

Great Tone

By Michael Chapdelaine

There are good and bad characteristics inherent in and unique to every musical instrument. The acoustic guitar has several bad things, which spring to mind. It's too quiet, doesn't have much sustain and lacks any significant repertoire, other than transcriptions, from most periods before 1920. And it is extremely difficult to play contrapuntal music on it, even though it is considered, and usually used as, a solo instrument.

The good thing about the guitar, and it is so good that it makes us want to toil endless hours and callous our aching fingers and strain our ears and stretch our musical boundaries trying to overcome the aforementioned problems, is that gorgeous sound. That beautiful sweet tone which, since childhood, could gently grab hold of our attention in the middle of a pop song or in a park or at a concert of Segovia or Hedges and sooth the ear and bathe the mind in a euphoria which is as close to bliss as sound can bring us. Strong statement? Not if you play guitar.

I think that possessing beautiful tone is most of what it takes to play great. If you have lovely tone and have done the work that is required to achieve it, then two things will make you a player that people will be moved by and will want to hear more of:

1) Hearing a lovely sound is much of what is appealing about music. If you play a simple melody with beautiful tone you will touch the soul of more people than if you play Paganini's 24th Caprice with bad tone. Having an appealing sound is similar to an actor having good looks. Certainly, a great talent could act without being beautiful, but we know that being beautiful, for an actor is frequently enough. If you add skill and artistry to that, then you have something truly extraordinary.

2) The process of acquiring fine tone (described soon, I promise) will define to you all the things which are possible when the union of your hands, ears, mind and soul with the guitar occurs. This is not a typewriter or a blender that we play. The guitar is a magic thing with which we can access a very profound level of consciousness and communication not available in our normal existence. I am certain that when we understand how each note on the guitar sounds, from it's birth until the time when our ears can no longer hear it, and how that sound makes us feel and how we will respond to it, then we will have some idea of what to do with the notes. The Zen teachers say that when one can find joy in silence and find interest in the feeling of the breath entering and exiting the body, then everything else will be powerfully stimulating.

"How do I get this great tone?" You are now wondering. Ok, here it is. And make no mistake, this is for all guitarists and not just for those eccentric classical players. First you will need to shape your nails in a way that takes best advantage of the softness of the flesh and precision and hardness of the nail. The nail should protrude about 1/16 – 1/8 of an inch beyond the fingertip, as viewed from the palm side of the hand. The nails should be shorter on the thumb side of each finger and slant to longer as they move toward the pinky.

Here is how it's done: You must first contact the string with the flesh, very close to but not quite touching the nail. Then you pull the finger through the string so that the string gradually ramps onto the nail, which transfers the energy of your motion, to the string, causing it to vibrate. The muscles used for this are only those that pull the finger straight back toward the wrist (flexors). Don't use any lateral muscles that make your finger twist or turn. It should feel neutral. Simple, yes?

Ok, here is some detail. The nail gives the clarity and edge to the sound, as well as reducing the friction created when a finger moves across a string. Friction = drag which reduces the fluidity, velocity and control with which we can play. While a fingertip without a nail certainly can pluck a string, plucking with a thin surface, like a nail or a plectrum (pick), will give the beginning (attack) of the note more focus, definition and projection. It will also reduce drag, so we can play more efficiently and ultimately, faster and with more control.

The problem, however, with nail or plectrum playing is that if a softer surface is not used to dampen the string before the nail or pick contacts it, then the note will begin with a Bzzz. Not pleasant!

Bzzz is that nasty clicking sound that a vibrating string makes when it is touched by a hard surface (nail, pick or callused fingertip). This appears impossible to solve for the pick, but the nail player can solve the bzzz by using the fingertip's flesh to reduce the degree of insult occurring when nail meets string.

The flesh, the skin just in front of the nail, must be used to gently dampen the movement of the string (if it's vibrating from a recent pluck) and to minimize the abruptness of the transition from silence to the moment when the nail strikes

the string. The softer the flesh is, the better it will accomplish this mission and the less bzzz your tone will have. If your flesh is callused or dry and rough, you must use some kind of moistening cream to soften it.

Click This is the sound that your nail will make if you begin the stroke from a point on the flesh which is any distance away from the nail. So, you must begin the stroke at the nail but not first arriving on the string at the nail because that would make a bzzz.

"But, oh maestro professor, how do I dampen the string with the flesh, and start the stroke at the nail at the same time? It sounds impossible!" You are screaming.

That's right, it is impossible. So here's how it really is done.

You actually must land on the string with the flesh, first, so that the nail is about .000001 mm from the string (or way close but not quite touching it). Then you simply apply a tiny pressure to the string (to begin the pluck) and your nail then contacts the string without a bzzz or a click. Then you pluck it. (Eventually, this will all happen in one motion, and you will not think about it). Challenging? You bet it is. But if it was easy, everybody would be doing it. Want to sound beautiful? Good! Now here is the work.

The work: Do this in a very quiet place. Any sound other than your guitar will cover up the bzzz and click and make it impossible to evaluate your results.

Do this for a week, twice per day for 1/2 hour each session. Don't play anything else, it will only reestablish your old habits and tone.

Listen hard and get it right.

Do the following steps.

1. Right hand wrist should be way relaxed and the hand hanging like it's asleep. Then, bring it to the string with minimum motion and effort. That will result in about 10-20% of wrist arch and bend. The "i" palm knuckle should be slightly closer to the top of the guitar than the "a" knuckle. Play over the sound hole.
2. Relax all the muscles from neck to fingertip while holding your hand gently in place.
3. Place the flesh of the fingertip on the string, so that the nail is about .000001 mm from the string.
4. Relax again. Listen to the silence. Be calm.
5. In a very quantum (all at once) motion, pull the nail through the string so that the fingertip comes to rest on the next string. (Classical guitarists call this rest stroke or apoyando).
6. Relax again and listen to the string until its sound is gone.
7. Bring the finger back to the string that you just plucked and repeat from step 1. Make sure you return to the string with the least travel possible. Don't make an arch or overshoot the string that you are going to.

That's it.

If you do these steps slowly enough and with great care and dedication, you will reduce or eliminate the bzzz and click. When those are absent, what is left is the best sound your guitar can make and the open gateway to the sound of your soul.

This, you will agree, is a very beautiful thing.

Thanks for trying it.

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