

HOW TO PLAY RHYTHMICALLY EVEN SLURS ON THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt. All Rights Reserved.

This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

This technique tip focuses specifically on learning to play rhythmically-even slurs. [Go here for a comprehensive guide on how to play slurs in general.](#)

In this technique tip, you will learn:

1. How to play even descending slurs ("pull-offs") on an advanced piece (*Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega).
2. How to play even descending slurs on an easy piece (*Allegretto in E major* by Fernando Sor).
3. How to learn to play even ascending slurs ("hammer-ons") on an intermediate piece (*Prélude No. 3* by Heitor Villa-Lobos).

I illustrate how it all works with a video for each piece.

THE QUICK SUMMARY: What to do if your slurs (hammer-ons and pull-offs) are uneven

1. Practice these four versions of the slurred passage:
 - a. Usually, uneven slurs are caused by hammering on or pulling off too quickly. Therefore, practice the slurs in the **opposite dotted rhythm**.
 - b. Play the notes evenly without any slurs.
 - c. Play the slurs in the correct rhythm.
 - d. Even practice the wrong rhythm so that you and your fingers recognize the difference between right and wrong.
2. If the passage is long or complex, break it down into smaller parts to practice with the four versions.
3. To save practice time, focus your practice on the slurs only. Later, practice the passage in a larger context.
4. If the fingers revert to the tendency to play the slurs unevenly, THINK the opposite rhythm to keep the slurs even.

DOUG'S DEEP DIVE (all the details)

Descending Slurs ("pull-offs") on an Advanced Piece

The opening passage of *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega consists of descending slurs or pull-offs. Example #1a:

Example #1a. *Capricho Árabe* (Francisco Tárrega) measures 2-4. Tárrega's original fingering.

The rhythms of the descending slurs (pull-offs) should sound like this:

Unfortunately, some guitarists mangle the passage, playing it like this with uneven slurs. Example #1b:

Example #1b. Incorrect rhythm.

A common problem—the player mangles the rhythm of the slurs like this:

To fix it, to keep your slurs even, intentionally practice the opposite rhythm. This type of practice is the most effective strategy to correct arhythmic or uneven slurs. Be certain to dot every slur. Sometimes, a player will not dot the slurs at shift points as much as the others. They must all be equally dotted. Example #1c:

Example #1c. Practice the opposite rhythm.

Intentionally practice (or think) the opposite rhythm like this:

If the counting looks a little scary, think of it like this:

The dotted opposite rhythm can be counted like this:

If the counting doesn't work for you, I highly recommend the "bouncy, bouncy" method (see the video).

Also, practice the passage with no slurs, so you learn to recognize the sound of even notes. Get the sound of that rhythm into your ears. Rhythmically, the passage should sound the same, whether you are playing the slurs or not. Example #1d:

Example #1d. Practice the passage WITHOUT SLURS
to hear the sound of even notes:

Practice these four versions of the slurs in random order:

1. Play the slurs in the opposite rhythm.
2. Play the notes evenly without any slurs.
3. Play the slurs in the correct rhythm.
4. Even practice the wrong rhythm so that you and your fingers recognize the difference between right and wrong.

For Example:

- You know that you pull-off too quickly. So, practice the opposite dotted rhythm several times.
- Then, play the passage with no slurs to hear what the notes sound like when they are even.
- Now, play the passage with the slurs. If it still doesn't sound right, practice the opposite rhythm again.
- Alternate between playing the slurs with the opposite rhythm and trying to play them with the correct rhythm.

- Throw in a few repetitions of the passage without slurs to remind yourself how even notes sound.
- Alternate between playing the slurs with the opposite dotted rhythm and the wrong rhythm. That will help you hear and feel the difference between right and wrong.

NOTE: It may seem a little odd that I recommend you also practice the wrong rhythm. After all, that is what you are trying to expunge from your playing. But it is extremely helpful to the hands, ears, and brain to practice right and wrong, so they have a clear understanding of the difference between the two.

In a longer passage such as this, you may want to break it down into smaller units. Begin practicing only the first four 16th notes in all four versions. Example #1e:

Example #1e. Break down a long passage into smaller parts.
Randomly alternate practicing these four versions:

Version #1: Practice the slurs in the opposite rhythm.

Version #2: Practice without any slurs.

Version #3: Practice with the slurs in the correct, even rhythm.

Version #4: Practice with the slurs in the incorrect, mangled rhythm.

To continue, we would:

1. Practice the next group of four 16th notes and master those.
2. Combine those with the first four 16th notes.
3. Next, learn the third group of four 16th notes.
4. Finally, combine the third group with the first two groups.

[See my technique tip on Step Practice or "Chaining".](#)

IMPORTANT NOTE: This practice method will develop the ability to control the speed of your fingers' pull-offs. But even so, at times, they may revert to pulling off too quickly. To prevent that, as you perform the passage, THINK the opposite dotted rhythm as you play. The fingers will play the slurs evenly.

Watch me demonstrate how to learn to play the descending slurs ("pull-offs") rhythmically evenly in *Capricho Árabe* in Video #1.

★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon at the bottom on the far right:

How to Play Rhythmically-Even Slurs on an Advanced Piece: *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega

THINK this rhythm:

Practice the opposite dotted rhythm (or think the opposite rhythm like this):

to play the CORRECT rhythm:

With Slurs in the Correct Rhythm

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

How to Play Rhythmically-Even Slurs on an Advanced Piece: *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega

Descending Slurs ("pull-offs") on an Easier Piece

This practice strategy can be used with easier pieces too. Let's have a look at the *Allegretto in E major, Lesson #8 from Opus 35, Book 1* by Fernando Sor. In measure #27 are two descending slurs or pull-offs. Example #2a:

Example #2a. *Allegretto in E major, Opus 35 Book 1 Lesson #8* (Fernando Sor) measures 25-28.

The rhythms of the descending slurs (pull-offs) should sound like this:

Many students tend to pull-off too quickly on the two slurs in measure #27, mangling the rhythm. Example #2b:

Example #2b. Incorrect rhythm.

A common problem—the player mangles the rhythm of the slurs like this:

Once again, to fix it, intentionally practice the opposite rhythm. This type of practice is the most effective strategy to correct arhythmic or uneven slurs. Example #2c:

Example #2c. Practice the opposite rhythm.

Intentionally practice (or think) the opposite rhythm like this:

If the counting looks a little scary, think of it like this:

The dotted opposite rhythm can be counted like this:

The image shows musical notation for measure 27. The top staff is a treble clef in 3/8 time, containing a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, slurred together. Above the staff, the counting sequence is: 1 2 3 4 (where 4 is red), 1 2 3 4 (where 4 is red), 1 2 3 4 (where 4 is red). The bottom staff is a guitar TAB, showing fret numbers: 4, 0, 3, 0, 0, 3. The TAB staff is labeled 'T A B' on the left.

If the counting doesn't work for you, I highly recommend the "bouncy, bouncy" method (see the video).

To save practice time, isolate measure #27 which contains the slurs, and practice these four versions of the measure in random order:

1. Play the slurs in the opposite rhythm.
2. Play the notes evenly without any slurs.
3. Play the slurs in the correct rhythm.
4. Even practice the wrong rhythm so that you and your fingers recognize the difference between right and wrong.

Example #2d:

Example #2d. Focus on the measure with the slurs.
Randomly alternate practicing these four versions:

Version #1: Practice the slurs in the opposite rhythm.

Version #2: Practice without any slurs.

Version #3: Practice with the slurs in the correct, even rhythm.

Version #4: Practice with the slurs in the incorrect, mangled rhythm.

Remember, to save practice time, focus your practice on the slurs only. Later, practice the passage in its larger context.

If the fingers revert to the tendency to play the slurs unevenly, THINK the opposite rhythm to keep the slurs even.

Watch me demonstrate how to learn to play the descending slurs ("pull-offs") rhythmically evenly in this passage in Video #2.

★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon at the bottom on the far right:

How to Play Rhythmically-Even Slurs on an Easier Piece: *Allegretto*, by Fernando Sor

Version #1: Practice with the slurs in the incorrect, ungrouped fashion

Version #2: Practice with the slurs in the correct, even rhythm

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

How to Play Rhythmically-Even Slurs on an Easier Piece: Allegretto , by Fernando Sor

Ascending Slurs ("hammer-ons")

This practice strategy also works with ascending slurs or hammer-ons. Let's look at the beginning measures of *Prélude No. 3* by Heitor Villa-Lobos. Example #3a:

Example #3a. *Prélude No. 3* (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measures 1-4.

The same problem/solution applies to ascending slurs or hammer-ons.

The rhythms of the ascending slurs (hammer-ons) should sound like this:

The image shows musical notation for measures 1-4 of 'Prélude No. 3' by Heitor Villa-Lobos. The notation includes a treble clef, a 2/4 time signature, and a key signature of one flat. The first measure is marked with a '1' and contains a slur over a sequence of notes. The second measure is marked with a '3' and contains a slur over a sequence of notes. The third measure is marked with a '2' and contains a slur over a sequence of notes. The fourth measure is marked with a '1' and contains a slur over a sequence of notes. The notation also includes a bass line with fingerings and a tablature line with fret numbers.

Unfortunately, some guitarists play it like this. Example #3b:

Example #3b. Incorrect rhythm.

A common problem—the player mangles the rhythm of the slurs like this:

short-long short-long

To fix it, intentionally practice the opposite rhythm. This type of practice is the most effective strategy to correct arhythmic or uneven slurs. Example #3c:

Example #3c. Practice the opposite rhythm.

Intentionally practice (or think) the opposite rhythm like this:

LONG-short LONG-short

If the counting looks a little scary, think of it like this:

The dotted opposite rhythm can be counted like this:

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

If the counting doesn't work for you, I highly recommend the "bouncy, bouncy" method (see the video).

Isolate the slurs in measure #3, and practice these four versions of the slurs in random order:

1. Play the slurs in the opposite rhythm.
2. Play the notes evenly without any slurs.
3. Play the slurs in the correct rhythm.
4. Even practice the wrong rhythm so that you and your fingers recognize the difference between right and wrong.

Example #3d:

Example #3d. Focus on the slurs.

Randomly alternate practicing these four versions:

Version #1: Practice the slurs in the opposite rhythm.

Version #2: Practice without any slurs.

Version #3: Practice with the slurs in the correct, even rhythm.

Version #4: Practice with the slurs in the incorrect, mangled rhythm.

To save practice time, focus your practice on the slurs only. Later, practice the passage in its larger context.

If the fingers revert to the tendency to play the slurs unevenly, THINK the opposite rhythm to keep the slurs even.

Watch me demonstrate how to learn to play the ascending slurs ("hammer-ons") rhythmically even in this passage from Villa-Lobos' *Prélude No. 3* in Video #3.

★ Also, if you prefer, you can read the transcript of the video (scroll to the very end of this article).

★ You can turn on closed captioning ("CC" at bottom right) if you find it is hard to understand my speech.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon at the bottom on the far right:

How to Play Rhythmically-Even Slurs on an Easier Piece: *Prélude No. 3*, by Heitor Villa-Lobos



Summary: To Correct Uneven Slurs

1. Practice these four versions of the slurred passage:
 - a. Usually, uneven slurs are caused by hammering on or pulling off too quickly. Therefore, practice the slurs in the **opposite dotted rhythm**.
 - b. Play the notes evenly without any slurs.
 - c. Play the slurs in the correct rhythm.
 - d. Even practice the wrong rhythm so that you and your fingers recognize the difference between right and wrong.
2. If the passage is long or complex, break it down into smaller parts to practice with the four versions.
3. To save practice time, focus your practice on the slurs only. Later, practice the passage in a larger context.
4. If the fingers revert to the tendency to play the slurs unevenly, THINK the opposite rhythm to keep the slurs even.