

A SECRET TO A RELAXED RIGHT HAND

The Pluck-Return free stroke

By Douglas Niedt

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Our right hand probably uses free stroke (tirando) at least 95% of the time in playing pieces. If we can learn to play free stroke with minimal effort, we can make a huge step to achieving a relaxed right-hand technique.

TWO WORDS: PLUCK. RETURN.

That's it. Whenever a finger plays a string free stroke, it should pluck the string, **use almost zero follow-through**, and **immediately return to its starting position in front of the string**, ready to play again. A crucial element of the process is that the finger returns to its starting position *not by the player pushing it back*, but by **releasing or emptying (relaxing) the tension in the finger and allowing gravity to pull the finger back to its starting position.**

Therefore, **tension is present in the finger only for the millisecond it takes to pluck the string.** The rest of the time the finger is always in an almost totally relaxed state. When this method of plucking the strings is used by all three fingers, any tension in the hand is greatly reduced and the player experiences an extremely relaxed right hand.

Another way of thinking about it is that we turn the finger tension on and off. We turn the tension switch to "on" for a millisecond to pluck the string. Then, we immediately turn the tension switch to "off" so the finger returns to its starting position. Many players have difficulty turning off the switch quickly and completely. When that is the case, tension builds in the hand.

Understand that *we do not try to make small finger movements* or restrict the trajectory of the finger. We simply release the tension *immediately* after plucking, and the finger stops its movement as *gravity* pulls it back to position in front of the string. *The release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*

Movement of a finger is restricted only *after* it returns to its home position in front of the string. We must stop the finger at that point because if we relax the finger completely, it will continue to move towards the floor past the 1st string, rendering it useless for guitar playing.

In his excellent book, *The Natural Classical Guitar*, Lee F. Ryan tells us the PLUCK-RELEASE (he calls it the Play-Relax) stroke

"is done very fast in the same way as one flicks or snaps the fingers...Some students find it helpful to blow a quick puff of air out of their mouths right at the moment of making the stroke. The actual energy expenditure of each stroke is a burst that only lasts an instant; if done properly, the finger and hand will feel relaxed both before and immediately after the stroke. It will feel as if you have done almost nothing to produce the stroke because it happens so quickly."

ADDITIONAL BONUSES: Your right-hand fingers will play far more accurately, with greater speed, and less exertion. Following-through after plucking a string is added useless finger movement. Follow-through takes the fingers away from the strings, leaving them out of position. If a finger is far away from the string it is supposed to play, accuracy and speed suffer. Also, if a string is plucked and the finger continues on a long follow-through, a lot of energy is required for the finger to recover in order to return to the string to play it again.

The PLUCK-RETURN technique minimizes excess finger movement. When the fingers make small movements with very little follow-through, travel distance is greatly reduced. The use of minimal movement and minimal effort (through the smart use of gravity), keeps the fingers relaxed and very close to the strings. This increases speed and accuracy and promotes effortless playing.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

If you have fingernails, be sure to engage them properly on the strings—flesh and nail simultaneously on the left side of the nail.

Play "on top" of the string. Do not pull from under the string. Instead push down onto the string so it sinks below its normal alignment with the other five strings. This is difficult to explain in words. Watch the video. Playing on top of the string greatly improves the tone quality and reduces finger movement.

[Watch Video #1: Introduction.](#) This will give you an overview of what you are trying to accomplish.

STEP 1. TRAIN EACH FINGER INDIVIDUALLY.

Pluck with "i"

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.
2. Place "i" and "m" between the 1st and 2nd strings. (Practicing on the second string makes the 1st string a boundary line that the fingers should not cross).
3. Touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger and then keep the finger hovering in front of or just above the 1st string. Keep the "a" finger very close to the string.
4. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "i". Allow it to **IMMEDIATELY return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "m" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

5. Continue plucking the 2nd string with "i" VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

Practicing at 70 or 72 may seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the string, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the finger.* It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the finger.
- Keep "i" and "m" positioned together, always between the 1st and 2nd strings.
- Keep the "a" finger close to the 1st string. If the "a" finger wanders off, occasionally touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger to reestablish its position.

[VIDEO #2: Train each finger individually first.](#)

Pluck with "m"

Same as before:

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.
2. Place "i" and "m" between the 1st and 2nd strings. (Practicing on the second string makes the 1st string a boundary line that the fingers should not cross).
3. Touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger and then keep the finger hovering in front of or just above the 1st string. Keep the "a" finger very close to the string.
4. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "m". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "i" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

5. Continue plucking the 2nd string with "m" VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

Practicing at 70 or 72 may seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the string, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the finger.* It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the finger.
- Keep "i" and "m" positioned together, always between the 1st and 2nd strings.
- Keep the "a" finger close to the 1st string. If the "a" finger wanders off, occasionally touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger to reestablish its position.

Pluck with "a"

Same as the technique to play "i" or "m":

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.
2. Place all three fingers ("ima") between the 1st and 2nd strings. (Practicing on the second string makes the 1st string a boundary line that the fingers should not cross).
3. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "a". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.

- Make sure the "i" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

4. Continue plucking the 2nd string with "a" VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

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- During the time between plucking the string, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the finger*. It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the finger.
- Keep all three fingers ("ima") positioned together, always between the 1st and 2nd strings.

Be sure the "a" finger minds its manners! Sometimes it will fail to completely release its tension and therefore will not return to its starting position, or will follow-through too far, or even curl up.

STEP 2. LEARN TO ALTERNATE THE FINGERS.

Alternate "i" and "m"

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.

2. Place "i" and "m" between the 1st and 2nd strings. (Practicing on the second string makes the 1st string a boundary line that the fingers should not cross).

3. Touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger and then keep the finger hovering in front of or just above the 1st string. Keep the "a" finger very close to the string.

4. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "i". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "m" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

5. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "m". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger

of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "i" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

5. Continue plucking the 2nd string alternating "i" and "m" VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

Practicing at 70 or 72 may seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the string, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the fingers*. It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the finger.
- Keep "i" and "m" positioned together, always between the 1st and 2nd strings.
- Keep the "a" finger close to the 1st string. If the "a" finger wanders off, occasionally touch (don't pluck) the 1st string with the "a" finger to reestablish its position.

[VIDEO #3: Alternating fingers.](#)

Alternate "m" and "a"

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.
2. Place all three fingers ("ima") between the 1st and 2nd strings. (Practicing on the second string makes the 1st string a boundary line that the fingers should not cross).
3. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "m". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "i" and "a" fingers are still hanging in place in their position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

4. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "a". Allow it to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the string, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the string is plucked.*
- The finger should not travel past the 3rd string.
- Also, be certain the finger returns all the way in front of the string. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the string again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the string. Don't pull across or from underneath.
- Make sure the "i" finger is still hanging in place in its position between the 1st and 2nd strings.

5. Continue plucking the 2nd string alternating "m" and "a" VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

Practicing at 70 or 72 may seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the string, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the fingers*. It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the finger.
- Keep all three fingers ("ima") positioned together, always between the 1st and 2nd strings.

Be sure the "a" finger minds its manners! Sometimes it will fail to completely release its tension and therefore will not return to its starting position, or will follow-through too far, or even curl up.

STEP 3. PRACTICE PLAYING THREE STRINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY

This exercise is very good for increasing the player's awareness of the difference between the tension present in the fingers to pluck the strings (turning the tension switch "on") and the near total absence of tension immediately after (turning the tension switch "off").

1. Set the thumb on the 6th string. Leave it there. The pinky finger should hang loosely next to or slightly in front of the "a" finger.

2. Place the "a" finger between the 1st and 2nd strings. Place the "m" finger between the 2nd and 3rd strings. Place the "i" finger between the 3rd and 4th strings. (Playing the inner strings instead of the first three strings makes the 1st string a boundary line for the "a" finger).

3. **Pluck** the three strings simultaneously with "ima" (the thumb does not play).

Allow all three fingers to IMMEDIATELY **return** to their starting positions in front of their strings by releasing the tension created when the fingers plucked the strings. Think: let go, empty the fingers of their tension, relax the fingers. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the fingers back to their starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the fingers back.

- Therefore, there is no follow-through. Well yes, you must follow-through to pluck the strings, but THINK ZERO FOLLOW-THROUGH. Remember, *the release of tension in the fingers should happen almost at the same time the strings are plucked.*
- The fingers should not travel past the next adjacent string.
- Also, be certain all three fingers return all the way in front of their strings. Otherwise, a wasteful additional movement forward will be required to pluck the strings again.
- Remember to "play on top" of the strings. Don't pull across or from underneath.

4. Continue plucking the three strings over and over VERY SLOWLY. Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each chord you pluck.*

Practicing at 70 or 72 may seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the strings, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the fingers*. It is as important as the stroke itself.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the fingers.
- For most players, the three fingers will lightly touch each other at the tip segments. Do not consciously splay the fingers apart.

Feel the sensation that *the release of tension in the finger should happen almost at the same time the strings are plucked*. It happens so fast that the fingers and hand will feel relaxed both before and immediately after the stroke.

[VIDEO #4: Pluck Three Strings Simultaneously.](#)

STEP 4. PRACTICE ARPEGGIOS.

Practice "pima"

1. Set the thumb on the 5th string. Place the "a" finger between the 1st and 2nd strings. Place the "m" finger between the 2nd and 3rd strings. Place the "i" finger between the 3rd and 4th strings. **Consider this the "home position" for those fingers.** (Playing the inner strings instead of the first three strings makes the 1st string a boundary line for the "a" finger).
2. Pluck the 5th string with the thumb. Be sure the fingers stay in their home positions.
3. After plucking the 5th string, set the thumb on the 6th string.
4. **Pluck** the 4th string with "i". Be sure "m" and "a" stay in their home positions.
5. Allow the "i" finger to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of its tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.
6. **Pluck** the 3rd string with "m". Be sure "i" and "a" remain in their home positions.
- 7 Allow the "m" finger to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of its tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.
8. **Pluck** the 2nd string with "a". Be sure "i" and "m" are still in their home positions.
9. Allow the "a" finger to IMMEDIATELY **return** to its starting position in front of the string by releasing the tension created when the finger plucked the string. Think: let go, empty the finger of its tension, relax the finger. Use whatever phrase connects with you so that *gravity* pulls the finger back to its starting position. Do NOT forcibly push the finger back.

Keep repeating steps 2 through 9 VERY SLOWLY.

Set your metronome at 70 or 72 for a quarter note (crochet). Play whole notes (semibreves). In other words, *the metronome will tick four times for each note you pluck.*

This will seem like it is way too slow, but do it. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

- During the time between plucking the strings, feel how loose the fingers feel just hanging there in position. Do not ignore this step of *feeling the near-total relaxation of the fingers*. It is as important as the actual strokes.
- Be certain your head is in a position where you can clearly see the movements of the fingers.

- Keep all three fingers ("ima") precisely positioned in front of their string in their home positions. **Especially watch the "a" finger. Sometimes it will fail to completely release its tension and therefore will not return to its starting position, or will follow-through too far, or even curl up.**

The PLUCK-RETURN technique should also be used when planting techniques are employed to play arpeggios.

[VIDEO 5: Arpeggios.](#)

Practice "pimami"

Use the same techniques as above for the "pima" pattern.

CAUTION: This arpeggio pattern is more difficult than the preceding pattern. When "m" plays the second-to-last note, it will tend to pull the "a" finger out of its home position. When "i" plays the final note, it will tend to pull the "m" and "a" fingers out of their home positions. Be vigilant! **Each finger should always stay in its home position except for the millisecond it takes the finger to pluck a string.**

Practice extremely slowly. It is important to be aware of the near-total relaxed state of the fingers and hand. The goal is to imprint on your brain that this is now the normal state of your hand when playing the guitar.

APPLY THE TECHNIQUE TO YOUR PIECES

To apply this technique to pieces you play, you must be able to focus nearly 100% on the right hand. Therefore, choose pieces you already play really well that you don't have to look at the left hand to play. BUT PLAY THEM OR PASSAGES FROM THEM VERY SLOWLY. Be sure you are using the PLUCK-RETURN technique on chords, intervals, single notes, and arpeggios.

[VIDEO 6: Repertoire.](#)