



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Painting the Music: Some Musical Uses of Color on the Lute

Recent installments of *Beyond the Basics* have examined the mechanics of tone control and the concepts of “Color Coding.” Building on these ideas, I would like to focus on the musical circumstances in which tone control (shading the lute’s tone with a variety of colors) helps make a stronger, clearer or more expressive musical statement.

Variations in tone color may be used to:

1. **Characterize the mood of a composition.** A bright tone combined with some short articulations will bring out the cheerful, lively nature of the opening section of John Dowland’s “My Lady Hunsdon’s Puffe.”

My Lady Hunsdons Puffe, m. 1

On the other hand, a darker tone (most effective when combined with legato connections between notes) helps to convey the somber, aching mood of Dowland’s “Lachrimae.”

Lachrimae, m. 1

2. **Intensify the harmonic dissonance or consonance of a chord.** For a particularly crunching dissonance, such as in Dowland’s “Forlorn Hope Fancy,” (measure 20, beat 1) you might choose a hard, (or even harsh) tone to convey the wrenching emotional intensity of the dissonance. For added contrast you could then play some of the consonant chords which follow (in measures 22 & 23) with a smooth, sweet tone.

Forlorn Hope Fancy, m. 19 - 23

3. **Help give shape to the melody.** Many lutenists attempt to shape melodies through volume control alone. But tone control and volume control can work hand in hand to shape the melody more clearly. The dynamic range of the lute is limited, but tone control can greatly amplify the listener’s perception of that dynamic range, creating the *impression* of a wider range.

As you approach the top of a melody's arch, allow your finger to follow through more deeply for a more intense, well-supported tone. Be sure that the string excursion toward the soundboard is most pronounced at the peak of the phrase. In some cases it may be desirable to brighten the tone at the peak, as well.

Fantasia #64, m. 38 – 44 by Francesco da Milano

4. **Underscore the rhythmic or lyrical nature of a composition.** In “Tocha tocha la Canella” a bright tone with some percussive edge (or chiff) will emphasize the lively, rhythmic quality of this lute solo.

On the other hand, Marco dall’Aquila’s “Ricercar #33” has a lyrical, almost lullaby-like character. A sweet, mellow tone with as little edge as possible helps to set the mood for this lovely Ricercar:

Ricercar #33, m. 1 - 6 - by Pietro Paolo Borrono

Those are some of the broadest concepts for the usage of tone color on the lute. In actual practice, tone color choices are often subtle and endlessly varied. When tone control is well used, detailed tonal shadings permeate each phrase of the music, often existing on such a microcosmic level that they do not lend themselves well to a written discussion.

To effectively “paint” a piece with tone color, you’ll need to employ keen perception and imagination. You must perceive the qualities that are inherent in a piece of music: its basic underlying character, its fluctuations of mood from phrase to phrase, the contour of the melody and the drama of its harmonic tension and relaxation. Then you must use your imagination and find ways to use the lute’s palette of colors (which is literally at your fingertips) to portray all these qualities. It is tremendous fun, and it helps both the listener and the performer to experience the music more vividly.