



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Tone Control

A variety of factors work in combination to shape and control the lute's palette of tone colors.

1. Tip joint stiffness or flexibility
2. Angle of attack
3. Speed of attack
4. Depth of follow through
5. The degree of string excursion toward the soundboard
6. Where the finger strikes along the string's length
7. Which part of the finger touches the string
8. The amount of arm movement vs. finger movement
9. How hard we strike the strings
10. The condition of the skin on the fingertip

On the question of fingernails: I have written this article with the lutenist in mind who has trimmed his or her fingernails so short that they will not touch the strings. However, almost all the points explained here are still valid for a lutenist who uses fingernails for tone production. The issue here is not whether one plays the lute with fingernails or with bare fingertips. Either way, one can develop an expressive range of tone colors to put in service to the music.

Touching the Strings:

1. **The relative stiffness or flexibility of the tip joint** is one of a lutenist's most important techniques of tone control. The more flexible the tip joint, the more soft and relaxed your tone will be. The stiffer the tip joint, the harder and brighter the tone. A whole range of colors can be achieved with small gradations of stiffness or flexibility. This is most effective when used in conjunction with other tone control techniques, such as angle of attack.
2. **Angle of attack.** One can stroke the strings at various angles that may be either more perpendicular or more parallel to the line of the string. The more perpendicular your finger's angle of attack, the brighter the tone (though this angle brings out a different quality of brightness than that created by stiffening the tip joint). The more parallel the angle, the warmer and rounder the tone. Furthermore, a more parallel angle tends to lessen the "chiff" or percussive noise at the beginning of a note. A more perpendicular stroke usually creates more chiff. This is especially useful for creating an "edgy" tone for particular passages.
3. **Speed of attack.** This refers to the speed with which your finger plucks through each individual note. Even if the music is very slow, one sometimes might pluck individual notes rapidly for the tonal effect. A faster attack creates more energy at the beginning of the note. A slow attack (especially when there is a long follow-through) lessens the front-edge energy of a note, and tends to help the note sustain longer. This is most valuable for a lyrical, "singing" style of playing.

4. **Depth of follow through.** A shallow follow through creates a light, shallow tone and less sustain (especially when there is little or no string excursion toward the soundboard). A deeper follow through usually creates a deeper and or more supported tone and greater sustain. (This deeper follow through is most effective when paired with a greater string excursion toward the soundboard.)

A light or shallow tone is **not** something to be avoided at all times. It can be used with imagination and artistry to express aspects of the music. For instance, ornamental passages or “filigree” often require a lighter tone to contrast with the deeper, supported tone of key melody notes.

5. **The degree of string excursion toward the soundboard** affects the depth of tone. When you push the string in toward the soundboard during the attack, the soundboard vibrates enthusiastically, creating a deep supported tone. A stroke “across” the string (more parallel to the plane of the soundboard) creates a shallow tone.
6. **Where the finger strikes along the string’s length.** This is the most well known of all tone control techniques. When one strikes closer to the bridge, a brighter, more nasal tone is produced. When one strikes closer to the middle of the vibrating string length, a rounder, sweeter tone is produced. This is most effective when used in conjunction with angle of attack and the relative stiffness or flexibility of the tip joints.
7. **Which part of the finger touches the string.** Place your right hand flat on a table with the palm facing down. I will write about the right and left side of your fingertips as seen from this perspective. Generally speaking, the right side of the fingertip produces a brighter, clearer sound. The further one angles the finger in this direction, the brighter the tone will be. The left side of the finger is not used as often in “thumb-under” technique, but it can be employed effectively to create a warm, lyrical sound with very little “chiff”. There are many shades of color that one can elicit by using various parts of the finger from left to right. It is not simply an either/or option. When playing a lute solo, I think it is essential to vary the contact point between fingertip and string in order to create a colorful mix of tones on the lute.

In addition to the variable of touching the string toward the right or left side of the fingertip, one can either touch the string nearer the end of the fingertip or contact the string further back into the fleshy pad (near the center of the whorl of the fingerprint). When the contact point is nearer the end of the fingertip, the sound is clearer and brighter. The further back the contact point, the warmer the sound.

8. **The amount of arm movement vs. finger movement** affects the weight, volume and strength of your tone. (Here, I have in mind the “thumb-under” technique, in which the arm often moves with each finger and thumb stroke.) More arm movement tends to create a louder, deeper and more supported quality of sound. Less arm movement (or use of the fingers alone) creates a lighter, quieter sound. Subtle gradations of the amount of arm vs. fingers can be used to great effect. It is possible to “shade” the sound of a scale passage or a long line of divisions by gradually adding and subtracting the amount of arm movement.
9. **How hard we strike the string.** Obviously, this has an effect on the volume. But the tone is also greatly affected by the force used when stroking the string. Listen to yourself. The lightest stroke creates a whispery sound that can barely be heard except in a small, quiet room. With a little more pressure, the string “speaks” softly but clearly. Beyond this point, more and more finger pressure tends to strengthen, then harden the sound and create more “chiff” at the beginning of each note. Too much force creates a harsh, unpleasant sound. But even this may be effectively used in some well-chosen musical moments. With enough imagination, we can sometimes use even “ugly” sounds artistically, and employ them to express some quality inherent in the music.
10. **The condition of the skin on the fingertip.** While this is not a tone control technique, the condition of your skin on the fingertip greatly affects your tone. Rough, dry skin creates a hard, scratchy sound. If the skin is too rough, it may be impossible to get rid of the scratchy “chiff” at the beginning of each note. This is an individual matter, but using some sort of hand cream or skin softener can be helpful in keeping your fingertips soft and your tonal options open.

The temperature of the fingertips also changes the tone. Cold fingertips create a brighter, colder tone. Hot hands create a “fat” sound. I prefer for my own hands to be somewhat warm and very slightly moist (but not

wet). This seems ideal for lute playing, and I find that I can create the greatest variety of tone colors with hands in this condition.

The Poetry of Tone Control

Of course this is merely a list of techniques for controlling tone. Using these techniques artistically, to communicate the structural and emotional content of a composition, is much too large a subject to be contained in a single column. However, in future installments of *Beyond the Basics* I will suggest some specific ways that these tone control techniques might be employed to help express music. I rarely use just one of these tone control techniques alone. Tone color is more effectively shaped by using two, three or more of these techniques simultaneously in order to create a rich, complex and musically satisfying result. Take time to experiment and use your imagination as you incorporate these techniques into your lute pieces. Once the techniques are thoroughly learned, they can be used more or less unconsciously, just as we change the tone of our speaking voices to express the meaning of our words. But for dramatic impact in a performance, some degree of color planning will also be necessary.