



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Color Coding

One musical use of tone control is the concept of color coding the voices of a composition. A lutenist can assign contrasting tone colors to different voices, giving them greater clarity and independence. With effective color coding, a lutenist can transform even a muddled thicket of voices into compelling music with clear voice leading.

Here are some of the uses of color coding:

1. **Highlighting a Melody.** The most common example of color coding is to highlight a melody or an important voice by following through deeply while simultaneously playing supporting voices with lighter, shallow strokes.

Please note that a deep follow-through is not the same as striking the string harder, nor does it create the same color. A harder stroke certainly makes the note louder, but also hardens the tone quality and tends to make the beginning of each note more percussive.

If desirable (that is, if the mood of the piece is suitable) one might choose to brighten the tone of the melody while keeping a darker tone in the accompaniment, thus allowing the melody to ring out even more clearly.

2. **Connecting Voices.** Sometimes it is impossible (or excessively difficult) to make a legato connection between two notes of the same voice. At such times one can create the impression of a connection in the listener's mind through color coding. As we become more advanced in lute playing, many alternate left hand fingerings begin to occur to us. Most of them are good. Usually they allow us to:

- A. connect voices more smoothly in a contrapuntal texture.
- B. create a "guide finger" to make a shift more secure.
- C. hold one voice, letting it ring, while another voice moves more rapidly.

These are all positive reasons to create inventive, sometimes complex left hand fingering options.

But sometimes, in pursuit of a seamless legato connection, we tie ourselves (and our left hand) in knots. Trying *too* hard to connect voices (or attempting an overly difficult fingering solution) can result in tense, labored playing. The voices might connect, but the mood and musical flow are damaged by the excessive effort to make a literal connection.

The mood or spirit of the piece is paramount. Don't spoil it by trying to be *too* clever in your left hand fingerings. Sometimes the most obvious shift, which doesn't literally connect anything, is best. It can be best because it is easier and preserves a feeling ease in the music.

In this case, a lutenist can finesse the connection of voices through the right hand touch. One can connect, not always literally through legato, but by assigning a color code to each voice.

In order to create a *strong* impression of connection, assign a markedly contrasting color to the voice you wish to connect. It should stand out as being quite different in color from the other voices.

If it is a melody line in the top voice, one easy solution would be to make that voice much brighter than the supporting voices. Even when the melody line must be broken, the ear hears a connection since the melody is identified by color.

3. **Clearer Counterpoint.** Even when one voice is not more important than another, one may assign a contrasting (or even a subtly differing) color to independent voices in a composition. This helps a listener to follow the independent lives of each voice throughout the piece.
4. **Characterizing individual voices.** A variety of moods or characters can be brought out by your choice of color. This is most effectively done in combination with your choice of articulation. Color and articulation work hand in hand to create character on the lute.

A bright color paired with short, staccato articulations makes a line sound snappy and full of life, while a dark tone paired with long, legato articulations makes a line sound calm, noble and sometimes full of pathos. These represent each end of the color/articulation spectrum.

But the real excitement and artistry lies between these two extremes, with the infinite shadings of bright and dark, lightness and weight and the many varieties of articulation. These can be used together in so many combinations, I can only urge you to experiment and use your imagination until the character you draw from each voice sounds right to you.

Beyond characterizing an individual voice, entire sections or whole pieces can be characterized through combinations of color and articulation.

5. **Maintaining a Good Sense of Balance Between Voices.** The ideal balance between voices is always shifting. Usually, the voices do not naturally maintain the same degree of relative importance throughout a composition with two or more voices. Even when one voice is dominant, the various parts tend to peek out from time, momentarily taking the spotlight from the other lines. You can help bring out these voices at appropriate times by brightening the spotlighted voice or giving it a heavier, more resonant tone than the other voices.