



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Rolling Chords

One of the most persistent defects in the playing of intermediate and advanced lute students is the habit of rolling too many chords.

I think rolled chords have a beautiful sound on the lute. But a roll loses its effectiveness, and even its meaning, if a lutenist rolls too often. One should have a musical reason for rolling a chord. A roll can be used to:

1. Highlight a melody note
2. Bring out a particular inner voice
3. Intensify a particular harmony
4. Create a more lyrical, less percussive feeling for a section of a piece
5. Give less stress to a chord
6. Give more stress to a chord

When rolling a chord for the purpose of highlighting a melody note or bringing out an inner voice, be sure to follow through more deeply with the finger plucking that note.

Vary the speed of your rolls.

Remember that there are more options than simply to roll or not to roll:

- ❖ A quick roll can lend energy and liveliness to a chord.
- ❖ A slower roll can give a lyrical, caressing quality, and it can help eliminate an overly percussive feeling.
- ❖ A very slow roll is often effective as the last chord of a piece of music. In this case, try rolling a six-note chord, decreasing the speed of your roll as you go.
- ❖ The opposite - increasing the speed of your roll - will give an uplifting feeling of energy.
- ❖ A loud roll which increases in speed gives a strong, emphatic quality.
- ❖ A whispery-light touch will give a feathery, transparent quality to the chord.
- ❖ Going from a darker to a brighter sound during a roll can sometimes be effective.
- ❖ A roll does not need to have the same intensity from bass to treble throughout the range of the chord. For instance, a slowly rolled chord (the sort of roll that is frequently used to end a composition) often sounds well when the lower range is played firmly while the upper range is played very delicately. One can make an effective ending by gradually lightening the touch throughout the roll until the last note is rendered with only a gossamer wisp of a tone.

There are more speeds and qualities of rolls than I can adequately describe in words. I urge you to carefully choose the chords you will roll, and mark them in your music. Then, experiment with various speeds and qualities of rolls until you have discovered the best kind of roll for each chord.

Even when playing only two notes at a time, there is a choice of whether to play them simultaneously or to break them by playing the lower note slightly ahead of the higher one. I consider this to be a roll, too: a two note roll! Many players unconsciously break pairs of notes, so be aware! Choose pairs of notes that sound best rolled, and mark your music if necessary.

Marking the chords to be rolled can also help you to be aware, and avoid rolling chords other than those you have chosen.

In a nutshell:

- ❖ Choose rolled chords carefully.
- ❖ Be aware how often you are rolling chords or even pairs of note.
- ❖ Be aware of the reason for each rolled chord.
- ❖ Vary the speed of your rolls.