (1450-1496), no. 148 in Alexander Buchner's Musikinstrumente von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (Prague, 1971); the portrait of G. P. Achillini by Marcantonio Raimondi, ca. 1510, repr. in Early Music, Oct., 1975, p. 345; the illustration in Judenkünig's Ain schone kunstliche underweisung, 1523 (in Buchner, p. 20, and the LSA Newsletter, Oct., 1975); the illustration of a lady lutenist on the title page of Waissel's Tabulatura of 1592 (LSA Newsletter, July, 1975); the illustration of several lutenists by B. Kütchler, 1611, repr. in Early Music, April, 1975, p. 138; and an engraving by P. de Jode (1570-1634) on the title page of this Newsletter.

It seems that around 1600, players began changing to the thumb-out position. For some time around the turn of the century the two techniques were in use simultaneously--Waissel and Besard refer to both. Alessandro Piccinini (1623) and Nicolas Vallet (1618) were among the early baroque lutenists who advocated the thumb-out position. Many illustrations depicting this newer technique are printed in the aforementioned issues of Early Music. It is important to emphasize that both positions require that the little finger be rested on the belly of the lute.

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If you wish to try the thumb-under technique, the following may help you to get started: The neck of the lute should be held lower than it is normally, almost horizontally to the floor. Perhaps the best way to understand the proper formation of the right hand is to observe it as your arm hangs at your side, completely relaxed; note that in this position the thumb falls naturally behind the fingers. Keeping your hand in this position, raise it up and place it on the lute, following the instructions of Waissel quoted above. You will find that this means your arm should be over the middle of the bridge, which is probably somewhat lower than the position to which you are accustomed. It is best to resist the temptation to slouch, as this will tire your back very quickly. Although treatises do not specify whether the hand should be nearer to the rosette or the bridge, most 16th-century pictures show the hand closer to the rosette and sometimes directly over it.

In the thumb-index alternation, the index finger strikes in front of the thumb (cf. Robinson, above); the thumb strikes more or less directly downwards, perpendicular to the strings, while the index finger strikes neither straight up (i.e. in a motion perpendicular to the strings) nor straight back (i.e. along the strings), but in a direction between these two extremes. The index finger should be relaxed, especially at the tip, and one should strike both strings of each course, trying to play with as much fleshy area as possible. It is the use of a relatively large area of flesh on the tip of the finger that gives this hand position its characteristic "round" tone. When the thumb and middle finger are to be played simultaneously, the middle finger should also strike in front of the thumb, again playing both strings of the course and striking with as much flesh as possible. In chords, the middle finger strikes between the index finger and the thumb; in four-note chords, the third finger is somewhat curled up and strikes opposite the thumb. The third finger might feel a bit handicapped in this new position (especially in chords), but it will become stronger with practice. ---to be continued in the next Newsletter---

FORUM

The following contribution to the question on octave- versus unison-stringing of basses was sent by lute maker Robert A. Smith of Raymond, New Hampshire.

A few practical suggestions for lutenists to try:

1. Beginners should at least start playing on octave-strung basses for the following reason. I began on unisons myself and switched after about a year. I was appalled to discover that much of the time I was playing only the second string of each bass course with my thumb. This could not be heard on unisons but was painfully apparent with octaves.
2. On those courses that are played only with the thumb, it is sometimes possible to alter the relative loudness of the two strings in a course by hitching them up higher or lower on the bridge. If the octave is a little higher than the fundamental (physically, not in pitch), it will be heard more, and vice versa. This same trick can be used with unisons to achieve a more equal balance between the two strings. Obviously this will work only on those courses that are habitually struck in one direction.
3. Have you ever needed a very low diapason? If you tune your octave string to the fifth rather than the octave, you get a good imitation of the note yet an octave lower (i.e. F + c sounds like FF). This is because F and c are the first two overtones of FF and the ear conveniently