

Thomas Offermann

Modern Guitar Technique

Integrative Movement Theory
for Guitarists

Translated by Miranda Bethell

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Prelude: About this book

Why this book? What does ‘integrative’ mean?

Aren't there already enough books on guitar technique – the four-volume guitar method by Emilio Pujol, Konrad Ragossnig's *Leitfaden zum täglichen Üben* (Daily Practice Handbook), the revolutionary Carlevaro-Method in the 1980s, and today Scott Tennant's wonderful *Pumping Nylon*, Joseph Urshalmi's knowledgeable *A Conscious Approach to Guitar Technique*, right up to the reprint of Jorge Cardoso's *Ciencia y Método de la Técnica Guitarrística* (Theory and Practice of Guitar Technique), to mention only a few? These are all outstanding and expert approaches to classical guitar technique.

Nevertheless, guitarists do often appear to feel they are out of touch with physical and physiological principles. Guitar players are still directed to the outdated techniques of the school of Francisco Tárrega, who first introduced the guitar in its present form and was thus a pioneer. Fernando Sor's approach, conversely, appears to be largely forgotten, yet his *Méthode pour la Guitare*, published as early as 1830, is full of clear instruction that is still valid today.

Guitarists continue to be taught to play as before: with a still right wrist cut off from any fluidity of motion and moving the fingers in isolation from other arm and shoulder muscles (the cause of guitarists' familiarity with orthopaedic surgeons); with a bent left wrist (condoned if not desired); and, despite a growing market in a huge variety of guitar supports as replacements or extensions of the footstool, with one-sided and twisted postures accepted as a necessary evil.

Moving the body while playing is commonly disapproved of: the picture of the introverted, motionless guitarist, sitting stiffly, and shying away from playing with other instrumentalists, is well known in the musical world. This is absurd, when you consider that many guitarists today come to the guitar through popular music not classical, and so their reason for starting was always on the fun-loving rather than the serious side. So it breaks my heart to see veteran guitarists struggling with their instruments in the prescribed attitude. Guitar playing is more than the goal of fulfilling criteria dictated by others.

Again and again I meet guitarists, students and even successful professional guitarists who complain of pain: many regard this as a necessary evil in guitar playing. How many guitarists have stopped playing? Back pain, pain in the hands, chronic tendonitis may have been the cause. The number of unreported cases of guitarists giving up completely is by no means small.

How is it that some guitarists come to terms with their instruments so easily and simply, and others give up playing the guitar completely? Is it merely a question of talent or luck, or is there a key to this problem for all guitarists? Are there purely physical factors and physiological principles involved? Is there a way of looking at guitar technique that is not based on undifferentiated and tendentious subjectivity or taste, a way that leaves room for very different approaches?

My purpose in this book is to present an accurate appraisal of modern guitar technique in many of its details, and at the same time to indicate approaches that are still uncommon, like using the little finger of the right hand to play, or specific training in counter-movements (movements in the opposite direction). *Modern Guitar Technique: Integrative Movement Theory for Guitarists* aims to enable guitarists to play by the simplest and most natural means, so it involves the entire body and addresses the origin and the physical and physiological principles of movement in playing the instrument, which are directly and indissolubly connected to the principles of music itself. Consequently, this book is not about technique alone but also has noticeable effects on interpretation, putting guitarists in the position to interpret music appropriately, free from all hindrances.

With this in mind I have defined movements, their origins, counter-movements, and posture when holding the guitar, and devoted much space to recognizing and avoiding compensatory movements.

I have been teaching in colleges of music since 1990 and have continued to refine and define my approach to the guitar. I have been able to ascertain that many guitarists of international rank have obviously drawn the same or similar conclusions as regards technique but have not delved into it to the extent that I have.

I was led to grapple with guitar technique in such depth, because, as a former competitive athlete, I had often drawn parallels between sport and music. Both generate top physical performances that demand absolute physical control, knowledge and discipline in both work and approach. The difference is that in music this mastery is put to the service of art: physical performance is not an object in itself. The question occasionally arises whether this contrast is valid in all cases, since there are after all artists like Maradona in football and instrumentalists for whom only athleticism, speed and volume seem to count.

In 1996, as a result of an illness that put an end to my concert career, I had to relearn all physical movements after a partial paralysis that affected my whole left side. I thus found myself in a unique situation: I was perhaps the only guitarist able to put my theories and the knowledge I had gained on guitar technique into practice on my own body. I have been urged by many colleagues and eventually by generations of students to write down my method.

Working with the movement and training sports research scientist, Dr Lars Janshen, a member of the research group for applied biomechanics at the Humboldt University in Berlin, brought new insights and the certain knowledge that research scientists in sports are far ahead of musicians. Analyses of movement using the latest technical instruments and scientific research has already been in progress for decades. So in August 2006 we set to work at Humboldt University with some classical guitarists who volunteered as research subjects. The exchange of ideas and the results of the investigation clearly confirmed, for example, that a preparatory tensing or pre-tensing of the muscles is unavoidable when playing

the instrument. In any one movement it is never just the directly responsible muscles that are involved: the movement also depends on the muscles that adjust the arm or bring the arm to the instrument and on all the muscles that control the arm. This control is only possible when these muscles too exhibit the necessary tension before the movement takes place.

In *Modern Guitar Technique* my aim is to simplify guitar playing and make the discussion about various approaches to technique more objective. The book has been written both for concert guitarists and for guitar teachers and students.

1. Integrative Guitar Technique: an Introduction

‘To play in a relaxed fashion is an error of judgement.’ To avoid compensatory movement, we need a high level of basic tension in both hands, the so-called muscle tone.

‘I must learn to play with large and not with isolated movements.’ The fine movement muscles (for example of the hands) are always only differentiating executors of the commands of the proximal muscles.

‘Practising means understanding. Understanding movement means being able to separate the preparatory tensing and the movement itself.’

‘Strength and speed: a contradiction.’

These four guidelines form the connecting thread of *Modern Guitar Technique*, provoking spontaneous understanding in some people and a shaking of the head in others.

The integrative guitar technique integrates the smallest movement of the fingers into a higher-level motion sequence and explains why isolated movements, for example moving the fingers in isolation from the other arm muscles and the shoulder muscles run contrary to our physiology, the physical constraints of our bodies and our instruments, and to our health. The integrative technique is concerned with the significance and function of all the muscles involved in posture that bring the hands to the instrument and control them. The technique highlights the physical constraints imposed by our bodies and the guitar according to which the guitarist must set his posture in relation to the instrument. The integrative guitar technique consciously involves comparisons with sport: sports physiologists define ten kinds of strength. Concepts like maximal strength, high-speed strength (or explosive power or take-off power) and endurance (or stamina) are part of the technique.

However, training methods such as interval training or mental training are also applicable in this guitar technique. An unclear idea of the origin of movement often goes with undifferentiated technique. This affects the playing of the guitar: failure to pre-tense muscles before a movement – particularly a very fast one – leads to uncontrolled articulation. The integrative guitar technique of course also involves artistic modes of expression, for example, legato or dynamics.

This technique increases players’ proprioception, their awareness of their bodies in space, and accordingly of the position of the left hand etc.; it points out ways to train this sense when playing the guitar. This integrative guitar technique gives weight to two significant aspects: counter-movements and the training of the little finger of the right hand.

The exercise section builds from basic techniques using the simplest exercises leading to further techniques and variations. The fundamental principle is that the hand should be considered as a whole to begin with, so that, for example, the basic right-hand technique is playing a chord.

I begin this book by analysing integrative guitar technique. How does it compare with other modern techniques and older approaches?

The second chapter, 'Technique: A Contradiction of the Guitar in its Natural State?', is devoted to the question of what technique actually is and why we need it.

The physiological principles with the relevant facts for guitarists are presented in Chapter 3. I lay great weight on the connections between muscles being used in performance and muscles being used to maintain posture, and on the significance of the nerves and proprioception.

The fourth chapter 'Posture and Movement' addresses historical guidelines and current trends on how to hold a guitar when playing. The subsections 'Movements', 'Counter-movements', 'Compensatory movements' and 'Training' form the heart of the book.

The most undervalued topic by far, 'Compensatory movements', is handled by means of the effects of compensatory movements on technique, security and musical expression. The section on training is devoted to overlaps between music and sport. What can musicians learn from the achievements of sport? They can certainly learn, for example, from the insight that for every movement it is necessary to pre-tense the muscles.

Chapter 5 is an introduction to the topic of technique exercises. Chapters 6-8 are dedicated in detail to the technique exercises of the integrative guitar technique arising from the previous chapters. Their themes are warm-up, proprioceptive exercises, and right- and left-hand technique. Technique exercises and technique practice programmes are given extensive treatment. Chapter 9 deals with co-ordination and synchronization.

In the tenth and last chapter, 'Contorted and Bent', certain unusual body and hand positions are described and discussed.

2. Technique: A Contradiction of the Guitar in its Natural State?

What is technique?

If you talk about technique in connection with playing an instrument, you are referring to playing technique. In Brockhaus, the German encyclopaedia, you can find this in the entry under technique: ‘by extension, a particular way of performing an activity or executing an action (for example, painting technique)’.¹

In conversations about technique in connection with playing an instrument, strong, contradictory emotions are encountered surprisingly often. Some instrumentalists dismiss technique out of hand, feeling threatened by the mere mention of the term. Playing an instrument should be ‘creative’: the pure essence of music, its natural state, is defiled by the stylizing, bloodless, goal-orientated, ultimately cold, technical approach. Responsible artists must remain untouched by considerations of technique or lose their authenticity. In their encounter with music they must remain unprejudiced, their emotions unbound. More – they must fuse with their instruments and finally become works of art themselves. Then again you can meet musicians for whom the technical mastery of a work seems to justify their very existence as artists. Often splendidly well-read in the background literature and highly informed about what they do, they set up an opposing position to the first group, and, often and painfully, their emotional understanding of music is missing; their artistry, which assumes interaction between artist and recipients, is blanked out.

A closer look reveals that both these attitudes lead nowhere. An instrument is after all a foreign body: touching it in any way demands technique. There is therefore no question of ‘natural’ interaction with the instrument. The belief that everything must be natural is an error and in the end naive: even peeling a banana or eating an apple demands technique.

What purpose does technique fulfil?

This assertion that instrumental technique might interfere with our natural approach to an instrument, is concerned with the question: what is after all our natural approach to the instrument? Mastering the playing of an instrument is, aside from the joy, an arduous and long-winded business, and if we are not shown the right way from the start, we will learn incorrect movements that will

¹ ‘im weiteren Sinne eine besondere Art des Vorgehens oder der Ausführung einer Handlung (zum Beispiel Maltechnik)’ – Brockhaus, student edition, 2001.

obviously limit our development. We will press our fingers down too hard, raise our shoulders to compensate, and so on.

As far as the guitar is concerned, the development of technique has taken place very recently and over a short period of time. Today classical guitar pupils and music college students benefit from the experience of preceding generations, including error-strewn paths that they no longer have to follow. Even 20 or 30 years ago techniques were considered necessary that we have now recognized as damaging to health. All this is knowledge of motion sequences; all this is technique.

There is no instinct that leads us to avoid pressing too hard with the thumb in a barré; there is no *Homo instrumentalis*, but there are members of the species *Homo sapiens* who are able to increase their skills limitlessly through knowledge and who are, as Arnold Gehlen put it, flawed creatures, incapable of surviving in this world without their intelligence. And we need this intelligence not only to understand music but also to understand how to hold and play an instrument.

The term 'technique' suggests something alien to many people, and this feeling is occasionally encouraged by dogmatic and often conventional precepts for posture or movement. Such instructions cause fundamental problems because visible postures or movements are only a result and hardly a basis. Achieving this result involves muscles, tendons and joints that may differ in shape and proportion in each person. This result also derives from the proprioception of each pupil or music college student; from the processing of these stimuli in the central nervous system and brain; and from the signals that are transmitted in turn from the brain to the moving arms or fingers.

What is visible can only be used as a means of checking, not as the point of departure for the construction of a method of playing an instrument. A method can only be drawn up on the basis of the nature of the body. The only dogma possible in connection with technique is that posture and movements must be kept as natural as possible – and to explain this is the intention of this book. The result of the experience of generations of guitarists is that it is possible to orientate the technique of playing the classical guitar towards the natural physiological prerequisites of the body. The imposition of musical or artistic limitations is an anachronism. It could be said today that the classical guitar has left its adolescence behind it, because arbitrary concepts of technique and interpretation, and concepts based on tradition alone have been overcome. The level the guitarists of today have reached confirms this statement. The classical guitar does not need to hide behind the piano or violin.

When we speak of ‘technique’, we should use precise terms

First, technique on an instrument always means the how: how we sit, how we hold our instruments, how we hold our hands, how we place our hands, how we produce a note, and how requirements such as varying dynamics and changing tempos affect the hands expressing them. Only when we can answer these questions can interpretation come into play: interpretation and technique are indissolubly bound together. A limited technique always limits our expression; interpretations are completely dependent on technical possibilities. A mature technique signifies a great repertoire of modes of expression. If, however, classical musicians devote themselves to points of technique alone, this can lead to sterile playing.

Classical musicians can perhaps learn from jazz and rock musicians who compose for themselves and improvise: while we must be as open and versatile as possible with our opportunities to express ourselves, in the rock world, say, a technical shortcoming can have a style-defining effect (think of guitarists like Frank Zappa, Muddy Waters, Keith Richards and many more).

Allow me here to make a short remark on nomenclature: when speaking of interpreting guitarists as opposed to improvising guitarists, I now prefer the term ‘concert guitarists’ to ‘classical guitarists’. It is a long time since we played classical music alone. The music of Piazzolla, but also that of Zappa, Hendrix or Oldfield has long had entry into this ‘classical’ repertoire, to which the compositions of D’Angelo, Domeniconi or Verdery also belong. ‘Concert guitarists’ devote themselves to the interpretation of composed music and strive for perfection in expression and performance. Distinctions are becoming blurred today.

What still distinguishes classical guitarists is the stylistic variety and the fidelity to the composer’s intentions with which they interpret differing styles. But classical guitarists also need a sound that makes them unique, a style of interpretation by which listeners recognize them. What classical guitarists should occasionally take from their colleagues is the intensity with which they make music. All this is not to say by any means that recognizability and personal expression in a classical guitarist should make up for sloppy technique, but it should underline the fact that classical musicians, too, play to convey emotions, that they play music to the people listening to them, and not to prove their mastery of criteria dictated from outside – usually technical criteria. The study of music – be it by Bach or Carulli – should never degenerate into a technique exercise alone, whether in a concert or while practising.

This is the reason it is so important to design exercises for fitness of hands and fingers that make a free and easy entrance into music possible. Take a technically demanding work for guitar like the *Sonata Eroica* Op. 150 by Mauro Giuliani: if we use this work to train our scales, arpeggios or scales in thirds, we are ultimately mistreating it. Work for such pieces of music should be devoted to the piece itself, to its interpretation. This means: in this piece how do I realize the technical skills I have already gained?

Here we come back to terminology: when we speak of technique, we often also mean practising technique or technique practice programmes. The classical guitar is a particularly suitable instrument for separate practice of technical sequences extracted from musical sequences, because –in contrast to the piano, for example – both hands carry out completely different tasks. There is also a need to practise technique in this way, because the distinct techniques that both hands must perform to perfection are probably incommensurable. The second half of the book is therefore dedicated to a generous number of technique exercises and exact explanations of how to do them.