



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

A Low Right Hand Position (for thumb-under playing)

This article may seem to belong to a column called Basics, rather than Beyond the Basics. Yet I have found that the majority of intermediate players playing with a rather high right hand position, tend to play inefficiently in one way or another, and have an incomplete understanding of the mechanics of the right hand technique called “thumb-under.”



Photo of Jacob Heringman by Kenneth Bè • Detail of 16th c. Flemish painting, Musée de Carnevalet

The painting and the photo of Jacob Heringman are examples of the position I have described. However, both hands are in playing positions which are a little higher than the "home base" I described. This is normal and natural, since the hands are actively playing rather than resting. In the course of playing the right hand will constantly go in and out of the "home base" position.

There are a variety of positions from which one can employ the thumb-under technique. Here is one that works well for many players. It works particularly well for early 16th century music such as Dalza, Spinacino, Bossinensis, Capirola, etc.

Position the right hand quite low in relation to the floor, so that the thumb and fingertips are a bit lower than the chanterelle. The right hand fingers must be nearly parallel to the strings.

The right hand pinky will rest on the lute's soundboard about 2 1/2 inches below the chanterelle. The distance can be adjusted, depending on the size of your hand.

From this position, make the point just below the chanterelle the "home base" to which your right hand always returns. This is a good position whenever the treble strings are being played. However, the pinky should slide nearer the chanterelle if you are playing on the bass strings, and back out again whenever the right hand fingers are concentrated in the treble. This should give the right hand plenty of room to follow through, and avoid excessive stretching whenever you play in the bass.

Keep the shoulders level. Be sure not to drop the right shoulder in pursuit of this lower right hand position. It is easiest to adopt this position when the lute is held higher on your body. This can be accommodated by sitting in a lower chair or by elevating the feet. If you use a lute strap, shorten the strap accordingly if needed. It will also help to hold the lute's neck fairly low, so that the neck is nearly parallel to the floor.

When this lower right hand position is adopted, you'll experience a sensation of "reaching up" to stroke the courses. It may take some time to get used to this sensation, but it has advantages for both the thumb and fingers: From this low position, the right hand fingers have excellent traction on the strings. The thumb touches the bass strings more deeply into the fleshy pad of the thumb, and away from the hard sounding edge of the thumb. And it is easier to find the "sweet spot" on the fingers and thumb, where the most plump and juicy tone can be found.

Also, this low position allows the right hand to be very relaxed, and to employ more of the weight of the right hand and arm. Playing from this position, using the weight of the right hand "falling" through the course with each downstroke, one can play more loudly with less effort. This makes a really relaxed and efficient right hand technique possible, while drawing full rounded tones from the lute. Conversely, from a high position (relative to the floor), it is more difficult to maintain good traction on the strings. The ridges of the fingerprints tend to slip and scrape over the surface of the string, making a shallow tone. And the thumb tends to play closer to its tip or edge, where a thinner, harder sound is created.

To play the lute artistically, drawing a full range of colors from the lute's palette, one must address the strings from a number of angles and positions. When a lutenist becomes stuck in one unvarying right hand position throughout a performance, the music sounds less colorful and less interesting. But it is important to have a comfortable, good sounding "home" position that is both a home base and a point of departure.

Incidentally, I should warn against craning your neck forward to view the music, as the woman in the painting is doing. Notice that Jacob's body position is healthier and better balanced.