

# Beginning Right-Hand Training

## Terms and Symbols

Circled numbers, ①②③④⑤⑥, indicate strings.

In a musical score, the right-hand thumb and fingers are identified by the first letter of the Spanish terms *pulgar*, *indice*, *medio*, *anular*, and *chico*. (To avoid confusion, these letters will be underlined when they appear within text: p, i, m, a, c or P, I, M, A, C).

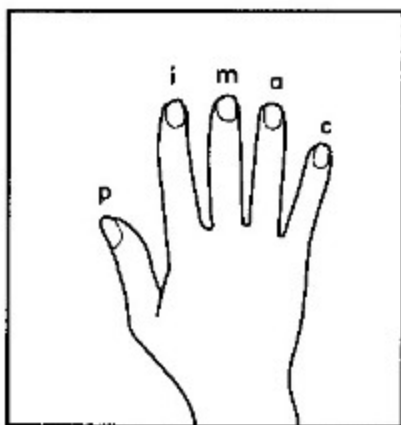


Figure 17A: Right hand.

The left-hand fingers are identified by Arabic numbers. The thumb requires no special identification.

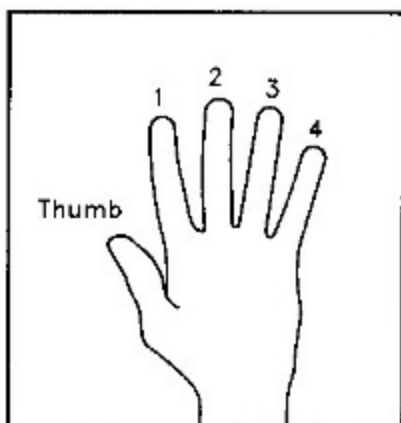


Figure 17B: Left hand.

The thumb and fingers each have three joints. The same names are used for the joints of both the right and left hands. **CAUTION:** Be sure to accurately distinguish between a joint and a segment. A joint is the point at which the thumb or finger bends — a segment is either the section between two joints, or (in the case of the tip segment) the section beyond the tip joint.

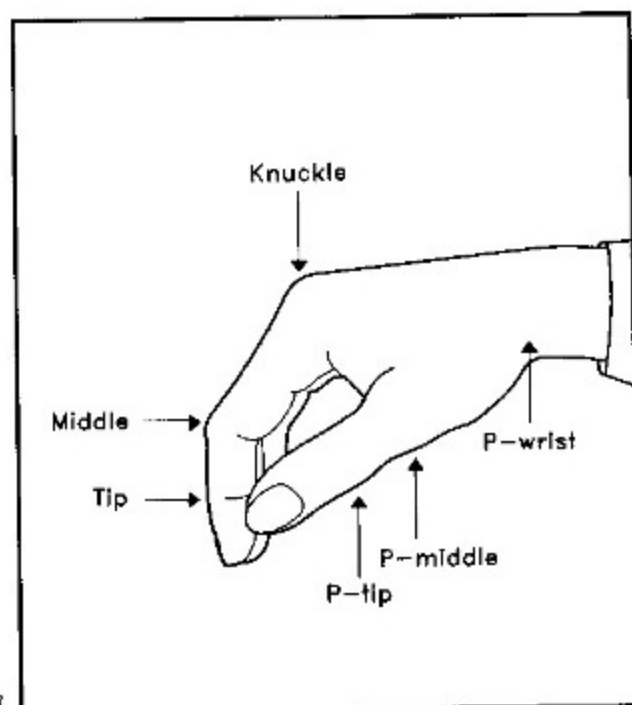


Figure 18

These directional terms are used for right-hand and wrist positioning.

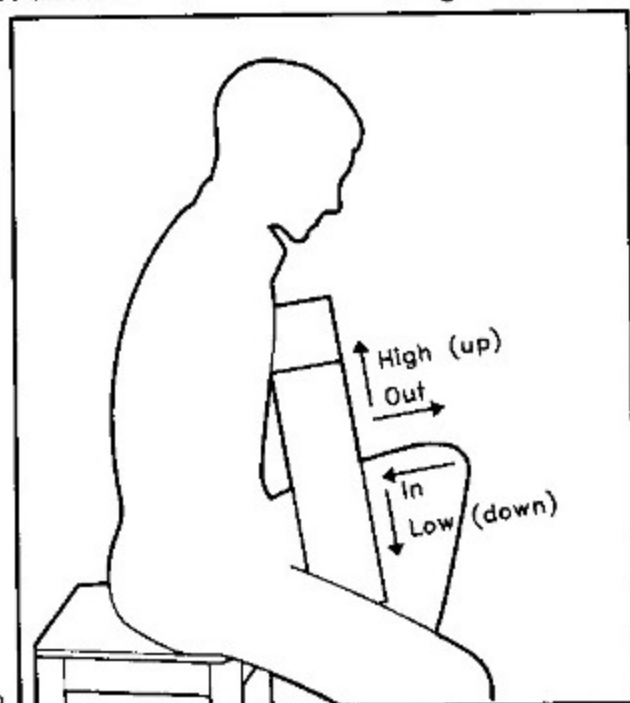


Figure 19

The *midway position* of a joint is the approximate midpoint between the comfortable limits of flexion and extension.

The *midrange movement* of a joint is approximately the middle two-quarters of the range between the comfortable limits of flexion and extension.

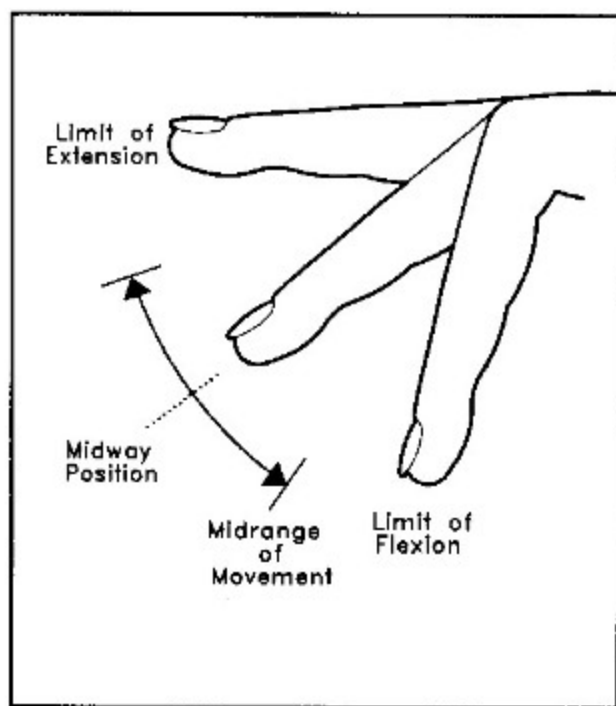


Figure 20A: Positioning and range of movement at the knuckle joint.

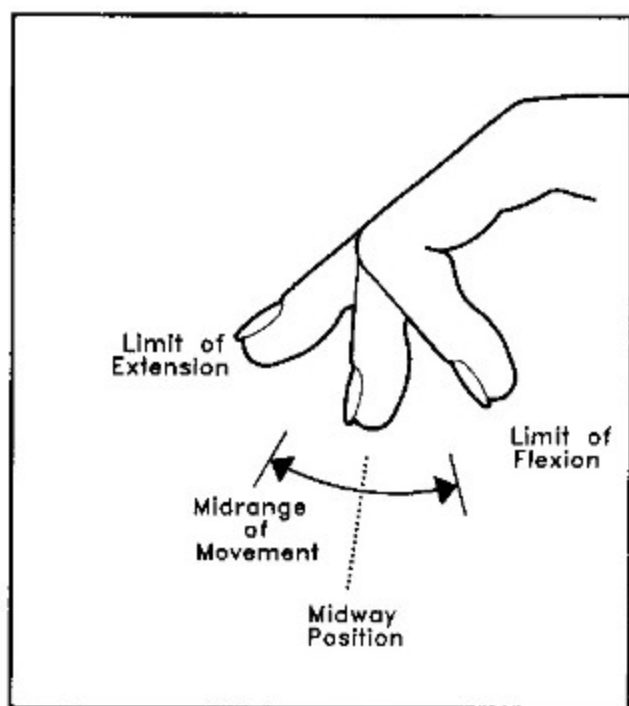


Figure 20B: Positioning and range of movement at the middle joint.

*Arch:* The result of flexion at your wrist joint.

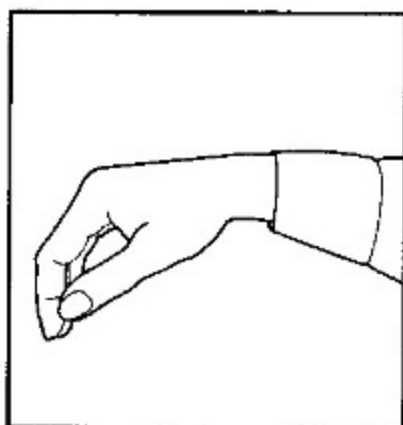


Figure 21

**Alignment:** The alignment of your wrist with your hand and forearm.

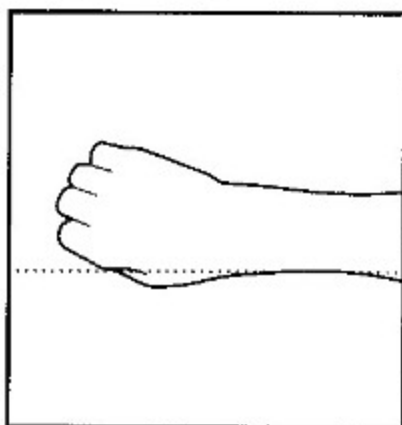


Figure 22A

**Deviation:** The sideways curvature of your wrist to either the right or left.

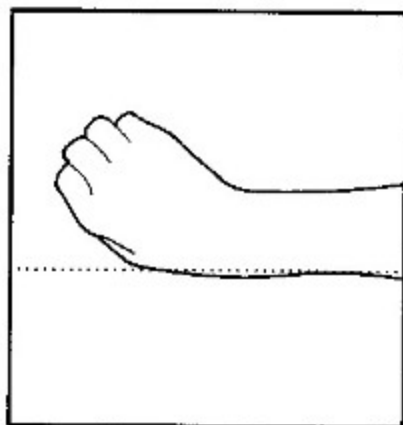


Figure 22B

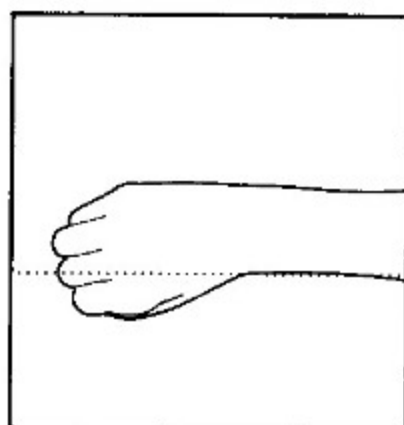


Figure 22C

**Tilt:** The orientation of your hand and fingers to the strings, resulting from the counterclockwise rotation of your forearm.

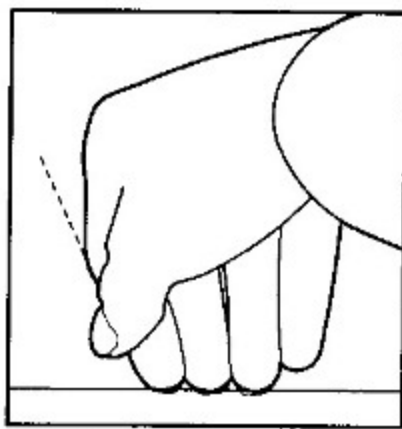


Figure 23

## Right-Hand Positioning

It's difficult to overemphasize the importance of right-hand positioning. It directly affects your development of coordination. An improper right-hand position will impede your progress as you begin learning thumb and finger movements.

Right-hand positioning involves two Principles of Efficient Muscle Function:

**Muscular Alignment:** Muscles function most efficiently only when naturally aligned with their base and joint attachments.

**Midrange Function of Joints:** Muscles function most efficiently only when the joints they control are operated within their midrange of movement.

Your aims are as follows:

- To position your wrist according to the principle of muscular alignment
- To arch your wrist and position the knuckle and middle joints of your fingers in their midway positions<sup>1</sup>
- To establish the most effective tilt of your hand:
  - a. for optimum tone production
  - b. to equalize the length of your fingers
  - c. for the easiest, most direct extension and flexion of p

<sup>1</sup>Since the tip joints naturally position themselves along with the middle joints, they require no special consideration at this time.

Proceed as follows:

With your body and the guitar properly positioned, align the side of the **j** knuckle with the side of your wrist and forearm. Notice that this aligns the **m** knuckle with the center of your wrist and forearm, and the **a** knuckle with its side of your wrist and forearm.

Until you've acquired a feeling of this alignment, check it frequently with a mirror. Another helpful check is to place a pencil or ruler so that it lies flat against the side of your **j** knuckle, wrist, and forearm.

Now you need to determine the midway position of your wrist and knuckle joints:

Hold your right hand away from the guitar. Relax your finger joints as much as possible.

Alternately flex and extend your wrist to its comfortable limits. Notice that, when your wrist is fully flexed, your fingers become almost completely extended (see Figure 24A); and, when your wrist is fully extended, your fingers become almost completely flexed (see Figure 24B).

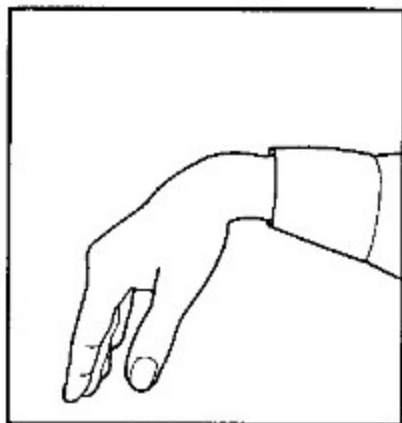


Figure 24A

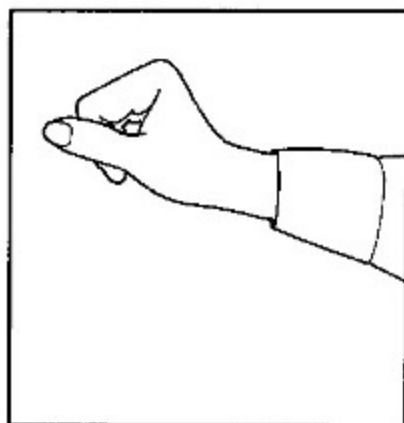


Figure 24B

Arch and hold your wrist in its midway position, so that your finger joints also assume their comfortable midway position (see Figure 24C).

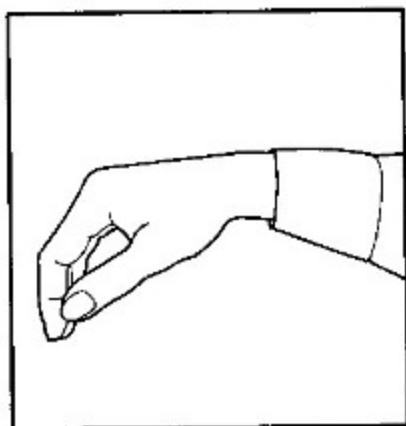


Figure 24C

□ With your wrist and fingers in their midway positions, place your forearm and hand in normal playing position (as you determined through the procedures on pp. 12–20.) As a point of reference, notice that the back of your hand is now approximately level with the plane of the strings.

□ Tilt your hand to the left so that the tip and middle segments of g are approximately vertical to the plane of the soundboard.

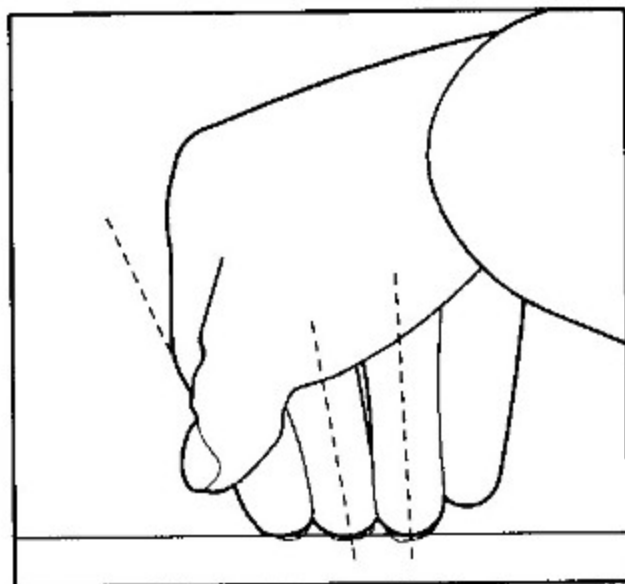


Figure 25

The tip and middle segments of m will be tilted to the left, and those of j even more to the left. Again, a mirror is helpful until you've acquired a feeling of the proper tilt.

Maintaining the proper position of your wrist and finger joints will be a demanding challenge when you begin the actual movement and training of p. You haven't gained sufficient coordination yet, and the resulting tension will tend to pull your wrist and finger joints into awkward positions. Thus, review the aims and procedures of positioning frequently, and make them habits during your daily study and practice. Strive to refine your position, achieving maximum advantage for your right-hand muscles.

## Rest-Stroke and Free-Stroke

The act of sounding a string is called a "stroke." There are two basic strokes used in guitar playing:

**Free-stroke:** (Spanish: *tirando*) Immediately after sounding a string, the finger or p swings freely above the adjacent string.

**Rest-stroke:** (Spanish: *apoyando*) Immediately after sounding a string, the finger or p comes to rest against the adjacent string.

Right-hand movement involves two Principles of Efficient Muscle Function:

**Uniform Direction of Joint Movement:** Muscles function most efficiently only when adjacent joints of an individual finger or the thumb are either flexed together or extended together.

**Follow-Through:** Muscles function most efficiently only when there is sufficient follow-through to avoid a build-up of counterproductive tension.

## The Prepared-Stroke

In the early stages of right-hand training, misdirected students often try to sound strings by moving p or their fingers in a continuous motion. Accurately moving p or the



fingers in a continuous motion, however, requires an advanced level of skill. Students who try to begin with a continuous motion tend to miss strings and produce a poor tone. Thus, they begin to build habits of insecurity.

**Before you can confidently sound a string with a smooth and continuous motion, you must first acquire habits of accuracy and security. The prepared-stroke is the most efficient way to acquire these habits.**

*In the prepared-stroke, you pause to place the tip and nail against the string as precisely as possible. As a right-hand training technique, the prepared-stroke offers the following advantages:*

- It ensures accurate and firm placement of the tip and nail against the string.
- It yields an increased feeling of security.
- It speeds your progress toward being able to accurately and securely move *p* or your fingers in a continuous motion.

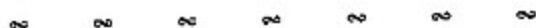
Because of these advantages, through most of your right-hand training you'll use the prepared-stroke when beginning new movement forms.

## **Training *P*: The Prepared Free-Stroke**

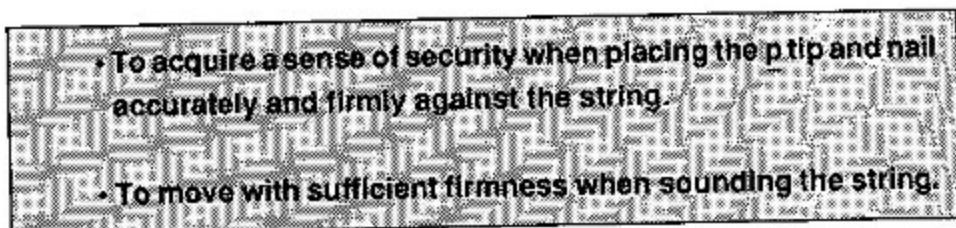
Starting your right-hand training with *p* has two advantages:

- 1) *P* affords ready access to the notes of the G-major triad: the open ②, ③, and ④ strings. By adding only a few notes with your left hand, you can produce remarkably appealing melodic and harmonic combinations.

2) The p free-stroke is initially easier to understand and execute than either the free-stroke or rest-stroke with the fingers. Thus, beginning with p provides the most immediate overall feeling of security for your right hand.



Your priorities in training p are as follows:



Before beginning, you should acquire a feeling of the basic movements used to sound a string with p. Without the guitar, carry out the following exercise:

- Establish the basic right-hand wrist position for playing the guitar (see pp. 33 – 36 ).
- Begin with p in its position of rest, with the tip joint slightly flexed and the tip segment resting lightly against the tip joint of i.
- Extend from the p-wrist joint to the comfortable limit of extension. Don't allow the tip joint to turn backward.
- Flex the p-tip and p-wrist joints together to bring the tip firmly back to its beginning position, slightly flexed against i. Emphasize movement from the p-wrist joint. Ideally, there should be no movement at the p-middle joint. Movement at the p-tip joint should be quite limited. Keep your hand and wrist steady.
- CAUTION:** Avoid circular motion of p. Circular motion is extremely complex and tends to cause counterproductive tension. Extend and flex as directly as possible — this is the least complex motion.

## Sounding the Strings

Your aims are as follows:

- To extend precisely, placing your tip and nail firmly against the string in preparation for a firm movement when sounding the string.
- To extend and flex from the p-wrist joint, with only slight movement at the p-tip joint.
- To move to and from the string as directly as possible, avoiding the tension of a complex circular motion.
- To follow through freely, coming to rest against i after sounding the string — this induces a release of tension in the muscles.

Proceed as follows:

□ With your right wrist and finger joints in their midrange positions, place the tips of i and m on ① to stabilize your hand. Place the left tip and nail edge of p firmly against ③.

□ Start the stroke by slightly flexing the p-tip joint; without hesitation sound the string by firmly flexing the p-wrist joint so that, when departing the nail, the string is deflected inward. *It should feel as though the tip and nail of p are digging into the string.* Follow through freely with p, bringing the tip segment to rest against i. (If you must begin training with a nail of inadequate length, use only as much of the tip of p as necessary to produce a full sound.)

□ Extend p from its wrist joint. At the end of extension, a slight inward motion of p is needed to contact the string. *Don't exaggerate this extension and inward movement into a complex circular motion — keep extension as direct as possible.*

When re-sounding a vibrating string, be careful not to contact the string with the nail before contacting it with the tip. When both nail and tip are placed simultaneously, the tip dampens the objectionable noise which would result from contacting the vibrating string with the nail alone.

Avoid the tendency to extend the p-tip joint before flexing it. Carefully flex or extend the joints together — never flex one while extending the other.

If the p-middle joint tends to collapse, as it sometimes does if you're "double-jointed," keep this joint slightly flexed to brace it against the force of the stroke.

Hold your hand and arm steady, and frequently check the tilt of your hand and the alignment and arch of your wrist. Until you can feel these important aspects of positioning without watching, you must establish them by sight.

*Work slowly and carefully!* Until this movement form becomes a secure habit, emphasize firm placement and accurate movement rather than speed.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

When you can sound ③ with acceptable accuracy and freedom, practice sounding ④. Then practice alternating between ③ and ④, always holding your hand steady. Then practice ②. Finally, practice the three strings in direct succession, one stroke for each string.

Once you can accurately perform the prepared free-stroke, you're ready to concentrate on the particular phase of this movement which requires special attention: the extension. Secure and fluent extension in preparation for the next stroke is the most challenging area of thumb and finger training. You can develop secure and fluent extension by practicing the prepared free-stroke in the following manner:

□ Begin by counting in twos at a slow tempo. A metronome setting of 52 (M.M. ♩ = 52) is about right.

□ On the count of one, sound the string, bringing p to rest against i. On the count of two, extend precisely and place the tip and nail against the string. Sound the string again on the count of one. Practice without a break in counting. Hold p against i for the full count of one, and against the string for the full count of two. This will help you emphasize a more rapid and precise extension. When the movement feels secure, gradually increase the tempo.

The prepared-stroke gives you a secure beginning in the training of p. With it, you'll form important habits of string contact and movement. Properly practiced, the prepared-stroke gives you a basis for a powerful, full-bodied tone and an overall sense of right-hand security.

## The Continuity-Stroke

The prepared-stroke, while essential for developing accuracy and security, has a relatively limited (though important) application in music. Since, in the prepared-stroke, you must pause to place the tip and nail against the string, you unavoidably dampen the string. Although this is useful in staccato playing, the demand for a smooth legato far exceeds that for staccato. Consequently, as soon as you feel secure with the prepared-stroke, you're ready to begin the continuity-stroke. In the *continuity-stroke*, your aim is to accurately place the tip and nail of p firmly against the string without a pause. The continuity-stroke is required not only for legato playing, but is also essential for your eventual development of speed.

Since we'll frequently refer to both the prepared and continuity-strokes, these concise definitions will be helpful:

• *The prepared-stroke is executed with a pause.*

• *The continuity-stroke is executed without a pause.*

Practice the continuity-stroke in the following manner:

□ As previously described, execute the p free-stroke at a slow tempo (M.M. ♩ = 52). However, rather than pausing to place your tip and nail, perform the stroke in a deliberate and continuous motion. Continue to emphasize direct extension and follow-through.

□ BE CAUTIOUS! Students often tend to emphasize rapid movement at the expense of firm placement and tone. This is a serious error which becomes increasingly difficult to correct later.

Bear in mind that, although the continuity-stroke is executed without a pause, it doesn't imply any lack of firm placement of the tip and nail against the string. If this movement feels insecure, practice the prepared-stroke again. Then alternately practice both — first the prepared-stroke, then the continuity-stroke.

## Summary

You need time and patience to develop secure habits of movement. There are no shortcuts, even for the most gifted students. Be certain you understand the principles involved. Begin with clear aims, and try to determine how the principles can best be applied to your aims. Find happiness in the marvelous process of learning this beautiful instrument. If you study and practice diligently, you can learn to play well.

You'll find musical examples for developing the p free-stroke in *Part Two*, pp. 14 - 20.