

How to Play Loud on the Guitar

By Douglas Niedt

The classical guitar is a quiet instrument. Its intimacy is certainly part of its charm. But oftentimes you need volume. To make your playing interesting to your listeners you want to use gradations of softness and loudness. You want to make crescendos. Quiet is pretty easy to do on the guitar. Loud is more difficult. This tip explains how to squeeze every bit of volume possible out of your guitar.

THE OBVIOUS

One trick you can use to produce a wide dynamic range is a very simple and obvious concept:

If you want something to seem loud, play everything else around it very quietly.

For example, if you want to make a crescendo big or obvious, begin the phrase with a feather-light touch. The climax of the crescendo, the loudest part, will then be obvious.

If you begin a phrase at too loud a volume level, you will have nowhere to go. You won't be able to play much louder. If you try to crescendo you will probably over-play the instrument and produce a harsh sound. Listen as I demonstrate the concept on *Romanza* (a.k.a. *Romance de Amor*, *Romance*):



How to Play Loud Video #1-Romanza

This technique works very well when you record. For a great example, listen to Christopher Parkening's CD, *Parkening Plays Bach* with headphones. He plays with a very light touch much of the time so that the loud parts really pop.

It also works well when you perform with amplification. However, if you play in a large space without amplification, forget it. The quiet parts won't be heard at all.

USE FREE STROKE AND REST STROKE TO INCREASE YOUR DYNAMIC RANGE

Switching from a light free stroke to a strong rest stroke can be an effective way to turbo boost a crescendo. Take this example from *Danza Pomposa* by Alexandre Tansman:

Danza Pomposa (Alexandre Tansman)

Measures 1-3 of *Danza Pomposa* by Alexandre Tansman. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The treble clef staff shows a melody starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo leading to a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The bass clef staff shows a supporting line. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. A red line with a circled 6 indicates a rest stroke.

4

Light free stroke Rest stroke

p p p m i m i

Measures 4-6 of *Danza Pomposa* by Alexandre Tansman. The score continues from measure 3. The treble clef staff shows a melody starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo leading to a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic, and then a rest stroke. The bass clef staff shows a supporting line. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. A red line with a circled 5 indicates a rest stroke.

Watch me demonstrate in this video:



How to Play Loud Video #2-Danza Pomposa

Or, to achieve additional range from loud to soft we can begin with rest stroke and end with a light free stroke. This technique can be used in this passage from *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega:

Capricho Árabe (Francisco Tárrega)

Rest stroke

Free stroke

VII Hinge bar X^③

17 18 19

f *p*

T
A
B

8 5 5 6 9 10 7 9 10 12 13 13 12 10 9 12 9 11 8 9 10 10 7 7 7 0 0 0 7 0 11 0 8 7 7 0

Watch as I play the passage in this video:



How to Play Loud Video #3-Capricho Arabe

USE TONE COLOR TO ACCENTUATE CHANGES OF VOLUME

You can use bright and dark tone colors (playing closer to the bridge or closer to the fretboard) to accentuate a listener's perception of loud and quiet. Take note that playing with a bright tone color doesn't have to coincide with playing loud. A bright tone color can be used on quiet passages too.

Watch as I demonstrate how to use tone color to accentuate the dynamics in the *Danza* from *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance* transcribed by Oscar Chilesotti:



How to Play Loud Video #4-Danza Lute Piece

Tone color can also be changed *gradually* to make a crescendo seem bigger. Here is a passage from *Fandanguillo* by Joaquín Turina:

Fandanguillo (Joaquín Turina)

Light free stroke Rest stroke Free stroke

19 *pp* 20 21

22 Free stroke but brighter tone Rest stroke VI V IV III II

23 24

25 *ff* 26 *pp*

The musical score is for a guitar piece in 3/4 time. It consists of three systems of measures. The first system (measures 19-21) shows a crescendo. Measure 19 starts with a rest and a *pp* dynamic. Measures 20 and 21 feature eighth-note patterns with fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and a red line indicating a crescendo. The second system (measures 22-24) continues the crescendo. Measure 22 has a 'Free stroke but brighter tone' marking. Measures 23 and 24 have 'Rest stroke' markings. Roman numerals VI, V, IV, III, II are written above the staff. The third system (measures 25-26) shows a decrescendo. Measure 25 has a *ff* marking, and measure 26 has a *pp* marking. The guitar part is shown in tablature below the staff.

Watch me play and explain the passage in this video:



How to Play Loud Video #5-Fandanguillo

HOW TO PLUCK THE STRINGS FOR MAXIMUM VOLUME

I wrote about this at length in my articles about *How to Produce a Beautiful Tone* with free stroke and rest stroke. Here are the salient points:

1. Follow-through has nothing to do with volume. You can do all kinds of theatrical hand movements but they won't increase your volume. Volume is mostly a result of how far you pull the string before you release it. Watch me demonstrate:



How to Play Loud Video #6 Follow Through

2. To play a loud and full free stroke, play “on top of the strings”. If you try to play a loud free stroke by pulling the strings hard from underneath, the result will be a thin and harsh sound. As you play louder and louder, the volume will “bottom out” as the tone quality disintegrates. Never claw at the strings or make the hand jump outwards. Pushing down onto the strings (pushing the strings into the guitar) will produce the fullest, loudest sound and produce the maximum volume before bottoming out.



How to Play Loud Video #7 Free Stroke

3. The fullest (but not necessarily the loudest) rest-stroke tone is achieved by playing on top of the string and pulling the string down into the guitar. But, if you play rest stroke and pull across the string with stiff tip joints, the result is a harder-edged, slightly percussive sound. In many instances, listeners will perceive this as louder volume. Also, the string can be pulled harder with the across-the-string stroke resulting in more volume before bottoming out. Watch:



How to Play Loud Video #10 Thumb Strums

4. When using the thumb alone, use rest stroke for maximum volume. However, the bass strings will tend to buzz or rattle when played with heavy thumb rest strokes. Move toward the bridge to lessen the buzzing. Watch:



How to Play Loud Video #10 Thumb Strums

STRUMS WITH THE THUMB

For maximum volume with thumb strums, use flesh and nail. Very important: be certain the thumb follows-through *into the guitar* as it leaves the final string of the strum. If you yank outward at the end of the strum, the result will be a thin tone and loss of volume in the final two to three strings. It may look cool but it will sound bad. Watch me demonstrate:



How to Play Loud Video #10 Thumb Strums

PLAY CLOSER TO THE BRIDGE

The string tension increases as you pluck closer to the bridge. Playing closer to the bridge allows you to play harder on the strings before the tone splatters and volume bottoms out. Watch:



How to Play Loud Video #11 String Tension

ROLL THE CHORDS

Rolling (arpeggiating) a chord can give the impression of greater volume and fullness. It can also take off the percussive edge and reduce the harshness of loudly played chords. Be sure not to pull the last string in the roll outward. Push into the string. Watch:



How to Play Loud Video #12 Rolling a Chord

YOUR GUITAR AND YOUR STRINGS

Every guitar is different. You have to learn the strengths and limitations of your particular guitar. You have to pay attention and learn by experience how hard you can push her until she protests with a brittle tone and bottoms out. When you play forcefully, certain areas of the neck, certain strings, or even particular notes will be buzzy than others. Listen to her. She will tell you with her voice when you aren't handling her correctly.

Strings can have a tremendous effect on the volume of your guitar. It goes without saying the strings must be fresh to produce the best tone quality and maximum volume. But beyond that, some brands of strings will simply sound much louder on your instrument than others. Experiment and find out which brand sounds best. Don't assume that higher tension strings will be louder. It isn't always the case. Again, if you listen carefully to your guitar, she will tell you which brand she likes best.

THE LEFT HAND

In general, as you pluck the strings harder with the right hand you will need to press the strings slightly harder with the left hand. Notice that I used the word "slightly". Only press hard enough to prevent string buzzing. Some players press way too hard on the left hand when playing loud. The amount of extra pressure required will vary with which string you are on and what area of the fretboard you are in.

Notes played above the 12th fret are particularly sensitive to left-hand finger pressure. One of my students once asked me what she needed to do to get a better tone on her high notes. She thought her tone was harsh and strident when she played loud. She asked about her nail shape and if she was striking the strings correctly. She assumed the problem was caused by her right hand. But the problem was actually with her left hand, not the right hand. She was getting many barely noticeable buzzes. But they weren't heard as obvious buzzes when she played. Because the string tension is so high in the upper register, the little buzzes manifested themselves as a harsh tone. She simply needed to press harder to produce clear notes. When she pressed harder with the left hand, the strident and harsh tone disappeared because the buzzes disappeared. The tone was clear and full even at high volume.

SUMMING UP

- To play loud, it is important to learn to play very softly. Playing quiet notes very quietly makes the loud notes seem louder. Beginning a crescendo very quietly widens its potential dynamic range.
- Use free stroke and rest stroke to expand your dynamic range. You can play much louder with rest stroke than free stroke. Beginning a passage with a quiet free stroke and switching to the more powerful rest stroke will expand your dynamic range on a crescendo.
- Use changes of tone color to accentuate changes of volume.

- Observe the basics of good technique to maximize volume: play on top of the strings for free stroke, pull across the strings for powerful rest strokes.
- For strums, use flesh and nail and follow through into the guitar. Don't pull out at the end of the strum.
- Play a bit closer to the bridge when you play hard on the strings to minimize buzzes and prevent "splattering" of the tone.
- Roll chords to add greater volume and fullness and minimize harshness.
- Keep fresh strings on your guitar and be sure the brand you use is a good match for your instrument.
- As you play harder with the right hand, press a bit harder with the left hand to prevent buzzing.
- Know your instrument. Don't overplay your guitar. Know how hard you can push it.