

Early Guitar Technique: A Little Advice
By Elizabeth C. D. Brown

The following represents a small sampling of the types of exercises I have created for my students and myself over the years. Although these examples are loosely derived from historical pieces as noted, the fingerings are almost entirely my own. These exercises address some basic techniques, given in one or two commonly used keys, which can be adapted to different keys or to fit more specific issues. Primarily intended for a 5-course Baroque guitar, they could also be played on 4-course guitar with some judicious editing. Hopefully this article will serve as a starting point for your own creativity.

Scales & Slurs

We are all aware of how important scales are, since they are the building blocks of music. The two exercises given here start with a straightforward scale, followed by a faster version in slurs. Fast, slurred scale passages are a trademark of the baroque guitar style, and are great fun to play. It is tempting to fly through these scales, but take the time to practice them slowly and carefully to make sure that every note comes through clearly, for a truly dynamic effect. Practicing slurs is also beneficial for left hand strength building and will help your ornaments. Remember in descending slurs that you are plucking the string with your left hand, which requires the finger to pull the string horizontally. This is the reason that these slurs are referred to by folk guitarists as “pull-offs,” rather than “lift-offs.”

Exercise 1: Scales/Slurs in C Major *taken from Pellegrini (1650), page 35*

The musical score for Exercise 1 is presented in two systems, each with two staves. The time signature is 3/4. The first system shows an ascending scale in the first staff and a descending scale in the second staff, both with slurs. The second system shows a more complex scale with slurs in the first staff and a descending scale with slurs in the second staff. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and letters a, b, c, d. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Exercise 2: Scales/Slurs in D Major *taken from Carré (c. 1720), page 1 and Pellegrini (1650), page 25*

Thirds and Sixths

I highly recommend practicing thirds and sixths in the keys of pieces that you are working on. Start by becoming familiar with a scale in the desired key, then try playing parallel thirds—which can also be described as playing two scales at the same time starting on the first and third notes of the scale you were just practicing. In the key of C Major, this would mean starting on C (first) and E (third), in the key of D Major your starting notes would be D (first) and F# (third), etc. In a similar manner, sixths start on the first and sixth notes. After you are comfortable playing straight ascending and descending parallel intervals you can try jumping around a bit as well, as these exercises do.

These exercises double as shifting practice as there are frequent position changes. Each shift is carefully fingered to make use of a guide finger that gently slides as you shift. (For example, see how the second finger can slide along the second course in the later half of the first measure.) It is very important to keep the left hand relaxed for accurate and efficient shifts, so remember to loosen your thumb and let your elbow drop, especially for ascending shifts. A sure-fire indication of too much left hand tension is finding your thumb rooted in one position while your fingers have progressed to another!

Exercise 3: Thirds in D Major *taken from Sanz (1697), Tomo I, page 8*

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Exercise 4: Sixths in C Major *taken from Corbetta (1670), page 72*

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Alfabeto and Strumming

This is the one area where you really can go to the original sources, especially the Italian and Spanish sources, and find a vast quantity of fun, and relatively easy, pieces in which to learn these techniques. Therefore, I am giving a little introduction here and encouraging the player to delve further into the topic on his or her own. For starters, find your *alfabeto* chord “cheat sheet” and either flag it in your book or, better yet, make a photocopy to have as an easy reference. Here are the *alfabeto* chords from Foscarini’s *Li cinque libri della chitarra alla spagnola* (Rome, 1640).



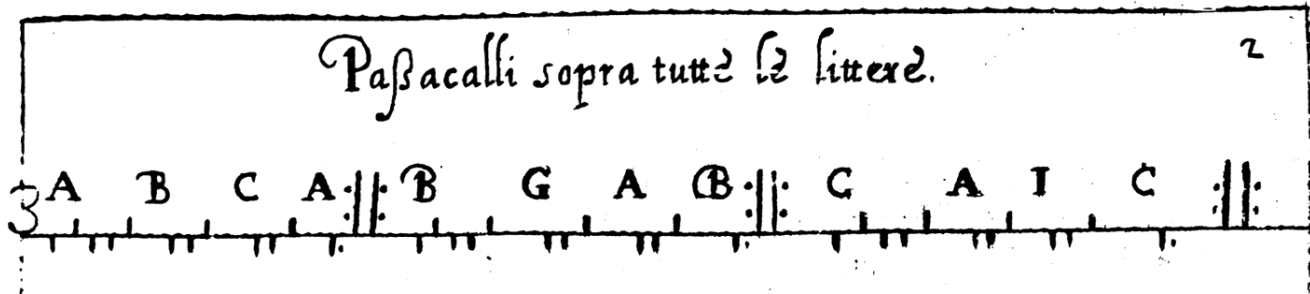
Example 1: Foscarini, page 1

Reading through this can be challenging since the *alfabeto* names do not correlate to “standard” guitar chords. However, the extra mental gymnastics required at the onset are worth the effort to have access to this abundant source of music. Many of the books containing sections of *alfabeto* strumming pieces start with a series of *Passacalli*, which are very short little pieces that can eventually be used as preludes or little interludes, but which also make for nice beginning exercises in learning the strumming style. Following is the first line of *Passacalli* from Foscarini’s book that correlates to the above *alfabeto* chord chart. Contrary to immediate appearances, this is actually 3 short pieces, consisting of a basic I, IV, V chord progression in the keys of G Major, C Major and D Major. The “3” at the beginning indicates that all of them are in triple time, although there are no bar lines. It is also helpful to note that each *Passacalle* starts on beat 2, so that there are two upbeats before the first complete “measure.” Strumming strokes are marked as downward and upward ticks, so that these exercises start with a down stroke followed up an up stroke, which constitutes the two pickup beats. The rest of the complete “measures” are made up of two down strokes followed up an upstroke. Each *Passacalle* ends with a single down stroke, which can then be combined with the opening pickup beats for smooth repeats.

I think that it is easiest to start with using a single finger, your index or your middle finger, for strumming both down and up strokes. Even with this basic approach, there are many variables that you should experiment with, including: the speed your finger passes over the strings, the flexibility of your finger joints, whether you move your entire arm or primarily from the wrist, and where you strum the strings relative to the bridge. Try to give some shape and direction to this relatively simple chord progression by varying these options to build up to the V chord (the third chord in the progression) and then quickly die away when resolving on the final chord. Then, try using a rolling strum with multiple fingers, perhaps for

the first down stroke of each “measure,” or using the thumb as one of the down strokes. While staying within the written framework of up and down strokes, you may use any combination of these strokes for effect. I am continually amazed at the sheer variety of tone color, dynamics and expression that can be produced on a strummed early guitar, and if you are playing one you should be too!

Exercise 5: Passacalli in G, C, and D Major, *taken directly from Foscari, page 2*



There are, of course, more complex pieces using the strummed style, referred to as *battente* in Italian and *rasgueado* in Spanish, including plucked pieces notated in tablature that mix in some strumming. Even if this type of piece is your primary goal in early guitar playing, I would encourage you to explore these “simple” types of pieces, challenging yourself to make them complex and interesting as you develop the control required to master the nearly endless possibilities of this expressive instrument.

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