

Douglas Niedt's

GUITAR TECHNIQUE TIP OF THE MONTH

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"



(Doug subtitled his Tech Tip as "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!)



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Conquering Guitar Acrophobia: Playing in the High Positions Past the 12th Fret

By Douglas Niedt

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Sometimes a piece of music takes us into the stratosphere—up into the area of the fretboard above the 12th fret. It doesn't happen frequently. But when it does, it is very important that your hand be stable and that the fingers are able to move freely and precisely amongst those very narrow frets. It is also a region where the action of the guitar (height of the strings above the fretboard) can be rather high. Although there aren't very many passages that go into that high region, those that do are usually very exposed. Just the fact that the notes being played are very high in pitch means that they are extremely noticeable within the musical context. Here is a good example:

Example #1: *Gymnopedie No. 1* (Erik Satie)

Transcribed by Christopher Parkening

The image displays a musical score for guitar, transcribed by Christopher Parkening. It consists of five staves of music, all in the key of G major (one sharp). The notation includes various chords, arpeggios, and melodic lines with specific fingering instructions (1-4) and circled numbers (2, 3). Performance markings include 'II' and 'VII' above the first and second staves, and 'Harmonic 5th string 12th fret' below the fourth staff. The score is written in a standard guitar notation style with a treble clef and a 6/8 time signature.

🎧 [Listen to the passage played by Christopher Parkening.](#) (A separate window will open that you can minimize in order to still see the written musical example as you listen.)

There are three major points to keep in mind when playing notes in the upper region of the fretboard above the 12th fret.

1. There are two basic finger positions you can use:
 - A. Parallel-with-the-frets position
 - B. Slanted position (I often call it the violinist's finger position)
2. It is usually a good idea to allow the tip joint of the left-hand first finger to "collapse" or "give." The anatomical jargon is: mildly hyperextend the tip joint.
3. The lower side of the guitar's upper bout is "your friend." It is not an obstacle. Use it to give the left hand stability past the 12th fret.

FINGER POSITION

We use both the parallel-with-the-frets finger position and slanted finger position *below* the 12th fret all the time. But in a way, the decision of which position to use is even more critical past the 12th fret. The frets are much closer together and the height of the strings above the fretboard is much higher as we pass the 12th fret. The instrument is very unforgiving in this high region. Fingers must be placed precisely against the frets with firm pressure. Anything less results in buzzes or no sound at all and sometimes, total breakdown. And again, this is usually happening in a very exposed spot often at a climatic moment of a phrase, section, or even the entire piece.



[Watch as I demonstrate the two basic positions.](#)

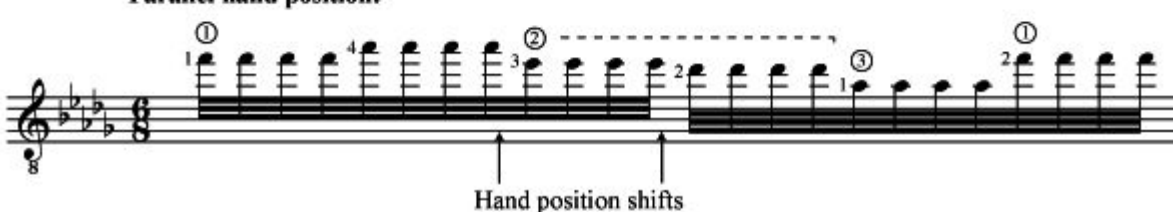
It is impossible to generalize which position is best for various situations. There are just too many variables not just in the music, but also with the hand and body anatomy of different players. In some instances the choice is very clear--only one position will work at all, so there will be no question.

Some passages could be done either way but one position may give a slight edge. Here is an example of that in the seventh variation of Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal*:

Example #2: *Nocturnal after John Dowland, Op. 70*
(Benjamin Britten)


VII. Gently rocking

Parallel hand position:



Hand position shifts

Slanted hand position:



No hand position shifts

The image shows two musical staves illustrating hand positions for a piano passage. The top staff, labeled 'Parallel hand position', shows a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1. A dashed line above the notes indicates a shift in hand position between the third and fourth notes. The bottom staff, labeled 'Slanted hand position', shows the same sequence of notes and fingerings, but the notes are slanted downwards from left to right, and a label below indicates 'No hand position shifts'.

 [Watch as I demonstrate both finger positions.](#)

In other passages a mix of both positions is required. Let's look again at the passage from Christopher Parkening's transcription of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*:

second finger to add stability when playing notes above the 12th fret, especially on the first string. By allowing the tip of the first finger to collapse, the string is pushed away from the edge of the fretboard. This also keeps the string from moving laterally during the execution of ornaments in high positions.

Here is a rather “dangerous” spot in Joaquin Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* with an ornament on the first string in the upper region of the fretboard:

Example #4: *Concierto de Aranjuez* (Joaquin Rodrigo)



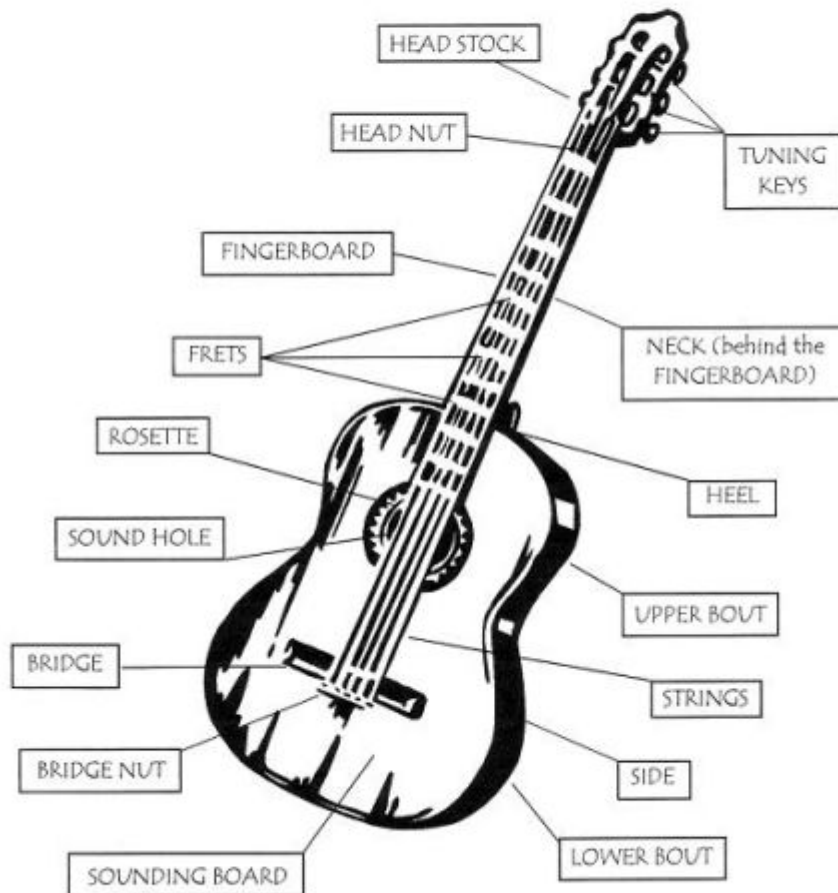
[Now watch as I demonstrate the hyperextension of the first finger and demonstrate its use in the above passage from Joaquin Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez*.](#)

THE UPPER BOUT IS YOUR FRIEND

One problem guitarists have in playing in the region past the 12th fret is figuring out where and how to position the left hand. It’s actually pretty simple most of the time.

First, let’s take a quick glance at guitar anatomy so we are all on the same page terminology-wise. Here is a diagram reproduced with the kind permission of the Music Educators National Conference. On the right side of the diagram just below “Heel” and just above “Strings” it says “Upper Bout.” That is the key part to which I am referring and is actually the lower side (closest to the floor) of the upper bout.

Parts of the Guitar



Don't look at the lower side of the upper bout as an obstacle. Don't think of it as being in the way. Instead, *use the lower side of the upper bout to give your hand stability*. You actually *want* to rest the heel of your hand on the lower side of the upper bout when playing in the upper positions past the 12th fret. (And whatever you do, don't purchase a nylon string guitar with a cutaway unless it's amplified and is to be used in pop groups or in clubs—they sound pretty awful).

Here is a passage from Alexandre Tansman's *Mazurka* in the upper region of the fretboard:

Example #5: *Mazurka* (Alexandre Tansman)

Musical notation for Example #5: *Mazurka* (Alexandre Tansman). The notation shows a treble clef, a 3/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piece is in 3/4 time. The notation includes a bass line with eighth notes and a treble line with chords. The chords are labeled XIV(2), XV(2), XIII(2), XII(2), and XI(2). The bass line starts with a 4 and 1, then a 2, and then a 1. The treble line has chords at the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th frets.



[Now watch as I demonstrate how the upper bout is your very best friend.](#)

Sometimes the difficulty of playing past the 12th fret is not so much playing in the upper regions of the fretboard but in *getting* there from the lower positions. Guitarists have problems adjusting their hand and wrist position as they approach the 12th fret and lower side of the upper bout.

The trick is how to change the position of the hand from its close-in-to-the-neck placement for normal playing below the 12th fret to the new position it must assume for playing past the 12th fret. The hand must *gradually* move away from the neck as it ascends towards and past the 12th fret. As the hand moves away from the neck and ascends on its shift, it should glide smoothly onto the lower side of the upper bout for support. The process is reversed as you shift back down below the 12th fret for normal playing.



[It's easier to show to you than describe. And here is a great little exercise to use to learn how to make the transition from positions below the 12th fret to positions above the 12th fret and the reverse. Watch.](#)

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Left-Hand Thumb Position

The position of the left-hand thumb when playing in the upper regions past the 12th fret will be very different from how it is positioned when playing below the 12th fret. There are two primary positions of the thumb in the upper regions of the fretboard. The choice of which position to use is for the most part dependent on whether the fingers will be in the parallel-with-the-frets position or in the slanted position. Aside from that broad generalization, exactly how the thumb is positioned depends greatly upon the passage being played, the size of the

player's hand, and length of the fingers.

BE CERTAIN THE THUMB IS IN CONTACT WITH SOME PART OF THE GUITAR AT ALL TIMES! Never play with the thumb dangling in midair.



[Watch as I demonstrate the variation of the left-hand thumb position.](#)

"Body English"

Upper body and left-shoulder position will also vary from player to player when executing passages past the 12th fret. Whether the upper torso leans forward, to the left, or whether the left shoulder dips down or stays even with the right shoulder will depend on the player's anatomy, small differences in the shape of the guitar's body, and even the size of the guitar in relation to the size of the player's body. For stability's sake, the ideal would be to not vary the sitting position at all. But it would be a big mistake to adhere to a strict "the body must not move" rule if it just doesn't work for a particular player or for a particular musical passage.

So my friends, guitar acrophobia is easily conquered:

1. Choose the appropriate finger/hand position
2. Use tip-joint hyperextension
3. Make the upper bout your very best friend
4. *Smoothly* adjust the left-hand position as it approaches or leaves the upper bout
5. Be sure the thumb is in the best place for the finger/hand position you are using
6. Experiment with "body English"

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