

Teaching Barre Chord Success

by Daniel Roest

Last month we looked in detail at the [please link] **hierarchy of left hand technique** to help your students cope with left hand challenges. This month we stay with the left hand and tackle the dreaded barre chord – a monster for many beginning and intermediate students. You may already know most of these ideas and teach some or all, but chances are there is something new here, and they are all together for easy referral.

I consider barre chords “intermediate chords” for two reasons. They build on basic open major, minor and 7th chords, and those should be learned before barre chords. And they are substantially harder to play cleanly than open chords. So before you teach these ways to make barre chords easier, make sure the student knows about fifteen open chords really well: Em, E, E7, Am, A, A7, Dm, D, D7, B7, C, C7, F, G, G7. Add more non-barre chords if you want, but these alone will work on about a bazillion songs.

Now we can get to the intermediate level barre chords. I'll give you the rule or idea and add an explanation to each one.

- 1. Stay close to the fret.** The least pressure necessary to avoid buzzing is closest to the fret.
- 2. Keep your left hand thumb under the barre and on the lower half of the neck.** The left thumb is most effective supporting the barre when it is directly under the barre finger and treble strings.
- 3. Roll off the fret onto the side of the barre finger.** You may find the side of the barre finger better than the bottom for making the barre, and this is a way to really park the barre finger in tight against the fret. Start with the finger centered on the actual fret, then lean the finger off the fret into the fret space.
- 4. Press only the necessary strings.** Say you have an E Type major barre chord, for example G at the 3rd fret. The 5th, 4th, and 3rd strings are held down by the 3rd, 4th, and 2nd fingers, and the barre is really only necessary for the 6th, 2nd and 1st strings. Remove the non-barre fingers, and the 5th, 4th, and 3rd strings should not be held down by the barre firmly enough to avoid buzzing. Why waste energy on those strings?
- 5. Arch the barre if it helps.** When doing the G major chord at the 3rd fret, it isn't necessary to have a super straight barre finger, as we see in number 4 above. Since the barre is only necessary for the 6th, 2nd and 1st strings, you can afford a curve in the barre.
- 6. Use a treadmill "hill mode" approach - bear down just long enough to get through the barre chord.** If you've ever played the classical standard called “Romance,” you know the two measures of full barres at the 7th fret are the hardest part, especially since it is a sustained arpeggio, not a quick choppy strummed chord. Those two measures are hard, but like the machine at the gym, you bear down hard for a short period until you get through the barre, and then relax *after* the barre.
- 7. Test your barre technique one string at a time on each barre chord.** Look for strings that buzz as you learn a new barre chord and adjust the barre accordingly.
- 8. Release the barre as soon as possible.** The idea is to conserve energy by releasing the barre quickly. Learn to relax the left hand as much as possible as you continue.
- 9. Use staccato technique.** When strumming barre chords, break up the work of holding down the barre by short, choppy chords instead of long, sustained chords, if this works musically. It won't work for classical arpeggios.
- 10. Know and use easier alternative chord forms.** If your left hand is too tired to make any more barre chords, use open chord alternatives or other, easier forms.
- 11. Adjust depth of barre to improve knuckle placement.** Just move deeper or shallower to place the knuckle over string instead of between two strings.
- 12. Piggy-back second finger on top of barre.** This works if the second finger is free, as in a 5th-fret A minor chord.

13. Squeeze guitar - pull back against your chest with right arm countering left.

This way, your left arm strength adds to your left hand strength to apply force to the strings.

14. Use gravity - the weight of your left arm and hand. Tilt the guitar neck enough to use the weight of your left arm to contribute to the pressure applied on the barre.

Barre Chords – Wonderful But Unnatural

If you think about the way the hand is designed, it's really good at opening and closing into a fist. What it is *not* designed for, however, is barre chords. That's why it hurts without good technique and good energy management.

Why does it hurt? The contraction of hand muscles restricts blood flow and lactic acid builds up, the same as when you overwork bigger muscles. As soon as you relax, fresh, oxygenated blood comes in and flushes out the bad stuff.

Once I was doing a wedding and backing a singer on the tune "*Midnight*" from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, "*Cats*," and it called for endless sustained arpeggiated barre chords. Sustained arpeggios give you no relief – you have to maintain the pressure throughout. My left hand was starting to give out, burning, and this was in the middle of the featured mid-ceremony song. I decided to bail on the barre chords and substitute open chords whenever I could get away with it, and that got me through the tune.

Barre chords are almost magical – the guitar has such an easier time shifting chords chromatically than the piano. I hope this column on teaching barre chord success has given you some new ideas to use in your studio. Until next month, happy teaching!

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Daniel Roest (pronounced "roost") started playing guitar at the age of seven and never stopped. Today he has performed in countless solo and ensemble events in nearly every kind of venue, and his concerts are praised for being entertaining and informative. For ten years he served as President and Artistic Director of the South Bay Guitar Society based in San Jose, CA, preparing many successful grant applications, and is now Director Emeritus. He also is recognized for presenting gifted guitarists such as Laurence Juber, Peppino D'Agostino, Muriel Anderson, Jeff Linsky, Franco Morone, Michael Chapdelaine, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Proctor, Mark Hanson, Duck Baker, Sharon Isbin, Lily Afshar, Carlos Barbosa-Lima and many others. His *Great Guitars! 2004* CD received 5-star reviews.

Roest majored in guitar and earned three degrees in music performance. He participated in dozens of masterclasses, including many he produced. He taught guitar and music fundamentals at California State University Stanislaus and De Anza, Foothill and San Jose City Colleges and now maintains a full-time teaching studio in Folsom, CA. He has adjudicated several multi-instrument competitions, presented music clinics and introduced many new audiences to the art of the classical guitar. His original solo composition, *February 4th*, was selected from hundreds of submissions by the ERMMedia "Masterworks of the New Era" CD series. Last year he was selected to be a teaching artist in the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission's Artist Residency Institute. Previous columns for **Guitar Sessions** include **So You Want to Make a Living with the Guitar**, Parts [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#), a ten part series, **Expressive Guitar Playing – Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist: Dynamics, Tempo, The Big Picture, Rhythm, Balance, Rubato, Pitch Effects, Tone, Phrasing** and **Stage Presence and Heart**, and **Teachers Who Can – Performing in Your Own Community**, Parts [1](#) and [2](#).