

Tone Color, Part 3 (conclusion)

By Douglas Niedt

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The Perception of Tone Color

A very important concept in interpretation is that one must establish what is normal for a mode of expression. Deviations from that norm are then perceived by us as contrasts. For tone color for example, most of us call plucking the strings on the left side of the fingernails at the bottom of the sound hole the normal or default tone color. When we use tone colors that deviate from that norm, we hear them as contrasts, i.e. brighter or darker.

It is important to be discriminating in your use of tone colors. Changing the tone color every measure or every phrase will probably sound wrong and confused. You would have nothing but constantly changing color without any meaningful contrasts.

How to Choose Tone Colors

In some late-20th and 21st-century scores, composers indicate specifically what colors they want. But in most music, deciding which tone colors to use is usually left to the discretion of the performer.

Look at the title of the piece for clues

The title of the piece might provide some strong clues. Maurice Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess* tells me it probably will require a dark but delicate color overall. Andrew York's title, *In Sorrow's Wake* is telling me dark. *Mrs. Winter's Jump* by John Dowland implies a lively piece with a bright and light coloration. You don't even need to know Mrs. Winter to figure that out!

The mood of the piece will suggest coloration

The mood of a piece might give you a hint as to what tone color is suitable. If the piece is fast and light, a brighter tone color might be more suitable than a dark, brooding color. If the piece is sad or brooding, dark might sound best.

Change the color on repeats or immediately repeated phrases

Changes of tone color can be used for variety. If you play a piece with repeats, changing the tone color on the repeat can be very effective. For example, this could be done on the repeats of *Lágrima* or *Adelita* or countless pieces like them.

Or, if a phrase is repeated immediately, one could change the color, as in these well-known phrases from Isaac Albéniz's *Leyenda*:

Example #8

Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz)

Change color on repeat of motif

Video #17. Watch me play this section of *Leyenda*.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 17 Changing color on immediately repeated motifs *Leyenda* octaves

Or, Tárrega's *Lágrima*:

Example #9

Lágrima (Francisco Tárrega)

Change color on repeat of motif

Video #18. Watch me play the opening of *Lágrima* with contrasting coloring.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select "Full Screen Multimedia". To return to normal size, right-click on video and select "End Full Screen Multimedia" or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 18 Changing color on immediately repeated motifs Lagrima

In this passage in *Fandanguillo* we can change the color of the repeated motif by playing the first measure with the thumb, using lots of nail, and the second measure with the thumb using all flesh. Playing with the thumb using all flesh is a very simple and effective way to produce excellent contrasts in bass parts.

Example #10

Fandanguillo (Joaquin Turina)

25

0
0
1

T
A
B

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Video #19. Watch me demonstrate the passage.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 19 Changing color on immediately repeated motifs with thumb Fandanguillo

When changing colors on repeats, don't do it the same way all the time. You do not want to be predictable.

Change the color on themes that are repeated later in the piece

If a melody or theme is repeated later in the piece, it could be played with a different tone color. For example, the main theme of Francisco Tárrega's *Capricho Árabe* appears three times in the piece. The final time could be played with a very dark, brooding character. In *Villa-Lobos' Prelude 1* the *da capo* repeats the entire first section. Why play it the same? The melody on the repeat could be played by the thumb with all flesh, at least for a few phrases.

Use different colors for different sections of a piece

A simple application of this technique on a macro level would be to play pieces with sections in minor keys with a palette of darker colors and sections in major keys with a palette of brighter colors.

This macro level approach could be used in pieces such as *Lágrima* (Part I in major=brighter color and Part II in minor=darker color). Or just the opposite in *Adelita* (Part I in minor=darker color and Part II in major=brighter color). In *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* I use a dark color palette for Part I in A minor, a brighter color palette for Part II in A major, and back to a darker color palette for the Coda. However, in addition to this macro coloration, I apply additional subtle coloration to individual phrases.

Orchestration

As mentioned earlier, using tone color on the guitar is like orchestration. You choose which instrument or sound quality you want for each passage of music. Segovia recommended that students listen carefully to orchestra performances with score in hand to analyze the composer's choices of instruments for each passage. He believed that by understanding how great composers use orchestration, one could then apply those principles to guitar pieces.

This is nothing new. Since the dynamic range of the guitar is very limited, we use changes of tone color to help provide expressive contrast. It is common for knowledgeable guitarists to think of the coloristic qualities of the guitar as an orchestral palette. Remember, the guitar's ability to produce a wide range of color is the unique strong point of the instrument. Guitarists have exploited the guitar's rainbow of color since the days of Giuliani and Sor.

Fernando Sor: How to Imitate a Horn

For instance, in his *Method for the Spanish Guitar* Fernando Sor describes how to imitate the horn, trumpet, oboe, and harp on the guitar. But Sor takes it to a level beyond the usual play close to the bridge or play over the sound hole. He makes the point that first, the music has to be arranged carefully in the style of the original instrument before trying to imitate it.

For instance, in his discussion of how to imitate the horn (the natural horn, not the modern French horn with valves), he faults this example because the second horn player (the lower voice) can't play the B's without partially muting the bell with the right hand:

Example #11

The Incorrect Way to Write for a Horn
from *Method for the Spanish Guitar* (Fernando Sor)

B's cannot be played on a natural horn without partially muting the bell with the right hand.

A good composer who knows how to write for the horn would instead write the passage like this:

Example #12

The Correct Way to Write for a Horn
from *Method for the Spanish Guitar* (Fernando Sor)

The B's have been changed to notes native to the natural horn.

Video #20. Watch and listen to the difference a few notes make.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 20 Incorrect and Correct Way to Write for the Horn

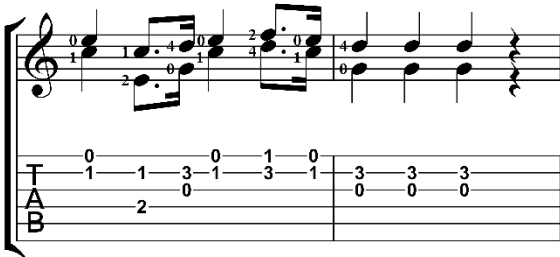
Once the music is arranged in the style or dialect of the horn, the listener is already being led to the illusion of a horn. Next, the player can add to the illusion by playing all the notes fretted for a darker tone (open strings produce a brighter tone).

Example #13

From *Method for the Spanish Guitar* (Fernando Sor)

The wrong way:

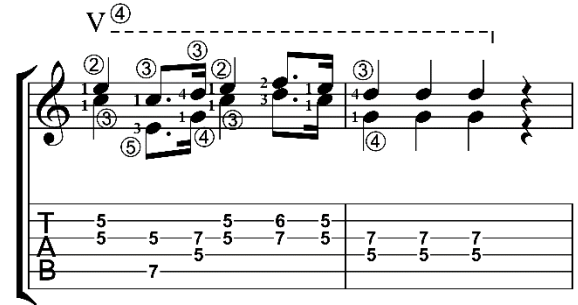
Sor tells us not to finger the example
in lower positions with open strings
"producing a silvery and tinkling sound."



The correct way:

"Play each note on the following string contiguous to it."

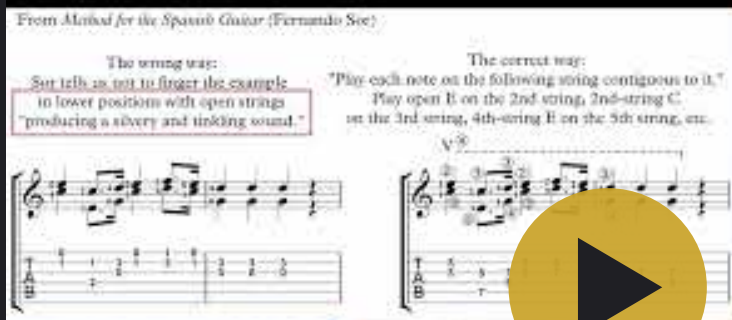
Play open E on the 2nd string, 2nd-string C
on the 3rd string, 4th-string E on the 5th string, etc.



Finally, to complete the illusion, the passage is played over the sound hole.

Video #21. Watch me demonstrate the effectiveness of Sor's aural illusion.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 21 Wrong and right way to finger a passage imitating a horn

Fernando Sor: How to Imitate a Trumpet

Likewise his instructions for imitating a trumpet are far more detailed than the usual instructions to play at the bridge in a staccato style. Once again he mentions that the passage must be native stylistically to the trumpet using mostly the first, third, fifth, and eighth (octave) degrees of a major scale. Again, if the passage is arranged in the natural style of the instrument, you are halfway there to producing the illusion of the instrument in the listener's ears. By the way, the notes may appear to be very high to be played on a trumpet. Remember, this is guitar notation. The notes sound an octave lower than written, putting them comfortably in the range of a trumpet or bugle.

Example #14

First Call

Played as a warning that military personnel should prepare to assemble for a formation.
In horse racing, a warning that jockeys and horses are to assemble at the starting post.

The musical notation for 'First Call' is presented in two systems, each with a treble clef staff and a corresponding guitar tablature (TAB) staff. The time signature is 3/8. The notation includes various fingerings (m, i, a, m, i, m) and articulations (accents, slurs, and a final grace note). The tablature uses numbers 8, 12, 15, and 3 to indicate fret positions. The first system consists of four measures, and the second system consists of five measures.

In addition to playing forcefully at the bridge in staccato style with the right hand, Sor describes how the *left hand* plays a crucial role in producing the characteristic brassy and splattery note attack of a trumpet. Instead of the norm of placing the fingers close to the frets, the fingers are placed in the *middle* of the space between two frets (or on modern guitars even further back in the fret space) *with reduced finger pressure*.

As you hold the string with the reduced finger pressure, pluck the string forcefully near the bridge. This will produce a harsh, buzzy, string rattle on the fret, reproducing the brassy or splattery attack of the trumpet. Combine that with a bit of staccato articulation and the aural image of a trumpet is conjured up in the listener's ears. I might note that although Sor played with all flesh, I think the effect is more striking with fingernails.

Video #22. This is very clever. Watch me demonstrate.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 22 Imitating a trumpet

Fernando Sor: How to Imitate an Oboe

Sor also describes how he imitates the oboe. He plucks "as near as possible to the bridge" and bends the fingers so as to "use the little nail I possess". As mentioned earlier, bending the fingertips results in pulling the strings outwards. This further maximizes high frequencies producing a very bright sound.

Applying Orchestration to a Piece

In his very fine book, *The Natural Classical Guitar: The Principles of Effortless Playing*, Lee F. Ryan presents Andrés Segovia's edition of *Fandanguillo* by Joaquín Turina as an example of how orchestral color can be applied to a piece.

1. The piece begins in measure #1 with a guitar tambor effect on the 5th and 6th strings to imitate the sound of timpani drums.
2. The chords in measure #2 can be played ponticello with lessened left-hand finger pressure to imitate an answer by the brass.
3. In measure #3 the timpani re-enter.
4. The timpani are answered in measure #4 by chords played over the sound hole to imitate the sound of rich, legato strings.
5. The timpani enter one more time in measure #5.
6. The timpani are followed by a fast scale.
7. Finally, this opening section ends in measure #7 with a passage sounding like a string section playing pizzicato.

Note however, that Turina indicated none of this in his original score. The tambor is not indicated, nor is the pizzicato. These were Segovia's additions.

Example #15

Fandanguillo (Joaquin Turina)

System 1 (Measures 1-5):

- Measures 1-2:** Timpani (5), Tambor (7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7, 0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0).
- Measure 3:** Brass (1), Timpani (5), Tambor (0-1-3-5-7-5, 0-1-3-5-6-4, 0-2-4-5-7-4, 0).
- Measures 4-5:** Legato strings (2), Timpani (5), Tambor (7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7, 0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0).

System 2 (Measures 6-10):

- Measures 6-7:** Strings pizzicato (6), Pizzicato (7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7, 0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0).
- Measures 8-10:** Strings pizzicato (7-8-10-12-13-15, 6-8-10-12-13-14, 5-7-9-10-12-14-15, 5-7-9-10-12-13).

Ryan hopes that this example will give you “some ideas about how to ‘orchestrate’ other guitar works”. I agree. I think it’s a great example.

Video #23. Watch me demonstrate this imaginative use of “orchestration”.

Be sure to watch on full screen. Click in video area to activate video. Then right-click and select “Full Screen Multimedia”. To return to normal size, right-click on video and select “End Full Screen Multimedia” or, press the escape key on your keyboard.



Tone Color Video 23 Orchestrating a piece Fandanguillo Joaquín Turina

Look for changes in dynamics, tempo, texture, or rhythms

Look for changes of dynamics, tempo changes, changes of texture (block chords to arpeggios, or single-line melody to chords, etc.) and passages where the rhythms suddenly change (long-value notes to 8ths or 16ths, smooth or even rhythms to jagged rhythms, etc.). If the composer indicates a change in volume, a change in color might also be effective at that point.

Color changes are usually made at the beginning of a phrase. In general it is usually not a good idea to change color in the middle of a phrase. It just doesn't make sense. Possible exceptions would be in modern 20th or 21st-century music.

Still have no idea?

If you are at a total loss, try playing the entire piece bright and listen to hear if certain sections or phrases “pop” with that bright color. Then play the entire piece dark and again, listen to hear if certain phrases or sections come alive with that color.

Apply Color Judiciously According to the Character of Each Piece

All these techniques and approaches to using tone color will not apply to every piece you play. Every piece must be examined on its own to determine what type and amount of coloration or orchestration should be used for the piece to sound its best. For some pieces, very little coloration will be needed—it might not add anything and could be distracting. Other pieces may sound their best with heavy coloration throughout. As with most aspects of interpretation, it is your call. Experiment, and use what you believe sounds best.