

The Evolution of the Left-Hand Range in the Guitar Technique

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Abstract: *This paper examines and acknowledges the evolution of the left hand range and the demands in the classical guitar technique since the 19th Century. In that regard, after presenting the problematics which surrounds the main subject of investigation, the special attention will be given to the section dedicated to the guitar in the Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes by Hector Berlioz (1844), the development of the guitar music after 1850, as well as the 20th Century and the contemporary music heritage of this instrument. The next stage of the evolution of the use of the left hand range in guitar technique will be discussed and options presented.*

Key-words: *Guitar; Technique; Left Hand; Range; Evolution.*

1. Introduction

Playing classical guitar is not an easy task, especially for the guitarist's left hand. In practice, only four left hand fingers have the responsibility of reaching the notes which are encountered on nineteen spaces² across different strings. Therefore, it is a common situation that a guitar player experiences certain degree of difficulty in covering the distances between the fingers which are necessary for producing the notes in various areas of the guitar fretboard. Nevertheless, that difficulty was not always considered to be the same. As this paper intends to show, there is a clear and present tendency and necessity in the guitar repertory for the left hand technique to increase the range which is covered by its fingers. That inclination is perceivable since the beginning of the 19th Century until the present day, and it is connected with both the non guitarist composers's demands and the compositional intention of guitar composers themselves. In that regard, different levels of

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² Author's note (A.n.): 20th fret, often used on the 1st and 2nd string on some guitars, can be included.

technical *common normalcy*, so to speak, towards the use of the left hand range will be presented and discussed.

1.1. The amplitude of the register

In order to define the aspects of this physical and technical element, the three components of the tone scale extension, in relation to the traditionally tuned³ classical guitar, can be separated by the overall register of the instrument (real pitch notes + the harmonics), the amplitude of the real pitch notes only and the range covered by the distance between fingers 1 and 4 in use on different strings and angles. Concerning the last-mentioned measure component, it is clear that a better definition of the reach of the left hand without its lateral movement and subsequent change of the numerical position is important, primarily between its most distant points. Therefore, it is considered that the following three forms of the positioning of the left-hand fingers coexist between each other and experience the transformation while acting further higher on the fretboard due to the narrowing of the spaces in the upper register of the guitar:

- contracted position/range (4 fingers cover 3 spaces or less);
- normal position/range (4 fingers cover 4 spaces on the fingerboard);
- extended position/range (4 fingers cover 5 or more spaces)⁴.

The Figure 1 demonstrates the separation between fingers 1 and 4, on the farthest strings (1st and 6th), regarding the situation on the 1st and 5th numerical position:

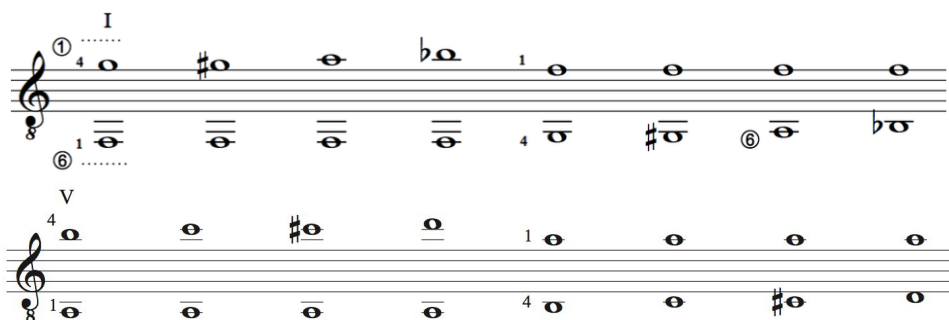


Fig. 1. *The distance between fingers 1 and 4 across the farthest strings.*
Source: University of Évora (2015).

³ A.n.: e1, b, g, d, A, E.

⁴ A.n.: This is achieved by the stretching of the left hand and its fingers.

The technical and physical exigencies of the guitar score are thoroughly defined by the existing number of these three positional components in the performance of the guitar music. Concerning the Fig. 1, it is noticeable that the level of technical difficulty between the two numerical positions decreases due to the narrowing of the spaces between the frets on the guitar fingerboard. That fact opens the possibility of increasing the musical interval range between the fingers 1 and 4 without the additional physical effort in the process, until some certain limit. Nevertheless, the difficulty level will be defined by the simultaneous use or avoidance of other two fingers.

2. Berlioz & Guitar

The transition from the popularity of the baroque guitar to the classical guitar with diverse string settings in the 18th century was accompanied by great interest and popularity across Europe (Wade, 2001). In the beginning of the century, the best luthiers were from southern Europe and the most well-known concert players from central and southern Europe. A significant recognition of the existence of the guitar as a concert instrument was its inclusion in the *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (1844) by Hector Berlioz. As a connoisseur of guitar technique, Berlioz wrote a brief reflection on the problematics of writing for guitar, indicating the instructions on the use of the instrument by someone who is not familiar with its technical elements and making the following general classification:

“The guitar is an instrument suitable for accompanying the voice and for taking part in instrumental compositions of intimate character; it is equally appropriate for solo performance of more or less complicated compositions in several voices, which possess true charm when performed by real virtuosos [...]. It is almost impossible to write well for the guitar without being able to play the instrument. However, the majority of composers who employ it do not possess an accurate knowledge of it. They write things of excessive difficulty, weak sonority and small effect for the instrument.”
(Dover 1991, 145)

The outstanding characteristic of the transposition of the instrument is underlined, since it sounds an octave lower than its writing and has only a smaller register. As already understood in the initial text, the guitar is given as “[...] a mainly harmonic instrument [...]” (Dover 1991, 145) which requires a better understanding of the feasible chordal structure. The examples which contain the classification of the difficulty level are shown in the Figure 2:

In C.

And all the portions of these chords.

In G.

In D. difficult.

In A.

more difficult.

In E.

Fig. 2. Chordal structure for guitar according to Berlioz.

Source: Novello & Co. (1858).

The positional view of the left hand guitar technique by Berlioz can be understood through the fact that all the indicated chords are performed in the range that cover at most the three spaces — the contracted hand position — including the chords

classified as difficult. In chords of increased difficulty, the fact that there is a greater separation between the left-hand fingers on the strings which are used (fingers 1 and 2 in the case of the 1st chord and fingers 4 and 2 in the case of the 3rd) causes a certain level of difficulty, which, nowadays, none of these chords can be considered as difficult for the intermediate grade levels. There is a greater separation of the upper or lower lines in some chords, resulting from the application of open strings in several voices. Berlioz also makes a reference to dominant seventh chords, stressing the importance of applying open strings (Figure 3):

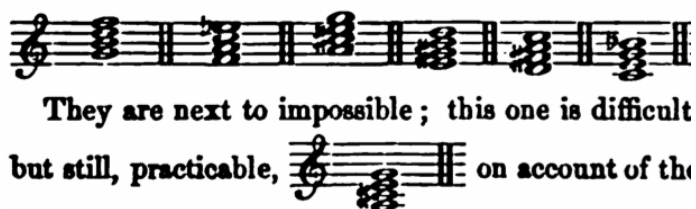


Fig. 3. *Dominant chords for guitar according to Berlioz.*

Source: Novello & Co. (1858).

It is understood that playing the respective chords in higher positions and the consequent string inversion effect (in the case of the 3rd, 4th and 6th chords), was not considered by Berlioz as a possibility. The indication of the difficulty level of the last chord is probably related to its practical result in the range of four covered spaces on the guitar fretboard.

2. Tárrega's Contribution

While general interest in the guitar in European society was fading away, a revolution in the construction of this instrument was happening in Spain by Ant3nio de Torres (1817-1892). The first guitars were built in the period between 1836 and 1842 and, during the later process of their development, a new criterion for the future construction of the contemporary instrument was crafted (Wade, 2001). Its use by guitarist-composers such as Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909) and Miguel Llobet (1878-1938) was crucial for the growing interest for guitar in Spain, and for the consequent designation of the instrument as the Spanish Guitar, frequently applied to the present day.

Figures 4 and 5 contain some of the examples of the further improvement in the left hand technique by F. Tárrega, regarding the necessity of increasing the range covered by its fingers. This tendency can be observed in all of Tárrega's work (original pieces, preludes & studies, transcriptions) and is considered as the *new normalcy*, in general, concerning the physical effort of the left hand. While Tárrega's *Danza Mora*, from 1900 (m. 58-59, Figure 4), demonstrates the use of the extended left hand range on the 7th numerical position, *Lágrima*, from 1891 (m. 11-12, Figure 5), obtains an engaging treatment of covering the notes which are encountered on distant strings in the range of normal left hand position (4 spaces). Having in mind the fingers stretching as a criteria for defining the level of technical difficulty, this kind of music texture for guitar represents physically the most demanding form of exploring normal position on the guitar in any numerical position due to the transversal distance between the strings.

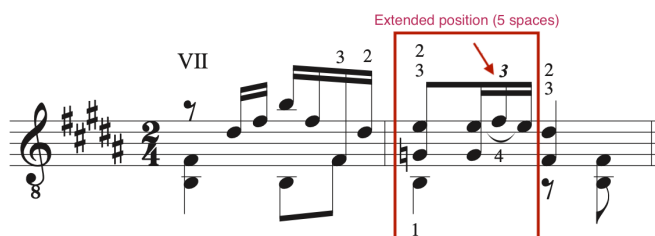


Fig. 4. *Danza Mora* by Francisco Tárrega, m. 58-59.

Other example of the significant increase of the left hand technique difficulty can be found in *Lágrima*'s m. 12 which contains the example of the use of 1st finger *barré* simultaneously with the other fingers exploring the normal position of covered spaces on the fingerboard.

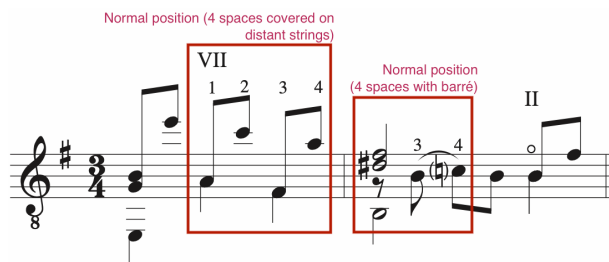


Fig. 5. *Lágrima* by F. Tárrega, m. 11-12.

Tárrega's student Miguel Llobet emphasizes the same left hand increasing tendency in covering space on guitar fretboard in his emblematic *Variations on a theme by Fernando Sor, Op. 15* (1908). While m. 1 shows the use of the normal range on the 2nd numerical position (Fig. 6), m. 4 consists of the simultaneous use of the 1st finger *barré* together with the fingers 2 & 4, which increases the technical demands of the music text.

Fig. 6. *Variations on the Theme by Fernando Sor, Op. 15* by Miguel Llobet, m. 1-4.

Furthermore, in relation to the same work by Llobet, *Intermezzo* (m. 7-8, Fig. 7), which is located between the 6th and the 7th variation, brings to attention the following example of the left hand stretching tendency, which demonstrates how the identical extended range on different numerical positions, in this case 2nd & 7th, can bring very different physical effort⁵. It is important to mention that both moments contain all the physically difficult elements: 1st finger *barré*, simultaneous use of fingers 2 & 3 and the extended range provided by the stretching of the finger 4.

Fig. 7. *Intermezzo from Variations Op. 15* by M. Llobet, m. 7-8.

⁵ A.n.: In this example, the hand and finger stretch which is necessary for its performance on the 2nd position of the guitar fingerboard can be considered as dangerous for health due to an increasing risk of tendonitis.

3. 20th Century non-guitarist composer's repertoire

In comparison to the 19th Century, the guitar repertoire of the 20th Century was particularly marked by a significant contribution from composers who didn't know how to play the guitar. In general, those works follow the compositional principles, aesthetics and logics of each composer which are mixed with the personal investigation about the technical and interpretative possibilities of guitar as an instrument. The majority of the aforementioned repertoire by non-guitarist composers was created in collaboration with some known guitarist performer who gave his opinion about its music text and playability. In that regard and directly connecting to the main subject of this paper, Julian Bream (1933-2020) contributed with the direct instructions to all the composers in his essay *How to Write for Classical Guitar* from 1957 where he points the following:

“By no means the least important point to bear in mind when writing for the guitar, is the span which the left hand is capable of stretching. For instance, it is obviously impossible to play a chord in a high position, and also expect to play a low F (first fret) on the sixth string [...]. [...] Although five or six frets is the average stretch between the first and fourth finger, this does not rule out the possibility of playing chords in the high positions of the treble strings and plucking open bass strings at the same time. [...] atonal works may present certain problems, though they can be entirely successful if the composer has acquainted himself thoroughly with the fingerboard and realized the importance of keeping the texture compact. Incidentally, whilst the forefinger might be engaged in performing the grand barre [sic] it is worthwhile to remember that the other three fingers can articulate and stop notes at the same time, providing that they are not required to stretch more than four frets higher than the point at which the barre [sic] is fixed”.

(Score and International Music Association magazine, 1957, 20-23)

This is also directly related to the technical demands found in Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal* for solo guitar (1963), whose 3rd variation (Figure 8) contains an extreme left hand stretching, combining both the longitudinal and transversal separation of the fingers on the fretboard.

Fig. 8. “Nocturnal” by Benjamin Britten (3rd variation), m. 50-53.

4. What’s next?

When approached by the most recent generation of composers, the guitar is often seen through a personal prism focused on specific elements arising from its technique, which are elaborated and deepened in multiple and distinct ways. A case that does not fall into this category is *Sunken Cross* (2008) by Srećko Bradić (b. 1963) which is based on widening the instrument's register as well as exploring the *legato* articulation and its expressiveness. As it is demonstrated on the Figure 9, this kind of music text for guitar creates the necessity of increasing the register covered by the left-hand fingers which is only possible if the left hand thumb is added above the fingerboard and equally involved in the process of the guitar technique.

Fig. 9. *The Sunken Cross* by Srećko Bradić (2008), m. 65-67.

Source: Author's edition

One of the successful examples of applying the left-hand thumb as a solution for preserving the original musical text for guitar is detected in the recently premiered *Que sont mes amis devenus...* (2021) by Jean-Sébastien Béreau (b. 1934) [Figure 10]. It's important to note that the original contrapunctal intention, which obliges the use of the extreme extended position of 7 spaces across the 6 strings, was preserved by this evolutionary technical solution whose practical application on the instrument can be observed on the Figure 11.



The image shows a musical score for guitar, measures 49-50. The score is written in treble and bass clefs. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The piece is marked *più f* and *cresc.*. A red box highlights a specific passage in measure 50, where the left hand thumb is used to play a chord. The notes are labeled with fingerings: 4, 3, 2, and 1. The word "thumb" is written below the bass clef staff, indicating the use of the left hand thumb.

Fig. 10. « *Que sont mes amis devenus* » by Jean-Sébastien Béreau, m. 49-50.



Fig. 11. The use of the left hand thumb for the sample included in the Fig. 10.

5. Conclusion

As it was demonstrated in this paper, the evolution of the left hand range in the guitar technique was always going on, since the 19th Century to the present day. While Berlioz sees the guitar as a difficult instrument and tries to relieve its left hand tension by covering 3 spaces on the fretboard, Francisco Tárrega and his disciples had the necessity of increasing that space and establishing the normal position range of 4 spaces as a standard practice. On the other hand, they didn't mind of adventuring a bit and included in their repertoire snippets of extended left hand position. Furthermore, that technical solution was deemed as normal and adequate in the repertoire created by 20th century non-guitarist composers who dared to give the priority to their own contrapunctal priorities. Nevertheless, as long as the will for better and more efficient contrapunctal language exists, larger left hand range will be need. In that aspect, the successful technical solution regarding the left hand thumb was shown as part of the performance of J.S. Béreau's recent work for solo guitar. Therefore, this paper encourages the fellow guitar professionals to apply the technique of using the left hand thumb as an integral part of pressing the strings on the guitar fretboard. By doing that, it is possible to achieve a larger range between the extreme longitudinal and transversal points of the fingerboard range, which will enrich the guitar technique and its possibilities furthermore.

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