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How to Master the Tremolo Part 3

By Douglas Niedt

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The Short Version

This page is for those readers who want a succinct summary of the tech tip—the “Just the facts, ma’am” types.

Only after the right hand alone is well on its way to mastery, should you begin to incorporate the left hand into your tremolo practice.

When playing in one fretboard position (no shifts) three methods may be used by the left hand to change from one melody note to another. One produces non-musical artifacts and therefore sounds sloppy. Another produces a clear break between changes of the melody note. The third produces a seamless, very beautiful connected melody.

The most difficult aspect of incorporating the left hand into the tremolo is that of maintaining an even tremolo when making a shift with the left hand. A great deal of muscular effort is exerted when making a shift. Sudden muscular efforts and movements in the left arm and hand tend to transfer tension to the right hand and fingers producing glitches in the tremolo movements. *The result can be unevenness of rhythm, a sudden emphasis of one finger, or failing to pluck a particular note in the tremolo entirely.* I explain how to develop complete independence between the left-hand shift movements and the right-hand tremolo pattern to fix this problem.

A common problem with shifts is moving the left hand at the shift point *before the right hand plays its final note.* In one’s haste to execute the shift in time to land on the next note, the left hand begins to move before the right hand plays the last note of the tremolo pattern (usually with “i”). The note doesn’t sound at all, is cut short, or is plucked while not being held down, tightly producing a click. I explain how to eliminate this problem.

To eliminate string squeaks on shifts, lift the finger (or fingers) off the wound bass string at the same time that “i” plucks the final note in the tremolo pattern. In other words, lift off the wound strings right before the shift occurs.

If one plays shifts while keeping the fingers tightly down on the strings, sliding sounds or glissandi (plural of glissando) are produced. In some romantic style tremolo pieces such as *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, these sounds may be desirable. If you wish to eliminate these sounds, lift the finger off the string as the thumb plays. Or more commonly, release the pressure but keep the finger resting lightly on the string.

Okay, now man up and read the full version.

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PART III: INCORPORATING THE LEFT HAND

We have used the left hand on a limited basis for the previous exercises. But it has been a stationary partner, holding intervals at various spots on the neck so the right hand could get used to different string tensions. You haven't practiced chord changes or melody note changes. Now it's time to begin fully using both hands together. Why wait until now?

First, practicing the tremolo requires intense focus on the right-hand finger movements and very focused listening. Left-hand movements and position changes would be a distraction. Secondly, movements of the left hand can affect the movements of the right hand. Shifts can cause a sympathetic tensing of right hand and right-hand finger muscles resulting in glitches in the tremolo. Once the right-hand-alone exercises are solid, problems with incorporating the left hand can be mastered more successfully.

The three ways to change from one left-hand finger to another in one fretboard position (no shift)

The following little chromatic exercise snippet (which is actually a part of the James Bond *Goldfinger* movie theme) provides a good example of the three ways to change from one finger to another in a passage with no shifts.

This discussion assumes you are not planting the “a” finger on the string carrying the melody when the thumb plucks the bass string. If you do use planting, you can use any of the three methods of placing the fingers. There will be no difference in sound between the three methods since you are muting the sound as the thumb plucks.

Example #40 shows the passage as written:

Example #40

From *Goldfinger/James Bond* (John Barry)

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Example #40. Each system consists of a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a guitar-specific staff below it. The first system includes the letters 'a m i' above the first measure and a 'p' dynamic marking below the first measure. The second system continues the notation without these markings. The notation shows a sequence of notes and rests, with some notes marked with '0' or '2' in the guitar staff, indicating fret positions.

The first method is probably how most players would naturally play the passage. It sounds as notated in example #41:

Example #41

From *Goldfinger/James Bond* (John Barry)

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Example #41, identical to Example #40 but with annotations. The first system has three annotations: 'Ghost note "hammer-on" produced by placing 1st finger here' pointing to the first measure, 'Ghost note "hammer-on" produced by placing 2nd finger here' pointing to the second measure, and 'Ghost note "pull-off" produced by lifting 2nd finger here' pointing to the third measure. The second system has four annotations: 'Ghost note "pull-off" produced by lifting 1st finger here' pointing to the first measure, 'Ghost note "hammer-on" produced by placing 1st finger here' pointing to the second measure, 'Ghost note "hammer-on" produced by placing 2nd finger here' pointing to the third measure, and 'Ghost note "pull-off" produced by lifting 2nd finger here' pointing to the fourth measure.

The ghost notes are notes you don't actually pluck but yet are audible as the result of placing and lifting the left-hand fingers on the beats *before the right hand finger actually plucks them*. I think they make the passage sound a little sloppy.

The second method of playing the James Bond theme requires more conscious effort and control and sounds as notated in example #42:

Example #42

From *Goldfinger/James Bond* (John Barry)

The image displays two musical staves, each with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The top staff begins with a bass clef and a common time signature (C) on the left, with a 'p' dynamic marking. The bottom staff also begins with a bass clef and a common time signature (C) on the left, with a 'p' dynamic marking. Both staves show a sequence of notes with various fingerings indicated by numbers 1 and 2. Annotations with arrows point to specific notes and fingerings, explaining why ghost notes are not produced. The top staff has three annotations: 'No ghost note produced because 1st finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '1'), 'No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '2'), and 'No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is lifted as 1st finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '1' and '2'). The bottom staff has four annotations: 'No ghost note produced because 1st finger is lifted and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '1'), 'No ghost note produced because 1st finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '1'), 'No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '2'), and 'No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is lifted as 1st finger is placed and note plucked here' (pointing to a note with '1' and '2').

Top Staff Annotations:

- No ghost note produced because 1st finger is placed and note plucked here
- No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is placed and note plucked here
- No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is lifted as 1st finger is placed and note plucked here

Bottom Staff Annotations:

- No ghost note produced because 1st finger is lifted and note plucked here
- No ghost note produced because 1st finger is placed and note plucked here
- No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is placed and note plucked here
- No ghost note produced because 2nd finger is lifted as 1st finger is placed and note plucked here

Staff Labels:

- Top Staff: B rings over, C rings over, C# rings over
- Bottom Staff: C rings over, B rings over, C rings over, C# rings over

This method of playing produces a more pleasing effect. No sound artifacts are produced by placing and lifting fingers out of sync with the right hand. The result is a pristine, continuous melody above the bass.

Watch the video, listen carefully.

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To learn the basics of this technique practice each possible finger combination individually. The combinations are: open-1st finger, open-2nd finger, open to 3rd finger, open to 4th finger, 1st-2nd, 1st-3rd, 1st-4th, 2nd-3rd, 2nd-4th, and 3rd-4th. Practice on the 2nd string in different areas of the fretboard. As in the second James Bond example (example #42), tie the notes together as shown in example #43:

Example #43

Open to 1st finger

Musical notation for 'Open to 1st finger'. The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 8/8. The melody consists of five measures of eighth-note patterns, each starting with a half note followed by six eighth notes. The notes are: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass line consists of five measures, each with a half note followed by a quarter note. The notes are: G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3. The first measure of the bass line has a '3' below the notes, and the second measure has a '2' below the notes. The notation ends with 'etc.' and a fermata over the final note.

Open to 2nd finger

Musical notation for 'Open to 2nd finger'. The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 8/8. The melody consists of five measures of eighth-note patterns, each starting with a half note followed by six eighth notes. The notes are: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass line consists of five measures, each with a half note followed by a quarter note. The notes are: G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3. The first measure of the bass line has a '3' below the notes, and the second measure has a '2' below the notes. The notation ends with 'etc.' and a fermata over the final note.

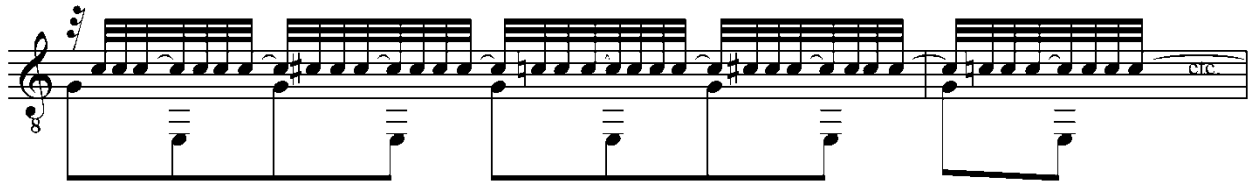
Open to 3rd finger

Musical notation for 'Open to 3rd finger'. The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 8/8. The melody consists of five measures of eighth-note patterns, each starting with a half note followed by six eighth notes. The notes are: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass line consists of five measures, each with a half note followed by a quarter note. The notes are: G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3. The first measure of the bass line has a '3' below the notes, and the second measure has a '2' below the notes. The notation ends with 'etc.' and a fermata over the final note.

Open to 4th finger

Musical notation for 'Open to 4th finger'. The notation is on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 8/8. The melody consists of five measures of eighth-note patterns, each starting with a half note followed by six eighth notes. The notes are: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass line consists of five measures, each with a half note followed by a quarter note. The notes are: G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3, G3, Bb3. The first measure of the bass line has a '3' below the notes, and the second measure has a '2' below the notes. The notation ends with 'etc.' and a fermata over the final note.

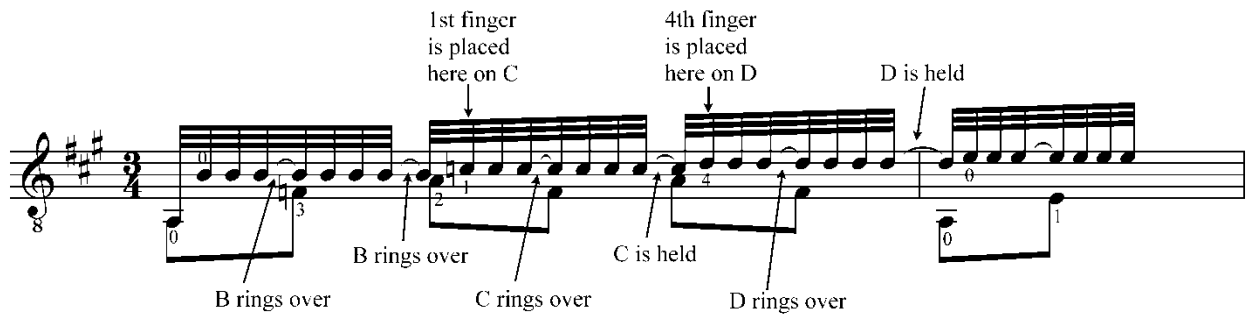
1st finger to 2nd finger



Proceed to practice the rest
of the possible combinations:
1-3, 1-4, 2-3, 2-4, 3-4

This technique which connects the melody notes seamlessly is very helpful in pieces such as Francisco Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. For instance, the melody from measure 40 to 41 can sound beautifully seamless when executed correctly as notated in example #44:

Example #44 Measure #40 *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*
Seamless execution of melody



Watch me demonstrate example #44 in this video:

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Example #45 shows another example from *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* in measures 21 through 23:

Example #45 Measure #21-23 *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*
Seamless execution of melody

The image displays two staves of musical notation for measures 21-23 of *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. The notation is in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time. The first staff covers measures 21 and 22, and the second staff covers measures 22 and 23. The melody consists of eighth-note runs. The bass line is indicated by numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, and 1 below the notes. Annotations include: 'E rings over' (four times), 'D rings over', 'C# rings over' (two times), 'D rings over', and 'E rings over'. Specific technique notes include: '2nd finger is placed here on D', 'D is still held down', '2nd finger is lifted and bar is placed here', '2nd finger is placed here on D', '2nd finger is lifted off D here', and 'II (4)'. A circled '4' is also present near the second measure of the second staff.

Watch my video demonstrating this passage.

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The third way of changing from finger to finger is to lift the finger entirely off the string or release the pressure off the string (but with the finger still resting lightly on the string) as the thumb plucks. This method is shown in example #46.

Example #46

This produces a clean break between changes of the melody note.

Maintaining an even tremolo when executing shifts with the left hand

The most difficult aspect of incorporating the left hand into the tremolo is that of maintaining an even tremolo when making a shift with the left hand. As I mentioned above, a great deal of muscular effort is exerted when making a shift. Sudden muscular efforts and movements in the left arm and hand tend to transfer tension to the right hand and fingers producing glitches in the tremolo movements. *The result can be unevenness of rhythm, a sudden emphasis of one finger, or failing to pluck a particular note in the tremolo entirely.*

Our goal is to develop complete independence between the left-hand shift movements and the right-hand tremolo pattern.

To get started, try doing the next exercise in example #47 without plucking any strings. Simply hold the right hand in position ready to play as you make the shifts:

Example #47

"Play" the exercise left-hand alone. Hold right hand poised in position to play.

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As the left hand makes its rapid shifts, the right hand should be relaxed. There should be no tightening or clenching of muscles in the right shoulder, arm, elbow, hand, or fingers.

Next, continue making the shifting movements with the left hand but place “pima” lightly on their strings. Once again, you should feel no tensing of any muscles of the right shoulder, arm, elbow, hand, or fingers. None of the fingers or thumb should dig into the strings.

Next, practice with both hands, beginning with short shifts of one fret and gradually increasing the distance. Use a variety of finger and string combinations. Ignore string squeaks. Begin slowly and *maintain constant vigilance on the feel of the right hand*. This may be difficult to do at first since the natural thing to do is to focus on the left hand which is executing seemingly far more acrobatic feats than the right. But you want to focus on the feel of the right hand, keeping it relaxed and unaffected by the sudden strenuous movements of the left hand. Monitor everything—the right shoulder, arm, elbow, wrist, hand, and fingers. Note how they feel when you stay on one chord. Then, try to maintain that exact feel of relaxation and ease in the tremolo pattern as you execute a series of shifts.

The repetition patterns shown in examples #48 and #49 are very useful. They can be practiced holding different intervals on many combinations of strings and fingerings.

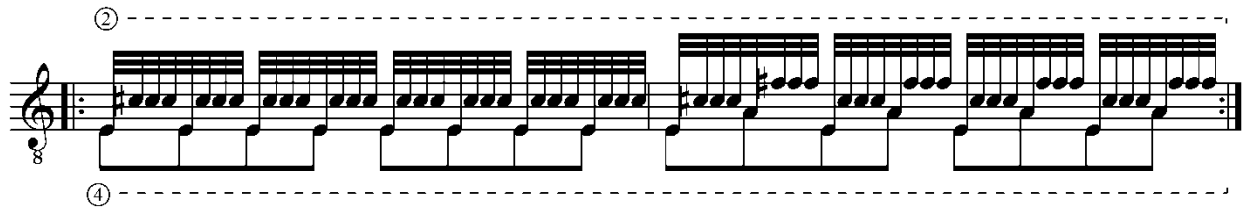
Example #48

The image shows two musical examples in treble clef, 8/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Both examples feature a bass line of quarter notes and a treble line of tremolos.

Example 1 (top): Labeled "4 repetitions of each interval" and "3 repetitions of each interval". It consists of two measures. The first measure has a bass line of E4, F#4, G4, A4 and a treble line of tremolo on E4. The second measure has a bass line of F#4, G4, A4, B4 and a treble line of tremolo on F#4. Dashed lines with circled numbers 2 and 4 indicate the interval between the bass and treble lines.

Example 2 (bottom): Labeled "2 repetitions of each interval" and "Each interval played only once". It consists of two measures. The first measure has a bass line of E4, F#4, G4, A4 and a treble line of tremolo on E4. The second measure has a bass line of F#4, G4, A4, B4 and a treble line of tremolo on F#4.

Example #49



I strongly recommend using the software program *Transcribe!* (described in Part 1) to monitor the effectiveness of your practice. It is very difficult to really listen to what is coming out of your guitar when you are practicing shifts. Your attention is diverted by the mechanics of executing the shift at just the same moment when you should be focused entirely on your sound. Using *Transcribe!* takes care of this conundrum very effectively. Record a passage and then play it back at half speed or slower. Listen to the quality of the tremolo at the moment of the shift.

Watch this riveting video.



Don't leave the last note behind

A common problem, and one you may notice you have in the preceding shifting exercises is this: when it is time to shift, the left hand moves *before the right hand plays its final note*. In one's haste to execute the shift in time to land on the next note, the left hand begins to move before the right hand plays the last note of the tremolo pattern (usually with "i"). The note doesn't sound at all, is cut short, or is plucked while not being tightly held down, producing a click. See example #50:

Example #50

Last note of tremolo pattern played before left-hand shift is at risk of not being played clearly or cut short.

Practice examples #48 and #49 again, focusing on playing the last note before each shift. Getting the note to sound clearly is a matter of awareness of the problem and then syncing the hands together. Don't shift the left hand until the final note of the tremolo pattern is clearly heard.

This can even be a problem when no shift is involved. Example #51 shows a problematic spot in *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*.

Example #51

Recuerdos de la Alhambra, measure #31

The at risk note.

The 4th finger must move from the 2nd to the 3rd string. The final F# might not sound at all or get cut short if the 4th finger moves a split second too soon.

Once again, resolving the problem is done through awareness and hand synchronization. Using the software program *Transcribe!* (see Part 1) is also very helpful. Record the passage and then play it back at half speed or slower and listen to that last note.

Eliminating string squeaks when shifting on the wound bass strings

To eliminate string squeaks on shifts, lift the finger (or fingers) off the wound bass string at the same time that “i” plucks the final note in the tremolo pattern. In other words, lift right before the shift occurs as shown in example #52.

Example #52

Musical notation for Example #52. The notation shows a tremolo pattern in the right hand with fingerings p, a, m, i. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings 1, 2, 1, 2. Annotations include circled numbers 2 and 4, and arrows pointing to the end of the tremolo patterns with the text "Lift 1st finger here".

Example #53 shows a passage in *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* where this technique works very well to eliminate ugly squeaks from a shift.

Example #53

Recuerdos de la Alhambra, measures #29 and #30

Musical notation for Example #53. The notation shows a passage from *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, measures #29 and #30. The right hand has a tremolo pattern with fingerings p, a, m, i. The left hand has a bass line with fingerings 1, 3, 1, 3. Annotations include Roman numerals II and IV, and an arrow pointing to a shift with the text "Lift 3rd finger and tip of bar here".

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Watch this stunning video as I demonstrate how to eliminate string noises from shifts. If you stay awake for the whole clip, give yourself a prize.



Eliminating glissandi from the melody when shifting on treble strings

If one plays the shifts shown in example #54 keeping the fingers tightly down on both strings, sliding sounds or glissandi (glissandi is the plural of glissando) are produced.

Example #54

Musical notation for Example #54, showing a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The notation consists of a series of eighth-note tremolos on the treble strings. The first two measures are marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The third measure is marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The fourth measure is marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The fifth measure is marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The word 'Glissando' is written in a wavy line under the notes in the second, third, and fourth measures, indicating sliding sounds.

In many Romantic-style tremolo pieces such as *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, these sounds can be desirable. Example #55 contains an excerpt from *Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré. He specifically notates a glissando of this type. Notated glissandi abound in music by Barrios, Tárrega, Llobet, and others of the Romantic spirit.

Example #55

Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios (Barrios) measure #62

Musical notation for Example #55, showing a treble clef staff with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 3/4 time signature. The notation consists of a series of eighth-note tremolos on the treble strings. The first measure is marked with a circled '1' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The second measure is marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The third measure is marked with a circled '2' above the staff and a circled '4' below the staff. The word 'Notated intentional glissando' is written above the notes in the second measure, with an arrow pointing to the notes. The word 'Glissando' is written in a wavy line under the notes in the second measure.

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But, when you wish to eliminate these sounds, lift the finger off the string or release the pressure (but keep the finger resting lightly on the string) as the thumb plucks as shown in example #56.

Example #56

Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios (Barrios) measure #70

Release pressure off G#
here to prevent glissando

Watch as I demonstrate how to eliminate the glissando in example #56.



Final thoughts

In order to maintain an even tremolo—even in tempo, even loudness of each finger, even in tone quality, and proper balance between the thumb and fingers—it is essential to *gradually* incorporate the left-hand into the mix. The most difficult part of incorporating the left hand is to prevent it from upsetting the evenness of the tremolo during shifts. The final secrets of playing a tremolo with a pristine, continuous, and seamless melody are to pay attention to how you change from finger to finger. Be sure to tie the notes together and try to eliminate extraneous left-hand noises.

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