# Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

## No Plodding

One problem I have often heard in the playing of intermediate players, and even some advanced players, is the tendency to play with the same touch and weight throughout a phrase. It is largely the subtle variation of touch and weight in your performance that makes a lyrical piece sing, and makes a dance piece really dance. Repeating the same weight, chord after chord, in a dance piece gives the impression of too many strong beats, making the dance sound heavy and earthbound. Lyrical music, without variety in the weight of chords and lines, simply sounds dull and boring.

It is important to thoughtfully vary the weight of single notes and chords for a natural flow of the music. Unvaried weight creates a static quality. When one maintains the same weight throughout a phrase, it is the musical equivalent of speaking in a monotone, instead of speaking with the natural rise and fall that makes a speaking voice expressive.

On the lute, one can increase the weight of a note or a chord by:

1. increasing the degree of string excursion toward the soundboard (that is, pressing the string down toward the soundboard before releasing the stroke)
2. increasing the amount of follow through of the fingers
3. increasing the amount of arm movement (in thumb-under technique)
4. that accompanies each finger stroke. (This applies to single notes, but not to chords.)

One lightens the weight by:

1. decreasing the string excursion
2. decreasing the follow through
3. decreasing the arm movement.

Music needs a sense of direction. The way you vary the weight of the notes and chords is an important part of providing that direction. However, to have a meaningful sense of direction, you need to know where you're going! It can be helpful to map out the phrase beginnings, endings, peaks and points of arrival in a composition, so that everything is clear to you when you are playing.

As an example, I would like to use the first 8 measures of Dowland's Goodnight, a lute solo that I wrote several years ago. It can be heard on the CD Indigo Road (Dorian Sono Luminus ). The lute tablature for Dowland's Goodnight, and all the compositions from Indigo Road may be ordered at http://www.mignarda.com/editions/.

Here are my suggestions, measure by measure:

**Measure 1** - I suggest beginning with a medium-light g minor chord followed by a heavier d minor chord on the second beat. Rolling that d minor chord along with a deep string excursion and follow-through will create a sense of gravity on the second beat. The last note in the measure should be fairly light.

**Measure 2** - should begin fairly lightly and continue to fade ( and therefore, with decreasing string excursion and follow through) as the energy wanes.

**Measure 3** - begins with a chord of medium weight. The bass note on beat two should be quite light, with very little follow through. But the three notes at the end of measure three should be played with increasing weight and follow through.

**Measure 4** - is another tapering measure, which begins lightly and continues to fade. This is the end of the first phrase.

**Measure 5** - mirrors the phrasing of measure one, but continues building its energy into measure six with a little crescendo.

**Measure 6** - In measure six, two things are happening at the same time: 1. Since the measure transitions into the phrase peak at measure seven, the energy needs to build to create a sense of a natural climax in the next measure. 2. The melody descends, and needs a slight taper. It's a little tricky to create a sense of pulling in both of these directions at the same time. Here's what I suggest: After playing the first beat with a good long follow through (and fairly heavy weight), play the two bass notes fully, with increasing weight. A rest stroke on the E flat followed by a long follow through on the 4th course G would be appropriate. Then slightly decrease the excursion and follow through of your stroke on the last two melody notes of the measure. This must be very slight, or you will lose the feeling of momentum and intensity.

**Measure 7** - The high c minor chord at the beginning of measure is the peak of the phrase, and should be the loudest, heaviest chord of the line. Play it with deep string excursion into the soundboard, and an extremely long follow through. Beat two begins a taper, with a medium heavy d chord. I suggest a fairly light rest stroke for the low D on beat three, and a light stroke on the last note (B flat) of the measure.

**Measure 8** - begins with an E flat chord, which should be almost weightless, since it is the very end of the tapered phrase. The last four notes of measure eight are a pickup into the next measure. Those four pickup notes should be played with a slight increase

of weight to create a sense of motion and gravity toward the beginning of measure nine, which is the start of the next section.

With this installment, the Beyond the Basics column draws to an end. I have now written everything that I set out to write when I first began this column in 2004. At that time, I saw that there were areas of technique and musicianship which were not being discussed, and it was my personal mission to raise awareness about these topics among lutenists. Now, having said what I wanted to say, I would like to thank the Lute Society of America and the Lute Society Quarterly for allowing me the space to write about the many "Hidden Secrets" of lute playing.