

Right-Hand Thumb Technique for Classical Guitarists

How Does a Classical Guitarist Use the Right-Hand Thumb?

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The right-hand thumb (p) plays a crucial role in classical guitar technique, primarily responsible for playing the bass notes and providing rhythmic and harmonic support. Here's a detailed guide on how a classical guitarist uses the right-hand thumb:

1. Basic Positioning

- **Hand Position:** The right hand should be positioned at the bottom of the soundhole slightly towards the bridge, with the thumb naturally extended out to the left of the index finger. For detailed information, see <https://douglasniedt.com/techtiprighthandposition.html>.
- **Thumb Angle:** The thumb should be at about a 45-degree angle from the soundboard.
- **Thumbnail and Flesh Contact:** The 45-degree angle allows the thumb to contact the strings at the center to the right side of the thumbnail. Be sure to contact the string with the nail and flesh simultaneously. If the nail touches first, you will hear a buzz as the string contacts the hard surface of the nail. If the flesh touches the string first, you will probably hear a click and get caught on the nail. If both the nail and flesh touch simultaneously, you will not get caught on the nail, and the flesh will cushion the vibrating string, eliminating extraneous noises. For detailed information on how to pluck a string with the thumb, see my technique tip: <https://douglasniedt.com/goodtonepart4of4.html>. For detailed information on determining the correct length for the thumbnail and how to shape it, see my technique tip: <https://douglasniedt.com/thumbnailshapeandlengthsubscribers.html>.
- **Movement of the Thumb:** Move the thumb from its rear joint, not the tip joint. Keep the tip joint straight or bent slightly backward. However, if the thumbnail or thumb is too short, you might need to bend the tip joint to contact the string properly. After plucking a string, the thumb should pass slightly to the left of the index finger. It might brush the index finger

slightly but should not collide head-on. The thumb should never follow through to the right, behind the other fingers (unless your thumb is extremely short).

2. Free Stroke (Tirando) with the Thumb

- **Technique:** The thumb plucks the string without touching or resting on the next higher-pitched adjacent string.
- **Usage:** The thumb plays free stroke 95% of the time.
- **Execution:** Place the thumb on the string.
 - For the fullest tone, push the string downward into the soundboard and release the string with a slight outward motion. Use this stroke to emphasize a note, such as a melody or accented note. We call this type of stroke a false or faux rest stroke or “playing on top of the string.”
 - For the standard thumb free stroke and a lighter tone, pluck across the string (not into the soundboard) and upward just enough to clear the adjacent string.

3. Rest Stroke (Apoyando) with the Thumb

- **Technique:** The thumb plucks a string and then comes to rest on the next higher-pitched adjacent string. For example, if it plucks the 6th string, it comes to rest on the 5th string.
- **Usage:** We use the thumb rest stroke to play bass notes with a strong, powerful sound or to play bass notes with a fuller tone. Use the thumb rest stroke if the melody is in the bass, either by itself or within an arpeggio.
- **Execution:**
 - Place the thumb on the string to be played.
 - For maximum fullness and weight, the thumb pushes the string downward into the soundboard, releases the string, and comes to rest upon the next higher-pitched adjacent string.
 - For a lighter and brighter rest stroke, pull the thumb across the string (instead of into the soundboard), coming to rest on the next higher-pitched adjacent string.
 - A heavy rest stroke commonly causes a bass string to buzz. You can minimize that by playing closer to the bridge.

4. Arpeggios using the thumb

- **Role:** The thumb often plays the bass note in arpeggio patterns, while the fingers (i, m, a) play the higher notes.
- **Execution:** Start with the thumb playing the bass note. Follow with the fingers playing the higher notes in sequence. If the thumb is playing the melody, you can use the thumb rest stroke to make the melody stand out. Or, you can still emphasize the bass melody by playing thumb free stroke but using the false rest stroke technique (playing on top of the

strings) to make the notes louder and fuller. If the melody is in the upper strings, use thumb free stroke so it supports the texture but stays in the background.

5. Strums with the thumb

- **Role:** The thumb frequently strums chords. The strums can be downstrums (toward the floor) or upstrums (toward the ceiling).
- **Execution of the down strum with the thumb:** The thumb strums primarily by using the arm and wrist with minimal movement from the thumb itself. Be sure the thumb travels straight across the strings, not slicing toward the bridge.
- **The strum is a series of thumb rest strokes. This is how to strum a chord, step by step:**
 1. The thumb plays the 6th string, coming to rest upon the 5th string.
 2. It continues its movement toward the floor, plucking the 5th string, coming to rest upon the 4th string.
 3. It continues its movement toward the floor, plucking the 4th string, coming to rest upon the 3rd string.
 4. It continues its movement toward the floor, plucking the 3rd string, coming to rest upon the 2nd string.
 5. It continues its movement toward the floor, plucking the 2nd string, coming to rest upon the 1st string.
 6. It continues its movement toward the floor, plucking the 1st string and following through toward the soundboard but not touching it. Do not pull the thumb up away from the soundboard at the end of the strum.
- **Thumbnail contact:** The thumb should contact the strings at the center to the right side of the thumbnail. As you strum, be sure to contact each string with the nail and flesh simultaneously. If the nail touches first, you will hear a buzz as the string contacts the hard surface of the nail. If the flesh touches first, you will probably hear a click and get caught on the nail. If both the nail and flesh touch simultaneously, you will not get caught on the nail, and the flesh will cushion the vibrating string, eliminating extraneous noises and producing a smooth strum.
- **All-flesh strums:** Instead of using the nail, sometimes a passage sounds better with an all-flesh strum. It is still a series of thumb rest strokes, but we keep the nail out of the way. Instead of the 45-degree angle of the thumb to the soundboard, position the thumb more horizontally with the soundboard. This position allows you to use the side of the thumb, keeping the thumbnail out of the way.
- **All-nail strums:** An all-nail strum can also be useful when you want a brighter sound.

6. String Damping with the Thumb

- **Role:** The thumb frequently damps bass strings that, if allowed to ring, would muddy the harmony or bass line. The player can also use the thumb to damp strings to eliminate unwanted resonance.

- **Execution:** To damp a string, set the thumb on the string as if you were going to pluck it, but touch the string with the flesh only (no nail) to avoid unwanted extraneous noises. Or, when going from a lower-pitched string to a higher-pitched string, damp the lower-pitched string with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher-pitched string. For detailed information on damping strings with the thumb, see my four-part series:
<https://douglasniedt.com/stringdampingpart1.html>.

7. Double thumb strokes

- **Role:** Technically, a double thumb stroke is a double stop on adjacent strings played with the thumb. In other words, the thumb plays two adjacent strings simultaneously.
- **Execution:** The double thumb stroke can be done with a rest stroke or free stroke. Rest stroke emphasizes the higher-pitched string, and free stroke emphasizes the lower-pitched string. The thumb sweeps across both strings very quickly so they sound nearly simultaneously. For detailed information, see my technique tip:
<https://douglasniedt.com/techtipdoublethumbstroke.html>.

7. The thumb can serve as an anchor finger

- **Role:** The right-hand thumb can serve as an anchor to stabilize the hand. While guitarists frequently plant the thumb on a string while playing fast scales, using the thumb as an anchor can provide stability in any passage played by the right-hand fingers, not just scales.
- **Execution:** While the fingers execute a scale or other passage, the thumb can stay on one string or can “travel” from one string to another depending on which string or strings the fingers are playing.