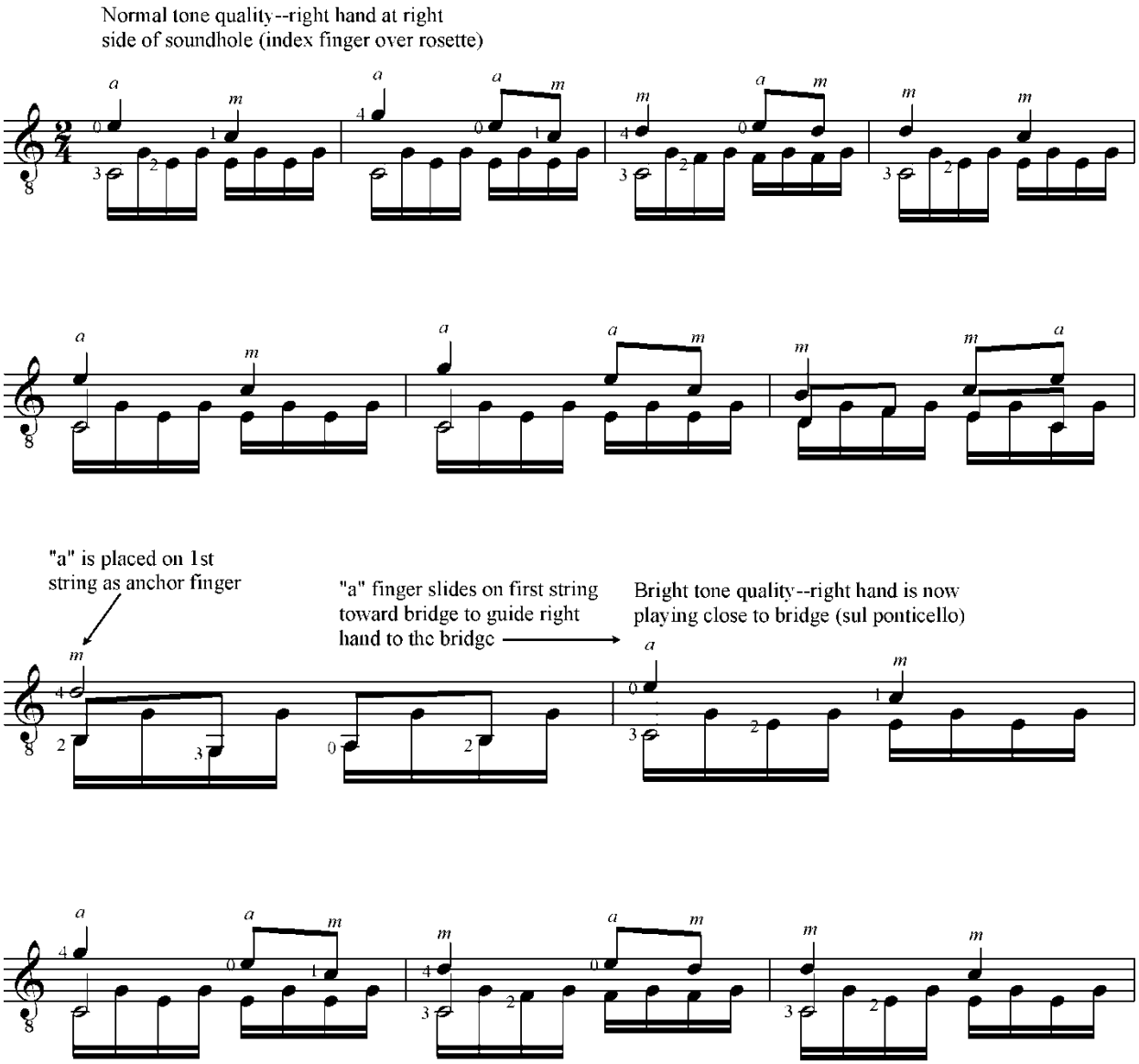
to enable the other fingers to confidently dig in more to their strings for greater volume while still retaining accuracy.

How many times have you tried to change tone color by moving the hand along the length of the string only to mess up the passage because your fingers began missing the strings? Let's look again at Sor's *Study #2*.

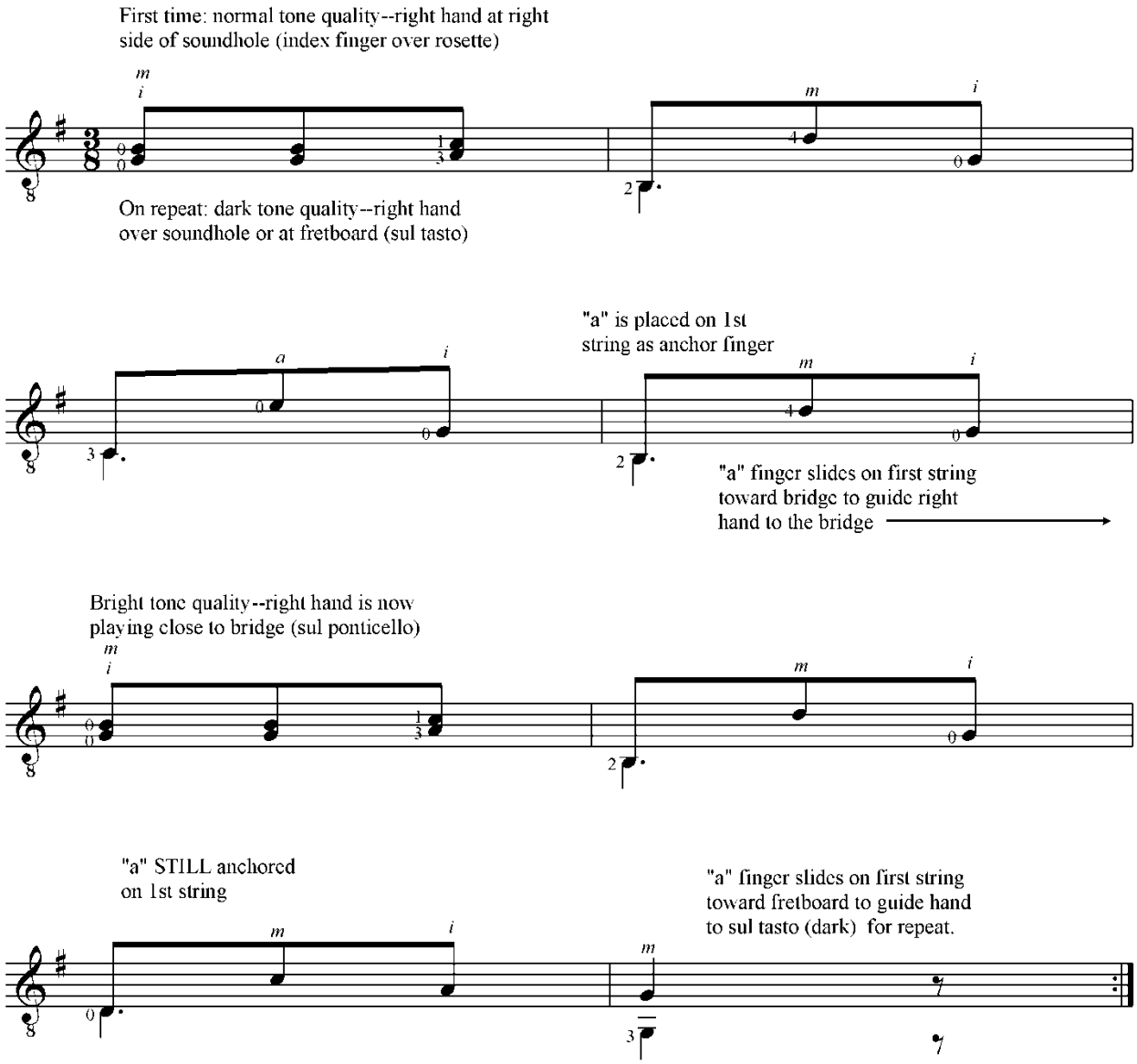
We would probably begin with a normal tone color. We could change to a bright tone color at the repeat of the melody at measure 9. Without an anchor, the right-hand fingers could easily lose their sense of where the strings are as the hand travels towards the bridge. But, with the "a" finger anchored on the first string, the problem is eliminated:



Watch as I demonstrate.



For a simpler example, let's look again at Carulli's *Waltz in G*. A common way to learn to execute tone-color changes is to change the color at the repeats:



Once again, moving the hand toward the bridge for the bright tone color (called ponticello, which means at the bridge) without an anchor is very precarious. With the anchor, it is no problem.

Incidentally, the term ponticello (pronounced pone-tee-CHELL-oh) is Italian for bridge. Technically, to indicate to play close to or at the bridge for a bright sound, we should say sul ponticello. Its opposite is sul tasto—to play on or at the fingerboard. For guitarists this is often interpreted to mean to play over the soundhole, and is sometimes indicated with the word dolce (sweet).

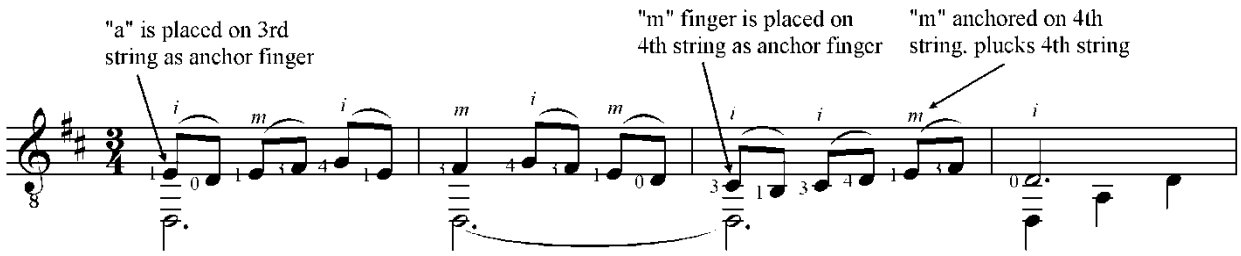
Watch.



Descending Slurs (Pull-offs)

At first, you might think a right-hand technique would have little to do with a technique executed almost solely by the left hand. But, one of the most common uses of the anchor finger is in conjunction with descending slurs, often referred to by guitarists as pull-offs. In my lengthy tech tip on slurs, I explained the use of the right-hand fingers as safety stops or safety blocks. Go here for a detailed explanation. But briefly, when doing pull-offs on the 2nd through 6th strings, there is a danger of producing an unwanted note from the adjacent higher string as a result of the pull-off or snap movement of the left-hand finger. The technique used to prevent the unwanted note is a safety stop (some call it a safety block.) The safety stop is done by damping (muffling or muting) the adjacent higher string. Safety stops are often done by the right

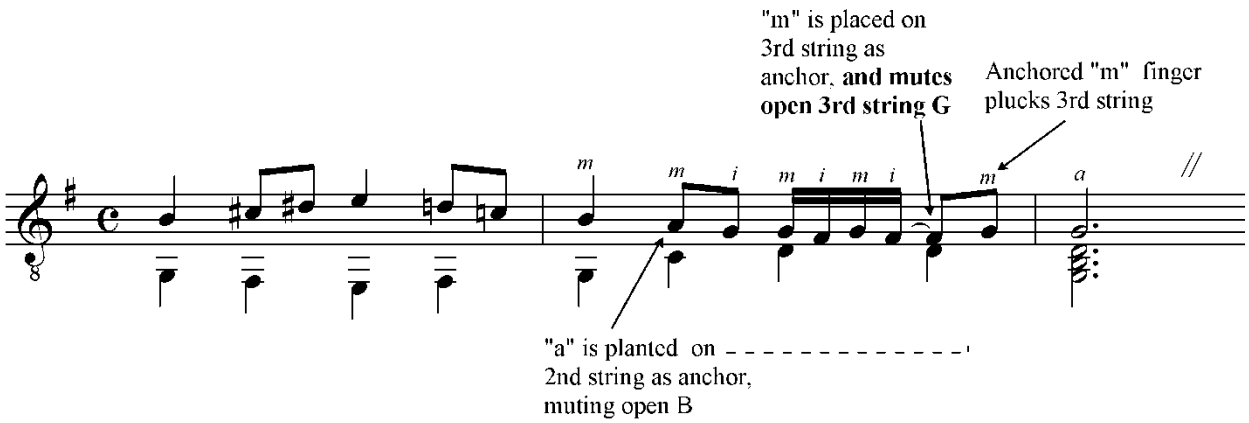
hand using anchor fingers. The *Saltarello*, from Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance, edited by Chilesotti, provides a great example:



The anchor finger not only serves the purpose of muting the string to prevent unwanted noises, but once again, by providing stability and confidence in the right hand, lends additional confidence and accuracy to left-hand execution.

Ornaments

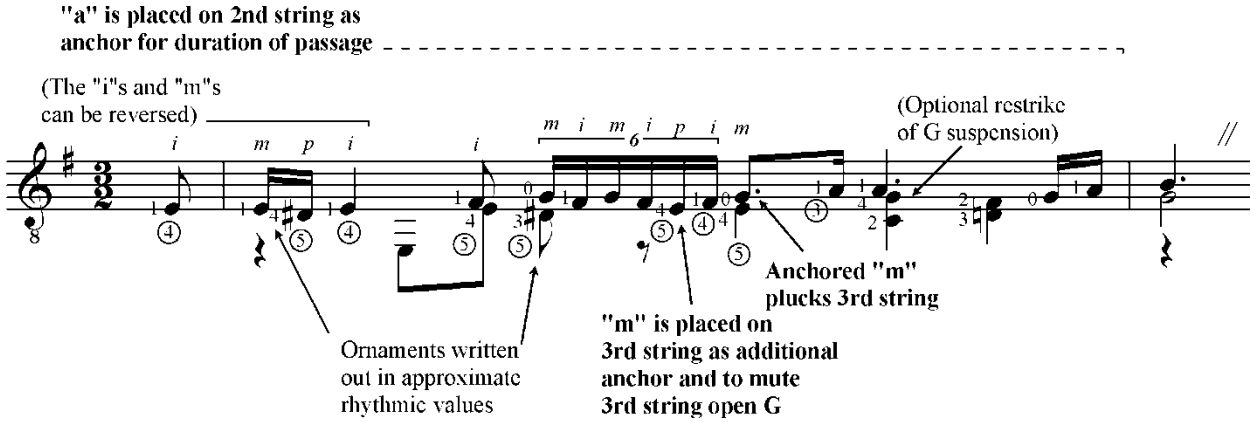
Anchor fingers can facilitate the secure and clear execution of ornaments. Anchors' secondary benefit of string damping makes ornaments sound cleaner. Here is a cross-string trill at the end of the first section of J.S. Bach's *Bourree* from *Lute Suite No. 1* (BWV 996). *T*he use of anchor fingers makes execution easier and mutes an unwanted open G at the end of the trill:



Watch.



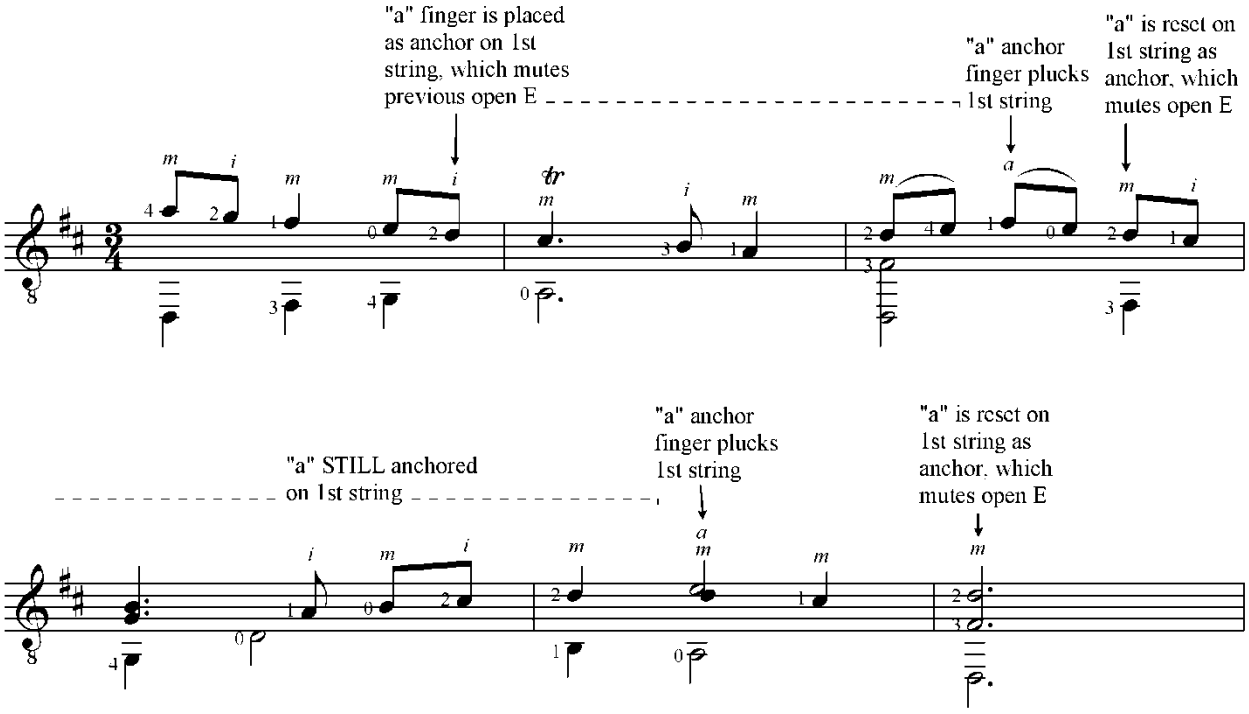
The opening of Bach's *Courante* from the same lute suite can be particularly troublesome. Once again, anchor fingers to the rescue. The anchor fingers give a sense of security and confidence from the very first note, provide a crucial spatial reference point, and damp an unwanted open G:



Watch this demonstration.



Anchor fingers deliver similar benefits on trills consisting of hammers and pull-offs. Here is a passage from *Bianco Fiore*, the second of the *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance*:



I will show you.

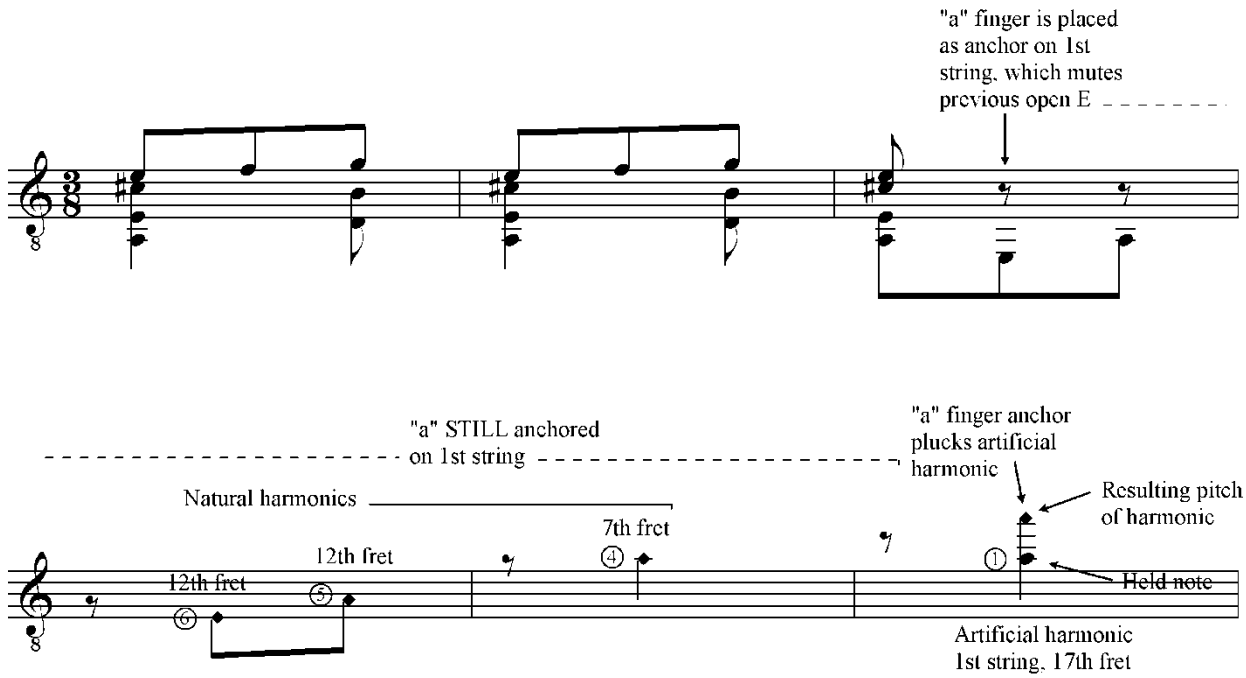


Harmonics

As you are aware, the execution of any kind of harmonic requires delicacy of touch. They can be tricky to play well, even when practicing at home. In a high-pressure performance situation with shaky hands, passages of harmonics can be ruined by instability. Anything that can stabilize shaking hands and fingers is especially welcome.

The most commonly used anchor for playing harmonics is actually the thumb. In the well-known section of harmonics in Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 4*, the thumb, resting on a bass string, can serve as a stabilizer for the hand and spatial reference point for the fingers.

Rafaga, by Joaquin Turina, provides an excellent example of how an anchor finger can aid in playing natural and artificial harmonics in the same passage:



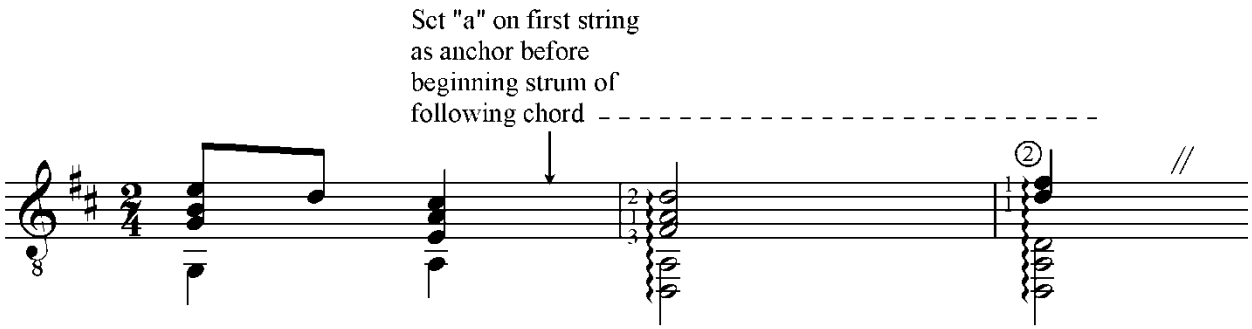
In measure three, the anchor damps the first string open E. In measures 4 and 5, the anchor on the first string keeps the hand steady for the thumb to play the natural harmonics. In the final measure, the "a" finger travels lengthwise along the string toward the fretboard to guide the hand into position for the index finger to touch the first string at the 17th fret. The "a" finger is already on the first string to pluck it, producing the artificial harmonic.

Watch this video demo.



Strums

Anchor fingers perform several useful functions when strumming with the thumb. One function is to serve as a stop for the thumb. In the first of Chilesotti's *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance*, is a passage with two strums:

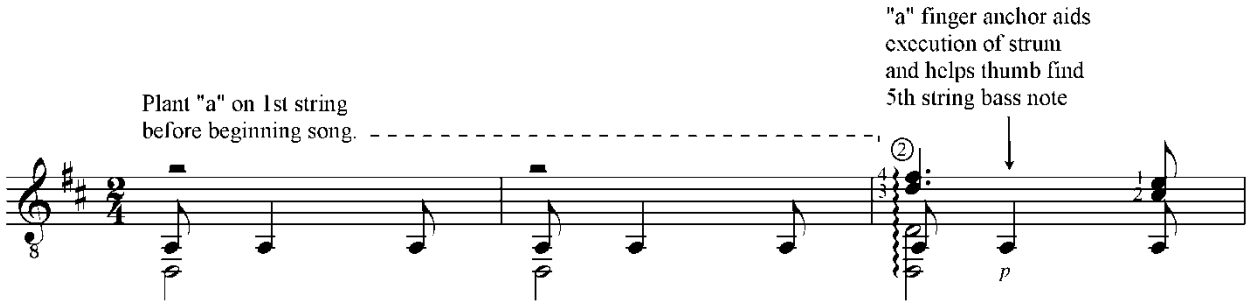


By placing the "a" finger as an anchor on the first string, the thumb will not overshoot its strum, accidentally playing the first string. If it did follow through too far and play the first string, it wouldn't sound, because the string is muted by the anchor.

 Watch as I explain.



An anchor finger is very helpful in producing a strum with a good tone quality. The anchor stabilizes the hand and lends very fine control of the placement of the thumbnail on the strings and the angle and speed of the actual strumming motion. The melody to *Capricho Catalan* by Isaac Albeniz opens with a strummed chord. To ensure accuracy and a beautiful tone on this chord (the thumb must contact the strings at just the right spot), the "a" finger can be planted on the first string from the very beginning. The anchor, providing a spatial reference point, also helps the thumb jump accurately to the low A on the 5th string immediately after the strum:

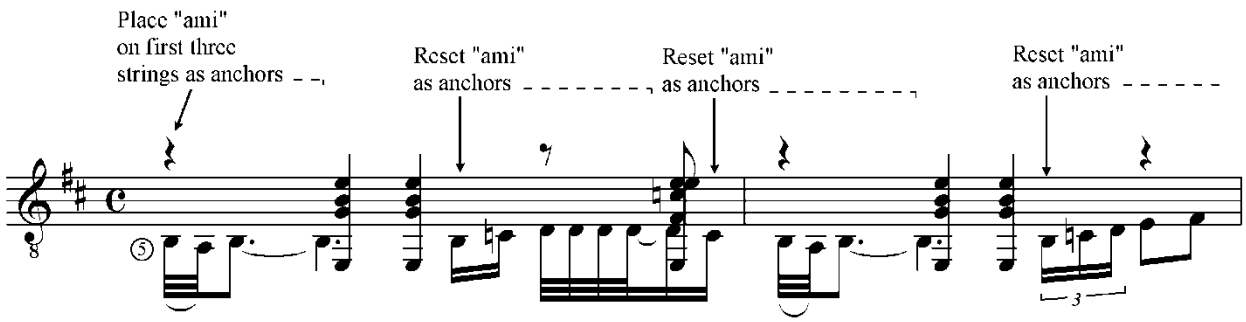

"a" finger anchor aids
execution of strum
and helps thumb find
5th string bass note
Plant "a" on 1st string
before beginning song.
p

Watch.


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Thumb Stability

In the second movement of Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, the thumb has a passage where it plays the melody:



By using anchor fingers on the treble strings, the thumb has better control and stability to play the melody with exquisite refinement.

Watch.



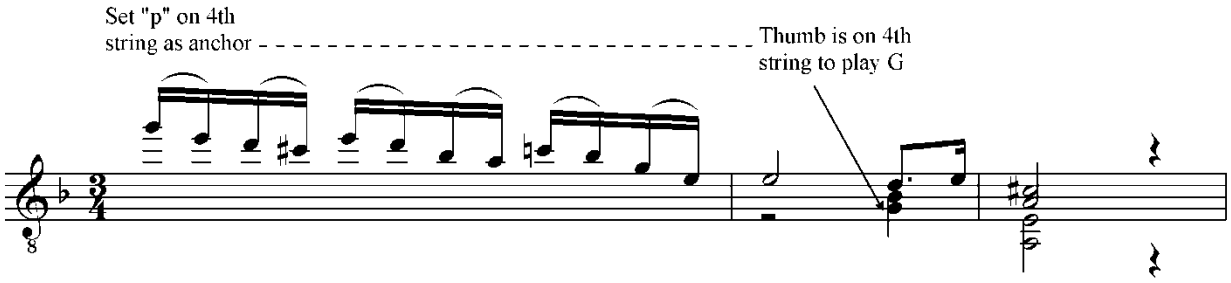
The Thumb as Anchor

One of the most common anchoring roles of the thumb is to serve as an anchor in the execution of scales and melodic passages played by the fingers. Players seem to fall into two camps on where to anchor the thumb. For fast rest-stroke scales spanning several strings, some players set the thumb on the rosette when they play the bass strings and on the sixth string when they play the trebles. Others let the thumb follow behind the fingers at a distance of two or three strings. If the passage only spans a few strings, the player will anchor the thumb wherever it is comfortable.

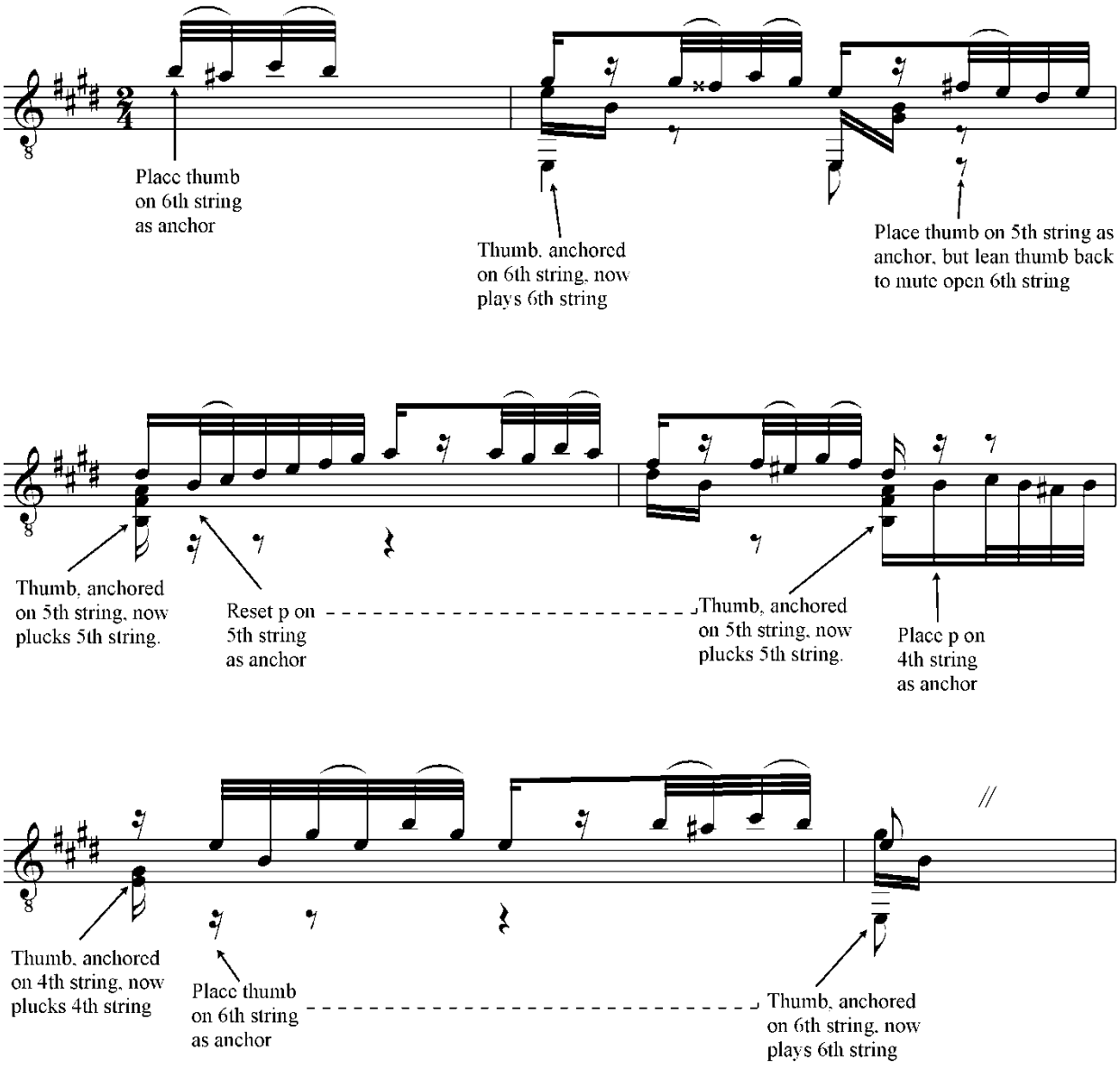
Watch.



Many times, the thumb is planted on the string it will play next after the scale or melodic passage. The opening of Francisco Tarrega's *Capricho Arabe* is a good example:



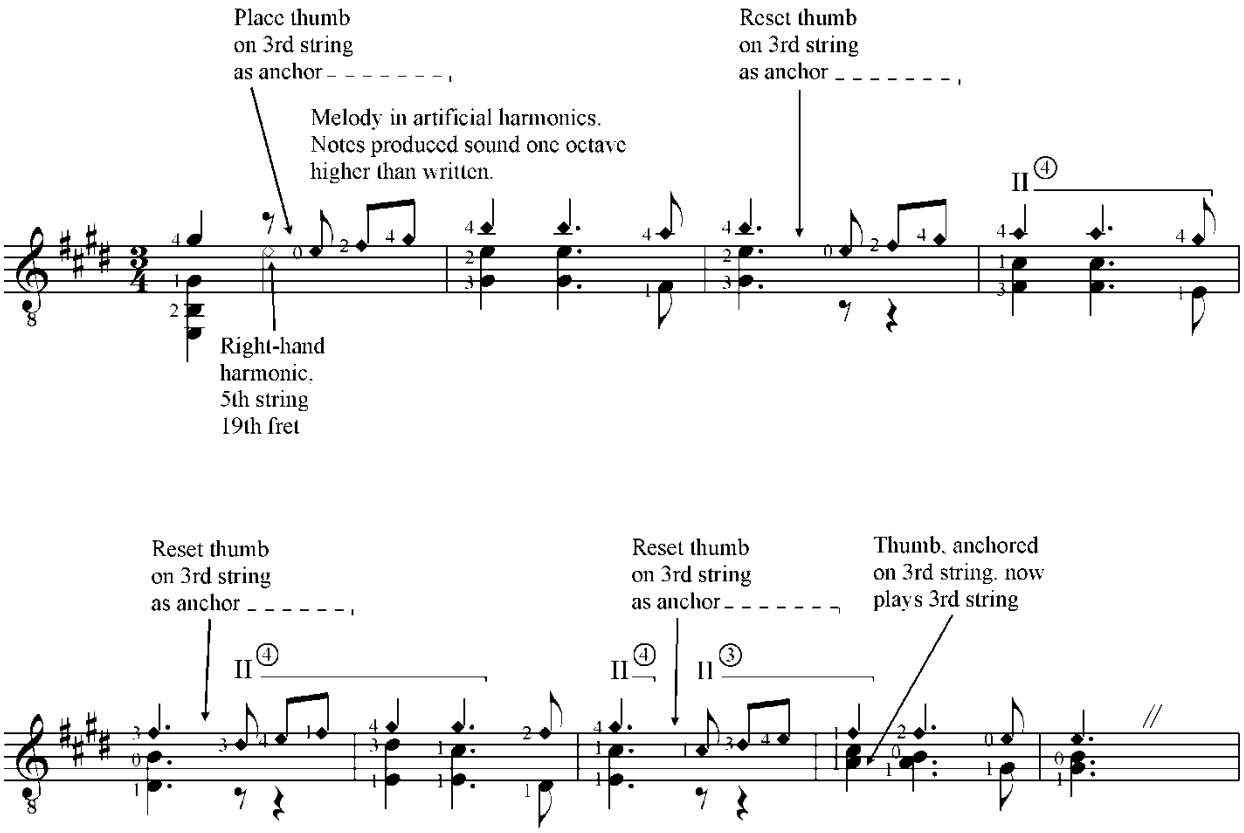
In Fernando Sor's *Variations on a Theme by Mozart*, execution of the first several measures of Variation #1 is made easier by the use of the thumb as an anchor. It lends stability and confidence in the execution of the slurs and scales in the upper part, and helps keep the overall texture clean by damping bass strings:


Place thumb on 6th string as anchor
Thumb, anchored on 6th string, now plays 6th string
Place thumb on 5th string as anchor, but lean thumb back to mute open 6th string
Thumb, anchored on 5th string, now plucks 5th string.
Reset p on 5th string as anchor
Thumb, anchored on 5th string, now plucks 5th string.
Place p on 4th string as anchor
Thumb, anchored on 4th string, now plucks 4th string
Place thumb on 6th string as anchor
Thumb, anchored on 6th string, now plays 6th string

Watch.

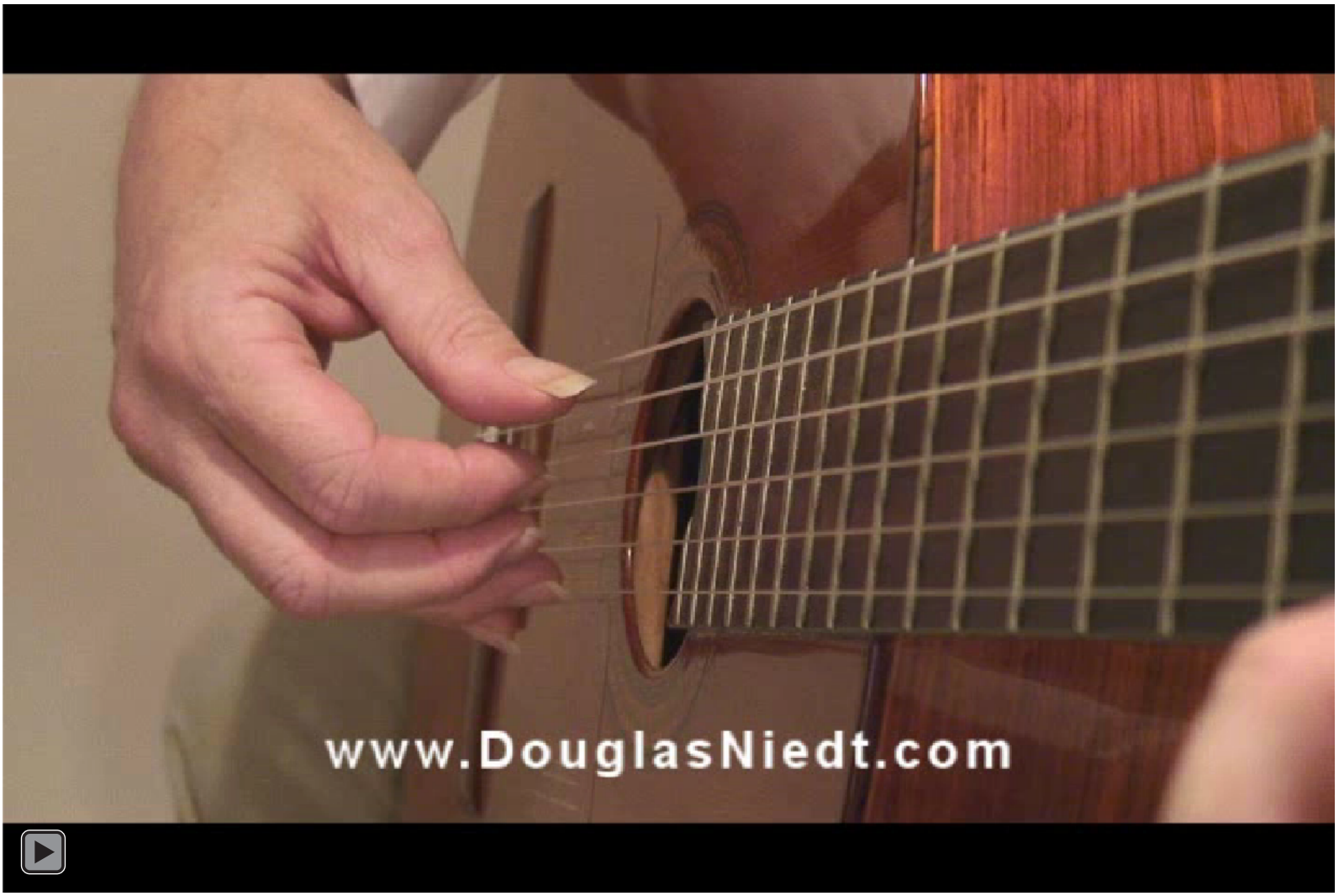


I briefly touched on the use of the thumb as an anchor when playing harmonics with the other fingers. It can be especially useful in playing passages of artificial harmonics. Here is a passage from Enrique Granados' *Spanish Dance No. 5*. Anchoring the thumb on the 4th string would help guide the hand along the length of the string to execute the artificial harmonics –it would also position the thumb to play the 4th-string bass notes. Unfortunately, sliding the thumb along the length of the wound 4th string produces too much string noise. Therefore, we have to anchor the thumb on the 3rd string instead, and move the thumb to the 4th string to play the bass notes:



Once again, the thumb anchors the right-hand playing mechanism for added control of the very fine movements required to play this type of harmonic.

 Watch.



Is There a Downside to Using Anchor Fingers?

The main difficulty in learning to use the anchor-finger technique, is that it takes quite a while to get used to. At first, it will seem to inhibit movements of the other fingers. Or, it will seem to be a lot of trouble for little benefit. But as with many things, once it is learned and becomes comfortable to use, you will wonder how you ever got along without it.

The other downside is that when using the "a" finger as an anchor on say the first string, a beginning or intermediate student will sometimes roll or lean their hand to the right. But with observation and reminders, it should be easy to correct.

Final Thoughts

When I began writing this tech tip, I thought I could crank it out in a page or two. But then I began thinking how I use anchor fingers. For me, it has become such an unconscious technique, that I didn't realize I used anchors in over a dozen ways in literally hundreds of pieces. It's another of those lesser-known techniques that will make a significant difference in your playing.