

1. using just the right amount of left-hand finger pressure—no more, no less,
2. making right-hand strokes with just enough tension—not too much, not too little,
3. relaxing the arms, hands, and fingers to compensate for the playing movements,
4. balancing the body and using just the right amount of energy to maintain the sitting position—no more, no less,
5. concentrating your mind on your performance only as much as necessary to play well, and
6. balancing the opposites in your interpretations.

### Let It Happen

If you have not yet experienced dynamic relaxation in your playing, then the ideas in this chapter and the next will help you set up the conditions for it to happen. At first, the majority of players will need to do some deliberate study of how to balance tension and relaxation in body and mind. But, after a certain amount of work on this, it will be necessary to let go of conscious study and *allow* dynamic relaxation to happen. Do not try too hard to achieve dynamic relaxation because it is a natural state that cannot be forced. Give the natural intelligence of the body a chance to produce the dynamically relaxed state automatically. It may surprise you to see how much it can do without much help from your conscious mind.

If you have already experienced some taste of dynamic relaxation, then you will find that the systematic techniques described here will allow it to be a more *regular* experience instead of a haphazard one. The techniques should also deepen the experience for you. The long-range results of cultivating dynamic relaxation are effortless guitar technique and improved musical interpretation. But the most satisfying result is that you have the joy of feeling that you are "one foot off the ground." Now let's explore the practical application of dynamic relaxation to the sitting position.

## SITTING POSITION

### Finding a Good Position

Before you can play with ease, you must establish a good sitting position. In spite of what people may tell you, it makes a good deal of difference how you sit. It is not a trivial matter. The guitarist should have a regal, but not arrogant bearing in his sitting position to fit the important role he has in making good music. When most fine players perform, their sitting positions are balanced

and "dynamically relaxed." They avoid extremes of all kinds. They look natural and comfortable with the instrument. They give a sense of steadiness without rigidity, of flexibility without flaccidness. In such a position, the player is like a healthy tree. His torso, seat, legs, and feet are stable like the trunk and roots of the tree while his head, arms, hands, and fingers are flexible like the branches and leaves that can give in the wind. Thus the player presents an appealing picture of "action in repose."

There is no one right way of sitting, but most of the finer players use similar positions for concert work. What is described here is a position that is used by some of the best players who have studied with Andrés Segovia. This position is both technically good and aesthetically appealing. As described below, it is good for most players, but some changes may be necessary to adapt it and make it natural for players with certain physical characteristics, such as unusually long arms, legs, or torso. Of course there are alternative sitting positions that may be better for some players. For example, some concert players who put the left foot on the stool in the usual manner place the upper bout of the instrument instead of the waist on the left thigh. Others put the right foot or even both feet on the footstool instead of the more customary left foot. Some guitarists have even dispensed with a footstool altogether and sit with both feet on the floor; they support the guitar on a special cushion that straps to the left leg.<sup>5</sup> The interested player can try out these seating options if he so desires, but we will limit our discussion to one position that has been proven to be effective by many players.

### **Dynamically Relaxed Sitting**

With a bit of familiarity, the dynamically relaxed way of sitting will feel quite natural. When done properly, it requires little or no effort to maintain. The key to the position is balancing the various muscle forces involved. A certain amount of experimentation is necessary to find the best way of adjusting the body for each individual.

Taking up the position can be broken down into several steps. While going through these steps, keep in mind that the photographs here give static views of what is a dynamically balanced situation, so they must be taken as only an approximate guide to the actual position. Now sit well toward the front of an armless chair with your back straight. Relax and let your arms and neck hang loosely for a few moments as in Figure 4-1. Closing your eyes will relax you even more. It also helps to shake the arms and shoulders to make sure that they are at a low level of tension. The shoulders should not be hunched or tilted. Now, keeping your back straight and bending from the waist, lean forward and backward and from one side to the other. This will help you find the balance point of your sitting position.

<sup>5</sup>This cushion is currently available from Guitar Works, P.O. Box 8085-S, Rockville, MD, 20856.

Figure 4-1 Sitting position: relaxing without guitar

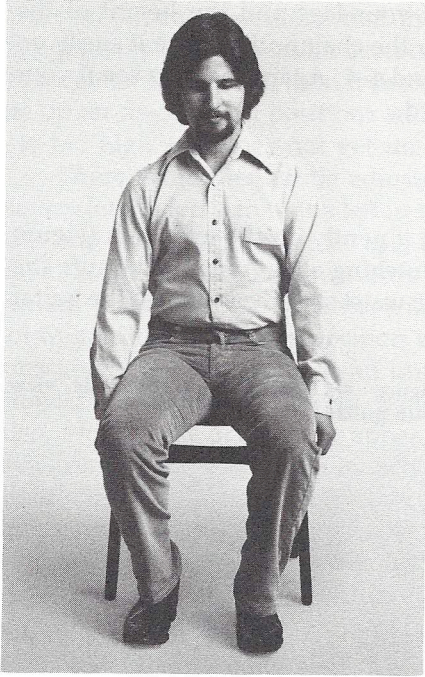
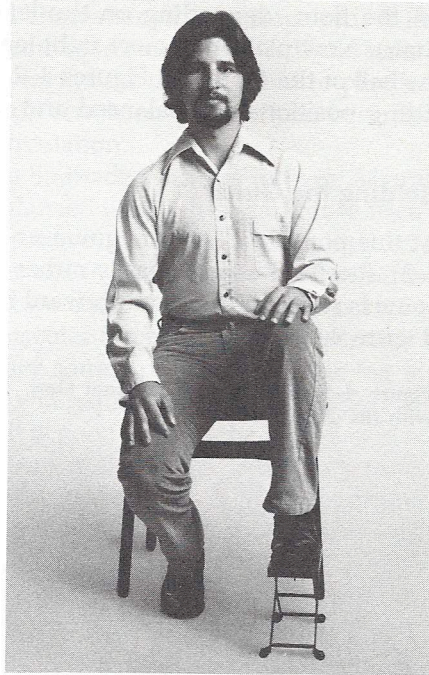


Figure 4-2 Sitting position: adjusting position without guitar



Now lift your head up as in Figure 4-2. To achieve a comfortable straightness of the spine, imagine your head being held up by a string, not rigidly, but rather like a puppet.<sup>6</sup> Make sure you have found your center of balance so that you are using the least amount of energy to maintain your position. You should feel a strong center of gravity where you sit; you should be able to move the upper part of your body in any direction with ease and still feel rooted in that center of gravity. The legs should also be relatively free to move. The position should be stable and flexible at the same time. If it requires too much effort to maintain and is not comfortable, then make whatever changes are necessary. Remember that an uncomfortable, unbalanced position makes it difficult to make good music.

### The Footstool

Now put the footstool (the adjustable type is best) directly in front of your left foot and place the foot on it (Figure 4-2). Make a rough adjustment of the height of the stool for your comfort. If it is too high, you may feel as though you are being pushed backward and that your left leg is being cramped; if it is

<sup>6</sup>See Alexandra Pierce, "Body and Performance," *Piano Quarterly* (Spring 1974), 4.

too low, then you may feel that you are falling forward. Find the height of the stool that is right for you (usually somewhere between five and eight inches off the floor, depending on the length of your legs and the height of the chair). Now place the lower right leg under the chair and balance it easily on the ball of the foot as in Figures 4-2, 4-3, and 4-4. Again check to see if your sitting position feels balanced and centered.

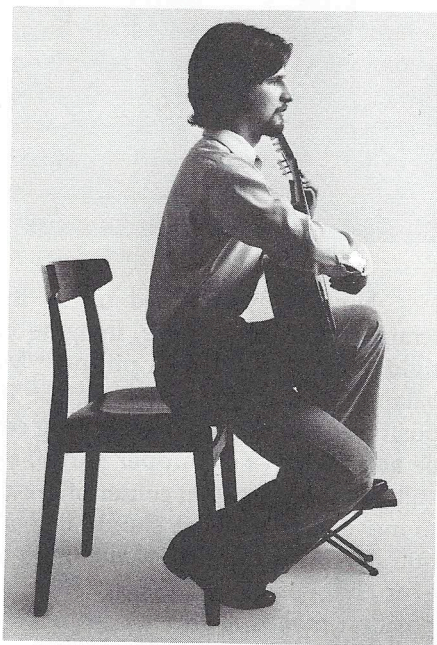
### **Holding the Guitar**

At this point, pick up the guitar and place it gently on the left thigh (Figure 4-3). *Receive* the guitar easily rather than clutching at it. Again make sure the spine is straight, then lean forward from the waist slightly and meet the guitar (Figure 4-4).

**Figure 4-3** Sitting position: front view with the guitar



**Figure 4-4** Sitting position: side view with guitar



Notice that the guitar leans slightly back toward you and balances your forward leaning. The guitar is then supported by the left thigh, the right thigh, the chest, and the right forearm. Now it is appropriate to make a further adjustment to the footstool so that the neck of the guitar is at about a thirty-five degree angle with respect to the floor. The head of the guitar will be approximately at ear level. Part of this adjustment can be made by raising or lowering

the right thigh since the lower bout of the guitar is sitting on it. The head of the guitar should not be too high because then the left arm will be so high in lower fingerboard positions that the blood circulation will be impaired. It is also quite awkward to make descending shifts up a steep incline. If the head of the guitar is too low, then it becomes awkward for the left hand to play in the upper fingerboard positions and the right arm becomes cramped because it is too high and does not get the best circulation.

There is another subtle adjustment to be made with the left leg. Many players let the leg lean to the left in an unbalanced way, which can cause back pain and technical problems. It is better to have the leg turned slightly inward. For this, it may be necessary to place the footstool somewhat more to the left. Then let the left knee lean inward toward the right leg. It is important not to hold the leg in this position with muscular force, as many players unconsciously do, because it is an unnecessary source of tension. If the leg is allowed to lean inward slightly, it normally will require no effort to support it. Also, for the sake of aesthetic appearance, it is good to keep the legs reasonably close together; in fact, it usually works out well to have both legs turned slightly inward. The composer Igor Stravinsky said that one of the important things not taught in music schools is that violinists should not sit with legs wide apart because it is so unattractive. Guitarists take note!

The guitar should be embraced gently, like a close friend. It should not be crushed up against oneself, but rather allowed to breathe and vibrate freely with full resonance. In Figure 4-4 you can see that only the top edge of the guitar touches the chest, not the entire back of the instrument. It is easy to demonstrate that, if you hold the back of the guitar tightly against the chest, the sound vibrations are damped and thus the sound is weaker. Only the relaxed weight of the right forearm is necessary to keep the guitar from falling off your lap; there need be no extra pressing of the instrument with the right arm. Such pressure is a waste of energy and creates unneeded tension. This pressure may also force the guitar to be pulled in too much to the right, which means that the fingerboard would be pushed too far forward. This causes problems of cramping for the right arm and hand as well as an awkward position for the left hand. It is better to have the face of the guitar either parallel to your chest or even turned slightly to the left. That allows the left hand to operate in a more relaxed way.

You need have no concern about the guitar slipping out of your grip if you are sitting properly. If you feel a need to hold the guitar very tightly, even though you seem to be sitting properly, it may be that you are overly anxious about your playing and are trying to *control* it too much. This difficulty may be due to a faulty right-hand technique. Many players feel that they will not be able to control the notes with the right-hand fingers if they do not hold the hand rigidly and press the guitar tightly against them with the forearm. Such problems usually disappear when the player stops trying so hard and learns

how to use the right hand in a natural way. Remember that the fingers of the right hand should do most of the playing; the arm and hand should just give quiet support to the fingers and do not need to be held rigidly in place. Some firmness of the arm and hand is all that is necessary.

### **Sitting Straight**

The significance of sitting with the spine straight and the chest out should be emphasized for several reasons. For one thing, sitting straight requires less effort than slumping. When you are slumped over, you have to fight gravity because it pulls the body down in many places; however, when you are sitting straight, gravity only pulls the body down along the axis of the spine. Another reason is that, when the spine is straight, the chest is more expanded and it is much easier to breathe properly. When the breathing is right, the mind is more alert and musical phrasing comes more naturally. The guitarist who is hunched over his instrument with his head hanging down and his nose following every move of the left hand cannot breathe properly. Thus he becomes tense and has technical difficulties. A further reason for sitting straight is that, if the spine is bent or twisted very much, the many nerves coming from it to the hands and other parts of the body get pinched. That can cause weakening of the muscles, to say nothing of backaches. The resulting physical discomfort is distracting and consequently leads to mistakes in performing. Slouching or excessive twisting of the spine can also have the effect of hindering the free flow of nerve energy between the body and the brain. This can inhibit mental clarity as well as bodily functions.<sup>7</sup>

The sitting position has a strong effect on your attitude toward playing the guitar for other people. A balanced, upright, "royal" position in which you lean slightly forward both looks and feels good. It tends to give you more confidence and less concern about "controlling" the instrument. On the other hand, hunching yourself over the guitar and trying to control every note makes playing an unnecessary struggle. It tends to produce a feeling of tension and a lack of confidence and does not make a good impression on audiences. However, in the "royal" position, the player is relaxed and open like a king who looks quietly down on his subjects—the fingers—as they go about their work. The player, much like the king, is not concerned about every little movement of the fingers, but rather is focused on the overall flow of the music. In such a dynamically relaxed position, playing becomes much easier. From the audience's point of view, the player will appear completely in charge of the situation.

<sup>7</sup>See Swami Vishnudevananda, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 69.