

27 REASONS TO PRACTICE THE CLASSICAL GUITAR WITH THE RIGHT HAND ALONE

Part 1

By Douglas Niedt

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1. Pick up your guitar and play one of your favorite pieces that you play well and confidently.
2. Now, do it again, *playing the right hand alone*. No, no, no. Don't put the left hand back on the neck to figure out where you are.

What was that? Did you get lost? You don't know or aren't sure of the right-hand fingering?

Join the club. Most classical guitarists don't confidently know the right-hand fingering of their pieces well enough to play the right hand alone. But why in the world would you want to spend hours practicing the classical guitar with the right hand alone?

Here are my 27 reasons:

1. Improve or correct your right-hand position.
2. Improve the flesh/nail contact of your fingers and thumb to improve tone quality.
3. Learn to release finger tension after plucking with free stroke. Make small finger movements.
4. Apply planting or double-check the precision of your planting technique.
5. Improve the independence of your hands. Prevent left-hand tension from transferring to the right hand.
6. Develop the autonomy of your right hand.
7. Correct or improve the balance between the melody, bass, and accompaniment.
8. Apply or improve your string damping technique.
9. Improve your control of dynamics. Increase your dynamic range.
10. Apply or improve changes of tone color.
11. Master passages with difficult string crossings.
12. Master complex rhythms.
13. Increase the speed of a piece or passage.
14. Improve the rhythmic evenness of arpeggios and tremolos.
15. If your left hand is temporarily injured, you can still practice the right hand.
16. Master passages that contain difficult right-hand configurations.
17. Master passages that require the use of the thumb playing rest stroke.
18. Master passages that combine the use of rest stroke and free stroke in arpeggios.
19. Master passages that use rest and free stroke together in non-arpeggio textures.
20. Increase the speed and evenness of arpeggiated passages.

21. Devise and test possible fingerings for any passage.
22. Diagnose problems with right-hand fingering choices.
23. Apply and get comfortable with using anchor fingers.
24. Apply articulation or staccato to a passage. Improve the clarity, degree, and control of the staccato.
25. Correct the alternation of the fingers.
26. Apply and improve the use of double thumb-strokes.
27. Increase your overall confidence in performing a piece by knowing your right-hand fingerings and techniques as thoroughly as you know the left hand.

Yes, we could make many of these improvements by practicing both hands together. BUT, it is far more effective and efficient to practice the right hand alone.

PRACTICE WITH THE RIGHT HAND ALONE ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR IS THE MOST EFFICIENT WAY TO CORRECT PROBLEMS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE RIGHT HAND

We can make improvements in our right-hand classical guitar technique faster and far more efficiently if we practice the right hand alone. Here are five reasons why:

1. If you focus your eyes only on the right hand instead of looking back and forth between the hands, you will be able to focus 100% on the right hand so you can diagnose and fix problems twice as fast.
2. If we practice both hands together, the left hand will get fatigued if we need to spend extra time to correct right-hand problems. If the left hand must hold bar chords or difficult positions and configurations, the level of fatigue will increase very quickly. We can practice the right-hand much longer by itself.
3. Tension from the left hand often transfers to the right hand, making it more difficult to isolate and correct the problems we are having with the right hand.
4. We can correct incorrect or imprecise rhythms by teaching the correct rhythms to the right hand alone. Difficult left-hand stretches or shifts may prevent the right hand from playing the correct rhythms. Left-hand difficulties can also hinder you from diagnosing the real problems.
5. The reason you can't play a passage up to tempo may be due to a problem with the right hand rather than the left. Isolating the right hand might provide insights and solutions to help you play faster.

HOW TO FIGURE OUT WHICH STRINGS TO PLUCK

To practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone, the first thing we need to do is figure out which strings we are supposed to pluck. If you have never tried to play a classical guitar piece with the right hand alone, you may find this is difficult to do. But it is fairly easy on a piece that uses a consistent right-hand fingering, such as an arpeggio. Let's look at the first sixteen measures of the famous anonymous *Romance*, or *Romanza*, or *Romance de Amor*. Example #1:

2. The "a" finger always plucks the 1st string, the "m" finger always plucks the 2nd string, and the "i" finger always plucks the 3rd string.
3. The thumb ("p") plucks a bass string simultaneously as the "a" finger plucks the first string on the 1st beat of each measure.

Example #2.

Romance or *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* (Anonymous) Measures 1-4.

Rewrite the standard notation on open strings.

Original:

Rewritten as open strings:

Tablature

It is even easier to figure out which strings to pluck if you focus on the tab. Ignore the fret numbers. Focus on the six horizontal lines that tell you which string to pluck. Example #3:

Example #3.

Romance or *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* (Anonymous) Measure 1, focus on the tablature

Therefore, using the tablature, we can rewrite the music on open strings. Example #4:

Example #4.

Romance or *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* (Anonymous) Measures 1-4.
Rewrite the tablature on open strings.

Original:

Rewritten as open strings:

On a repetitive piece like *Romance*, you may not need to rewrite the music. You may be able to look at the standard notation or tab, convert the notes to open strings in your head, and immediately practice the music on the open strings.

But it is more difficult to extract the open strings from a piece or passage that contains a mixture of intervals and scalar melodies, even on an easy piece such as Mauro Giuliani's *Scottish Dance*. This version is from Charles Duncan's [A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar Repertoire, Part 1](#). Example #5:

Example #5.

Scottish Dance (Mauro Giuliani) Measures 1-16

The image displays a musical score for 'Scottish Dance' (Mauro Giuliani) Measures 1-16. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a treble clef. The melody is written in standard notation, with fingerings (i, m, a) and dynamics (p) indicated. Below the melody, there are four fretboard diagrams, each corresponding to a measure. The diagrams show the fret numbers for the strings (T, A, B) and the fingerings (i, m, a) for the notes. The diagrams are as follows:

- Measure 1: T (2), A (2), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 2: T (2), A (1), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 3: T (1), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 4: T (0), A (3), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 5: T (2), A (1), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 6: T (1), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 7: T (0), A (3), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 8: T (2), A (1), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 9: T (3), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 10: T (0), A (1), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 11: T (3), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 12: T (1), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 13: T (3), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 14: T (1), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 15: T (3), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).
- Measure 16: T (1), A (0), B (0). Fingerings: i (1), m (2), a (0).

It takes some effort, but from the standard notation, we can rewrite the music (or rethink it in our head) as open strings. For each note, ask yourself, "Which string do I pluck to play this note?" and play it as an open string. Example #6:

Example #6.

Scottish Dance (Mauro Giuliani) Measures 1-16.

Rewrite the standard notation on open strings.

Original:

Original musical notation for measures 1-4. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Rewritten
as open
strings:

Rewritten musical notation for measures 1-4, showing the original melody line rewritten using open strings (0) in the bass line. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Original musical notation for measures 5-8. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten musical notation for measures 5-8, showing the original melody line rewritten using open strings (0) in the bass line. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Original musical notation for measures 9-12. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten musical notation for measures 9-12, showing the original melody line rewritten using open strings (0) in the bass line. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Original musical notation for measures 13-16. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten musical notation for measures 13-16, showing the original melody line rewritten using open strings (0) in the bass line. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melody line with various fingerings (i, m, a) and a bass line with open strings (0) and a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.



Or, we can do the same process reading the tablature. Example #7:

Example #7.

Scottish Dance (Mauro Giuliani) Measures 1-17.

Rewrite the tablature on open strings.

Original:

Original guitar tablature for measures 1-4. The notation shows fingerings (i, m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i) and fret numbers (2, 1, 2, 0, 1, 0, 1, 2, 0, 3, 0, 1, 2, 1, 2, 2) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

Rewritten
as open
strings:

Rewritten guitar tablature for measures 1-4 using open strings. The notation shows fingerings (i, m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i) and fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

5

Original guitar tablature for measures 5-8. The notation shows fingerings (m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m) and fret numbers (2, 1, 2, 0, 1, 0, 1, 2, 0, 3, 0, 1, 2) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten guitar tablature for measures 5-8 using open strings. The notation shows fingerings (m, i, m, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m) and fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

9

Original guitar tablature for measures 9-12. The notation shows fingerings (i, a, i, a, i, a, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, a) and fret numbers (3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten guitar tablature for measures 9-12 using open strings. The notation shows fingerings (i, a, i, a, i, a, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, a) and fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

13

Original guitar tablature for measures 13-16. The notation shows fingerings (a, i, a, i, a, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m) and fret numbers (3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 1) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

Open strings:

Rewritten guitar tablature for measures 13-16 using open strings. The notation shows fingerings (a, i, a, i, a, i, m, a, m, i, m, i, m) and fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0) on the strings. The bass line consists of open strings (0) with a *p* (piano) dynamic marking.

Although it is more difficult to extract the right-hand fingering from a complex passage, remember that the benefits of practicing the right hand alone increase exponentially with the complexity of the right-hand fingering.

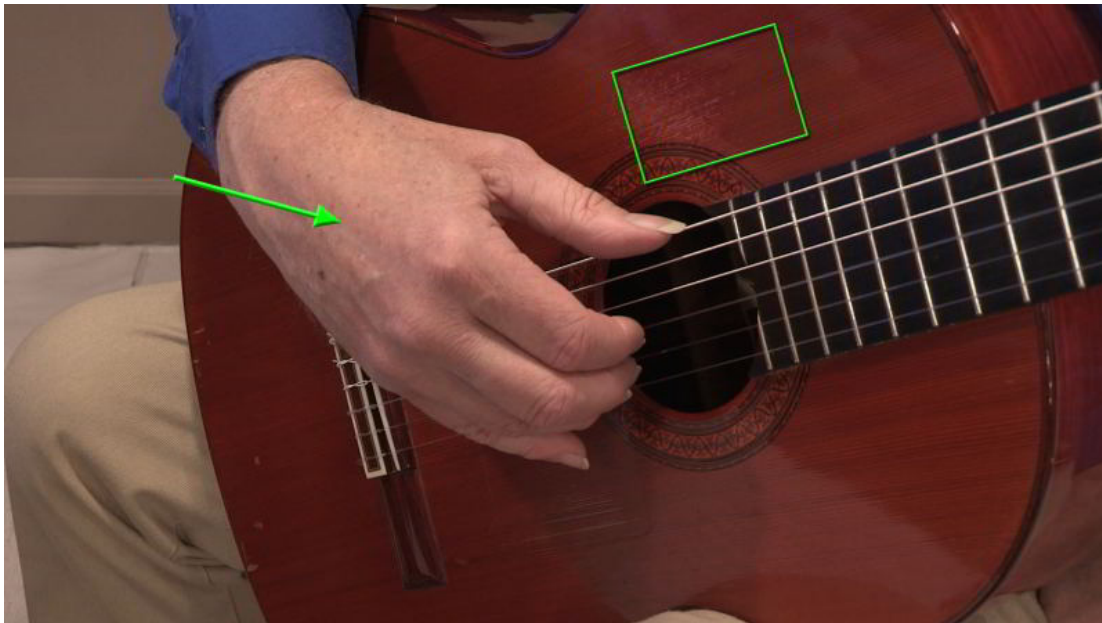
Now that you understand how to extract the right hand alone from a piece of music, I will explain how you can use this ability to improve your playing in 27 ways!

THE BENEFITS OF PRACTICING THE CLASSICAL GUITAR WITH THE RIGHT HAND ALONE

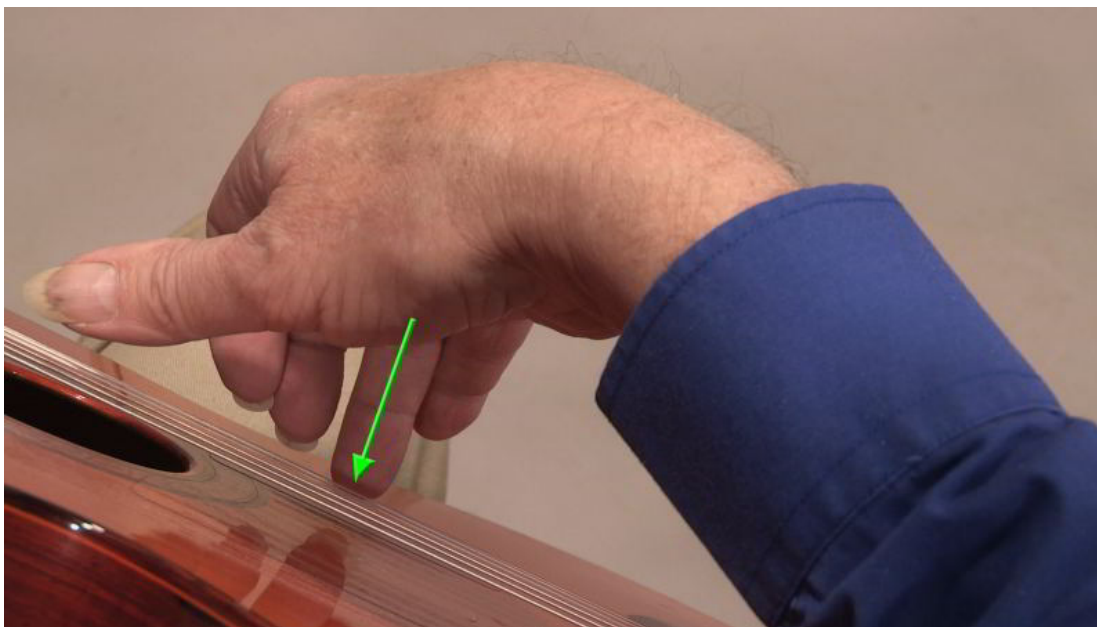
The Basics

1. Practice the right hand alone on the classical guitar to improve or correct your right-hand position

Let's use our *Romance* as an example. One common problem is that the right hand may tilt to the right. To correct it, we can observe the top of the hand. The top of the hand should be parallel with the top of the guitar.



Or, we can observe the position of the "a" finger on the first string. If you lean your head to the right (not your body, just your head), you can peak through at the "a" finger. It should stand perpendicularly to the string or lean slightly to the left:



For a thorough discussion of the classical guitar right-hand position, see my technique tip, [How to Find a Good Right-Hand Position for Classical Guitar](#).

In *Romance*, it would be very difficult to correct the position of the right hand while also playing the left hand. We would have to constantly take our eyes off the right hand to watch the shifts and bar chord placement of the left hand.

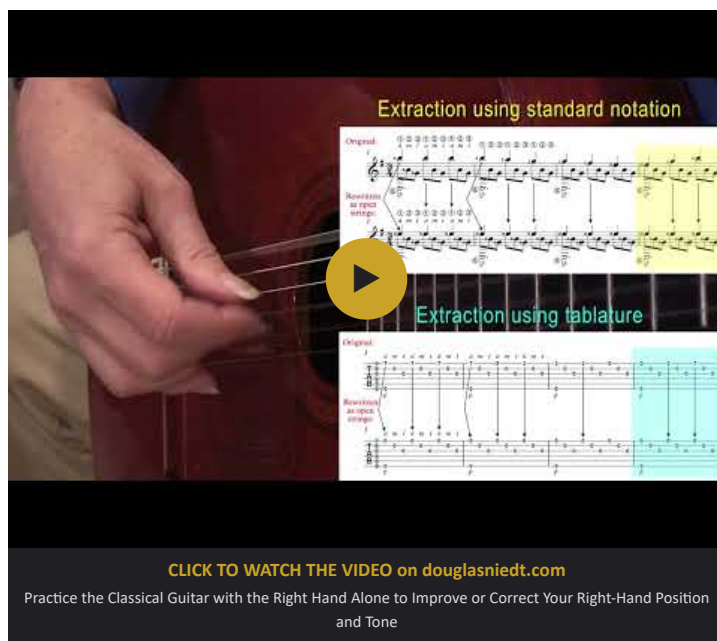
But if we play the right hand alone, we can give our total focus and concentration to the wrist position or the position of the "a" finger as it plucks the first string. You may ask, "Doug, why not just practice the pattern of the first measure over and over on open strings?" You could do that, but having the right-hand play the exact strings of the piece is much more relevant to our goal of playing the piece correctly. Also, on pieces with more complex and ever-changing note configurations (like the *Scottish Dance*), it will not be possible to devise simple, repetitive exercises to fix a problem with the hand position. You must play the actual piece, or passages from the piece, right hand alone.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #1.

- ★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.
- ★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon at the bottom on the far right:

Practice the Classical Guitar with the Right Hand Alone to

Improve or Correct Your Right-Hand Position and Tone



Extraction using standard notation

Original: [Musical notation]

Restricted as open strings: [Musical notation]

Extraction using tablature

Original: [Musical notation]

Restricted as open strings: [Musical notation]

[CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com](#)

Practice the Classical Guitar with the Right Hand Alone to Improve or Correct Your Right-Hand Position and Tone

2. Practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone to improve the flesh/nail contact of your fingers and thumb and improve your tone quality.

For a thorough understanding of this topic, see my four-part technique tip, [How to Produce a Good Tone on the Classical Guitar](#).

It is difficult to observe the details of correct flesh/fingernail contact of the fingers and thumb while trying to play the notes and chords on the left hand. We need to focus 100% on the right hand. Practicing the right hand alone is a fantastic way to improve the consistency of fingernail/thumbnail contact and thus improve our tone quality. When you don't look at the left hand, it will amaze you how much more sensitive your hearing and touch become and how much your awareness of your sound increases.

3. Practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone to learn to release finger tension after plucking with free stroke. Make small finger movements.

See my technique tip, [A Secret to a Relaxed Right Hand on the Classical Guitar—The Pluck-Return Free Stroke](#), for a comprehensive explanation of the technique. In the next video, I explain the basics of how to execute the pluck-return free stroke. As you will see, you must keep track of many details to execute the technique correctly. The only way to monitor those details is to practice at first with the right hand alone, on simple open-string exercises. Don't try to learn the technique on a piece.

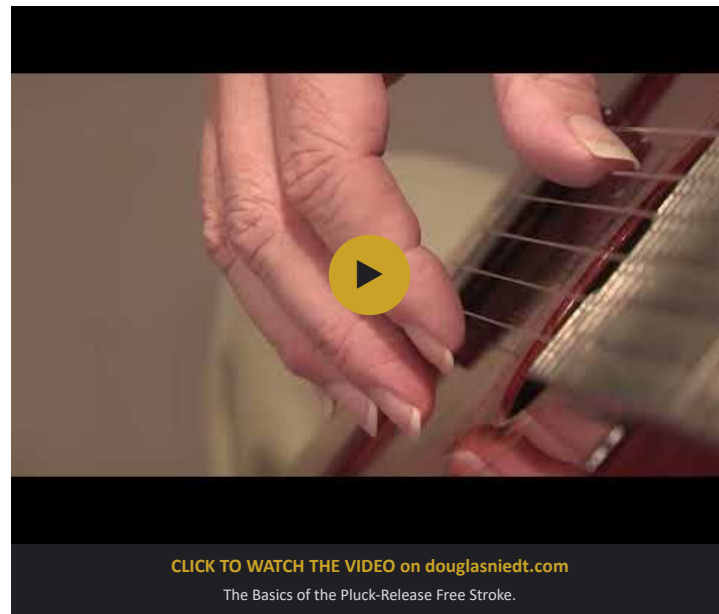
Once you are comfortable with the technique on the simple open-string exercises, it is essential to apply it to your actual pieces. And the best way to do that is to extract the open strings so you can practice the piece with the right hand alone.

Watch me explain and demonstrate the basics of the pluck-return stroke in Video #2.

★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.

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

The Basics of the Pluck-Release Free Stroke.



4. Practice the Right Hand Alone on the Classical Guitar to Apply planting or double-check the precision of your planting technique.

Sometimes, we decide to use the planting technique for our right hand on a piece or passage. Our intention is very clear in our mind. But when we play the piece, we allow the difficulties of the left hand to hijack our attention and focus, and we discover (or our teacher tells us) the right hand is no longer executing its planting technique correctly.

For example, if we intend to play *Leyenda (Asturias)* at a fast tempo, in measures #41-44 (and many others in the piece), we must plant our right-hand fingers when our thumb plucks each melody note in the bass. Planting enables us to play this arpeggio at high speed with stability and precision. Example #8:

Example #8.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) The arpeggio pattern for measures 41-44.

VII *p i a p i a p i a* VIII

Plant "i" and "a" each time the thumb plucks a melody note on the bass strings.

Measure	T	A	B
41	7	7	7
42	8	8	8
43	9	10	9
44	8	8	8

However, to learn to apply the planting technique or to fine-tune it, we must repeat the passage many times. Practicing with both hands together would quickly tire the left hand due to the continuous bar chords we must hold. Here is a perfect opportunity to extract the open strings of the passage for intensive right-hand practice.

We can rewrite the standard notation as open strings. Example #9:

Example #9.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) The arpeggio pattern for measures 41-44.
Rewrite the standard notation on open strings.

The image displays two staves of music. The top staff, labeled 'Original:', shows measures 41 and 42 in standard notation. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The music consists of arpeggiated chords with fingerings (1-4, 2-3, 3-4, 1-2, 3-4, 1-2, 3-4) and a '3' indicating a triplet. The bottom staff, labeled 'Open strings:', shows the same measures rewritten using open strings (0) for the left hand, allowing the right hand to practice the arpeggio pattern without the left hand's involvement. The notation includes a 'VII' and 'VIII' fret marker above the staff.

Or, we can rewrite the tablature as open strings. Example #10:

Example #10.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) The arpeggio pattern for measures 41-44.
Rewrite the tablature on open strings.

The image displays two staves of guitar notation. The top staff, labeled 'Original:', shows measures 41 and 42 in standard guitar tablature. It includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes fret numbers (7, 8, 9, 10, 12) and a '3' indicating a triplet. The bottom staff, labeled 'Open strings:', shows the same measures rewritten using open strings (0) for the left hand, allowing the right hand to practice the arpeggio pattern without the left hand's involvement. The notation includes a 'VII' and 'VIII' fret marker above the staff.

Now, we can focus 100% on our planting technique without fatiguing the left hand. Practicing the right hand alone will also prevent the transfer of tension from the left hand to the right hand. Adding tension to the right hand would hamper our efforts to learn or fine-tune our planting technique.

If a piece or passage, whether easy or difficult, contains arpeggios on which you want to use planting, practice it first with the right hand alone. Once the right hand understands its role and is secure, then put both hands together. For more information about planting, read my technique tip, [Right-Hand Planting Technique for Arpeggios](#).

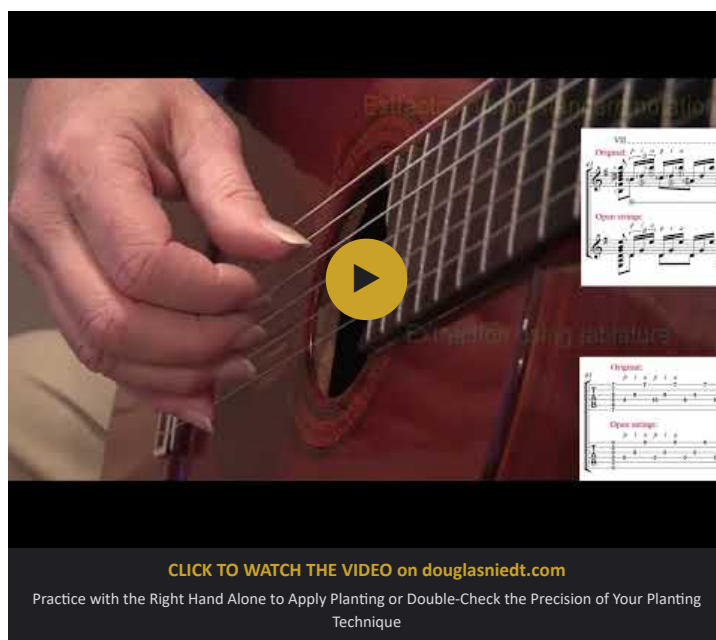
Watch me demonstrate how practice with the right hand alone on this passage works far better to work on your planting technique than trying to practice with both hands together.

Watch Video #3.

★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.

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

Practice with the Right Hand Alone to Apply Planting or Double-Check the Precision of Your Planting Technique



5. Practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone to improve the independence of your hands. Prevent left-hand tension from transferring to the right hand.

Excessive right-hand tension is a major cause of mistakes, bad tone, fatigue, reduced precision, and loss of speed. Anytime the left hand is under duress from holding difficult bars, stretches, or awkward fingering configurations, there is a danger of tension transferring to the right hand. In other words, if we tense or clench the left hand, we tend to tense or clench the right hand. It requires conscious effort and awareness to keep the right hand at ease as the left hand is traversing its precarious terrain.

We can improve our hand independence on any piece, beginning or advanced. The principles of practice are the same. But you can experience the phenomenon of this transfer of tension most easily on a difficult passage.

Let's look again at measures #41-42 of *Leyenda (Asturias)*. Example #11:

Example #11.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) The arpeggio pattern for measures 41-44.

The original in standard notation and tab, plus the rewritten versions on open strings.

The image displays musical notation for measures 41-44 of *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz. It includes three parts:

- Original:** Standard notation for measures 41-44, showing a complex arpeggio pattern with triplets and fingerings (1-4-3-2-1). The notation is divided into two systems, VII and VIII.
- Original:** Guitar tablature for measures 41-44, showing the fret numbers for each string (T, A, B) and fingerings.
- Open strings:** Standard notation and guitar tablature for measures 41-44, showing the arpeggio pattern rewritten using open strings (0) for the same melodic line.

The left hand is under significant duress during measures 41-44. Not only are we constantly holding bar chords, but we are playing the passage very fast and very loud.

Play the passage a few times with both hands together. Then, play it with the right hand alone. Play it again, both hands together, then right hand alone. When we get rid of the left hand, we are suddenly aware that our right hand is less tense than when we played both hands together.

To fix the problem:

1. Practice the right hand alone, taking great care to play with as little effort as possible. Feel how effortless it is.
2. Then, add the left hand but focus on keeping the right hand in the same state of relaxation as it was when it was playing by itself.
3. Repeat the process until you experience the sensation of the left hand exerting significant effort to play its part while the right hand remains at ease.

This practice strategy is an excellent exercise to practice on all your pieces. It will surprise you to learn how many passages you play in which you unconsciously and unnecessarily tense the right hand.

6. Practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone to develop the autonomy of your right hand.

You will play any piece more confidently if your right-hand knows its part so well that it can play it alone. The right hand becomes independent, in effect having a brain of its own, rather than following what the left hand is doing.

Most players put the right hand on autopilot. The right-hand fingers follow what the left-hand fingers tell them to do. In high-pressure situations such as a concert, autopilot often fails. As Charles Duncan, the revered author of [The Art of Classical Guitar Playing](#), writes, "Not

knowing your right-hand fingering is an invitation to the Devil to send one of his imps to sit on your shoulder and whisper sweet nothings in your ear like, 'Hey buddy. What's the right-hand fingering for this really difficult fast scale you're about to play?'" In response to that question, you crash. Badly. But if the right hand knows its fingerings, the evil voice will stay silent.

There. Those are six reasons to practice the classical guitar with the right hand alone. We have 21 to go. See you next month.