



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Surviving a Scale Burst

How many times have you played a piece of music at a reasonable tempo, with everything pretty much under control, only to be thrown off by a burst of four to eight notes which are written to be played at twice the speed as the rest of the piece? Its typical of Renaissance lute music. And its easy to "stub your toe" on such a passage, even for an advanced player.

Problems:

The most common problems in playing a scale burst are:

1. Most lutenists tend to tense up when they're about to play a burst. That's understandable and human, but its counterproductive. The fingers and hand can move faster and more accurately when loose and relaxed.
2. There is a tendency to rush.
3. There is a tendency to try to play a burst too loud, especially at the beginning of the burst.

Any of these things will cause the fingers to get "bogged down" in the strings and become unable to play the passage cleanly.

Solutions:

1. Relax. You've got to convince yourself to relax when a scale burst occurs. In fact, that's the time to be extra relaxed. It may take a lot of self-training to automatically relax when you're approaching a rapid passage, but its the only way you'll be able to play a burst with elegance, as opposed to merely surviving.
2. There is a tendency to rush... Its curious that we would tend to rush a passage that already feels uncomfortably fast. That seems kind of self destructive, doesn't it? Yet, its almost as common as "tensing up" just before a burst.
3. Most of the time a scale burst or rapid ornamented passage requires a delicate touch. This is good news! It is an advantage both musically and technically, since it is easier to execute a rapid passage lightly. The louder one plays, the more difficult it becomes to play with nimble fingers.

Often a lutenist will try to play a burst too loud and fast. It is better to begin such passages with a lighter touch, gaining in firmness as the passage progresses.

At the same time, it often works well to begin a burst slightly under tempo, and then catch up - increasing your speed as you go. At first it can seem a little scary to let yourself get behind in a scale burst. It will probably feel like you'll never be able to increase your speed enough to catch up. But

you'll get used to it. Catching up depends on your degree of relaxation, your ability to manifest a calm but electric energy, and the efficiency of your right hand stroke.

This is subtle. It must not be overdone. But these techniques of "scale-burst survival strategy" can make the difference between playing a tricky burst with elan or "stubbing your toe" on the passage.

In a nutshell:

1. Relax. Train yourself to relax. Ironically, relaxing can be a matter of hard, concentrated work!
2. Begin with a lighter touch, then gain firmness if needed.
3. Accelerate through short bursts of rapid notes: start more slowly, then catch up. This works well on both a technical and a musical level.