Some Do's and Don'ts

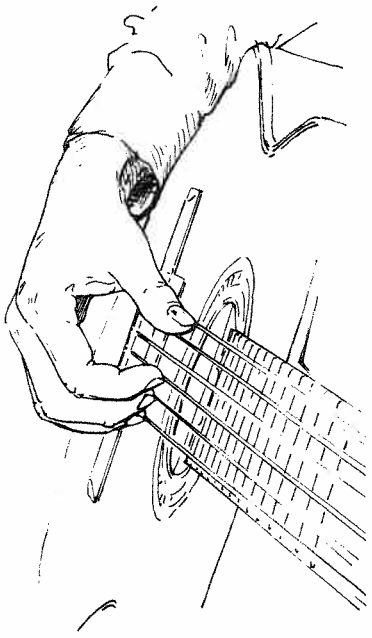
About the Hands

Before we immerse ourselves in the technical exercises in this book, let's cover some basics. There are numerous guitarists who, despite the seemingly awkward appearance of their hands, posture, and technique, produce amazing results. Generally, the philosophy is to leave well-enough alone (or, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"). My original intention for this book was to avoid telling people exactly how to hold their hands, how to sit, etc. But there are some physical problems which one should avoid, and some basic truths that need to be addressed.

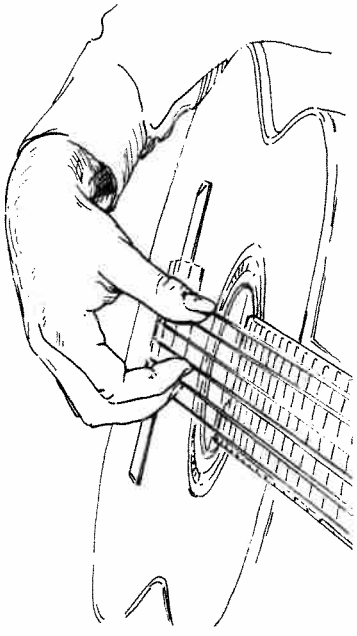
The hands should be in a constant state of *dynamic relaxation*. This means they should always be free of excess tension. At the same time, they should always be on stand-by; ready to play in an instant. Then they should empty, or relax, just as quickly. In order for all of this to happen, the hands need to be positioned as naturally as is possible while maintaining an advantageous angle to the strings.

For maximum results, the wrists of both the hands should be naturally straight (in relation to the arm), not forced into being straight. The diagrams below illustrate this point.

See here how the wrist is straight on the top-side of the hand, and not on the bottom-side.



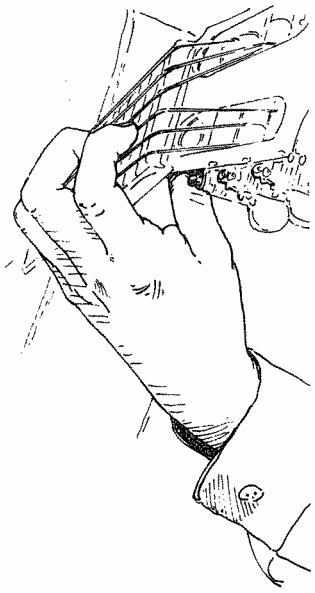
Here the wrist is bent too much, and thus not allowing the tendons to work easily.



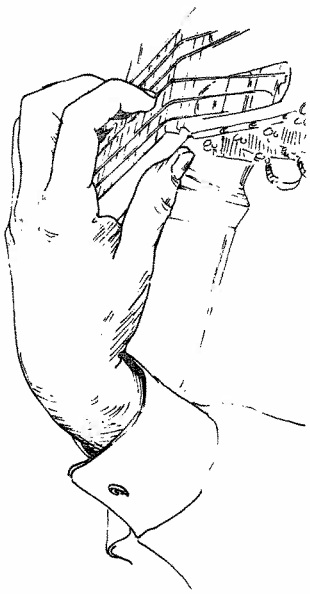
Try this experiment: keeping your wrist bent, make a fist. Not very comfortable, is it? In order for the fingers to work correctly, comfortably, and for extended periods of time, the tendons must be as free as possible to move around (like the cables that they are) inside the carpal tunnel. The carpal tunnel is the boney passage in your wrist. Bending the wrist too far aggravates the tendons, and could eventually cause irreparable damage.

In the two diagrams that follow, notice how the same principle applies to the left hand.

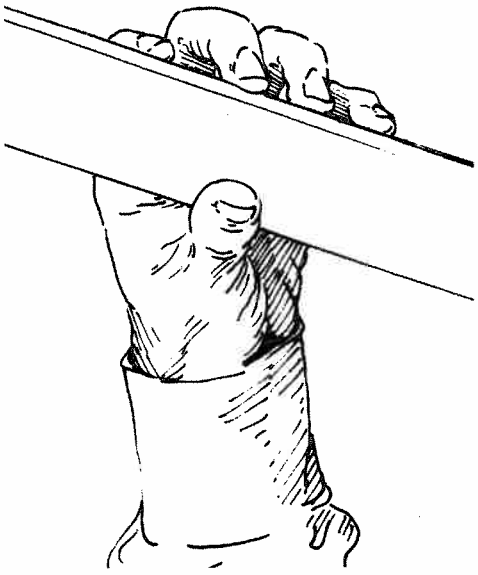
The straighter the wrist, the more dexterity your fingers will have.



Bending your wrist too much makes it a struggle to play



As for your left-hand thumb, it's generally wise to keep it positioned just under your second (middle) finger. This creates somewhat of a vise, and allows for an even distribution of pressure throughout the hand.



About the Body

The body should also be in a relaxed state. While seated, try stretching your neck and spine upwards towards the ceiling, pulling your shoulders back slightly (just enough to keep them from drooping forward). Now, relax your muscles so that your body sort of freezes itself in that position. This is a good state for the body to settle into. Your shoulders should not crunch upward into your neck. Take a look at the illustrations in the following section about holding the guitar.

About Holding the Guitar
— *The Triangle*

The guitar touches the body at three points to create a triangle:

1. At the lower part of the chest (near the sternum).
2. At the top of the left thigh.
3. At the inner part of the right thigh.

Of course, the reverse applies if you play left-handed! This triangle is held into place when the right forearm is rested on the instrument.

It's basic, yes, but this position provides the best angle for the guitar. For good tone production, especially in a concert situation, it is essential that the vibration of the back of the guitar is not compromised by placing it flat against your stomach. Since the guitar is such a directional instrument (it sounds best wherever you aim the soundhole), this angle also allows for the sound to travel a greater distance, because it keeps us from pointing the instrument at the floor.

"Failure to prepare is preparing to fail."

• John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach •

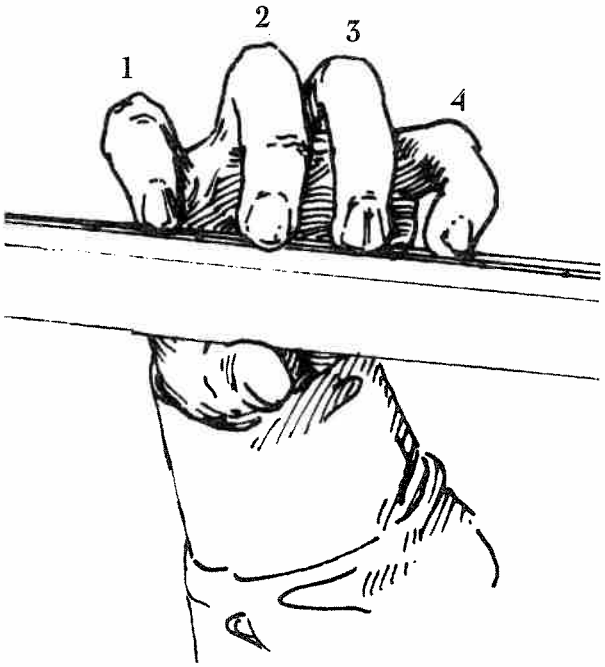
The Left Hand

Finger Placement and Accuracy

It is vital that one adopt a strong left-hand "stance" and place the fingers in a position which allows for maximum reach and flexibility.

As you can see from the illustration below, the fingers of the left hand are not all placed on the center of the fingertips. Rather, an advantageous position for the left hand is as follows:

1. The first finger (1) plays on the left side of its tip.
2. The second finger (2) plays just to the left of its tip.
3. The third finger (3) plays just to the right of its tip.
4. The fourth finger (4) makes contact on the right side of its tip.



This position brings the larger muscles on either side of the hand into play, not necessarily to support fingers 1 and 4 (although this is a benefit), but to balance the whole hand and give it a stronger, more secure stance. It also allows for greater finger dexterity.

Notice the space between the middle joints of each finger. They're not touching! Not only are they not touching, but there is an intentional amount of extra space. This allows the fingers to spread apart and reach with greater speed when necessary. Never allow these joints to touch. This actually takes more muscular effort than keeping them apart, and the buzzword of this book is "economy": ***economy of effort, economy of energy, economy of motion***.

As for the thumb, keep it just under the second finger. This helps to distribute the pressure evenly between the fingers and thumb, creating a sort of vise.

Pressure and Release

To familiarize yourself with this left-hand position, especially if it's new for you, practice the following.

Pressure/Release Exercise

Place your left hand in the correct position as shown on page 10. (Don't neglect your thumb, either.) Place fingers 1, 2, 3, and 4 on frets I, II, III, and IV respectively on any string (although I suggest you start with the third string ③). Press them down on the string and then *empty* them (release the pressure), keeping your fingers on the string. From this "relaxed-on-the-string" position, proceed to press the four fingers down, then empty them. Press, then empty. Press, then empty, and so on. Do this a number of times while keeping your fingers on the string. The point of this exercise is to feel the immediacy with which your fingers press (apply pressure), and then empty (totally release pressure) with the same immediacy. All four fingers should press and release simultaneously. Feel the vise grip we spoke of earlier. Feel the pressure distribute evenly throughout all four fingers and thumb.

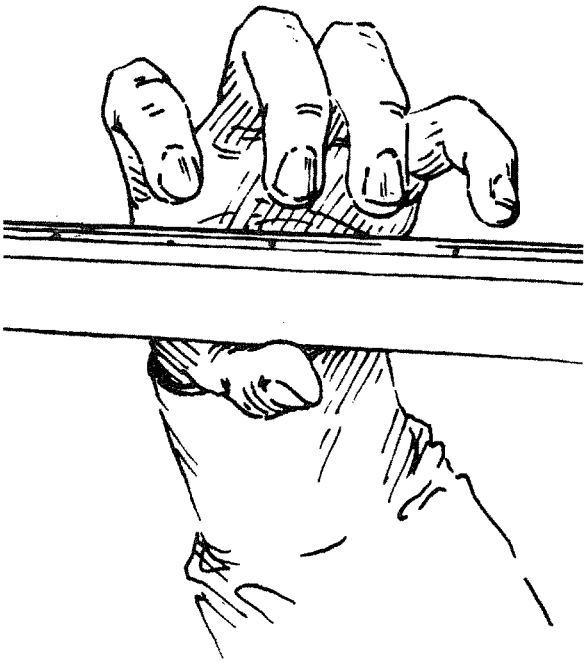
After you have repeated this many times and gotten the hang of it, try it pressing the fingers down one at a time. Start from the same position as before: with all four fingers touching the string but not pressing.

Finger Exchange

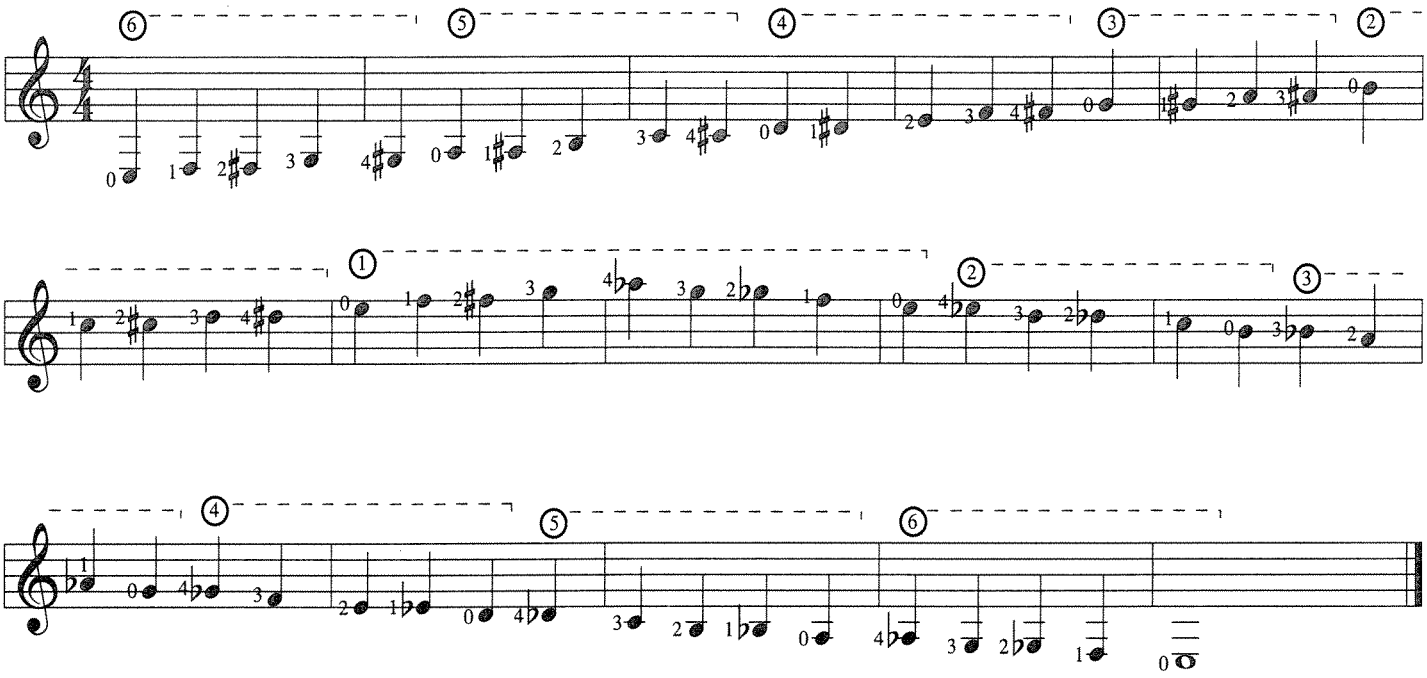
As elementary as it may seem, we have just touched upon the most important issue concerning a good left hand: controlling the pressure and relaxation in the fingers. Now let's move on and approach exchanging fingers in the same manner.

The issue with exchanging fingers is maintaining the proper distance from the string. Notice in the illustration on the right that the fingers are all roughly the same distance to the string.

Ideally, the fingers should be about half an inch above the string, but definitely no more than one inch. Moving the fingers any more than one inch above the string defeats our goal of economy of movement.



From this position, we will practice the following chromatic scale. With the same immediacy as in the previous drill, press the fingers down and empty them, one at a time, in order. This time, however, do not keep your fingers touching the string when not playing. When you empty a finger that has finished playing, spring it back into its place; about half an inch above the string. Since we will be dealing with the right hand in a later section, don't worry about which right-hand fingering to use for now. A simple *i, m* alternation will do. Use rest stroke or free stroke—it doesn't matter. Just focus on your left hand.



As one finger empties, make sure that the next *fills up* with exactly the same amount of pressure. I like to imagine this exchange as a shifting of weight from finger to finger. As you feel the weight shift, don't feel it only in the fingers, but throughout the whole hand. This will give you a heightened awareness of the balance in the hand.

Ascending Slurs (Hammer-ons)

A good, solid ascending slur, (or, as it would lazily roll off our tongues in simpler times, "hammer-on"), is nothing more than a slightly more energetic approach to the pressure/release applications.

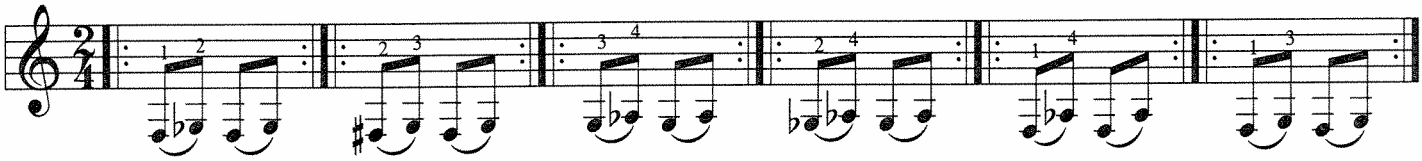
From the half an inch hovering position pictured in the last diagram, simply snap the desired finger onto the string. If you have diligently practiced the pressure/release exercises up until now, the feeling during execution of the slur is the same. The pressure is quick and accurate. In the case of the slur, the finger must be snapped down onto the string with slightly greater speed. This is what produces the sound and creates our tone during a slur. Don't think of bringing the finger up any further above the string than half an inch to an inch, or pressing down on the string any harder. The speed is what counts. I like to use the word "snap" when referring to a slur, because, for me, that's what it feels and sounds like.

In the following simple exercise, take your time and do several repetitions of each slur.

DO: snap the finger quickly and cleanly onto the string.
DON'T: continue to apply extra pressure once you're on the string.

If your slur is quick enough, the force with which you come down onto the string will be enough to keep the note sounding clearly.

Repeat each example at least 4x.



As in the pressure/release exercises, the shifting of weight from finger to finger is a must. Just before a finger executes its slur, it is empty. As it executes the slur, it fills up (with energy), and with a combination of muscle and weight (momentum), snaps onto the string; all in the blink of an eye.

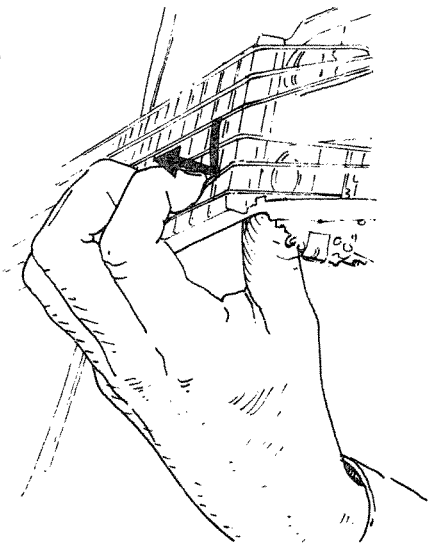
Have faith! Work speed, not force and tension, into your slurs. And before you start complaining that half an inch is just not enough space, consider Bruce Lee's famous "One Inch Punch." With his fist only one inch away from his unfortunate volunteer's chest, he would punch, seeming only to tap the opposite fellow, and send him flying backwards for several yards! So, I think you can produce strong, clean-sounding slurs with a little less wind-up, don't you?

Descending Slurs (Pull-offs)

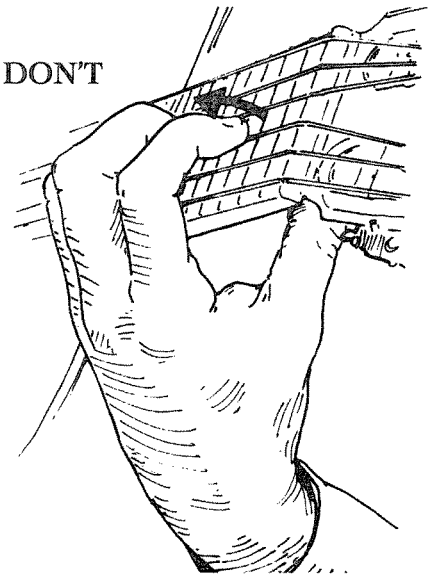
A descending slur, or pull-off, has the same sort of a "snap" to it, with only a few extra components.

In the two following illustrations, you can see what a secure pull-off looks like, and what an all too common but insecure pull-off looks like.

DO



DON'T



In the first example, the finger pulls down into the fingerboard and next string. At first casual glance, it appears as if the finger may indeed be pulling itself off the string; but in reality, we are making the string snap-off of the fingertip. This, of course, causes the finger to pull into the next string, creating a sort of left-hand rest stroke. Use this adjacent string to help our finger empty out, and to spring it back into a ready position above the string.

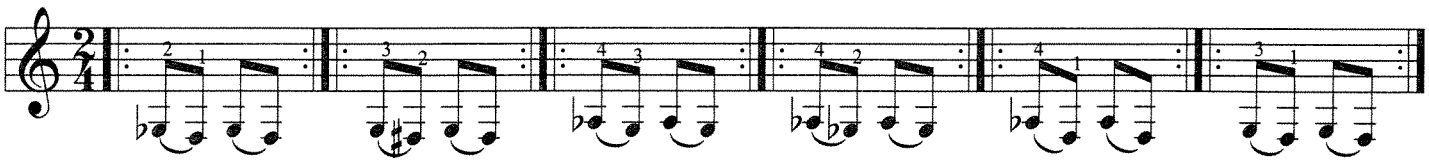
The second illustration shows a pull-off done habitually by many people. Practically taking the term "pull-off" literally, the finger is pulled upward away from the string and fingerboard, thus creating a consistently feeble tone.

Practice the following slur exercise with these things in mind:

From a state of dynamic relaxation (meaning, in this case, the finger is pressing down just enough to make the note sound), move, or snap, the finger quickly through the string, then spring it back up with a relaxed gesture. Both the snap and the spring are one motion. The finger should not seem to be forced back up. Rather, it is quickly brought back up with the springboard of the string to help you.

Repeat this on each string.

Repeat each example at least 4x.

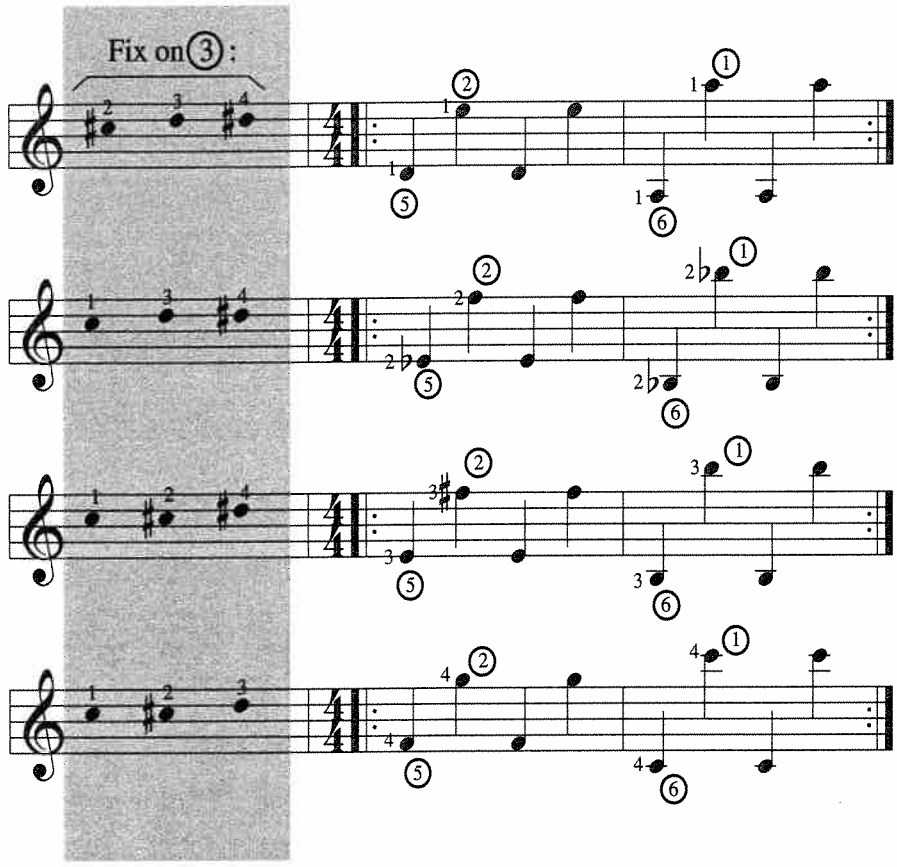


Finger Independence

It is crucial that the fingers be able to maneuver independently of one another. The following exercises are designed to increase both vertical and horizontal dexterity. Some are also incorporated into the *Daily* Warm-up Routine on page 48 of this book.

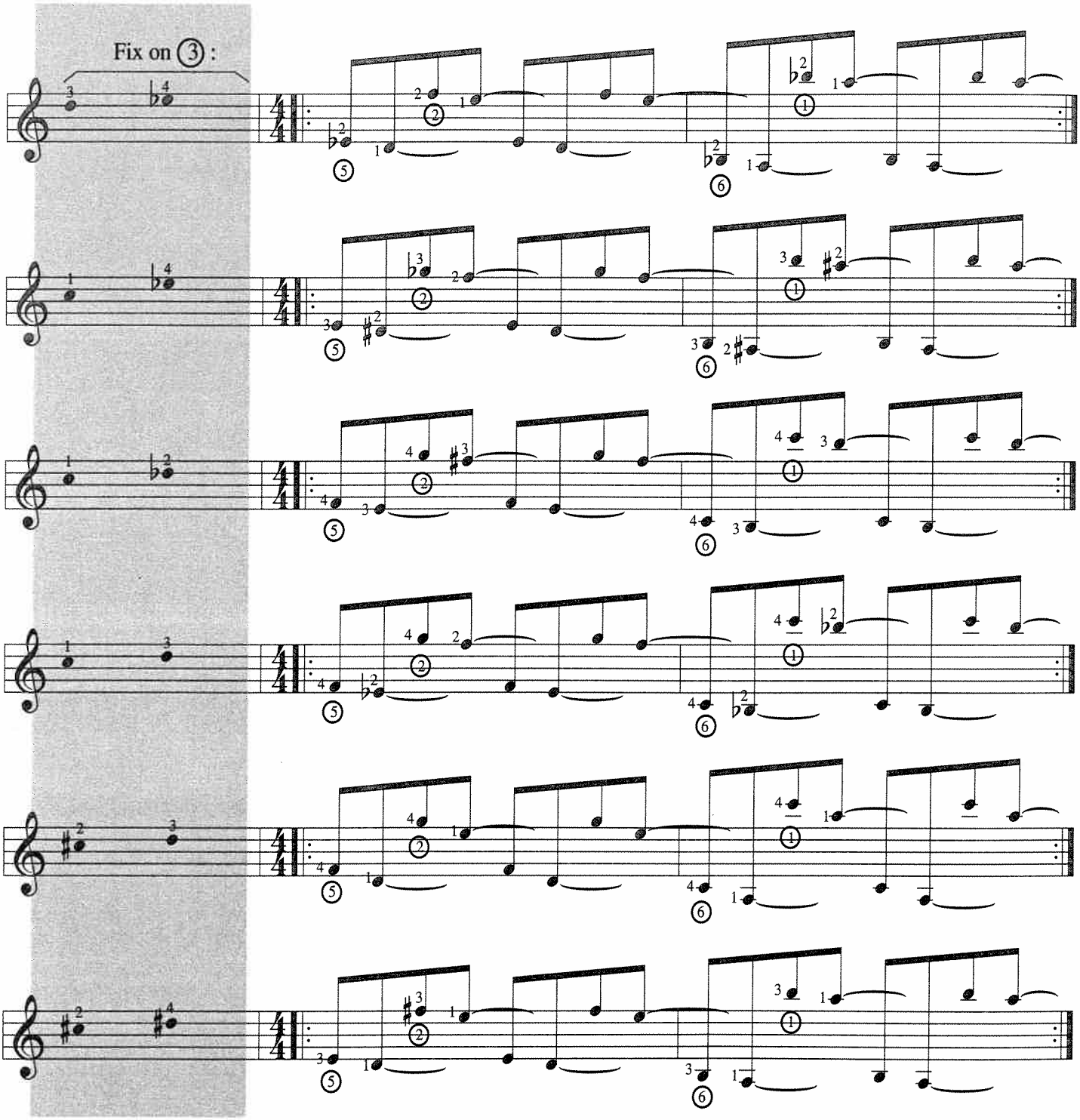
#1

Put down or "fix" the fingers indicated on the third string. Play the notes indicated with the free finger. It always helps me to think of the fixed fingers as being rooted to the very back of the neck, and the free finger as being as light as a feather. I also prefer practicing these in the fifth position, where the frets are closer together and the horizontal reach is easier and therefore less fatiguing over an extended period of time.



#2

Now we will deal with moving two fingers and fixing two fingers. The same principles apply here: rooting the two fixed fingers through to the back of the neck, while keeping the two movable fingers as light as possible. You'll find there's more potential for strain here, so take it slow and focus on the stretch as you extend your fingers, and then on the opposing motion as they pass each other. Finally, sustain the second bass-note as your next finger travels up to the treble, and then hold the second treble-note as you switch to the bass, etc.

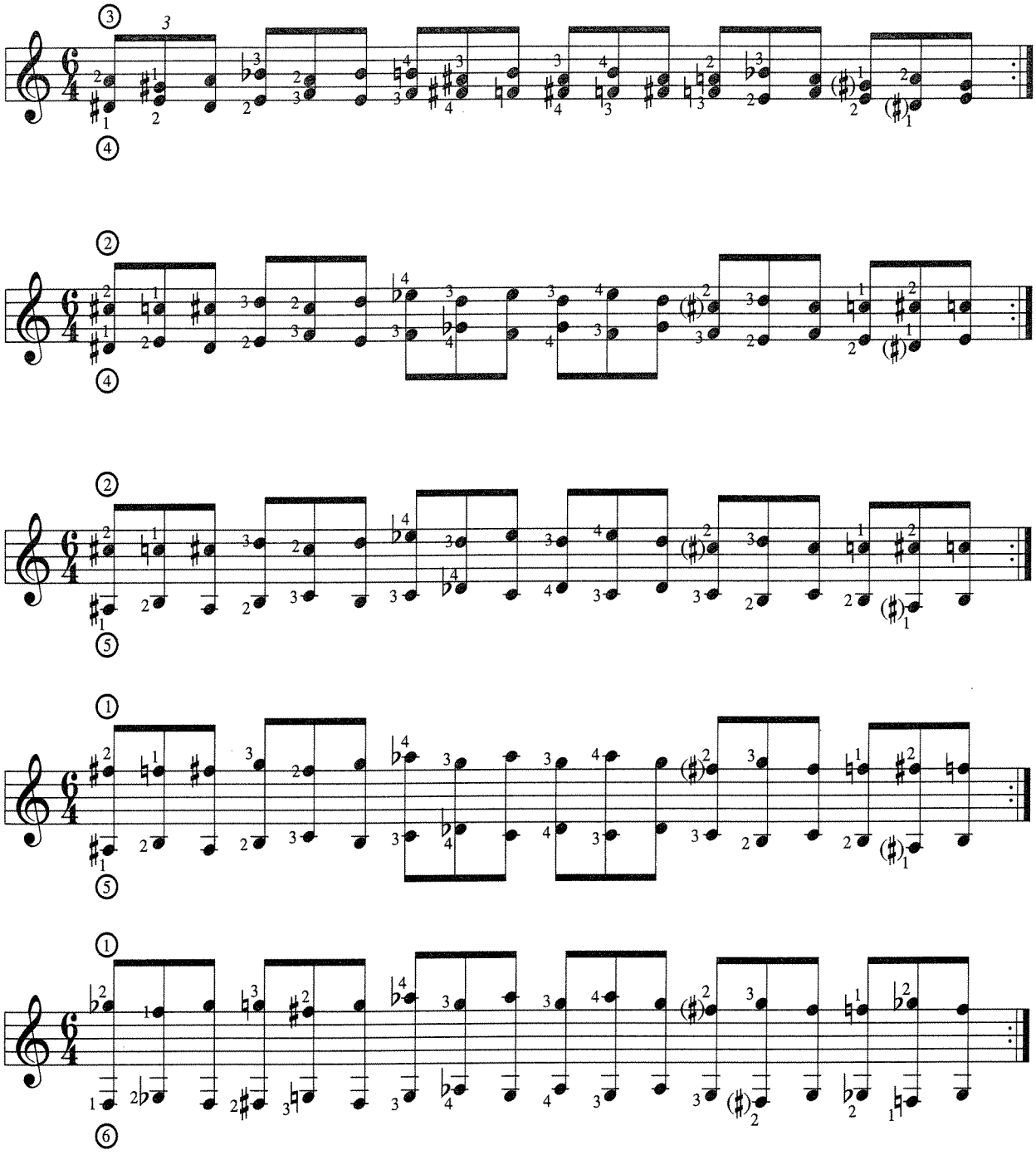


#3 - Opposing Motion

You should practice this exercise two ways:

First, play each one *staccato,* with all the notes detached. Let the fingers of your left hand feel the spring upward between fingering changes. Remember not to spring upward any higher than one inch. After your fingers release the notes, instantly place them right above the next two notes. Take your time and play through each variation this way.

The next step is to play them as *legato* as possible, without a noticeable gap between the notes. To do this, stay on the strings until the last possible instant. Visualize your fingers going to the next two notes, then switch.



#4- Horizontal Character Builders

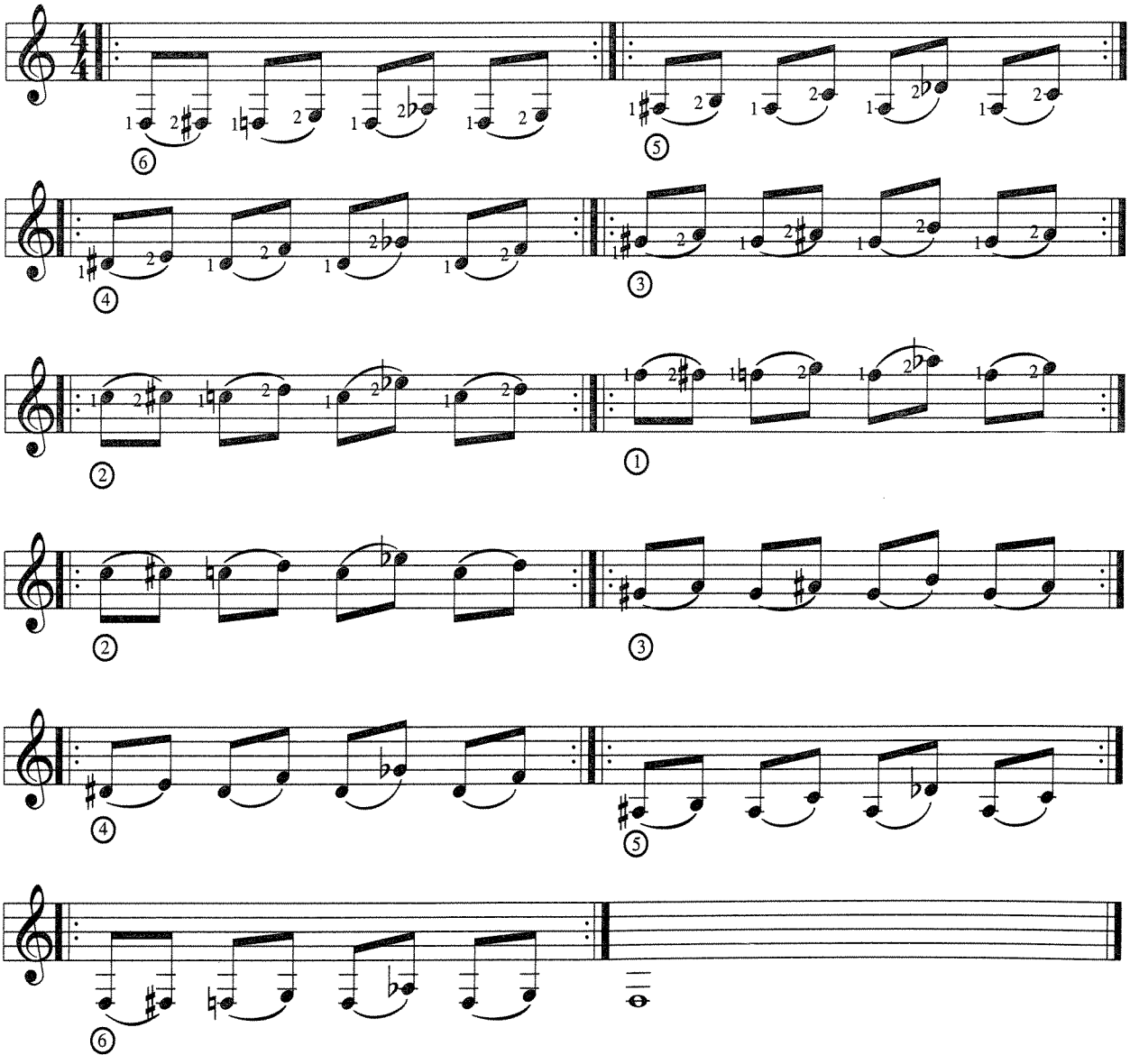
It's exercises such as this one that earned this book its title. We're focusing on several things during this next set. First of all, because they're slurs we have to make sure we play them cleanly and with the proper snap. Try to make each one sound clearly. Relaxing or emptying out each finger when it lifts up is very important. Since you're extending your finger across the strings at practically the same moment you're lifting it, there is less time to empty it. This is why I insist that you begin slowly. Start with a metronome setting of ♪ = 60!

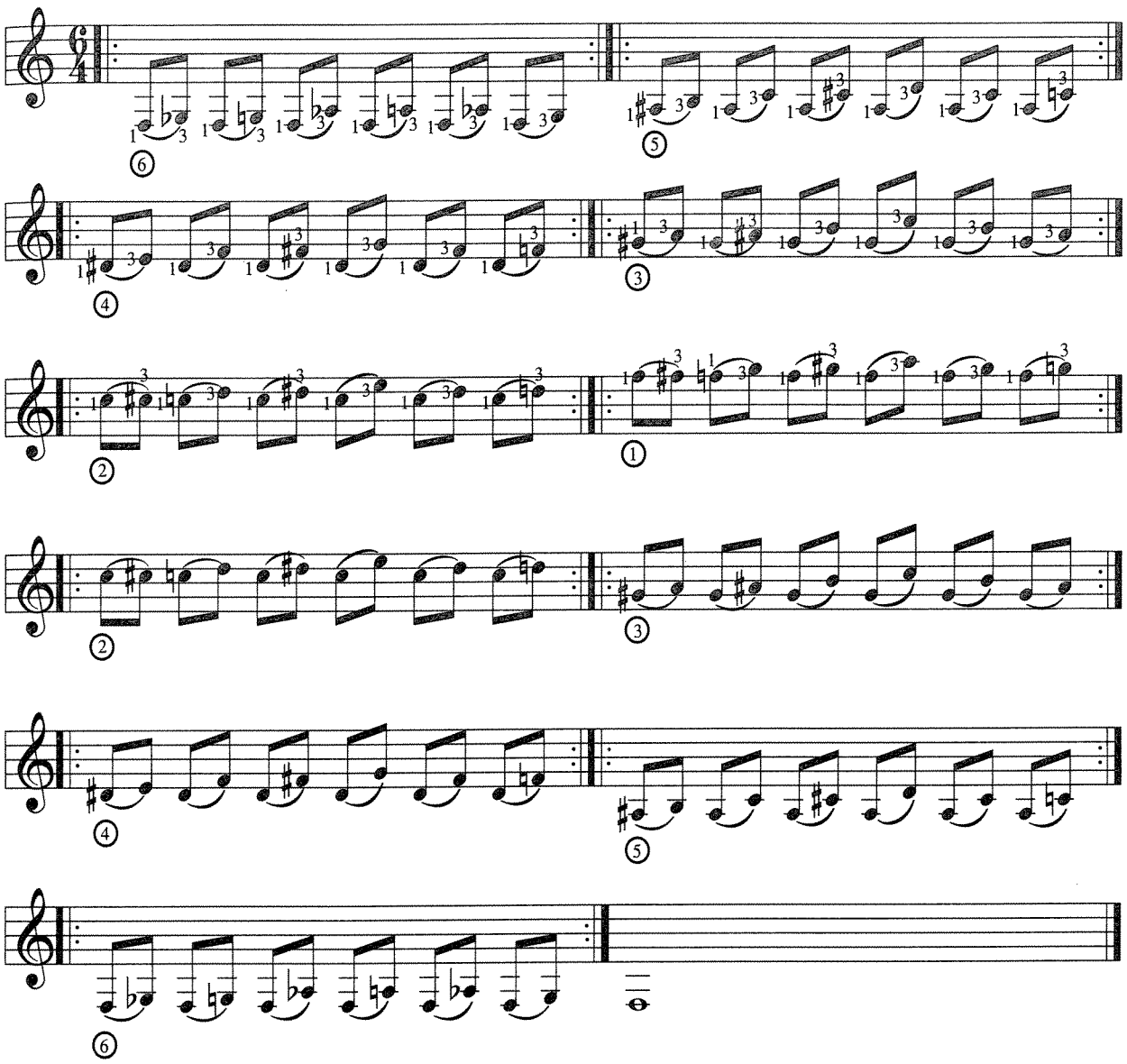
We also need to concentrate on extending the fingers. Try to position each finger over its next note right away. Play slowly, but move quickly.

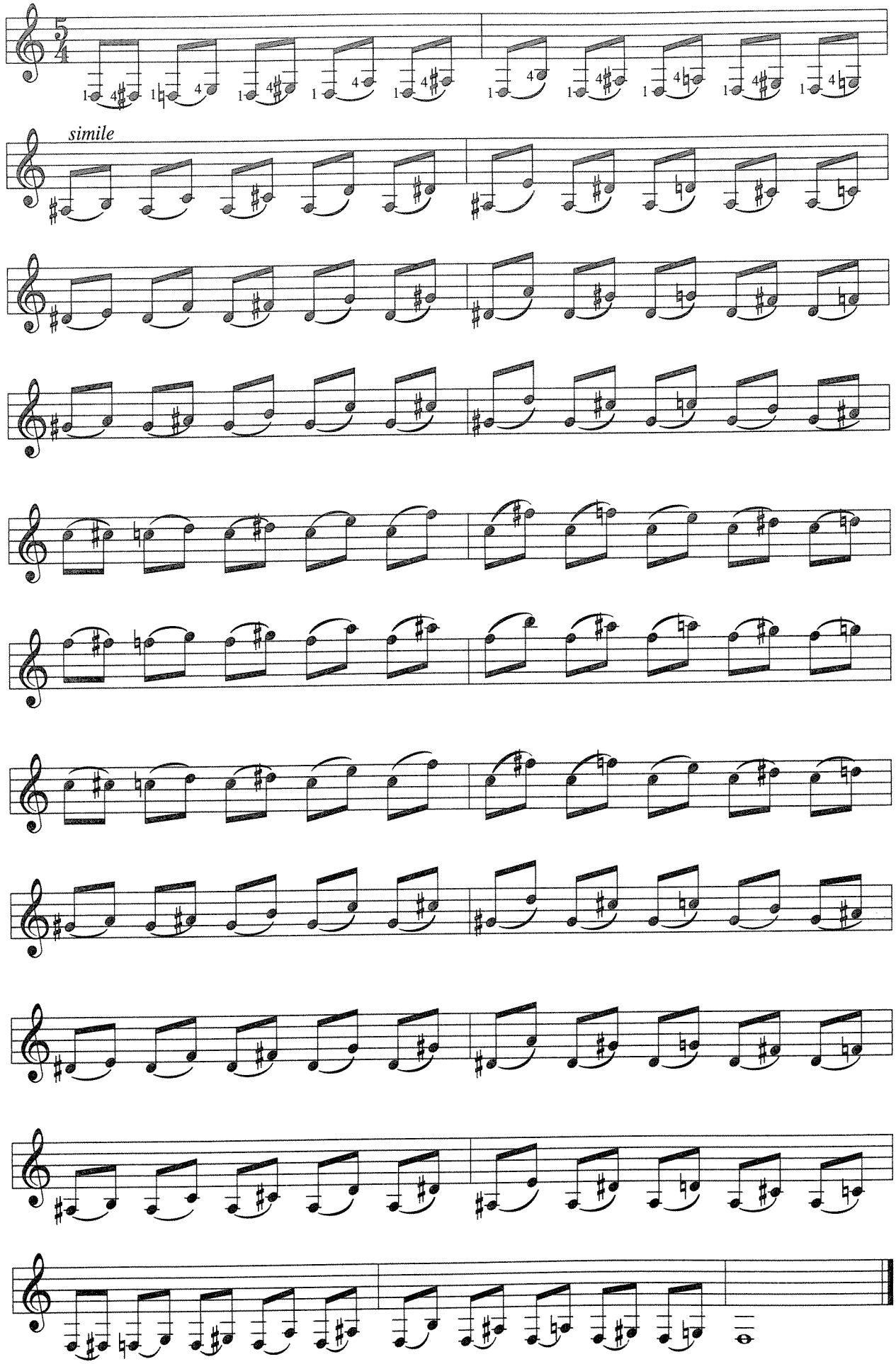
IMPORTANT: If you feel any pain in your hand, wrist, or forearm, stop and rest! Of course, try to distinguish between pain and a little fatigue. The whole point of these exercises is to strengthen your hand, increase stamina and work certain muscles that may not have been worked before. Your hand will be a little tired after each exercise, and this is normal. Pain, however, is not normal, and the only way to get rid of it is to stop playing.

I also suggest you rest for five minutes or more between each exercise until the fatigued feeling goes away. Then you can start again. Either go on to the next one or repeat the one you've just done. If you feel that a particular stretch is impossible for you, skip it. You'll be able to do it in time.

Begin at ♪ = 60



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#5 - *Odair's Favorite Drill*

I'm not really certain that this is his *favorite*, but I did borrow it from Odair Assad and his brother Sergio when they suggested that a student practice this a lot during one of their master classes. It's self-explanatory. Just make sure you hold down the notes where indicated.