

Classical Guitar Technique

CHASING RAINBOWS, Part 1 of 2

The Left Hand

By Douglas Niedt

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If you are not familiar with the phrase "Chasing Rainbows", it means to constantly pursue things that are unrealistic or unlikely to happen. Have you ever practiced a passage in a piece for weeks, months, or years? And you *still* can't play it? Well, you may be chasing rainbows. It may even fall into the category of "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results".

If you still can't play a passage reliably after months and months of practice, something is terribly wrong. Of course, your method of practicing may be at fault. You may be guilty of mindless practice or practicing mistakes. I have addressed those topics in other technique tips.

The good news is that if your practice methods are solid, two simple solutions will usually stop rainbow chasing dead in its tracks:

1. Change the fingering.

2. Change the notes.

My dear readers, life is short. Sure, you can keep hacking away at a difficult passage month after month. You can tell yourself, "I almost have it." Or, "It's getting better" (after 3 years). Be my guest. Personally, I would rather change the notes or the fingering or both, finally master it, move on, and learn some new pieces before the grim reaper wrests the guitar from my hands.

In addition to the wasted time element, repetitive over-practice of a difficult passage can lead to hand injuries.

CHANGE THE FINGERING

The concept is simple: If the fingering you are using for a passage does not work after 3-4 weeks of conscientious practice, change it.

Let's look at *Study No. 2* (as numbered by Segovia) *Op.35, No. 13* by Fernando Sor. As fingered by Segovia, the barre chords in measures 27-29 are stumbling blocks for many guitarists. Example #1:

Example #1. *Study No. 2* (as numbered by Segovia), *Op. 35 No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measure 25-29.
The melody notes are in blue.
Standard fingering with bars.

25

27

III

II

T
A
B

0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2

3 4 3 4 3 4 3 4

3 0 2 0 2 0 2 0

4 3 2 2 2 2 2 2

2 3 2 3 2 3 2 3

What to do? Practice the barre chord changes unsuccessfully month after month? Year after year? How about trying a different fingering? Here is a fingering that does not require any barre chords and contains some very helpful guide fingers for security and stability. Example #2:

Example #2. *Study No. 2* (as numbered by Segovia), *Op. 35 No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measure 25-29.
The melody notes are in blue.
Alternative fingering without bars.

25

Alternative fingerings (no bars) for measures 27-29

27

Here is an annotated score with the details of execution. Example #3:

Example #3. *Study No. 2* (as numbered by Segovia), *Op. 35 No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measure 25-29.

The melody notes are in blue.

Alternative fingering without bars.

Details of execution:

25

1st finger is guide finger.

Alternative left-hand fingerings (no bars) for measures 27-29

27

1st finger is guide from previous measure.

Keep 1st finger down as guide

Lift 3 here and prepare to play following low G

Lift 1st finger here to prepare to play following low F

Place fingers sequentially!

Place fingers sequentially!

Place fingers sequentially!

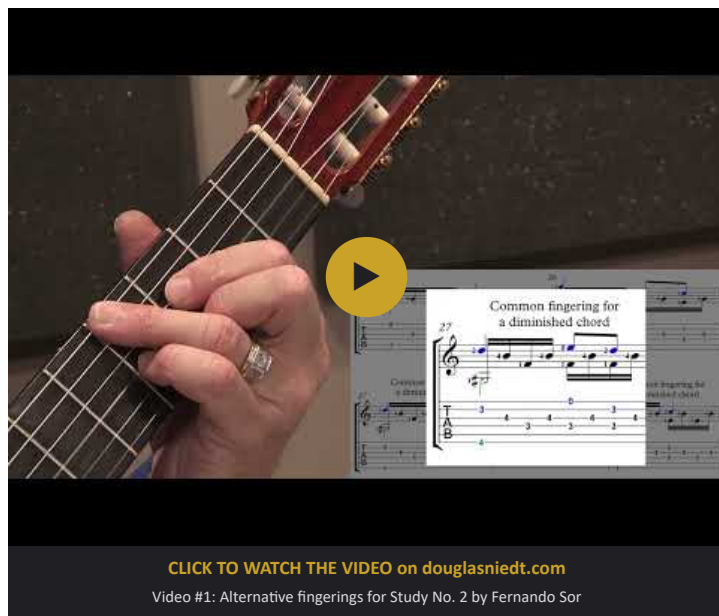
I should point out that many teachers would insist that the student work on these measures with the standard barre chord fingering until they get it, come hell or high water. I get that. It is important to master barre chords. But the fact is, some guitarists will *never* be able to play that passage reliably with the barre chord fingerings. And others may be able to play the barre chord fingerings most of the time at home, only to have them fail miserably in a lesson or in a public performance.

Rather than struggling forever with measures 27-29 of *Sor Study No. 2* to learn the barre chords, a better strategy would be to learn to play barre chords on other pieces first. Then perhaps, return someday to the *Sor Study* and try it with the barre chord fingerings. Interestingly, I have found that most players (myself included) prefer the non-barre chord fingerings anyway.

Watch me demonstrate the problem in Fernando Sor's *Study No. 2* and the solution. Video #1.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #1: Alternative fingerings for *Study No. 2* by Fernando Sor



Don't fall into the trap

It is so easy to fall into the trap of using a certain fingering because that's how everyone does it. Or that's the way it has always been done.

Look at this passage from *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz. This is a standard fingering found in most editions that most guitarists use. Example #4:

Example #4. *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz) measure 15-17.
Standard fingering.

For this fingering to work, on the final 8th note of m16:

1. The 3rd finger must be prepared precisely above the 5th-string E at the 7th fret, no more than 1/4 inch above the string.
2. The 4th finger must be prepared precisely above the 1st-string B at the 7th fret, no more than 1/4 inch above the string.

I used and taught that fingering forever. That is the way it was always done. For many it is a great fingering. But over the years I found it is not a reliable fingering for everyone. I heard over and over, "I can do it most of the time—I guess I have to keep practicing it" (they had been using the fingering for three years). No. If after three years (or three months) it can't be played correctly 99% of the time, something is wrong. CHANGE THE FINGERING!

Here is one of my favorite fingerings that results in 99% accuracy for many players Example #5:

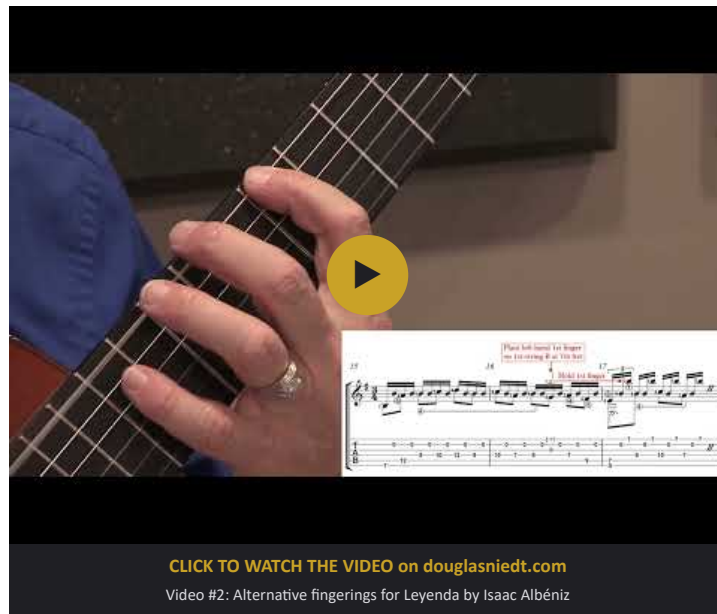
Example #5. *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz) measure 15-17.
Doug's favorite alternative fingering.

This is a fingering I came up with after observing so many students use traditional fingerings that didn't work reliably.

Watch me demonstrate the difficulty of the standard fingering of this passage from *Leyenda* and the relative ease and stability of the revised fingering. Video 2.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #2: Alternative fingerings for *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz



Let's look at one more example. In *¡Marieta!* by Francisco Tárrega, we have this passage. The first two beats of both measures present a configuration of notes and fingerings that is difficult for many guitarists to play. Example #6:

Example #6. *¡Marieta!* (Francisco Tárrega) measure 17-18.
Tárrega's fingering.

The great Andrés Segovia is one of the few guitarists who recorded the piece using Tárrega's fingerings. Not only does he use Tárrega's fingerings, but he plays all the note values as written.

But nevertheless, for many guitarists, these fingerings can be very difficult or impossible to play cleanly. Fortunately, several alternative fingerings may be used instead.

Most contemporary guitarists use the next fingering. Note that the bass notes are not held. The barre is lifted on the 2nd beat. The 3rd finger is used on the 3rd-string D so the 2nd finger does not have to be scrunched behind the 4th finger. It is much easier to play. Example #7:

Example #7. *¡Marieta!* (Francisco Tárrega) measure 17-18.
Modern alternative fingering.

Or, we could play open E's and eliminate a few barres. Once again, the bass notes are not held. Example #8:

Example #8. *¡Marieta!* (Francisco Tárrega) measure 17-18.
Modern alternative fingering with open E's and fewer bars.

On the other hand, if you don't like the sound of the bass notes getting cut off prematurely and want to hold them their full value as Tárrega and Segovia do, we could use the 4th finger to barre the D and F#. For some players, this is much easier to do than scrunching the 2nd finger behind the 4th finger. Example #9:

Example #9. *¡Marieta!* (Francisco Tárrega) measure 17-18.
Bar with 4th finger to keep bass notes ringing.

più mosso.

V. Bar with 4th finger

VII^④

V. Bar with 4th finger

Bass notes are held

Bass notes are held

T 5 5 7 7-9 7

A 6 5 7 7

B 3-7 1-5 0 7

10-12 10 0 11 0

Watch me demonstrate these fingering possibilities for Tárrega's *¡Marieta!* and the pros and cons of each. Video #3.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #3: Alternative fingerings for *Marieta* by Francisco Tárrega

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video #3: Alternative fingerings for *Marieta* by Francisco Tárrega

THE TAKEAWAY

Just because the composer or some famous guitarist fingers a passage a certain way does not mean it is the best fingering for YOU. Just because everyone plays the passage a certain way or that it has always been played that way does not mean it is the way YOU should play it. After several weeks of practice, if a fingering does not work for you, CHANGE IT. Don't chase rainbows!

I DON'T HAVE DOUGLAS NIEDT ON SPEED DIAL. HOW WOULD I FIGURE OUT THESE FINGERINGS BY MYSELF?

"Fishing for Fingerings"

Finding alternative fingerings is mostly a matter of slogging through all the permutations.

Sometimes, if you know the ideal fingering you would like to use for a particular spot in a passage, you can start there and work backwards through the possibilities. [I demonstrate that process here in my technique tip](#) *The Many Amazing Things We Can Learn from Mauro Giuliani, Part 2*.

Otherwise, methodically go through the possibilities. The decision making goes something like this:

To Barre or Not to Barre

If a barre is indicated, do I really need a barre? Is there another fingering that does not require a barre? If a barre is required, how many strings MUST I barre? Is it easier to barre more strings? How many?

Finding fingerings

What are all the possible fingerings for chord X? Are there other areas of the fretboard where I can play the chord? What are all the possible fingerings I can use to get to each of the possible chord X fingerings and locations?

What are all the possible fingerings at point X? Can point X be played in other areas of the fretboard? Working backwards, what are all the possible fingerings I can use to arrive at each of the possible fingerings and locations for point X?

Sometimes the possibilities are limited, and it will only take 10-20 minutes to test them all out. But other passages may have many fingering options and it may take 30-60 minutes a day over several days to thoroughly test all the options. As a rule, unless the best choice is obvious, it is best to test fingerings and make final decisions about fingerings over a period of several days. It takes patience!

CHANGE THE NOTES

If you have tried all the fingerings for a difficult passage that you can think of, and none of them work, **change the notes**.

In the *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) *BWV 999* by J.S. Bach, we have a nasty chord in measure #15. Example #10:

Example #10. *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure 12-17.
Standard fingering.

12

14

Very difficult F major 7 chord

Ossia Or this fingering:

16 or open B's

*By the way, in measure #16 the small staff is called an "Ossia" staff. An ossia is an alternative passage which may be played instead of the original passage. The word comes from the Italian for "alternatively" and was originally spelled o sia, meaning "or be it". Ossias are usually used to indicate alternative notes, fingerings, or rhythms. They may be easier, more difficult, or the same difficulty as the original version.

The F major 7 chord in measure #15 is very difficult or impossible for many guitarists to play. Some players play the low F very short (as a 16th note) and then jump to play the next notes with various fingerings. Personally, I don't think lifting the F early sounds good at all.

Instead, for players who cannot do the "this is the way it has always been done" fingering, I recommend playing the low F up an octave. Several very playable fingering options suddenly appear. My favorite is this. Example #11:

Example #11. *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure 12-17.
Alternative fingering.

12

14

F bass note shifted up one octave

V

Ossia Or this fingering:

16

or open B's

TAB

It can be further refined (and perhaps made more dependable) by playing the preceding Am chord on different strings (which will take a little getting used to for the right hand) but makes the transition to the F major 7th chord very easy and dependable. Example #12:

Example #12. *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure 12-17.
Refined Alternative fingering.

12

Same right-hand fingering but on different strings

F bass note shifted up one octave

V.

Ossia Or this fingering:

or open B's

Or, the F major 7th chord can be played with the F bass shifted up an octave but played on the 4th string instead of the 5th string.
Example #13:

Example #13. *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure 14-15.
F major 7th chord fingered at 3rd fret.

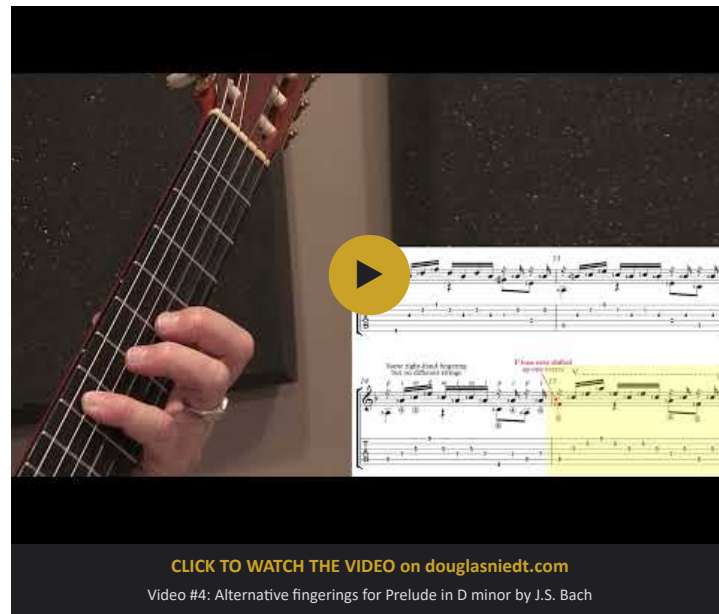
Or, we can play the F up an octave on the 4th string but play the notes that follow with a 3rd or 4th-finger barre. Example #14:

Example #14. *Prelude in D minor* (originally C minor) BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure 14-15.
F major 7th chord fingered at 3rd fret and bar with 3rd or 4th finger at the 5th fret.

Watch me demonstrate the problem and these great solutions for Bach's *Prelude in D minor*. Video #4.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #4: Alternative fingerings for *Prelude in D minor* by J.S. Bach



Another favorite piece among classical guitarists is Leo Brouwer's *Un Dia de Noviembre*. It is a very playable piece for most intermediate-level guitarists. Unfortunately, they are hit with a roadblock at measure #28 which has a nasty stretch with a full barre that many guitarists cannot play with clarity. Example #15:

Example #15. *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) measure 28-31.
Original version for guitar.

Chord with difficult stretch

Once again, rather than engaging in a never-ending struggle with the chord and never getting it quite right, *change the notes*. Here are several possible rewrites. You may not like them as well as the original. And, the high E melody note gets cut early. But at least you will be

able to play the notes clearly, so you don't ruin the piece. Who knows, maybe you will prefer one of these to the original. That's a win-win.
Example #16:

Example #16. *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) measure 28.
Six alternative versions.

VII

28

Same as original but lift the high E melody early.

28

28

We could even alter measure #29 if need be. This version eliminates the barre. Example #17:

Example #17. *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) measure 29.
Alternative version with no bar.

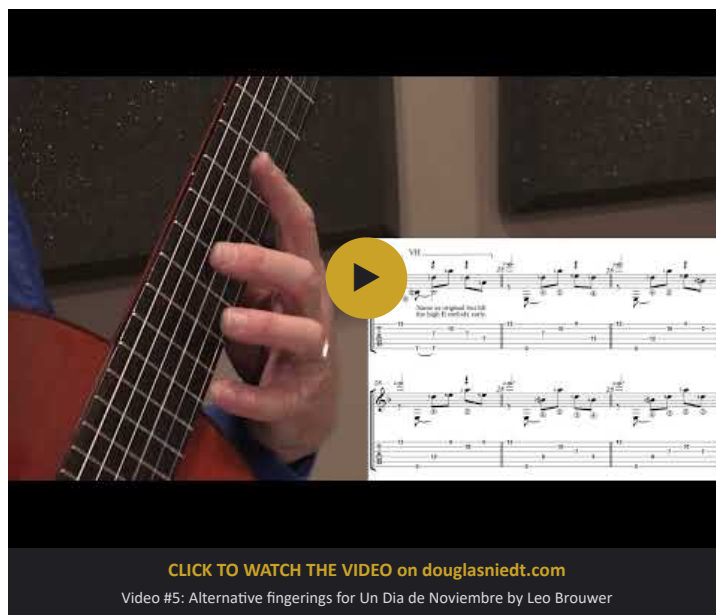
29

29

Watch me demonstrate these alternative revoicings of the chords in *Un Dia de Noviembre*. Video #5.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #5: Alternative fingerings for *Un Dia de Noviembre* by Leo Brouwer



Another example of an instance where changing the notes can reap wonderful benefits is the difficult barre chord in measure #37 of *Leyenda*. [explain the solutions here](#).

How Do I Learn How to Change the Notes or Revoice Chords?

Learning how to rewrite passages and revoice chords is not something you can learn entirely by reading books. Some knowledge of harmony is helpful. A good ear is a must. But mostly, it takes practice and experience. Ideally, the altered version should be easier to play, sound musical, fit the musical context, and fit the composer's original intentions.

Just like searching for fingerings, changing the notes often requires a lot of experimentation and testing. It is usually not a good idea to immediately adopt the first solution that occurs to you. The process requires time and patience.

Sacrilege?

Some musicians might object to the idea of changing the composer's notes to make something easier to play.

1. If the piece is a transcription, I say no problem. Many notes have probably already been changed to make the transcription.
2. If the piece was written for the guitar, keep in mind that Sor, Giuliani, and other guitarist-composers often produced multiple versions of their compositions with different passagework and chord voicings.
3. Composers who don't play the guitar but write for the instrument often welcome suggestions by the guitarist to make their pieces more idiomatic and effective for the instrument. Although admittedly, some composers will bristle at any suggested changes.

Improvisation is a close cousin of changing the notes of a written piece. Bach was a marvelous improviser and wrote different versions of some pieces for different instruments. Elaboration and alteration of passages of a piece was the order of the day in the Baroque period. In fact, improvisation was an important skill throughout most of the history of classical music until the 20th century. The idea of musical notes being sacred, that they should never be changed, is a misguided, modern idea.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Don't chase rainbows. Time is short. Don't sentence yourself to practicing a difficult passage for months or years thinking that eventually you will master it. That is probably not going to happen. Change the fingering or change the notes so you can play it and move on. Learn something new. Playing the guitar should be fun and rewarding, not an exercise in endless frustration.