

Positioning the Guitar

Positioning the guitar is the foundation of your technical development. You need to establish a position which is effective and enables you to avoid counterproductive tension. Excess tension in your back and shoulders automatically spreads to your arms and hands, reducing your sensitivity to movement and hindering your development of coordination.

• Your general aim is to hold the guitar in the most effective, comfortable, and secure playing position, providing free access to the strings and to the full range of the fingerboard.

For your position to be comfortable, your back muscles must be aligned and your shoulders level. Thus, positioning the guitar involves the Muscular Alignment Principle.

General Positioning



Figure 6 illustrates the general seating position. Carefully study this illustration, then carry out the procedure on p. 13.

Figure 6: The general seating position.

□ Adjust the footstand to about seven inches in height and place it eight inches in front of the chair. Align the footstand with a point just inside the left front leg of the chair and a point midway between the two rear legs. Sit well forward on the chair, facing the same direction as the footstand. If necessary, move the footstand either forward or backward so that your lower leg is perpendicular to the floor. Sitting at an angle on the chair allows you to lower your right thigh (if necessary) without being impeded by the edge of the chair.

□ Rest the guitar snugly against your left thigh. Rest the lower back rim of the guitar against your right thigh and the upper back rim against your chest.

□ Hold the guitar in position by resting your right forearm on the front rim of the lower bout. Don't hook your elbow around the rim of the guitar — only your forearm should touch the guitar. Slide your forearm until your hand is over the edge of the soundhole nearest the bridge.† CAUTION: Don't raise your shoulder as you position your forearm on the guitar. Your right shoulder should remain level with your left shoulder.

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The next step is to adjust your position so that it provides maximum advantage for both your hands. Adjusting your position, however, is an individual matter which depends on your overall physique: the length of your legs in relation to your torso, the width and slant of your shoulders, and your general build, whether heavy or slim. Thus, before you can begin to adjust your position, you'll need to consider the following information:

†To allow your forearm to slide freely on the guitar, wear either a long-sleeved shirt or a removable sleeve of stretch fabric over your right forearm (a sock with its foot section removed works well). This also protects the finish of the guitar from perspiration.

• **The Five Ways of Moving the Guitar:** This information provides you with a clear understanding of the various ways the position of the guitar can be adjusted.

• **The Right- and Left-Hand Position Checks:** This information provides you with basic aims as you begin adjusting your position.

The Five Ways of Moving the Guitar

There are five ways in which the position of the guitar can be adjusted:

- 1) moving the guitar head forward or back
- 2) tilting the bottom of the guitar in or out on your left thigh
- 3) raising or lowering the guitar head
- 4) raising or lowering the entire guitar in relation to your torso
- 5) moving the entire guitar to the right or left in relation to your torso.

The Right- and Left-Hand Position Checks

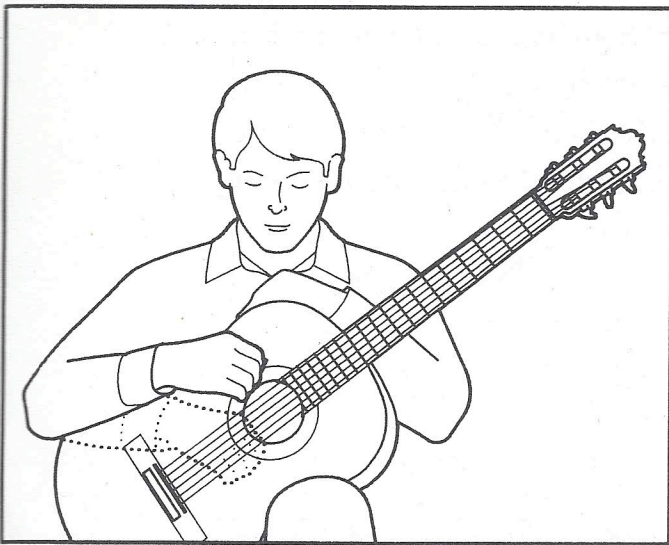


Figure 7A: Right-hand position check.

To position the guitar effectively and securely, you must find a playing position which provides free access to the strings with your right hand, and to the full range of the fingerboard with your left. The following position checks isolate the basic functions of each hand, allowing you to consider each hand separately.

• **Right-Hand Position Check:**

Moving only from the elbow, swing your forearm up and down, carrying your hand across all six strings.

•*Left-Hand Position Check:*

- Place the first finger of your left hand across the 1st fret. Then move your left hand to place the tip of your fourth finger at the 19th fret.

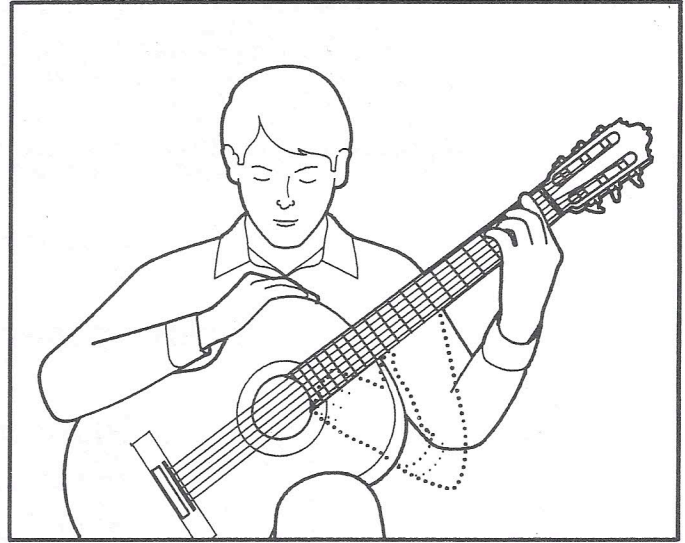


Figure 7B: Left-hand position check.

Adjusting Your Position

Having been provided with the previous information, you're now ready to begin adjusting the general position of the guitar to your own individual physique. Although for now you won't be entirely comfortable in any position, you'll be least uncomfortable in a specific position, and you need to find that position.

• Your aim is to find an overall position in which your right hand can swing freely across the strings without being impeded by the rim of the guitar, and which gives your left hand the most comfortable access to the full range of the fingerboard.

Using the procedure which follows, experiment with each of the five ways of moving the guitar separately, carrying out the right-hand check, then the left-hand check, and finally both checks together. Continually experiment within the positioning guidelines, trying different positions and footstand heights, to discover which adjustments are the most comfortable and advantageous.

NOTICE: In carrying out these adjustments, you'll often find that what's most comfortable for one hand will not be most comfortable for the other. Thus, you should aim to strike a compromise between the most comfortable position for each hand — finding a position which gives equal advantage to both hands.

Proceed as follows:

1) Moving the guitar head forward or back:

- Right Hand:** Notice that this adjustment strongly affects the comfortable movement of your right forearm on the rim of the guitar. Your arm will be less impeded when the guitar head is positioned relatively far forward.
- Left Hand:** Notice that positioning the guitar head far forward is awkward for your left hand — to place your finger across the 1st fret, you must strain your wrist past its limit of comfortable flexion. Your left hand moves most comfortably when the guitar head is positioned relatively well back.
- The Compromise:** Place the guitar head only slightly forward. Although this isn't the most comfortable position for either hand, it provides equal advantage for both hands.

2) Tilting the bottom of the guitar in or out on your left thigh:

- Right Hand:** Notice that this strongly affects the comfortable movement of your forearm on the rim of the guitar. Your arm will be less impeded when the guitar is tilted relatively far out on your thigh.
- Left Hand:** Notice that tilting the guitar far out on your thigh is awkward for your left hand — to place your finger across the 1st fret, you must strain your wrist past its comfortable range of flexion. Your left hand moves most comfortably when the guitar is tilted inward on your thigh.

- ❑ **The Compromise:** The guitar should be held at a slight angle, with the bottom tilted slightly outward so that only the upper rim leans against your chest. Again, although this isn't the most comfortable position for either hand, it provides equal advantage for both hands.

3) Raising or lowering the guitar head:

- ❑ **Right Hand:** As long as you avoid extremes, this adjustment has little effect on right-hand comfort. Thus, you should concentrate mainly on the left-hand position check when making this adjustment.
- ❑ **Left Hand:** Notice that your left hand moves most comfortably when the guitar head is positioned relatively high. Avoid placing the guitar head too low — to place your finger across the 1st fret, you would need to twist your left forearm to the limit of its counterclockwise rotation.

4) Raising or lowering the entire guitar in relation to your torso:

- ❑ **Right Hand:** As long as you avoid extremes, this adjustment has little effect on right-hand comfort. Thus, you should concentrate mainly on the left-hand position check when making this adjustment.
- ❑ **Left Hand:** This adjustment strongly affects your ability to comfortably reach the higher frets. Your left hand moves most comfortably when the guitar is positioned relatively high in relation to your torso. To achieve this position, you may need to elevate the entire guitar by adjusting the foot-stand higher. You should be able to reach the 19th fret without having to dip your left shoulder.

5) Moving the entire guitar to the right or left in relation to your torso:

- Right Hand:** As long as you avoid extremes, this adjustment has little effect on right-hand comfort. Thus, you should concentrate mainly on the left-hand position check when making this adjustment.
- Left Hand:** Notice that this adjustment strongly affects your ability to comfortably reach the entire range of the fingerboard. Position the guitar far enough to the right so that you can reach the entire range of the fingerboard without twisting your torso out of comfortable alignment.

CAUTION: Most students don't position the guitar far enough to the right to make the first few frets readily accessible. The 1st fret is frequently used in guitar playing — the farther the guitar is positioned to the right, the more accessible is the 1st fret. Move the guitar until the soundhole is over or slightly to the right of the center of your torso.

Bear in mind that learning to position the guitar is a gradual process. If you're a beginner, every position will feel awkward at first. If you're an experienced guitarist, you may be so accustomed to a disadvantageous position that any alteration — even an advantageous one — will feel wrong. Thus, it may be some time before you finally arrive at a secure and comfortable position.

An Alternative to Using the Footstand Alone

The position described in the preceding procedures is the traditional seating position for classic guitarists. Many guitarists, however, find that using the footstand alone results in awkward and uncomfortable positions. To position the guitar in correct relation to their torso, many find they must either raise their thigh in a sharply upward angle or compensate by hunching over the guitar. Further, to position the guitar far enough to the right, many students find they must either lean their torso to the left or point their left knee to the right. All these variations contradict the Principle of Muscular Alignment. Uncorrected, they introduce excess tension and often cause back pain.

One solution has proven comfortable and effective -- using an adjustable support with or without a footstand. By carefully adjusting the support, you can keep your left thigh in a comfortably horizontal position, and you can also move the guitar sufficiently to the right without disturbing the comfortable alignment of your body.

Using an adjustable support contributes so much to comfort and security that I no longer recommend positioning the guitar with the footstand alone. As you gain experience with positioning, you may wish to try this alternative to the traditional seating position.

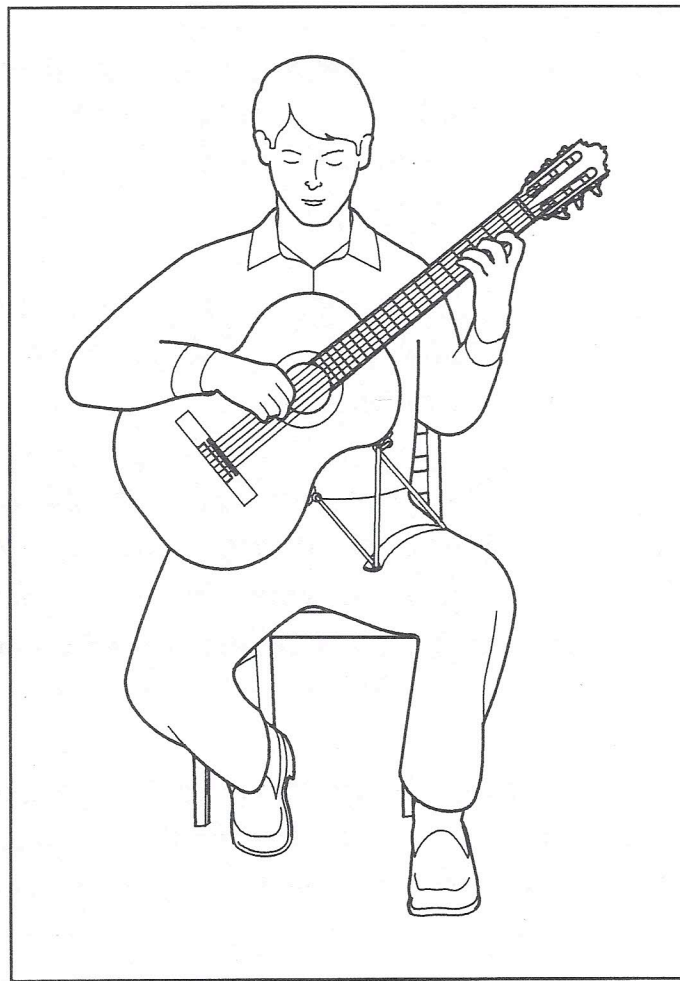


Figure 8: An adjustable support is used with or without a footstand. (Notice that, in this figure, the guitar is positioned lower in relation to the torso than in Figure 6 [see p. 12]. This is because Figure 8 shows a guitarist of somewhat larger build than the guitarist in Figure 6. Generally, people of larger build will position the guitar lower in relation to their torso than people of smaller build.)*

*The adjustable support shown here is the *A-Frame*, which is available through Mel Bay Publications.

Summary

These positioning procedures will give you an acceptable position for beginning your training. Thus, you should concentrate for now on gaining coordination with right- and left-hand positioning and movements.

As you gradually gain coordination, however, you'll soon become more sensitive to your position — you'll begin to feel the advantages and disadvantages of subtle alterations. As you develop this sensitivity, you can begin to refine your position. Again, use the right- and left-hand position checks to carry out these refinements:

• ***Repeatedly try the right- and left-hand position checks separately and together.*** Remember, what's most comfortable for one hand won't necessarily be most comfortable for the other.

• ***Learn to recognize excess tension.*** Slightly alter one position, then another, striving to discover the position of least tension.

• ***As you become sensitive to excess tension, begin experimenting with extremes.*** By discovering the disadvantages of obviously wrong positions, you'll become more sensitive to the advantages of slight adjustments.

Above all, be patient. You're building habits which strongly influence how much time you'll need to develop fine coordination of the hand muscles. Approach positioning with a spirit of experimentation, using the right- and left-hand positioning checks as your guides.