

The Choreography of Tension and Relaxation

By Daniel Nistico

Video Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLyFPNR6goo>

The mechanics of playing an instrument have a lot to do with the interplay of tension and relaxation, however there are often a lot of details missing when people talk about tension and relaxation.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that relaxation is an inactive impulse - that somehow by just thinking “I’m relaxed now” or “I’ll play it slower” is enough to produce systematically relaxed playing.

Just like tension, **relaxation is an active impulse** and requires the same amount of energy, thought and intent as it does to produce tension.

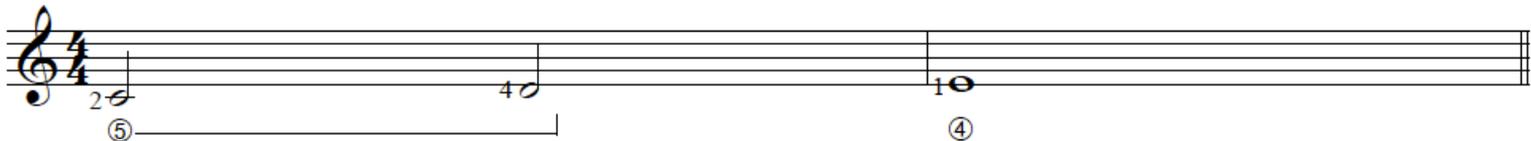
Tension is a necessary part of playing any instrument. On the guitar, tension is required for these two actions:

- 1) Pressing down frets with the left hand (including barring, slurring, etc.)
- 2) Plucking strings with the right hand (including strumming, rolling, etc.)

So any action other apart from these is an opportunity for relaxation.

There is a special sequence of movements that when followed produce the most efficient system for controlling tension and relaxation. This sequence is the choreography of tension and relaxation.

Let’s begin exploring the dynamic relationship between tension and relaxation with a basic musical example.



It’s very easy to play these notes and hold tension in both hands from the first note to the last. So we need to build in very intentional and deliberate movements of relaxation.

1. Left hand tense

2. Relax right hand immediately after plucking

3. Relax left hand and shift towards next note

3. Plant right hand (still relaxed)

Repeat this sequence again

The eighth note rest is obviously too much time to take when playing music in “real time” - i.e. our playing will not be legato. But in normal playing we still have a split second where we can employ these movements. Practice this very slowly so that you have time to think about each movement very intentionally. This is one occasion where slow practice can be extremely valuable (slow practice does not always equal good practice!).

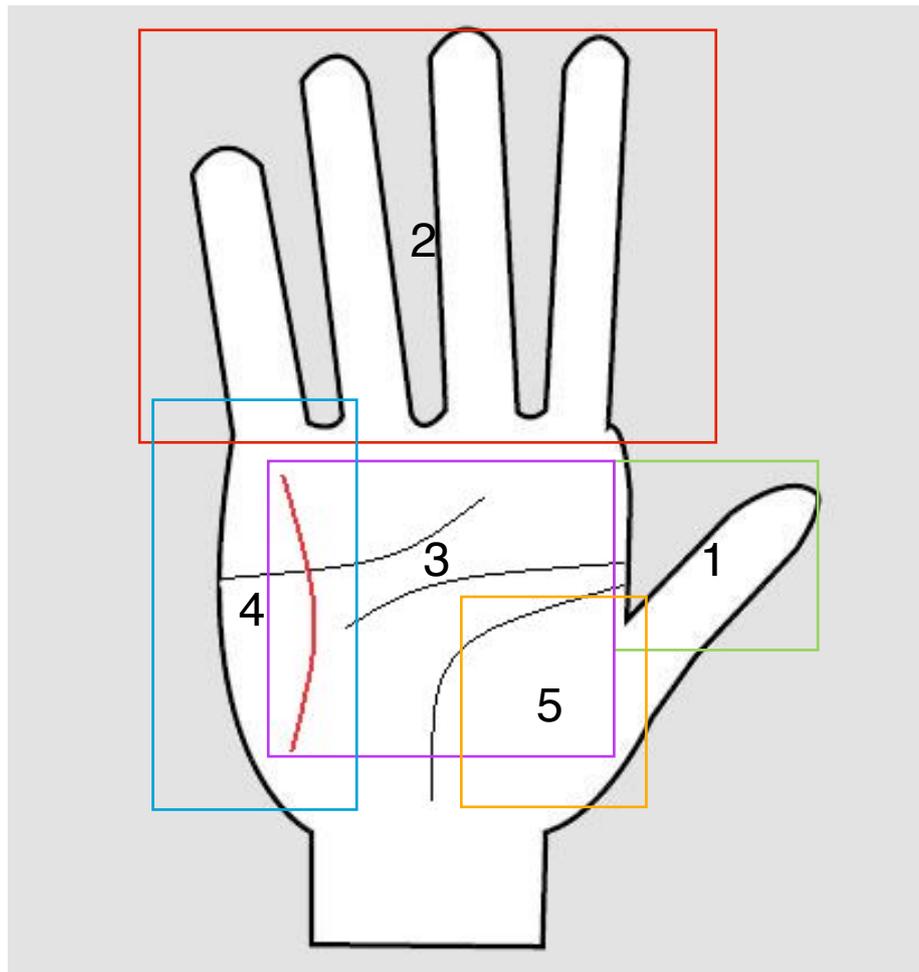
Dividing the hand

Video Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6y4xiVpBvE>

When we want to command tension and relaxation, it can help to divide the hand up into different sections. This makes those commands a lot less vague and a lot more specific.

You can divide the hand up into five sections (in no particular order):

- 1) Your thumb
- 2) Your fingers
- 3) Your palm
- 4) The side underneath your pinky
- 5) The base of your thumb



When you command tension: Make the command very specific

- If you just need to pluck with your thumb, then make that as specific as possible (i.e. only section 1 is tense)
- For the musical example above, when you pluck the first note the command for tension will only apply to the finger that plucks that note

When you command relaxation: Make the command very general

- Command all five sections to relax at every possible moment you have to relax
- For the musical example above, the command for relaxation at the eighth note rests will apply to all five sections

Practicing more advanced materials

The choreography of tension and relaxation can apply to any piece or technical exercise.

To demonstrate something that is a step above the first musical example on page 1, you can try applying the tension and relaxation choreography to triads.

1. Left hand tense

2. Relax right hand immediately after plucking

3. Relax left hand and shift towards next chord

3. Plant right hand (still relaxed)

Repeat this sequence again

⑥

⑤

④

③

VIII³

VIII³

④

⑤

⑥

Detailed description: The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is in 2/4 time and shows a sequence of triads: a G major triad (G-B-D) with fingerings 3-2-1 and a circled 6 below it; an F major triad (F-A-C) with fingerings 2-3-1 and a circled 5 below it; an E major triad (E-G-B) with fingerings 1-2-3 and a circled 4 below it; and a D major triad (D-F-A) with fingerings 0-2-2 and a circled 3 below it. A red dot is placed on the staff between the G and F triads. The middle staff is in 3/4 time and shows three octaves of an F major triad (F-A-C) with fingerings 2-3-1 and a circled 5 below it. The bottom staff is in 3/4 time and shows a sequence of triads: an F major triad (F-A-C) with fingerings 2-3-1 and a circled 5 below it; an E major triad (E-G-B) with fingerings 0-2-2 and a circled 4 below it; a D major triad (D-F-A) with fingerings 0-2-2 and a circled 3 below it; and a C major triad (C-E-G) with fingerings 3-2-1 and a circled 6 below it.

Summary

Tension is only required for these two actions and any action other apart from these is an opportunity for relaxation:

- 1) Pressing down frets with the left hand (including barring, slurring, etc.)
- 2) Plucking strings with the right hand (including strumming, rolling, etc.)

The choreography of tension and relaxation is as follows:

- 1) Left hand presses the fret/s (tension)
- 2) Right hand plucks and immediately relaxes
- 3) Right hand prepares on the next note/string, left hand relaxes and shifts towards the next note

You can divide the hand into five sections:

- 1) When you command tension, command it at the specific section of the hand where it's needed
- 2) When you command relaxation, command it at all sections of the hand even if they weren't tensed