



# THE BASIC SITTING FOR CLASSICAL GUITARIST

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## **Abstrak:**

*Untuk memulai bermain gitar bagi pemula, kita harus memperhatikan cara duduk yang benar, posisi gitar dan posisi jari tangan kanan dan kiri. Karena ini juga merupakan hal yang penting untuk diperhatikan agar dapat bermain dengan santai dan relaks.*

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This lesson describes exactly how you and your guitar work together to allow you to make music. It covers the “what, how, and why” of the basic playing position and of the use and movement of the two hands.

## **The Basic Sitting Position**

Before picking up the guitar, we need to discover how to relax in the proper sitting position. To begin with, go into a quiet room and sit on a hard flat chair that is high enough so that your legs will be bent at 90 degree angles at the knees with your feet flat on the floor. Your legs should be kept at about the width of your shoulders. Your back should be straight and your shoulders should be relaxed and level with each other. Your arms should be resting comfortably at your sides. Close your eyes and breath deeply in and out slowly two or three times. Concentrate on letting all the tension out of your body and forgetting about all the activities of the day. This time is for you. Continue breathing in and out slowly in this position until you can feel all the tension fade in your head, neck, shoulders, arms, back, and legs. By beginning your practice sessions in this manner you will learn to become immediately relaxed as soon as you assume this position. That type of deep relaxation is absolutely necessary for performance and it's best to begin now to learn how to reach that relaxed state quickly.

## **The Basic Playing Position**

For simplicity, I'll assume everyone in the world is right handed; if you're not, just flip to the other hand or leg and you'll be fine. I'm going to de-



scribe how to hold the guitar in several steps. The first step involves the position of your legs and the rotation of the instrument on your left leg. The second step lifts your left leg by using a footstool, causing the top of the instrument to move closer to your body and the height of the instrument to be more suitable to proper motion of your arms. The final step is to correctly position the guitar so that it is supported by your body at exactly four points: the upper left thigh, the inner right thigh, the center of your chest, and the inner portion of your right arm. The left arm is not used to support the instrument, the guitar is positioned to optimize the motion required by the left arm while playing.

### **Step 1.**

Pick up the instrument and place it on your left leg so that the bottom side of the guitar, the indentation between the upper and lower bouts of the instrument, is resting flat on your thigh, about midway between your knee and your hip. You'll notice that the bottom of the guitar is also touching your right leg. You can adjust the angle in which the guitar rests by executing two separate motions: 1) moving your right leg to the left or right while keeping your right foot flat on the floor, changing only the angle your leg makes with your hip joint, and 2) rotating the instrument on your left leg while still keeping it resting flat on your thigh to raise or lower the neck of the guitar. Always keep the instrument flat on your left thigh and touching your right inner thigh. As you move your right leg to the right, you can raise the neck of the guitar - still making sure the guitar keeps contact with your right inner thigh and stays flat on your left upper thigh. Do not move your left leg! That leg should still be in the original relaxed position, left foot pointing straight ahead, foot flat on the floor. You can find a good starting angle for the guitar by adjusting the angle as described above until the center line of the instrument (an imaginary line that bisects the guitar and extends from the head of the instrument to the bottom of the instrument) is positioned at about the halfway point between the front and back of your right thigh, touching your inner thigh. This will cause the neck of the instrument to be at about the "10:00 O'clock" position (where the hour hand of a watch would be at 10:00 O'clock.)



## Step 2.

Adjust your footstool so that it is about 6 inches high and place it under your left foot. Keep the bottom side of the guitar touching flat on the top of your left thigh. Do not let the instrument rest only on an edge, it must remain flat on your left thigh. Lifting the left leg will raise the guitar but it will also cause the angle of the top (face) of the instrument to point slightly upward instead of straight ahead. You'll notice that as you lifted your left leg, you had to move your right leg to the left in order to maintain the same contact with your right inner thigh. That's fine - you're on the right track. That lifting motion, provided that you have correctly kept the guitar resting flat on your left thigh, caused the back edge of the upper side of the instrument to move closer to your chest. Adjust your footstool to raise or lower your left leg so that the guitar moves toward, and gently touches your chest. You should also lean forward **SLIGHTLY** toward the guitar. Do not exaggerate the forward leaning motion, you don't want to lean over the guitar. Notice that if you keep the angle of the neck the same as it was in Step 1., the center line of the guitar is now touching your right inner thigh at a point almost at the top of the right thigh, having moved upward from the point where it touched in Step 1.

## Step 3.

You are now supporting the instrument at three points: your two legs and your chest. The final support point will be the inner surface of your right forearm. In order to correctly position your right arm, first hold your right arm at about a 90 degree angle at the elbow, with the palm of your hand facing your body. Your hand should be held so that a flat object (a ruler) which is laid on the arm is touching at all points along your upper forearm and your hand. To do this, your right wrist should not be bent. It should also not be rotated left or right, there should be an imaginary straight line extending from the large knuckle of your right index (pointer) finger along the left inner edge of your right forearm. While maintaining this orientation of your right arm and hand, rotate the entire right arm at the shoulder while not lifting the shoulder, until the inner portion of your right forearm contacts the outer edge of the lower bout of the guitar. The contact point on your forearm should be about 1/3 of the way between your elbow and your wrist, the contact point at the guitar should be almost directly in line with the saddle (the place where the strings



attach) of the guitar. A natural downward and inward pressure by the right arm will hold the instrument firmly against the other three contact points. Lower your right hand toward the strings and suspend your relaxed right hand about an inch above the strings and close to the sound hole of the guitar. You are now holding the guitar correctly in playing position.

Practice picking up the guitar and getting into playing position several times. It should become a habit that feels natural and easy. Whenever you decide to practice the guitar, start with the relaxation procedure, and then pick up and hold the guitar in the correct playing position. Stay in that position without playing a note until you feel comfortable and relaxed. Once again, you learn what you practice. If you allow tension to exist, you will learn to play with tension and you will get very good at it over time. If you learn to play relaxed, your music will expose that inner state to your audience and it will be enjoyable to listen to you play.

## **Fundamentals of the Left hand**

We'll begin to learn each new skill by isolating the activities associated with that skill. Assume the basic sitting position without the guitar in your hand. Your left arm and hand should be hanging at your side and totally relaxed. Lift your left forearm and hand by bending the arm at the elbow while rotating your hand and forearm counter-clockwise until you can look directly into the palm of your left hand, between your thumb and the four fingers, and you can see the crease in the palm just opposite the large knuckle of your left index finger. If your hand is correctly positioned, your four fingers should be relaxed and curled in a slight arch, the outside edge of your thumb should create a smooth arch from your wrist to the tip of the thumb. Your left hand is now in proper left hand playing position. Practice the motion of bringing your hand from the basic sitting position to left hand playing position several times, until you get the motion to be smooth and natural.

## **Motion of the fingers of the left hand**

With your hand in the correct left hand playing position, sequentially move each finger by pivoting at the large knuckle. The motion is similar to that of a typewriter key as it is depressed (for those of you who have ever even seen typewriters.) Each finger should be able to move inde-





pendently. You should not “stop” the other fingers from moving as you move any one finger, you should simply only move the finger you choose to move. Admittedly, this may take some practice. Be content with a small movement at first. The idea is to gain control over your own finger muscles. Most people are used to moving all of their fingers at once so fine motor control of each finger muscle has never been developed. You will have to be very patient in order to learn this skill. Some people get upset about their inability to control each finger independently and end up losing the necessary state of relaxation required for playing. Don't let that happen. You will be able to learn to move your fingers properly - it just takes time, practice, and patience. Don't practice incorrectly! This isn't something you can force. Remember, if you practice wrong you will learn very well how to play wrong.

This skill is essential to good playing so please don't gloss over this section. When I had to “relearn” to play for the third time, I spent an entire week just sitting in this position moving my fingers. Quite humiliating for someone who believed himself to be an “advanced” player. Classical Guitar music very often has several voices sounding simultaneously. Each voice must be controlled separately and consciously. Controlled, independent motion of each finger must be achieved if you are going to play classical music on the guitar.

### **Left hand summary**

We have covered the proper positioning of the left hand on the neck of the guitar and the three motions required of the left hand and arm: 1) pivoting the fingers at the large knuckle to raise and lower the fingers, 2) sliding the left hand up and down the neck of the guitar using a rotation at the shoulder, and 3) positioning the left hand fingers over the desired string by moving the left arm at the elbow.

### **Fundamentals of the Right hand**

The motions involved with correct right hand technique are fairly complex. The right hand controls the creation of the sound that is produced as you play the guitar..



## **Left-to-Right motion of the Right hand**

Just as you used a left arm rotation at the shoulder to move the left hand up and down the neck of the guitar, you must use that same motion with the right arm to position your hand over the section of the strings required to get the sound you desire. I won't get into the actual creation of the sound at this point, that must be reserved for a later lesson, however, be aware that the point on the string which you touch in order to produce a sound has profound effects on the quality of the sound produced. Quality is not meant here as a measure of "goodness" or "badness", the quality I am referring to is the sound quality - the "timbre", or "tone color" of the sound. Tone color is what allows you to differentiate a flute from a french horn or violin, even when all of the instruments are playing exactly the same pitch.

In order to move your right hand along the strings, it is necessary the you slide your forearm across the upper edge of the lower bout of the guitar. If you are not wearing a long-sleeved shirt, you may want to place some type of soft cloth between your arm and the guitar. Many classical guitarists use an ordinary sock that has been cut off at the heel - not the most elegant solution, but it works! Be careful that you don't lift or drop the right shoulder, as that could introduce unwanted tension into your playing. The motion is a simple rotation of the right shoulder, sliding the forearm along the guitar, and causing the entire hand to move along the strings either toward the nut (left) or the saddle (right).

## **Top-to-bottom motion of the Right hand**

As in the left hand motion, the right hand should be positioned over each of the six strings by pivoting the right arm from the elbow. The basic starting position to play on any single string is reached by using the arm motion from the elbow to place the thumb and four fingers of the right hand directly over the desired string. Playing single note scales which span several strings will require you to position your hand over each succeeding string by using the arm motion from the elbow. It is not correct to "reach" for the next string by extending or flexing the fingers. There will be many times when you will need to play two or more notes simultaneously, requiring you to extend or flex the fingers of your right hand to a position that is different than the basic starting position. The key consideration is that you would first move the arm from the elbow to



accomplish the “gross” motion, then use the motion of the fingers as required to reach the correct strings.

## **Motion of the fingers (i,m,a) of the Right hand**

The Classical Guitar is played with the thumb and first three fingers of the right hand. The fourth finger should always be made to follow the motion of the third finger. Each of the fingers are identified in Classical Guitar literature by the following letter designations:

“p” = Thumb or Pulgar

“i” = Index or Indice

“m” = Middle or medio

“a” = Ring or anular.

There are three joints on each finger. The motion of each finger is limited to either a flexation or extension at any of those three joints. When your hand is in a relaxed position, each of the joints are at a point about mid-way between the limits of their possible extension and flexation. The joint at the tip of the finger should be kept firm, but not tense. It can move slightly during a stroke because of the pressure against the finger from the string, but we will not try to control this joint at this stage of playing the guitar. The middle joint is the main source of finger motion. Preparation for a stroke requires that you extend the finger at the middle joint, while keeping the large joint at about the middle point of the limits of its range of motion. As your finger tip touches the string, the motion of the finger continues from the middle joint until it is near its limit of flexation. At that point the motion continues with a follow through of the stroke by flexing the finger at the large, or third knuckle. The range of movement that occurs during playing will become smaller as your technique improves, but the fundamental motion of the fingers will not change. We will talk later about the mechanics of an actual stroke and refer back to this description of finger motion at that time.

Practice the motion of each finger without the guitar in your hands, and watch carefully so that you are sure to practice the correct movements. Remember, if you practice wrong....(snóoze)...

## **Motion of the thumb (p) of the Right hand**

There is some disagreement in guitar pedagogy about exactly how the thumb should move. Some very competent players insist that the motion



should be a circular motion, others disagree vehemently and say that the motion should be identical to that of the other fingers. Most teachers agree that the main motion should be from the joint where the thumb attaches to the wrist. My own personal approach is a hybrid motion which sometimes contains a slight rotation, but mostly moves in a fairly straight line. The decision you make will depend on your own body and on how you can best make the sound you want from your thumb. We'll cover this more in depth when you try to use the thumb to play music.

## Summary

At this point you should be comfortable sitting with the guitar in playing position and you should be able to move both hands to any playing position on the instrument. You should also be able to properly move all four playing fingers of the right hand from the correct finger joint. Congratulations! I hope it was easier to do than it was to explain in words! In the next lesson we'll discuss how the finger nails of the right hand play an important role in shaping the sound you will get from the instrument. I'll explain how to shape and use the finger nails of the Right hand so that you can get any sound which your instrument is capable of producing.