

◇ Tremolo

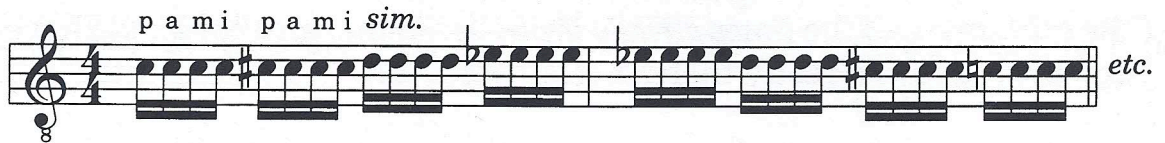
Developing a good tremolo is no different than any other right hand technique, though it is one which often concerns students. As with any specific technical problem, if it is isolated from the piece and practiced separately, the results are more satisfactory.

The first thing a student must understand is that a tremolo should not, ideally, sound like separate notes. It should be a smooth, virtually continuous sound—almost a “hum.” However, because of the physical movement, an uneven rhythm may occur.

The easiest way to develop a smooth tremolo, is to practice the pattern (*p, a, m, i*) *all on one string*. This can be done while playing a chromatic scale (which will also help with right and left hand coordination).

Practicing this way will keep the fingers from planting on the string too soon, which is the main cause of a tremolo sounding uneven.

Fig. 6. Chromatic Exercise for Developing Tremolo.



Another useful exercise, is to play a left hand pattern that does not fit into the four notes of the right hand tremolo pattern, shown in Figure 7.

Fig. 7. Exercise for Developing Tremolo.



Practicing tremolo as in Figure 7 has many advantages. First, each finger is alternately accented, because the left hand pattern fits into a metric grouping of three, while the right hand pattern is in four (*cf.* accents). This can help prevent one finger from inadvertently sounding louder than the others when the tremolo is performed, which is a common problem. Another advantage to this type of exercise is that it trains the right hand fingers to act more independently, and will ultimately result in a smoother tremolo.

Obviously the triplet pattern may also be practiced with three notes per triplet as in Figure 8.

Fig. 8. Exercise for Developing Tremolo.



This approach has the same advantages as we have often discussed: *i.e.* an even fingering (*p, i, m, a*) against an uneven series of notes (*triplets*), which alternately accents each finger (*N.B.* accents).

Although rare, in cases where the right hand fingers are not playing soon enough, it is important to have the student practice the above exercises very staccato (on the top melody line only). In short, planting the next finger that will play sooner, but waiting a moment before sounding the string.

In cases where the student is planting on the string too soon (but *playing* too late), the student should practice the above exercises very legato. Again, this is the most common problem, and results in the tremolo sounding very "choppy."

Tremolo is an important technique, not only because of the amount of popular literature requiring this technique, but because it is a *marvelous* right hand exercise for finger independence and for right and left hand finger coordination.

Tremolo

Many players have difficulty achieving a good tremolo when they play such pieces as Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* or E. Sainz de la Maza's *Campanas del Alba*. The Play-Relax approach can be helpful here. In fact, in one form or the other, a number of prominent players recommend it to their students. Figure 5-15 illustrates one way you can do it.

Figure 5-15 Play-Relax exercise for tremolo

Plant Plant Plant

a a m i a a m i a a m i etc.

This simple type of exercise does not involve the left hand and thus you can more easily concentrate on the tremolo. In this tremolo practice method, the *a* finger is planted on the first string at the same time as *p* plays the bass note. Whenever possible, *p* plays a rest stroke and is allowed to rest on the adjacent string to stabilize the hand. Once the *a* finger is planted, the other fingers seem to have no trouble finding the string. Many students have developed a perfectly accurate and even tremolo this way.

Slow, conscious practice of the exercise in Figure 5-15, starting with the metronome at about $\bullet = 88$, will develop the precision and evenness of movements needed for the tremolo when it is played up to tempo. The practice of planting the *a* finger is what assures the accuracy of the tremolo at high speed since that finger, although it will not be consciously planted, will be trained to stay very close to the tremolo string. The other fingers will tend to follow the ring finger.

Some players recommend planting *every* finger to make sure that each one learns to find the right string. This completely staccato approach starts off as above by planting *a* along with *p* and then the process is continued. The *m* finger should plant at the same time as *a* plays and *i* should plant at the same time as *m* plays. Finally, *p* should plant as *i* plays. The additional planting in this approach may be just the thing to make your tremolo perfectly accurate.

You can try both these methods of tremolo practice and see which one works best for you. Whichever practice method you choose, each finger should make a vigorous free stroke of equal loudness and, as in the previous exercises, the fingers should relax as completely as possible after the stroke.

For the tremolo to have its proper effect, it must be played quickly—at least $\bullet = 144$ (four notes to a beat). At that tempo, the listener gets the impression of a continuous thread of sound rather than individual notes. The tremolo practice methods we have described—especially the second one—tend to produce a choppy, staccato sound at slow speeds, but as you increase your speed, the choppiness will gradually disappear. One way to gain speed and yet retain accuracy is to gradually increase your metronome settings using the tremolo exercises we described. However, players who try to increase their speed by this “one-notch-at-a-time” method often have difficulty getting past a certain tempo because they are trying too hard to control each note of the tremolo.

Another and perhaps better way to increase speed is to alternate the slow, careful practice with “letting the tremolo happen.” “Letting it happen” means that you play the tremolo at the fastest comfortable speed without trying to control the accuracy—even though it may sound a bit messy at first. The idea is to gain the fluidity that is necessary to play the tremolo fast. Sooner or later, the player will have to “let the tremolo happen” anyway in order to play at tempo, so he may as well practice letting it go shortly after he starts working on it. With this combined approach, the accuracy and even-

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ness of the slow practice and the fluidity of the fast practice will eventually come together in a beautiful, dynamically relaxed tremolo.

Tremolo

Judging from the frustrated attitudes I have encountered on the subject, tremolo is certainly one of the most challenging of techniques. Difficult and frustrating it may be, but I believe we are fortunate as guitarists to call it our own. It isn't tremolo that is unique to our instrument, but the way we do it. It is an illusion we create—an illusion in which the melody seems to be constantly sustained, although it is not.

The key to success in playing a good tremolo is not speed, as most students believe, but evenness of articulation. The more articulate each note, the faster the tremolo seems. The more articulate the tremolo, the more control we have over it.

Psychological Outlook

Strive for control rather than speed. Learn to think of your thumb as just another finger. One of the problems many players have with tremolo is that they think of their thumb as a heavier, more forceful appendage. This leaves them with the psychological burden of *fitting in* the other three notes between thumb strokes. Instead of dividing tremolo into *one + three* notes (thumb plus the three fingers), these individuals should think of it as simply *four* notes played by four consecutive fingers.

Let's try to put this into practice. Before you play Exercise #1, just play steady eighth notes on one string, using, of course, *p-a-m-i*. Play them at a slow tempo. Listen very carefully to make sure they sound even - are they all the same volume and of the same length? This is an important preliminary exercise for tremolo, because eventually you will rely on your ears to play your tremolo for you; you will hear an inaccuracy, and your fingers will automatically adjust. Get used to listening well instead of just watching your fingers.

Exercises

Exercises 1 - 3

Keep the notes short throughout your tremolo practice, not just in this exercise. I have found that practicing a slower tremolo staccato makes it sound extremely smooth when played quickly. It also feels easier to play quickly after having practiced it in this way slowly.

In this exercise we are gradually incorporating *speed bursts*. When doing speed bursts of any kind, it is essential that one always returns immediately to the slower note values. This gives us a reference point; and, eventually—when the length of the burst increases—the faster version should feel no different than the slow one. Playing all the notes staccato for now enables us to hear the length and volume of each note more clearly, and as long as we can hear it, we can control it.

GOALS:

1. Practice each one until the fast notes feel easy.
2. Do not move on until the first one feels easy.
3. Strive for equal volume on all notes.
4. Strive for equal duration on all notes.
5. *Feel* each note *before* you play it.
6. *Listen* to each *as* you play it!