

Guidelines for Basic Classic Guitar Performance and Technique

by Mary Jo Disler, M. Mus. Theory, The University of Michigan

Author of *Guitar QuickStart™*, a book for adult beginners, ISBN 0-9642229-0-6

These notes begin with personal advice to students: If you are learning classic guitar, *please* locate a respected teacher. Classic guitar is exceedingly complex, and *not* a “do it yourself” endeavor. It involves far more than figuring out notes or tablatures. Music reading is absolutely essential - tablature far too limited for reasons best explained another time. Sound and technique need to be demonstrated and applied to your individual needs and abilities, and these can *never* be learned from a web site or book alone.

The guidelines in this paper are intended as a starting point for a solid, dependable classic guitar technique. They are not comprehensive, as the application to specific performance requirements becomes very complex. Variations on these themes occur with any experienced serious teacher or performer. However, early level students will not go wrong in studying these principles and working with them thoughtfully and carefully over time. Mesh them into your study and experience, along with the wisdom of your private teacher. Serious students should work with more than one respected teacher over the years, and take to heart the best that each has to offer. In addition, students and teachers alike will benefit greatly by listening to other instruments besides the guitar and avoid getting into an instrumental rut or stereotype. Eventually individuals cultivate the combination of technique, sound, and musicianship that is satisfying to them and to their listeners. Work at the basics, but don't be afraid to experiment and broaden your background. Pay your dues.

Posture

1. Sit with spine erect and shoulders straight, but not stiff.
2. The guitar body is raised to chest height with either a footstool for the left foot, or left thigh support, such as an A-frame.
3. If a footstool is used, the knee should align with the center of the body (spine, nose). It should not be to the far left. This central alignment encourages balance and prevents excess stress on the back.
4. The head of the guitar [end of the neck] should be approximately shoulder high.
5. The right elbow rests on the upper side of the body, and pushes the body low enough that the right shoulder remains level. The upper arm is dead weight on the instrument.
6. The right hand (plucking hand) should be well in front of the strings to gain the leverage of the full length of the fingers on the strings.
7. The left shoulder should be level, with the upper arm hanging dead weight.
8. The fretting hand should be close to the neck, for the most part, with a straight line from elbow across the back of the hand to the natural curvature of the fingers. The pressure of the thumb's middle joint (not the end of the thumb) is approximately in the middle of the neck, opposite the second [middle] finger. [Left hand fingers are numbered 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 from the index finger.] The choreography of performance requires variations on this position, but it is the point of reference and return.

Left Hand Technique notes

Over time, the fretting hand has far more problems to solve than the plucking hand. Guitarists are really learning to blend *two* technical issues that are very different physically: plucking and fretting, with all their intricate variations. The tricky part is to cultivate them independently, yet use them together in precise coordination. Here are some ideas to get students started.

9. Use each left hand fingering configuration to propel (thrust) the hand to the next configuration. Each serves as a setup for the next.
10. To discover the optimal hand-finger-arm position for a given fretted pattern within a piece, finger it and use it as a pivot for all physically possible hand and wrist movements: left to right, right to left, front of neck, behind neck, across the neck. THEN let the hand gravitate instinctively to the least stressful position. This is the one to “aim” for in the flow of performance.
11. Grip as close to the fret as possible, with enough strength for a clean tone, but not so heavily that horizontal motion along the neck is impeded. This takes a *lot* of experimentation, especially in the earlier stages of learning.
12. It is all right for fretting fingers to be somewhat straight at times, and not necessarily curved and gripping on the fingertip, as long as all strings required by the music can be articulated cleanly.
13. Let the arm assist the hand and fingers in various fretboard moves, especially if your hands are small. Pretend that someone is behind your elbow pushing your arm and hand for long jumps and reaches.
14. Practice left hand alignment exercises that begin with the 4th finger, rather than the first [for example, “4 3 2 1” on adjacent frets, in addition to “1 2 3 4.”] The fourth finger is the shortest, most awkward one, and the first finger is naturally more agile and reaches more easily. Too often students instinctively place the first finger then reach with the poor, short 4th finger. This puts the latter finger at a double disadvantage: the shortest finger required to reach the furthest! Give the fourth finger a priority placement, and this will help you find the most natural left hand position. Let the *first* finger do the “reaching” as much as possible rather than the fourth.
15. The thumb of the fretting hand is the true “position changer.” Normally a position on the neck is identified as the fret number where the first finger is located. True enough. However, keep in mind that a position is not really changed unless the thumb goes along behind the neck..

Coordination and legato, the heart and soul of dependable technique and gorgeous playing.

16. Working on fluid legato performance [except, of course, where the musical context requires a broken sound], is central to beautiful performance, and coordination of both hands is central to legato technique. We guitarists have to work extra hard on legato, as the plucked string sound starts to disintegrate immediately. Truth to tell, our “legato” is really an illusion: we fool the ear into “hearing” connections that aren’t quite there. As a basic approach, the fingers of each hand should reach the required string and fret *exactly together*. Avoid too much “setting up” with the fretting hand before the playing hand plucks the strings. This results in a disjointed rhythmic result. *Both hands should feel that they are contributing to the flow of rhythm. Both hands should feel that they are playing the piece.* In advanced music and very fast pieces, selective “setting up” of the fretting hand can obviously contribute to speed, but an undergirding legato coordination should be the rock-solid foundation of all classic guitar technique.