

Classical Guitar Technique

HOW TO PLAY SHIFTS ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR AND IMPROVE YOUR SHIFT TECHNIQUE

By Douglas Niedt

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Brevity is the Soul of Wit?

Well, maybe not.

Many of my technique tips are long and detailed. The two videos that comprise this technique tip are long and detailed.

But let me ask you this. If you were to undergo brain surgery, which of the following books would you want your surgeon to have read?

1. The Complete, Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Brain Surgery
2. Bubba's Quick Guide to Brain Surgery

I rest my case.

This isn't brain surgery but watch these two videos to learn everything you need to know about shifts and shift technique.

Tech Tip How to Play Shifts on the Classical Guitar Video #1: An Overview



CONTENTS AND TIMELINE:

Our ultimate goal 00:14

Bad shifts vs good shifts 00:38

Practice on treble strings only 01:01

Extract shift from scale or passage 01:21

How to test to tell if your shifts are inaudible 01:53

Guide fingers 03:15

Thumb position 04:17

Shift on the beat to make shift inaudible 04:44

Make lightning-fast shifts 06:03

Shifts must be graceful and effortless 06:18

Right hand should not accent the shifts 06:37

Ascending shifts are easier than descending shifts 07:18

Practice shifts with mixed rhythms 07:50

Musical examples referenced in Video #1

The complete C major scale

The image shows the complete C major scale in treble clef, 4/4 time. The scale is written on a single staff with fingerings (1-5) indicated above the notes. Below the staff is a tablature section with five lines labeled T, A, B, and two unlabeled lines. The tablature shows the fret numbers for each note of the scale.

We extract this fragment from the C major scale to practice.

The image shows a fragment of the C major scale in treble clef, 4/4 time. The fragment is written on a single staff with fingerings (1-5) indicated above the notes. Below the staff is a tablature section with five lines labeled T, A, B, and two unlabeled lines. The tablature shows the fret numbers for each note of the fragment.

The shifts we want to master.

Sheet music for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with fret numbers 2, 4, 5, 7, 5, 4, 2. The melody consists of eighth notes: F#4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), B4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), G#4 (3rd finger), F#4 (1st finger), and E4 (1st finger). There are two red 'SHIFT' labels: one under the first A4 and one under the second A4.

The guide fingers.

Sheet music for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with fret numbers 2, 4, 5, 7, 5, 4, 2. The melody consists of eighth notes: F#4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), B4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), G#4 (3rd finger), F#4 (1st finger), and E4 (1st finger). Red arrows indicate guide finger movements: from F#4 to A4, from A4 to B4, and from B4 to A4. There are two red 'Guide finger' labels: one under the first A4 and one under the second A4.

Alternate practicing the fragment with shifts and with no shifts as shown here. Make the two versions should sound the same!

No shifts. Stretch from note to note.

Sheet music for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with fret numbers 2, 4, 5, 7, 5, 4, 2. The melody consists of eighth notes: F#4 (3rd finger), A4 (2nd finger), B4 (3rd finger), A4 (2nd finger), G#4 (3rd finger), F#4 (2nd finger), and E4 (2nd finger). There are no shift labels.

With shifts. Make the shifts inaudible.

Sheet music for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with fret numbers 2, 4, 5, 7, 5, 4, 2. The melody consists of eighth notes: F#4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), B4 (3rd finger), A4 (1st finger), G#4 (3rd finger), F#4 (1st finger), and E4 (1st finger). There are two red 'SHIFT' labels: one under the first A4 and one under the second A4.

Practice in mixed rhythms to improve the synchronization of the hands.

③

TAB: 2 2 2 2 4 4 4 | 5 5 5 5 7 7 7 | 5 5 5 4 4 4 | 2

Practice in mixed rhythms to improve the synchronization of the hands.

③

TAB: 2 2 2 2 4 4 4 | 5 5 5 5 7 7 7 | 5 5 5 5 4 4 4 | 2 2 2 2 2

Practice in mixed rhythms to improve the synchronization of the hands.

③

TAB: 2 4 5 7 5 4 | 2 4 5 7 5 4 | 2

Tech Tip How to Play Shifts on the Classical Guitar Video #2: The Details

Important Points

- Use guide fingers on all shifts if possible
- Land on broad part of finger, not the tip
- Focus on the target point
- The thumb should follow the hand
- Put elbow in position before the shift

TAB: 2 3 5 7 9 10 9 7 5 3 2

[CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com](#)

Tech Tip How to Play Shifts on the Classical Guitar Video #2: The Details

CONTENTS AND TIMELINE:

SHIFT TECHNIQUES

NOTE: You may notice I don't always follow my own advice about keeping the thumb in position with the hand. In an effort to keep my head out of the video, I was leaning back in my chair like a pretzel. My thumb was occasionally less concerned with correct shift technique than with helping me to not drop my guitar on the floor.

Ascending Shifts 00:14

Elbow position 00:37

Guide fingers 01:26

Thumb Position 01:40

Leaving fingers down or lifting them 03:00

Descending Shifts 03:45

The Guide finger 04:08

Land on the broad part of the finger 04:39

Elbow position change 05:35

Thumb on descending shifts 07:48

All Shifts

Compression of the fingers 08:44

"Look before you leap." Choose a target point 10:00

Summary 11:38

SHIFTS IN UPPER POSITIONS PAST THE 12TH FRET 12:37

NOTE: You may notice I don't always follow my own advice about keeping the thumb in position with the hand. In an effort to keep my head out of the video, I was leaning back in my chair like a pretzel. My thumb was occasionally less concerned with correct shift technique than with helping me to not drop my guitar on the floor.

Ascending Shifts 12:51

Ascending shifts collapse of tip joint 13:07

Thumb position 13:27

Elbow position change 13:54

Clearing the upper bout 14:01

Descending Shifts 15:42

Guide fingers 15:46

Land on the broad part of the finger 15:52

More on Guide fingers 16:08

Elbow position 16:27

Clearing the upper bout 16:45

"Look before you leap." Choose a target point 17:11

Thumb position 17:56

Musical examples referenced in Video #2

SHIFT TECHNIQUES

The complete F major scale

TAB 3 5 2 3 5 7 9 10 10 9 7 5 3 2 5 3

We extract this fragment from the F major scale to practice.

TAB 2 3 5 7 9 10 9 7 5 3 2

The shifts we want to master.

TAB 2 3 5 7 9 10 9 7 5 3 2

The guide fingers

Musical notation for the guide fingers in the G major scale. The treble clef staff shows the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. Red arrows indicate the guide fingers: the 3rd finger for G, the 1st finger for A, the 2nd finger for B, the 4th finger for C, the 3rd finger for D, the 1st finger for E, the 2nd finger for F#, and the 1st finger for G. The bass clef staff shows the fret numbers: 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 9, 7, 5, 3, 2.

SHIFTS IN UPPER POSITIONS PAST THE 12TH FRET

The complete G major scale

Musical notation for the complete G major scale. The treble clef staff shows the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. The bass clef staff shows the fret numbers: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 15, 14, 12, 10, 8, 7, 10, 8.

The shifts we want to master.

Musical notation for the shifts we want to master. The treble clef staff shows the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. Red arrows indicate the shifts: from G to A, from B to C, from D to E, from F# to G, from A to B, from C to D, from E to F#, and from F# to G. The bass clef staff shows the fret numbers: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 15, 14, 12, 10, 8, 7, 10, 8.

The guide fingers

① Guide finger

Guide finger

SHIFT

SHIFT

T
A
B

8 10 7 8 10 12 14 15 15 14 12 10 8 7 10 8