HOW TO STOP MAKING STUPID, EMBARRASSING MISTAKES ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

By Douglas Niedt

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Have you ever made stupid, embarrassing mistakes like these?

Watch these disasters in Video #1!

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

Video 1 Crashes and Disasters

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Video1. Crashes and Disasters.

The common properties of these examples are:

1. The stupid mistake is in a relatively slow passage.

2. There is a pause (either written or implied) before the fatal error.

3. They usually occur at the beginning or end of a phrase.

Those are the types of mistakes I am addressing in this technique tip. My solutions do not necessarily apply to moderate or fast passages with difficult shifts or chord changes. We all understand how easy it is to mess up in those situations.

But mess up in a slow piece where everything is exposed? Mess up an amazingly simple chord at a poignant, emotional moment? How does that happen? How embarrassing. How stupid. You get the idea.

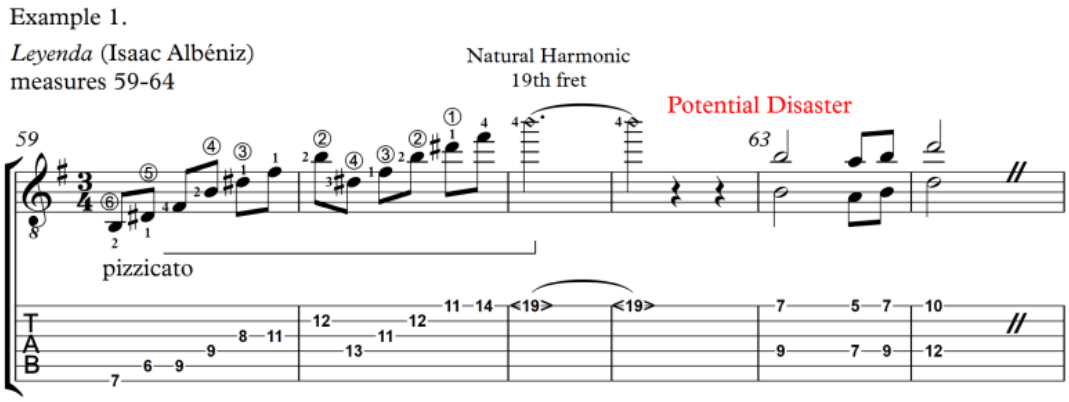
It's even worse when you have gotten through a truly difficult part of the piece, let your guard down, and mess up an easy part. It just isn't fair!

And if that's not bad enough, these things happen at the worst possible moment. When I was a boy, I had a crush on a girl named Cindy Adelstein. She didn't pay any attention to me, so I decided to impress her with my guitar playing. One day, I took my guitar to school. When classes were over, I had her sit down, and I played a beautiful Sor study for her. Everything was going great. As I played, I glanced up at her now and then and could see she was fascinated. I came to the end of the song, thinking I had her wrapped around my little finger. And wouldn't you know it, I was distracted thinking about her and completely fouled up the ending. She made a face that clearly said "Loser" and walked away. Ouch!

The solution is simple: pre-plant the right-hand fingers, the left-hand fingers, or both before playing the potentially treacherous note or chord.

Let's look at a straightforward example in *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz. The first section is fast and furious. It ends with an arpeggiated or broken B-major chord ascending to a high B harmonic. There is a pause for the audience to catch its breath, and then the slow, soulful Cante Jondo section begins.

There are a dozen ways to play measures 59-62 and measures 63-66. It doesn't matter which version you play because the principles to avoid a stupid mistake will be the same. Example #1:

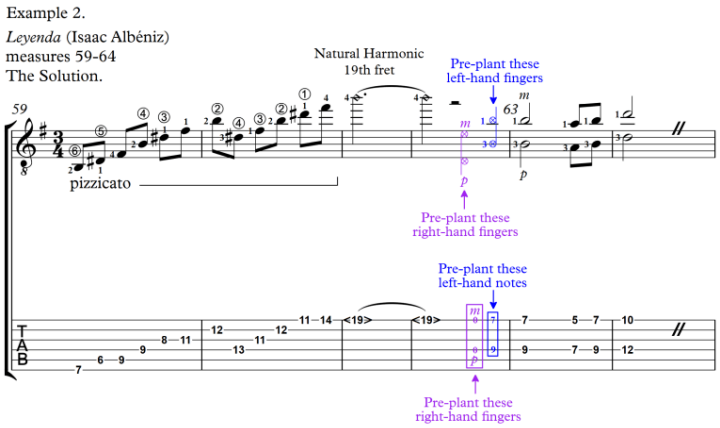


The problem is that the guitarist gets through the fast, difficult first section, let's their guard down, and trips over the strings going into the octaves, as I demonstrated in Video #1.

The fix is so simple. The "showboating" I did in Video #1 of lifting the hand and arm dramatically from the guitar after the harmonic is fine if you're into that sort of thing. But don't try to grab the B octave out of thin air. Instead, do this:

Step #1: BEFORE measure 63, pre-plant whichever right-hand fingers you will use to pluck the B octave firmly on the 1st and 4th strings. Sometimes it does not matter if you pre-plant the fingers of the left hand first or the fingers of the right hand first. But in this case, to prevent extraneous noises that will be produced by the left-hand fingers pre-planting on their strings, plant the right-hand fingers first.

Step #2: BEFORE measure 63, pre-plant whichever left-hand fingers you will use to fret the B octave on their strings. **Don't pluck the strings until you are positive that all four fingers are on the correct strings!** When the moment is right, play the octave. If the fingers are all planted, nothing can go wrong. Example #2:



Watch me show you how to do it right in Video #2.

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

Video 2 Leyenda, pizzicato to the octave

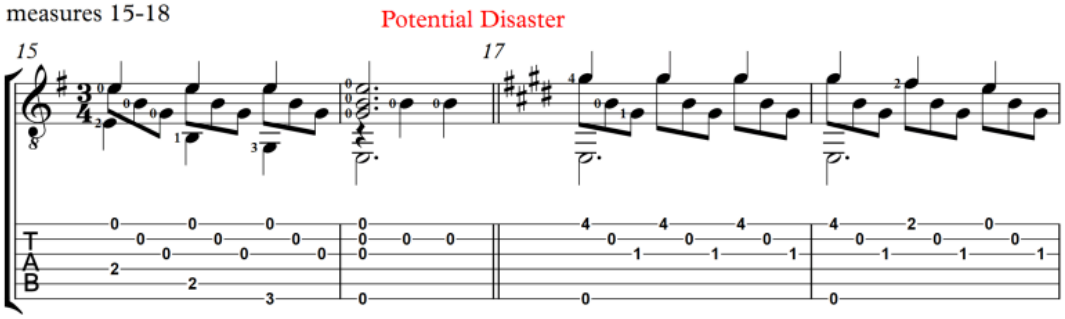
CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video 2. Leyenda, the transition from Part 1 to Part 2.

Do not feel rushed. Take your time. Musically and dramatically, it is a good thing to make a significant pause between the two sections.

Keep in mind that pre-planting requires a significant amount of practice to learn the technique. Plus, the application of the skill will be different in each passage, which will require additional rehearsal. But the benefits of preventing stupid mistakes are well worth it.

Let's look at more examples. In the ever-popular anonymous *Romance*, we have the transition from Part I to Part II. Example #3:

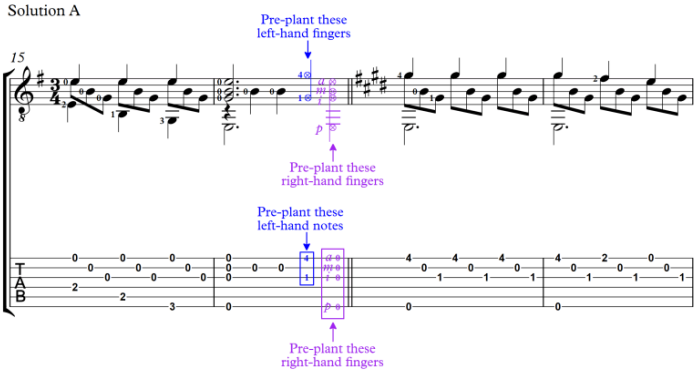
Example 3.
Romance (Anonymous)
measures 15-18

In this case, you know you are entering a danger zone, so at least you will not have let your guard down. But nerves and worry can lead to embarrassing yourself here.

We have several approaches to pre-planting to eliminate failure. In this example, it does not make a lot of difference if you pre-plant the fingers of the left hand first or the fingers of the right hand first. Try both and see which way gives you the most confidence and stability.

Solution A:

Do a full pre-plant on both hands. Example #4:

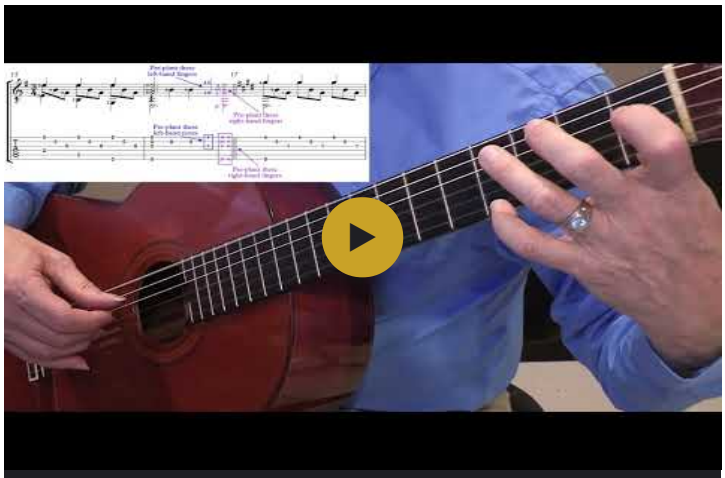
Example 4.
Romance (Anonymous)
measures 15-18
Solution A



This method is very stable. The downside is that the resonance of the open strings from the previous measure gets cut off. To some, this is a good thing. Advocates would argue that this is the end of the phrase and the section. Therefore, a breath (the silence) is desirable. But other players may like the sound of the notes of the E-minor chord continuing to ring.

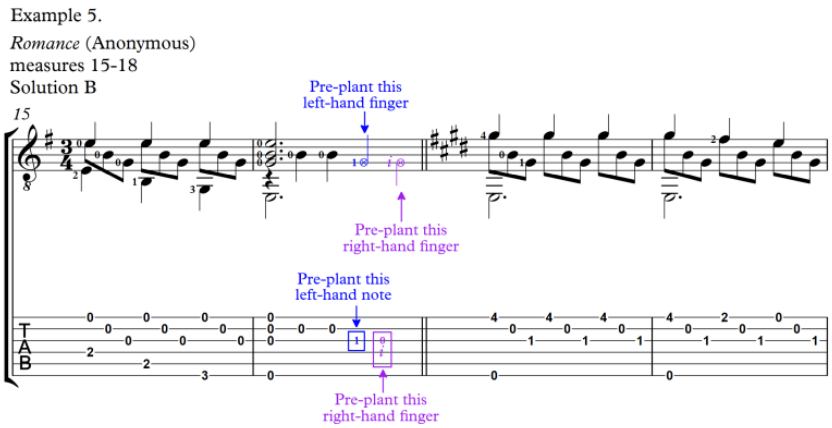
Watch me demonstrate in Video 3.

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

Video 3 Romance Solution A

Video 3. Romance (Anonymous), Solution A.

Solution B:

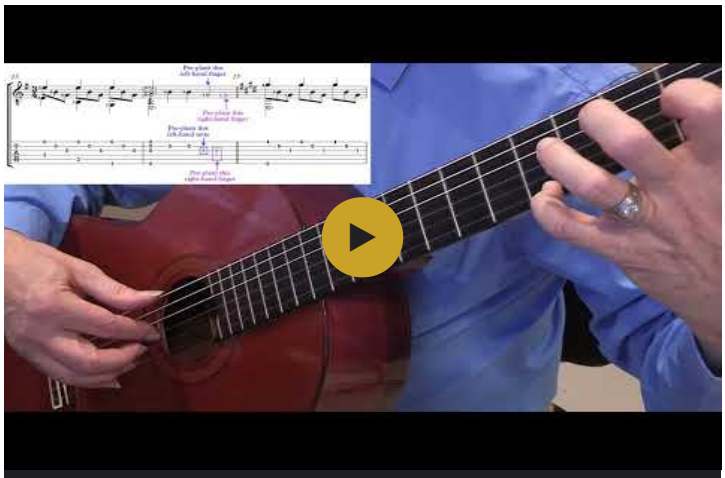
The least obtrusive approach would be to only pre-plant the left-hand 1st finger on the 3rd-string G# at the first fret and the "i" finger on the third string. Example #5:



Sometimes pre-planting only one or two fingers is all you need to provide security and dependability.

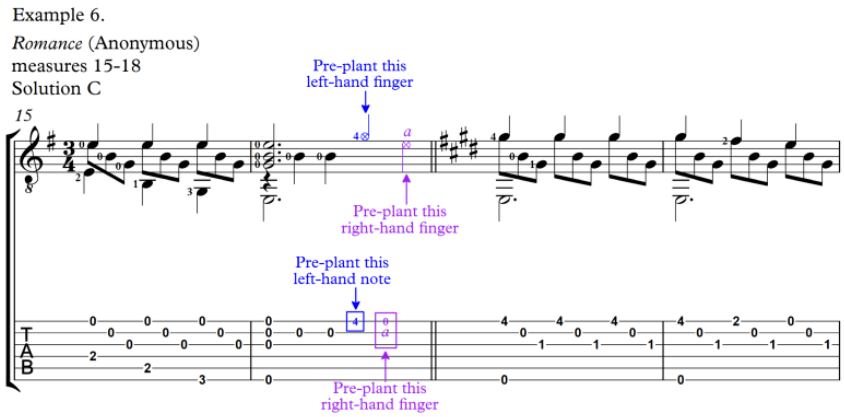
Watch me demonstrate in Video 4.

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

Video 4 Romance Solution B

Video 4. Romance (Anonymous) Solution B,

Solution C:

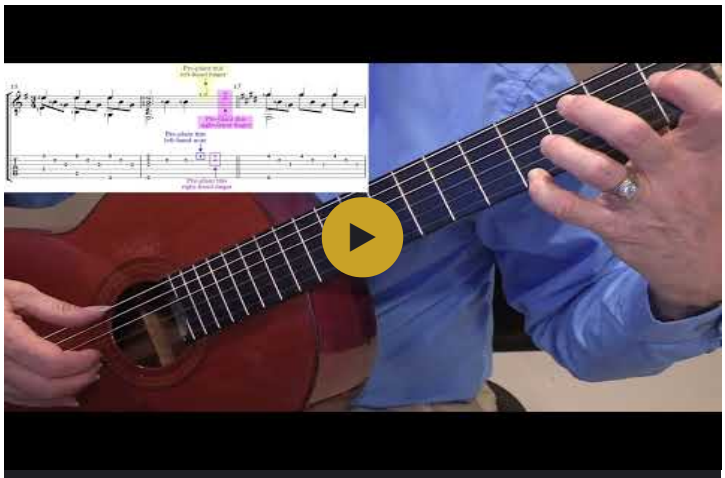
Similarly, we could pre-plant only the "a" and 4th fingers on the 1st string. Example #6:



After all, if any finger is going to screw up, it is usually the left-hand little finger, right?

Watch me demonstrate in Video 5.

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

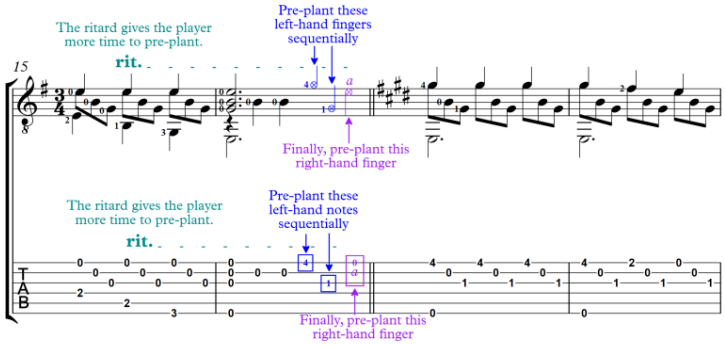
Video 5 Romance Solution C

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video 5. Romance (Anonymous) Solution C.

Solution D:

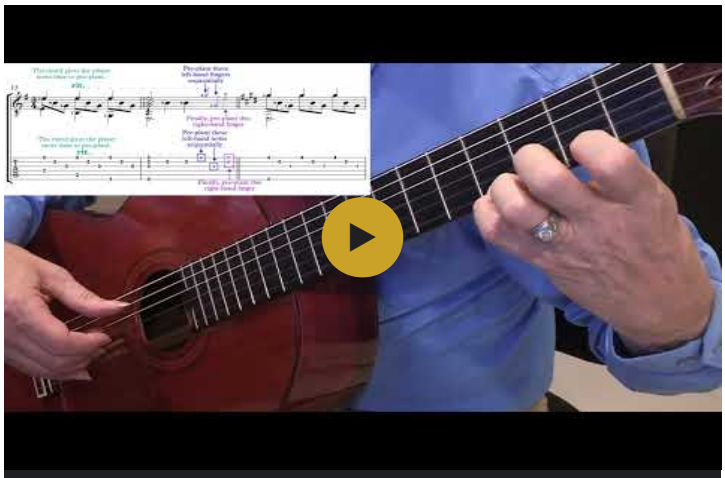
Or, on the left hand, you could pre-plant the 4th finger on the 1st string at the 4th fret and the 1st finger on the 3rd string at the 1st fret. On the right hand, the "a" finger could pre-plant on the 1st string. Plus, in a passage such as this, where you can add a slight ritard, the guitarist can pre-plant the left-hand fingers sequentially to make the pre-planting even easier. There is plenty of time. Example #7:

Example 7.
Romance (Anonymous)
measures 15-18
Solution D



Watch me demonstrate in Video 6.

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

Video 6 Romance Solution D

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

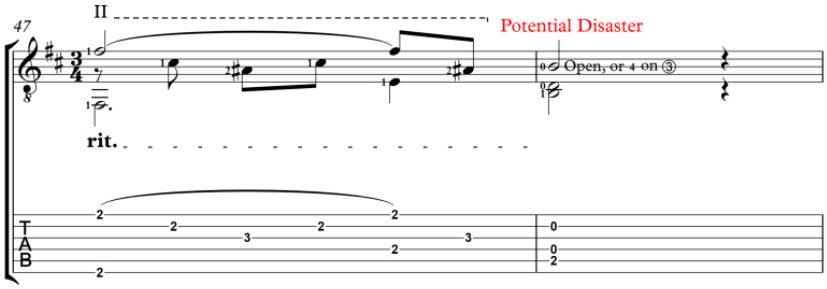
Video 6. Romance (Anonymous) Solution D.

And there are several more combinations of pre-planting one could do.

In every case, you will have to experiment to find the combination of fingers to pre-plant that is most helpful and easiest for you. **If you make the pre-planting too complicated, that will be as disastrous as no pre-planting at all!**

In the iconic *Allegretto Op. 35, No. 22* by Fernando Sor (*Estudio No. 5 in B minor* as numbered by Segovia in his famous *Studies for the Guitar by Fernando Sor*), countless students have messed up the ending. The ritard is very expressive but makes the spot even more exposed. Example #8:

Example 8.
Allegretto Op. 35, No. 22 (Estudio No. 5 as numbered by Segovia) (Fernando Sor)
measures 47-48

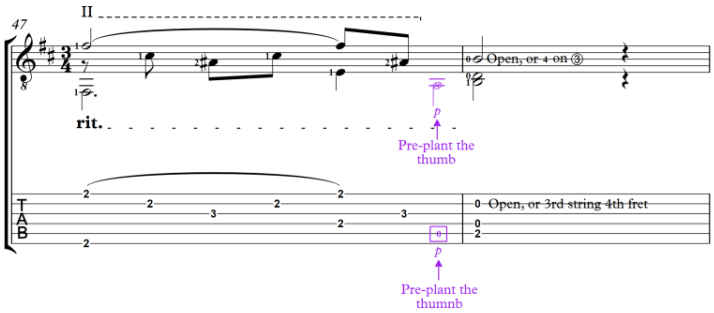


Once again, the player must decide how much resonance, if any, they want to carry across into the final chord.

Solution A

The least intrusive way to pre-plant would be to pre-plant only the right-hand thumb. Sometimes pre-planting only one finger on the right hand or left hand provides enough stability to prevent failure. Example #9:

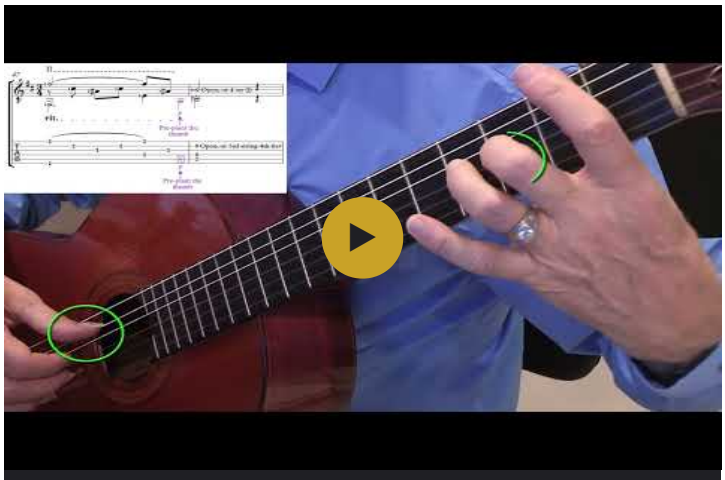
Example 9.
Allegretto Op. 35, No. 22 (Estudio No. 5 as numbered by Segovia) (Fernando Sor)
measures 47-48
Solution A



Also, notice in the next video that I lift the bar when I move from the F#7 bar chord to the final B minor chord. *But I keep the 2nd finger down on the A#*. That keeps the A# ringing until I play the final B minor chord.

Watch me demonstrate Solution A in Video 7.

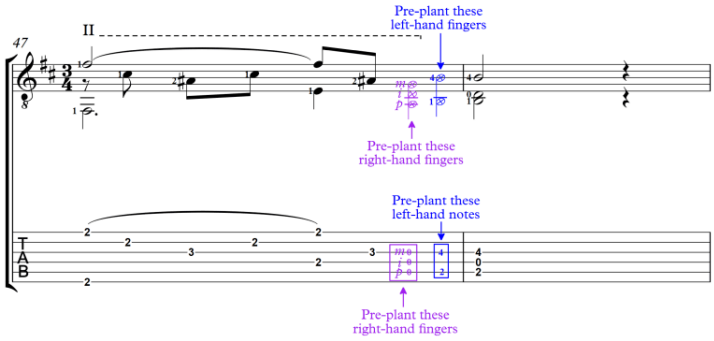
★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

Video 7 Sor Study 5 Solution A

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com
Video 7. Study No. 5 in B minor (Fernando Sor), Solution A

Solution B

If you wanted to play the final chord's melody note on the 3rd string, you might want to do a full pre-plant with both hands. In this case, pre-plant the right-hand fingers first to subdue the extraneous noises caused by the left-hand fingers pre-planting on their strings. Example #10:

Example 10.
Allegretto Op. 35, No. 22 (Estudio No. 5 as numbered by Segovia) (Fernando Sor)
measures 47-48
Solution B



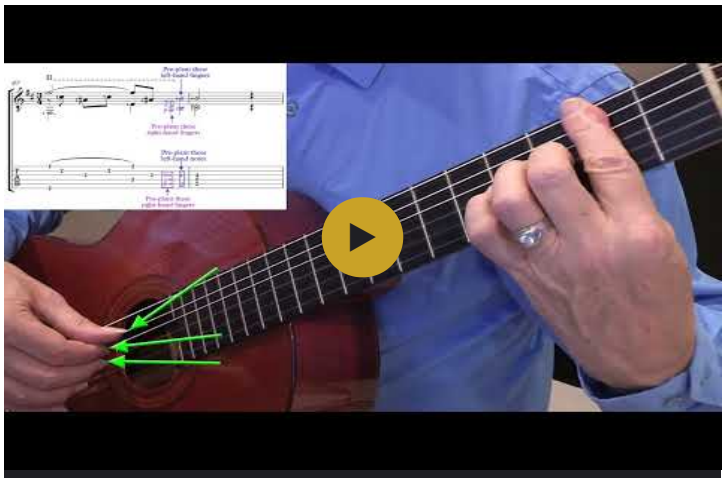
Once again, there are many other possibilities of various left and right-hand finger pre-planting between these two extremes.

Remember, passages like this often sound best with ritards, whether written or not. Not only does the music sound better, but the ritards give you more time to pre-plant, making the pre-plants more manageable to execute.

Watch me demonstrate Solution B in Video 8.

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

Video 8 Sor Study 5 Solution B



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video 8. Study No. 5 in B minor (Fernando Sor), Solution B

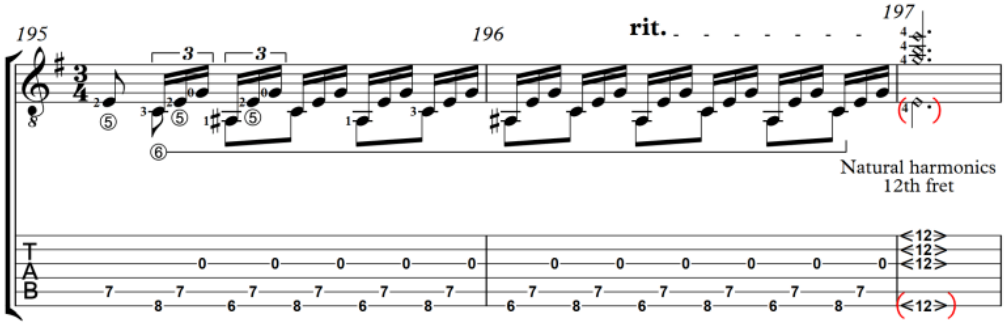
Harmonics

Natural Harmonics

Harmonics, by their very nature, are very exposed musical elements. They are hard enough to play well when you practice at home. But playing a passage or even one chord in harmonics in a live performance with shaky hands can be a disastrous moment. Pre-planting is extremely useful for successfully executing both natural and artificial harmonics.

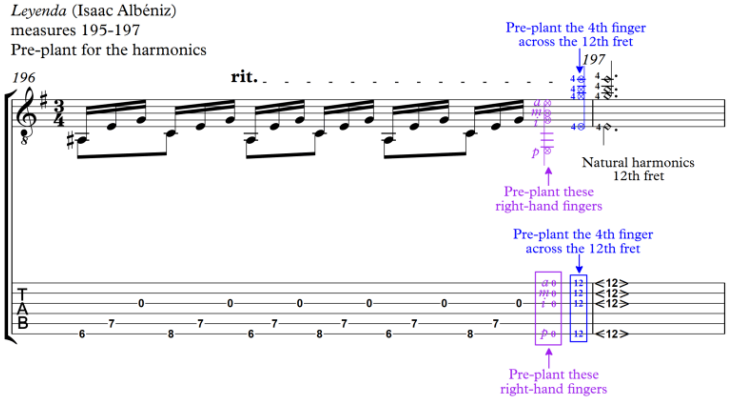
There are dozens of songs that have harmonics at or very close to the end of the piece. For example, we have this passage at the end of *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz. Measures 195-196 appear in several different versions in different transcriptions. Regardless of how you play those measures, the principle of pre-planting for the harmonic chord will be the same. And yes, there are also several versions of the harmonic chord. Example #11:

Example 11.
Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz)
measures 195-197



Whenever possible on harmonics such as these, I recommend planting the fingers on both hands. Plant the "ima" fingers on the treble strings (plus the thumb on the 6th string if your version calls for it). Also, plant the little finger on the left hand across the treble strings at the 12th fret. Example #12:

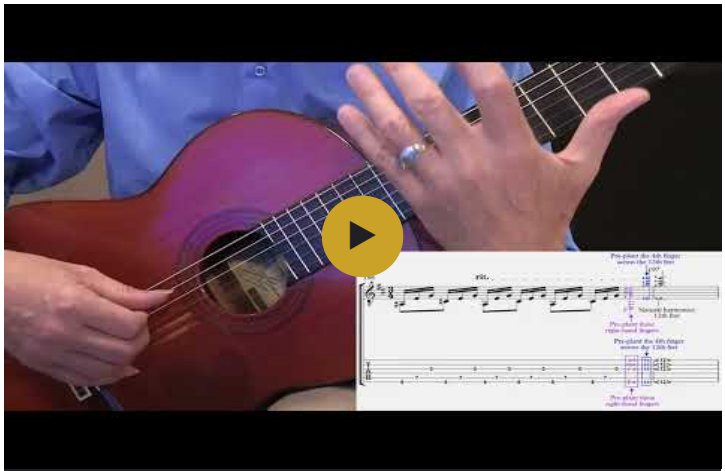
Example 12.
Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz)
measures 195-197
Pre-plant for the harmonics



The tempo at which you play measures 195-196, determines how much time you have to pre-plant to play the harmonics in measure 197. Making a ritard at the end of measure 196 makes the pre-plant easy to do. But even at high speed, don't lift from measure 196 and then lunge and stab at the harmonics. Take a split second to pre-plant. It makes a big difference.

Watch me demonstrate how to do this in Video #9.

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

Video 9 Leyenda Chord in Natural Harmonics

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

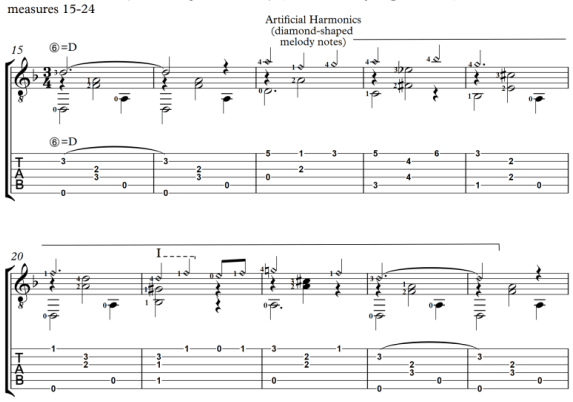
Video 9. Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz), the chord in natural harmonics at the end.

Artificial Harmonics

The principle also applies to artificial harmonics. In an extended passage, you probably will not be able to pre-plant on every harmonic. But planting on certain harmonics can increase your confidence and stability. Here is a passage in artificial harmonics from *El Testament d'*

Amelia by Miguel Llobet. Llobet gives the instruction, "El canto con armónicos octavados" (The melody with octave harmonics). In other words, play the melody with artificial harmonics. Go here to learn how to play harmonics. Example #13:

Example 13.
El Testament d'Amelia (Melodia Popular Catalana) (Harmonized by Miguel Llobet)
measures 15-24



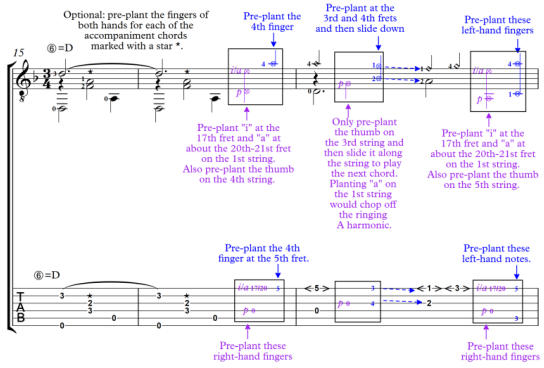
All kinds of things can go wrong in the passage! It can be even worse when you play it for someone, and you are nervous, and your hands are a little shakey. You might produce muted harmonics, miss a harmonic altogether, pluck an incorrect bass string, or pluck the wrong strings in the accompaniment chords.

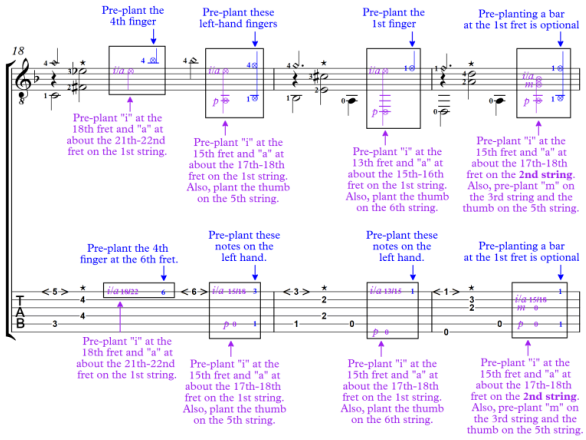
The answer to preventing these maladies is to use pre-planting. We cannot pre-plant for every harmonic (it would sound choppy), but pre-planting for some of the more difficult ones provides confidence, stability, and assurance.

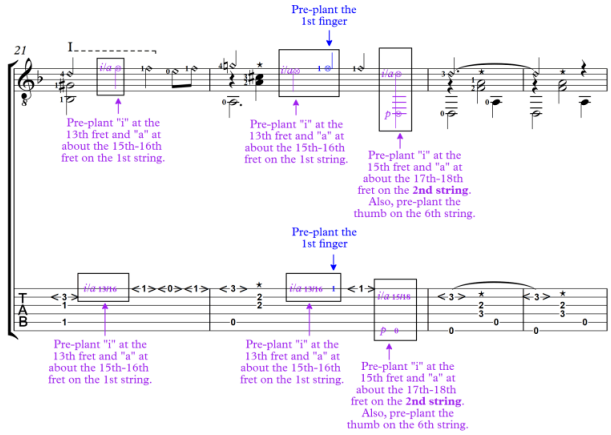
It is complicated. But if you work out one pre-plant at a time, you will catch on to the procedure in a few weeks. Also, in each instance, *practice the right-hand pre-plant first by itself*.

I have indicated some possible pre-plants in the example below. Some guitarists would not use all of these, and others might add a few more. Example #14:

Example 14.
El Testament d'Amelia (Melodia Popular Catalana) (Harmonized by Miguel Llobet)
measures 15-24
Pre-planting techniques on the harmonics

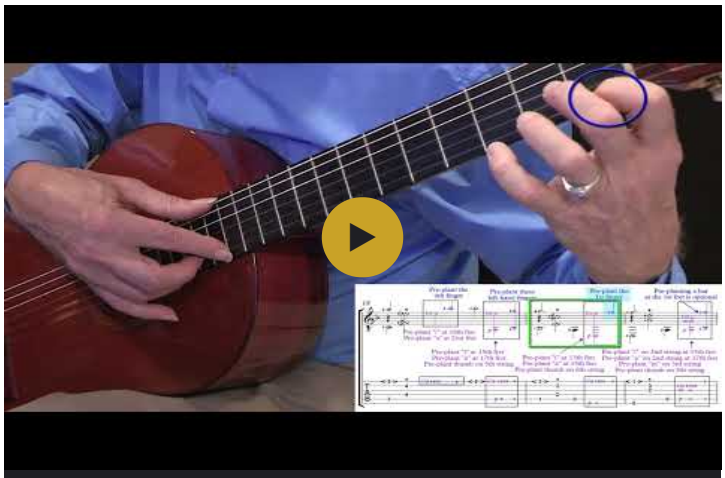






In Video 10, I guide you step-by-step through the process of learning how to pre-plant artificial harmonics. Apply this process to ANY piece you play that uses artificial harmonics.

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

Video 10 El Testament d'Amelia Harmonics

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video 10. El Testament d'Amelia (arr. by Miguel Llobet), artificial harmonics section

SUMMARY

Pre-planting the fingers on the left hand, right hand, or both hands together can often prevent stupid, embarrassing mistakes.

Sometimes, pre-planting will cut off notes you would rather keep ringing. In those cases, pre-planting only on certain strings so that you don't silence the notes you want to keep ringing will still provide the benefits of security and stability.

Since the potentially embarrassing spots often occur at the beginning or end of a phrase, planting on the strings (which sometimes introduces a complete silence) is often desirable. The silence is the equivalent of taking a breath. In many cases, the silence will make your music sound more musical rather the choppy.

Look for potential disaster spots in the slower pieces YOU play. Apply the technique of pre-planting, and I will guarantee that you will prevent many potentially embarrassing moments!