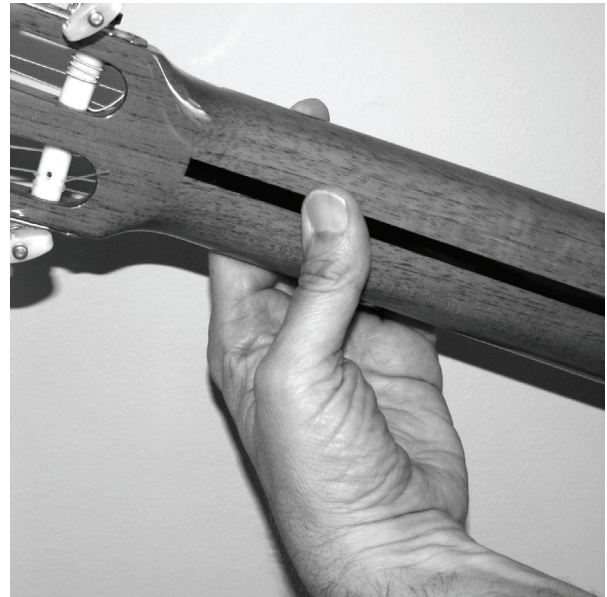


Chapter 10

Left Hand Technique

Left Hand Position

In the illustrations below you can observe a front view of the left arm and hand, and also a view of how the thumb is positioned in the back of the neck of the guitar:



Notice how, in the illustration above on the left, the elbow is gathered in towards the body. This helps support the fourth finger as it extends to play the bass note of the GM7 chord being held.

And notice how, in the illustration above and on the right, the elbow is held away from the body, in order to allow the fingers to align to play the B7 chord.

Key Points about Left Hand Position

1. The wrist is slightly bent. If the wrist is too straight the fingers cannot reach all the notes. If the wrist is too bent, it becomes very uncomfortable, and your hand will tire quickly.
2. The thumb is perpendicular to the neck, approximately opposite the first and second fingers.
3. The fingers are curved to allow the fingertips to contact the strings and have efficient leverage to press down the string.
4. Allow a space of about two fingers' width between the neck of the guitar and the inside of your hand.
5. Most of the time the elbow is oriented slightly away from the side of the body. But, like the bowing arm of a violinist, the elbow adjusts by moving away from and close to the body depending on the technical requirements of the passage you are playing.

Finger Action

1. The fingers are curved and flexed to bring the fingertips to the strings.
2. The fingertips are placed just behind the fret of each note to be played. This prevents buzzes and produces a good tone.
3. Use minimal, but sufficient pressure when pressing down the strings. This conserves energy and allows the transition from note to note to be smoother.
4. Keep the fingers close to the strings before playing, in a curved shape, and use minimal lift-off when releasing a note. This increases the accuracy of your playing.

Basic Principles of Left Hand Fingering

Guitarists devote much of their musical lives to working out left hand fingerings that are musically sound and technically sensible. Each kind of musical structure, whether it is chords, scales, or arpeggios, has tricks of the trade that, once learned, can be applied again and again. The details of these approaches to fingering are covered in the exercises that follow. A brief outline of the main principles of left hand fingering is summarized below:

1. **One finger, one fret.** For any position you are playing in, the left hand fingers are placed in adjacent frets, whenever possible. For example, if the first finger is playing the F in the first fret of the E string, the F# in the second fret will be played with the second finger.
2. **Holding fingers down.** When changing chords, if both chords share a common note, the finger holding the common note is held down, while the other fingers move to the other notes of the second chord. This principle is explored and illustrated in detail in the chapters on chords and basic chord progressions.
3. **Sliding along a string.** When changing position, up or down the fingerboard, it is often possible to slide a finger holding a note to a note in the new position. Most of the time the sliding is done without creating a sound, with the string effectively guiding the fingers to the next location where the music is played.

Left Hand Exercises

Slurs

A *slur* is a curved line that connects two or more notes. It indicates that they are to be joined smoothly together. On the guitar this is done by plucking the first note of the slur in the normal way, then the left hand, *without* using the right hand, either *hammers-on* or *pulls-off* the remaining notes of the slur. The slur can be applied to any combination of ascending and descending notes. The example below shows various kinds of slurs:

Ascending Slurs Descending slurs Combined ascending and descending slurs



The image shows three musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff illustrates ascending slurs with notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The second staff illustrates descending slurs with notes C5, B4, A4, and G4. The third staff illustrates combined ascending and descending slurs with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, and F4.

Ascending Slur, also called Hammer-on

To play the ascending slur, pluck the first note of the slur in the normal manner, then *hammer* the indicated left hand finger down just behind the fret of the second note. The hammer action should be more like a light *tapping* than an action with great force or wild motion.

At first it helps to watch the finger that is tapping: guide it to a precise position just behind the fret of the second note. Keep the finger more curved than straight, and try to contact the string with the tip of your finger. A clear sound emerges when these elements are well integrated.

If the sound is not clear it means that the placement and curvature of the finger need further adjustment. Merely increasing the force of the movement does not usually improve the sound.

In the exercises below play each slurred pair 4 times. Rest the hand before continuing to the next pair.



The image contains four staves of musical notation for hammer-on exercises. The first staff shows pairs of notes with fingerings: (0, 1), (0, 2), (0, 3), (0, 4), (0, 1), (0, 2), (0, 3), and (0, 4). Arrows labeled 'Pluck' and 'Hammer-on' point to the first notes. The second staff shows pairs: (1, 2), (1, 3), (1, 4), (1, 2), (1, 3), and (1, 4). The third staff shows pairs: (2, 3), (2, 4), (2, 3), and (2, 4). The fourth staff shows pairs: (3, 4) and (3, 4).

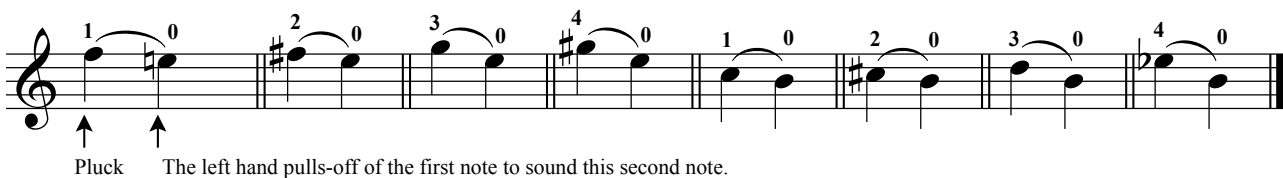
Descending Slur, also called Pull-off

To play the descending slur, pre-place both notes of the slurred pair. Pluck the first note in the normal manner. Then *pull-off* the finger that is holding the first note so that the second note is sounded by the action of the finger that has pulled away from the string.

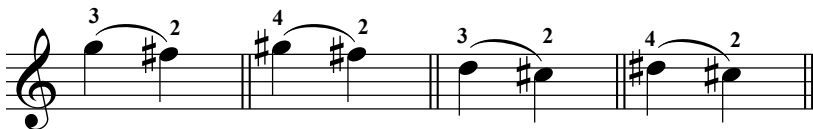
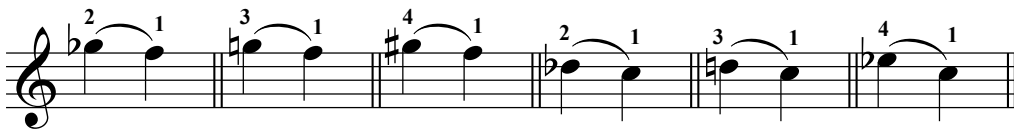
The left hand "pulling-off" finger is, in effect, *plucking* the string, in a way analogous to the right hand. It is also important that the finger holding the second note of the pair continues to exert enough pressure so that the action of the pull-off does not disturb it.

It takes focused practice for the slurs to attain reliable quality. You can measure the quality by listening to both the plucked initial note and the slurred note that follows. Over time the slurred notes will sound smooth and musically well-joined.

In the exercises below play each slurred pair 4 times. Relax the hand before practicing the next pair.



Pluck The left hand pulls-off of the first note to sound this second note.



Slur exercises are one of the surest ways to develop finesse and fine muscle control of the left hand. Slurs develop control of the small muscles within the hand called the *interossei*. Spend a few minutes doing these exercises during each practice session. But do not over-work your hand.

It is better to rest briefly *as soon as* your hand begins to tire. Like the delicate gears of an old-fashioned Swiss clock, the *interossei* work for you automatically beneath the threshold of conscious control.

That is partly why the pull-off and hammer-on techniques take special patience to master. Even so, once you have understood and practiced the essential elements, slurs become easy to do whenever required.

Two Note Intervals: Medieval Melodies in 3rds, 5ths, 6ths and Octaves

Medieval composers were the creative innovators who first began to harmonize single line melodies, in what the historians call "organum." Parallel organum means that the primary melody is accompanied note for note with another melody at a chosen *interval** - usually fourths, fifths or octaves. Below are four ancient melodies harmonized with intervals of thirds, fifths, sixths and octaves.

(*The term "interval" means the musical distance between two notes.)

Hymn to St. Magnus

CD track # 1

Thirds: Thirds always are written from line to line or space to space within the staff.

13TH CENTURY

Adagio

Ambrosian Hymn

CD track # 2

Fifths: Fifths always are written from line to line or space to space with one line or space between notes.

9TH CENTURY

Largo

Begin to recognize the appearance and characteristic sound of the two note intervals in this section. Knowledge of the appearance and sound of intervals is a useful step towards the long term ideal of being able to imagine the sound just by looking at the musical score.

Song of the Donkey

CD track #3

Sixths: Sixths always are written from line to space or space to line with one and a half spaces between notes.

12TH CENTURY

Allegretto

Ballade

CD track #4

Octaves: Octaves always are written from line to space or space to line with two and a half spaces between notes.

RICHARD COEUR-DE-LION
(1157-1199)

Andante