

# Therapy for a Flamenco Guitarist

BY ANTONIO MADIGAN

I first heard about Pat from Rafael Benatar, my classmate in Hopkinson Smith's continuo course in Hall in Tirol, Austria. Around 1984 I had begun to experience some frustrating goings-on in my right hand; my middle finger kept missing the string, and I couldn't play an arpeggio properly. Rafael had run into Leo Brouwer in Madrid. Leo had put his brilliant guitar-playing career on hold after a Russian tour. He had refingered his repertoire because of a broken *m* nail and had begun to have the same problem I had. He told Rafael about someone in New York who knew how to deal with it, and who even knew that it had a name.

Remember that back then not a great deal was known about focal dystonia. All kinds of musicians experienced mystifying difficulties, but we tried to keep it quiet, hoping it would go away, dreading the day someone would notice that our playing had badly deteriorated. Practicing only made it worse. I really knew I was in trouble after I played the German premiere of *The Lighthouse* by Maxwell Davies, which I had learned in a week. You have to double on banjo for that one. Ten-hour daily practice sessions bashing the poor music into your muscle memory is not a good idea at the best of times, and my life back in the mid-eighties was pretty much in disarray on the personal side, combined with a painful back injury and incipient depression. And now this. Playing the guitar had always been my refuge, the one thing I could always do even without thinking. Therein of course lay the root of the problem. Most baffling of all was that there was nothing you could put your finger on (literally) and there was no pain.

So, thanks to Rafael and Leo, I found myself, shortly before Christmas 1986, in a dusty little room at the end of a narrow corridor in a ramshackle building west of Sixth Avenue crammed with books and music and a fluctuating population of instruments of all descriptions. In the middle of all this sat a round gentleman who looked exactly as Falstaff would have looked had he been transported from Merrie England to Brooklyn and had lived through the sixties. In this little room I spent every Wednesday afternoon for the next 10 years.

He had a few strands of long hair pulled back in a ponytail, a big bushy black beard, a gap-tooth grin, a pockmarked nose, somewhat purple in hue, and a permanent twinkle.

What was instantly comforting was his voice, a high, somewhat breathy tenor speaking with an indeterminate accent that sounded almost British at times. He was patient and gentle. It was very hard to tell when he was irritated. There was merely a subtle change in the atmosphere. That was it. But it was enough.

“Let me see what you’re doing.” He handed me a guitar, took a swig from a large beverage he always seemed to keep close by, and crouched down on the floor so he could see my right hand from underneath.

“I bet you had a really good tremolo.” Typical Pat—find something positive to say. Right away I saw that it was Pat’s take on the situation that made him such an effective teacher. It was as if he were saying, “OK, you’ve got a problem but it’s not the end of the world, I’ve seen this sort of thing before.”

The first thing we did was to get the right-hand fingertips loosened up. Instead of the still claw I used to control the fingers with, he had me bend the tip joint slightly backward as it moved through the string. The sound came as the string escaped from the gentle pressure of the finger seemingly all by itself. The finger continued to move from the middle joint into the palm, like the follow-through when you hit a golf ball, and was then allowed to return to its original resting length, ready to move through the string again.

Getting this to happen took some time, but it was crucial. Getting the tip joint to relax together—combined with performing exercises using middle joint (which at first I couldn’t control at all) will activate the big muscles on the outside of the forearm and not the gristly stuff on the inside of your wrist that still joints will activate. Pat’s right-hand fingers actually did bend back a bit at the tip joint, and you could see this when he would join his hands before his nose in a prayerful gesture that actually meant, “Stop your chattering and listen to what I’m telling you.”

“*Allow* the sound to happen, don’t *make* it happen, think how, not what, soft on the outside, strong in the center,” he said. All these concepts Pat took from a variety of disciplines, martial arts not the least of them, and applied them to plucking an instrument. He had an exercise he called the “zen thing,” which consisted of making sure the finger returned to its length by actually hitting the string with the back of the nail on the way down.

Then there was the thumb. “The last thing that got tacked on in evolution was the opposing thumb and they still haven’t got it right.” Pat himself played lute thumb-out, but sometimes he taught thumb-under, especially on renaissance lute. This approach graduated to thumb-out as instruments started acquiring more bass strings toward the bass. I had a big ball of muscle at the base of my thumb on the palm side basically caused by

misuse playing flamenco. “We’re going to let that atrophy,” he said, which meant I would be starting to favor the muscle between the thumb and the index finger big joint on the outside of the hand. To activate this, the thumb describes a counterclockwise circle out and over the index finger on bass notes, marvellously rebalancing the hand.

He discussed pronation and supination, as applied to both hand–arm–shoulder relationships. He pointed out that the wrist should favour the little finger in the left hand, twisting slightly so it was closest to you and the index farthest away. This relieved a great deal of pressure on the left thumb.

Pat always worked from the premise that the soundest and most natural technique was that of the renaissance lute, the early 19th-century guitar being the lute’s direct descendant at least as far as the right hand was concerned. Put a guitar in any beginner’s hands and almost invariably they will place the thumb inside and lean the little finger on the body of the instrument. This meant that the use of *a* is very limited. In fact, it is perfectly possible to play a great deal of music from the early 19th century using only *p*, *i*, and *m*. Misuse of the *a* finger can lead to many problems, as many pianists have found out.

Segovia’s re fingering of the Sor’s études was, therefore, regarded with grave suspicion by Mr. O. Fortunately all of Sor’s output was, in those years, being published in facsimile, and thanks to Pat we were able to see what Sor and his contemporaries really wanted us to play.

Pat’s idea of reorganizing your technique and your musicality by studying early, lighter string instruments ran counter to uptown teaching methods. He knew the lute to be the source of all that was good about plucked instruments down through the centuries. It didn’t matter if you played Mississippi John Hurt (he taught me how to do that) or the Britten Nocturnal (that one too). Pat always found the easiest and most natural way and saw the connections. In reconnecting your damaged synapses and nerve endings, he gave you back the best part of yourself.

Having closely observed the matchless technique of the most natural lute player of our time, Paul O’Dette, Pat knew exactly what was necessary in any given situation and could pass it on with incomparable generosity.

“There ya go,” he’d say as you walked out of that room with a load of new music under your arm and, likely as not, a new instrument. “There ya go,” he’d say after he had just taught you a fail-proof way to play continuo in about 20 minutes.

And there we all went.  
I owe him everything.