

Chapter 9

Right Hand Technique

The right hand is used to create sound by plucking and strumming the strings. The left hand, in a sense, just prepares the strings to be plucked. So it is the right hand that sets into vibratory motion the notes that the left hand has prepared for sounding.

Because each hand has a completely different role, that of preparation and that of "inputting" the sound, each has its own special techniques for mastery.

Right Arm Position

1. While sitting, and having adjusted the height of the footstool to a comfortable position, support the guitar by using your left hand to hold the neck of the guitar. Let your right arm rest at your side.



2. Now bring your arm up to a position where your forearm is resting on the upper shoulder of the guitar.



3. Keeping your wrist relaxed, orient your fingertips towards the strings, making adjustments until the fingertips are touching the strings. The thumb is extended across the rosette and is above the sound hole, with i, m and a arrayed over and behind the rosette, a little towards the bridge. The illustration here shown has the thumb on the A string, with i, m and a ready to pluck the notes of a chord on the upper three strings.

Consider this to be a kind of *basic* position, since, when you are playing, the right hand will *vary* its touch point along the strings, either playing closer to the bridge, for a brighter tone, or else playing a bit more over the sound hole, for a darker, more mellow tone quality.



4. When playing several notes successively on the same string, the knuckles of the hand adjust to be *parallel* to the line of the string being played. This way, i and m, or another pair of fingers, can alternate easily. Keep in mind that it is crucial that your hand *feel* natural and comfortable during the alternating of finger pairs.

The sound will also tell you if the position is working well: if the sound is even and smooth, probably you have found a good position; if the sound is uneven in amplitude, and it is hard to keep a smooth rhythm, continue to adjust your hand and finger posture until you are satisfied with the results.



5. When plucking the strings, the finger tip contacts the string at the left side of the finger, at the junction between the nail and the flesh. There is a vast palette of tonal color available just within the possibilities of using the nail, the flesh, and a combination of nail and flesh.

For now, focus on the basic position of the arm and hand, and begin to explore the sensations and resulting sounds as you play the guitar. When your hand feels tight or fatigued, rest for a moment, drop your hand to your side, and only when you are ready, return to your practice of right hand technique.

Basic Techniques of Right Hand Fingering

Depending on the musical texture you are playing, the right hand has several types of finger actions available to it to create the musical effect you wish. The two most basic actions are called *free stroke* and *rest stroke*, and are described below.

1. **Free Stroke** (also called *Tirando*) consists of plucking a string with the fingertip, which then lifts slightly in its follow-through to avoid striking other strings.
2. **Rest Stroke** (also called *Apoyando*) consists of plucking a string with the fingertip, then allowing its follow-through to rest against the next lower-sounding string. When the thumb does a rest stroke, it will, of course, *rest* on the next higher-sounding string.

There is a lively debate among guitarists, that actually goes back to at least the 19th century, about when and how to use rest strokes and free strokes, and about whether to use flesh or nails.

My own opinion in these matters is quite simple. That is, learn to use *all resources of your right hand*, and be able to apply them in any manner you wish, according to the musical demand as you see it. Some will insist that all melody notes should be played using rest stroke. Some accomplished guitarists have even argued that rest strokes should never be used.

After all the dust settles, why not consider allowing the music to communicate to you exactly how each note may be plucked? Master musicians of other instruments have often chronicled their lifelong quest to find the best fingerings and articulations for the music they play.

3. **Alternating Fingers**, whether using free or rest strokes, is the most basic rule of right hand technique for playing melodies, scales, and single note patterns of all kinds. Alternation of i and m is akin to walking.
4. The thumb may, however, be used repeatedly.

Basic Principles of Right Hand Fingering

Since most guitar music does not have much indication of which right hand fingering to use, it is crucial to learn the basic logic of right hand finger actions:

1. The thumb, with few exceptions, plays all the bass melody notes. In chords the thumb plays the lowest-sounding note.
2. The index and middle fingers, and, at times, the ring finger, play the notes of melodies and scales, using an alternating pattern as described above.
3. For arpeggios (that is, notes of a chord played one at a time) the thumb plays the bass note, and the index, middle and ring fingers cover the remaining notes on successive strings.

The right hand exercises on the following pages can be helpful in beginning to establish reliable patterns of finger alternation.