

Some Thoughts on Planting (Both Pro and Con)

by Frank Koonce

When I took over this column from Kerry Alt last November, I was provided with a pre-publication copy of his final installment for the Winter 1987-88 issue (XIV/4, pp. 265-66), an article by Alison Bert entitled "Mechanics of Right-Hand Technique—The Planting Principle." I felt that Ms. Bert's initiative had created a basis for further discussion on this important issue; subsequently, I asked Richard Provost to elaborate upon and add to the information already provided by Ms. Bert. He did so with a fine report entitled "The Planting Principle Revisited" (XV/1, pp.33-37). Because of the lag in time from when an article is submitted to when it is published, I did not realize prior to Mr. Provost's contribution that Kerry Alt had preceded Ms. Bert's article with an expression of his personal reservations on the planting technique as a universal approach. He states:

There are several musical and physiological reasons why the processes of planting and preparation should not be the basis of one's right-hand technique, but rather part of a more holistic approach to the development of tone and technique on the guitar. I would caution beginning guitar students to apply the techniques so well described by Ms. Bert's article with caution and thoughtful consideration.

Planting is an extremely valuable tool, particularly in the learning process, and should be studied. There is,

however, more to the right-hand story than planting and preparation, and I hope other writers will make their thoughts known on this important topic. The techniques described by Ms. Bert are not an "industry standard" as some pedagogues would have us believe. As an example, I just returned from the ASTA/GFA Guitar Festival in Phoenix where I saw and heard David Tanenbaum, Manuel Barrueco and David Russell perform. While I saw planting techniques applied only sparingly in their performances, I have no doubt that these techniques might be a part of their practice and technical routines. Barrueco played Villa-Lobos Prelude No.4 (Ms. Bert's example 2). During the arpeggio passage, as far as I could tell, he did not use any planting techniques at all.¹

These are very interesting observations by Mr. Alt. I suspect some of the physiological reasons against planting that he is referring to have to do with two principles of efficient muscle functioning: (1) to release tension through movement, and (2) to avoid using opposing muscle groups simultaneously.² As for the

1. Kerry Alt, "At Last! A (semi) Controversial Pedagogy Forum Article!!," ASTA Guitar Division Pedagogy Forum, *Soundboard*, XIV/4 (Winter 1987-88), p. 264.

2. From the teaching of Aaron Shearer. See Frank Koonce "Right-Hand Positioning in Modern Pedagogy," *Soundboard* XV/2 (Summer 1988), p.126.

first, planting, when not used correctly, can inhibit the natural follow-through and recoil of a finger stroke. As for the second, improperly synchronizing the preparation impulse of one finger together with the execution impulse of another can result in confusion and tension. A student who is already having trouble with tension, coordination, or self assurance will probably find planting concepts to be more of a hindrance than a help. Teachers should, therefore, use discretion in determining if and when a student should be advised to plant.

Instead of leaving it to pure speculation as to whether or not the performers referred to by Mr. Alt use and advocate planting, I decided to contact them personally for their input. Here are their replies:

David Tanenbaum

I have continued to avoid planting because I like to counteract the natural tendency of the guitar sound, which is one that focuses almost exclusively on the initial attack. While I can understand the security that beginners can acquire by starting on the string, I find that planting in performance, because it requires a burst of energy to initiate a sound, enhances the focus of the listener's attention on the attack and produces a more dry, staccato sound. If there were a graph of this sound, it would start at the highest volume and move straight down.

If the stroke begins before contacting the string, some of the energy required for the burst is converted into movement. The finger can move more steadily (and sometimes more slowly) and produce a more fluid sound. A graph of this should would start more in the upper-middle range of the volume scale and hover around there for a second before decaying more gradually. With this stroke, one can sometimes create the illusion of a swell after the stroke. So much of what happens in music occurs between the notes; I find these strokes help me to control the decays and spaces better and to give them more dimension. Accuracy is not diminished with these strokes as long as the playing is from the top knuckle down, and the wrist and arm remain stable, insuring that the string will be in the same place next time. I think that a big price is paid in sound for the feeling of security one gets from planting, and that playing without planting can be just as secure.

Although a player should have a basic sound and playing posture, one can adapt different sounds and articulations to different musical situations, so players who predominantly plant,

and ones who don't, often borrow from each other. In fact, I believe that in performance the two methods gravitate towards each other much more than their initial stance would suggest.

Manuel Barrueco

To me, planting is a technique that can help add accuracy to one's performance. First, simply by having the finger prepare the next movement and, second, by helping to stabilize the hand when it is trembling from nerves. For me it is only an aid to be used carefully so that it does not affect the music.

David Russell

I use planting all the time. It is worth thinking about two types: (1) While playing arpeggios, I prepare the next finger that is going to play, not the whole block (p-i-m-a). This prevents stopping the ringing notes, especially the first string, which, if stopped too soon, is very noticeable. I use this more in loud arpeggios where I want the attack to be stronger. In rippling passages, I plant less, but the idea is always there. I miss the string less frequently, and I can control the volume of each string more easily.

(2) While playing notes on the same string, e.g. scales and repeated notes, I practice with a very noticeable preparation so that I can control the amount of staccato or articulation. Obviously, the more smooth or fluid I want it to sound, the less time I spend on the string. This planting is to avoid the clicking of the nails as they come in contact with a vibrating string. The speed with which I plant the finger down affects the click, especially on the third string which vibrates widely.

By preparing all notes as a general rule, I find it easier to control volume, tone, and articulation. In very fast or very legato passages, the stopping of the note is reduced to the same amount as that of a player who never plants; but the idea of placing the finger on the right spot is always there.

Let me share with you my own conclusions with reference to the above remarks by these distinguished performing artists. The guitar, unlike a bowed string instrument, is incapable of a perfectly legato sound. There is always some degree of separation between the end of one note and the beginning of another. However, skilled players can control the amount of separation

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they want for the musical effect. Anyone who does not do this loses articulation as an element of musical expression. And to articulate anything other than the most legato effect possible, one must use planting.

David Tanenbaum tells us that, since the guitar by nature is a staccato instrument, he avoids planting to counteract the significance of the initial attack. Nevertheless, advocates of planting do this too when they want the most legato sound possible, as explained in David Russell's final sentence. The main difference here, it seems to me, is one of perception since the effect is the same. I also think it is more of a question of musical orientation as to whether a player predominantly uses one method of articulation (degree of legato or staccato) over another.

All three performers agree that it is the music that dictates the technique, and not the other way around; planting should never get in the way of the desired effect for tone and articulation. This is good advice indeed!

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The Pedagogy Forum, as its title suggests, is a platform for the dissemination of ideas on pedagogical issues. In the coming months, I hope to explore many aspects of the guitar, including technique, notation, teaching philosophies, and other such matters of interest. Your input will be most welcome. You may wish to submit your own article, suggest a topic for discussion, or respond to (contribute to or disagree with) one of our articles already in print. This is a complicated business we're in, and we can all learn from one another. Please send all correspondence to:

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