



Douglas Niedt, Guitarist: Official Website

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!)

The Little-Known Secret of: Connecting Your Chord Changes Smoothly.

By Douglas Niedt

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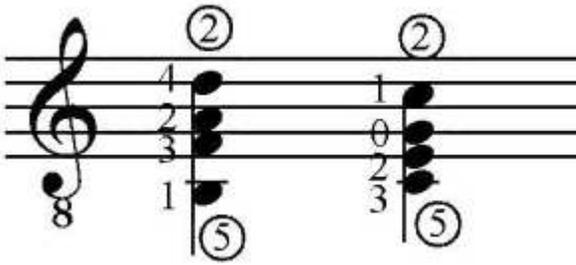
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Here's a technique you rarely read about in technique articles and is rarely explained in most guitar methods and books.

This is a technique used to play progressions of chords or intervals in a legato style, legato meaning connected or smooth. An excellent teaching piece for developing this technique is found in the original (published by Sherry-Brener--it's not in the new revised edition published by Hal Leonard) Christopher Parkening Guitar Method Vol. 1, p. 57. It is a short four-voice arrangement of a choral segment of the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The entire example is given at the end of this article.

The fact that the original music is sung by a choir indicates that the sound produced by the guitarist should be smooth or legato. Each change of harmony must "melt" into the next. The sound must be seamless without any silence or sense of space between chords. Most beginning students and many advanced students play four-note chord progressions in a "vertical," detached, or choppy manner with very unmusical results. Again, what we want is a very fluid, unbroken "line" to the music. Here is how to do it.

Let us use this chord change to work with:



Most players would: (1) play the first chord, (2) lift all four left hand fingers together, and (3) place the fingers on the strings for the second chord as the right hand fingers pluck the strings. Playing in this manner will result in a disconnected sound. Because all the fingers are lifted together in step two, for a fraction of a second there is no sound (save for a possible extraneous sixth string harmonic ringing the pitch B from sympathetic vibration). This fraction of a second of silence produces the undesirable disconnected sound. If this is done over and over in a progression of four-note chords, the progression will be chopped to pieces by disjointed chord changes.

The correct way to play this chord change with the most legato sound possible is to: (1) play the first chord, (2) lift the first, second, and third fingers together leaving the fourth finger down on the D. (3) While still holding the D (thus continuing its sound) the first, second, and third fingers prepare themselves in position over the C chord: the first finger above C on the second string, the second finger above E on the fourth string, and the third finger above the C on the fifth string. And I mean prepare! Each fingertip should point directly downward at the note it will press down and hover approximately 1/8 inch above its respective string. (4) As the prepared fingers of the left hand press down the strings, the right hand plucks and the fourth finger lifts simultaneously.

Please understand all this happens in one fluid motion in a quick movement of the hands and fingers. But what makes the change legato is the fact that *the little finger "lags behind" holding the D, thus keeping the sound going while the other fingers are en route to the C chord.*

When first practicing this technique, definitely do one step at a time very slowly. At this speed the chord change will still sound very disjointed but the D will keep ringing. Once you get the feel of the little finger lagging behind, speed up each step until you do all the steps in one fluid motion. When you do the movements correctly, to a person casually watching your fingers, it will appear that all four fingers are lifting off the strings together and being placed back on the strings together. But if the observer looks very very closely he will see that the fourth finger is lagging behind the others during the lifting step.

Now of course not all the notes of the first chord progress smoothly to those of the second chord. In reality only the change from the note D to the note C on the second string is legato. But the fact that this one change is legato, and especially that it occurs in the upper voice which is the voice most immediately apparent to our ears, gives the illusion of the entire chord change being legato. The discussion of this technique assumes the player does not have problems with basic hand coordination (which will be discussed in the future) or with the right hand fingers touching the strings (and thus stopping the sound) a fraction of a second before the fingers make their plucking movements.

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Many players may discover they are using this technique automatically without realizing it, and that is great. If you're a teacher, show it to your students! I have found that beginning guitar students learn this technique quite easily. It is not for advanced players only.

In conclusion, this technique in chord changing may be stated as follows: any finger or fingers used to play the first chord but not the second chord "lag behind" as the other fingers prepare to finger the second chord. If a player uses this technique at every opportunity when playing chord changes, the result will be a very musical, legato sound. Below is an excerpt from the Beethoven practice piece mentioned earlier. The circled notes are the notes which are to "lag behind."

Circled notes "lag" behind



