

# Douglas Niedt's GUITAR TECHNIQUE TIP OF THE MONTH

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



I subtitled my Tech Tip "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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# I Saw Three Ships

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*By Douglas Niedt*

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For my November technique tip, I always enjoy giving a little Christmas gift to my fellow guitarists. I give it to you now so you have time to learn it by Christmas. It is an arrangement of *I Saw Three Ships*. I have made it easy enough that it won't be too much of a struggle to learn. Unlike some easy arrangements, I think this one has some nice twists and sounds really good.

## The Story Behind the Carol

The words of this English carol (its alternate title is *On Christmas Day in the Morning*) were first published in 1666. The wonderfully bouncy tune in 6/8 is thought to be a traditional English melody. Historians love to debate the symbolism found within the different versions (there are many) of the lyrics. Most believe the three ships were meant to represent the three Wise Men. The "three ships" refers to the belief that there were three Wise Men--the number three coming from the number of gifts brought to the Christ child. However, the number of Wise Men has been estimated from two to twelve over the centuries.

Over the passage of time, the Holy Family was substituted for the Magi as symbols for the "three ships" in the lyrics. Others hypothesize the three ships are references to the Holy Trinity. Still others contend the three ships are a reference to 1 Corinthians 13:13 (King James Version), "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

No matter the interpretation, it one of the most delightful and enduring Christmas carols of all time.

## Fascinating Facts You Are Dying To Know

To be honest, I never paid much attention to the lyrics of this carol. The words "I saw three ships" never connected with me or aroused my curiosity. I just liked the energy and lilt of the melody. But it turns out the background to the lyrics is fascinating.

The many variant texts of this carol can be attributed to the Mediterranean journeys of the "relics" (skeletal remains--skulls, possibly nearly entire skeletons) of the Magi. Some historians say it was the Empress Helena (Saint Helen), mother of Constantine the Great, who carried the relics to Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. They were taken to Milan by St. Eustathius in 344. They were finally given to the Archbishop of Cologne, Germany in 1164.

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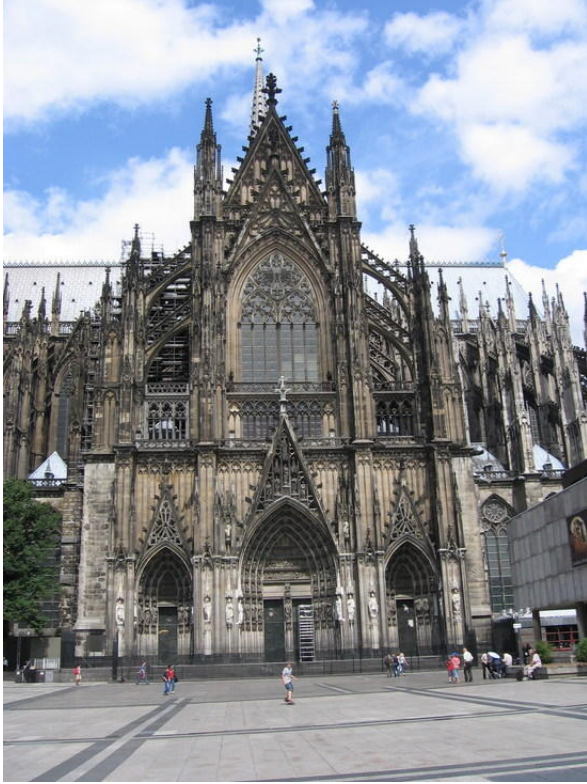
A shrine to hold the relics was finished circa 1225. It is a large gilded and decorated triple sarcophagus or casket:



Here is another view:



Construction of the present Cologne Cathedral was begun in 1248 to house this important shrine containing the relics. **The cathedral took 632 years to complete** and is now the largest Gothic church in northern Europe. Have a look:



Here is the interior:



On July 20, 1864, the shrine was opened, and the remains and 2000-year-old clothes of the Three Kings were examined. An eyewitness report of the time reads:

*"In a special compartment of the shrine now there showed-- along with remains of ancient old rotten or moulded bandages, most likely byssus (a fine-textured linen of ancient times, used by the Egyptians for wrapping mummies), besides pieces of aromatic resins and similar substance-- numerous bones of three persons, which under the guidance of several present experts could be assembled into nearly complete bodies: the one in his early youth, the second in his early manhood, the third was rather aged..."*

One version of the carol includes these lines:

I axed 'em what they'd got on board  
They said they'd got three crawns (skulls)  
I axed 'em where they was taken to  
They said they was ganging to Coln upon Rhine (Cologne, Germany)  
I axed 'em where they came frae  
They said they came frae Bethlehem

It is likely that in English versions of the song, the voyage to Cologne has been fused and confused with the idea of the three ships symbolizing the magi (arriving at a landlocked Bethlehem!), and later the Holy Family.

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## And Now, The Arrangement

### I Have Three Versions

**I have included three versions all in standard notation AND tablature:**

1. Basic version. This is for early intermediate players. You don't have to do bar chords and most of the execution should be doable in a few weeks. It can be played slowly and still sound good.

[Here is the Basic Version as a PDF file you may print out.](#)

[Listen to me play the Basic Version.](#) (A separate window will open that you can minimize in order to still see the written musical example as you listen.)

2. Version 2. This is for intermediate level and above. There are bar chords and fancier variations and harmonies.

[Here is Version 2 as a PDF file you may print out.](#)

[Listen to me play Version 2.](#) (A separate window will open that you can minimize in order to still see the written musical example as you listen.)

3. Version 3. Again, for intermediate level and above. This one has a little variation in harmonics that is very fun, along with the more advanced harmonies of Version 2. (The first four pages are identical).

[Here is Version 3 as a PDF file you may print out.](#)

[Listen to me play Version 3.](#) (A separate window will open that you can minimize in order to still see the written musical example as you listen.)

## About the Key and Fingering

I chose the key of A major to keep the melody in a higher range and because the melody could be played in natural harmonics in this key.

The fingering choices were made to keep the melody on the first string for an even tone quality.

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## Lots of Harmonics

All the versions contain natural harmonics at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> frets. On most guitars, harmonics at those frets are slightly out of tune. Don't try to fix them--you will only throw off the tuning of the other strings. I think the slightly off intonation gives the passages a charming music box effect.

Speaking of harmonics, in the standard notation staves, I used diamond-shaped notes to indicate natural harmonics. These diamond-shaped notes are NOT the pitches that come out of the guitar! *They are notations of where you place your fingers to produce the harmonics.*

Remember, to get a clear and loud natural harmonics, **always pluck the strings 1-3 inches from the bridge--not at the soundhole.**

## How Fast Should You Play It?

There is no one tempo for any of these versions. You can even adopt a freely changing tempo. Do what sounds good to you and what you can play well. The Basic Version is especially versatile in terms of tempo choice.

My special thanks goes to composer/guitarist Elizabeth Niedt for her valuable assistance with this arrangement.

**Finally, here are two common versions of the lyrics:**

I saw three ships come sailing in  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
I saw three ships come sailing in  
On Christmas day in the morning

And who do you think was in them then?  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
And who do you think was in them then  
But Joseph and his lady

He did whistle and she did sing  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
He did whistle and she did sing  
On Christmas day in the morning

And all the bells on earth did ring  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
And all the bells on earth did ring  
On Christmas day in the morning

And all the angels in heaven did sing  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
And all the angels in heaven did sing  
On Christmas day in the morning

I saw three ships come sailing in  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day  
I saw three ships come sailing in  
On Christmas day in the morning

Or, another common version:

Source: William Sandys, *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* (London: Richard Beckley, 1833)

I saw three ships come sailing in,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,

I saw three ships come sailing in,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

And what (1) was in those ships all three?  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
And what was in those ships all three?  
On Christmas day in the morning.

Our Saviour Christ and his lady (2)  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
Our Saviour Christ and his lady,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

Pray whither sailed those ships all three?  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
Pray whither sailed those ships all three?  
On Christmas day in the morning.

Oh, they sailed into Bethlehem,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
Oh, they sailed into Bethlehem,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

And all the bells on earth shall ring,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
And all the bells on earth shall ring,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

And all the Angels in Heaven shall sing,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
And all the Angels in Heaven shall sing,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

And all the souls on earth shall sing,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
And all the souls on earth shall sing,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

Then let us all rejoice, amain,  
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,  
Then let us all rejoice, amain,  
On Christmas day in the morning.

**Notes**

1. Or: *who* in both the first and third lines of this verse.
2. Or: The Virgin Mary and Christ were there (Bramley and Stainer)

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