

Bass Technique Lesson

PICKING/PLUCKING HAND TECHNIQUE

TWO FINGER REST STROKE TECHNIQUE PLUS EXERCISES

By Paul Wolfe

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Enjoy!

Paul

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi, my name is Paul Wolfe and I have been been playing the bass since I was 15 (seems an awfully long time ago!) and have been making a living from music since 1992.

In 1994 I co-founded CARTE BLANCHE, one of the UK's most popular party/function bands.

In addition to Carte Blanche, I have played with numerous tribute bands covering Abba, Robbie Williams, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, Blues Brothers, Freddie Mercury, Kylie Minogue,

70s Disco, 80s, Britpop, Bee Gees and more.

I have played over 1500 gigs since 1990! Highlights (and lowlights!) included a palm shaded beach bar in St Tropez, The Natural History Museum, The Science Museum, Ski Resort gigs (Meribel, Tignes, Val D'Isere), Lords (! - a personal favourite!), Twickenham, The Stoop, Grosvenor House Hotel, The Dorchester, the Park Lane Hilton, New Years Eve on the beach in Qatar, The British Club in Dubai, wedding in Chantilly (France), wedding in Dublin, weddings all over the UK, balls for universities across the UK, the list goes on...and on...and on!

PICKING/PLUCKING HAND TECHNIQUE

INTRODUCTION

There are several different ways of playing with the picking/plucking hand (and that's before we consider advanced techniques such as slapping, tapping, strumming, classical style picking etc etc).

The basic two options open to the beginning bassist are to either use finger(s) or a pick. Whether using the fingers or using a pick is preferred the beginning bassist must strive to develop a strong, even tone. **The picking/plucking hand is the foundation for every bass player's sound.**

In this lesson we'll be looking at developing our fingerstyle playing. The majority of bass players play with two fingers – the index (i) and the middle(m) – and this is the approach we're going to look at in this lesson (NOTE – we'll be checking out 3 fingered right hand technique in a later lesson).

Let's get to it.

THUMB POSITION

The first thing to consider when playing fingerstyle is the position of the thumb – the thumb acts as an anchor for the plucking hand and needs to be lightly but firmly grounded.

There are two natural resting points for the thumb for general playing. These are:

- 1) On the bridge pick up
- 2) On the neck pick up

(This of course assumes you have a 2 pick up bass! When I came to take the photos for this lesson I realised that my two pick up Steinberger was being set up at the local repair shop and I had to use my Line 6 Variax bass – which has no pickups! Fortunately there is a nice wooden ‘ledge’ for the thumb which you can see in the pictures!)

As you play through the exercises that follow and start develop your plucking hand technique it is worth testing both pick ups as the anchor point for your thumb as you get a brighter more trebly sound when the thumb is anchored on the bridge pick up, and a fuller bassier sound when the thumb is anchored on the neck pick up.

Also there are technical considerations to think about – it is easier to play faster passages when anchored on the bridge pick up as the strings have less give down by the bridge.

(A personal note – although I use both anchor points, my personal preference is for the sound when the thumb is anchored on the *neck* pick up).



Here's the basic thumb position (please use a bit of artistic license and imagine the thumb ledge of the Variax is the top of a pick up!!!)

NOTE: When playing sitting down there is a natural inclination to rest the underside of the wrist on the body of the bass. Please don't, here's why: the tendons in the arm that control the fingers run all the way into the hand from the elbow. If you roll your sleeve up, straighten your arm and then drum your fingers hard on something you should see the tendons 'twitching' beneath the skin right the way up to the elbow.

When playing sitting down try and keep your wrist in as straight a line as possible – it feels unnatural (and tiring!) at first but if you start playing two or three hours a day it will help prevent tendonitis and other hand related problems. Trust me, I learnt this lesson the hard (and painful!) way.



Here's a photo of the kind of arm position you should try and adopt to avoid tendon problems as discussed in the text box above.

MUTING AND THE FLOATING ANCHOR

As well as being the anchor for the left hand, the thumb also performs another valuable function – it helps mute strings that aren't being played. To help get a clean sound this is a crucial task – if you play extended range basses it's even more important!

Although the thumb acts as an anchor on the pick up, it is helpful to picture the thumb as a floating anchor rather than a stationary one!

When playing on the E string the basic position on the top of the pick up is perfect.



When playing on the A string the thumb should still rest against the pick up, but now the anchor position should be on the E string. This will prevent any extraneous sounds occurring from the E string.



When playing on the D string the thumb should now move to the A string, but still also rest against the E string. This prevents any unwanted sounds from the E or A strings.



When playing on the G string the position with the thumb anchored on the A string works fine – any unwanted noise from the D string will be dealt with by the rest stroke...

THE REST STROKE

Once the thumb is in position – lightly but firmly – the fingers can do their thang!

Start with the E string, rest the thumb on the tip of your pick up of choice (I still can't believe I didn't have my Steinberger when I did the photos! Duhhhh!) and place the fleshy pad of your finger on the string ready to play.

Sound the E string, alternating between index and middle fingers, you should use enough force so that the fingers come to rest against the pad of your thumb once you've sounded the string. Try not to play too hard or you will get a weak, distorted tone.

Repeat this until it feels comfortable then drop your thumb to the top of the E string and play the A string with alternate index and middle fingers. This time the fingers should come to rest against the E string.

Next up, drop the thumb to the A string and play the D string with alternate index and middle fingers. This time the fingers should come to rest against the A string.

Finally the G string. Leave the thumb on the A string – make sure there are no unwanted rings from the E string though! – and play the G string with alternating index and middle fingers. This time the fingers should come to rest against the D string – thereby preventing any unwanted string noise from the D string.

As you start exploring the tutorial literature that's available for the bass guitar you'll come across a number of players that don't use the rest stroke and their fingers don't come to rest on the string below the string they are currently playing. All I can tell you is that I've tried both methods and for me you the rest stroke method feels more natural *and* gives you a rounder, fuller tone. As you read through the articles on my web site you'll see that I'm a firm advocate of bass players thinking for themselves and trying to find the solution that best works for their individual situations and goals. Where I know there are alternate ways of fulfilling a function I'll *always* let you know so that you can make an informed choice for yourself!

PLUCKING HAND EXERCISES

The goals of plucking hand exercises are as follows:

- 1) To develop a clean sound and an even, consistent tone when moving from string to string.
- 2) To develop plucking hand facility so that harder and/or faster tunes can be played.

Although the majority of this work is repetitive - and boring! - it is crucial that the beginning bass player spends some time each practise session working on plucking hand technique. It doesn't take long to develop 'muscle memory' so that you no longer have to think about plucking hand technique, you can concentrate on playing and your plucking hand will do the thinking for you!

To really get the most out of these exercises you should use a metronome or - far better - a drum machine. Set up a simple one bar drum machine pattern with a bass drum sounding on beat one, a snare or cross stick on beats two, three or four, and eighth note hi hats throughout the bar. This simple loop gives you lots of information to subliminally absorb/play with - the bass drum marks the start of each bar, the snares/sticks mark the other beats and the hi-hats mark out the underlying eighth note pulse that is the foundation of most rock music. If your drum machine has a *metronome marking* (ie how many beats per minute the loop is playing at) you can easily keep track of your progress and as you master an exercise you

can try playing it 5 beats per minute faster, then another 5, then...you get the picture. (For more on getting the most out of practising, see my practising articles).

Enough with the theory, lets give the plucking hand some bass time!

OK the **Exercise !** is pretty straightforward, set your drum loop at a tempo you feel you are reasonably comfortable with and play the following:

Basically you are playing eight notes on each string per bar ascending from the E string up to the G string. Make sure that:

- 1) The transitions between strings are smooth.
- 2) Remember to shift the thumb at the appropriate points.
- 3) Strive to make the *volume* consistant for each string.
- 4) Follow strict alternation. Play the exerise through 4 times starting with the index finger. Stop. Reset your drum machine and play through 4 more times starting with the middle finger
- 5) Relax! If the first tempo you set is too fast, stop and slow your drum loop down. Find the tempo where this exercise is comfortable and nail it before you move on!

Once you've mastered Exercise 1, try **Exercise 2:**

Now you are playing only 4 notes on each string before ascending – work on keeping the transitions between strings smooth, everything nice and even and – most critically – ensure strict alternation of the index and middle fingers (and don't forget to reverse them too!).

Once you've got that mastered, try Exercise 3 (I think you can guess what's coming...):

Now you're only playing two notes per string before ascending, so the emphasis here is really on getting the transitions between strings nice and smooth.

These exercises are seriously unmusical I know – but please persevere with them as it doesn't take long to build a sound plucking hand technique which will support your endeavours when you move onto playing technically challenging *music!*

You'll notice that so far we have dealt purely with playing the string in *ascending* fashion – i.e. going up from your low E string to the A string, then the D and finally the G.

The reason for this is that when playing in a *descending* fashion there is a slight change in alternation technique.

Check this out, imagine you're playing on the G string and want to switch to the D string. Locate the anchor position for the thumb on the A string then play the G string – if you're doing the rest stroke properly the finger that just played the G string is now resting on the D string, ready to play it!

So for more efficient playing – which will lead to the ability to execute faster passages more easily later on – when descending from a higher string to a lower string the same finger is used to sound the lower string as was used for the higher string.

This technique is known as **The Rake**.

The next series of exercises deal with the rake – to really help you master this I have included fingering notations so it should be totally clear which finger to play.

Here's exercise 4. When starting on this exercise make sure you have the fingerings spot on before you start pushing the tempo marking up.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Exercise 4. Each system consists of a bass clef staff in 4/4 time and a tablature staff below it. The first system has four measures of music with fingerings: i m i m i m i m, m i m i m i m i, i m i m i m i m, and m i m i m i m i. The second system has four measures of music with fingerings: m i m i m i m i, i m i m i m i m, m i m i m i m i, and i m i m i m i m.

You'll notice there's eight bars here – the observant among you will notice that as you begin the pattern again at Bar 5 the rules of alternation when *ascending* mean that you start the pattern again automatically with the middle finger.

Follow the plucking hand fingerings religiously and don't move onto exercise 5 until you've got a really good grasp of this.

The image shows one system of musical notation for Exercise 5. It consists of a bass clef staff in 4/4 time and a tablature staff below it. The system has four measures of music with fingerings: i m i m m i m i, i m i m m i m i, m i m i i m i m, and m i m i i m i m.

FINAL WORD

The diligent application of these exercises as part of your regular practise routine will bring a natural – yet rapid – improvement in your plucking hand technique.

Remember to start *slowly* and really master the combination of the different thumb positions, the rest stroke, alternation with the fingers when ascending and raking when descending. Sooner than you first think, these concepts will become locked in your hand's 'muscle memory' and when you come to play more challenging pieces of music your hand will take care of the fine details without you having to think about it!

It is important to remember that these are **ONLY** exercises and bear the goal in mind when doing these exercises – to develop plucking hand technique. These exercises are **NOT** music – and our ultimate goal is to become the best musicians we can be – don't waste time playing these exercises for hours and hours, beating up on your metronome.

10 – 15 minutes a day, regularly applied, is all that you need. Really.