

# CLARA ROCKMORE METHOD FOR THEREMIN



Revised Transcription by  
David Miller &  
Jeffrey McFarland-Johnson

## Introduction to the New Edition

Clara Rockmore began her musical life playing the violin. At four, she was the youngest student ever to be admitted to the famed St. Petersburg Conservatory. There she began her studies with Leopold Auer, teacher of Jascha Heifetz and Efrem Zimbalist. She concertized with her sister, Nadia Reisenberg, until the age of nineteen, when an injury to her arm forced her to give up the violin. The end of one career was the beginning of another. She soon took to another instrument; using principles and philosophies learned from Auer, her incredible natural abilities enabled her to devise a technique for playing a new and unique instrument, the **theremin**.

With this technique, Rockmore soon established herself as *the* premier virtuoso of the instrument. Had it not been for Rockmore's Theremin-built instrument (as opposed to the RCA theremin), her technique could not have been developed to the extent that it was. Theremins of that day were quite slow to respond to the finer nuances of dynamic shading (loud and softness) and lacked the range (five octaves) of her instrument. Her collaboration with Prof. Theremin not only created an instrument with an improved response and range, it also created the tone we now associate with better theremins.

One difficulty encountered by Rockmore when teaching students was that of transferring what could be done on her instrument, to the student's instrument. It would be many years before other theremins possessed the qualities of the Rockmore theremin.

Rockmore kept a busy schedule as a concert thereminist for several decades, performing not only original pieces composed for the instrument, but transcriptions of cello and violin works as well. Rockmore expended considerable effort legitimizing the theremin during an era when the instrument had been relegated to producing the spooky sound effects used in motion pictures. She paved a way for the modern musician of today. For that, we are all thankful. The theremin is first and foremost, a **musical** instrument.

With the advent of the keyboard synthesizer, the theremin almost slipped into oblivion. Though manufacturers such as Bob Moog (of MOOG™ synthesizer fame) still made an occasional theremin, it wasn't until the early 1990's that the theremin found itself back in the limelight. With the release of the documentary, **Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey**, a renewed interest in the instrument emerged. People who had never heard the word, *Theremin*, were drawn to the story, and those of us who had already been familiar with the instrument felt a closer bond. Our instrument's story was finally being told! The theremin was now *in*; soon companies would re-introduce theremins to the marketplace. The theremin had never really gone away, but one could not help but view this as a *comeback*.

It was during this time of renewed interest that Clara Rockmore began writing down her technique for future thereminists. The method book was called, **The Art of the Theremin**, and was dedicated to Bob Moog. Moog's company, Big Briar, Inc. (1-800-948-1990), has just released, **Clara Rockmore: The Greatest Theremin Virtuosa**, an excellent companion video to the method book.

The edition you are holding is an updated, **The Art of the Theremin**. The musical examples are easier to read, having been professionally set by Jeffrey McFarland-Johnson, and only the slightest changes were made to the actual text, where certain obvious grammatical errors had occurred within the original edition.

In accordance with Mrs. Rockmore's wishes, this new edition is distributed free of charge. It is my sincere hope that these pages will serve the reader well in establishing the technique needed to play the theremin.

David Miller

Shreveport, LA  
August 30, 1998

"But instruments do not make music: people do."

Max Rudolph  
(N.Y. Times, June 21, 1992)

Dedicated to my very special friend  
Dr. Robert Moog  
In appreciation of his continued  
Interest in promoting and reproducing  
The space-control theremin.

Clara Rockmore

A few suggestions for future "thereminists" – those who approach and welcome it, as yet another voice, with which to interpret **real music**, not a magic toy for producing strange and eerie **sounds**.

### **Less is more**

The very name of space-controlled ether-wave theremin should guide you. Don't forget your whole body is an electro-conductor, in the electro-magnetic field and it is therefore necessary to control the slightest motion – not only of hands and fingers. Any involuntary motion, such as the head or shoulders can interfere with pitch and volume.

### **You don't need hammers to work with air**

Don't forget that you are dealing with air! Think of your fingers as delicate butterfly wings, and you will get much further than if you use strength.

\* \* \*

It is of course advisable – even necessary – to first learn to read music and have at least elementary knowledge of theory – harmony etc., by starting music lessons on the piano – just as all violinists do.

You cannot point to a spot in the air and say, "Here is middle-C!"

### **IMPORTANT**

Be sure that no one passes by, as you are playing, and enters the electro-magnetic field **from the other side**, immediately affecting the performance.

### EXERCISE NO. 1

The first study in the relative distance between different intervals. To be played slowly – sliding from one note to the other, but with great care taken not to slide beyond the note. The left hand remains stationary. This exercise is to be practiced in different keys.

Hand in first position – forefinger resting on thumb.

### EXERCISE NO. 2

An important study to prevent the action of one hand affecting that of the other. To be played as slowly as possible – beginning each note pianissimo and slowly raising and then lowering the left hand on each note, at the same time being very careful to retain the correct pitch with the right hand.

### EXERCISE NO. 3

Further study to achieve greater freedom, speed and accuracy, in finding intervals of different distances. This exercise serves as an example. The most beneficial method would be having the student follow intervals given at random on the piano. Begin slowly and increase speed as the student becomes more advanced – always returning to slower tempo if the intonation is not pure.

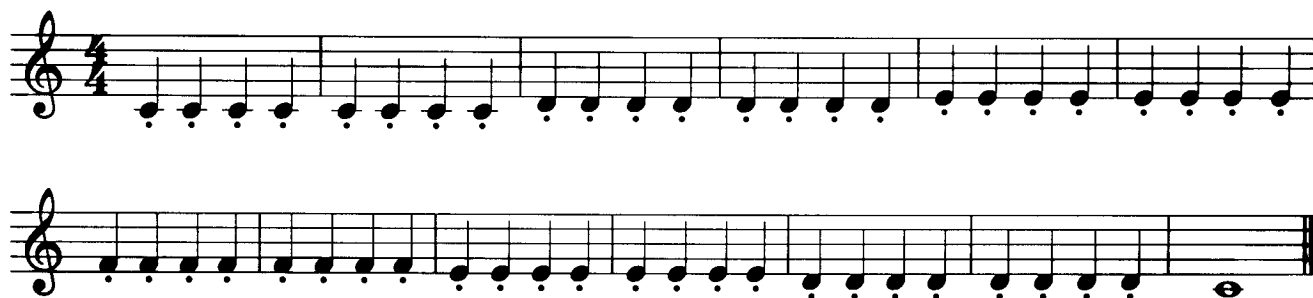


### EXERCISE NO. 4: STUDY FOR THE LEFT HAND

The left hand is to be raised and dropped sharply on each note – producing a staccato effect. To be practiced in different keys.

Use your left hand, as you would use a violin bow. All legato, staccato and various accents can be achieved with different motions of the hand or fingers.

First have a clear idea of what you want to say, and then logic will help you find the best way to achieve it.





## LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NOS. 5 & 6

Four staves of musical notation in 3/4 time, each ending with the word *etc.* The notation consists of eighth notes and quarter notes, some beamed together and some with slurs, illustrating legato and staccato variations.

### EXERCISE NO. 7

Further study in finger positions going from position 1 to position 3 directly.

1 pos. 3 pos. 1 pos. 3 pos. etc.

Five staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The notation includes slurs and fingerings (1, 3) indicating finger positions. The exercise involves moving from position 1 to position 3 directly.



### EXERCISE NO. 8

Same as exercise No. 7 only to be played staccato.

1 pos. 3 pos. 1 pos. 3 pos. etc.

3 1 etc.

### LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NOS. 7 & 8

1 pos. 3 pos. 1 pos. 3 pos. etc.

etc.

1 pos. 3 pos. 1 pos. 3 pos. etc.

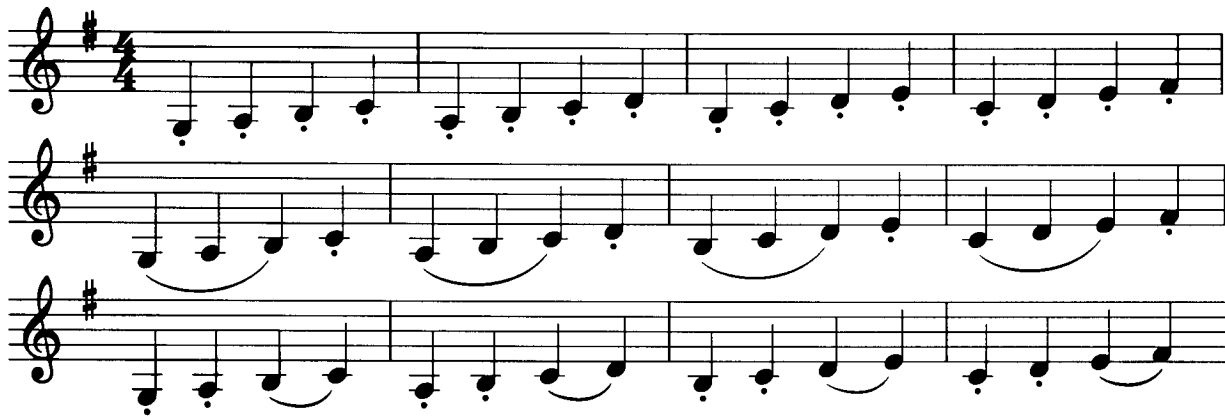
etc.

# EXERCISE NO. 9

Study in positions 1, 2, 3, and 4 also in half position. Half position is obtained by stretching the fingers to a half-tone distance.

The musical score consists of eight staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled "position" and "segue" with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The second staff continues the exercise with similar phrasing. The third staff shows a change in fingering to 4, 3, 2, 1. The fourth staff includes a "segue" marking and fingerings 4, 3, 2, 1. The fifth staff continues with the 4, 3, 2, 1 fingering. The sixth staff shows a change in fingering to 1, 2, 3, 4. The seventh staff continues with the 1, 2, 3, 4 fingering. The eighth staff concludes the exercise with a double bar line.

## LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NO. 9



etc.

etc.

etc.

This block contains three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, key of D major. The first staff shows a sequence of eighth notes with a staccato articulation. The second staff shows the same sequence with a legato articulation, indicated by slurs. The third staff shows a variation with slurs and staccato markings.

## EXERCISE NO. 10: OCTAVE STUDY

Finger position 1 to 4 is first played staccato. The same exercise is then practiced legato. The sound of the slide to be eliminated by opening the left hand while going from one note to another and closing it when the note is reached retaining even volume.



position 1 4 4 1 1 4 4 1 etc.

pos. 4 1 1 4 4 1 4 etc.

9

This block contains seven staves of musical notation for Exercise No. 10. The first staff is in 4/4 time and shows a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 4, 4, 1, 1, 4, 4, 1. The second staff shows the same sequence with fingerings 4, 1, 1, 4, 4, 1, 4. The remaining staves show the exercise in different positions and articulations. The page number 9 is located at the bottom right.

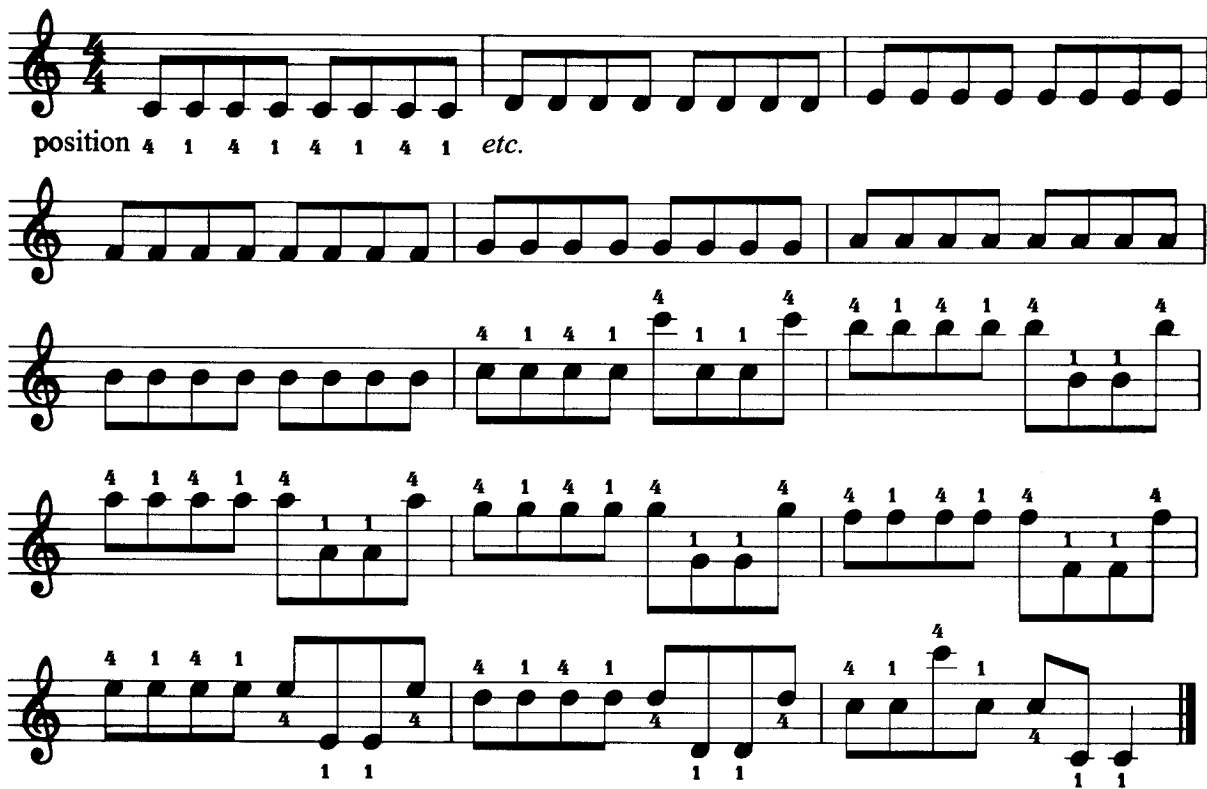
## VARIATION OF EXERCISE NO. 10



Musical notation for Variation of Exercise No. 10, featuring a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a sequence of eighth notes with slurs. The notation ends with the word *etc.*

## EXERCISE NO. 11

Advanced study in quick changes of position.



Musical notation for Exercise No. 11, featuring a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a sequence of eighth notes. The notation includes fingerings (4 and 1) and the word *etc.* below the first staff. The exercise consists of five staves of music, with fingerings indicated above and below the notes.

# EXERCISE NO. 12

Daily warm up exercise.

The musical score for Exercise No. 12 is written in 4/4 time and consists of eight staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It contains several measures with slurs and fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) above and below the notes. The second and third staves continue the exercise with slurs and ties. The fourth staff also features slurs and ties. The fifth staff includes slurs and fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) above and below the notes. The sixth, seventh, and eighth staves continue the exercise with slurs and ties. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

## VIBRATO

Very important to produce the desired tone quality.  
Forefinger of the right hand resting on the thumb and please, please  
not a wide vibrato, but as fast and as much **in place** as possible –  
not to be mistaken for a trill.

A trill should not be a wide vibrato, but a very exact, either half- or  
whole-tone, distance.

Avoid constant vibrato, allowing areas without it, as the music dictates.

\* \* \*

When ready to try to make music, start with easy pieces.

Example: **The Swan** – C. Saint-Saëns  
**Air on the G-String** – J.S. Bach

\* \* \*

Now, the quality of the sound is all-important – mold it with a **beautiful vibrato** and **beautiful phrasing**.

The choice of “positioning” your right arm or fingers will depend entirely  
on your musical phrasing, so always be prepared for the direction that  
the music is going.

Try all alternatives, of arm at rest and fingers forward or back, or arm  
forward or back, with fingers either together or stretched forward or  
back as the music dictates.

## PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Connect the instrument first and let it warm up, about fifteen minutes, before tuning.

Tune to your own body capacity. I found it, for myself, to be the G – below middle-C – giving me three + octaves up to the vertical rod and one + octave down toward myself.

The range of each newly built instrument may be different.

In searching for material, in the vast libraries for voice and other various instruments, suitable for the theremin, remember that in fast passages close intervals are possible, not so for passages easy for the violin, the “over the string” ones.

In playing, develop the daring of a diver in reaching wide jumps without any sliding – always aiming not only for the **desired note**, but the **very center** of the note.

When performing as soloist with a symphony orchestra, make sure at the rehearsal that your instrument is placed accordingly to insure that neither the bows of the first violins, nor the baton of the conductor, can possibly intrude in your magic electro-magnetic circle.

A sample of what level of difficulty I was able to perform on the theremin:

**Schelomo** – E. Bloch, for cello and orchestra, played with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra in Philadelphia.

**Sonata for violin and piano** – C. Franck, performed with my sister, Nadia Reisenberg (all four movements) in recital at Town Hall, New York.

**Concerto for theremin and orchestra** – in three movements by Anis Fuleihan, performed with the New York Symphony in New York with Leopold Stokowski (who commissioned the work especially for me) conducting. This composition was subsequently performed with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Alexander Hilsberg conducting and with the New York Philharmonic at the Lewison Stadium, New York.

Now – take it further, with all my blessings, and may the theremin remain – yet another voice – in the world of music.