

Tone Production and Scale Practice. [\[PDF\]](#)

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“To some extent, the limitations [on the power of the guitar’s sound in performance] are still those of the player.” —Segovia

Why anything new?

I conceived a desire to address this by hearing one of today’s most esteemed players pushing his limits to get greater dynamics in his playing and failing to produce the desired result. That together with the fact that the debates over use of right hand nails just go on and on without producing anything positive, and a growing suspicion that the players of two centuries ago knew something that we have failed to learn, convinced me that something other than a stubborn adherence to traditions is indicated.

Finger Strokes for Scale Practice

It is not necessary or desirable to practice every type of finger and thumb stroke in practicing scales, but rather to provide the player with concentrated practice at the extremes of a *range* of strokes with the fingers. If alternating thumb and finger, the strokes must be all short, so there is no way of practicing a range of strokes.

YouTube in this brief hour of history has brought us an heretofore unparalleled opportunity to see and compare the techniques of many of the best guitarists in the world, and to me the most remarkable thing which I have seen is how much variation there is in how the right hand fingers of master players attack strings. I am confident that this new approach will lead to much less difficulty in finding and maintaining a good hand position. Of course hand position is only a description of one instant of string attack. Better to say that, by practicing a range of strokes, the student will be much better able to find his way to excellence with fewer hindrances.

Three Basic Finger Strokes

1. *Appoggiato*

If the digit comes to rest on the neighboring string after sounding a string, the stroke is *appoggiato*, or *appoggiando* or *apoyando* if you insist.^[1]

Either a note is played *appoggiato* or it is not. If it is not *appoggiato*, it is *tirato*. Some notes are played a lot more *appoggiato* than others, according to the degree to which the string is displaced toward the top.

The right hand is pronated sufficiently to address the nail to the string obliquely and on the left side. The finger must be drawn across the string at about the same opposing angle that the thumb is usually pushed across the string. When playing scales the thumb when idle rests on all the strings lower than the one you are playing to mute them. The string is pushed toward the top, and the string is carried along the fingernail from left to right. File away any portion of the nail which snags the string when leaving it. The contact surface should be as blunt as possible to minimize noise from the windings, but if you must have totally noiseless playing, play some other instrument.

2. *Corto (tirato)*

The difference between the *appoggiato* stroke and the short (*corto*) stroke is that the finger does not come to rest against another string when playing. Some straightening of the finger on contact will give a better tone. You will lose this touch if you play amplified too much, so be warned. There is no relaxation. This is the usual manner of playing, but it is an extreme limit to how short your stroke can be to still realize the best tone without sacrifice of speed.

3. *Lungo (tirato)*

The long stroke is playing very like a contrabass playing *pizzicato*. The pronation of the right hand approaches 45 degrees, and the finger is extended as much as possible toward the bridge, so that as much as possible of the side of the finger is in contact with the string along its length. You play with no nail at all, or too little to notice. This stroke is suitable for playing very loudly, and there is a characteristic popping sound on very high notes. A *lungo* stroke may also be used as Sor suggested, to barely rub the string for a nailless *pianississimo*. Fortunately, you can practice this without playing loudly, to develop calluses slowly and avoid blisters. The annular finger cannot do an extreme long stroke.

How does this relate to playing real music?

In playing pieces you seldom have a pure short or long stroke. They are usually much more short than long, but lengthening a stroke is indicated for splitting the middle and annular fingers across several strings or carrying a melody *forte* in a tenor voice with the index. You will also be better able to play chords very very *forte* and still sound good. This practice will make you much more comfortable with a good right hand technique.

Combinations

The Carcassi "Scales"

The Carcassi "scales" are for thumb *appoggiato* and a *lungo* or somewhat lengthened stroke with index and middle. Carcassi called his extended scale exercises "scales" but they are not scales in the traditional sense. Thumb and fingers are practiced separately.

Combinations for DGT Scales

Like all combinations, this is not *the* way to do it, it is a way to do it.

Legato is of course not a stroke but a reminder to play the scales *legato*. Your *legato* is your speed, because it is the distance between one note and the next. The hand must be very steady to do the combinations using the thumb. The thumb should not be bent back all the way at the end joint, to make sure that the end joint is used somewhat, and to avoid snagging the string with the corner of the thumbnail. The thumb is also laid across the lower strings to mute them except as necessary to play a string.

When you repeat a scale, play the last note twice and *mi* becomes *im* for example.

| Start with | C | E | A ^b | C | E | A ^b | C | E | A ^b |
|------------|-------|----|----------------|--------|----|----------------|---------|----|----------------|
| | Set I | | | Set II | | | Set III | | |
| lungo | mi | mi | mi | mi | mi | mi | mi | mi | mi |
| corto | am | mi | ia | mi | ia | am | ia | am | mi |
| appoggiato | ia | am | mi | am | mi | ia | mi | ia | am |
| (legato) | ti | ta | tm | ta | tm | ti | tm | ti | ta |

Stick with set I for a while (a year?) and then rotate later.

Do less of what you need less. If you spend half as much time on the DGT extended arpeggios as you do on scales you may not need the thumb-finger combinations for scales.

Notes

A metronome is great for music, but bad for pure tech. Listen only to the notes, not a machine.

A scale has speed but not tempo, tone but not timbre, etc., because a scale is not music. Each scale should be beautiful because of its mechanical perfection, but not in some way which cannot be quantified and leveled, because control is the goal. Anything which is rather more or less, such as dynamics, should be practiced with music, not with tech. Segovia described this benefit of scale playing as "physical beauty of tone".

End Notes:

§1 I heard Segovia use the term "*appoggiato*", so don't be upset by my using Italian instead of Spanish. *Appoggiato* is not merely a technical term but it is also a playing direction which is sometimes used to indicate a certain sound or tone color, and playing directions are traditionally given in Italian.

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