

Joaquín Clerch

The Cuban Guitar School

About the Course

The classical guitar is a versatile instrument capable of expressing a wide range of musical styles. From the intricate rhythms of Cuban music to the complex polyphony of J.S. Bach, it demands precise articulation, including careful control of string resonance and the application of accents.

Renowned Cuban guitarist Joaquín Clerch explores these elements through the lens of the Cuban Guitar School, emphasizing key aspects such as posture, finger mechanics, and the concept of preparation for both hands.

Contents

Chapter 1: Zero Position	pg. 3
Chapter 2: Finger Mechanics	pg. 4
Chapter 3: Preparation	pg. 7
Conclusion	pg. 8



Chapter 1: Zero Position

The first essential concept for playing the guitar effectively is finding the proper physical posture, which Clerch calls “Zero Position.” Due to the instrument’s shape and size, guitarists often struggle with achieving a comfortable, ergonomic posture that minimizes tension and maximizes efficiency.

A proper sitting position is critical to setting the foundation for effective technique. To establish a good posture, start by sitting without the guitar and letting the arms hang naturally, ensuring the shoulders remain relaxed.



Clerch recommends elevating the left leg with a footstool rather than guitar support for greater stability and connection to the instrument. Experiment with the footstool’s position to ensure circulation is not cut off. One common challenge to achieving a proper sitting position is that the shape of the guitar can cause the right shoulder to lift and strain, making it difficult to play freely; great attention should be paid to keeping both shoulders level.



Chapter 2: Finger Mechanics

The Left Hand

A key aspect of guitar technique is the positioning and movement of the left hand. Traditionally, guitarists are taught to place their fingers as close to the frets as possible for clarity of sound. However, playing too close to the fret can introduce unnecessary tension as the fingers spread, especially when playing in the first position, where the frets are farther apart. Clerch advises placing the fingers more centrally on the fret, particularly when using the pinky finger, as this reduces overall tension and allows for a more fluid motion. This technique should be executed with care, as placing the fingers too far from the fret can result in buzzed notes. Finding the balance between clear tone and comfort is critical, and it may take time to discover the optimal finger placement for each individual player.

Another critical aspect of left-hand technique is avoiding excessive thumb pressure, which can lead to tension and long-term injury in some extreme cases. Instead, the fingers should generate enough strength to produce a clean sound without relying on the thumb to provide additional pressure.

When playing two adjacent strings at the same time, it is important to avoid muting the top string with the back of the finger. In these situations, Clerch recommends turning the hand slightly to the right to ensure the pinky is properly aligned with the string. This will allow both notes to ring freely and keep the notes more in tune.



Out of tune



In tune

There are two main methods of playing legatos, or slurs, on the guitar: apoyando legato and tirando legato. Apoyando legato involves imitating a rest stroke with the left hand, where the finger rests on the adjacent string after the pull-off. Tirando legato, on the other hand, mimics a free stroke, with the finger pulling away from the string and into the air. Both techniques offer different sonic qualities, with apoyando legato providing a fuller, more pronounced sound and tirando legato offering a faster, lighter touch.

The Right Hand

The right hand plays a critical role in Cuban guitar music, particularly in maintaining the integrity of multiple voices. A hallmark of Cuban music is its complex syncopation, which requires the right hand to articulate each note cleanly and stop unwanted strings from ringing, muting specific strings while allowing the desired strings to sound clearly.

In general, the thumb is responsible for muting the fourth, fifth, and sixth strings, while the index, middle, and ring fingers stop the third, second, and first strings, respectively. This selective muting prevents unwanted resonance and ensures that each note can be articulated clearly and rhythmically



Right-hand placement can be categorized by three “positions,” which refer to the placement of the ring finger on different strings. When the ring finger is on the first string, it is in the first position; when it is on the second string, it is in the second position; and when it is on the third string, it is in the third position. The thumb moves between the bass strings accordingly, creating a fluid, interconnected motion.



1st position



2nd position



3rd position

One of the most critical aspects of right-hand technique is ensuring that the fingers and thumb work together with minimal tension. The power in the right hand comes from the first phalanx of the finger, located between the big knuckle and the first joint. For a proper free stroke, the wrist should be elevated, allowing the fingers to slide through the string toward the palm, creating a full and resonant sound.



The speed and surface area of the finger's contact with the string influence the volume of the note; faster strokes create a louder sound, while slower strokes result in a quieter, more delicate tone.

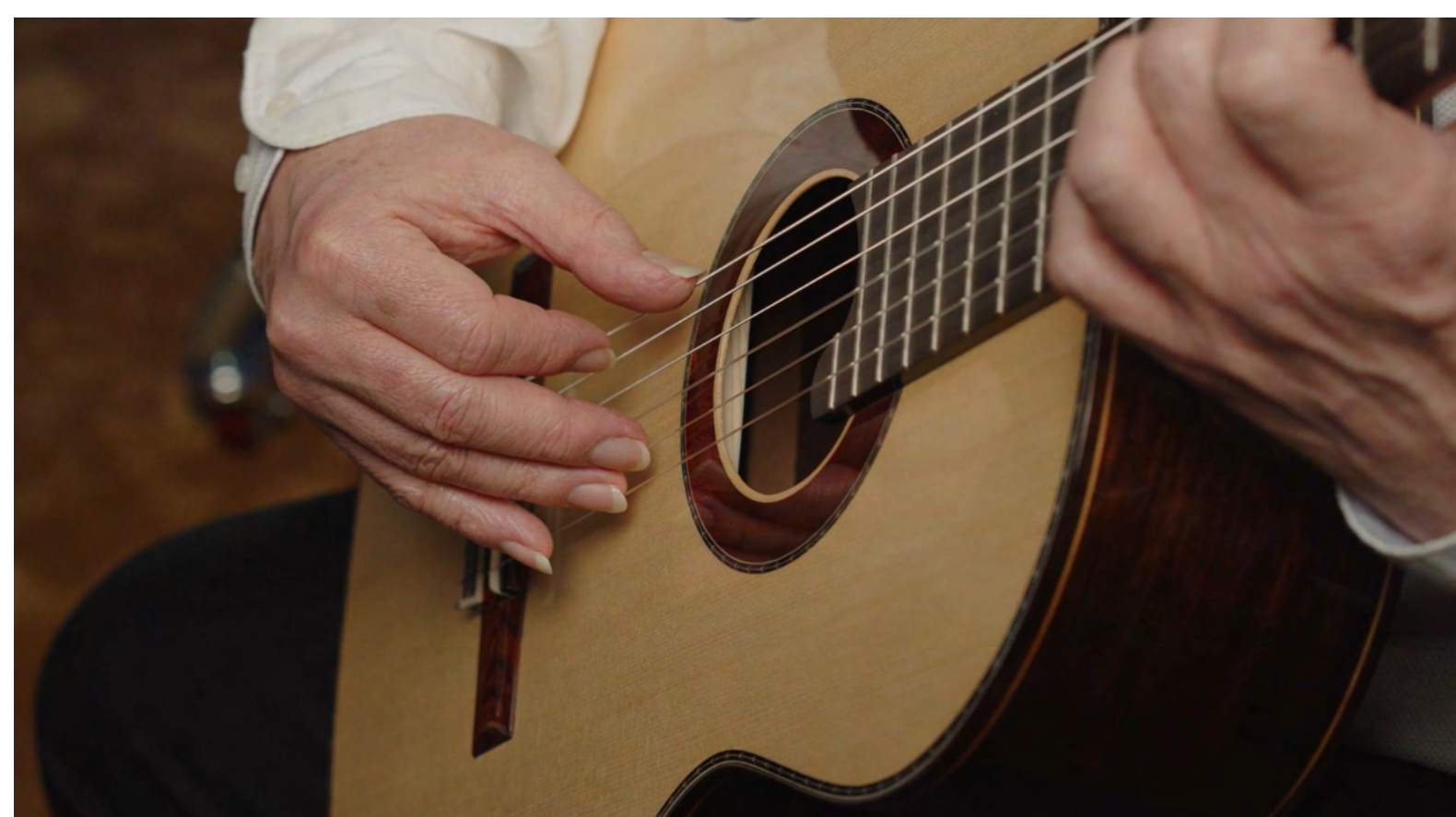
Additionally, the surface area of the nail can be used to increase volume for accents. By turning the hand slightly to the right, the larger surface of the nail engages more of the string, creating a stronger accent. For a softer, more delicate sound, the left side of the nail is used, allowing the player to glide effortlessly through the string.

Chapter 3: Preparation

In Cuban guitar technique, preparation is vital in achieving precision and clarity. Preparation refers to having the fingers of both hands in contact with the strings before plucking. This is particularly important for the right hand, allowing smooth transitions between notes. For example, when playing a free stroke, the thumb is recommended to rest on an adjacent string, providing stability for the other fingers.

For the left hand, the release of pressure after playing a note should be done carefully. It is important to maintain light contact with the string after releasing the pressure to avoid an unintentional pull-off to the open string. Failure to stop the strings can result in the sympathetic vibrations causing overtones, making the music sound muddy and indistinct.

One effective way of muting strings is by using the thumb. The thumb can either directly rest on a string to stop it from ringing or indirectly mute a lower string by leaning back slightly.

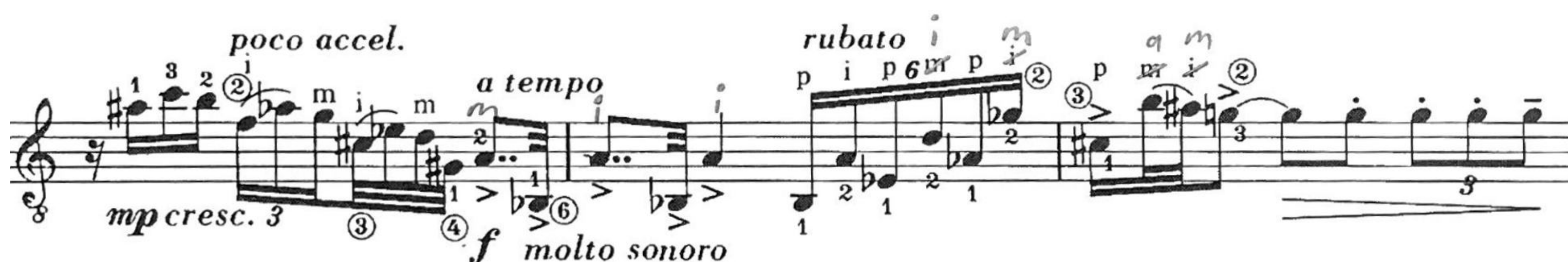


Directly



Indirectly

These techniques are vital for maintaining clarity in complex passages, such as in measure 5 of Brouwer's *Elogio de la Danza*. During the sixteenth note sextuplet, the thumb can indirectly mute the lower bass note while simultaneously preparing to pluck the next one.



Conclusion

The Cuban Guitar School offers a rich and nuanced approach to classical guitar technique, emphasizing efficiency and clarity. Through a relaxed posture and mastery of finger mechanics and preparation, the guitarist can achieve a level of musical precision crucial for performing the complex rhythms found in Cuban music. By minimizing tension and using natural finger movements, guitarists can navigate even the most challenging passages with ease and fluidity, allowing the beauty of the music to shine through. Ultimately, the Cuban Guitar School stresses that effective technique is not just about physical movement but about aligning the player's body and mind to produce the clearest, most articulate musical expression.