HOW TO PLAY CLEAN OR CLEAR CHORDS ON THE GUITAR (How To Get Rid of Buzzes in Chords)

By Douglas Niedt

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What is a "clean" chord?

A clean or clear chord is one in which none of the strings buzzes, and none of the strings is muted. We hear all the chord's notes.

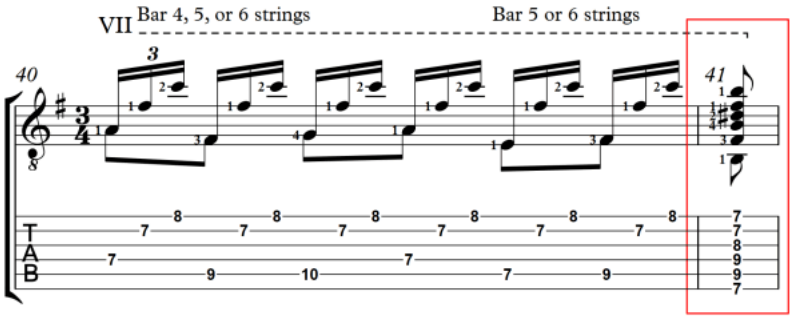
A Simple Practice Strategy to Play Clean or Clear Chords on the Guitar

Determine Which String(s) Are Buzzing or Muted

The most common error guitarists make is not precisely determining which string is muted or buzzing. They hear a buzz or hear a thud, but they do not know which string is the culprit.

Here is a passage from *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz. Example #1.

Example 1.
Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz)
measures 40-41



It isn't easy to play the B-major barre chord on the downbeat of measure #41 cleanly with no buzzes or muted notes. It also isn't easy to hear which finger is causing the chord not to sound clear.

The techniques I will show you in Video #1 ARE NOT JUST FOR *LEYENDA*. *They apply to any piece you play where you must change into a difficult barre chord*.

This practice method is especially effective with chords of four or more notes where it may be difficult to hear which string is not coming out. It is also very helpful with cleaning up barre chords.

In Video #1, watch me demonstrate a simple practice method to figure out which string(s) is the problem. (A printed transcript is at the end of this article.)

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

Video 1 *Leyenda*

Determine WHY the Chord Does Not Sound Clean or Clear

Many guitarists will practice a chord over and over, hoping it will sound good on the next repetition. Instead, the guitarist must ask themselves *why* the chord is not clear.

Here is a Checklist:

Is a string buzzing? If so, why?

1. Are you not pressing hard enough?
2. Are you holding the string down too far away from the fret?
3. Are you holding the string down with a soft part of the finger instead of the fingertip?
4. Is another finger lightly touching that string?
5. Are your left-hand fingernails too long?

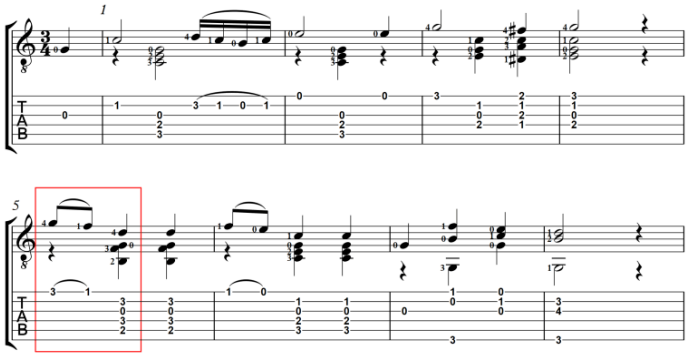
Is a note muted? If so, why?

1. Are you not pressing down hard enough?
2. Are you placing the finger on top of the fret wire instead of behind it?
3. Is another finger damping that string? If so, why is that finger touching the string?
    a. Is a joint collapsed?
    b. Is the hand in the wrong position to play that chord?

And of course, you should be sure your guitar's action is okay, and the strings are the appropriate tension for your playing style and touch.

How to get a chord (no barre) to sound clean and clear

Let us look at an example from an intermediate piece. Here is the opening passage from *Minuet in C, Op. 25* by Fernando Sor. Example #2.

Example 2.
Minuet in C, Op. 25 (Fernando Sor)
measures 1-8

In measure #5, we must grab a G7 chord on the second beat. It is not a barre chord, but it can be tricky to play absolutely clearly. Many things can go wrong! But if you use the simple practice strategy and the checklist, you will consistently produce a clean chord.

The techniques I discuss in the next video ARE NOT JUST FOR THIS SOR *MINUET*. *They apply to any piece you play where you must change into a challenging chord*.

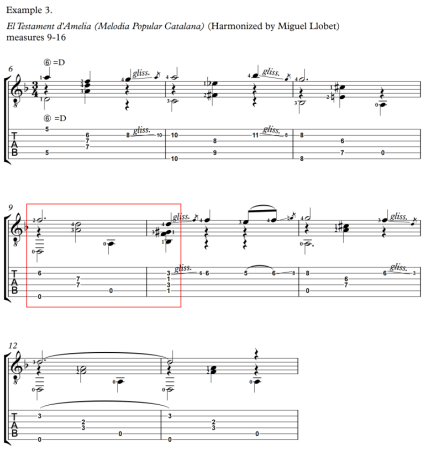
In Video #2, watch me demonstrate how to determine why a note is buzzing or muted and how to fix it in non-barre chords.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

Video 2 *Minuet in C, Op. 25* by Fernando Sor

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com
Tech Tip How to Play Clean Chords. Video #2: Minuet in C, Op. 25 (Fernando Sor)

How to get a BARRE CHORD to sound clean and clear

And finally, let's have a look at a barre chord that is difficult to play cleanly. Here is a passage from *El Testament d'Amelia*, as harmonized by Miguel Llobet. Example #3.

The barre chord is challenging to play clearly because the barre is at the 1st fret (where the string tension is very high), and the barre must hold an inner string (in this case, the 3rd string).

Remember, the techniques I discuss in the next video ARE NOT JUST FOR *EL TESTAMENT D'AMELIA*. They apply to any piece you play where you must change into a difficult barre chord.

In Video #3, watch me explain the problems and solutions to getting the barre chord clean and clear.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

Video 3 *El Testament d'Amelia* as harmonized by Miguel Llobet

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip How to Play Clean Chords. Video #3: El Testament d'Amelia (as harmonized by Miguel Llobet)

Summary

You can apply this practice strategy to any chord, with or without a barre. You can use it on any piece. And remember, there are two components to the procedure:

1. Determine which string has the problem.
2. Go through your checklist to determine what is causing the buzz or unclear note so that you can fix it.

Transcript from Video #1

Here is a difficult passage from *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz. The B major barre chord is challenging to play clearly. It is a very common barre chord form or shape. If you grab the chord all by itself and have a reasonably good barre technique, it is not a big deal for most intermediate and advanced guitarists to play it clearly. But playing it in this context is a very different story.

The practice routine is very simple. Play the passage at the final tempo that you want to play the piece. Start a measure or two before the problem chord. In this case, I will play only one measure before the chord. Then, and this is the crucial trick, finger the entire chord but only pluck one string. In other words, grab the whole chord but pluck only the 6th string, like this. Or pluck only the 5th string, the 4th string, etc. This way, you can easily hear if a string is presenting a problem.

Some guitarists use a similar routine where they stop on the chord and then, while still holding the chord, test every string like this. This method's problem is that your hand will subconsciously change its position as you test all the strings. That will not teach the hand what it must do to produce a clean chord *immediately* on the beat in a fraction of a second.

Let's try it again, and this time, I will pluck only the 6th string. In this case, you will often see yourself place the barre so that the tip falls on top of the fret wire, like this.

If you run the test and the 6th string is clear, move on and play the passage again but only pluck the 5th string.

Once the 5th string is successful, try again and pluck only the 4th string.

Repeat and this time, pluck only the 3rd string. I have decided that when I play this passage, I am going to strum this chord with the thumb. Therefore, I am plucking the 3rd string with the thumb. If you were going to use a finger to pluck a string, be sure to run the test and pluck with that finger. The reason is that the fingers displace the string differently than the thumb does.

Furthermore, each finger displaces a string slightly differently. The type and amount of force applied by the right hand on the string will affect the amount of pressure a left-hand finger must exert to produce a clear note. Therefore, when you run these tests, be sure to pluck the string with the correct right-hand finger.

Now, try again and pluck only the 2nd string.

Finally, pluck only the 1st string.

So, you can see this is a very simple and efficient method to determine which string or strings in a chord are the culprits in producing buzzes or muted notes.

However, be sure to take the fatigue factor into account. Unless your left hand is very powerful, you will need to take a break to let your hand rest after testing one or two strings. Otherwise, the fatigue will affect how you play, and the test will not be reliable.