

A New Approach To Classical Guitar



By Ken Hummer

Foreword

My idea in creating a new guitar method is not to replace any of the outstanding methods that are in use today, but rather to provide supplementary materials that “fill in the cracks” for the beginning student of the classical guitar.

When I attended a two week Master Class in the mid 1970’s under the tutelage of the great Argentinian-born Mexican guitarist Manuel Lopez-Ramos (1929-2006), I was very impressed with his great concern for his students. In fact it was that very Master Class at which he had accepted a beginner as one of the performers. He told all of us in the class that he considered it very important for us to experience how he would work with a beginner as well as the rest of us more advanced players. Undoubtedly, he was secretly acknowledging that the vast majority of us would be teaching the guitar some day – and probably teaching large numbers of beginners. As a teacher he was very concerned to share with us what he considered important for new students to succeed. That made a lasting impression on me.

As he rightly suspected, I have spent a great deal of my 40+ years as a teacher with beginning students. It has been a constant joy for me to “initiate” these newcomers into the world of classical guitar, and especially so when it becomes a new-found interest for them. I have used several of the traditional method books over the years (depending on which one seemed best suited for each student). When needed, I would find supplementary materials for them. If there were no materials for their particular needs, then I would venture to compose original exercises and pieces to prepare them for what came next in their studies.

This guitar method is the result of that venture. I wanted to provide students with short, melodic pieces that developed slowly and methodically and would help prepare them to approach the much longer pieces in their method books. Plus, I wanted to capitalize on the use of the open bass strings with melody notes to compose enjoyable and musical pieces which are accessible to the beginning guitarist.

This book can be used as a stand-alone method, or its many pieces can be used as supplementary material to great advantage in conjunction with any other method. I hope you find this material helpful whatever your level of interest in the classical guitar.

Finally, I dedicate this book to the memory of a great teacher and performer, Manuel Lopez-Ramos, who inspired us with his artistry, his teaching, his humanity and his spirit.

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GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL FORMS

- Air**.....meaning a tune or melody; an instrumental composition which is very song-like
- Barcarole**.....a Venetian boat song; a composition usually in 6/8 time which imitates the gentle swaying of a Venetian boat
- Bolero**.....a Spanish dance in 3/4 time characterized by the use of triplets to hint at the sound of castanets
- Bourree**.....a lively 17th century French dance with a duple feel beginning on the upbeat
- Cha-Cha**.....a slow, gutsy dance of Cuban origin with a persistent accenting of the fourth beat
- Divertimento**.....In general terms, a delightful and entertaining piece of music; a recreation, a diversion.
- Etude**.....a study piece for students written to focus on certain techniques; a performance piece which highlights certain playing techniques
- Fanfare**.....a trumpet flourish; a dramatic series of notes to announce something important is happening/about to happen.
- Habañera**.....referring to Havana, Cuba; a slow Cuban dance with a distinctive, persistent rhythm in duple time
- Mazurka**.....a lively Polish national dance
- Musette**.....a type of bagpipe; in the Baroque Period a composition which imitates the constant droning sound of the musette
- Nocturne**.....having to do with the night time; a dreamy, reflective composition
- Pathetique**.....evoking strong, heartfelt emotions
- Prelude**.....a piece which was written to precede/introduce a larger composition; now it can be written as a stand-alone piece that has the feel of a prelude.
- Reverie**.....a composition which is meant to depict a dreamy, reflective state
- Rondino**.....a small rondo; a piece in which a main theme keeps returning after each contrasting theme
- Round Dance**.....a musical description of a folk dance where the participants would join hands and dance in a circle
- Tango**.....a genre of music which originated in Argentina and Uruguay
- Two-Step**.....a jaunty kind of dance with a jerky side-to-side motion
- Vals Triste**.....a sad waltz
- Waltz**.....a dance in triple time; a very popular ballroom dance of the 19th c.

BASIC TECHNIQUE

A classical technique will afford the best possible positioning of the guitar and allow for optimum technical development. The following are the main points of a good technique. Remember that the advice and encouragement of a qualified teacher are indispensable for avoiding bad habits.

A. SITTING TECHNIQUE

- Use an armless chair with a flat seat.
- Sit up straight, with the shoulders squared and relaxed.
- Elevate the left leg on an adjustable footstool made for classical guitarists (or use one of the more recently developed pillows or frames to support the guitar).
- The guitar has three points of rest: the top of the left thigh, the inside of the right thigh, and leaning back against the chest.
- The guitar should be held at more or less a 45 degree angle.
- You should just be able to see all six strings if you turn and drop your head slightly.

B. RIGHT HAND TECHNIQUE

- Place the right forearm on the top edge of the guitar, keeping it more or less parallel to the floor. In this position you should be able to "lock" the guitar securely in place with only the pressure of the forearm.
- Let your right hand and wrist totally relax. Lower the forearm just enough in order to position your fingers on the strings in the following order: thumb on the 6th string, index finger on the third string, middle finger on the 2nd string, and ring finger on the 1st string.
- Your hand should be positioned so that the fingers fall at the right edge of the soundhole.
- When playing, your hand is elevated slightly above the strings, but try to maintain the same position as if the fingers were still resting on the strings.

C. "ATTACKING" THE STRINGS

- The best plane of vibration for a plucked guitar string is side-to-side, never up-and-down.
- Pulling the string will result in a "twangy" sound or a string buzz or slap.
- The fingertip bears down on the string, pushing it down and across. On releasing the string, you should achieve a full round sound.

Rest Stroke

Bear down with force and allow your finger to come to a complete rest on the next lower string (e.g., play **E** and allow your finger to land on **B**).

Free Stroke

Bear down with force, but this time allow your finger to pass over the next lower string without touching it.

D. LEFT HAND TECHNIQUE

- The thumb should always be held more or less halfway down the back of the neck.
- The thumb should be positioned more or less behind the index finger.
- The palm of the hand is held below the neck, keeping a space between the palm and the neck of the guitar. (Never wrap the left hand around the neck or allow the neck to rest on the palm. This will merely inhibit your freedom of movement.)
- Keep the fingers curved.
- Play with the very tips of the fingers.
- When fingering a note, be sure to stop the string directly in front of the fret wire. This is the point at which you can hold the string with the least amount of pressure.

BASIC WORKING PRINCIPLES

Practicing the Exercises

The exercises are kept short, but one should practice each one as many times as necessary in order to become comfortable with all the finger positions and movements involved. There is never any need to rush through the materials provided. It is better to practice in small segments, that is, to work on a measure or two until all positions and movements are **comfortable**. Then add another couple of measures and so on until the whole piece is learned.

Strict Alternation of Index and Middle

An important principle to be learned right from the start is the **strict alternation** of **i & m** (index and middle fingers of the right hand). Notice that all exercises and pieces in this method have been completely fingered for the right hand. This allows one to be aware **at all times** whether strict alternation is being observed. To aid in the mastery of this technique, sometimes **i & m** should be said aloud as one is practicing. This offers several benefits: 1) one learns to focus on both notes and fingerings; 2) strict alternation becomes comfortable and natural; and 3) awareness of which finger is playing which note at any given time is heightened. (This kind of control is absolutely essential as music progresses in difficulty. It will help one to avoid the pitfall of "tripping" over one's own fingers.)

Free Stroke or Rest Stroke?

The **rest stroke** (also referred to as supported stroke or *apoyando*) can be used when playing melody notes alone or when playing melody notes and accompaniment notes **not** found on adjacent strings. The **free stroke** (also referred to as unsupported stroke or *tirando*) must be used when playing arpeggios (broken chords) or when playing combinations of notes found on adjacent strings. For the beginner, the advice and guidance of a qualified teacher is essential for discovering the balance and blend of these two strokes and the proper way of executing them.

ORGANIZATION OF PRACTICE TIME

It is very important for the student to set aside a minimum of 1/2 hour every day for practice. Even when this is not possible, it is still essential to find some time (even if only 5 or 10 minutes) for some well-focused rehearsal. Just as in physical therapy a patient will lose a portion of what has been gained when missing a session, so with the development of technique on an instrument. Daily practice will assure the continued development of technique.

With this in mind, consider the following model for organizing practice time.

I. Spend 5-10 minutes on technique and technical exercises.

- observe your hands very closely
- occasionally practice in front of a mirror
- model your teacher's hand position and technique as closely as possible
- practice with a metronome*
 - start out with as slow a tempo as necessary in order to play and exercise successfully, gradually increasing the tempo over a long period of time
- strive for as strong and as full a sound as possible without buzzing or snapping the strings

II. Spend 10-15 minutes on new pieces.

- circle trouble spots and practice them first
- practice smaller segments of 2 to 4 measures
 - when you are comfortable with one segment, move on to the next
- never attempt to practice a piece straight through unless it is one that you are already comfortable with
- use right hand fingerings as given
- keep your eyes on the music as you play
- try for a full, round sound
- use a metronome *
 - begin at as slow a tempo as necessary in order to play the music successfully
 - have an idea of how fast a piece should go when it has been "mastered"
 - work gradually from the slower tempo to the faster tempo

x.

- III. Spend 10-15 minutes reviewing music already learned.
 - concentrate on smoothness of playing
 - concentrate on precision of playing
 - concentrate on fullness of sound

- IV. If you have some extra time during the day and are so moved, just pick up the guitar and play.
 - just **play**, using the technique that you have developed up to this point
 - just **play** to enjoy the music

- V. If you intend to rehearse longer than 1/2 hour, just increase each of the sections proportionately.

Note that this model makes very little mention of quality of sound. If one works slowly, striving for a full round sound and observing proper technique, then good sound will develop. This approach is based on the principle that **"good sound comes from good technique"** (Manuel Lopez-Ramos 1929-2006).

- * In the author's experience, the metronome is one of the greatest tools for developing control, precision and expressive musicianship. There have traditionally been two schools of thought on the use of the metronome: first, that the metronome teaches one to play so mechanically that expression is lost; or second, that the metronome aids the guitarist in developing control to the point that he/she can then be free to play the music expressively. The author whole-heartedly subscribes to the second school of thought.

APPROACHING THE MUSIC FOR THE FIRST TIME

When beginning a new exercise or piece, the student would do well to have a systematic approach. The following points should be kept in mind when looking at music for the first time.

1. Determine the **time signature**. (How many beats per measure?)
2. Count the **rhythm patterns** out loud as you keep time by clapping your hands or tapping your foot.
3. Say the names of the notes out loud to reinforce their recognition.
4. Practice the **melody notes** first, then the **bass notes** and/or other **accompaniment notes**. Finally, put the parts together when you feel comfortable with them.
5. Always practice **small segments** of the piece, that is, learn several measures well before moving on to the next group of measures. It is never a good idea to "plow through" a new piece of music. In this way you will have learned at least a part of the piece well by the end of a practice session. You can then learn the next **small segment** at your next practice session, and one success will build upon another.
6. Always practice **slowly** and **deliberately**, repeating a segment as many times as necessary to gain comfort with the positions and movements involved.

Music Reading Basics

STAFF = the five lines and four spaces on which music is written.

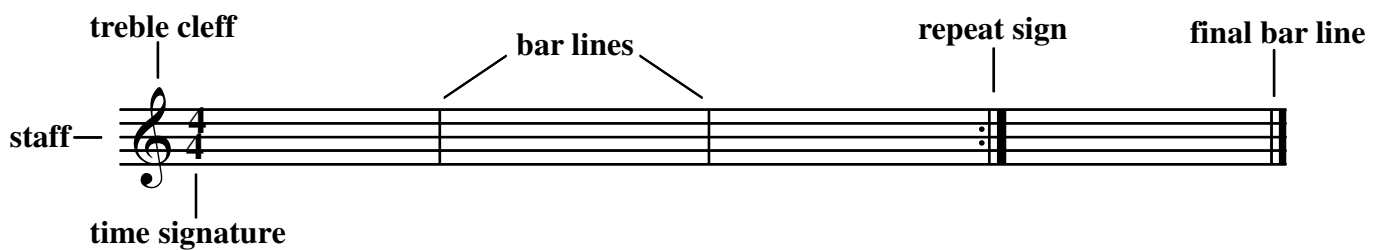
BAR LINES = the lines dividing the staff into MEASURES

TREBLE CLEFF = the sign which locates **G** on line 2 of the staff

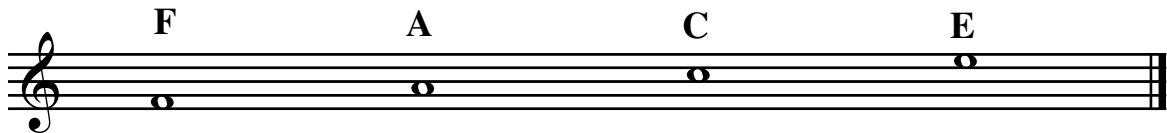
TIME SIGNATURE = the sign which indicates how many beats are in each measure and what kind of a note gets one beat.

FINAL BAR LINE = the sign which indicates the end of a piece

REPEAT SIGN = the sign which indicates that one should repeat what has just been played

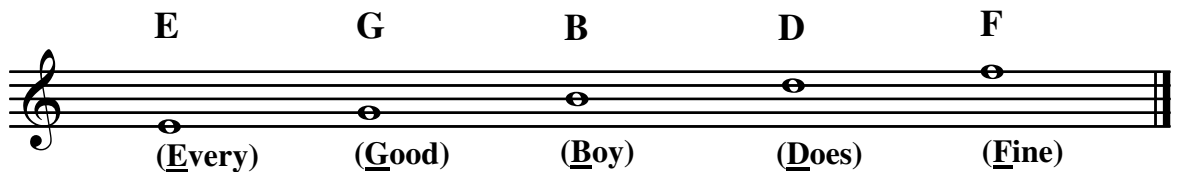


Names of the Notes on the Staff



If the note is on a **space**, think "**face**."

If the note is on a **line**, think "**fine**."



Note Values

Whole Note.....	4 counts
Dotted Half Note.....	3 counts
Half Note.....	2 counts
Dotted Quarter Note.....	1 1/2 counts
Quarter Note.....	1 count
Eighth Note.....	1/2 count

When we say that a whole note gets four counts (or beats), we mean that the note is struck once and is allowed to keep ringing for the duration of four counts. The dotted half note is allowed to ring for the duration of three counts. The half note for two, etc.

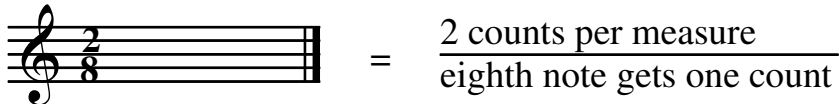
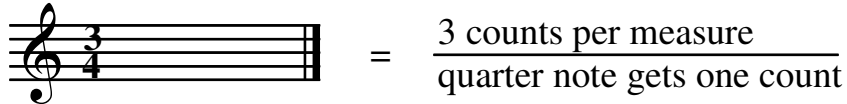
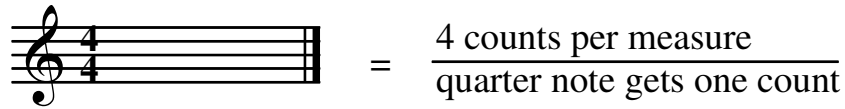
A musical staff in treble clef showing six measures. Above each measure is a label and a vertical line pointing to the note. Below each measure is the count. The notes and counts are: Whole (4), Dotted Half (3), Half (2), Dotted Quarter (1 1/2), Quarter (1), and Eighth (1/2).

Corresponding Rest Symbols

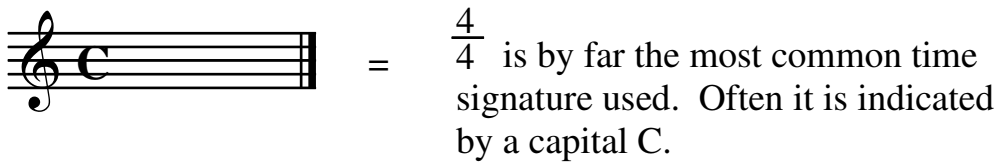
If we wish to indicate that there is a cessation of sound in the music, we use **rest symbols** to indicate for how many counts. These **rest symbols** correspond to the respective **note values**.

A musical staff in treble clef showing six measures. Above each measure is a label and a vertical line pointing to the rest symbol. Below each measure is the count. The rest symbols and counts are: Whole (4), Dotted Half (3), Half (2), Dotted Quarter (1 1/2), Quarter (1), and Eighth (1/2).

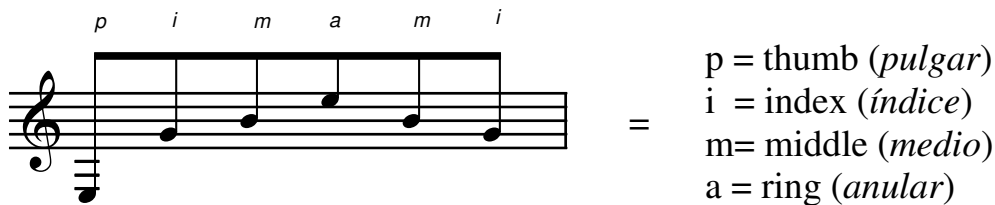
Time Signatures



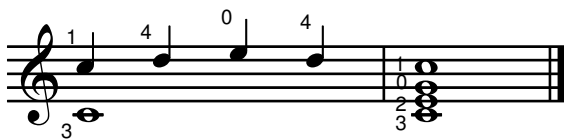
Some other common time signatures: $\frac{2}{4}$ $\frac{6}{4}$ $\frac{3}{8}$ $\frac{4}{8}$ $\frac{6}{8}$ $\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{12}{8}$



Right Hand Fingering is indicated by the letters *pima*.



Left Hand Fingering is indicated by the numbers 1234.



PRIMER LESSON

The student's first goal should be to play all six open strings of the guitar without the necessity of reading or playing musical notes. This will give the student a "feel" for the guitar before moving on to more demanding material.

TREBLE STRING EXERCISE

- Play each treble string (strings 1, 2 & 3) four times.
- Rest the thumb (**p**) on the 6th string for support.
- Use a **rest stroke** and alternate **i** & **m** (index & middle).
- Play as loudly as you can without "buzzing" the strings.
- Observe proper right hand technique (cf. pages vi & vii).

BASS STRING EXERCISE

- Play each bass string (strings 4, 5 & 6) four times.
- Rest the index finger on the 3rd string.
- Rest the middle finger on the 2nd string.
- Rest the ring finger on the 1st string.
- Keep **ima** (index-middle-ring) planted on the strings for support.
- Use a free stroke with the thumb.
- In its movement the thumb describes a small circle.
- Play slowly and smoothly.
- Play as loudly as you can without "buzzing" the strings.
- Observe proper right hand technique (cf. pages vi & vii).

Doing these exercises at least 5 to 10 minutes a day at the beginning will instill the confidence needed to undertake the lessons ahead. Much time can be "wasted" at the beginning simply because the student does not yet have a "feel" for the guitar. Apply yourself seriously to the task of obtaining a "feel" for the guitar by doing these first exercises faithfully, and you will be guaranteed much success as you begin the reading and playing of music on the guitar.