

Improving Your Stroke Through Practicing Arpeggios, A new approach in 2 parts:

by Larry Bolles

I . Refining Your Stroke & II. Breaking The Speed/Reflex Barrier

An interviewer once asked Eddie Van Halen how he happened to begin using his brilliant tapping techniques. He answered that he had listened to players such as Julian Bream and wanted to find an easier way to reach that level of speed with his arpeggios. Actually it is not so difficult to play very rapid and even arpeggios with a systematic approach. Working on this will help you develop a secure and refined right hand technique.

There is no one school of technique for the guitar. The approach I offer here gives a detailed presentation of one model for developing an efficient free stroke. Many great players and teachers today stress using movement from the base knuckle of each finger. I have attempted here to give some detailed information for students to use in understanding why and how to have this be a part of their technique. Please adapt this model for your needs and hopefully it will enhance your approach. Intermediate to advanced level players may find the second part of this paper to be of more interest. I have chosen to use arpeggios as a vehicle for right hand development because they offer the opportunity for the beginner to gain security in their stroke and the advanced player will gain much speed through this kind of practice. Arpeggios also give you a chance to enjoy playing music while working carefully on your technique.

Part I. Refining Your Stroke: Try this experiment: Hold your right hand just above a flat surface and let each finger fall in a natural wave shape with your smallest finger going down first. Some people never "drum" with their fingers when they are bored. If that's true for you don't worry about the wave motion- just let your fingers fall on their tips. Notice how free and easy this motion is. Do the same drumming motion very fast and you'll see how efficient this kind of movement is. You should be letting your fingers move from the joint where your fingers join your hand.

Now try a different movement: Hold your right hand in the air and make your fingers bend from the middle joint. We will refer to this joint as the 'knee' joint. This motion is like that of scratching with your nails. Do this scratching or clawing motion rapidly and then compare moving from the base knuckle instead. You will probably find movement from the base to be much freer and easier. We will allow some movement to occur from the knee joint later but first it is essential to master pushing from your base knuckles. If you cannot move almost entirely from the base at slow speeds you will probably have no movement from that knuckle when you go faster. Concert players may appear to be moving mostly from the middle joint but it is their rapid push from the base that is driving this follow through movement.

The way you think about playing can affect how your hand responds. We speak of "plucking" strings. The primary meaning of the word "pluck" in Webster's Dictionary is: "to pull." If you give a small child a guitar they will often do this with a string resulting in a loud but harsh tone. I began playing the guitar before studying classical guitar and like most self taught players I didn't really push from the base. Don't feel bad if you do this too as it seems to be a natural impulse. Pushing requires very precise hand placement so that you don't run into the next string. Let's begin finding a way to utilize movement from the base knuckles by replacing the idea of plucking the strings.

A better model than that of plucking is to think of just pushing on the end of a plastic ruler or other springy object until your finger overcomes its resistance and pushes past the object. After you finger pushes and clears the springy object it doesn't need to pull back. Instead you just let the finger return to where it began the stroke. Plucking involves reaching out and grabbing an object then pulling back. When you learn to push through the string instead, all your energy goes into a push in one direction. Your fingers will be relaxing immediately after clearing the string and so will

move with more speed and less fatigue. You will also notice a great improvement in your tone.

Many students fall into clawing or plucking the strings because it feels very difficult to do any other stroke. There are two factors that are vital to consider in pushing instead of plucking the strings: Your nails must be not offer too much resistance as they clear the string, and your hand must be low enough towards the ground to make it easy to avoid the next string.

You might want to just scan the next two sections if you already know all about how to finish your nails and how to find the best sitting position. We will only deal with the issues that most directly affect your stroke here. I encourage you to consult a good teacher for a more thorough and individualized approach for these involved topics. If there is a guitar society near you they may bring in outstanding players for master classes. Local universities and instrument builders may be able to direct you to a good private instructor.

Basic Nail Shaping Information:

It is very important to use a diamond type file such as a Revlon Emeryl or Diamond Deb. Use the finishing or finer side. Never use a metal file with grooves as it will grind your nails instead of cutting them like a diamond file. Follow up with either #400 Tri-m-ite open coat or regular #600 sandpaper. Stores that sell products for refinishing furniture will have this.

The two main approaches to shaping nails are to either use a shape similar to the contour of your finger tip or try to create a flatter end shape so the string meets a larger area of nail. Avoid creating any points in your shape as these will ruin your tone. The flatter shape has become very popular but the older way of following the contour of your finger tip yields consistency of tone from any angle with ease.

For more advanced players: You can have a quicker release by having a slant to your nail so that the exit or right side is slightly shorter than the left side. If you need more resistance for greater volume you could make this side slightly longer. If you have problems with nail clicking you may need to be sure that the string doesn't have two points of contact instead of one. It may take some time to find out what shape is best for you. Always try to see in your mind how the string sees the nail when solving these problems.

The most important point for our purpose here is that your nails should not hang up at all on the strings. Your nails must be very smooth on the playing surfaces and short enough to allow you to not feel like you are having to hop over each string. Players with thick nails may wish to try creating a bevelled shape by angling the nail file sharply. The point is to have an easy release for the strings. This could also add some flexibility to overly hard nails. If your nails are very thin you will need to be careful not to thin them too much. If your tone is too nasal you might try for a thicker, more rounded edge. Classical and flamenco players today are using shorter nails than in the past for increased speed and a cleaner sound. Some players are using such short nails that you can just see them from the palm side of their hand. Another great advantage to this is that shorter nails are easier to keep without breaking. The thumb nail usually needs to be considerably longer than the fingernails. Avoid detergent and water when possible by wearing rubber gloves.

Sitting Position: Sit with a steep enough neck angle to have the tuning machines at ear or eye level and both shoulders the same height and relaxed. This angle will help you to have your thumb away from your index finger. I will assume you know about footstools and other means to elevate your left leg to support the guitar. Your spine should be erect in a natural way. Do not use the back of your chair for support. If you do this you will end up hunched over. You need to balance the weight of your head on your spine so that if you were to lean your head to one side your body would lean to that side. Place your right forearm (left if you play left handed) on the rib of the guitar. Players who have their right elbow past the front edge of the guitar often have very little variation in their tone. It is very easy to move quickly from near the sound hole to the bridge

when your forearm rests on the guitar. Check to see if you're holding your shoulders up. Let them hang. Take breaks often and stretch. Massaging your face and neck during these breaks can be very renewing.

Positioning The Hand On The Strings:

Set up your first three fingers (referred to as i, m, and a) all on the third or G string. Place your thumb, (p), on the same string. Notice how this set up places your thumb so that it doesn't block your index finger. Move your thumb to the fourth string and release all your fingers except your index finger. You can allow your wrist to straighten so it's in line with your forearm if you like. Never allow your wrist to collapse and drop towards the top of the guitar. You should now be in just the right position to be able to clear the next string when you use a pushing stroke.

Can you easily push on the third string with your index finger and overcome the string's resistance or is your nail catching? Stop and fix your nail if it resists sliding off of the string. Now check your other fingers to see if your nails will allow you to have an uninhibited pushing stroke. Play the second string with your m finger and the first string with your ring, (a), finger. Practice your stroke with each finger until it feels natural to push from the base. Take the time to practice the stroke with each finger many times.

Start your strokes on the strings after you find the spot where your nail and flesh meet. Do not slap the strings. Landing far from your nail will slow your stroke and can cause a loud clicking noise as the string slides into the nail. Let your fingers have a natural bent shape. You will have to bend your wrist too much if you try to use straight fingers. Feel yourself push in towards the back of the guitar with your bent fingers. It is like the motion people make with their leg when starting a motorcycle; after the pedal gives way the knee and base segments fly in the direction the push. You can then cease all effort.

We are now ready to put these techniques into practice. You need some etude to put this new stroke to work with. You could select some chords you like or use my piece at the end of this article. Look for pieces that allow you to focus on your right hand with all four note chords. I have also written a more extended classical guitar piece that features four note arpeggios for Mel Bay's Fingering 2000 Anthology.

You will get the most benefit if you just play a part of a piece and repeat each arpeggio several times. You may wish to prepare each chord by setting up your fingers, p,i,m,and a, on the strings. It is also important to work later on playing without planting the fingers.

Think of the time you spend building your model for technique as a kind of meditation where you slowly guide your hands through simple but perfect movements. These movements will replace any inferior habits as your body responds to moving with greater ease. Playing arpeggio pieces slowly with good technique will enable you to have a good stroke when you move on to pieces that use less predictable movements.

Part II. (Intermediate to advanced technique), Breaking The Speed/Reflex Barrier:

Most students reach a certain speed with their arpeggios where it seems impossible to go faster. That speed is probably right at the limit of how fast the mind can think of individual finger movements. Concert pieces require a much greater speed. Is running the same as walking speeded up or do you cross into a new kind of movement? You must educate your hand at slower speeds to have total independence of the firing of each finger and then carry this awareness into a reflex motion.

Play some arpeggios at a moderate speed. Listen for any natural tendency for a to follow too soon after m. It may take some time to really eliminate this habit. Be very picky about this. Learn the bias of your hand. It is easier for the thumb to follow a finger than another finger. Learn to

hear when a finger or your thumb jumps in early. Try a rhythmic pattern that makes you go against this bias. Next single out one finger at a time and make it play much louder without affecting the lower volume level of the following finger. Again be very discriminating and fine tune your ear to hear these things. When you cross the speed reflex barrier it is your ear that will control your arpeggios. It is much easier to increase the speed of an even arpeggio than an uneven one.

Experiment with finding what your speed limit is for playing even arpeggios while still thinking separate fingers. Do this only after you have mastered the above independence exercises. Push up to this barrier or wall and play with great relaxation. Notice how you can sense that you would have only clumps or clusters of notes if you tried to go faster. Now practice some even speed bursts. This is like a drummer doing short drum rolls. Play pimap as one unit and then allow a one beat rest and keep repeating. You should be able to play these short even rolls much faster than the previous limit we spoke of. Improvise various patterns with rolls and rests. Think of the patterns you've heard drummers in marching bands practice. Next try connecting two or more continuous fast rolls and then add a very rhythmic rest. The rests are important. Remember to relax immediately after you push. Your fingers will return automatically if you let them. Take every mini-vacation you can!

Notes for playing American Dream: For arpeggio practice start by playing just sections I and II and play each arpeggio 4 times-- then play as written (Sections are played in this order: I, II, I, III, II, Coda). The idea is to give your right hand a chance to experience its highest speed.

American Dream

Larry Bolles

Section I *p i m a*

III

5 0 0 3 5 0 0 3 4 0 0 3 4 0 0 3 2 0 0 2 0 0 0 3 3

p i m a

3 3 2 2 0 0 3 3 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2 3 3

Section II *1st Ending* *Second time jump to Coda*

5

3 3 0 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

Section III

2nd Ending

2/3 CV

III

I

D.S. al Coda

Coda

Fine

rit.

You have just played with the kind of reflex action that we started with at the beginning of this paper- remember that drumming motion that felt very free? Now return to playing continuous p,i,m,a arpeggios and move up towards the limit of your speed with evenness. Move back to a slightly slower speed if you hear any sign of unevenness. Regain your evenness and return to pushing up to your limit of speed. Do this again and again like a dance. Don't do this uninterrupted for more than 20 minutes. Never play through pain or force speed. If your stroke is correct and your body is relaxed you will have little fatigue. Still it is best to pace yourself and avoid repetitive motion injury by taking breaks or doing a different movement.

At some point you will begin to push through the reflex barrier. You will notice a new sense of freedom to go faster. If you slow down slightly you can find the point where you are moving more like walking than running. The big difference in the reflex mode is the feeling that you can keep increasing your speed without a barrier. Do maintain evenness at all times. The principles outlined here can also improve your tremolo technique and scales.

Don't be discouraged if it takes much time to master these concepts. Try to focus more on a relaxed and even technique than on speed. You can get out of balance if you try to rush your technical development. Allow a time to play or read through pieces that you can play easily with great expression. Notice what gives you the most feeling of freedom and confidence. I hope that

this presentation will assist you in your playing. (Listen to Prelude and Allegro by Larry Bolles in Mel Bay's Fingerpicking 2000 book (CD) for an extended classical guitar piece demonstrating these principles.)

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