



In the Black Box

technique(s) of the classical guitar

Thomas Viloteau

I N T H E B L A C K B O X
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T E C H N I Q U E (S) O F T H E C L A S S I C A L G U I T A R
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HOW TO “THINK GUITAR”

Thomas Viloteau

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Warning, This book contains high definition video examples. Given their large format, they are kept on the website www.thomasviloteau.com and not on this PDF file . To watch them, you simply have to click on the “play” button whenever a video is available. Those videos can only be accessed through this e-book.

Internet connection required.

Thanks to, Kailee, for her patience through the long days spent writing this book in London, and for editing the English translation many times in Montréal...

My parents, for their endless support and for pushing me in the right direction,

Every student that I have ever had, for teaching me more than I ever taught them.

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Introduction

This book is primarily intended for advanced students. I tried my best to only include things that, I believe, can help the reader get better. Whether it has been in concerts, auditions, master-classes or lessons, I have been given the opportunity to hear countless students who, despite the fact that they played well, stagnated at the same level because of some unresolved technical issues or because they did not practice properly. All the mistakes that these students make are due to one or two specific things that are almost always easy to identify. From these experiences, my goal with this book was to address the majority of these problems concisely using layman's terms and expressions. I hope to have succeeded, even if talking about technique proved to be more complicated than expected...

You will not find countless exercises here. I am not a big fan of annoying technical work, and I always prefer to practice pieces rather than exercises. I think that technique can easily be learned and developed properly by working only on pieces or studies - in short with *music*, since it is what we are supposed to be doing - and by having a clear idea of the theory.

This is not an opinion that is shared by everyone though, so in order to be as complete as possible I made sure to include three or four exercises that can be useful. I also want to say that I do not impose anything on anyone and that I do not think that there is only one way to play the guitar well. One can reach a very high level without taking into account what is said in this book. The pages that follow are simply presenting some of the technical concepts or principles that seem to work for most of the

great guitarists of our generation and that can be good to know. How they are applied - if applied - is personal.

The book is divided into two parts, the first one being on the technique itself and the second one on its practical applications when playing music.

Finally, it remains a universal truth that it is absolutely necessary to understand the score to improve one's technique. Practicing technique for the sake of technique does not make any sense.

To finish this short introduction, I would like to thank some of the teachers who have influenced me the most in my musical journey: Alvaro Pierri to have been a major influence at an age when his advice was exactly what I needed; Alberto Ponce for truly opening my ears and making me discover a broader "*monde sonore*" and getting me used to playing under pressure; Roland Dyens for his charisma and humor and having taught me how to deal with the score from the view of the composer; Judicaël Perroy for "coaching" me, for pushing me farther and for making me realize that the guitar and music held an important place in my life; Marc Teicholz for forcing me to justify every little musical choice I made and for having always treated me as an equal. It would not be fair to end this introduction without also mentioning my "co-workers": Gabriel Bianco, Florian Larousse and Nicolas Papin. I owe all these musicians a large part of what is in this book. This is a bit of a summary of their teachings - whether it was in lessons, lively discussions, practice sessions, etc. - and I consider myself very lucky to have crossed their paths.

First part
GENERAL TECHNIQUE



Position

One of the most common issues amongst players who have an average technique is having a bad position. Fortunately it is also one of the easiest things to fix. An improper position will not only prevent the guitarist from playing without mistakes, but it can also lead to injuries. If the back, shoulders, arms, wrists or hands hurt, it is probably related to the position. A good posture should allow the guitarist to practice all day without feeling any pain.

The "traditional" position which is generally accepted today is achieved by using a footstool or a support attached to the side of the guitar and lifting the left leg up to place the guitar on the thigh comfortably. This position should be ergonomic and natural. It should allow us to play in the first or the sixteenth position without adapting it too much. That said, this position is far from being obvious to everyone. Some defects are more recurrent than others, and they all have their share of disadvantages. Those defects are often added to a position that is basically mostly correct. Let's see the most common ones and what they cause:

- Basic position + footstool (or support) too low = back needs to be bent, with risk of injury in the long run,
- Basic position + guitar held too horizontally (with the neck almost parallel to the ground) = right shoulder higher than the left one, with the obligation to turn the right hand to the right to play. Also, neck too far away from the body, forcing the player to twist the left wrist and causing difficulties to play in the upper frets, or even to switch positions,

- Basic position + guitar held too "straight" (with the guitar held perpendicular to the ground) = player has to move the chest forward in a "hunched" position which can also reduce the visibility of the fingers on the fretboard. The lower side of the guitar can also cut the blood flow in the left thigh, which is not very pleasant,
- Basic position + guitar held "forward" (with the neck pointing forward) = left hand placed badly, with a "broken" wrist, and here also reduced visibility of the fretboard,
- Basic position + legs kept too close together = loss of stability of the position, which may cause one of the defects mentioned above,
- The worst one: footstool too low + guitar held horizontally and straight + neck pointing forward + legs too close together = ...fortunately quite rare!

To those are inevitably added "broken" wrists. Most cases of tendonitis are actually due to a shortening of the tendons in the hands caused by those "broken" wrists. Both wrists should generally remain flat, allowing the fingers to move as freely and relaxed as possible. A good position almost always guarantees an injury-free practice. The opposite is also true.

Here are some simple rules to keep in mind to maintain a good posture. It must also be said here that a very rigid position is just as bad as a faulty position. We should always adapt our legs, the height of the guitar, the angle of the wrists, etc. to the different scenarios presented by the piece.

- Firstly, the choice of a certain chair, bench, or type of

footstool or support is crucial. It is essential to know what works for you and to try to keep the same position as much as possible - be it in your practice room, in the classroom or on stage. Personally, I need a low chair or piano bench set to its lowest level with a footstool set relatively high. I practice in this position and make sure to keep the same position wherever I have to play. It is very important not to change your position depending on the situational location. Again: the equipment you use is important. In any case, the player should be seated at the edge of the seat and be comfortable and stable. The core should be straight and not move too much and the legs should be able to open and contract without problem (if you want to lift the guitar up to play in the higher positions for example).

- Then, using either a support or a footstool, the guitar should be held at a convenient height. Too low, and after a while your back is going to hurt, possibly causing injuries. On the other hand, if the guitar is held too high the freedom of movement of the upper body will be reduced, forcing the shoulders to work to raise the left arm and place the right hand correctly. As a general rule we can say that the head of the guitar should be at least at eye level.
- The upper side of the guitar should be directly under the chin.
- The guitar should be held slightly tilted, and the neck should never point forward. This means that the fretboard should be clearly visible and that the left hand should not need to grip the neck but should instead rest on it. If the guitar is held too "straight" - at an angle close to perpendicular to the ground - the left elbow will have to be held back, causing tensions throughout the left arm and shoulder and forcing you to "break" the wrist. The lower side of the guitar can also cut the blood circulation in the left leg, which is far from pleasant. This same goes

for the right arm. The guitar should be held inclined - at an angle of about 20 degrees to the ground - allowing the right forearm to rest on the side of the instrument without having to squeeze the guitar against the body or to lift the right shoulder, so that the right wrist can remain flat.

These few rules should allow everyone to find the position that best suits them and to keep it at all times. Of course, I admit that everybody is different, but unless you have legs that are three times larger than normal and at the same time arms that are five times smaller, I have a hard time justifying the use of a "hybrid" position. I myself have played for a long time with the guitar on the right leg, the latter crossed over the left leg, like flamenco players. To me this position seemed more comfortable and "safe" but pretty bad back pains quickly made me switch to the more traditional position... It is not my intention here to impose anything by saying that it is the best thing to do while condemning everything else, but the truth is that we can see that most great guitarists today use this traditional position. There are exceptions of course, but they are minorities and the guitarists who play with such positions have very specific reasons to do so.

There is also a method called the Alexander Technique, which can help to better understand the anatomy of the body and how it works when we play. Having tried it myself a few times and having seen many guitarists try to stay in complete agreement with the method and end up playing with the strangest positions or even stretching between two pieces on stage (...), I must say - avoiding any denigration - that it did not impress me. It is up to each one of us to try it and draw our own conclusions.

To end this chapter on position, it is always possible that even with a correct posture, you still feel pain. This is usually due to weak muscles, and doing sports - swimming, running, working out, etc. - can help greatly.



Left Hand



Placement

Proper placement of the left hand is almost always a guarantee to avoid many mistakes. When we realize this, we can say that about 80% of the technical mistakes that guitarists do will be corrected with better placement. A good left hand position will not only prevent injury, it will also allow the fingers to move more freely and accurately. This is actually something quite easy to fix in most cases, but that requires a long time to really integrate. It is very difficult to habitually have a perfectly placed left hand, but working towards this goal will save a lot of time trying to solve problems. A perfect hand simply cannot make mistakes.

If we had to keep a basic concept, it would be that of *parallelism*. The hand should stay as much as possible parallel to the neck. What follows is thus intended especially for those who didn't develop this habit early on and who play everything with the hand at an angle.

A hand that stays constantly parallel to the neck is a guarantee to play with considerably less mistakes. In practice, it is quite simple: just turn the hand so that the fingers become perpendicular to the strings. If the hand is not used to it, it might feel unnatural and even hurt the arm a little. This is simply a matter of stretching the different muscles of the forearm, and slow and meticulous practice should take care of that.¹

¹ From there and for those who do not play with the hand parallel to the neck, two solutions are possible: the first one will be to work hard to keep your hand parallel at all times, the other will be to wait for mistakes induced by this faulty placement to correct it. I make this digression here because I know from experience that this is one of the hardest things to integrate well. It really is a question of will and practice. It is

Once the hand is parallel, we must pay special attention to the wrist. Numerous guitarists actually limit their left hand and thus their whole technique by not paying attention to their wrist. They play with a "broken" wrist, which hampers freedom of the fingers and makes preparation difficult, if not impossible. Just like for the right hand as we shall see in the part devoted to it, it is very important to keep the wrist flat as a basic positioning. Not only is it to avoid a large number of mistakes, but also especially to continue playing the guitar for a few more years! I say "broken" wrist to describe its shape, but too many hours practicing like this and the expression won't be understood figuratively anymore. Once more: beware of injuries.

As always when it comes to technique, remaining too rigid is not desirable either. For big stretches in particular, whether it is to play an F on the ⑥ with the first finger and a Bb or a B on the ① with the fourth finger to take an extreme example, it is absolutely necessary to lift the elbow and the wrist in order to raise the hand fully above the

a simple thing to put your hand correctly for a particular passage, but for it to become natural it is weeks or months of work. It is each player's choice to see where they stand with this practice. Aiming towards a perfect left hand will be proactive in fixing mistakes due to placement since there shouldn't be any anymore. Correcting these errors as they occur can also work, but will require the player to be attentive to them *at all times*. I personally opted for the second solution for a long time, due to a lack of time or motivation perhaps, but I finally decided to do my best to keep my hand straight as much as possible. The reason is simple: it takes less energy in the long run, and prevents me from reverting to old habits when on stage, thus avoiding making mistakes that are due to a lack of concentration. That said, we will assume for the remainder of this section that we have chosen to practice hard and that everything is performed with a perfectly placed left hand...

fretboard, making the stretch easier.

A simple rule for the wrist then is to keep it flat - *except for large stretches*.



One comment here before I go any further: the elbow is too often forgotten when placing the left hand. Very often, guitarists who play with a “broken” wrist and who try to fix it will keep the elbow at the same position. This is a mistake since it is actually the elbow that will move the wrist. An elbow kept forward will cause “breaking” of the wrist. It needs to be kept back just enough to allow a good placement (along the body seems to work for most players). To make it simpler, if the position is good, the elbow should be relaxed and simply “accept” the gravity allowing the wrist to be naturally flat.

Another bad habit that persists even in advanced guitarists if it wasn't fixed at an earlier age, is to touch the base of the index finger, or even in the worst cases the whole hand, on the edge of the neck, even when playing on the first string. This bad placement is a cause of tendonitis and practicing many hours with such a left hand can be dangerous. The hand itself should not touch the neck, even if a certain stability can be had by doing it in some cases. Again: in some cases only. Nothing in the technique should be rigid, but bad habits are to be kept away.

Finally, the placement of the fingers themselves is important. Except in some special cases which we will discuss later, the fingers should keep a rounded shape and press the string with the end of the last phalanx (the finger tip). Flat fingers are generally to be avoided or kept to cut some resonances.

SUGGESTIONS OF PIECES AND STUDIES:

- **‘STUDY 3’ BY VILLA-LOBOS, AND TO A LESSER EXTENT BUT ALSO FORMIDABLE, THE CENTRAL PART OF THE ‘STUDY 10’.**
- **‘STUDY 6’ BY REGONDI, ESPECIALLY THE CENTRAL PORTION.**
- **‘WALTZ OP. 8, N°4’ BY BARRIOS.**

Preparation of the fingers / Movements

This is a very important chapter. You have to know how to prepare your fingers if you want to get better. The goal here is to minimize your gestures and to recognize the ones that are useless (too wide or too fast), when playing anything on the guitar. The objective is to achieve a certain *slowness* of movements, whether the piece is written to be played *Lento* or *Presto*. When this is learned well and carefully, it can absolutely push a player to a whole new level. To be perfectly honest, only a fraction of the students I've had in class knew how to prepare their fingers correctly. It seems to be something that is still uncommon and not taught that often, which is too bad in my opinion. Preparing our fingers does not actually require any work in itself.

Or rather: it is not the kind of work that we are used to. Unlike the trills, bars, etc., we cannot really work on the preparation of the fingers with exercises. It is mostly a matter of being conscious of *where your fingers are* and *where they're going next* on the fretboard, rather than repeating a movement over and over again until it becomes natural. It is actually quite simple to do, but it requires ample amounts of slow and meticulous practice.

To simplify it and understand what this is really all about, we will try to practice it on a basic C Major scale, in first position from the C (3rd fret/③) to the C (1st fret/②), with the following fingerings: 3-0-2-3-0-2-0-1. To prepare the fingers means that before playing the E on fret 2/④, the

2nd finger will come rest right above it (without stopping the open D from ringing) and that when the time comes to play the E, the 2nd finger will then only have to press down and play in a "relaxed" manner. It will be the same process for the 3rd finger on the F (it will move above the 3rd fret while the E sounds), for the 2nd finger on the A (3rd string) and finally for the 1st finger playing the last C. In the end, you should play the scale in an almost motionless manner, and even if it is performed quickly. The result should be a certain feeling of slowness in the hand.

Rather than trying to understand this concept and to apply it to the pieces that you play, it is this feeling of slowness that should be looked for at the beginning, being the sign

*prepare the 2
**prepare the 3
***prepare the 2
****prepare the 1

that you prepare your fingers correctly. For those who find it difficult to acquire this feeling in their left hand, here is the theory: *the maximum slowness of movement is achieved by moving the fingers at constant speed*. It really is everything there is to know about it. In the example of the C scale, it simply means that the whole process of leaving the E, moving to rest above the A then pressing down and playing the note needs to be completed at *constant speed*. To preemptively leave the E to quickly go place the finger over the A just to wait there to put it down when the time

comes will not improve anything.

One more tiny thing to make sure to cover everything for this subject: I have seen many guitarists try to prepare their fingers and move at constant speed, but who added unnecessary movements to their playing. In our little scale example, this means that they would go from the E to the A at constant speed but their 2nd finger would move very high or sideways while traveling between the two notes. Such players are moving at constant speed, but by adding an extra distance to be covered by their fingers, they do not reach maximum slowness. You must reduce the overall movements made by the fingers to a strict minimum, it is essential.

This concept is briefly what it means to prepare and move your fingers. It is a rather simple thing to understand and to do on a small C scale, but it will become more complex in a big and difficult piece.

SUGGESTIONS OF PIECES AND STUDIES:

- **TO DEVELOP THE HABIT OF PREPARING YOUR FINGERS, ANY PIECE OF YOUR REPERTOIRE CAN BE USED, BUT SOME EASY STUDIES MIGHT BE PREFERABLE. THE 'STUDY 8, OP.6' BY SOR FOR EXAMPLE IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF SUCH STUDIES. THE STUDY ITSELF IS RATHER SIMPLE TO PLAY, AND SLOW ENOUGH TO REALLY BE AWARE OF EVERY TINY MOVEMENT. ONCE THE FINGERINGS ARE SET, ATTENTION MUST BE DRAWN TO EACH FINGER (WHERE EACH ONE COMES FROM AND WHERE IT GOES) MAKING SURE THAT THE FINGERS MOVE AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE.**
- **'CHÔRO DA SAUDADE' BY BARRIOS.**
- **'JULIA FLORIDA' BY BARRIOS.**

- **1ST MVT OF THE 'SONATA' BY TEDESCO, (ORIGINAL VERSION).**
- **'FAREWELL' BY DOWLAND.**
- **CANCIÓN FROM THE 'SUITE VENEZOLANA' BY LAURO.**
- **THE 2ND OF THE '3 CANCIONES POPULARES MEXICANAS' BY PONCE.**
- **'EQUINOX' BY TAKEMITSU.**