

Right Arm Movement and Follow Through in Thumb-Under Technique

By Ronn McFarlane

When learning thumb under technique, the beginner is taught to always move the right arm up and down with each thumb and finger stroke when playing a single line. This builds the right habits for a strong, efficient technique. But at a more advanced level, it is not necessary, or even desirable, to always move the right arm down and up.

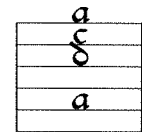
The amount of arm vs. finger movement affects the weight, volume and strength of your tone. More arm movement tends to create a louder, deeper and more supported quality of sound. Less arm movement (or use of the fingers alone) creates a lighter, quieter sound. Subtle gradations of the amount of arm vs. fingers can be used to great effect. It is possible to shade the sound of a scale or a long line of divisions by gradually adding and subtracting the amount of arm movement. This is much more effective than trying to strike the string harder or softer to create a dynamic shape.

Passages that require a lighter, more delicate sound are effectively executed by moving the arm less and relying more on finger and wrist movement, while using more arm movement to bring out more important melody notes. The very lightest passages may be played by moving only the right hand fingers, with almost no arm movement.

One can also shade the sound of a line by controlling the depth of follow through, which works much the same as right arm movement. A shallow follow through creates a lighter, more shallow tone and less sustain - especially when there is very little string excursion toward the soundboard. A deeper follow through usually creates a deeper, or more supported tone and greater sustain. This deeper follow through is more effective when paired with a greater string excursion toward the soundboard.

One can bring out individual voices with a deep follow through, and lighten secondary parts by giving them a more shallow follow through.

You can also balance the voices in a chord by controlling the depth of follow through with each individual finger. As an exercise, play a four voice chord such as C major:



Play the chord several times with a deep follow through in the ring finger. The other fingers should move with somewhat shallower strokes. This will bring out the top voice of the chord. Play the chord again, with only the middle finger employing a deep follow through. This should bring out the alto voice (e'). Playing the chord yet again, follow through deeply with only the index finger. You'll hear the tenor voice (c) emerge as the most prominent voice. Finally, follow through deeply with only your thumb, and you should hear the bass voice ringing out most clearly.

This is an excellent exercise for gaining control of the individual voices in a chord.

When playing a running passage, one can use the follow through and right arm movement together to shape the line. My best advice is to try out varying degrees of arm movement and finger follow through and listen to the results. Be sure to mix each degree of arm movement and finger follow through with varying degrees of string excursion toward the soundboard. With a little experimentation, you'll find many qualities of sound to use to shape the music.