



CHAPTER ONE

SITTING

◇ *Position of the Instrument*

Nearly every school of playing has a different approach to the subject of sitting. Yet, if we look at the matter objectively, one simple question arises: *should the player arrange his body around the instrument, or should he place the instrument where it best suits the body?* In short, since *something* has to be adjusted, should it be the player or the instrument?

This is the same problem which Dionisio Aguado tried to overcome by the use of his Tripod. Fernando Sor allegedly used a table on which he set the upper bout of the instrument. Other solutions have included supporting the guitar between the arms of a chair (suggested by François Molino in his *Method*), and the common 19th-Century practice of suspending the instrument by a ribbon tied over the neck of the player, similar to our modern guitar strap.¹

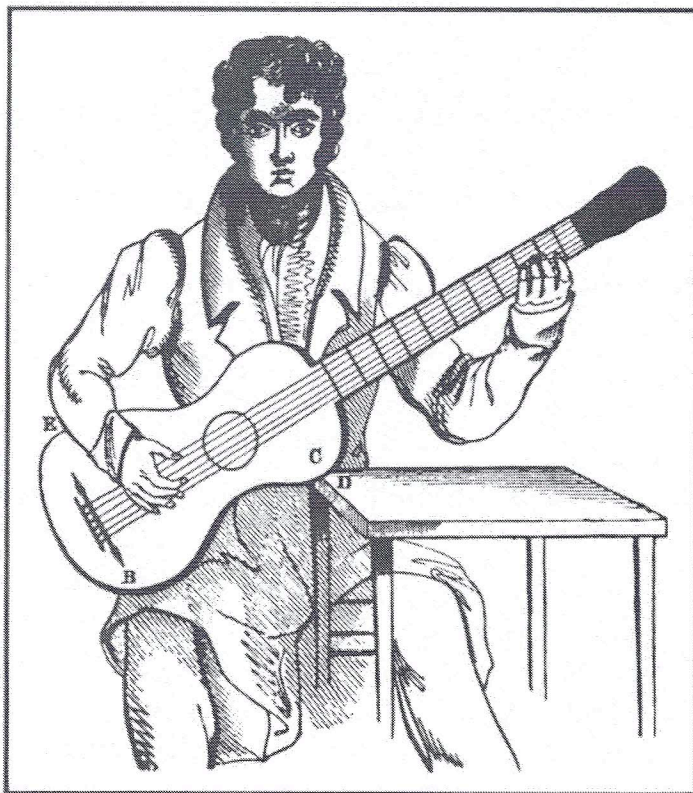
While some of these solutions may seem a bit extreme, nearly all guitarists have come to the same conclusion: *the position of the player should be fixed, while the instrument is arranged to suit that fixed position.*

1. Although the 19th-Century guitar was considerably smaller than our 20th-Century instruments, this is all the more reason to look carefully at our solutions to the problem of sitting since their smaller instruments would have facilitated sitting, while our larger instruments complicate the problem.

Fig. 1. Aguado sitting with his Tripod.²



Fig. 2. Sor sitting with a table.³



2. Dionisio Aguado, *New Guitar Method* (Madrid, 1843), trans. Louise Bigwood, ed. Brian Jeffery (London: Tecla Editions, 1981), xx.

3. Fernando Sor, *Method for the Spanish Guitar* (Paris, 1830), trans. A. Merrick (London, 1850) (New York: published in facsimile by Da Capo Press, 1971), 10. Public domain.

Fig. 3. Sitting holding the guitar with the use of a ribbon. ⁴



With our contemporary solution of using a footstool, the teacher must always watch that a student's back is not twisted, since this can cause excess physical stress. Much of this will be dictated by the height of the footstool, so the teacher must take care that the footstool is neither too high nor too low.

Since footstool height varies with a student's physical size, a general rule is that the footstool should be as high as the student's hand is long, from the tip of the middle finger to the wrist.

In addition, the instrument should be as "centered" as possible to the body. For example, while sitting at a piano, no one would sit at one end or the other, but in the *middle*, so that both hands have equal access to the keyboard. Likewise, for guitarists, the closer the 12th fret can be placed to the center of the player's body, the more equally the hands will be able to work and the more balanced the sitting position will be.

A fairly recent development is the use of an "A-frame" or a cushion which sits, or is strapped on to the leg of the guitarist to raise the guitar. While I have no personal objections to these devices, some newspaper critics have complained that they are aesthetically distracting on stage. As with Aguado's tripod, this can be an overcompensation

4. Bennett, Alfred. *Instruction for the Spanish Guitar* (London: Chappell, n.d. ca. 1830-40). Public domain.

to a relatively simple problem. However some fine guitarists have found an A-frame the ideal solution.

If the guitar is centered in relation to the player's body, this means that the 12th fret will fall near the center of the body. Without the aid of a tripod or other device, this can be difficult. A simple solution (though contradictory to strict 20th-Century practice) is to move the instrument slightly to the player's right side, so that the upper bout rests on the top of the left leg. While it is more common to place the middle bout on the left leg, some guitarists have found that this position does solve the problem of centering the instrument while at the same time providing a comparable stability.

Fig. 4. Traditional 20th-Century Sitting Position.



Fig. 5. Sitting with the Guitar Centered.



◇ *Position of the Arms*

If the player's back is straight and the instrument is centered, then the arms will fall evenly on both sides of the body. To maintain this position when playing, two simple things must be done:

1. The neck of the instrument must be pushed slightly away from the player, to allow the right arm to easily reach over the instrument. This will keep the back more erect and avoid too great an arch in the right hand wrist. As we shall see later, any extreme bend in the wrists *must* be avoided! ⁵

5. cf. Chapter 2, *Anatomical Structure of the Hands*, "Position of the Wrists."

2. The angle of the guitar's neck must be neither too high, nor too low. If it is too high, a lower chair (or higher footstool) must be used to compensate. If the neck is too low, the left hand wrist will be forced to bend outwards at an uncomfortable position.

Note also that if the left leg is too high, it is very tiring to maintain this position for any length of time. In addition, this position cramps the player's insides, which can restrict breathing.

◇ *Position of the Legs*

This is not a highly debated subject, but it is an important one. It is generally accepted that the lower part of the left leg should be straight up from the footstool (approximately a 90 degree angle to the floor). The right leg may also be at 90 degrees, or brought in slightly toward the player.

It is important to note that if the right foot is brought in too close to the player, the foot will not stay flat on the floor. This causes a minimal loss of stability. For advanced students, this slight loss of stability can be advantageous, since it permits them to expressively move their bodies with the music. However, beginners should always keep the right foot flat on the floor for the sake of added stability.