

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

Part 2

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7. Correct or improve the balance between the melody, bass, and accompaniment.

Practicing with the right hand alone is an excellent way to fix or improve the balance between the melody and accompaniment.

In the famous *Leyenda* or *Asturias* by Isaac Albéniz, the piece opens with these measures. Example #1:

Example #1.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz). Measures 1-2.

The thumb plucks the melody (red notes) on the bass strings),
and "i", "m", or alternating "im" play the accompaniment (blue notes) as open 2nd-string B's.

Original:

Original:

String	Measure 1	Measure 2
T	0	0
A	0	0
B	7	7

Countless players think, "Oh, this opening passage is really easy." But most play it wrong. They play the open B's too loud.

Yes, the player could correct the problem by practicing with both hands together. But in my experience, the left hand distracts the guitarist from listening closely to the right hand and feeling the touch of the right-hand fingers.

We can correct the problem more quickly by extracting the open strings from the passage and practicing with the right hand alone.

Example #2:

Example #2.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz). Measures 1-2.

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

The thumb plucks the melody (red notes) on the bass strings),
and "i", "m", or alternating "im" play the accompaniment (blue notes) as open 2nd-string B's.

THE GOAL: Play the red notes loud, play the blue notes very quiet.

Original:

Original:

T	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A	7	9	10	7	9	10	7	9	10	7	9
B	7	9	10	7	9	10	7	9	10	7	9

Open strings:

Open strings:

T	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Now, we can practice the passage on open strings with the right hand alone. Example #2a:

Example #2a.

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz). Measures 1-2.
The first two measures played on open strings.

Open strings:

Open strings:

We can focus on playing the melody notes strongly with the thumb but playing the open B's with a very light touch, so they are just barely audible. When it comes to improving the balance between voices, exaggeration is helpful.

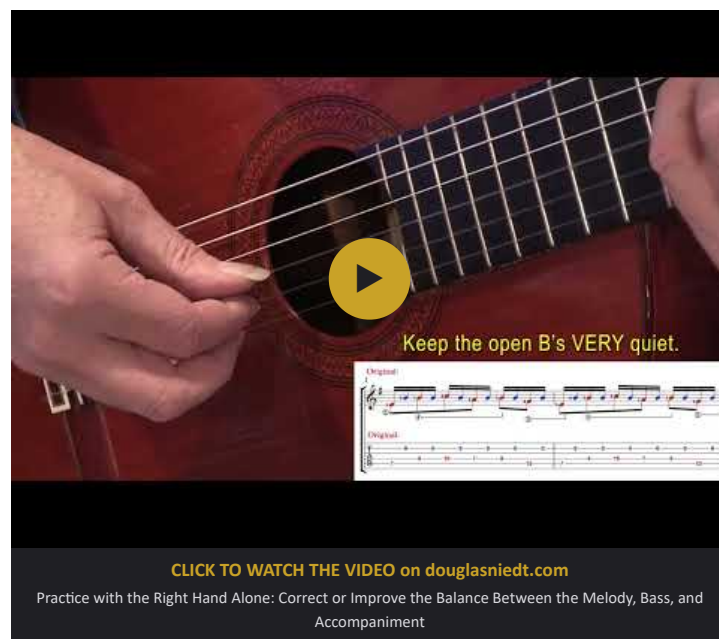
Practice with the right hand alone, slowly at first, until you achieve an exaggerated balance, and the right-hand feels confident. Then, add the left hand, still playing slowly, and try to maintain the exaggerated balance. Go back and forth between right hand alone and both hands together, first very slowly, and then gradually work up the speed to your desired tempo and balance.

Watch me demonstrate how this works in [Video #1](#).

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

Practice with the Right Hand Alone:
Correct or Improve the Balance

Between the Melody, Bass, and Accompaniment



Keep the open B's VERY quiet.

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Practice with the Right Hand Alone: Correct or Improve the Balance Between the Melody, Bass, and Accompaniment

Here is an excerpt from an easier piece, an *Allegro* by Mauro Giuliani. By the way, you can find the complete piece in Charles Duncan's [A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar Repertoire, Part 1](#). The melody jumps back and forth from the bass voice to being part of the arpeggio. Example #3:

Example #3.

Allegro (Mauro Giuliani). Measures 1-9.

THE GOAL: Play the red notes (the melody) loud, play the black notes (the accompaniment) very quiet.

Or, focus on keeping the "i" finger very quiet while keeping "p", "m", and "a" strong.

The musical score for Example #3, measures 1-9, is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains a melody of red notes, and the bass staff contains an arpeggio accompaniment of black notes. Fingerings (0-4) and dynamics (p, m, a, i) are indicated above the notes. The systems are separated by measure lines.

System 1 (Measures 1-3):

- Measure 1: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (0 2 1 2 2 1 2).
- Measure 2: Treble (p i p i p i p i), Bass (0 2 2 2 2 2).
- Measure 3: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (0 2 3 0 2).

System 2 (Measures 4-6):

- Measure 4: Treble (p i p i p i p i), Bass (0 2 2 2 3 2 0 2).
- Measure 5: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (2 1 0 1 1 0 1).
- Measure 6: Treble (p i p i p i p i), Bass (2 1 3 1 2 1 0 1).

System 3 (Measures 7-9):

- Measure 7: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (4 3 2 0 2).
- Measure 8: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (1 3 1 1 3 1).
- Measure 9: Treble (p i m i a i m i), Bass (2 1 2 2 1 2).

If we don't emphasize the melody as it jumps from the bass to the arpeggio, the piece sounds like a generic arpeggio study. We would fail to realize that Giuliani has turned what appears on paper to be a relatively simple piece into a semi-virtuosic miniature in *three* voices. Here is the passage re-notated in three voices as it should sound when played correctly. Example #4:

Example #4.

Allegro (Mauro Giuliani). Measures 1-9. Notated in 3 voices, as it should be played.

Red notes=Soprano Voice
Black notes=Tenor Voice
Purple notes=Bass Voice

The musical notation for Example #4, measures 1-9, is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a grand staff with two bass staves labeled T, A, and B. The notes are color-coded: red for Soprano Voice, black for Tenor Voice, and purple for Bass Voice. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 0-3 above or below the notes. The first system shows measures 1-3, the second system shows measures 4-6, and the third system shows measures 7-9. The notation includes various musical symbols such as rests, accidentals, and slurs.

Now, our "simple" piece has become more complicated. And, it becomes an ideal candidate for practice with the right hand alone. Learning to play the piece in three voices and emphasizing the melody is difficult to do if we have to keep track of both hands. Instead, let's extract the open strings. Example #5:

Example #5.

Allegro (Mauro Giuliani). Measures 1-2.

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

THE GOAL: Play the red notes (the melody) loud, play the black notes (the accompaniment) very quiet.

Or, focus on keeping the "i" finger very quiet while keeping "p", "m", and "a" strong.

Original:

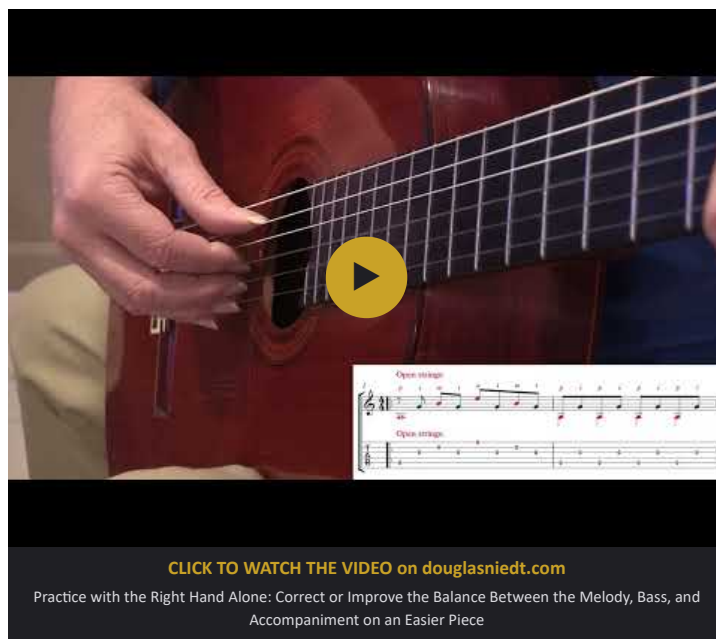
Original:

Open strings:

Open strings:

Now, it will be much easier to teach the right-hand fingers to keep the melody loud with "p," "m," and "a" while keeping the accompaniment in the background by playing the "i" finger quietly with a light touch. Example #6:

Between the Melody, Bass, and Accompaniment on an Easier Piece



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Practice with the Right Hand Alone: Correct or Improve the Balance Between the Melody, Bass, and Accompaniment on an Easier Piece

8. Apply or improve string damping.

In my [four-part series on String Damping](#), I ask:

Have you ever learned a piece, and even though you are playing it quite well, noticed that something still doesn't sound quite right? You are playing all the right notes and the correct rhythms, but it just doesn't sound clean?

One of the steps of polishing a piece that you might have missed is the application of string damping throughout the piece. It is one of those details that contributes to the overall impression of how you sound. A great way to clean up your playing is to damp unwanted resonances and clashes of notes and harmonies.

In many cases, applying some types of string damping to a passage can be an overwhelming task when attempted with both hands together. Let's have a look at a beginners-level piece titled *Andante* by Matteo Carcassi. (You can find the complete piece in Charles Duncan's [A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar Repertoire, Part 1](#).) Example #7:

Example #7.

Andante (Matteo Carcassi). Measures 1-8.

The musical score for Example #7, measures 1-8, is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains the melody, and the bass staff contains the bass line. The bass line is written in a way that avoids muddiness by using specific fingering and articulation. The first system shows measures 1-4, and the second system shows measures 5-8. The bass line in the first system starts with a 0 (open string) and a 2 (second fret), followed by a 1 (first fret) and a 0 (open string). The second system shows measures 5-8, with the bass line starting with a 1 (first fret) and a 0 (open string), followed by a 3 (third fret) and a 1 (first fret).

If we do not apply string damping, the open bass strings ring freely, making the bass register very muddy. Example #8:

Example #8.

Andante (Matteo Carcassi). Measures 1-8.

Without string damping, the bass notes ring together, resulting in a muddy bass register.

The musical score for Example #8, measures 1-8, is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains the melody, and the bass staff contains the bass line. The bass line is written in a way that results in a muddy bass register due to the lack of string damping. The first system shows measures 1-4, and the second system shows measures 5-8. The bass line in the first system starts with a 0 (open string) and a 2 (second fret), followed by a 1 (first fret) and a 0 (open string). The second system shows measures 5-8, with the bass line starting with a 1 (first fret) and a 0 (open string), followed by a 3 (third fret) and a 1 (first fret). Red arrows in the bass staff indicate the string damping technique, showing the string being damped after each note.

But if we apply string damping with the right-hand thumb where Carcassi has inserted 8th-note rests, most of our problems are solved. However, I would also damp the open E and A in measure #7. Example #9:

Example #9.

Andante (Matteo Carcassi). Measures 1-8.

The application of string damping with the right-hand thumb.

The score consists of two systems of music. The first system shows measures 1-4, and the second system shows measures 5-8. Red annotations indicate where to damp the 5th-string A and 6th-string E with the thumb. The left hand is shown with fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and rests (0).

Measure 1: Damp 5th-string A with thumb. Measure 2: Damp 5th-string A with thumb. Measure 3: Damp 6th-string E with thumb. Measure 4: Damp 6th-string E with thumb.

Measure 5: Damp 5th-string A with thumb. Measure 6: Damp 5th-string A with thumb. Measure 7: Damp 5th-string A with thumb. Measure 8: Damp 6th-string E with thumb.

For a beginner, the application of string damping while also playing the left hand will be a difficult task. Once again, practicing with the right hand alone comes to the rescue. Let's extract the open strings. Example #10:

Example #10.

Andante (Matteo Carcassi). Measures 1-8.

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

Original:

Original:

Open strings:

Open strings:

Now, we have this. Our task of learning the string damping is much easier to understand and teach to the right hand. Example #11:

Example #11.

Andante (Matteo Carcassi). Measures 1-8.
Rewritten version on open strings.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for measures 1-8 of Example #11. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a guitar-specific staff with strings T, A, and B labeled. Red annotations with a '7' in a box indicate damping techniques:

- Measure 1:** Damp 5th-string A with thumb.
- Measure 2:** Damp 6th-string E with thumb.
- Measure 3:** Damp 5th-string A with thumb.
- Measure 4:** Damp 5th-string A with thumb.
- Measure 5:** Damp 5th-string A with thumb.
- Measure 6:** Damp 6th-string E with back of thumb.
- Measure 7:** Damp 5th-string A with thumb.
- Measure 8:** Damp 6th-string E with thumb.

We can focus 100% on training our thumb to damp the strings. At first, focus on one or two measures at a time. Play very slowly, so you don't practice mistakes. Also, as you play on the open strings, try to hear the real music in your head or sing the melody out loud. Once the right hand is secure in that one measure or measures, add the left hand. Switch back and forth between the right hand alone and both hands together until the string damping is secure. Then add one measure or two measures. Continue to build the passage in small increments.

In Video #3, watch me demonstrate how to practice string damping with the right hand alone.

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

Practice with the Right Hand Alone:

Apply or Improve String Damping



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Practice with the Right Hand Alone: Apply or Improve String Damping

9. Improve your control of dynamics. Increase your dynamic range.

Practicing the dynamics of a piece with the right hand alone is an excellent way to be able to focus on the touch of the right hand—but only in the early stages. The reason is that the right-hand touch will feel quite different when we play open strings as opposed to fretted notes, so we must do most of our dynamics practice with both hands. But practicing dynamics with the right hand alone is still very helpful, especially if we are working on a passage that is difficult or strenuous for the left hand.

Let's go back to the anonymous *Romance*. Here is one possible schema of dynamics we could use for measures 1-16. Example #12:

Example #12.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous)

A schema of dynamics for measures 1-16.

① ② ③ ① ② ③ ① ② ③ ① ② ③ ① ② ③ ① ② ③

a m i a m i a m i

pp ————— mp ————— p —————

mf *subito p* ————— *f* —————

VII —————

mf ————— *ff* ————— *f* —————

p ————— *mf* ————— *pp*

If we wanted to focus on improving our dynamics from measures #7-11, which contain the climax of this section, it would be a great idea to practice them on open strings. Why? Because these measures contain bars and a difficult stretch that wears out the left hand very

quickly. Practicing both hands together would limit our practice time quite a bit. If we overdid it, we could even strain or injure our left hand.

Therefore, let's extract the open strings from measures #7-11. Example #13a:

Example #13a.

Romance or Romanza or Romance de Amor (Anonymous), measures 7-11.

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

Original: V ^③

Open strings:

VII

Open strings:

Now, we can practice efficiently on the open strings with the right hand alone without straining the left hand. Example 13b:

Example #13b.
Romance or *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* (Anonymous), measures 7-11.
 The dynamics on open strings.

The musical score for Example #13b consists of two systems of music. The first system contains measures 7 and 8, and the second system contains measures 9, 10, and 11. The music is written for guitar in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written on the treble clef staff, and the guitar tablature (TAB) is written on a six-line staff below it. The TAB uses '0' to represent open strings. The dynamics for the melody are: *f* (forte) for measures 7 and 8, *mf* (mezzo-forte) for measure 9, *ff* (fortissimo) for measure 10, and *f* (forte) for measure 11. The TAB shows open strings for all measures.

I also recommend that you try to hear the melody in your head as you practice. Also, sing the melody out loud with your intended dynamics as you play the open strings.

Practicing on the open strings will also help you to extend your dynamic range. With the extra focus you have when you play the right hand alone, you can focus on your right-hand touch. Play the quietest notes with the lightest touch possible. Play the loud notes right up to the point where the tone begins to break, or the string begins to buzz.

However, when you add the left hand, you will find you must adjust how loud you can play certain notes and chords. For instance, in the *Romance* example above, you will not be able to play measures #9 and #10 as strongly with the fretted notes and bar chord as you can on the open strings. Therefore, on any piece, as soon as the right hand alone feels confident, add the left hand to make any necessary adjustments to your right-hand touch.

[Watch me demonstrate how to practice dynamics with the right hand alone on Romance in Video #4.](#)

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

Practice with the Right Hand Alone:
Improve Your Control of Dynamics.

Increase your dynamic range.



There. You have three more reasons to practice the right hand alone. We have 18 to go. See you next month.