Anchor Fingers

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt, All Rights Reserved. This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

One of my students recently returned from the excellent master class (part of the Bowdoin International Music Festival) given annually by Ricardo Iznaola in Bowdoin, Maine. Ricardo encouraged my student to make more use of the anchor-finger technique. It's a technique I began using unconsciously many years ago. But, no one ever mentioned it. It was never written about in books or magazines. Teachers never brought it up. Since I never heard anyone talk about it, I thought maybe it was a crutch, and I shouldn't use it. Finally, I heard Christopher Parkening remark in a master class that he used the technique. So, I finally felt vindicated. Since then, I've heard it mentioned a few times, but it seems to receive little discussion.

The anchor finger technique may be defined as placing a right-hand finger (usually the "a" finger, but sometimes the pinky or "m") on a string while playing other strings. Setting the right-hand thumb on the guitar or on a string while playing other strings with the fingers, is a more well-known use of the anchor technique. I will describe it later.

Be sure to place the anchor finger in ready-to-play position—string in contact with flesh and left side of fingernail. This is important, because many times, the anchored finger will eventually pluck the string on which it is set.

Watch how it's done.

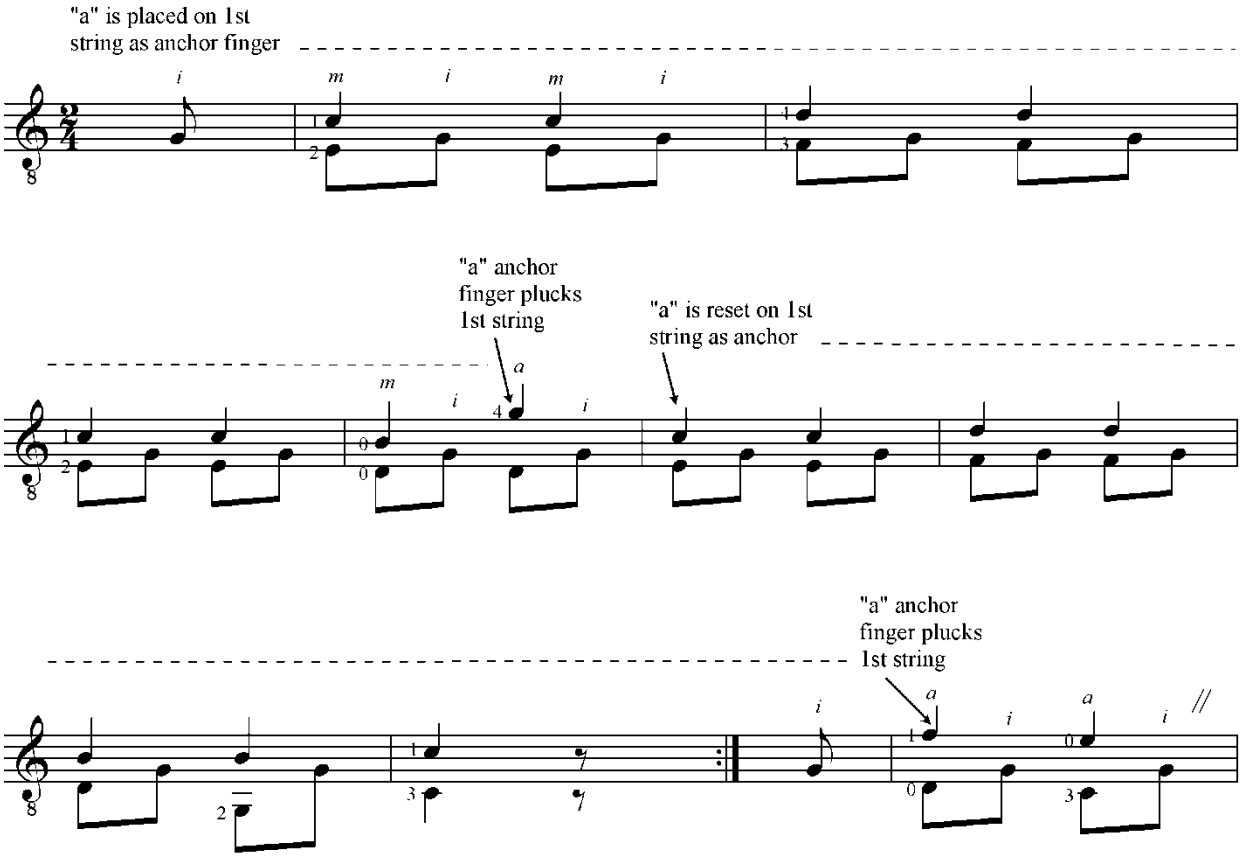
The use of anchor fingers differs from the planting technique in that the anchor finger might not play the string on which it is anchored. Or, if it does play the string, it happens sporadically, not in a pattern. Planting on the other hand, is done with the express purpose to have the finger on the string as preparation to pluck the string. It is usually used as part of a pattern of execution such as, most commonly, an arpeggio.

The Benefits of Using Anchor Fingers

1. Anchor fingers lend stability to the right hand, resulting in security and confidence. In situations such as public performance, the hand may shake from nervousness. The use of anchor fingers helps keep the hand steady, greatly increasing accuracy and confidence, thereby lessening performance anxiety.
2. At the same time they provide benefits such as stability and speed, anchors provide ancillary benefits such as string damping to clarify melodic lines or eliminate unwanted dissonances.
3. Increased right-hand stability often translates into increased left-hand accuracy.
4. The anchor finger serves as a spatial reference point, resulting in more accurate playing by the other right-hand fingers.
5. Speed.
6. Enhanced touch for better control of dynamics.
7. Control of tone color changes.
8. Improved tone quality
9. Provide stability for the execution of descending slurs ("pull-offs").
10. Provide stability for the execution of ornaments.
11. Provide spatial reference points and stability for execution of harmonics
12. Provide accuracy, security, and improved tone quality for strums with the thumb.
13. Provides stability for melodic passages executed by the thumb

How It's Done

Ferdinand Carulli's *English Dance* provides a good example how the anchor finger technique works:

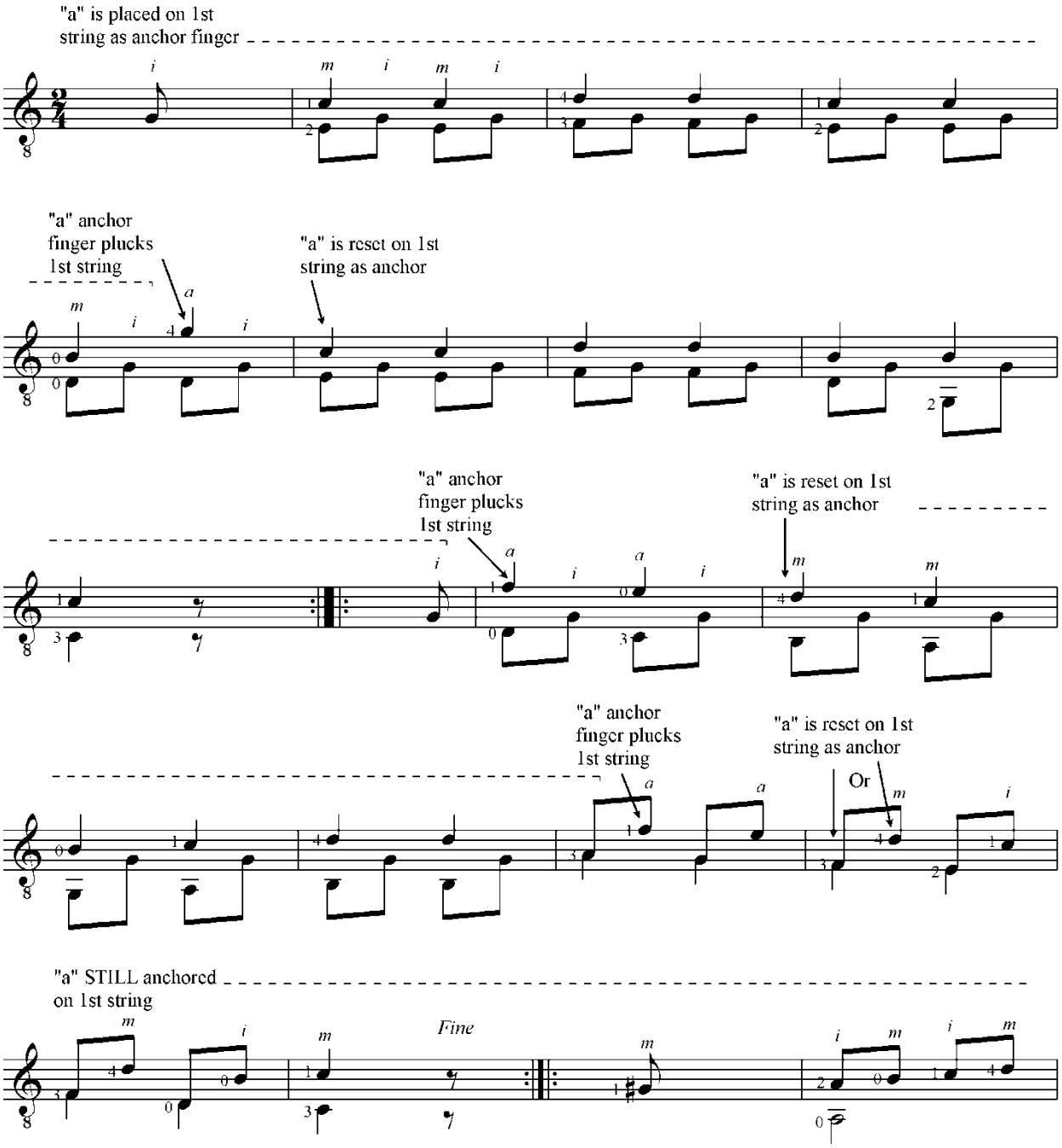


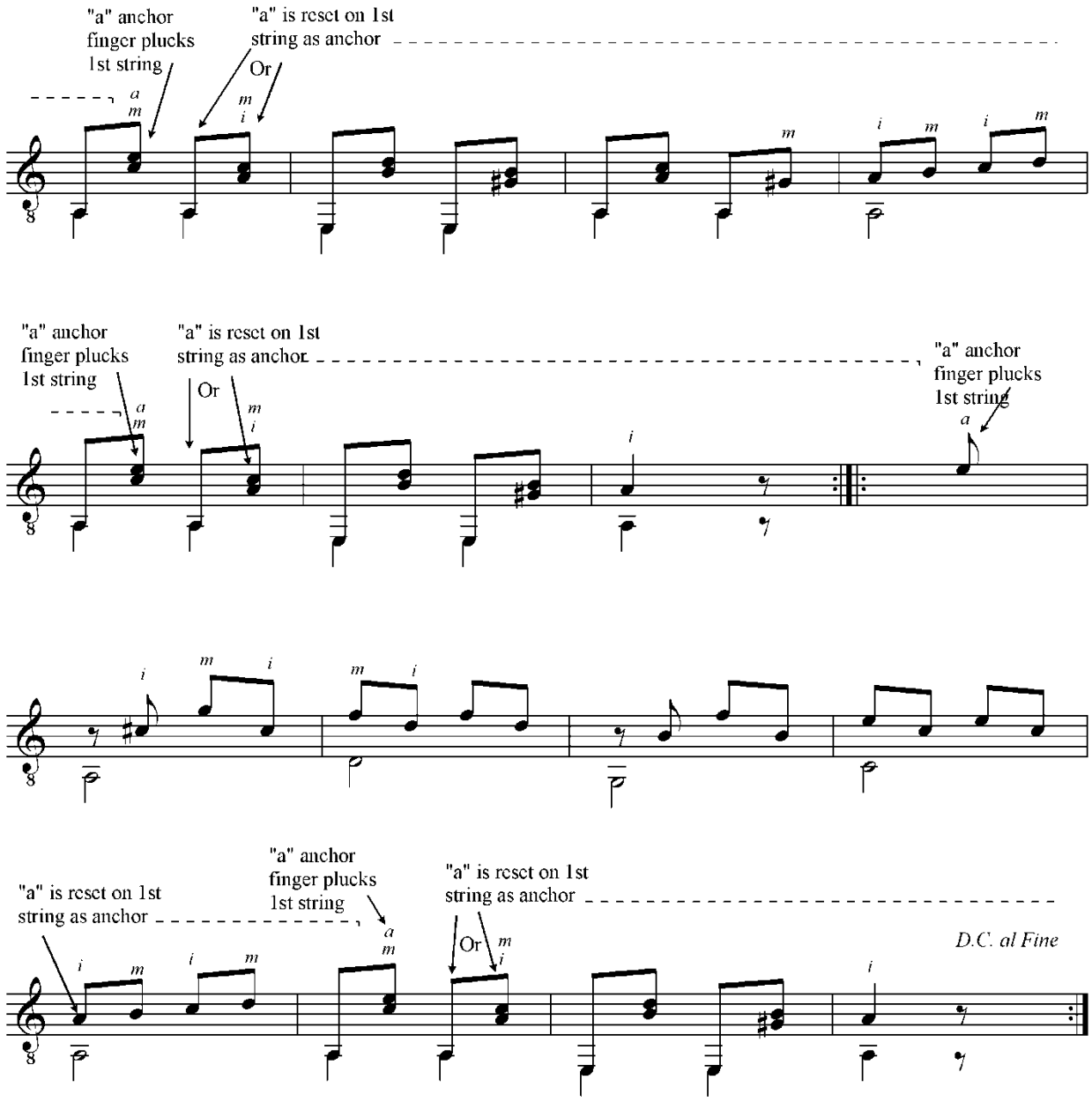
Before playing a single note, the "a" finger is placed on the first string. That is the anchor finger. It stabilizes the hand, keeping the hand steady. It provides a spatial reference point. What I mean by that is, since "a" is on the first string, "m" and "i" can better feel where their second and third strings are.

In measure 4, we arrive at the high G on the second beat. Playing the correct string is simple, because the "a" finger is already on the string as the anchor. Plus, the tone quality should be excellent because the "a" finger anchor has already been set on the string on the left side of the fingernail and flesh—the sweet spot.

At measure 5, the "a" finger is reset on the first string as the anchor. It remains there for the repeat. If continuing on to the next section, the "a" finger anchor is on the first string, ready to play the F on the first beat of measure 9.

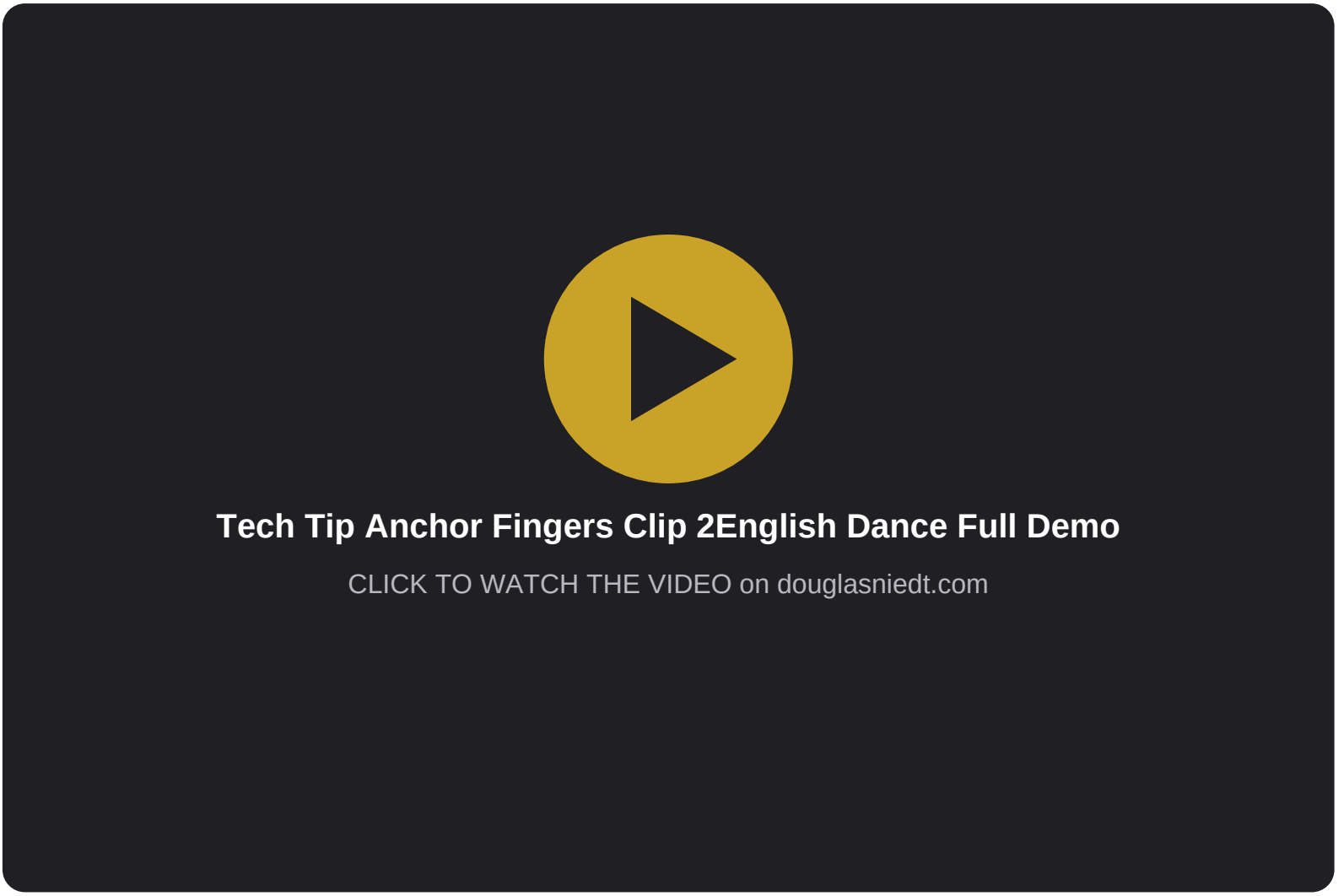
Here is the entire piece with my indications for the use of anchor fingers:


"a" is placed on 1st string as anchor finger
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor
Or
"a" STILL anchored on 1st string
Fine

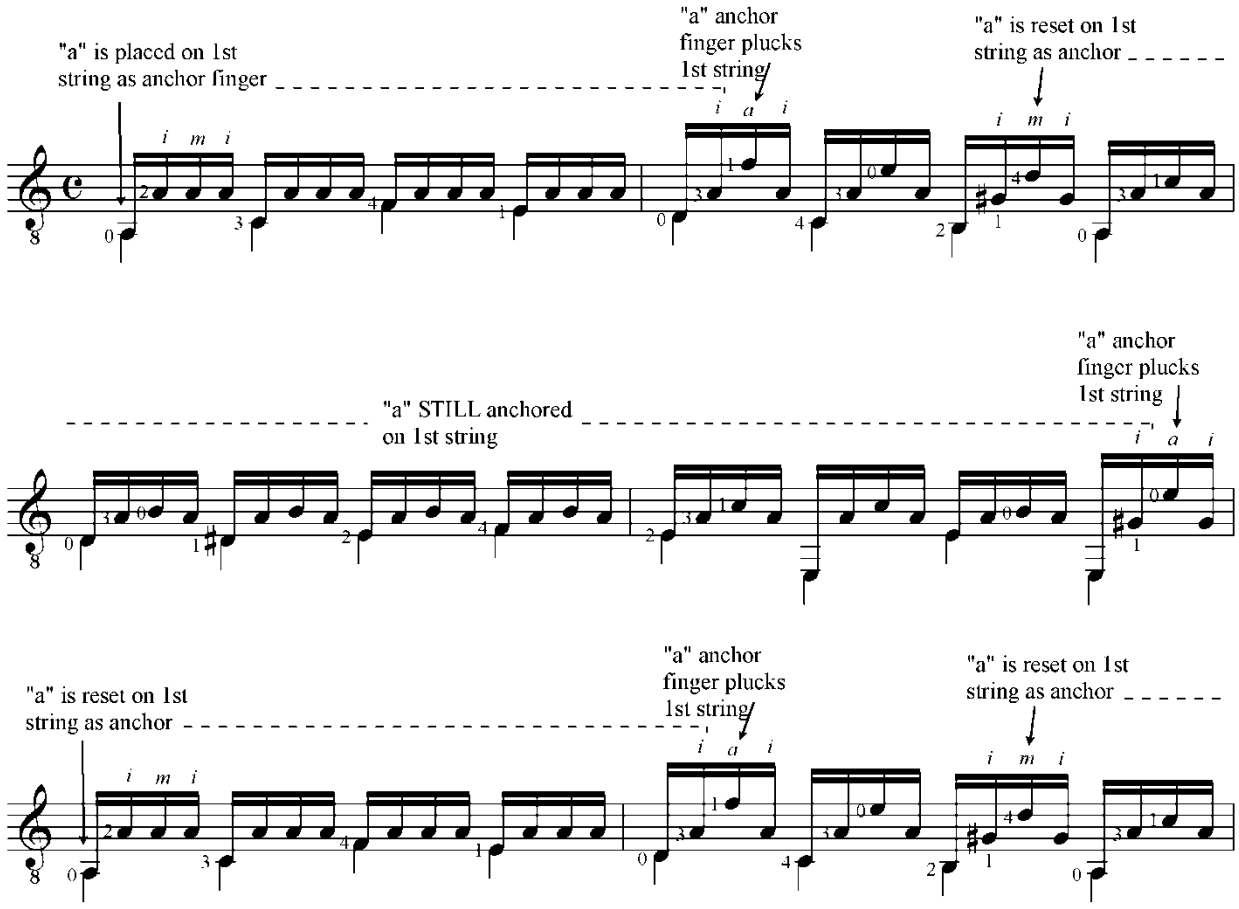


As usual, it is much easier to show you how to use the technique than to describe it in words.

Watch as I demonstrate how to use anchor fingers on Carulli's *English Dance*:


Tech Tip Anchor Fingers Clip 2English Dance Full Demo
CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

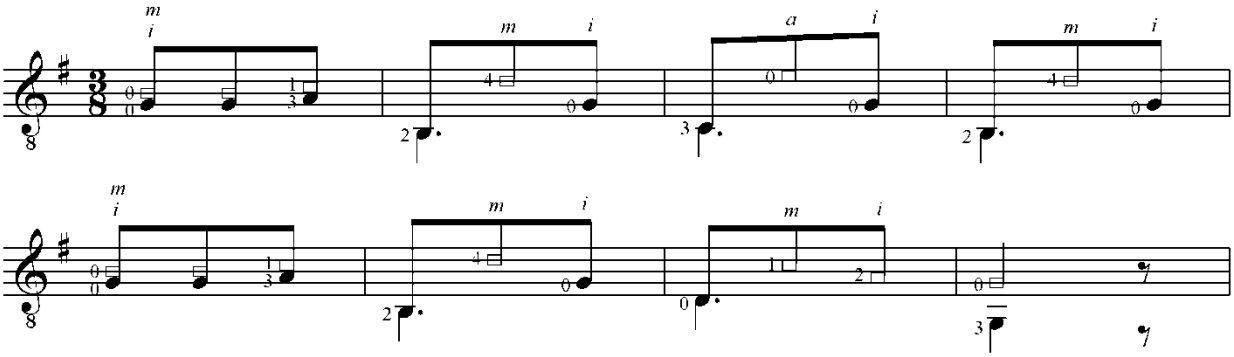
In a more advanced piece such as *Etude #7* by Matteo Carcassi, I would use anchors the same way:



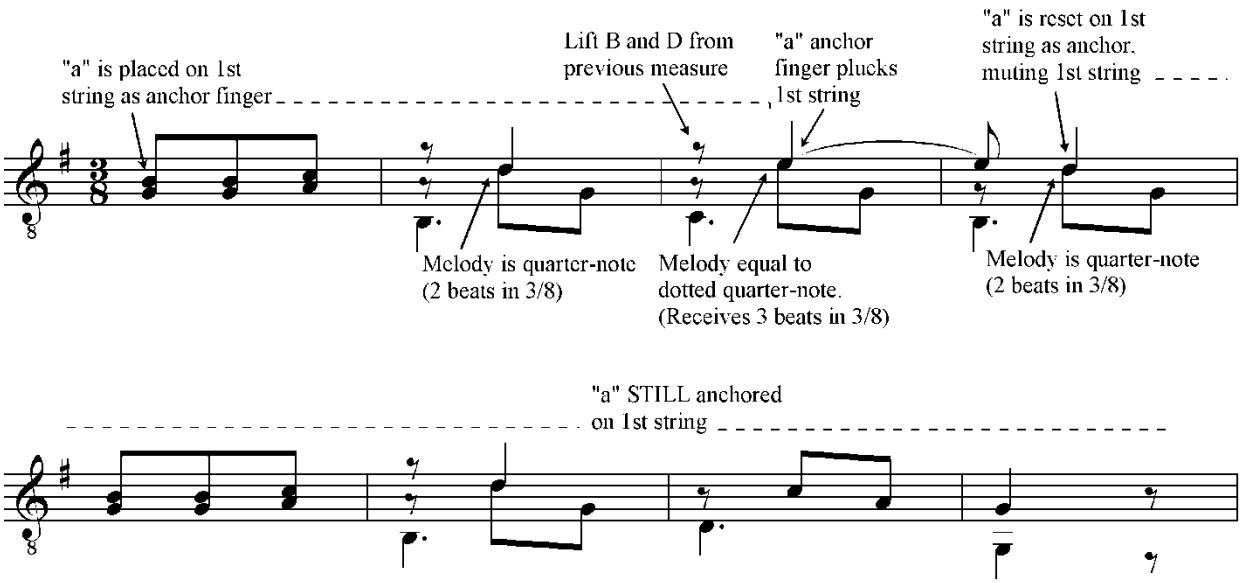
Watch.

Anchors Can Clarify the Melodic Line

One subtlety of the technique that must be taken into consideration, is exactly when to place the anchor finger on the string. Let's look at an example that on the surface seems simple and straightforward. Unfortunately, it's not. Here is Carulli's *Waltz in G*. I have indicated with hollow square note heads which notes comprise the melody:

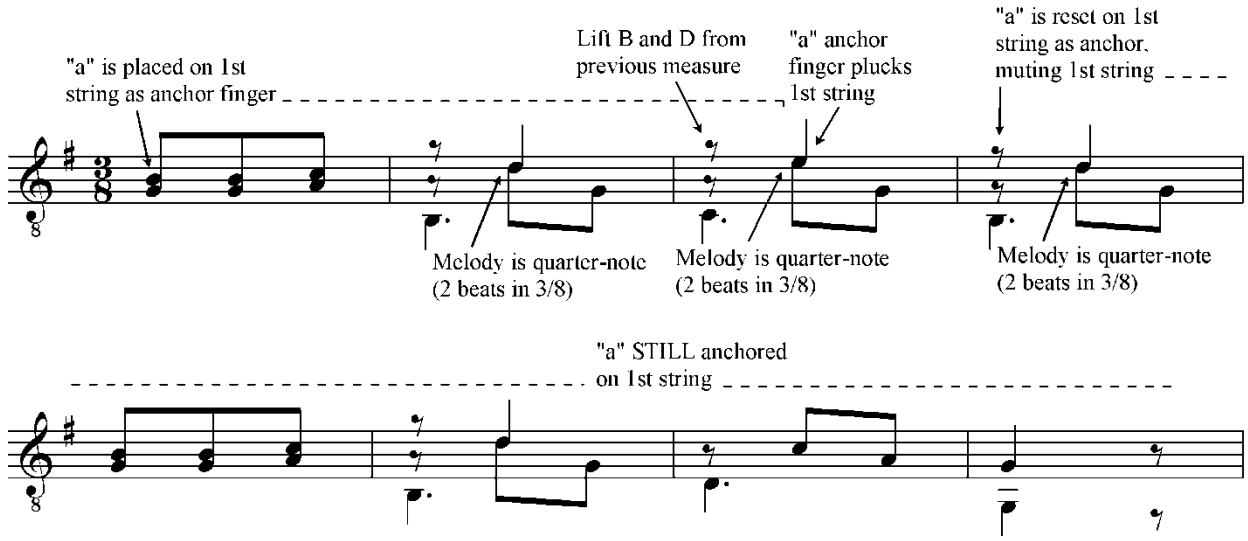


Using anchor fingers can produce this result:

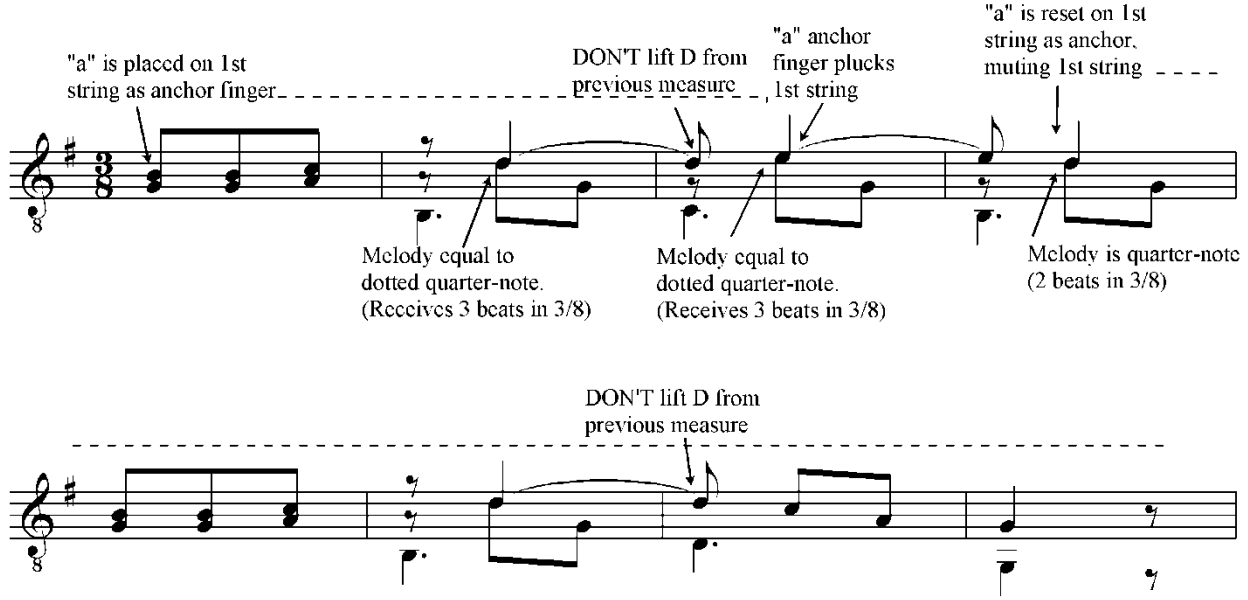


Note how the use of the "a" finger anchor in measure 4 mutes the ringing open E from measure 3. This is a good thing—in classical period music of this type, we don't want the open E forming a dissonance against the second string D. But, note that there is a lack of uniformity in the rhythmic duration of the D to E to D. For many, that may be just fine. But, there are more possibilities.

To achieve a desired uniformity of sound, the melody notes in measures 2, 3, 4, and 6 could all be played as quarter notes. To do so requires that the open E in measure 3 be muted at the downbeat of measure 4. The solution? Place the "a" finger as an anchor on beat one of measure 4. It works out perfectly:

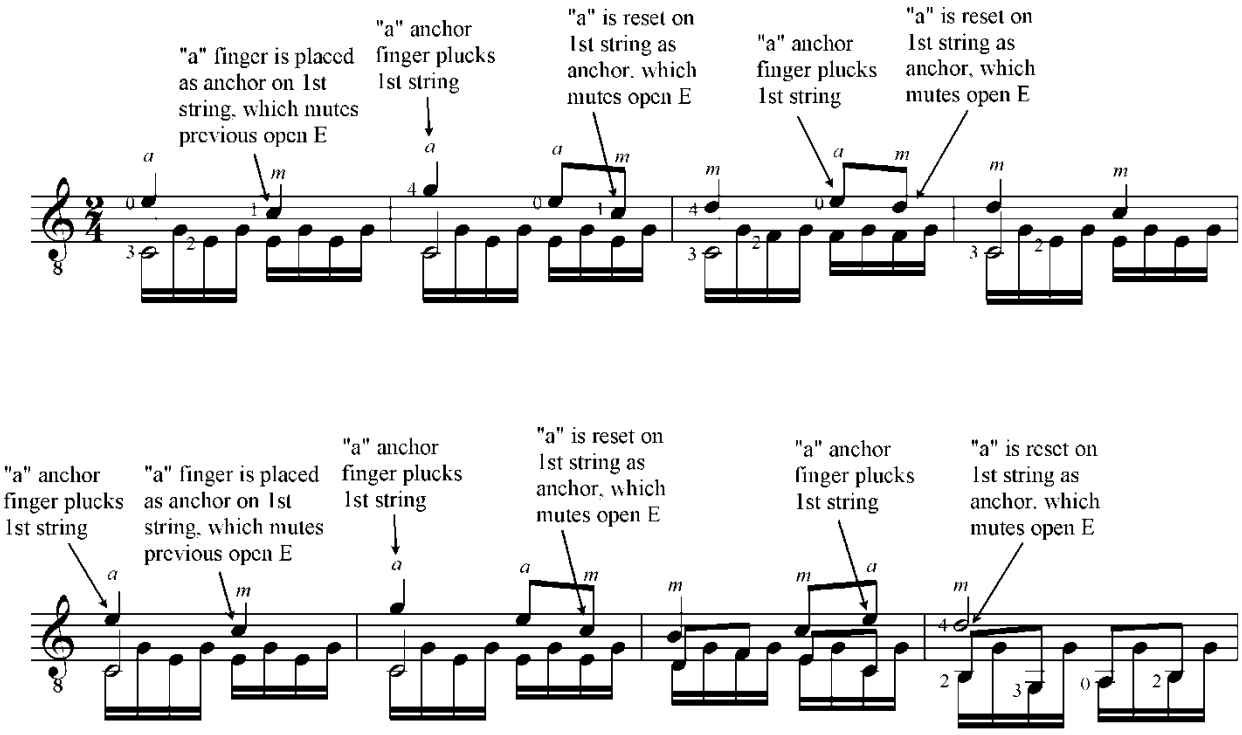


But, what if we want the melody to be completely sustained from note to note? If this is the desired effect, it is important not to place the anchor finger on the first string until beat two of measure 4. A completely sustained melody would be notated and executed as:



Watch this video clip as I demonstrate these points.

Fernando Sor's *Etude #2* (Segovia edition) provides an excellent example of how the use of anchor fingers can serve double duty—not only providing stability but helping to clarify the melody by damping unwanted ringing notes. If we want to play the melody note values precisely as written, we could use anchor fingers as notated here:

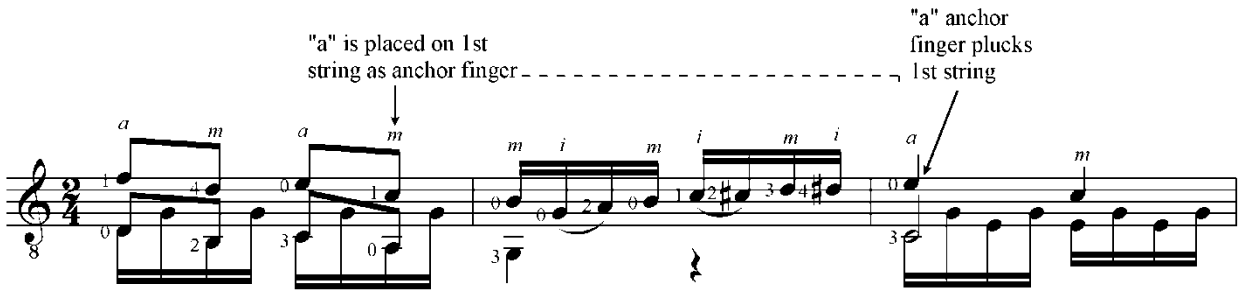

"a" finger is placed as anchor on 1st string, which mutes previous open E
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor, which mutes open E
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor, which mutes open E
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" finger is placed as anchor on 1st string, which mutes previous open E
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor, which mutes open E
"a" anchor finger plucks 1st string
"a" is reset on 1st string as anchor, which mutes open E

Watch.

Anchors=Right-Hand Stability=Left-Hand Accuracy

If you didn't want to use anchors as extensively as in the preceding example with the resulting string damping (for some, it's too "dry" a sound), anchors could still be used at key points in the piece. Keep in mind benefit #2 listed above: increased right-hand stability often translates into increased left-hand accuracy.

For instance, in Sor's *Etude #2* above, playing the ascending scale from measure 24 into 25 can be tricky. Using an anchor to stabilize the right hand gives the left hand more security, bringing much-needed stability to the passage:

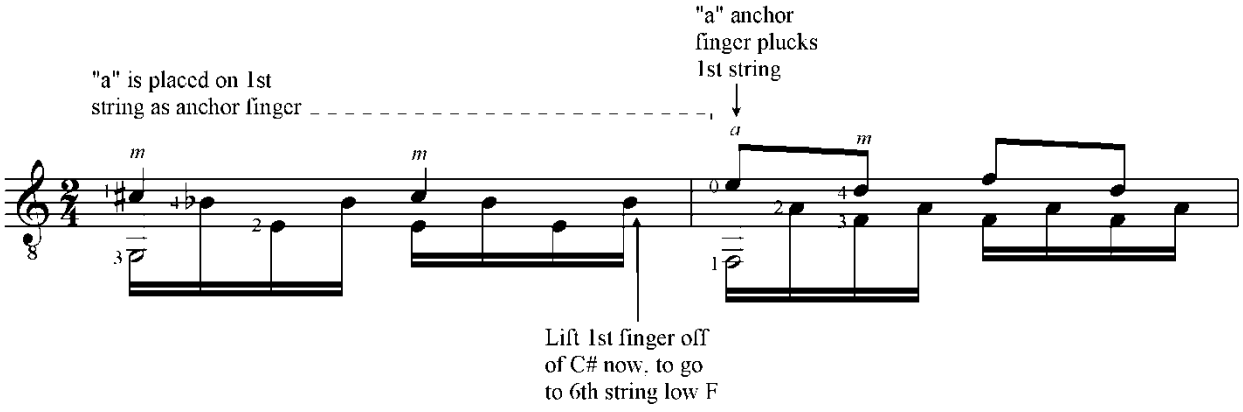


Watch how it works.

Tech Tip Anchor Fingers Clip 6Sor Study 2Fast Scale

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Another example can be seen in measures 29-30. It is a difficult chord change for the left hand. But by anchoring the "a" finger on the first string, most of the difficulty for the right hand is neutralized. This allows total focus on the left hand. Because the right hand is stable, no right-hand tension is present that could transfer to the left hand to make its job more difficult:



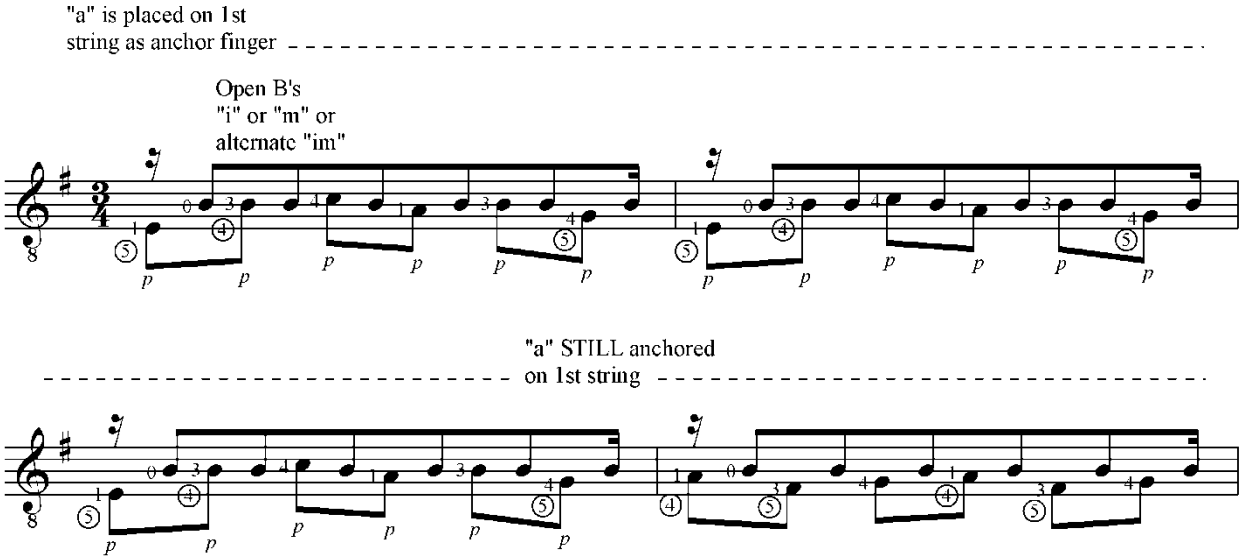
I will demonstrate.

Speed

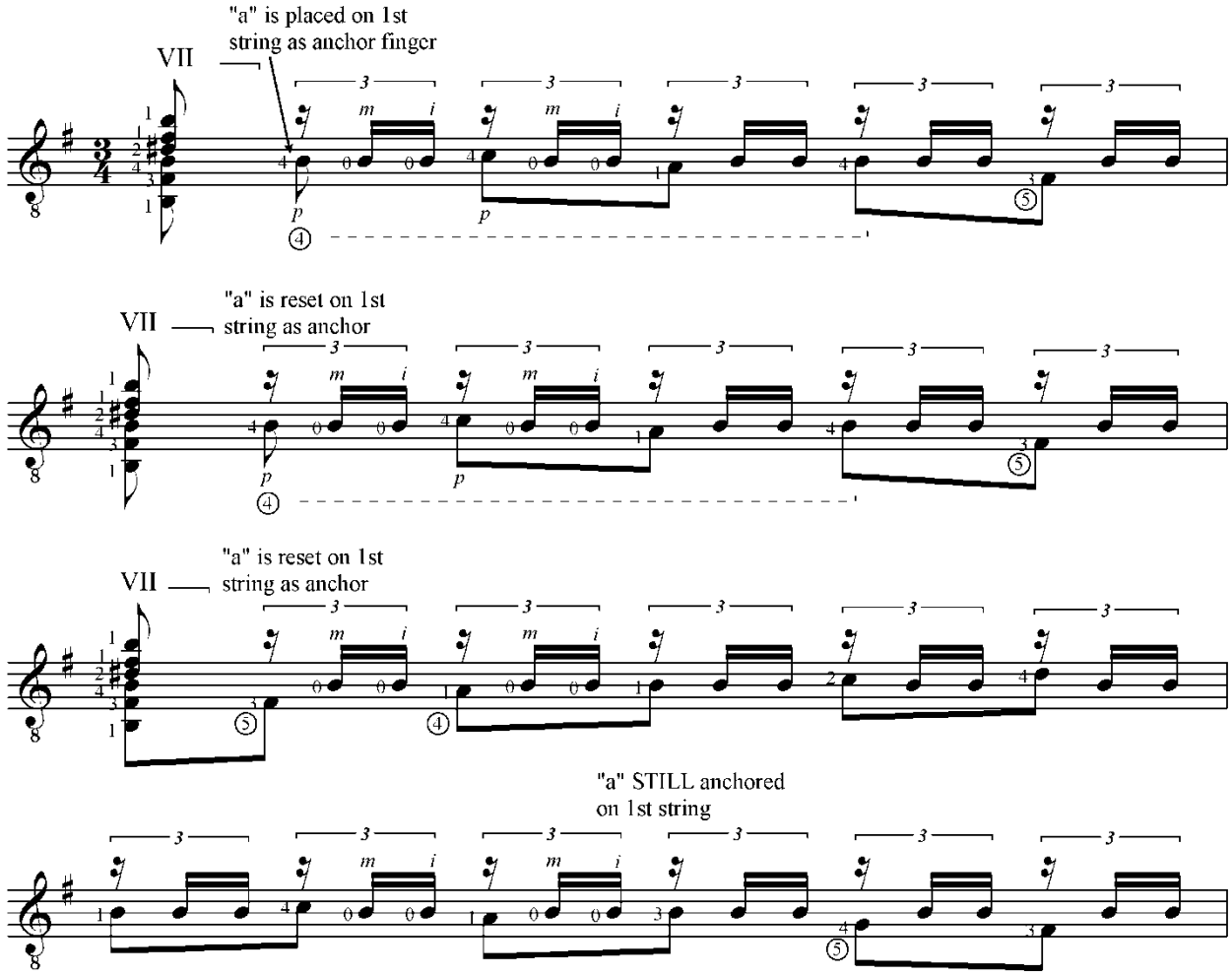
This benefit may be more of a byproduct of other factors, rather than inherent to the technique itself. I say this because some people say that although they use the technique for its many benefits, it doesn't seem to increase their speed of execution. Others say it does. Some players say the anchor finger resting on its string acts as a springboard and lends leverage to the movements of the other fingers and hand. It enables more efficient and synergistic use of all the mechanisms involved in playing.

What I think happens is that the increase in speed, real or imagined, is a result of the added stability, security, confidence, and accuracy the technique provides. You will just have to test it yourself. Do some A-B tests of your speed on various passages with and without using an anchor finger. But, don't try to test it until you are totally comfortable, confident, and at ease with using the technique.

I have found the technique to be very useful in *Leyenda* by Isaac Albeniz. In the opening measures, speed is not an issue, but even here, it's nice to have the added stability of the anchor:



Several measures later, in the tremolo section, the anchor begins to lend some real benefits in stability and in my opinion, speed:



Watch me demonstrate these sections of *Leyenda*.

Tone Quality, Dynamics, and Tone Color

The use of anchor fingers can improve your tone quality in a couple of ways. The most obvious is the same as in planting. If the finger is placed on the string before it has to play, plenty of time is available to set it precisely on its sweet spot--the left side of the fingernail and flesh. The other way tone quality is improved with the use of anchor fingers, is by the increased stability of the hand. With less extraneous hand movement and better spatial sense of where the strings are, the precision of placing the fingers on their sweet spot is greatly increased. It is far more difficult to hit that precise spot if the hand is moving around (even a small amount) or a finger is not exactly certain where its target spot is on the string.

The same points apply to playing loud and soft. Having a finger anchored on a string provides an incredible amount of security when trying to play very quietly—especially if you are nervous and your hand is already shaking. When trying to play loudly, the tendency is to make bigger finger movements. The entire hand also tends to get involved with the act of playing loudly. It starts to jump around or make small extraneous movements. Not only does it become increasingly difficult to control the volume level, but accuracy plummets as the hand movement increases. The anchor finger will lessen hand movement. Sometimes it will eliminate it altogether. I think that in loud playing, the leverage element of the anchor finger also comes into play. The slight pushes and pulls of the anchor against its string seem