



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Avoid Labored Playing

I have often heard earnest performances on the lute that were fairly clean, well phrased and full of good intentions, but were burdened with an overriding sense of heaviness. This labored quality drains the energy and fun from a performance, for both the performer and the audience.

How do you avoid labored playing? To avoid labored playing, you must minimize your physical effort:

1. Use no more left-hand pressure than needed to depress the strings for a clear sound. Keep a firm but light touch. One can experiment with a lighter left hand touch by trying to let the strings buzz just a little) on each note. Then add just a little more pressure until the sound is clear. This can give you a clearer sense of just how little pressure is really needed to get a clear sound. (Of course, this assumes that you are already playing with an efficient left-hand technique, depressing the courses with the fingertips at a right angle to the plane of the fingerboard, and touching the strings just behind the frets. Also, your frets must be fairly fresh and unworn to get the clearest sound.)
2. Let the weight of the left arm do as much of the work as possible, by relaxing some of the weight of the arm, transferred through the fingers to the fingerboard. It is surprising how much the weight of the left arm can help in depressing the strings. It makes the job of the left-hand fingers much easier.
3. Release the left-hand fingers from the fingerboard when they are not needed. That is to say: Don't over-hold. Don't hold fingers on the strings longer than needed. They should remain in a "relaxed but ready" position when not being used.
4. Don't choose more difficult fingerings (for legato connections) than necessary. Sometimes the easiest, most obvious left-hand fingering choice is best. One can often convey a sense of voice connection without contorting one's hand to make a literal connection.
5. Develop the Quick Release. Quick Release is the action of releasing all tension in a right-hand finger immediately upon stroking through a course. With a good Quick Release, one can play vigorously or rapidly and still remain relaxed, since the finger rests for a fraction of a second between each stroke. The Quick Release stroke creates a buoyant tone that is quick-speaking and full, but not heavy.