

The bass line

The inevitable attention paid to the right-hand fingers and the sheer number of notes for which they are responsible can very easily distract us from the importance of the role of the thumb. It really is our most important digit. Without recourse to a strong, deep thumb sound nothing really works; with it, the whole guitar comes alive: overtones are more fully activated and the instrument's overall resonance is greatly enhanced. Harmony is typically defined by the bass line, which, on the guitar, is the province of the thumb.

When playing with another instrument, or accompanying a singer, the guitar's bass line is very often their bass line too, which means our thumb technique carries even more responsibility than it would in a solo composition (where its responsibilities are already considerable). The quantity and quality of sound produced by the thumb is therefore of paramount importance. Paganini's *Cantabile* for violin and guitar (Example 2) provides a window into William Pleeth's 'world of possibilities' by showing us how, in this case, any perceived problems of balance can be solved by a correct understanding of the relationship between the guitar's bass line and what is happening above it.

Replete with contrary motion, this bass line so actively underpins the violin part that, between them, nothing is left unimplied as far as the harmony is concerned. Playing just these two parts shows that the repeated triplet chords that sit in the middle are, harmonically speaking, almost superfluous: in most instances they merely state the obvious, their primary function being to characterise the piece's rhythmic flow. It's tempting for the guitarist to play the chords strongly throughout the bar, imagining that this will help the guitar 'compete' with the violin. But that will simply detract from the presence and sustain of the all-important bass notes, creating the opposite effect to that which is intended. It will also make the rhythm sound stodgy: triplet rhythms such

as these should 'float', with each group containing a decrescendo that tracks the decay of the thumb note.

Example 2 Niccolò Paganini, *Cantabile*, MS 109, bars 1–12

Cantabile

The musical score is for a Violin and Guitar duo. It is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The title is *Cantabile*. The score shows bars 1 through 12, with systems starting at bars 1, 4, 7, and 10. The Violin part has a melodic line with slurs and decrescendos. The Guitar part has a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and chords. Dynamics include *p* (piano), *f* (forte), and a decrescendo (decresc.).