COUNTING OUT LOUD—the Skill that Will Improve Your Guitar Playing More than Anything Else

By Douglas Niedt

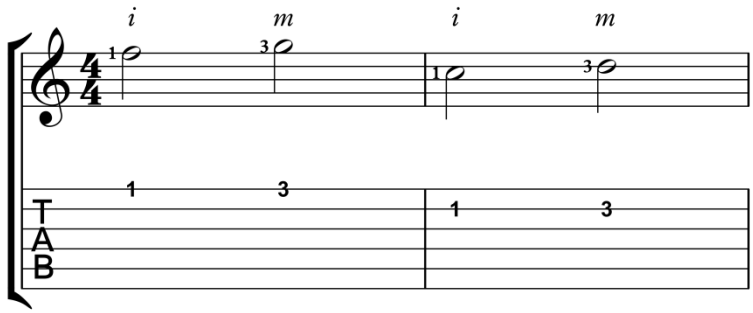
If you are a beginning to intermediate guitarist, listen up. There is a skill you can learn that will improve your playing more than anything else. That skill is to *count out loud*. Believe it or not, that's it. The most important skill you can learn has nothing to do with hand positions or sitting positions. Nothing to do with your fingernails. Nothing to do with dexterity or speed exercises. Counting out loud—that's it.

In my many years of teaching, I have come to realize that for the beginning and intermediate student, rhythmic weakness or uncertainty is at the root of countless technical and musical problems. In fact, a student will never progress to an advanced level of playing if their rhythm is insecure or faulty.

Think about this: you are training your hands and fingers to execute truly amazing feats of complex, synchronized, and integrated movements. This is true of even fairly easy beginning exercises. If a left-hand finger makes a move a fraction of a second too early or too late, the right-hand finger that is supposed to play that note becomes confused. The next left-hand finger that is supposed to play also gets confused. And the next right-hand finger gets thrown off as well—a chain reaction. Result? You play a wrong note, a clipped note, or a note that does not sound.

Let's look at this very basic exercise in 4/4 time. Let's play it rest stroke with "i" and "m". Our goal is to play it so the notes are seamlessly connected (legato).

Example #1



1. Before we begin playing, we place the 1st finger on the F on the first string and the “i” finger on the first string.
2. We play the F. The “i” finger is now resting on the second string. “m” is poised in front of the first string ready to play the next note.
3. Next, the “m” finger plucks the first string at the same exact instant that the 3rd finger lands on the G. At the same exact instant, the 1st finger lifts off the F and the “i” finger lifts off the second string. All of this happens at the same moment in a fraction of a second. The “m” finger is now resting on the second string. “i” is poised in front of the second string ready to play the next note.
4. The “i” finger plucks the second string. At the same exact instant, the 1st finger lands on the C on the second string. The 3rd finger lifts off the first-string G. The “m” finger lifts off the second string. The “i” finger is now resting on the third string. “m” is poised in front of the second string ready to play the next note. Again, all of this is synchronized to happen at the same moment in a fraction of a second.
5. Finally, the “m” finger plucks the second string at the same exact instant that the 3rd finger lands on the second-string D. At the same exact moment in time, the 1st finger lifts off the C and the “i” finger lifts off the third string. The “m” finger is now resting on the third string.

As you can see, when this rather simple exercise is described in words, it is a very complex undertaking. The fingers must move and the muscular movements must “fire” in absolute synchronization to play these four notes in a connected, smooth fashion. If any finger makes its move too soon or too late, the smooth and seamless connection between a given pair of notes will be lost.

How do the muscles and fingers know when to make all these complex movements? How do they know when to “fire”? The answer is rhythm. Your internal body clock is counting, “Beat. Beat. Beat. Beat.” In fact, you may naturally and unconsciously play this simple exercise at the rate of your heartbeat. Your foot might tap along with your internal body clock. You might nod your head with the beat. You might be feeling 1, 2, 3, 4. The muscles and fingers use that rhythmic pulse to tell themselves when to move. The more regular and precise the rhythmic pulse or rhythmic clock, the better the muscles work in synchronization.

I find all this absolutely amazing. The human body astounds me. The fact that our brain can direct all these small, complex finger movements in perfect synchronization to produce music is almost beyond comprehension. But what happens if the synchronization is not perfect? Well, you make a mistake. Or the connection between notes is disjointed. If the synchronization is off on a fairly regular basis, you don’t play very well. Everything will be off. Your playing will be hit-and-miss or erratic.

The best guitar players have the best sense of rhythm

The rhythmic pulse or clock is what tells our muscles when to fire. It tells our fingers when to move. Not an approximate time to move, but an exact precise moment in time when to move. If those precise

moments in time are ill-defined, the fingers and muscles become confused. They don't know when they should move. The rhythmic continuum must be precise and unchanging. The beats must occur at precise intervals. If the rhythmic foundation of regular beats at precise intervals of time becomes rocky or unsettled or if even one of the intervals between two beats changes ever so slightly, confusion ensues. The muscles and fingers must second guess when they are to move.

When the rhythmic foundation underneath them is shaky, the fingers find themselves poised to move but have to keep asking themselves and the other fingers "Is it time for us to move now? Or now? Oh, I was early. Oh, I was late. Sorry, I jumped the gun and moved before you did." If the point in time is ill-defined the left-hand finger may decide to make its move to press a string but the right-hand finger may delay in plucking because it thinks it isn't quite the right moment. The result is disjointed playing. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's very subtle. But it separates good players from not-so-good players.

Of course, a weak rhythmic sense does not only impair one's basic technique. Playing inaccurate or incorrect rhythms ruins the song you are trying to play. It simply won't sound right.

The Cure

Fortunately, there is a very basic solution to help you establish a solid and precise rhythmic foundation and to prevent rhythmic mistakes: count out loud. Don't count to yourself silently or in your head. *Out loud*. Count like a drill sergeant.

I know. You don't want to do this. You think counting to yourself will work just as well. It won't. If you count to yourself, you will leave out numbers or syllables or stop counting at spots where you are uncertain. You may think that using a metronome will work just as well. It won't. You can leave out entire beats without knowing it. You can be out of sync with the metronome and not realize it.

Bottom line: any other fix for insecure rhythm will not come close to counting out loud. Speaking the count and hearing the count as you hear what you are playing increases your awareness of how your finger movements fit into that rhythmic framework.

Any spot where you say the wrong syllable or number or where you stop counting should raise a red flag and sound an alarm. I guarantee you, that is the spot where you don't know the rhythm or where your fingers are uncertain when they are supposed to play.

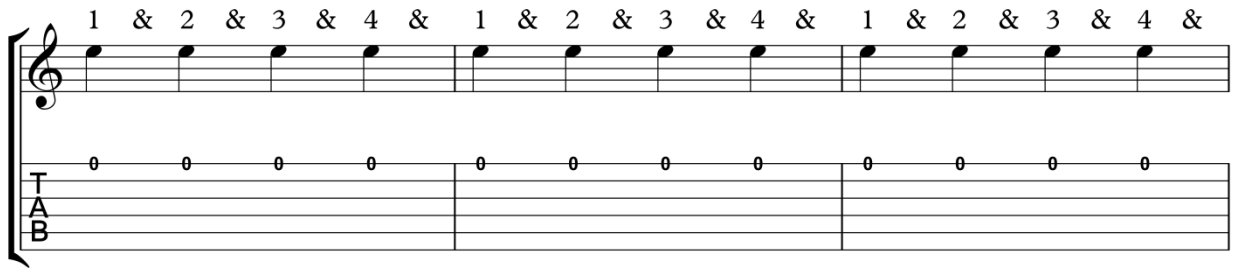
You must carefully untangle the passage. Write in the counting above the notes and methodically figure out beat by beat when each note is supposed to be played. Speak your way through the passage very slowly until your voice doesn't falter and your fingers play when you say the appropriate syllable.

Whenever possible, subdivide the beat. Don't just count the primary beats, "1, 2, 3, 4." Instead, count, "1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &." ("One and two and three and four and.") Or, if you are dealing with 16th notes, count "1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a." ("One ee and uh two ee and uh three ee and uh four ee and uh.") Inserting the extra syllables will help keep your counting even. Your counting must be loud and clear. No mumbling or slurring of syllables.

Any spot where your counting falters—you leave out a syllable or say the wrong number—indicates with 100% accuracy that either you don't know the rhythmic count at that point or are insecure about it. If it isn't fixed, you will never consistently play that spot correctly or dependably.

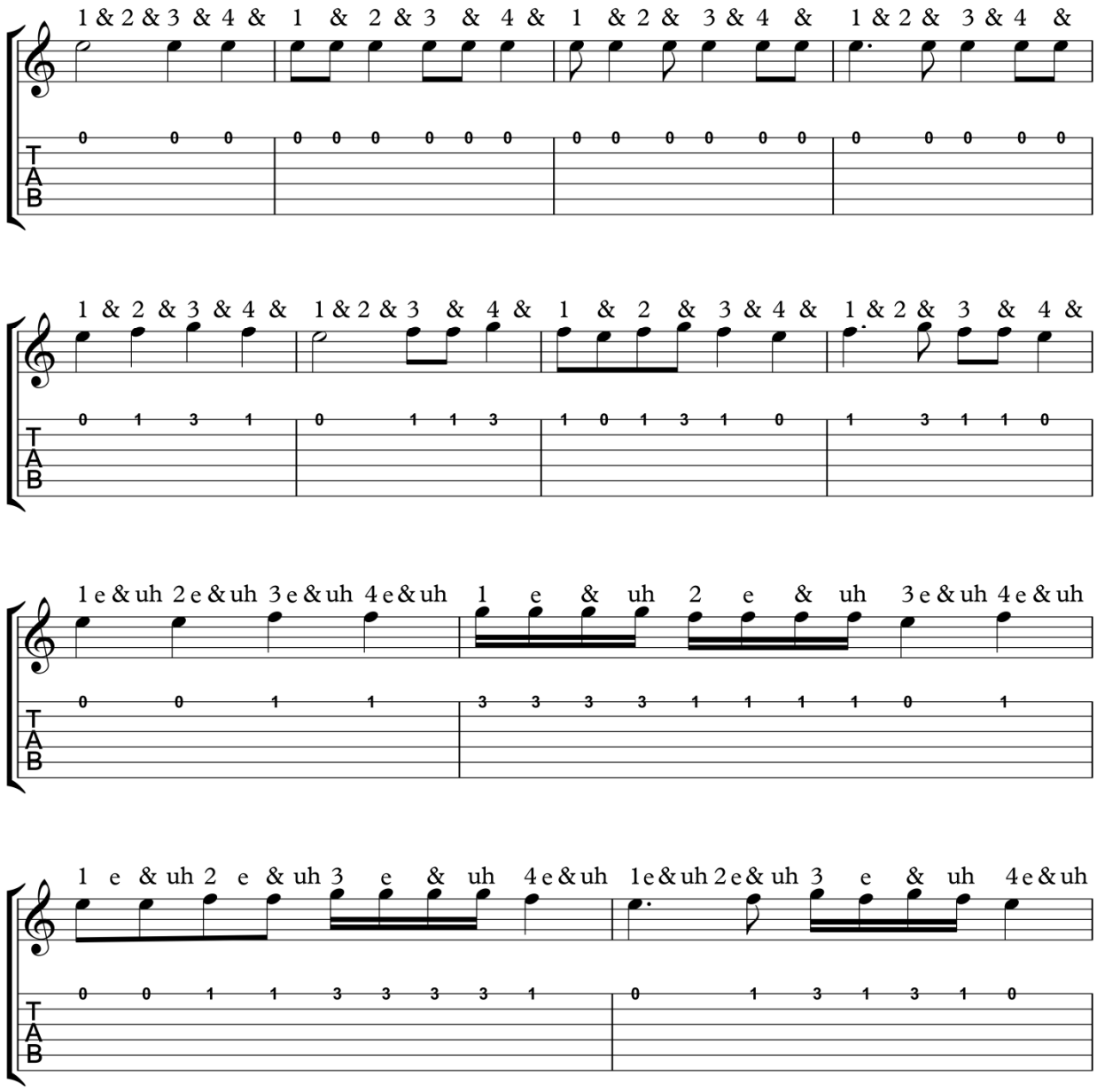
At first you will probably find it difficult to speak and play at the same time. You will fight it. You won't want to do it. But hang in there. If you find it really difficult to talk and play, begin by playing the open first string as quarter notes and counting 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &:

Example #2



Progress step by step to more difficult exercises:

Example #3


1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
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A
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1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
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T
A
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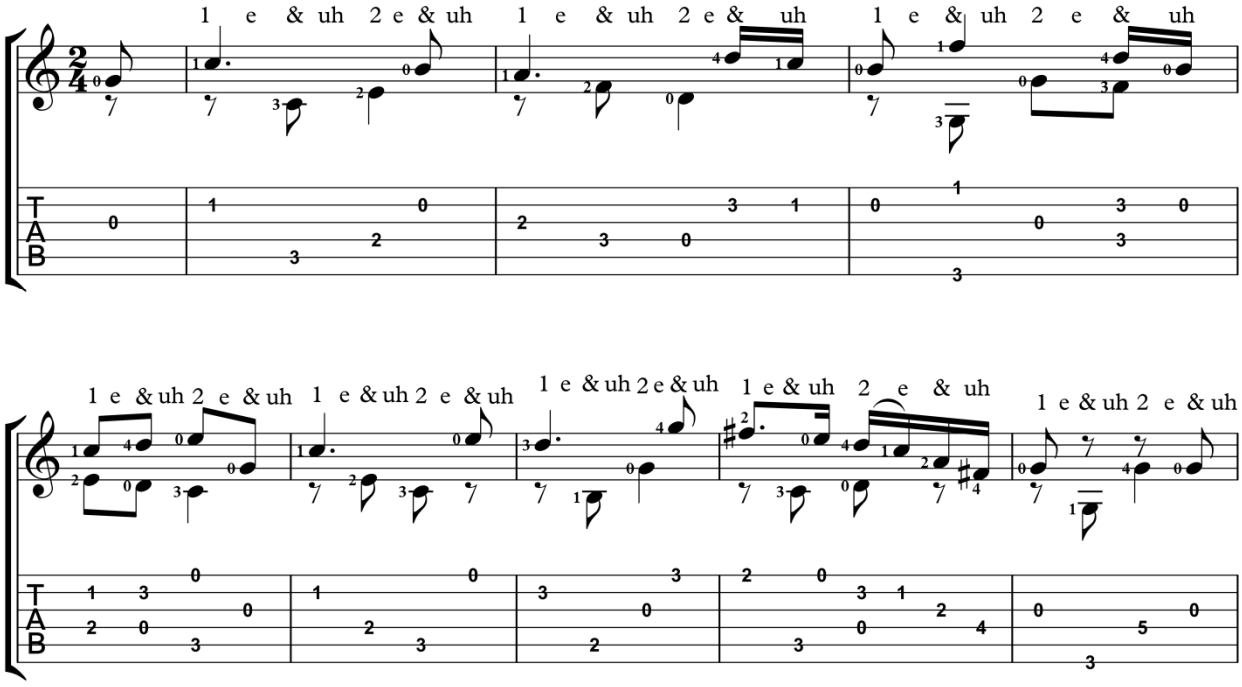
1 e & uh 2 e & uh 3 e & uh 4 e & uh 1 e & uh 2 e & uh 3 e & uh 4 e & uh
T
A
B

Soon you will be comfortable talking and playing at the same time.

Pieces with mixed rhythms are often tremendously improved by counting out loud. Try playing and counting out loud on Fernando Sor's *Allegretto moderato*, Op. 44, No. 4:

Example #4

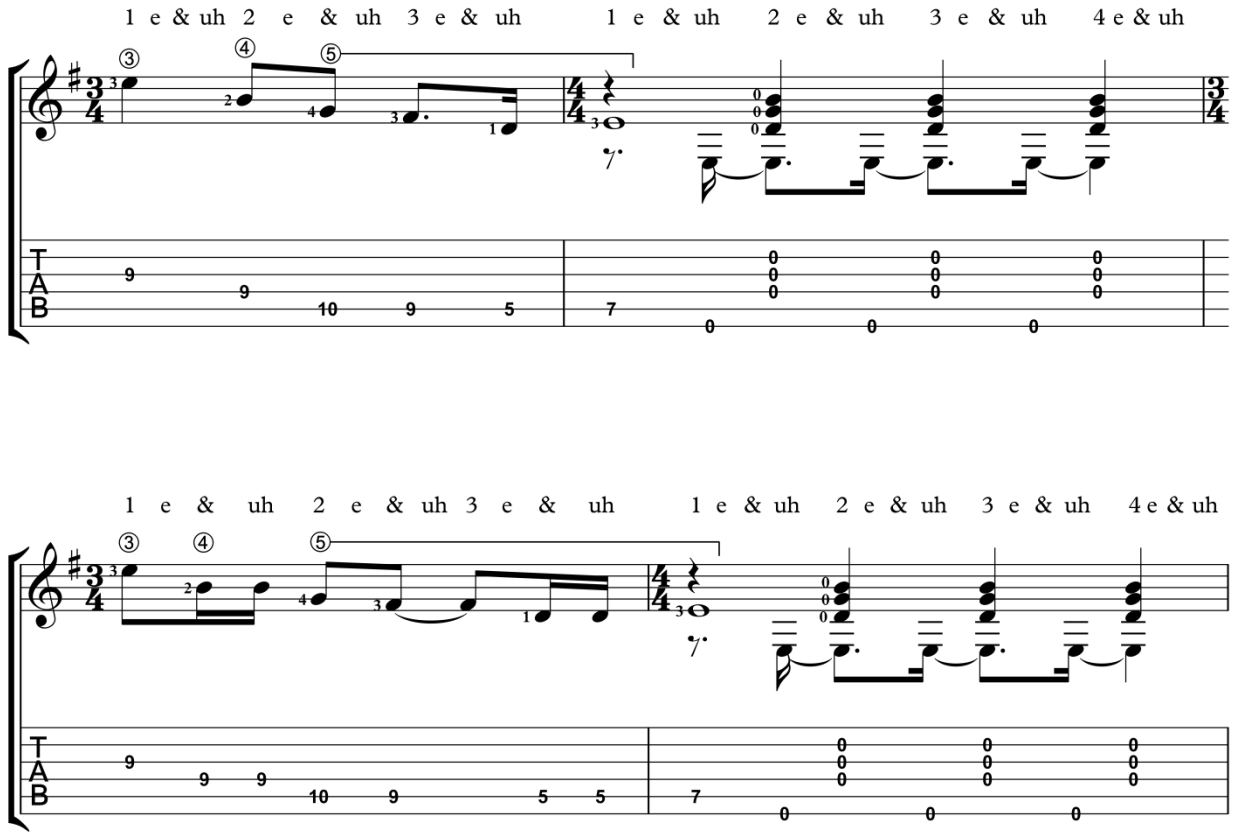
Allegretto moderato Op. 44, No. 4 (Fernando Sor)



Many students play the rhythms of *Prelude No. 4* by Heitor Villa-Lobos incorrectly. Counting out loud will fix it:

Example #5

Prelude No. 4 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)



The Metronome is Your Friend

Students with a very weak sense of rhythm may need to count out loud AND use a metronome. Begin by learning to count out loud with the metronome ticks *without playing the guitar*. Try different speeds and be sure to count the "&" syllable whenever possible. At slow speeds also learn to count "1 e & a 2 e & a…" Then try some of the easy exercises I outlined above, counting out loud with the metronome. Even the intermediate and advanced student will benefit from counting out loud with the metronome to learn difficult passages.

Summary

1. Nothing will improve your playing more than developing a sound rhythmic foundation
2. The best players have a good sense of rhythm
3. You can build a solid rhythmic foundation by counting out loud
4. Counting out loud is far more effective than counting silently or using a metronome
5. Counting out loud teaches the fingers and muscles precisely when to “fire” or make their movements and keeps them synchronized
6. When fingers know the precise moment they are to move, they perform with greater precision
7. Any point where your counting falters is the spot where you or your fingers are uncertain of the rhythm
8. Counting out loud can be a difficult skill to learn
9. With patience the skill can be learned
10. For the beginning AND advanced student it will oftentimes be necessary to count out loud AND use a metronome