

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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Tambor

By Douglas Niedt

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The tambor (Spanish) or tambour (French) or tambora (Afro-Caribbean?) is an effect used in classical and flamenco guitar playing to imitate the sound of a tuned drum. (The tambora is actually a percussion instrument with a low range that makes a low deep sound--you could think of it as a bass drum.) Some writers liken the usage of the tambor effect in some pieces to the sound of the timpani. It can be notated in several ways.

Note that the words Tambor, Tambora, Tambour or the abbreviations T, Tam, and Tamb (and probably others) may be used. The word or abbreviation can be followed by either a solid or dashed bracket:

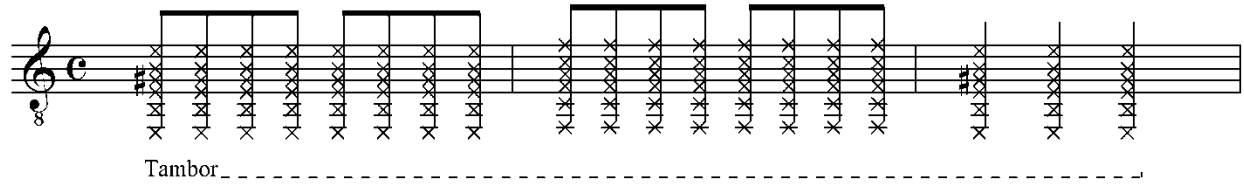
Example #1

Tambor - - - - -
 Tambora _____
 Tambour - - - - -

T _____
 Tam. _____
 Tamb. - - - - -

The note-heads may be written normally or as I prefer, with an "x" replacing the note-head:

Example #2

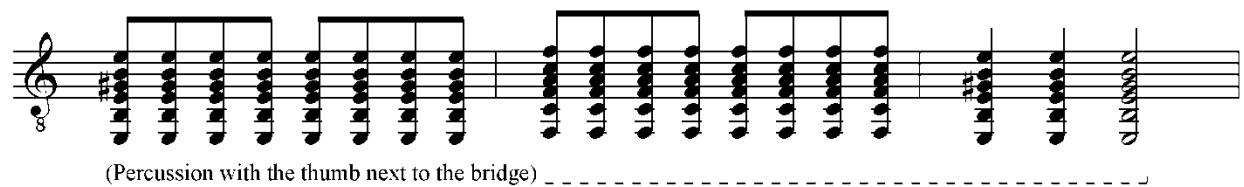


Musical notation for Example #2. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The notation consists of five measures. The first four measures each contain a bracketed group of four notes, with each note head replaced by an 'x'. The fifth measure contains three notes, also with 'x' note heads. Below the staff, the word "Tambor" is written, followed by a dashed line that spans the width of the five measures.

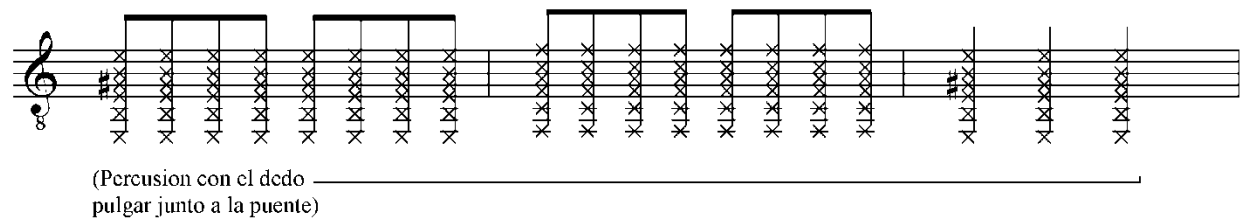
Sometimes it is more generically indicated as simply "Percussion" or in Spanish, "Percusion," again with the options of brackets or altered note-heads:

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Example #3



Musical notation for Example #3. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The notation consists of five measures. The first four measures each contain a bracketed group of four notes with normal note heads. The fifth measure contains three notes with normal note heads. Below the staff, the text "(Percussion with the thumb next to the bridge)" is written, followed by a dashed line that spans the width of the five measures.



Musical notation for Example #3, identical to the one above but using 'x' note heads. Below the staff, the text "(Percusion con el dedo pulgar junto a la puente)" is written, followed by a solid line that spans the width of the five measures.

If tambors are inserted between non-tambor notes or chords, it can be notated in several different ways:

Example #4

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The staff is divided into four measures, each illustrating a different guitar technique. Above the staff, the techniques are labeled: 'T', 'Tamb.', 'Tambora', and 'Tam.'. The first measure shows a standard chord with a '25' above the first note and an '8' below the bass line. The second measure shows a chord with a 'T' above it, indicating a thumb tap. The third measure shows a chord with 'Tamb.' above it, indicating a tambora effect. The fourth measure shows a chord with 'Tambora' above it, indicating a tambora effect. The fifth measure shows a chord with 'Tam.' above it, indicating a tambora effect. The notation includes various notes, rests, and symbols like 'x' and '#' to indicate specific techniques.

In its most basic function solely as a drum effect, it is usually produced by rapidly rotating the forearm, wrist, and hand as one unit, thumping the strings with the side of the right-hand thumb, parallel with and close to the bridge. It is important to rotate the forearm to execute the movement. Do not lift the arm off the guitar. Do not use the upper arm to make downward vertical hits or karate chops of the hand onto the strings. That produces extreme tension in the arm and hand, wreaking havoc with whatever follows the tambor passage. Such excessive tension also makes the execution of the tambor itself much more difficult than it should be.



[You have to watch this.](#)

The tone quality of the tambor can be altered quite dramatically with two basic adjustments. The thumb position can be changed from parallel with the bridge to an angled position. We can also choose to use either more of the hard bony parts of the thumb or the fleshier softer parts to hit the bridge and strings. These adjustments enable the player to produce more or less "wood" and varying degrees of percussive attack in the sound.

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Also, keeping the thumb close to the bridge produces the most drum-like sound. As the hand is moved away from the bridge and closer to the soundhole, the sound of the deep drum decreases and the sound of the strings becomes more dominant.



[Watch as I demonstrate these variations.](#)

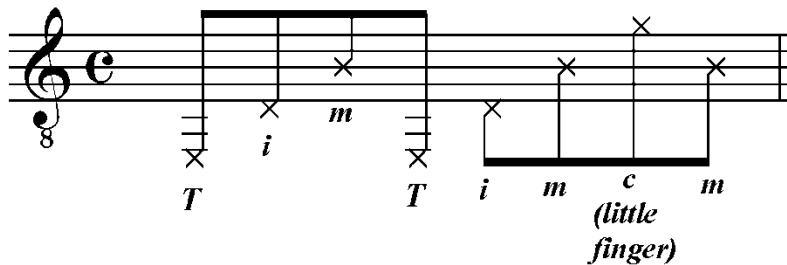
Keeping the thumb close to the bridge also presents the opportunity to mix the tambor effect with percussive hits on various parts of the soundboard using the other fingers. The effect can be greatly varied by what the left hand holds (or mutes) as the right hand executes the percussion.



[Check this out.](#)

Here is how these effects could be notated: (Composers and arrangers/copyists please note it is an excellent idea to provide a diagram indicating where on the guitar percussive hits are to be made. Such effects can be very difficult to describe in words.)

Example #5



The musical notation for Example #5 consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are represented by 'x' marks on the staff. Below the staff, there are labels for the fingers used for each hit: 'T' for thumb, 'i' for index, 'm' for middle, and 'c' for little finger. The sequence of hits is: T, i, m, T, i, m, c, m. The 'c' is labeled as '(little finger)'.

This photo shows where each finger is to hit the guitar:

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Notation for same type of effect but holding chords on left hand:

Example #6

Musical notation for Example #6. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The notes are on the first string. There are three groups of notes, each with a horizontal bar above it. The first group has notes on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd frets. The second group has notes on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th frets. The third group has notes on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th frets. Below the staff, there are guitar-specific symbols: 'T' (thumb) under the first note of each group, 'i' (index) under the second, 'm' (middle) under the third, and 'c' (little finger) under the fourth. The 'c' is labeled '(little finger)'. There are also 'x' marks above the notes, indicating where to place the fingers.

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Instead of using the thumb, the tabor can also be executed by hitting the strings with any of the other fingers or even the edge (side) of the palm below the little finger. For that matter you could also use the

face of some or all the fingers together as one unit. You can produce very fast tabor hits or drum roll effects by alternating two individual fingers (usually "im").



[Watch as I demonstrate some common techniques.](#)

Playing a Melody with a Simultaneous Tabor

A commonly called for effect in guitar music is to play a melody, chordal accompaniment, and tabor all at the same time. This is done by fingering the melody (usually on the first and second strings) and chordal accompaniment with the left hand and simultaneously executing the tabor with the right-hand thumb.

But there is a key difference in execution that sets this effect apart from other tabor effects. The melody has to be brought out to sound markedly louder than the accompaniment and drum effect. To do this, the thumb and arm are kept rotated much more to the left so the thumb is almost upside down in relation to the top of the soundboard.

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To thump the strings with the thumb, the player still moves the hand by rotating the forearm. But now, the *back of the thumbnail* strikes and bounces off the treble string which results in accentuating the melody. At the same time, the rear of the thumb hits the strings close to the bridge or the bridge itself to produce the tabor and to resonate the strings of the held chord.



[This is fun. Watch.](#)

Here are some notational examples of its use:

From *Gran Jota de Concierto* by Francisco Tarrega:

From *Aconquija* by Agustin Barrios Mangore:

From *Chopi* by Pablo Escobar in E-major guitar tuning:

Example #9

Chopi (Pablo Escobar) revised Jorge Morel

Open E major Tuning:
 1st string=E
 2nd string=B
 3rd string=G#
 4th string=B
 5th string=G#
 6th string=E

Tambora -----

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A Variation on Playing a Melody with Tambor Accompaniment

In a correctly-executed tambor, the rotational movement of the forearm allows the hand to stay relatively steady. Therefore, should the music require it, one could use the fingers to play a simple melody at the same time the thumb produces a tambor accompaniment. This technique enables the execution of independent rhythms between the melody and tambor and more contrast of volume between the melody and accompaniment than the common simultaneous melody/tambor explained above. I have rarely seen this technique used, but it is certainly worth exploring.



[Watch this one.](#)

Here is my notation for what you are watching:

Example #10

⑤

③

34

8

Tambor with thumb at bridge

Pluck the melody with the fingers

Tambor the chords only (with the thumb)

36

8

The tambor is a very colorful technique. As you can see, it can be executed in a variety of ways depending on the demands of the music and the sound desired by the performer.

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