

Tone Color

One way of refining your playing is to learn how to produce an attractive and varied palette of tone colors and then use them tastefully in your pieces. Tone color refers primarily to the quality of sound you produce with the right-hand strokes on the different strings. The particular tone color is largely determined by the presence or absence of certain harmonics above the fundamental note. On the classical guitar, tone color is a great expressive resource. You can produce many colors that sound like different instruments by striking the

strings in different ways. Thus you can make the guitar sound like a "miniature orchestra."

An important concept in connection with tone color and other elements of interpretation is the establishment of a *normal mode of expression*. That means, for most music, that you establish one basic tone color and use others as occasional contrasts. If you change the color every other bar, or even every phrase, you will have nothing but constant contrast and the color variations will become meaningless. Therefore it is good to be discriminating in your use of tone colors.

Most guitarists are familiar with the different tone colors produced by striking the strings closer to or farther away from the bridge. There are also color variations that can be produced by playing the same passage on different strings. Some of the colors obtainable just by moving the right hand are: a nasal oboe sound close to the bridge; a brass sound midway between bridge and soundhole; what Segovia calls the full "natural voice" or normal sonority of the guitar at the edge of the soundhole nearest the bridge; and a very mellow, harplike tone at the edge of the soundhole nearest the fingerboard. Not everyone will agree with Segovia's idea of the normal sonority of the guitar, but it is something that the guitarist should think about. In any case, remember that if you want true color variations, you must have a normal color from which you can occasionally deviate so that there will be meaningful contrast.

The colors produced by playing the same notes on different strings are quite varied due to the differences in thickness and material of the strings. The color of open strings and the stopped strings in lower positions tends to be bright and clear while that of stopped strings (except the first) in upper positions tends to be softer and richer. Of course there is a clear difference between the nylon and metal wound strings. The former tend to be lighter and thinner in tone quality and the latter heavier and richer—although, when new, the metal strings have a certain brilliance.

Experiment with the colors on the guitar to get a feel for them. Take a short melodic passage and play it on different strings and with different right-hand attacks. Listen to the sounds with eyes closed so that you can focus on them clearly. Try making sounds that are "golden and round," "dark and velvety," "light and silvery," "sharp and nasal," or whatever you can imagine. Notice the subtle or not so subtle differences in the emotions that the different tone colors evoke. You will find that it is not necessary to move your right hand very much to produce several colors. You can do it by simply changing the angle with which you attack the strings. For most players, a straight-on attack (with the nail face parallel to the string) produces a sharp, metallic quality; a more angled attack (off the left-hand side of the nail) produces a softer, mellower tone. Of course there are many shades in between. An additional muted color can be created by playing with the flesh of the thumb.

The use of tone colors is most often left to the discretion of the performer, although modern scores are sometimes quite detailed in this respect.

The colors are usually indicated by words such as: *ponticello* (at the bridge), *tasto* (at the fingerboard), *dolce* (sweetly—usually near or over the soundhole), and so on.

Segovia has suggested that, if guitarists want to learn how to use tone colors properly, they will do well to study orchestral performances to hear how the various instrumental sounds are applied in a composition. The player can then see how he might imitate some of those sounds at appropriate places in his pieces. Needless to say, this guitar "orchestration" should be done with care and taste. A beautiful example of how tone colors can be tastefully applied can be found in Segovia's edition of Turina's *Fandanguillo*. To the flamenco aficionado, the piece will evoke the sound of dancers and singers. However, for someone who has listened to much orchestral music, the piece will evoke the sounds of different instruments. The first few bars start off with sounds like a timpani on the fifth and sixth strings answered by brass on the first four strings (Figure 6-19).

Figure 6-19 Joaquin Turina, *Fandanguillo*

PERCUSSION WITH THE THUMB
NEXT TO BRIDGE ON THE
6TH AND 5TH STRINGS

PERCUSSION

From *Fandanguillo* by Joaquin Turina. Copyright © 1926, B. SCHOTT'S SÖHNE, Mainz. Copyright © renewed 1954. Used by permission of the publisher, B. SCHOTT'S SÖHNE, Mainz.

Shortly afterward comes a passage that sounds like a string section playing pizzicato (Figure 6-20).

Figure 6-20

Pizzicato

1 3 1 2

TH

X X X X X X X

p

1

In measure 27 of the piece (Figure 6-21), there is a passage on the first three strings that sounds very much like trumpets and in bar 29 the same passage is echoed on strings 2, 3, and 4 where it suggests French horns.

Figure 6-21

27 *Suave*

The musical score for Figure 6-21 consists of two staves. The top staff, labeled '27' in a box, is marked 'Suave' and 'p' (piano). It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/2 time signature. The music consists of chords and eighth notes on the first three strings. A 'III' marking is present above the first measure of measure 27. The bottom staff, labeled '29', shows the same passage on strings 2, 3, and 4. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1-4.

There are other striking color effects in the *Fandanguillo* that you can undoubtedly identify. By exploring the colors, in this piece, you get some ideas about how to “orchestrate” other guitar works. Obviously such colors cannot be used in every piece. Each individual piece must be studied carefully to see how much “orchestration” would be appropriate. Many pieces need little or none, while others, like the *Fandanguillo*, can use quite a bit.

The Right Hand

Tone Production

The right hand produces sound. Although the quality of tone is determined by both hands, the type of tone and the volume are controlled primarily by the right hand.

There are seven ingredients that go into tone production:

1. Nail length and shape.
2. Choice of stroke: free stroke or rest stroke.
3. Hand position and the angle of the fingers to the strings.
4. How the fingertip and nail approach the string.
5. How the fingertip and nail prepare on the string.
6. Finger pressure against the string.
7. The release of the fingertip and nail from the string.

Each of these ingredients influences all the others. One will generally determine what comes next. For instance, your choice of rest stroke or free stroke will determine your hand position, and therefore the angle of the finger to the string. This will then determine how the finger approaches the string, and thus how the finger is finally prepared on the string. All of these contribute to the security of the fingers on the string and your ability to apply the appropriate pressure; and the pressure inevitably effects how the string will be released. The length and shape of the fingernail effects how successfully you will be able to carry out all of the various parts of the stroke.