Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Left Hand Shifts

Shifting up and shifting down:

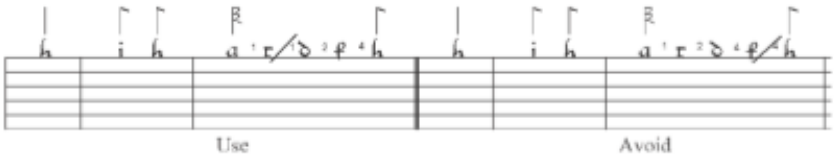
When executing an ascending shift (from a lower to a higher pitch), avoid sliding on the 4th finger whenever possible. The 4th finger tends to get "hung-up"or "caught" on the frets in an upward shift. This tendency is even more pronounced if the left hand is tense, or applies too much pressure against the fingerboard. It is best to shift upward on the 1st finger (the 2nd and 3rd fingers are OK, too). See Example 1, 2 & 3.

Conversely, it is best to avoid sliding down with the 1st finger, since the 1st finger will tend to get hung up on the frets more easily than the other fingers during downward shifts. The 2nd, 3rd and 4th fingers are much better for descending shifts, since they can be shifted down more smoothly. See Example 3.

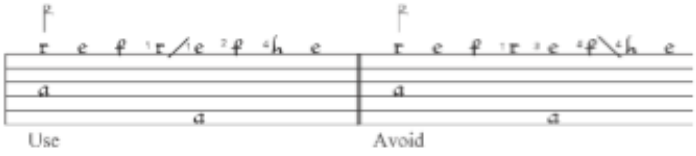
Landing after a shift:

Whenever possible, shift from a weaker beat to a stronger beat. When landing on the first note following a shift, there is a natural tendency to slightly accent that note. When that note is on a strong beat, it can receive a slight accent without disturbing the flow of the music. When shifting to a weaker beat, one must take special care to land very, very lightly. Otherwise the shift will have an awkward, ungainly quality due to the misplaced accent.

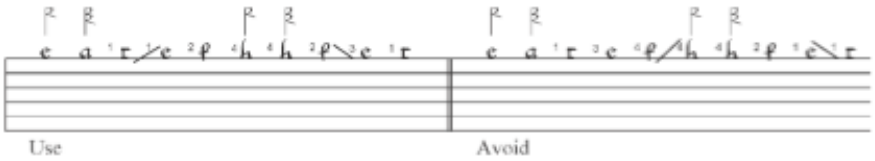
Example #1 Ricercar #34 ("La Campagna"), by Francesco da Milano (m. 1-3)



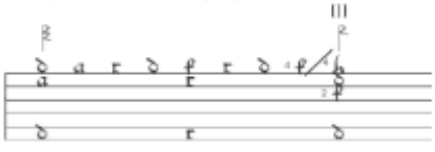
Example #2 My Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home, by John Dowland (m. 47)



Example #3 Chi Passa (lute duet treble), by John Johnson (m. 39)



Example #4 Pavana Bray, by William Byrd (m. 29)



When shifting upward to reach a high note (at the conclusion of an upward line), avoid shifting on the last note. It is better to shift a little earlier so that you can already be in position for that last high note. This creates a safer, more secure fingering scheme. If any mistake is made during the shift, it is better to make that mistake on a less important note. Shifting upward with the 4th finger to the highest

note of a scale run is just asking for trouble! There are plenty of exceptions to this rule.Sometimes it is impossible (or excessively awkward) to follow these principles of shifting due to the construction of the music. See Example 4.

Here, there is no good alternative but to shift upward on the 4th finger. In such a case, be sure to maintain a relaxed, light touch with your left hand. This will give you the best chance of a clean upward shift.