

CLASSICAL GUITAR TECHNIQUES

KLASİK GİTAR TEKNİKLERİ

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3.3 Classical Guitar Performance Techniques

Classical guitar performance techniques are categorized under left-hand, right-hand and contemporary guitar techniques.

3.3.1 Left-hand Techniques

The left-hand fingers are named with numbers; 1 for the index, 2 for the middle, 3 for the ring and 4 for the little finger. The left-hand thumb is not given a number due to its position under the fretboard. The left-hand techniques are categorized under ornaments, *glissando*, vibrato and the bar technique.

3.3.1.1 Ornaments

The guitar ornaments are categorized under the ascending slurs, descending slurs, slur combinations and the cross-string ornaments.

3.3.1.1a Ascending slurs

An ascending slur is played by strongly striking one of the left-hand fingers onto the fret in order to produce a note without the right-hand plucking. Because the motion of striking is like hammering a nail, it is also called hammer-on. The ascending slurs are shown by a curved line placed under two or more different notes, the first is the plucked note and the other(s) are the note(s) produced by the slur (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2: Ascending slur example.

3.3.1.1b Descending slurs

A descending slur is executed by pulling down one of the left-hand fingers which is already depressing a string, into the adjacent string, causing to vibration of the open string or the fret that a left-hand finger is already pressing. The pulled off left-hand finger fulfills the function

of plucking. It is notated by a curved line placed under two or more different notes, the first is the plucked note that is pulled and the other(s) are the note(s) achieved by pulling off the string (Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.3: Descending slur example.

3.3.1.1c Slur Combinations

There are many types of ornaments originated from the combination of ascending and descending slurs. Most of these ornaments emerged from the keyboard or lute music of the Baroque era. Some of these are the trill, *mordent*, *appoggiatura*, *gruppetto*. Each of these ornaments has a specific symbol. Some of the ornament types from J. S. Bach's table of embellishments from the *Klavierbuchlein* are as follows (Bach, 1994: 16):

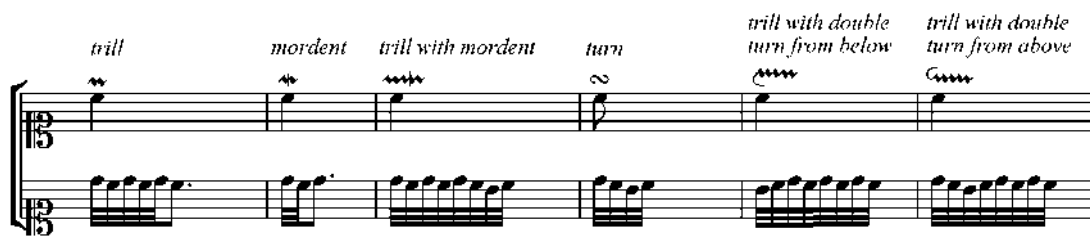


Figure 3.4: Some ornament types from J. S. Bach's table.

The most commonly used slur combination in classical guitar is the trill. When the ascending and descending slurs are played on the two adjacent notes one after another, one or more times, the ornament type that is generated is called a trill. It is shown by the abbreviation *tr* or the symbol that is shown above. The number of slurs in a trill changes according to the tempo, performer, the style of the piece, the meter etc. Although other ornaments are also used in many pieces (for example the *mordent* is a popular ornament), the symbols or the titles of the Baroque era are not generally used by the composers in the 20th and 21st century guitar notation. Instead, these ornaments are shown by the note values.

The slur combinations can be shown with grace notes. Grace notes are smaller in size than the note they precede and they are placed on the left side of the note with a curved line tied to the main note. There is a small line crossing the note's stem (♯). In Figure 3.5, two examples of the slur combinations were shown with grace notes.



Figure 3.5: The slur combination examples.

3.3.1.1d Cross-string Ornaments

When the trills, mordents, turns and other kinds of ornaments are played on two adjacent strings with an arpeggio technique rather than on one string with the ascending or descending slurs, the ornament type is called a cross-string ornament. The notes of the cross-string ornaments sound simultaneously. Figure 3.6 shows two kinds of cross-string ornaments with a trill, the first without the bass and the second with the bass.

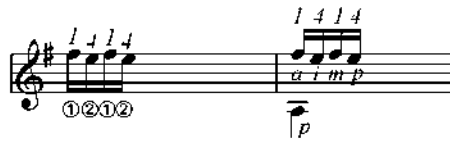


Figure 3.6: Cross-string ornament examples.

According to Isbin (1999, 41), “Cross-string fingerings are most commonly used for Baroque ornaments that call for extra clarity and articulation, dynamic control, and/or lyricism.”

3.3.1.2 *Glissando*

The French term *glissando* means ‘to slide,’ derived from the verb *glisser*. In this technique, a pressed note is plucked and a left-hand finger slides down or up to the desired fret. When the left-hand finger reaches that fret, the right-hand finger can pluck the string again. It is shown by a line that combines the two notes (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7: *Glissando* example.

Sometimes the abbreviations for *glissando* (*gliss.*) can be inserted above the line. A *glissando* in electric guitar is called a 'slide.' Sometimes classical guitarists use the term 'slide' instead of *glissando*.

3.3.1.3 Vibrato

In the vibrato technique, the left-hand finger presses a fret and makes a horizontal movement (parallel to the strings) to the left and right in a rapid or slow manner while remaining on the fret and without releasing the pressure. This technique is important for the articulation of the melody. It is used to emphasize some of the individual notes of the melody. It increases the sustain period of the note. Although vibrato is sometimes shown with the abbreviation *vib.* or some other symbols, composers generally don't indicate it with letters or symbols and leave it to the interpretation of the guitarist. The vibrato technique is also a way for obtaining microtones (see 3.3.3.2f). In electric guitar, the vibrato movements are perpendicular to the strings in contrast to the classical guitar vibrato's horizontal movement.

3.3.1.4 The Bar (fr. *Barré*)

The bar is executed by placing the left-hand's first finger across the required number of strings in a straight or curved manner on a selected fret. The bar serves the function of a nut. It is very common to play chords with the bar technique which are sometimes called "bar chords." The bar is generally shown with a Roman numeral placed above the notes indicating the fret number that the bar is placed¹ (Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.8: The bar example.

¹ Sometimes the roman numerals are written next to the letters 'B' or 'C'.

3.3.1.5 The Snare Drum Effect

By crossing the two adjacent bass strings and holding them with the left-hand fingers, one can achieve a sound similar with the snare drum. Francesco Tarrega crossed 5th and 6th strings and use this effect in his piece *Gran Jota*. In the notation of the piece, the Italian word *tamburo* was used which means drum. Tarrega used a plus-like sign for a notehead (Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.9: Notation for the snare drum effect.

3.3.2 Right-hand Techniques

After several debates and experiments throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, it is generally accepted that the classical guitar is played by striking the strings with a combination of right-hand nails and fingertips. The shape of the nails and the angle of the fingers to the strings changes depending on the preference of the guitarist. The right-hand fingers are named after the first letters of the Spanish words: 'p' (*pulgar* meaning the thumb), 'i' (*indice* meaning the index finger), 'm' (*medio* meaning the middle finger) and 'a' (*anular* meaning the ring finger). Although in classical guitar literature the little finger² ('c' from *chico* which means little, 'e' from *meñique* which means tiny, or 'x') hasn't been used extensively³, the little finger has a significant role in the flamenco guitar strumming techniques.

Melodies and scales are generally played by alternating two fingers ('i', 'm'; 'i', 'a' or 'm', 'a'). Various alternations of three or four fingers (for example 'i', 'm', 'a'; 'p', 'm', 'i' or 'p', 'a', 'm', 'i') are also used on some occasions such as fast scale passages. The thumb (p) can either be played independently or alternating with the 'i', 'm' or 'a' fingers.

The right-hand techniques are categorized under the plucking techniques, arpeggio, tremolo, strummed techniques, harmonics, *pizzicato*, *staccato*, *tambora* and tone production techniques.

² The letter (e) for the little finger is preferred for this thesis.

³ Charles Postlewater wrote an article entitled "Extending right-hand technique to include the little finger" in which he discussed the history of the little finger use in classical guitar literature and he provided exercises to integrate it with the other fingers (Postlewater: 2002). Safa Yeprem also advocated the use of the little finger in classical guitar and he wrote etudes for this purpose (Yeprem: 2003).

3.3.2.1 Plucking Techniques

There are two main plucked techniques, the free stroke and the rest stroke. The free stroke is generally used in chord plucking and arpeggios. Both of them are used when playing melodies or scales. Sometimes the rest stroke is more advantageous for more volume and speed than the free stroke. These plucking styles also create different tone qualities. According to Sharon Isbin, the performer's choice of the stroke kind depends on the projection, articulation, phrasing, rhythm, color and musical character (Isbin, 1999: 39).

3.3.2.1a The Free Stroke

The free stroke is also called *tirando*, meaning 'pulling' in Spanish. The free stroke is executed by plucking a string upward toward the palm with the 'i', 'm' or 'a' fingers individually or in specific combinations. The thumb plucks the string downward. After the right-hand finger plucks the string, there is no contact with an adjacent string.

3.3.2.1b The Rest Stroke

The rest stroke is also called *apoyando*, meaning 'resting' in Spanish. The rest stroke is played by resting a right-hand finger on the upper or lower adjacent string after plucking a string. If the string is played *apoyando* with the thumb, the thumb rests on the lower adjacent string. If the string is played with 'i', 'm' or 'a' fingers, the fingers rest on the upper adjacent string.

3.3.2.2 Arpeggio

The term arpeggio derives from the Italian word *arpeggiare* which means to play the harp. The arpeggio is generally played with the free stroke technique. The exceptions are when the thumb and 'a' finger accent a desired note with a rest stroke during an arpeggio. It is executed by playing each note of any chord one after another on different strings. During an arpeggio, individual notes might include more than one note. Many arpeggio patterns are possible on the guitar. One of the best examples of an arpeggio pattern is Heitor Villa Lobos' arpeggio study "Etude No.1." This etude is based on an arpeggio pattern that covers all the strings of the guitar (Figure 3.10).

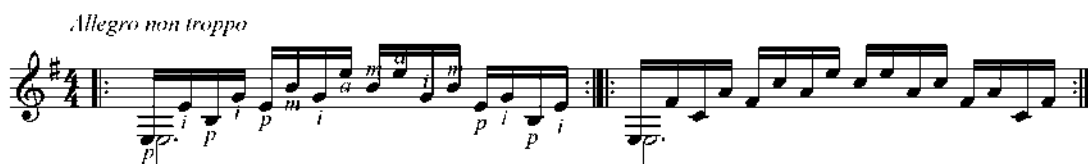


Figure 3.10: Villa Lobos' Etude No.1 introduction part.

3.3.2.3 Tremolo

In bowed string instruments the tremolo is executed by repeatedly playing a single note for the duration of a specific note value. In classical guitar, the tremolo technique is executed by playing a single note three times on the same string with the ‘a’, ‘m’ and ‘i’ fingers consecutively with the free stroke technique after a bass note is played with the thumb. The tremolo technique provides the effect of a sustained upper voice. Although the most commonly used tremolo pattern is executed by the consecutive fingering ‘p’, ‘a’, ‘m’ and ‘i’, there can be different variations of this pattern. Francesco Tarrega's piece *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* is one of the most famous tremolo piece of the classical guitar literature with the standard ‘p’, ‘a’, ‘m’, ‘i’ pattern (Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.11: Francesco Tarrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* introduction part.

The flamenco guitar tremolo generally consists of five notes and the most common pattern is ‘p’, ‘i’, ‘a’, ‘m’, ‘i’.

3.3.2.4 Strumming Techniques

There are various strumming patterns with the right-hand for the classical guitar. The most common is a downward stroke played with the thumb or index finger from 6th string to the 1st in a rapid manner. It is generally shown by an upward arrow together with the letter of the related right-hand finger (Figure 3.12).



Figure 3.12: Downward stroke example.

If this downward stroke is played with the thumb like a fast downward arpeggio, it is called an arpeggiated down stroke. It is shown by a different kind of arrow (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.13: An arpeggiated down stroke.

The classical guitar strumming techniques are strongly influenced by the flamenco *rasgueado* techniques and many of these *rasgueado* patterns have been used in the classical guitar literature, especially in the works of the Spanish composers such as Joaquin Turina, Manuel de Falla, Joaquin Rodrigo etc. One famous example is the arrangement of Manuel de Falla's *Dance of the Miller*, which contains flamenco *rasgueado* patterns. In Figure 3.14, the triplet *rasgueado* pattern is used. The right-hand finger choice is left to the performer in this score.

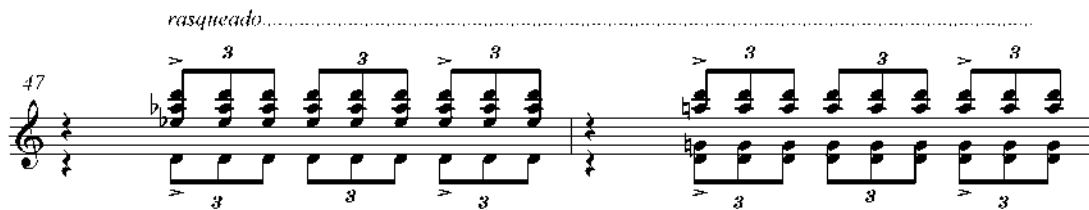


Figure 3.14: *Rasgueado* patterns in *Dance of the Miller*.

The *rasgueado* technique is also used in the contemporary classical guitar repertoire as a way of sustaining the chords and as an effect. For example, Tristan Murail used the technique extensively in his piece *Tellur*. In the contemporary classical guitar repertoire the *rasgueado* can be also played on one string. According to Andia (URL-7), “The *rasgueado* on one string can be executed on any string on the condition that neighboring strings are damped by the left hand.”

3.3.2.5 Harmonics

Harmonics are the overtones that are produced by dividing a string in specific ratios. There are two ways to produce harmonics.

3.3.2.5a Natural Harmonics

Natural harmonics are executed by leaning one of the left-hand fingers on the related fret and touching the string lightly. This is followed by the plucking of the string and lifting the left-hand finger. It is important that the left-hand finger should touch onto the fret wire rather than the conventional part of the string between frets. It is generally shown with the abbreviation *harm.* written on top of a diamond note-head at the pitch of the resulting note, together with the position number written in roman or standard numerals and sometimes the string number (Figure 3.15).



Figure 3.15: Natural harmonic example.

Sometimes the symbol ‘o’ is placed on top of a note to indicate the harmonics.

3.3.2.5b Artificial Harmonics

It is possible to produce harmonics anywhere on the string by generating a ratio of the natural harmonics from particular frets with the help of the left and right fingers. One left-hand finger presses a fret and the right-hand index finger touches onto the fret wire on the same string generally 5, 7, 9 or 12 frets above the pressed fret. While the right hand ‘i’ finger is still in place, the right-hand thumb or the ‘a’ finger plucks the string. Artificial harmonics are shown with the abbreviation *harm. with the right-hand, art. harm.* or just *r.h* (right-hand) written on top of a diamond note head, together with the position number written in roman or standard numerals and sometimes the string number (Figure 3.16).



Figure 3.16: Artificial harmonic example.

3.3.2.6 Pizzicato

The Italian word *pizzicato* means plucked. The *pizzicato* technique is executed by resting the side of the right-hand’s palm above the saddle and muting the strings. This is followed by plucking the string generally with the thumb. The other fingers (‘i’, ‘m’ or ‘a’) can also be used. The plucked notes sound muted and thus sustain less than the non-*pizzicato* notes. *Pizzicato* is shown with the abbreviation *pizz.* (Figure 3.17).



Figure 3.17: *Pizzicato* technique example.

The *pizzicato* types, Bartók *pizzicato* and the surface *pizzicato* are used in the contemporary guitar repertoire (see 3.3.3.1 and 3.3.3.2e respectively).

3.3.2.7 *Staccato*

The Italian word *staccato* means detached or untied. *Staccato* results in very short length notes. The note is played and stopped immediately by the right-hand or the left-hand. The staccato techniques can also be applied to damping notes. The staccato symbol is a dot that is placed above or below the note (Figure 3.18).



Figure 3.18: *Staccato* technique example.

The two styles of *staccato* are as follows:

3.3.2.7a The Right-hand *Staccato*

The right-hand *staccato* is executed in various ways. One method is to alternate the fingers: after one of the fingers (except the thumb) plucks a string, the other finger stops the ringing string immediately by touching it and remaining on it. When the note is played with the thumb, the thumb plucks the note and immediately stops the ringing string itself by resting on it. When two or more strings are plucked, they are stopped by immediately lowering the right-hand fingers onto the related strings. In order to stop all the strings after a chord is played with a strumming technique, the right-hand palm touch the strings and stops them by remaining on them immediately after the chord is played.

3.3.2.7b The Left-hand *Staccato*

The left-hand *staccato* is executed in two ways. The first is to pluck a pressed note and then release the left-hand fingers pressure until the note stops while keeping the finger on the string. The other way is to use the unused left-hand fingers to stop the vibrating string by leaning onto it, touching it and remaining on it. In flamenco guitar, the left-hand *staccato* is named *apagado* which means muted in Spanish. It is executed by the fourth finger, generally after a chord is played. The fourth finger stops all the strings by touching them immediately after a chord is played and remaining on them.

3.3.2.8 *Tambora*

The term *tambora* came from the Spanish word *tambor*, meaning a drum. As the term describes, this is a percussive technique. It is executed by hitting the side of the thumb of the right-hand onto the bridge or onto the strings just near to the bridge. Generally, a chord is placed by the left-hand when the *tambora* technique is played. The abbreviation *tamb.* placed above or below the related notes and the crossed note head is sometimes used (Figure 3.19).



Figure 3.19: *Tambora* technique example.

3.3.2.9 Tone Production Techniques

The classical guitar is a rich instrument in terms of the range of timbres. It's seen as a 'small orchestra' by many musicians. According to Schneider (1985: 99), Fernando Ferandière is one of the first to describe the potential of the guitar to imitate instruments such as flutes, trumpets, oboes in 1799.

The location of the plucking right-hand finger on the soundboard is decisive for tone production. Generally, the right-hand plucks the strings above the rosette next to the hole. It may move closer to the bridge (*sul ponticello*) in order to create brighter and metallic tones or move over the fretboard (*sul tasto*) to create softer sounds. Contemporary composers and guitarists are especially likely to indicate the region they want, above the staff with the terms *sul ponticello* or *sul tasto*.

The choice of flesh or nail playing with the thumb also effects the tone production. Some composers and guitarists also indicate this choice in their notation. The choice of free-stroke or rest-stroke also change tone color, but it is not generally mentioned by the composers and guitarists. The string preference is also significantly altering the timbre.

3.3.4 Some Flamenco Guitar Techniques

3.3.4.1 *Rasgueado*

The word *rasgueado* derived from the verb *rasguear* which means to strum in Spanish. In flamenco guitar the role of the right-hand is different from the classical guitar right-hand due

to the importance of the strumming patterns. The rhythmic patterns of the flamenco forms are called *compás* (meaning measure) and are executed by many patterns of *rasgueados*. The basic *rasgueado* pattern is executed by striking the strings with the back of the fingernails by the ‘e’, ‘a’, ‘m’ and ‘i’ fingers downwards one after another (Figure 3.28).



Figure 3.28: The basic *rasgueado* pattern.

There are various *rasgueado* patterns with two or more strokes. In the classical guitar literature, there are many examples of flamenco guitar *rasgueados* (see 3.3.2.4 strumming techniques).

3.3.4.2 The Thumb and *Alzapúa* Technique

The position and the playing style of the thumb in flamenco guitar is different from the classical guitar's in terms of the playing style which is rest stroke and the position of the wrist which is more vertical than the classical guitar's linear position. The strong rest stroke use of the thumb has emerged due to the need to be heard with the singing, clapping, foot-tapping elements of the flamenco music (Tennant, 1995: 42).

The thumb style of flamenco guitar has its roots in the Moorish *oud*, a bowl-shaped fretless necked folk lute. The *oud* is played with the plectrum in down and up strokes. Parallel with this, the flamenco guitar's *alzapúa* technique is executed by the thumb's downward and upward strokes. Therefore, the back of the nail is used in the upward strokes. The term *alzapúa* derived from the word *alzar* which means to lift and *púa* which means plectrum in Spanish (Martin, 1978: 79). In *alzapúa*, the thumb plays downward and upward strokes in one or more strings together with a *golpe* (see 3.3.4.3 *golpe*) (Figure 3.29).



Figure 3.29: An *alzapúa* pattern.

3.3.4.3 Golpe

The word *golpe* means to hit in Spanish. It is usually executed by the ‘a’ finger, which hits the area below the soundhole. It is generally shown with a square, placed above the staff. The *golpe* can be executed without any notes or simultaneously with a downward stroke with the ‘i’ finger (Figure 3.30).



Figure 3.30: *Golpe* examples.

The area of the flamenco guitar on which the *golpe* is played, is covered with a special material called *golpeador* to protect the wood from any damage that can be caused by the fingernail. The *golpe* is generally used on the strong accents of the *compás* at the same time as a chord or a note.

Another type of *golpe* is played on the side of the fretboard above the *tasto* region. When a chord is played, the right-hand ‘i’ or ‘m’ fingers first hits this location and produces a percussive sound. After this, it continues its downward stroke by playing the strings. It can also be executed with the thumb of the right-hand with an upward stroke in the same manner. In classical guitar, the *golpe* is not used except for some pieces in the contemporary repertoire. This is probably due to the lack of *golpeador* on classical guitar. The *golpe* styles of the flamenco guitar are also found in similar manners in *bağlama* performance techniques.

3.3.4.4 Arrastre

The word *arrastre* means to pull in Spanish. *Arrastre* is a rapid arpeggio technique. The arpeggio starts with the ‘p’, ‘i’, ‘m’ and ‘a’ downward arpeggio and then an upward arpeggio across all the strings is achieved by dragging the ‘a’ finger up (Figure 3.31).



Figure 3.31: *Arrastre* example.

Arrastre has also variations which use upward arpeggio with the ‘i’ finger after the ‘a’ finger.

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