

THE HIERARCHY OF LEFT HAND TECHNIQUE

by Daniel Roest

This month we'll switch gears – from mind control to hand control. There is an easy way to immediately help a student who is frustrated by left hand problems, and we will look at it here. Over many years of teaching, I have learned that most technical problems come down to two words: "Hand position."

I was fortunate to see a demonstration of true effortless playing when the late **Abel Carlevaro** [[link: http://www.melbay.com/authors.asp?author=441](http://www.melbay.com/authors.asp?author=441)] (1916-2001) gave masterclasses and a concert at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. It was many years ago – the '80s, and all in the room were astonished at the left hand and arm of this virtuoso performer and teacher from Montevideo, Uruguay. His left hand was as efficient as any guitarist we had ever seen. The key, as he explained it in the classes, was first and foremost – left hand position.

The brilliant, key concept that Carlevaro taught was putting the main responsibility for getting the fingers to the various destinations with the left palm, and not the fingers themselves. You may already know and teach this, but I think you will profit from reading further.

"I...Can't...Reach It!"

A perfect demonstration of the importance of the hand placing the fingers *where they can succeed* is switching between two chords – B7 (first position, open chord) and G7 (also first position, open chord.) Have your student make the G7 and find the most relaxed, comfortable place for the left arm, wrist, hand, thumb and fingers. The elbow will be close to the side. Then have them attempt a B7 from that exact same position that worked so well for the G7. It's problematic – maybe impossible. Now move their left elbow out away from their side – big improvement! Repositioning the left elbow a good eight or ten inches straightens the wrist and makes a huge difference. Now the student finds the very best position for the B7. Have them try the G7 from that arm and hand position. Again, they can't do it.

Carlevaro framed his left hand positioning in what he called "Longitudinal Presentation" (one finger per adjacent fret) and "Transversal Presentation" (two or more fingers occupy the same fret, like the B7 chord we just played.) You don't need to use his terms, but you do need to show your students the tremendous advantage of moving the forearm and wrist when they are not in the best position for a given chord, scale, and *everything the left hand does*.

Of course the guitar neck position is very important, too, so make sure that is set first. If the guitar neck is slung too low to have that same feeling, or the neck is pointing too far in front like a rifle, the hands are compromised.

I like to remind students of the "middle range of motion" of the hands, where we are most comfortable, as when we bring up a glass to take a drink. In this near field area in front of us, our hands are at their most dexterous, and they can twist about the same amount in opposite directions. The wrists aren't bent, and the tendons are unimpeded.

Linkage – the Hierarchy of Left Hand Technique

I tell students that it's important to understand how one element of technique depends upon another. For example, the left wrist puts the hand here or there, in this position or

that. If they forget that simple concept, they'll work harder than you have to. The "hierarchy" idea owes to the fact that the hand serves the fingers, not the other way around. And the wrist serves the hand. It's as if the fingers order the hand, "Put us here!" and the hand orders the wrist, "Put me here!" and so on.

Let's now go over the hierarchy of left hand technique to appreciate how interdependent different parts of the body are to smooth technique:

- 1. The music calls for certain locations on the fretboard.**
- 2. The fingers go to the locations.**
- 3. The left hand puts the fingers there.**
- 4. The left wrist puts the left hand there.**
- 5. The left forearm puts the left wrist there.**
- 6. The left elbow puts the left forearm there.**
- 7. The upper left arm puts the left elbow there.**
- 8. The left shoulder puts the upper left arm there.**
- 9. The torso puts the left shoulder there.**
- 10. The sitting position places the torso there.**

Try some familiar chords with the hierarchy in mind and see how useful a change of arm and wrist position is when switching through chords like B7, G7, E, D, D9, etc. Again, we note how the angle of the guitar neck (part of the sitting position) greatly influences the success of the left hand.

The Weight of the Finger Versus the Weight of the Hand

You should have seen Carlevaro's playing – it was a marvel. It seemed the fingers didn't move so much as the arm and hand. And he had perfected his technique so much that he had tremendous capacity for playing – he could play hours and hours, and you couldn't find calluses on his fingers!

Another memorable moment in that class was his pointing out that we sometimes ask our fingers to do things better left to the hand. He demonstrated his message, asking which made more sense – to (try to) lift a music stand with a finger or to use the hand, wrist and arm? By the same token, when we fixate the left hand while hammering and pulling off slurs, we ask the fingers to work harder than necessary. By contrast, if we fixate the finger and move the hand, like knocking on a door, we transfer the mass of the hand through the fixated finger. The difference in the impact on the string is huge. Try shaking your wrists, but with stiff fingers. Anything the fingers knock into would be impacted far more than if the hand was immobile and the fingers attempted to just spring out. Throw the hand with stiff fingers onto the strings, randomly, and see the neck jerk back from the impact. This will be illuminating for a student whose left hand is immobile. What may have worked for one chord may be useless for the next.

I hope this column has been useful in providing a way to explain the best way to help the fingers hit their marks.

Next month, a baker's dozen tips on success with barre chords. Until then, happy teaching!

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 Your Own Community**, Parts [1](#) and [2](#).