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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)

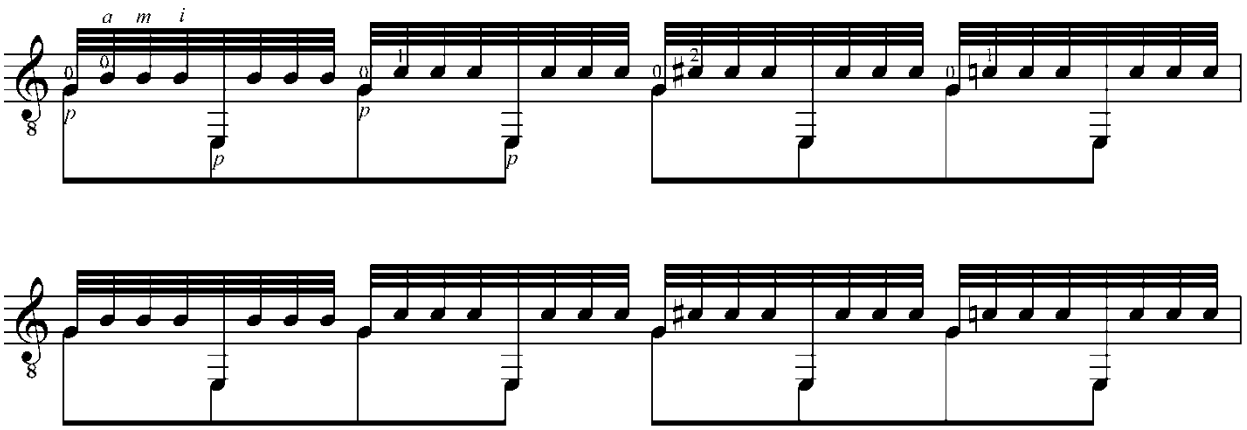
The following little chromatic exercise snippet (which is actually a part of the James Bond *Goldfinger* movie theme) provides a good example of the three ways to change from one finger to another in a passage with no shifts.

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

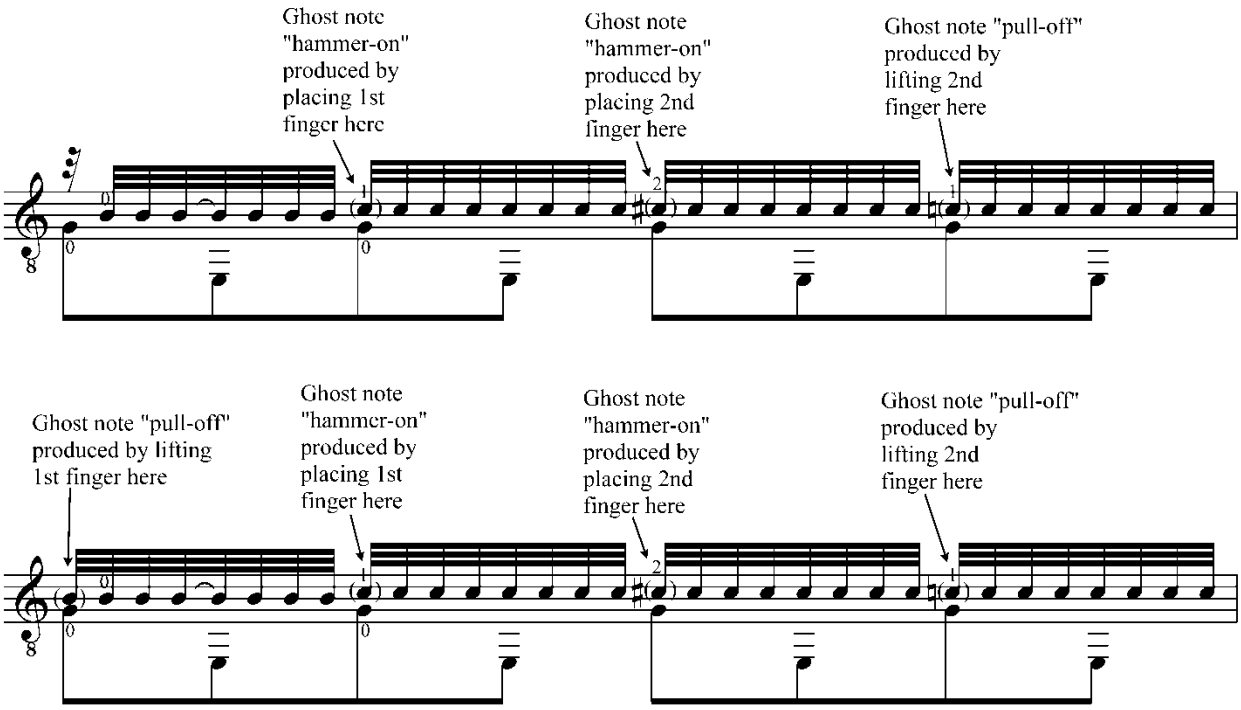
From *Goldfinger/James Bond* (John Barry)



The 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)

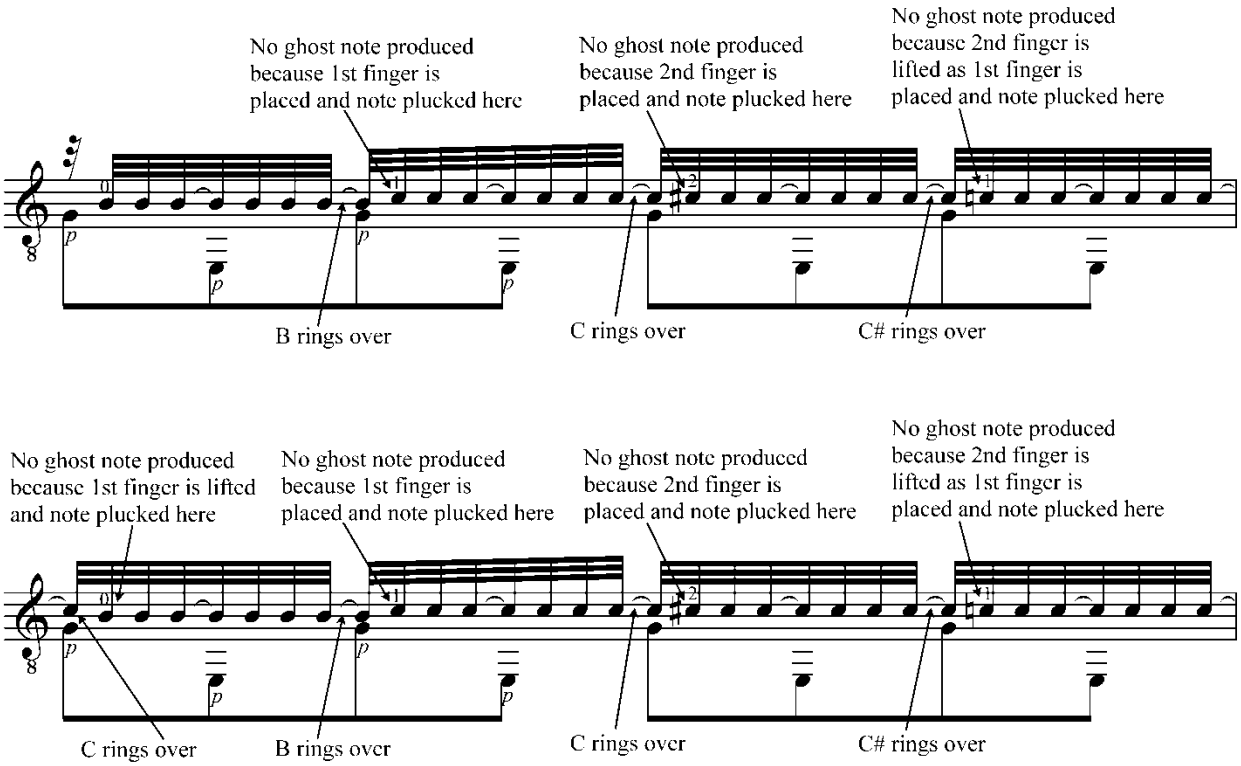


The ghost notes are notes you don't actually pluck but yet are audible as the result of placing and lifting the left-hand fingers on the beats *before the right hand finger actually plucks them*. I think they make the passage sound a little sloppy.

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)



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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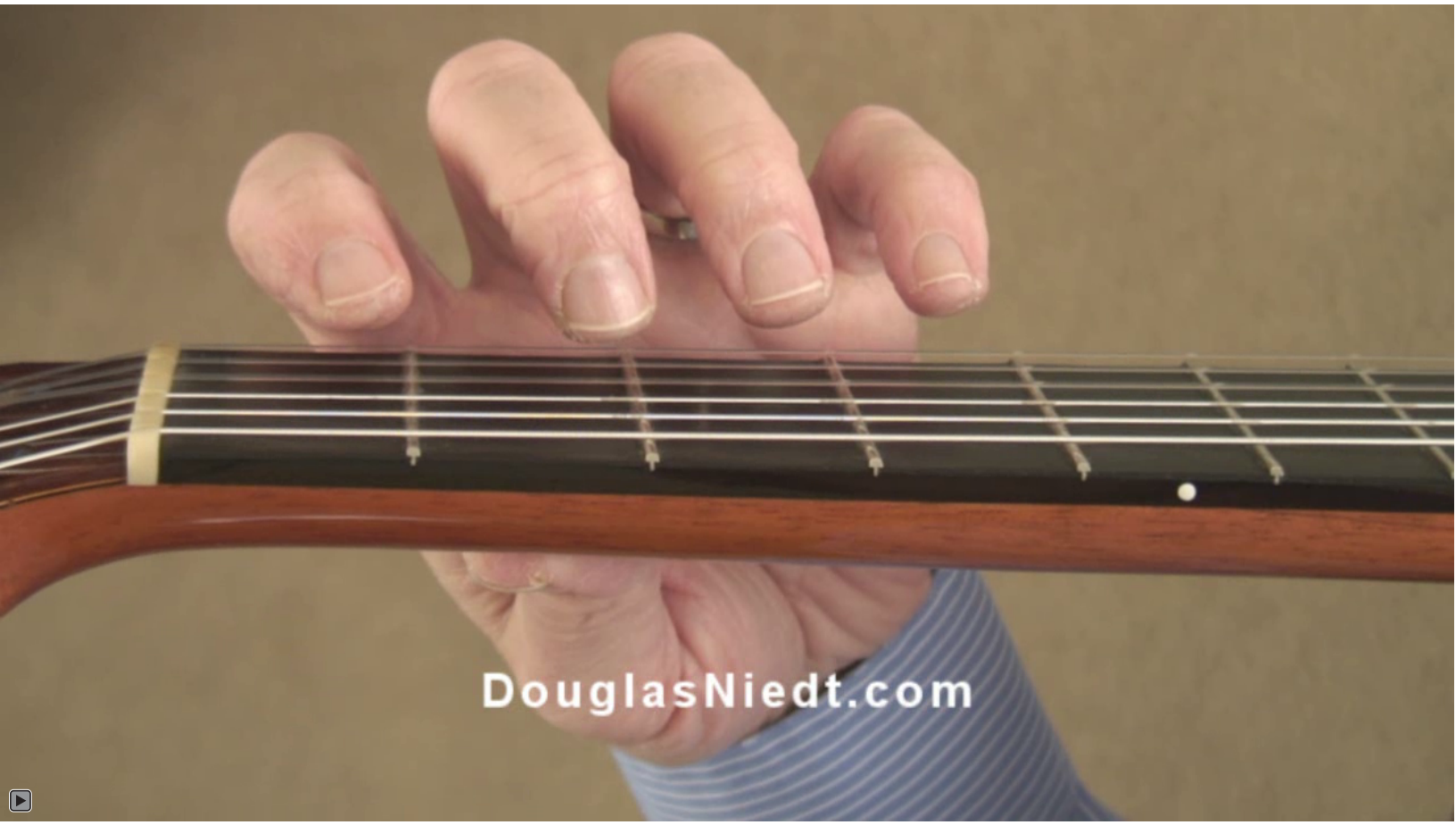
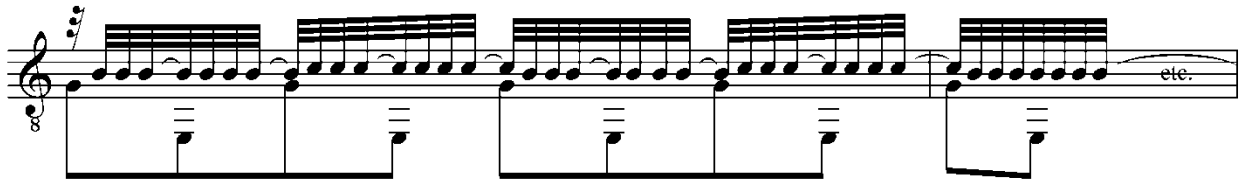


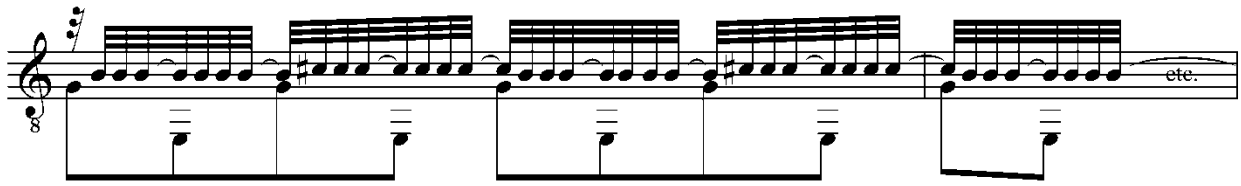
To learn the basics of this technique practice each possible finger combination individually. The combinations are: open-1st finger, open-2nd finger, open to 3rd finger, open to 4th finger, 1st-2nd, 1st-3rd, 1st-4th, 2nd-3rd, 2nd-4th, and 3rd-4th. Practice on the 2nd string in different areas of the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

Example #43

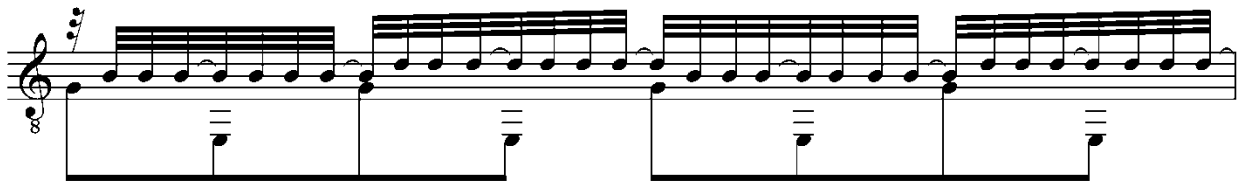
Open to 1st finger



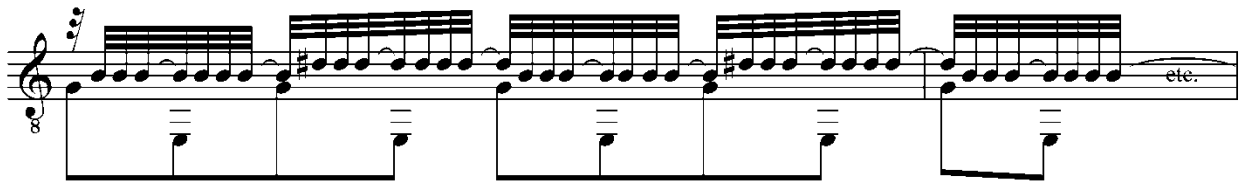
Open to 2nd finger

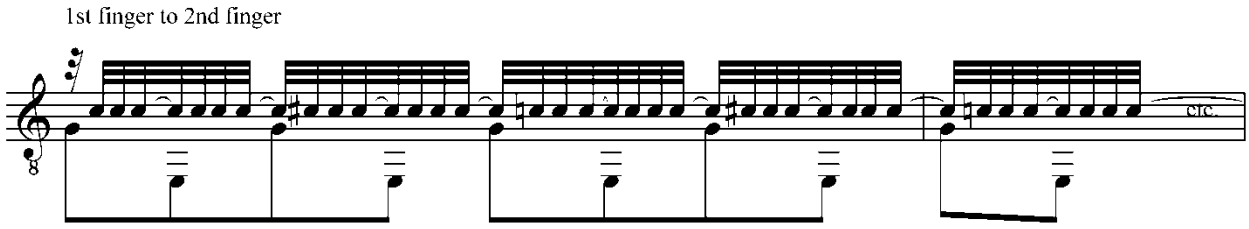


Open to 3rd finger



Open to 4th finger

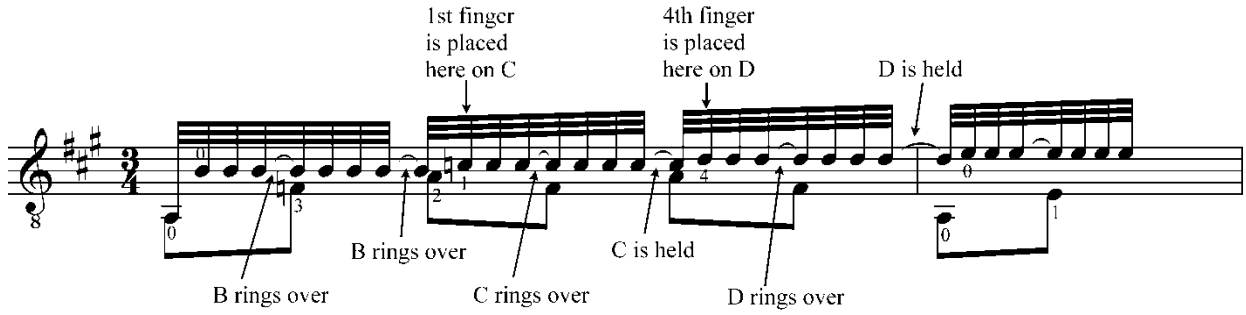




Proceed to practice the rest
of the possible combinations:
1-3, 1-4, 2-3, 2-4, 3-4

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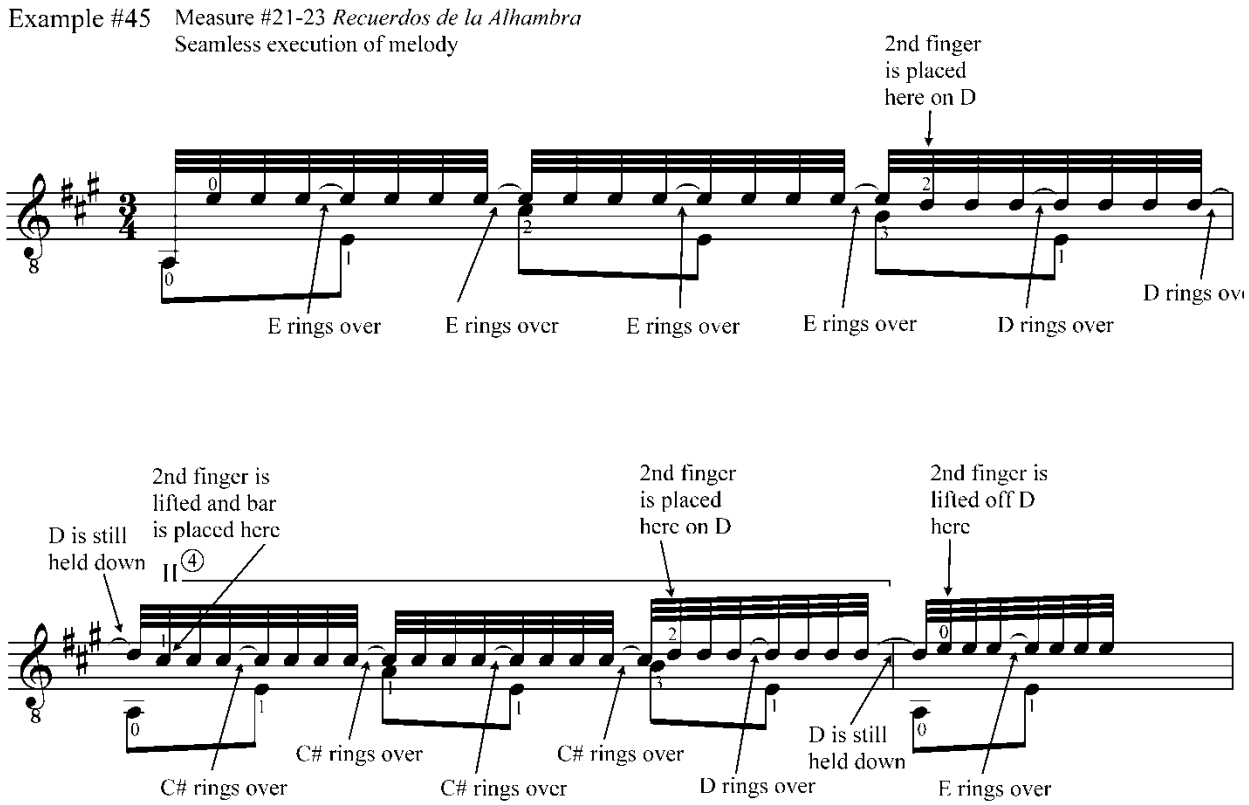
Example #45 shows another example from *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* in measures 21 through 23:



Watch my video demonstrating this passage.

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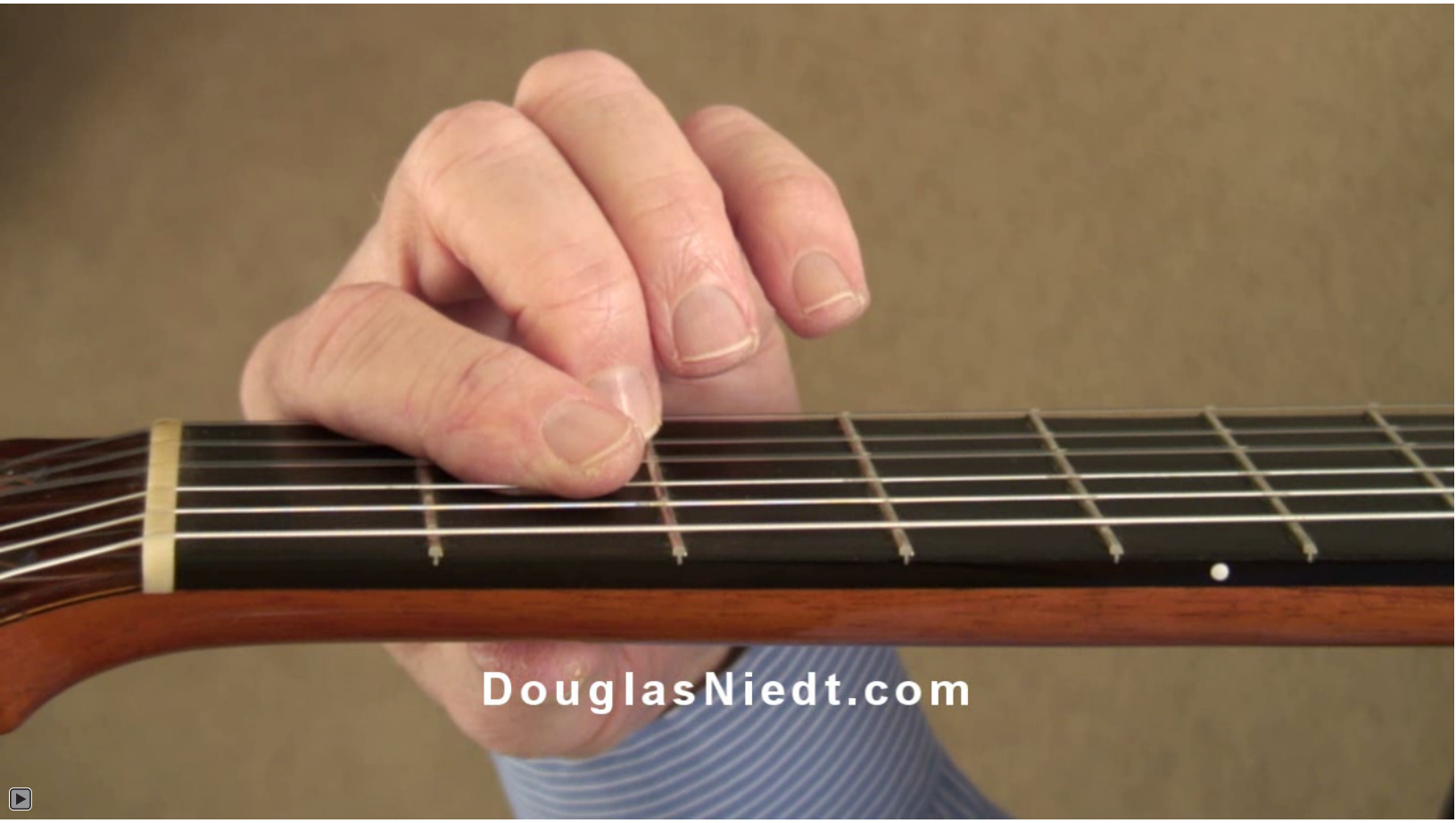
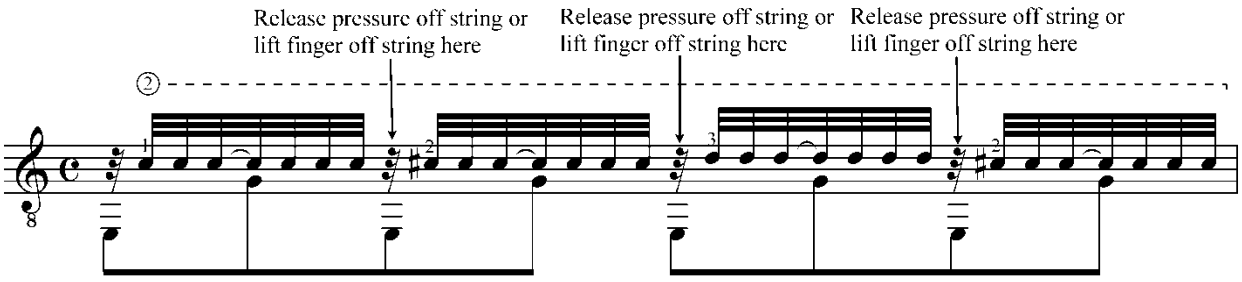


The third way of changing from finger to finger is to lift the finger entirely off the string or release the pressure off the string (but with the finger still resting lightly on the string) as the thumb plucks. This method is shown in example #46.

Example #46



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

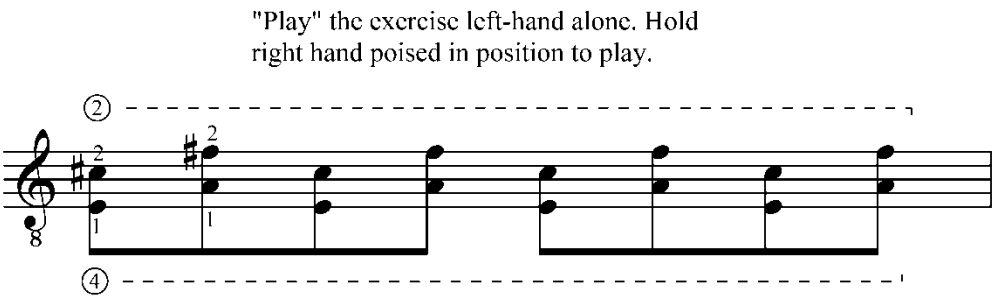
Maintaining an even tremolo when executing shifts with the left hand

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



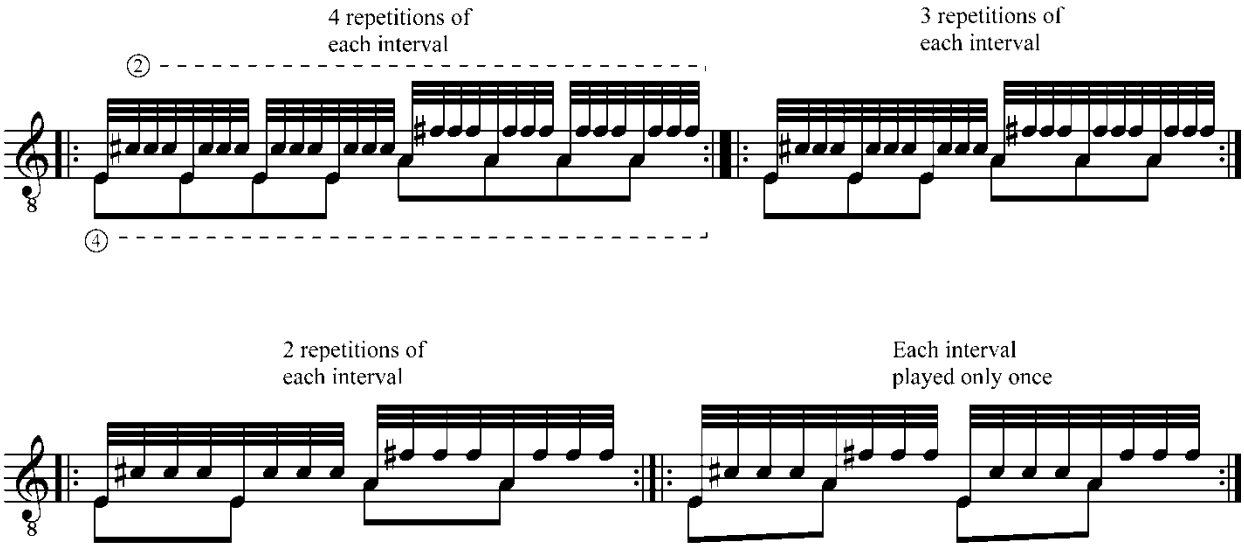
As the left hand makes its rapid shifts, the right hand should be relaxed. There should be no tightening or clenching of muscles in the right shoulder, arm, elbow, hand, or fingers.

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.

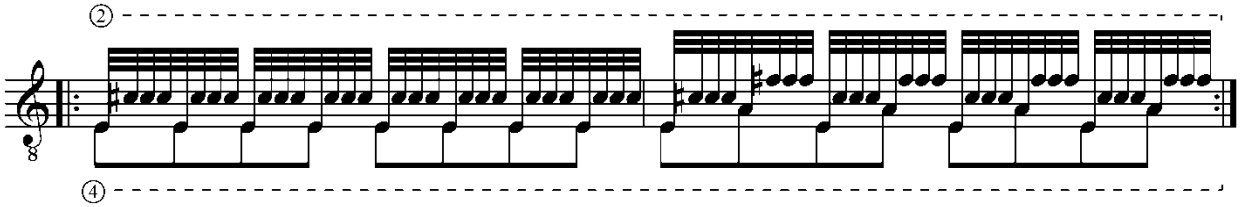
Next, practice with both hands, beginning with short shifts of one fret and gradually increasing the distance. Use a variety of finger and string combinations. Ignore string squeaks. Begin slowly and *maintain constant vigilance on the feel of the right hand*. This may be difficult to do at first since 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



Example #49



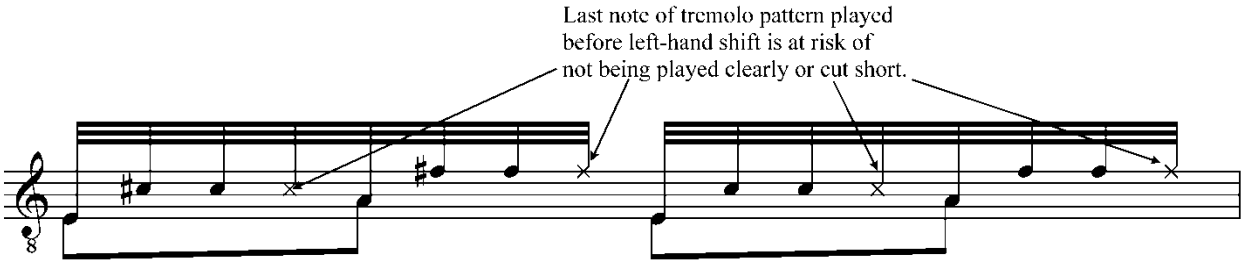
I strongly recommend using the software program *Transcribe!* (described in Part 1) to monitor the effectiveness of your practice. It is very difficult to really listen to what is coming out of your guitar when you are practicing shifts. Your attention is diverted by the mechanics of executing the shift 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:

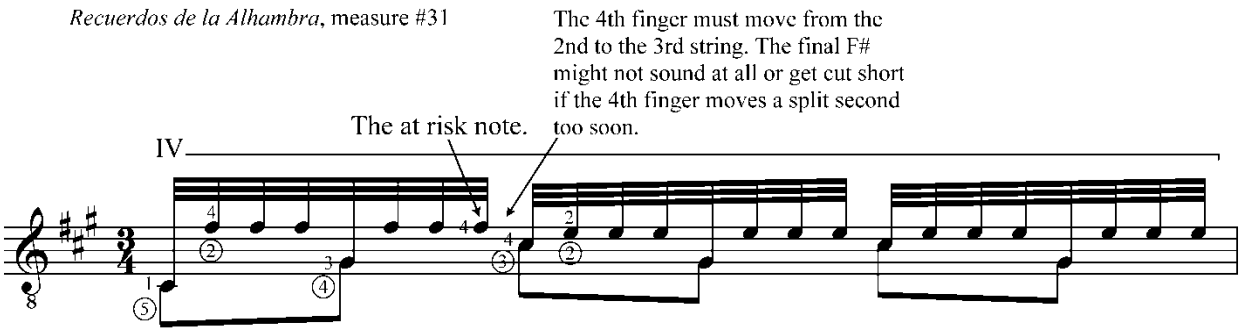
Example #50



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 synching 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

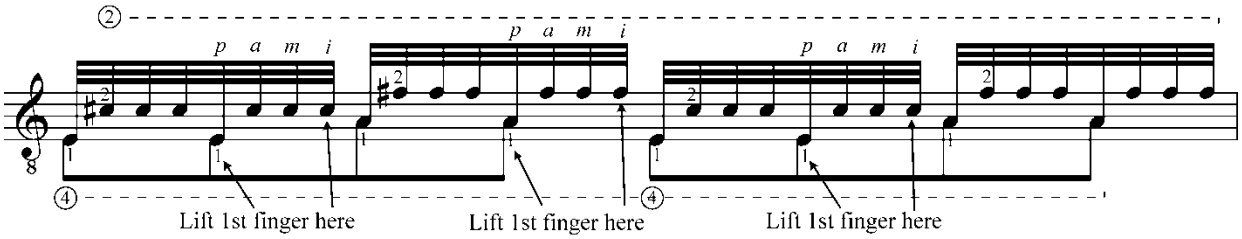


Once again, resolving the problem is done through awareness and hand synchronization. Using the software program *Transcribe!* (see Part 1) is also very helpful. Record the passage and then play it back at half speed or slower and listen to that last note.

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.

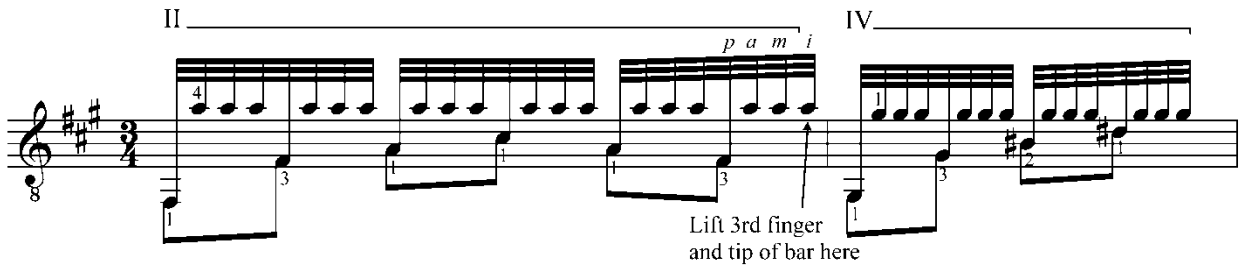
Example #52



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

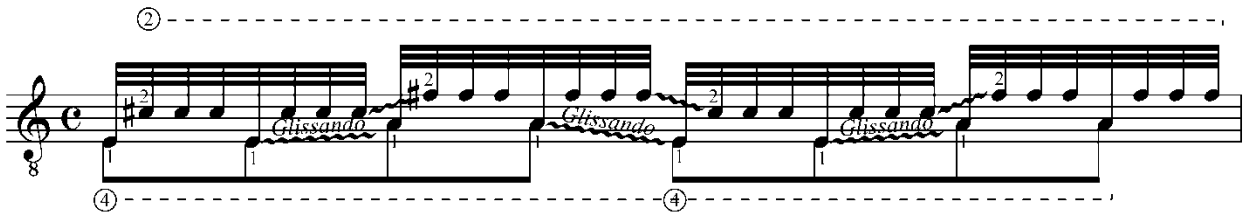


Watch this stunning video as I demonstrate how to eliminate string noises from shifts. If you stay awake for the whole clip, give yourself a prize.

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.

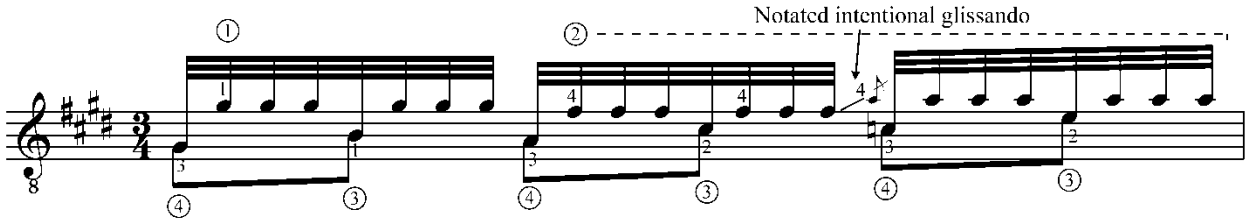
Example #54



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

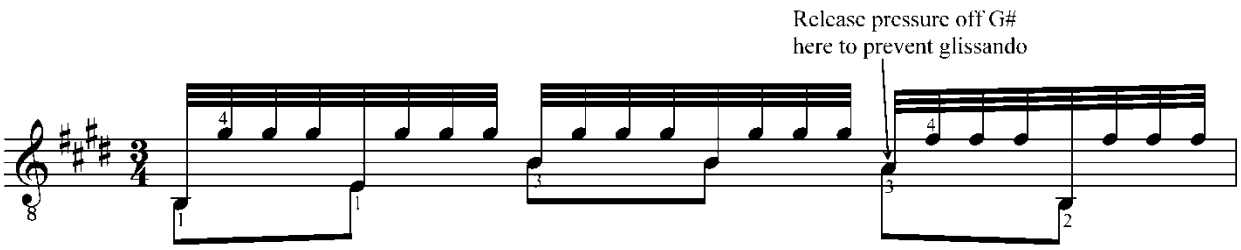
Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios (Barrios) measure #62



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



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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