

The Shearer Classic Guitar Strap

Guitar Positioning Handbook

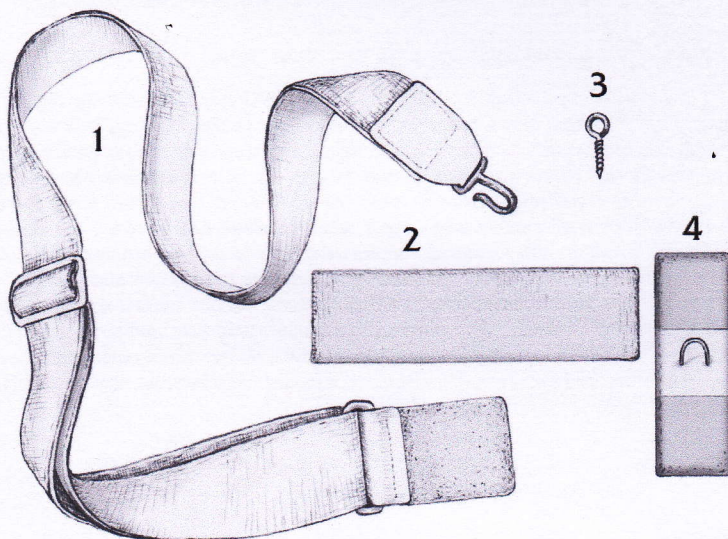


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Enclosed is one Shearer Classic Guitar Strap-Kit containing the four following items:

1. One adjustable main strap which has velcro on one end and a black metal hook on the other.
2. One 2 X 6 inch section of industrial strength velcro.
3. One metal screw eye requiring a $7/64$ in. pilot hole $9/16$ in. deep.
4. One 1 X 4 in. strip of velcro with a small metal loop as an alternate method of securing the hook end of strap for those guitarists who would like to try using the strap before deciding to install the permanent screw eye.

(Caution: If you decide to use the screw eye, which I recommend as being more secure and less noticeable, the installation should be done only by someone skilled in the use of a small power drill.)



Attaching the Strap to the Guitar

Place the 2 X 4 in. section of velcro in the area close to the edge of the guitar's top, with the edge of the velcro strip ending at the dotted line as shown in **Figure 1**. This provides the permanent base for attaching the velcro as shown. Placing the end of the strap at various angles and on different areas of the velcro provides flexibility in determining the most comfortable fit.

* You should clean the areas where the velcro is to be attached. This includes guitar polish and wax. Allow velcro to cure for 24 hours once attached.

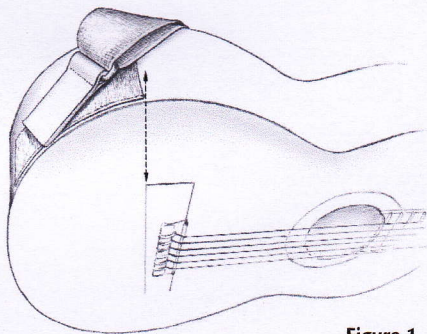


Figure 1

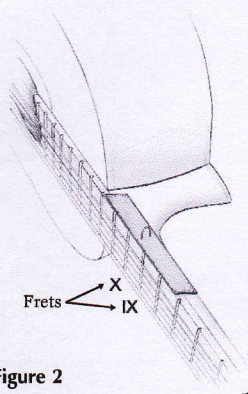


Figure 2

Place this attachment near the edge of the fingerboard so that the metal loop falls in line with a point between the ninth and tenth frets.* Also, placing this and the side attachment to establish a forward center of gravity (as in **Figure 1**) causes the guitar to tilt slightly backward for better visibility of the fingerboard.

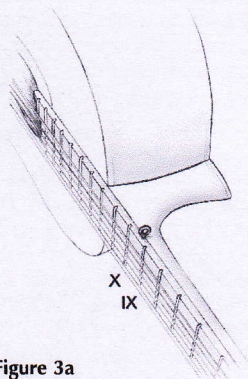


Figure 3a

Figure 3a shows the screw eye installed close to the edge of the fingerboard in line with a point half way between the ninth and tenth frets.* Again, as stated under **Figure 2**, establishing a forward center of gravity causes the guitar to tilt slightly backward for easier visibility of the fingerboard .

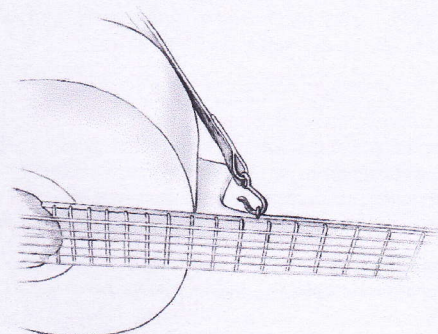


Figure 3b With the hook in place

*Note that the farther the strap is attached to the left on the neck the farther the guitar is positioned to the right for better access to the first position frets. See the accompanying article, *Why A Classic Guitar Strap?*

Why A Classic Guitar Strap?

Whether you are a serious student or an advanced guitarist, if you feel strain and painful discomfort in areas of your back and shoulders, and especially in your left wrist and hand when playing, your approach to positioning the instrument has most likely been very erroneous and therefore should be thoroughly reviewed. The body mechanism which signals a misuse of muscles does not make mistakes. Feelings of strain and painful discomfort are clear indications that you are using the involved muscles in an ineffective manner which nature did not intend. Not only does such misuse of muscles impede the efficient development of technique, it's a distraction that also hinders development of the well-focused concentration absolutely essential in learning to play and in playing the guitar well. Many people may be surprised to learn that these problems have undoubtedly been present among guitarists for as long as the instrument has been studied seriously and, strangely enough, are prevalent on all levels of guitar performance today. That the guitar is sometimes played remarkably well is a testament to the exceptional talent and iron will of those who persist in spite of formidable problems that, as confirmed in the following paragraphs, have long endured.

A Brief History of Positioning the Guitar

The importance of positioning the guitar and its critical influence on ease and overall development in playing this instrument was recognized more than 150 years ago. Two of the most famous guitarists of their time, Dionisio Aguado (1784-1849) and Fernando Sor (1778-1839), wrote Methods in which they clearly expressed their concern about problems related to positioning and posture. Their writings indicate that they both experienced back strain and left hand strain leading to serious discomfort that still plagues guitarists today. Aguado made some especially astute observations concerning general posture and its effect on left hand function.

- He affirmed that, "The player's posture should be natural; the body should be held straight, without slumping as if to peer forward, and leaning to the left," which are problems of back misalignment observed among almost all guitarists today.
- Then he implied that the cause for such posture was an effort to reach all the frets, specifically "the first



Figure 4

An illustration from Sor's Method shows him holding the guitar supported on the corner of an ordinary table.

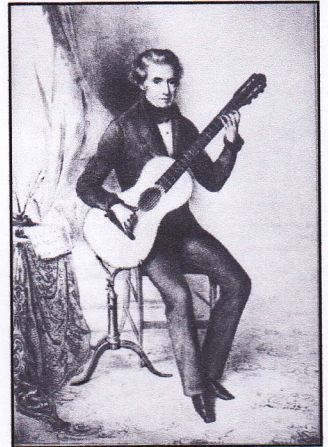


Figure 5

Aguado was even more inventive as illustrated in his Method. He is shown with the guitar cradled on a stand (apparently his own design) with three legs he called a tripod.

frets." He stated that, "The angle of the neck must be such that the left hand can cover the fingerboard comfortably from end to end, without tiring when the first frets are used, and without difficulty when the rest are played." His reference specifically to the "first frets" indicated his concern that these frets are the most widely spaced and farther removed from one's body and are therefore most conducive to left hand "tiring" and strain.

Their writings indicate that Aguado and Sor were friends who must have experimented with various ways and means of holding the guitar. The preceding illustrations (**Figures 4 and 5**) show that each devised a different approach to positioning the guitar which they undoubtedly realized would not be practical.

Both approaches resulted in a similar positioning of the guitar which solved the problem of bad posture and provided the left hand with full access to the fingerboard. Although there is no evidence that anyone ever adopted either approach, we should not ignore the fact that these remarkable guitarists were analysts and thinkers far ahead of their time. While their written explanations of how the guitar should be held lack essential information and offer no practical solution to the problem, their focus of attention on general posture and function of the left hand was certainly far more insightful than that of performers, teachers and writers of instruction books which followed, including those of today.

Toward More Effective Movement

Scientists and widely recognized authorities concerned with effective body movement, such as F.M. Alexander and Moshe Feldenkrais, emphasize the importance of maintaining a well balanced posture. Since everyone's goal in beginning guitar study is to play as well as one's talent and time for study will permit, it's essential that developing the mind and body for playing the guitar and music be carried out efficiently. We all know that the ability to concentrate is negatively affected by discomfort from pain and fatigue. Thus positioning assumes an importance far beyond the physical aspects of movement.

Use of a Footstool Is Begun

While Sor and Aguado left us the earliest concrete evidence of major concerns with finding a more effective and comfortable playing position, they probably were not the first to actually have had such concerns. The general design of the guitar and how it must be played has obviously posed serious physical problems for players ever since the instrument was invented—problems which have never been satisfactorily solved. Presumably to hold the guitar more securely and to provide freer access to the fingerboard, guitarists of the mid 1800's began placing the guitar on the left thigh elevated by the use of a footstool. Further, in quest of a more effective functioning of the left hand, it was found necessary, in using a footstool, to contort the spine through turning and leaning to the left thus causing severe tension (and often pain) throughout the back and shoulders. Although the spread of such counterproductive tension to both hands is unavoidable, this is, after over a century of use, still the most widely employed method for positioning the guitar.

The Adjustable Footrest Is Introduced

With the thought that it would be advantageous for guitarists of various sizes and builds to be able to adjust the height of the footstool, I began in the early 1950's to experiment with such a device. When my *Classic Guitar Technique Book* I was first published by G. Ricordi (1959), my new footstool, adjustable up to nine inches in height (priced at \$4.95!), was pictured inside the back cover. Although the adjustable feature appeared to be an improvement, it soon became evident that even more elevation of the thigh was needed. Thus I began providing my students with styrofoam pads, shaped to fit the contour of the thigh on one surface and the curve of the guitar on the opposite surface, used along with

the footstool. Some of my well-known former students still use such a combination of support for holding the guitar. Guitarists in general who do not use a pad or other device for elevating the guitar often resort to an extremely high footstool which necessitates elevating the left thigh to an uncomfortable angle with the sharply bent left knee pointed upward. This awkward positioning of the already contorted spine and muscles of the back is often painful and can lead to injury. Further, such positioning does not solve the problem of holding the guitar far enough to the right to provide easy access to the often used first position frets.

The "A-Frame" Is Invented

About a decade ago, some 140 years after Sor and Aguado, the first true innovation for positioning the guitar was introduced. The A-Frame, which I assume most classic guitarists have seen or at least heard of, was designed jointly by Robert Driggers, a design engineer, and David Stevenson, the guitar instructor at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. Its main purpose was to elevate the guitar without uncomfortably elevating the thigh. However, for reasons that will soon be apparent, the A-Frame does not adequately solve the elevation problem and one other extremely important issue in positioning the guitar.

Determining the Best Playing Position

Sometime during the early part of 1999, it occurred to me that, to my knowledge, the optimal playing position had never been clearly defined. Thus I decided to try an experiment that hopefully would provide an answer to this vexing question. Taking my cue from Aguado, my experiment would center on the left hand while providing for a viable right hand position. This thought led to my holding the guitar in an approximate playing position with my right hand, while standing, and then shifting the instrument alternately up and down, to the right and the left, and angling the neck higher and lower, while executing a six string bar at the first fret as well as other normally challenging left hand formations. Only a few minutes of testing clearly revealed that the strongest, most comfortable functioning of the left hand fingers requires that the wrist be relatively straight which results from the guitar being placed substantially higher and farther to the right than is customary. (See Figure 6)

By my continuing to hold the guitar (with the right hand) in this same position when seated, the two main reasons why other devices do not provide an adequate solution to positioning the guitar became apparent: They do not permit elevating the guitar high enough nor placing it far enough to the right to achieve optimal comfort of the left hand and wrist while providing an effective right hand position. This discovery called for a radical change in the approach to positioning the guitar. That change would include a new design and a more advantageous placement of a device that has been widely used for many years on almost all types of guitars except the classic guitar, the shoulder strap.

Advantages of Using a Strap

Although I had considered use of a strap in the past, because my objectives were not clearly defined, I dismissed its use, as others had probably done, as impractical for holding the classic guitar. That use of a strap is now becoming recognized as both desirable and practical is due primarily to the following:

- The necessity of holding the guitar higher and farther to the right than has traditionally been established has resulted in a new approach to placing and attaching the strap to the classic guitar.

- By providing an overall well-balanced seating posture with one's legs kept closer together and with the feet more or less flat on the floor, an entirely unprecedented level of comfort in holding and playing the classic guitar is achieved.
- Use of the strap provides optimal mechanical functioning of one's hands, further contributing to comfort and ease.
- The strap provides mobility, freeing the guitarist to move expressively as most other instrumentalists do when performing.
- Of major importance is the fact that users of the strap can be comfortable when performing standing as well as seated. (**Figures 6 and 7**)
- It is convenient to carry and easy to use. (Depending on how tight-fitting the case is, the velcro end of the strap may be left attached when the guitar is placed in its case).

On Trying the Classic Guitar Strap for the First Time

I strongly recommend that, when an experienced guitarist first tries the strap, the procedure of self-discovery previously described above under the heading, *Determining the Best Playing Position*, be carried out. Once the proper length of the strap is decided and the most comfortable and effective position is determined, the strap often feels like a godsend. Depending on the natural mental and physical flexibility of the individual, some guitarists, even those who have been playing many years, almost immediately perceive the advantages of the strap (including its convenience). Others need time to experiment and consider the ramifications of making the change. We know that, because of tradition and deeply ingrained habits, we tend to resist change which involves various mental adjustments and muscular regrouping. Acquiring new habits will demand some time and patient practice before the full benefits from using the strap can be realized. But when such adjustments are perceived as making playing far easier and more effective, even professional guitarists have been known to make the change very quickly.



Figure 6



Figure 7