

Douglas Niedt's GUITAR TECHNIQUE TIP OF THE MONTH

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"



(Doug subtitled his Tech Tip as "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!)



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Scales

By Douglas Niedt

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Why practice scales? Segovia gives us his cogent answer in the preface to his *Diatonic Major and Minor Scales*, published by Columbia Music Company (and believe it or not one of the best-selling guitar publications of all time!):

"The student who wishes to acquire a firm technique on the guitar should not neglect the patient study of scales. If he practices them two hours a day he will correct faulty hand positions, gradually increase the strength of the fingers, and prepare the joints for later speed studies...In one hour of scales may be condensed many hours of arduous exercises which are frequently futile. The practice of scales enables one to solve a greater number of technical problems in a shorter time than the study of any other exercise."

These words are from the greatest guitarist of the last century and certainly one of its best technicians. Anyone with any doubts about Segovia's technical prowess in his younger days should listen to the CD *Andres Segovia, The EMI Recordings 1927-39* to hear one of the most impressive techniques of his time.

Jascha Heifetz, the great violinist, used to audition prospective students simply by listening to them play nothing but scales! Heifetz believed the scale is the most important phase of technique. "The foundation of everything is the scale." Granted, one could argue that scale technique is more important in the execution of violin music than guitar music, but still I hope you get the point. If you need any more encouragement to practice scales, read the words of almost any great musician about the development of technique.

How one practices scales depends on one's objectives. In this article, I am NOT talking about practicing scales for improvisation or for learning the fingerboard or for theory- related objectives. I am talking about using scales for developing or honing very basic technical skills. For those prone to hand problems, they are an ideal low-impact method to gently warm up the muscles, joints, and tendons to prevent injury.

For most students in the first few years of study, it is advisable to practice them very slowly with the objective of developing correct hand positions, finger movements, good tone quality, and particularly

hand coordination. Hand coordination is an often neglected problem. A lack of coordination between the hands leads to very unmusical playing: choppiness, unwanted glissando, fingernail noises, and disjointed, uneven shifts.

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Scale Fingering

I would advise practicing your scales as Segovia has indicated in his booklet of scales. Use *im*, *mi*, *ma*, *am*, *ia*, *ai*, and perhaps *imam*. Although Segovia only recommends using rest stroke, I would also practice with free stroke. As far as left-hand fingering goes, the Segovia scale fingerings are fine although Abel Carlevaro has a different take on scale fingering. Segovia's fingerings of the three octave scales tend to bunch up all the shifts together one after another:

Ex. 1: Segovia fingering

The image displays three staves of musical notation, each representing an octave scale in G major. The first staff shows a scale from G4 to G5. The second staff shows a scale from A4 to A5. The third staff shows a scale from B4 to B5. Each staff includes fingerings (1-4) and shift points indicated by 'Shift' labels and dashed lines. The shifts are clustered together at the beginning and end of each scale.

Carlevaro states that a shift is a "traumatic event" for the left-hand playing mechanism. He believed it best to spread out the shifts as evenly as possible throughout the scale:

The main purpose of practicing these types of scales is to improve basic technique.

Here is a list of common problems that careful practice of scales can help fix and skills they can teach:

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1. Lifting left-hand fingers too far away from strings.
2. Not keeping unused fingers pointing directly down at the strings.
3. Not keeping the fingers spread apart in a four-fret span.
4. Not placing the fingers close to the frets.
5. Lifting a finger the wrong direction. For example, on the descent, lifting a finger towards the floor when it should lift in the direction of the next lower pitched string where it will be needed next.
6. Audible shifts. If someone is listening to you but not watching, they shouldn't be able to tell when you shift.
7. Lifting a finger from the wrong joint. It should lift from the back joint, not the tip or middle joint.
8. Learning to place a finger on the very tip close to the fingernail, or slightly off the tip, or way off the tip for string damping. We don't just place a finger on a string—we choose precisely how and where we want the finger to land.
9. Learning correct technique in playing past the 12th fret.
10. Correcting left-hand thumb technique and positioning.
11. Learning to exert as little pressure as needed to play a given note.
12. Playing loudly, playing softly, and controlling crescendos, decrescendos, and tone color changes.
13. Basic right-hand finger control and technique—moving from the correct joints, small finger movements, strict finger alternation.
14. Tone production and correct use of fingernails. That is a BIG ONE.
15. Consistency of tone and volume from finger to finger.
16. Independence of movement of each finger from the other fingers.

17. Vibrato technique.
18. Playing legato (all the notes connected smoothly with no dead space between them).
19. Learning to play something flawlessly.

There are more, but those are the basics.

The Quest for Perfection

Skill #19 above is a somewhat intriguing and very important one. I don't think many of us realize how difficult it is to play something absolutely flawlessly. To me, the flawless execution of a scale means that there is not one buzz or click or extraneous noise from either hand, the tone and volume of every note is even, shifts are inaudible, all the notes are perfectly connected, and the rhythm absolutely even. That is REALLY HARD to do.

Just the quest for that perfection is an important facet of scale practice. If you begin your practice session by playing scales with the goal of perfection in the forefront of your mind, it sets the tone for your entire practice session.

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Working on Scale Speed

To work solely on scale velocity (begin this only after mastering everything in the list above!) I recommend working on chromatic scales and especially scale passages from actual pieces. Passages from the first movement of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* are especially valuable. Unlike a pianist, who can use virtually the same fingering for a scale in many different pieces, the guitarist, because of the nature of his instrument, must use different fingerings for a scale depending upon the context in which it occurs. Therefore it makes more sense, and will save the player time in working on scale velocity, to work on scales with fingerings used in actual pieces rather than mastering one particular set of fingerings which cannot be used in the repertoire.

Do I Really Have To Practice Scales My Entire Life?

Opinions on whether one should devote a lot of time to scale practice in one's advanced stages of technical development are divided. Violinists Yehudi Menuhin and Joseph Szigeti felt that after one developed a sound technical foundation, the benefit to be derived from scale practice was limited. Mischa Elman and Jascha Heifetz, on the other hand, believed scales should be practiced constantly all through one's life. Heifetz once stated that a student should devote three-fourths of his practice time to scales! But again, that is violin playing. I personally still practice scales ten to twenty minutes each day at slow to moderate speeds. I find a certain comfort in their practice; a feeling of security is generated, as well as a high sense of orderliness in technique. The mild warmup for the muscles, joints, and tendons is always a good thing. And again, I always emphasize flawless execution to set the bar at a high standard for the rest of my practice session.

But Not Everyone Practices Scales

Every artist has their personal practice routine and recommendations on how much time to spend on technical work. And I think we have to be very careful when we hear great technicians tell us they never practice scales or exercises of any sort. That may very well be true. But those particular people are wired that way—they are born with a neuromuscular system that performs with lightning speed and precision with very little training through formal technical exercises. They can just DO IT.

But for the rest of us, I believe there is no denying the importance and necessity of assiduous scale practice in the early through intermediate stages of our technical and artistic development.

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