American String Teachers Association

Guitar Division

Pedagogy Forum

conducted by Kerry Arlt

Our second installment on guitar pedagogy is submitted by Frank Koonce of Arizona State University, a school that offers degrees from the undergraduate to the doctoral level. Mr. Koonce will be the Symposium Director for the 1987 ASTA Guitar Symposium / GFA Festival, which will be held jointly at A.S.U. on October 21-24, 1987. Watch *Soundboard* for details. His article is an excellent overview of many current views in right-hand positioning on the guitar and should give readers much to think about.

Frank Koonce is a graduate of the North Carolina School of the Arts and Southern Methodist University, and was the recipient of a Fulbright Grant to Italy in 1974-75. Before coming to Arizona, he was an Artist-in-Residence for the Dallas City Arts Program. He continues to be an active performer and is currently preparing a series of publications through *Music of the Americas*.

Comments and suggestions are, as always, desired and welcome. Please note my new address:

Kerry Arlt
5143 Micro #1
Las Cruces, NM 88001

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

Important addresses to have are:

For ASTA Guitar Publications:

The Dauphin Co.
P.O. Box 5237
Springfield, IL 62705
(217) 973-2424

For applications for membership in ASTA write:

J. Kimball Harriman
ASTA Executive Director
UGA Station
P.O. Box 2066
Athens, GA 30601

∞∞∞∞∞

Right Hand Positioning in Modern Pedagogy

A Comparison of Selected Methods

by Frank Koonce

Introduction

The intent of this article is simply to introduce the reader to a variety of resources provided by some of our most outspoken and influential pedagogues. It does not intend to advocate one method over another in examining the various schools of thought. The reader is encouraged to refer to the sources cited for more thorough explanations of the concepts presented herein and their applications. In presenting this survey, I am aware of the risk I take in misrepresenting another's ideas through my own interpretations, and also through the removal of the material from its intended context. I, therefore, hope that I do not do a disservice to any of these respected authors, and I would invite their clarifications, if needed, in a future volume of this journal.

As a teacher, I recommend specific techniques to my students based upon my own experience and preferences. In my pedagogy class, however (for

students who have already acquired a basic technique), we examine alternate methods in order to broaden perspectives. Ultimately each student of the guitar must come to understand how and why his technique works (or does not work) and how his reasoning compares with the reasoning of others. A study and comparison of the available resources may save hours of frustration and aimless practicing. One might argue that this conflicting input will only confuse the student and develop a sense of insecurity. I believe, however, that more often than not the various viewpoints provide the student with a broader understanding that may even eliminate a sense of ambiguity on given issues.

Modern Pedagogy

Perspectives, reasoning, and terminology are still evolving in modern pedagogy. We are continually searching for the most effective way to communicate our ideas. The choices of terminology and syntax by one teacher may be effective for a particular student's understanding, whereas those of another would not be effective. In some matters, not only the teaching methods, but also the desired objectives may differ as a result of individual priorities. Consider the issue of right-hand positioning as discussed by some of our most influential pedagogues.

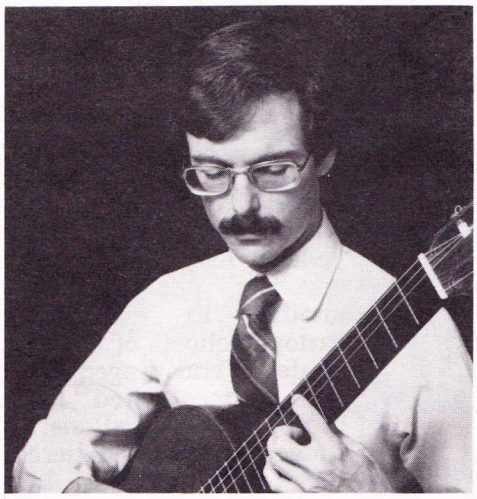
Pepe Romero tells us:

> Finding the correct position for the right hand has everything to do with the anatomical makeup of every player and, therefore, the final position will be different with each player. The principles upon which to establish your own correct position, however, can and should be constant. For the free stroke, the *m* finger should act as the pivoting point upon which the palm of the hand should tilt to the left or the right. For players having a shorter *a* finger than *i*, the right side of the palm should be closer to the top of the guitar; if the *i* is shorter than the *a*, the left side of the palm should be closer to the top of the guitar; if they are both the same length, the palm should be parallel to the top of the guitar. The height of the wrist is determined by the relative length of the thumb to the fingers.
>
> The tilt of the hand should be achieved by rotating the forearm from the elbow and not by forcing the wrist into an uncomfortable position that may impede the even flow of energy into the fingers.[1]

Mr. Romero begins with an "awareness" exercise in which the fingers are placed on the first three strings and the thumb is placed on the fifth string. He then has the student "visualize the right hand from the strings' point of view" and concentrate on the sensations produced from touching and playing the strings.[2] Unnecessary tension is avoided through absolute concentration focused on the sound and its production.

According to Aaron Shearer:

> Of prime importance is affording maximum advantage to the muscles involved in playing the guitar. The wrists, and also the finger and thumb joints, can be placed in various positions and the finger and thumb joints can be moved in various directions and/or sequences and one can still play the guitar. However, certain joint positions and movements provide maximum advantage for the muscles and are, therefore, most conducive to the development of fine coordination.[3]



Frank Koonce

Mr Shearer speaks of four principles for efficient muscle functioning, the first two of which help determine the optimal positioning of the right hand:

1. "The Principle of Muscular Alignment"— Maintain the natural alignment of the muscles (and tendons) to afford the most direct pull of the muscles.
2. "The Principle of Mid-Range Function of the Joints"— Operate the joints within their mid-range of movement between the comfortable limits of flexion and extension.
3. "The Principle of Uniform Direction of Joint Movement" — Flex or extend together the joints of individual fingers to avoid the tensions produced by opposing muscle groups.
4. "The Principle of Muscular Release Through Movement" — Give sufficient movement at the joints to provide the momentum and follow-through needed for the release of tension.

With these principles in mind, begin by aligning the guitar with your body.[4] Then:

> ..., align the side of the *i* knuckle with the side of the wrist and the forearm (the three-point alignment). Notice that this positioning aligns the *m* knuckle with the center of the wrist and forearm and the *a* knuckle with its side of the wrist and forearm....[5]

Mr. Shearer has the student simultaneously find the midway position of the finger joints and the wrist by relaxing the hand and fully extending and flexing the wrist. To find the proper tilt of the hand, he advises:

> Tilt the hand to the left so that the tip and middle segments of *a* are approximately vertical, sideways, to the plane of the soundboard.... The tip and middle segments of *m* will be tilted somewhat to the left, those of *i* even more to the left.[6]

Charles Duncan also has an analytical approach to developing technique. He observes that:

> Mechanically speaking, the entire arm from shoulder to fingertip is a system of compound levers. Each part moves as the result of leverage from the one next closer to the body, all the way down to the tips of the fingers....[7]
>
> For most playing (and certainly almost all free stroke playing) the knuckle should be positioned nearly over the tip.... The further the knuckle retreats from this alignment with the tip, the less force will be available at the tip. With the fingers curled, the leverage of the knuckle is lost, and with it, an important sensation of weight and support from the hand and arm.[8]

To form the position:

> 1. Make a fist of your right hand; note the contours especially the pronounced angle between basal segments and the back of the hand;
>
> 2. Lay the fist upon the strings and uncurl the fingers enough to place the tips upon the treble strings as if to play a three-note chord. Push up from the tips, until the fingers are only slightly curved. Let the wrist follow this movement so that the back of the hand, the wrist, and the forearm are aligned. Raise the wrist a little further until it is gently arched....
>
> 3. Compress the fingers, starting with the little finger, which should be locked against *a* at its tip. Deliberate compression prevents splaying or wobbling of the fingers, even a little of which is a handicap.[9]

Mr. Duncan stresses the importance of distinguishing between "functional" and "dysfunctional" tension in playing the guitar. In conjunction with understanding the applications of leverage, an awareness of the necessary tension for efficient playing, contrasted with the tension that is detrimental to playing, will aid the guitarist in finding the optimal positions.

Lee F. Ryan stresses the importance of finding one's "natural position." He says that:

> As in other aspects of guitar playing, the dynamically relaxed approach to the right-hand position avoids extremes. The position should look and feel as natural and balanced as possible. It should not involve bizarre twisting, bending, or excess tension. Such a position is based on the normal way you use your hand every day, that is, grasping or gripping various items....
>
> Notice that when you make a fist without thinking about it too much, you do not bend the wrist, and strength is maximum. Notice also that the fingers are very strong in the curled position. However, for guitar playing it does not work well to hold the fingers in such a tightly curled way. Thus we will just use the fist as a natural starting point and then modify it somewhat so that the hand forms a natural position for playing. First, allow the fist to open easily so that the fingers retain a moderate, natural curvature—not too much, not too little—and then put the thumb on the fourth string and the index, middle, and ring fingers on the first three strings.... Notice the gentle, natural curvature of the fingers and the only slightly bent wrist. This position should not be interpreted too rigidly. Although extremes should be avoided, some bending of the wrist may be useful. For example, some players may find that the hand will work better if the wrist is bent slightly to the right; others will find it most comfortable to have a slightly greater arch in the wrist....
>
> Contrary to what is often said, it is not always appropriate to line up the knuckles of the right hand exactly parallel with the strings; the angle of the knuckles in relation to the strings should be adjusted for each person according to the shape of the nails, length of the forearm, and so on. Since most guitarists' fingernails work best when the strokes are made off the left-hand side, the most comfortable position is usually one that is slightly angled to the left....[10]

Abel Carlevaro does, however, favor a positioning that aligns the fingers perpendicularly (and the knuckles parallel) to the strings in order to avoid the "friction and scraping that could jeopardize obtaining the perfect sound.":[11]

> The correct placement of the right hand and a perpendicular stroke on the strings by the fingers will be achieved by interacting three different elements: Point on the arm that touches the guitar, point on the upper side on which the arm rests, and the degree of inclination of the instrument. These elements should be combined in the way that best suits each guitarist.
>
> The right hand can be displaced in three different ways, and each way permits the fingers to be positioned comfortably so that they need not stretch to reach the required string....
>
> 1. Displacement Type One
> The arm remains equidistant to the soundboard as it is displaced over it, describing part of a circle which has its center at the contact point between the arm and the upper side....
>
> To make sure that the fingers always strike the strings perpendicularly, the lateral angle formed at the wrist must be adjusted as the hand moves towards the bass strings: this angle becomes more pronounced as the forearm tends towards parallelism with the strings....
>
> 2. Displacement Type Two
> The hand describes a line perpendicular to the strings without requiring the arm to slide over the side of the instrument. It can be seen that the wrist will move away from the soundboard without affecting the contact point of the arm....
>
> 3. Displacement Type Three
> Situations in which the contact point is not employed...require that the arm temporarily change or even abandon contact altogether.[12]

Situations requiring Displacement Type Three as recommended by Mr. Carlevaro include certain harmonics and *sulla tastiera* or *sul ponticello* effects. It may also be used in

different kinds of *fijación*, a term used to refer to the fixation of selected joints to allow "stronger and more capable elements to perform in a particular way."[13]

With a similar priority of sound quality, but in sharp contrast to Mr. Carlevaro's conclusions on hand position, we have the teachings of David Russell, who prefers the darker and fatter tone produced by an acutely diagonal stroke across the strings. Mr. Russell's hand is therefore held at approximately a forty-five degree angle to the strings. Such a positioning presents complications with regard to alternating the fingers of different lengths (especially in rest strokes) on the same string and during string crossings. Mr. Russell acknowledges the difficulties inherent in this approach, but maintains that the quality of tone justifies the technique. Rest strokes are used less often and are less important due to the strength and fullness possible in free strokes. Proportionately, the "scraping" sound produced by the windings of the strings is less significant. The player also learns to minimize this problem through careful shaping of the nails and planting techniques. With regard to the thumb joint, Mr. Russell has developed different applications of the tip-joint to produce changes in color and texture. Although Mr. Russell's ideas have not yet appeared in print, they are becoming widely known through his performances and masterclasses.

Conclusions

Right-hand positioning remains a complex issue in modern pedagogy as evidenced through the teachings of the aforementioned authors and performers. Nevertheless, many parallels do occur in the various methods regarding muscular alignment, relaxation, and other physiological factors. Artistic preferences, terminology, and teaching perspectives account for most of the variables, all of which are valid in their own right. Since right-hand positioning is affected by the way we hold the guitar, and as it in turn affects the shaping of the nails, the tone produced, and the facility of movement, we must consider all the options in determining what works best for ourselves and our students. We no longer have an excuse for not being informed; the resources are available.

Endnotes

1. Pepe Romero, *Guitar Style and Technique* (New York: Bradley Publications, a division of RBR Comm., 1982), p.8.

2. Romero, p.5.

3. Aaron Shearer, *Principles of Learning the Classic Guitar* (Unpublished: Mr. Shearer has kindly agreed to share some of this thoughts, which will form part of a new series in preparation for publication.)

4. For a discussion on this aspect of guitar pedagogy based on Shearer's teaching, refer to Christopher Berg, "Seating and Positioning the Guitar," *Soundboard*, Vol. XII, no.4 (Winter 1985-86): pp.363-364.

5. Shearer, p.20.

6. Shearer, p.21.

7. Charles Duncan, *The Art of Classical Guitar Playing*, (Princeton: Summy-Birchard Music, 1980), p.4.

8. Duncan, p.36.

9. Duncan, pp.38-39.

10. Lee F. Ryan, *The Natural Classical Guitar, The Principles of Effortless Playing* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp.63-64.

11. Abel Carlevaro, *School of the Guitar, Exposition of Instrumental Theory*, translated by Jihad Azkoul and Bartolomé Díaz (n.p.: Boosey and Hawkes, 1984), p.10.

12. Carlevaro, pp. 13-15.

13 Carlevaro, p.22.