

HOW TO GET RID OF AND ELIMINATE FRET BUZZES, STRING BUZZES, STRING BUZZING, FINGER BUZZING, AND FINGER BUZZES ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

By Douglas Niedt

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Fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes are not subtle flaws in the sound of your playing. They are obvious, annoying, and instantly noticeable to your listeners. Interestingly, perhaps because they tend to be present early on as you learn a piece, your ears may become accustomed to them and they may go unnoticed by YOU, even after you have seemingly mastered the piece. To experience this, record yourself playing a piece you think you play well and as you listen back, focus on hearing fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes.

Is your playing marred by fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes? Do fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes drive you crazy? Does your teacher or do you tell yourself, "Just press harder"? Oftentimes much more is involved in getting rid of them than just pressing harder.

Fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes may be caused by Your Guitar or the Strings

This is one of the most effective solutions. After all, the problem couldn't possibly have anything to do with you!

Unfortunately, 99% of the time, the problem IS you. However, there certainly is that last 1% of possible causes:

1. The action of your guitar is too high. In other words, the strings are unnecessarily high above the frets. You can watch a few videos on YouTube on adjusting the nut and saddle (usually adjusting the saddle will do the trick) and do it yourself. Or, take or send the guitar to a qualified luthier.
2. The frets were not properly dressed or shaped correctly. Do NOT watch a few YouTube videos and attempt this yourself. Take or send the guitar to a qualified luthier and have the frets redressed or have them replaced entirely.
3. The tension of your strings is too high or too low for your guitar or playing style. Experiment with different brands and tensions. Remember, one brand's medium tension may be equivalent to another brand's high tension. You must try them all.
4. A string may be old or defective. An old or defective string will buzz.
5. Use this as an excuse to buy a new guitar.

How to Get Rid of and Eliminate Fret buzzes, string buzzes, and finger buzzes

Press harder

Of course, you must press the string to the fret with enough weight to produce a clear note. But how is that done? By squeezing harder between the thumb and finger(s)? NO! Not usually. Most of the time, your thumb should be a *passive participant*. It is there to stabilize the hand position. The force required to hold down a string should come from the weight of your arm and from pulling the guitar against your chest with both arms. In more extreme situations, the thumb can help by adding a little more pressure, but that is the exception, not the norm. If more pressure is needed to eliminate a buzz, that is best done by adding more power by pulling with the arms. For a complete explanation of this, see ["Use the Correct Balance Between Using the Thumb, Pulling with the Arms, and Arm Weight"](#).

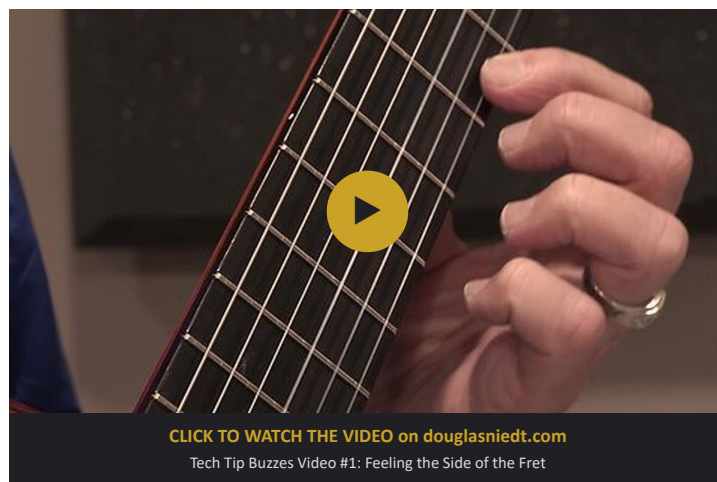
Keep the fingers close to the frets.

The further away from the fretwire you place a finger, the harder you must press to keep the note from buzzing.

1. Try playing a buzzy passage or an entire piece and focus your eyes only on where your fingertips fall on the fretboard. Are the fingertips landing consistently close to the fretwire or in the middle of the fret space? Play slowly and train yourself to place the fingertips close to the fretwire.
2. Do the same as #1 *by feel* instead of by sight. You will have to slow down even more for this. You literally want to feel the side of the fretwire with each finger as you play.

As an exercise, with your eyes closed, practice sliding each finger from the middle of a fret space up to the fretwire until you can feel the side of the fretwire. This will help your fingers understand what you expect them to do. It will help them gain a tactile memory of what it feels like to be truly close to the frets. Watch me demonstrate:

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #1: Feeling the Side of the Fret



Maintain constant pressure on the strings.

Our fingers know they must place firm pressure on the strings as a note or chord is plucked. But sometimes, after the initial sound is produced, a finger will relax a small amount which produces a buzz. The pressure must be equally maintained through the duration of the note or chord.

As you add or remove fingers of a chord, others may slightly release pressure causing a buzz. A good way to diagnose and fix the problem is to practice the chord change but restrike the strings that were played first as you proceed to add the additional fingers.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #2 how to Maintain Constant Finger Pressure.

I will use these passages from *Leyenda* and *Romance* to illustrate. Keep in mind that while you may not play these pieces, these situations appear in the repertoire at all levels of difficulty. Pay attention to the principles and techniques rather than the actual pieces I am demonstrating.

Leyenda (Isaac Albéniz) m41-42.

Musical notation for *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz) measures 41-42. The notation is in 3/4 time, key of D major. It shows two measures, VII and VIII, with fingerings and a guitar tablature below.

Measure VII: Treble clef, 3/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7.

Measure VIII: Treble clef, 3/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8.

Romance (Anonymous) m7-10.

Musical notation for *Romance* (Anonymous) measures 7-10. The notation is in 4/4 time, key of D major. It shows four measures, V, VI, VII, and VIII, with fingerings and a guitar tablature below.

Measure V: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 8, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.

Measure VI: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.

Measure VII: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 7, 8, 7, 7, 7, 8, 8.

Measure VIII: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Notes: D4 (1), E4 (1), F#4 (1), G4 (1), A4 (1), B4 (1), C#5 (1), D5 (1). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. Tablature: 11, 7, 8, 7, 7, 8, 8.

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #2: Maintaining Constant Pressure

Video thumbnail for Tech Tip Buzzes Video #2: Maintaining Constant Pressure. The video shows a close-up of a guitar player's hand on the fretboard, demonstrating a technique. A red arrow points to the fretting hand, and a yellow play button is overlaid. Below the video is a small snippet of musical notation for *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz) measures 41-42.

[CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com](https://douglasniedt.com)

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #2: Maintaining Constant Pressure

The louder you play the more firmly you must hold the string

We always want to use only the amount of finger pressure necessary to produce clear notes. But, the amount of finger pressure required varies considerably as we proceed through a piece.

In addition to the specific pressure requirements of individual notes and chords, the finger pressure must be increased for loud notes/chords and passages.

But in many instances, the loud chord/note will last for a short duration. Be sure to apply the extra pressure only as long as it is needed. Do not continue to press hard once the loud notes are over. Otherwise, the hand will become unnecessarily fatigued.

The amount of finger pressure should change constantly depending on the demands of the music.

Also, playing a note with a heavy rest stroke can cause buzzes. If your guitar is not adjusted properly, rest strokes can produce buzzes, especially on the bass strings. Even if your guitar is adjusted properly, playing with a heavy rest stroke on the bass strings will produce buzzing. Try lightening the stroke or play closer to the bridge to reduce or eliminate the buzzing.

Aim high in the fret space on stretches and sometimes on shifts

We often get buzzy notes when we try to reach a difficult stretch. Usually, a finger reaching up to the highest note of the chord lands too far from the fretwire. The solution is to aim high. In other words, instead of focusing on a landing point close to the fretwire, focus on a landing point ON the fretwire or even past the fretwire. Then, the finger will land much closer to the fretwire eliminating the buzz.

The reverse can also happen. As we stretch for a high note, a finger holding a note on a lower fret gets pulled onto the fretwire, producing a damped note. The solution is to purposely land the finger holding the lower note in the middle of its fretspace. As you stretch for the high note, the finger holding the lower note may still get pulled higher in its fretspace, but probably will not get pulled onto the fretwire.

In the case of difficult shifts, diagnose the landing errors. Are you landing short of your destination or shifting past it? If the error is consistent, aim higher or lower as needed.

Bar (Barres)

Bars are a major source of buzzes. A few things to keep in mind:

1. Be sure you are using correct basic bar technique. [See my technique tip.](#) [And also, the follow-up.](#)
2. Keep bars parallel with the fret. When a bar is crooked, the tip of the finger lands on the fret damping the lowest string and the rear of the bar lands too far from the fret, producing a buzz.
3. The number of strings you bar can make a huge difference. Sometimes, barring more strings can be less buzzy than barring fewer strings. And vice-versa.
4. Try barring only the strings you must bar.
5. Don't over-practice a bar passage. Fatigue sets in quickly and the bars will sound worse and worse. Take a break.
6. Carefully examine which strings are buzzing.
 - a. Hold the bar chord. Pluck each string held by the actual bar (not the other fingers) to find the one that is buzzing or not coming out at all. Apply the required corrective action.
 - b. Begin playing from a few notes or a measure before the bar. Stop on the bar chord. Again, pluck each string held by the actual bar (not the other fingers) to find the one that is buzzing or not coming out at all. Apply the required corrective action.
7. Usually, it is best to stay close to the fretwire. But some bar chord formations will pull your bar onto the fret. In these situations, you must consciously keep the bar away from the fret, so it does not produce a damped string.
8. When you must bar two or three strings, use a hyperextended tip joint. This is usually more mechanically efficient (more pressure with less effort) than a straight or flat finger.

Finger Clearance: Buzzes Produced by Incorrect Finger, Hand, Wrist, or Elbow Position

Incorrect positioning is responsible for a large percentage of buzzes. This is especially true in many pieces written by guitarists that use open strings in combination with fretted notes.

In these common situations, there must be enough space (finger clearance) behind the finger for the open string to sound clearly. Incorrect positioning causes the back of the finger to slightly touch the open string, producing a buzz or even damping the note altogether.

Here are several examples. And again, remember that while you may not play these pieces, these situations appear in the repertoire at all levels of difficulty. What is important are the principles and techniques rather than the actual pieces I am demonstrating.

Here are the examples, followed by the solutions, followed by the video demonstrating how to fix the problems.

Prélude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) m36-38

3rd finger must not touch adjacent open 2nd string

T
A
B

Étude No. 7 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) m13-14

2nd finger on 4th string must not touch adjacent open 3rd string

1st finger on 3rd string must not touch adjacent open 2nd string

T
A
B

Andantino (Fernando Sor) m1-4

1st finger on 5th string must not touch adjacent open 4th string

T
A
B

Squares Suspended (Andrew York) m8-12

Be careful not to allow the fingernail of the 3rd finger to touch and buzz against the open 6th string.

Be careful not to allow the fingernail of the 2nd finger to touch and buzz against the open 6th string.

Watch me demonstrate the above musical examples with the following solutions in the video below.

Solutions

1. Keep the left-hand fingernails short.

I know. Many of you may be saying "Well duh". But inexperienced players may not be aware how crucial this is. In these types of musical textures, the tip joint of the fingers must usually land vertically onto the string. There is little room for error. A fingernail that is a little too long will prevent the fingertip from landing vertically. The nail will hit the wood of the fretboard and cause the finger to lean just enough to buzz or damp the string behind it.

2. Bring the hand close in to the neck.

If the hand is even a little too far from the edge of the neck, it prevents the fingertips from landing vertically on the strings. Try bringing the hand in closer to the neck, sometimes in combination with arching the wrist.

3. Arch the wrist.

Usually, the wrist should be straight or slightly rounded. But in difficult situations it must be arched slightly to help the fingertips land vertically on the strings. This may be used instead of or in combination with Solution #2—keeping the hand close in to the neck.

4. Change the elbow position.

As I have pointed out in other technique tips, the position of the elbow is a fluid one. In difficult passages, experiment with tucking the elbow in tight to your side, winging out to the left, and moving it forward and back. These adjustments may need to be used in combination with Solution #2 and/or #3.

5. Move the string.

Sometimes even if you try solutions #1-4, the back of a finger will still buzz or damp the string behind it. In this case, as you hold down the string, push it across the fretboard a few millimeters to open up additional clearance behind the finger. This will make the intonation of the string go sharp but is usually not noticeable. Players with large fingers or with thick fingertips sometimes find this is the only solution that will work.

6. Practice at a different time of day.

Minor swelling in our hands and fingers waxes and wanes at different times of the day. It is more pronounced in some people than others. On the classical guitar, millimeters make a difference. Try playing at a different time of day. You may find that the chord or passage that was seemingly impossible to play now sounds just fine.

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #3: Finger Clearance and Positioning



Andantino (Fernando Sor) m1-4

1st finger on 5th string
must not touch adjacent
open 4th string

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #3: Finger Clearance and Positioning

Two Fingers at the Same Fret=Trouble

Buzzes are often produced when we hold formations that require us to hold two fingers together or consecutively on two adjacent strings at the same fret:

Preludio No. 2 (Francisco Tárrega) m1-7. As fingered by Tárrega.

V----- III-----

Lean the 2nd finger to the left and slide into position from the 6th fret to 7th fret.

Lean the 2nd finger to the left and slide into position from the 4th fret to 5th fret.

TAB

VII----- II-----

TAB

IV-----

Lean the 2nd finger and 3rd finger to the left and slide the 3rd finger against the fretwire.

TAB

Marieta (Francisco Tárrega) m17-18. As fingered by Tárrega.

V----- VII----- V-----

Lean the 2nd finger to the left and slide into position from the 6th fret to 7th fret.

Lean the 2nd finger to the left and slide into position from the 6th fret to 7th fret.

TAB

If a finger lands too far back in the fret and buzzes, lean the finger to the left (plus tuck in your elbow) and slide the finger further up into the fret space. Note that in both of the examples above, alternative fingerings could be used to neutralize the problems. But, if you want to stick with Tárrega's fingerings, this technique will help to eliminate buzzes.

And again, remember that while you may not play these pieces, these situations appear in the repertoire at all levels of difficulty. What is important are the principles and techniques rather than the actual pieces I am demonstrating.

Watch me demonstrate the solution in Video #4: Two Fingers at the Same Fret=Trouble:

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #4: Two Fingers at the Same Fret Equals Trouble



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #4: Two Fingers at the Same Fret Equals Trouble

Lean the 2nd finger to the left and slide into position from the 4th fret to 5th fret.

Place Fingers Sequentially in Arpeggios

In chord changes in arpeggiated passages, always place the left-hand fingers sequentially rather than grabbing entire chords. Among many other benefits, this allows the fingers to make minute adjustments to their positioning in the fret space as you proceed through the chord change:

Study No. 2 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 35, No. 13* (Fernando Sor) m19-21.

Place the fingers sequentially:

Place 2 and 4

Lift 2

Place 3 here and slide it at least to the middle of the fret space.

Caprice (Matteo Carcassi) m8-11.

The musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is presented in two systems. The first system contains the first two measures of the melody and the corresponding tablature. The second system contains the next two measures. The melody is written in treble clef, C major, 4/4 time. The tablature is written on a six-line staff with letters T, A, and B indicating fret positions. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Place the fingers sequentially:

[illegible]

TAB
 0 2 3 2 2 3 2 3 3 3 3 3 | 3 3 3 3 3 3 2 2 2 2 2 2
 1 1 0 3

Tech Tip Buzzes Video #5: Sequential Finger Placement



Memorize the Locations of the Buzzes

Once you determine the cause of a buzz, you must memorize the location of the buzz in the music, so you can anticipate it as you play. If you anticipate it, you can employ the required corrective action to get a clear note. It is NOT enough to only memorize the piece. You must memorize the locations of the buzzy spots as well! For weeks you will need to employ your memorization of the location of each buzz to eliminate them. After a few weeks, many of them will be fixed and will not require conscious effort on your part to keep the spot clean. But for others, you will ALWAYS have to anticipate the fix to prevent the note from buzzing.

The Practice Procedure

To find the buzzes, play the piece VERY SLOWLY and as soon as you hear a buzz, stop and figure out what is needed to eliminate it.

1. Mark the location and a detailed description of the corrective action in the music.
2. Memorize the location.
3. Memorize the corrective action.

Record Yourself

When we play through a piece or perform a piece, our senses and brain are usually at the point of overload. We have so many things to hear, feel, see, and recognize. So many things to anticipate. Many players will not notice or hear buzzes as they play unless they are specifically listening for them.

The best remedy for this is to record yourself. Record yourself at home, in a lesson, and in a performance. As you listen back to the recording, have the music score in front of you. Ignore everything else and listen only for buzzes. Mark every one of them in the score. NEVER tell yourself, "Oh, I don't usually mess up there. That isn't a problem." If it happened once, it's a problem. It will occur again unless you consciously fix it.

Over the next few days, go back through the music, memorize the locations of the buzzes and the corrective actions for each one. Be sure that as you play through the piece, you are able to anticipate every one of the problem spots.

Once you believe you have successfully made the necessary repairs, record yourself again. Repeat the process of marking the locations and fixes for each buzz in the score. As you practice on this second round be sure you can anticipate each problem spot.

Record yourself a third time. By now, your music will probably be buzz-free. If it isn't, repeat the process.

In a Word: Focus

The way to use all these techniques to eliminate buzzes from your playing can be summed up by one word: "focus". You must focus on the sound that is coming out of your guitar. Not what you imagine or hope it to be. But what it really is. Do not ignore buzzes.

Find the buzzes, determine the causes, and apply the fixes. Then, as you play through the piece, anticipate every problem spot (you have memorized them, remember?) and apply the proper corrective actions. That may not sound too difficult, but believe me, it takes loads of concentration and focus.