

How to Stabilize Scordatura Tunings

By Douglas Niedt

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What is Scordatura?

"On this next piece I use *scordatura* tuning" sounds a lot more impressive than "On this next piece I use dropped-D tuning." But *scordatura* (pronounced score-dah-too-rah) is just a fancy word for altered and open tunings. It comes from the Italian word *scordare* which actually means to mistune.

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians tells us *scordatura* is:

"A term applied largely to lutes, guitars, viols and the violin family to designate a tuning other than the normal, established one. *Scordatura* was first introduced early in the 16th century and enjoyed a particular vogue between 1600 and 1750. It offered novel colours, timbres and sonorities, alternative harmonic possibilities and, in some cases, extension of an instrument's range."

For us guitarists it also makes possible the execution of wide intervals, intricate string crossings, interesting chord voicings unavailable with standard tuning, and greater resonance on certain chords in certain keys often with the addition of open string drones.

The Problem

Our strings are made of nylon or nylon-like compounds. Unfortunately, nylon has "memory." When we tune a string down in pitch, it wants to return upward to its "remembered" tension or pitch. Conversely, when we tune a string up in pitch, it wants to return downward to its "remembered" tension or pitch.

It's bad enough trying to keep the guitar in tune in standard tuning. When you change the tuning of the strings, how in the world do you get the guitar to stay in tune?

How to Fix It

This month's technique tip gives you the simple and easy answer: **Tune past the destination note.**

As an example, let's say you want to tune the sixth string down to "D" and keep it there. Here is what you do. On most nylon-string guitars it takes about three half-turns of the tuning machine knob (or key) to tune the sixth string down to "D" (a half-turn is a 180 degree rotation of the knob). To "trick" the string's "memory," *turn the tuning knob six half-turns down instead of three.* That takes the string way past its destination of "D." Let it sit for about five seconds. Then turn the knob back up three half-turns which brings it approximately back to "D." That's all there is to it. Those three extra turns, going down past your destination note and then back up, help "set" or stabilize the string at its new pitch. It will still creep up a little bit, but very little. In his excellent book, *Tuning the Guitar by Ear* (published by Mel Bay Publications), Gerald Klickstein recommends tuning down nine turns and up six. Experiment and see what works for you.

Then, to tune the sixth string back up to "E" after playing in dropped-D tuning, turn the tuning knob up six half-turns. Again, this takes you way past your destination pitch of "E." Let it sit about five seconds. Then turn the tuning knob back down three half-turns which brings it back approximately to "E." Once again, those three extra turns that take you up past your destination note help restore the string's "memory" so it stabilizes back on "E" with very little string drift afterward.

Some people pull or tug on the string after tuning it down or up. Personally I don't recommend it. It may help stabilize the string, but doing so repeatedly, wears out the string faster. Some people say that tugging on a string at the soundhole area can stretch the string unevenly, resulting in a ruined string that won't play in tune. I have also observed guitarists tug on a string and then accidentally let go of it, producing an unintended and very embarrassing "Bartok pizzicato."

In a concert situation, after tuning the string past its destination and waiting for it to "set," I kill time for five to ten seconds by briefly rechecking

the tuning on the other strings. Then I return to the *scordatura* string and take it to its final destination.

Tuning the string past its destination is effective with any string or group of strings although the number of turns required may vary from string to string and even guitar to guitar. Experiment to figure out what your guitar requires. And finally, although I haven't had it happen to me, tuning a really old or defective string up three half-turns past its destination could possibly break it. So be sure to keep relatively fresh strings on your guitar—after all, she (he, it) responds best when well taken care of...