

How to Play Staccato, Part 1

By Douglas Niedt

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Musicians deal with two types of articulation: legato and staccato. Legato is Italian for "tied together" which means that the notes should be played or sung smoothly and connected. Staccato is Italian for "detached" which means that the notes should be separated with silence between them.

So you may say, "Okay Doug, you're telling me staccato means to play kind of choppy. Hey, I already do that real well. Why am I paying you to tell me how to do that?"

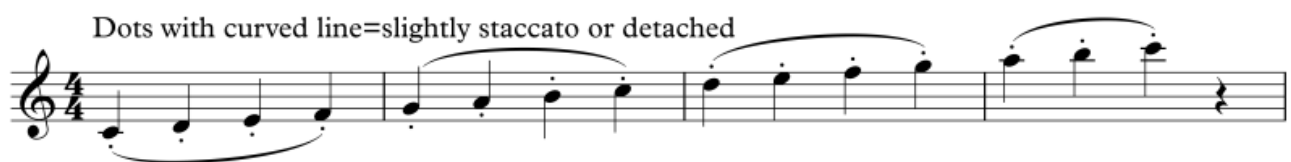
The answer is that you need to learn to control the degree, quality, and evenness of your staccato. To do that requires specific techniques some of which are quite complicated.

Notation of Staccato

Since the 20th century, staccato has generally been notated with a dot placed above or below a note (Ex. #1):

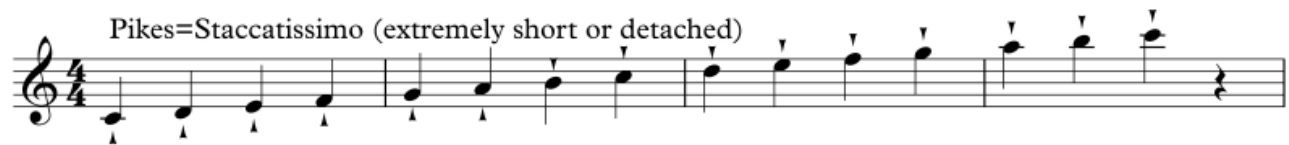


A curved line placed above or below a series of dotted staccato notes implies a slightly staccato or detached sound, in other words not as short or crisp as a regular staccato (Ex. #2):

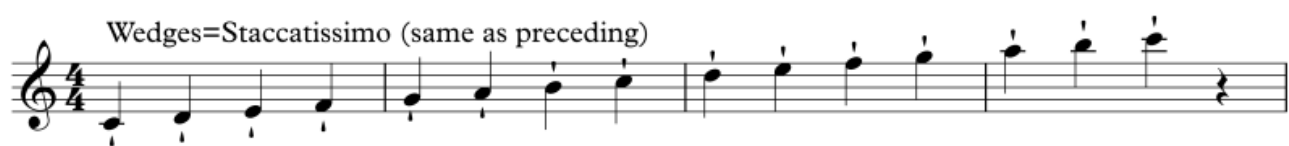


A wedge or pike indicates staccatissimo (very staccato) or extremely separated and distinct (Ex #3 and 4):

Pikes=Staccatissimo (extremely short or detached)



Wedges=Staccatissimo (same as preceding)



Before the mid 19th century, dots, wedges, pikes, and even dashes often had the same meaning although some theorists attempted to devise rules correlating certain symbols with specific note lengths. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, various combinations of dots, vertical and horizontal dashes, and vertical and horizontal wedges were used to attempt to discriminate subtle nuances of staccato. But attempts to standardize any of these signs have been unsuccessful.

How Short Should Staccato Notes Be Played?

Some say the normal staccato indicated by a dot indicates the note should be played at half its written value followed by the same value rest (Ex. #5 and 6):

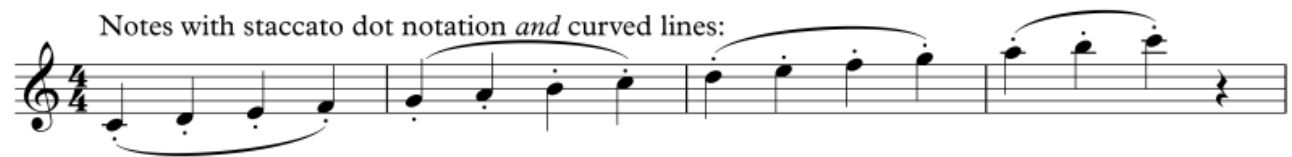
Notes with standard staccato notation



Should be executed as:



And similarly, here are approximations for other staccati (Ex. #7-10):



I recommend you ignore those estimates! The length of the notes and the feel of the staccato will vary from piece to piece even with the same notation. Yes, staccato is short. But how short is totally up to you the performer. When it comes to staccato, don't be ruled by mathematical formulas. You must go with what sounds best to you.

How Is Staccato Notated in Music Written in Two or More Parts?

In the multi-voice music we play on the guitar, sometimes it is difficult to tell which notes are to be played staccato. In 21st-century notation, what is *supposed* to happen is this: if the notes are part of the same voice or part and share a common stem, a staccato mark applies to all the notes (Ex. #11):

Here, each pair of notes shares a common stem.
That means both notes are part of the same voice.



Therefore, both notes in each pair are played short:



If the pairs of notes are stemmed in different directions (which indicates two voices or parts), the staccato marks apply only to one note of each pair (Ex. #12):

Here, one note of each pair has its stem pointing up
and the other note's stem points down.
That means the notes belong to two separate voices.
The staccato dots only apply to the *upper* voice.



Therefore, only the *upper* notes are cut short.
The bottom notes are allowed to ring
to smoothly connect to each other.



Or (Ex. #13):

Here again, one note of each pair has its stem pointing up and the other note's stem points down.
Therefore the notes belong to two separate voices.
In this example, the staccato dots only apply to the *lower* voice.



Therefore, only the *bottom* notes are cut short.
The upper notes are allowed to ring
to smoothly connect to each other.



But as usual, real life doesn't conform to rules. These rules of notation are not always followed. In the end, do what sounds best to you.

Left-Hand Staccato is an Imperfect Technique

Staccato with the left hand is done by playing a fretted note and immediately releasing the finger pressure off the string. A very important concept is to release the finger pressure only—do not lift the actual fingertip off the string. Suddenly lifting the fingertip off a fretted note usually makes the open string sound. Therefore, release the finger pressure first, and then lift the finger off the string.

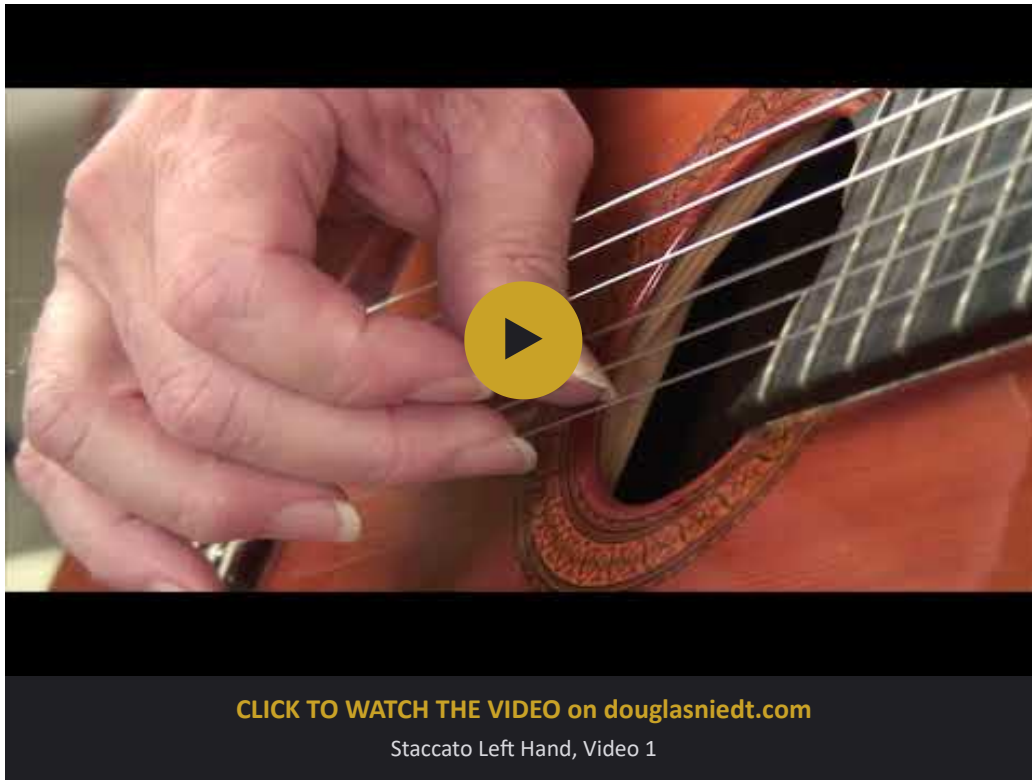
Unfortunately, left-hand staccato is an imperfect technique, even when you do it well. On the classical guitar, it just isn't very clean. Extraneous noise is produced when releasing the finger pressure off the string.

So, why should you watch the following video on how to execute a flawed technique? Because, there are times when one must use it, so it is important to learn how to do it as well as possible.

Check it out:

If you don't see a video, refresh your browser.

Be sure to watch the video on full screen. Click the symbol to the right of "HD" in the lower right-hand corner after the video begins playing. Hit escape "ESC" on your keyboard to return to normal viewing.



Use the Right Hand to Produce the Best Staccato

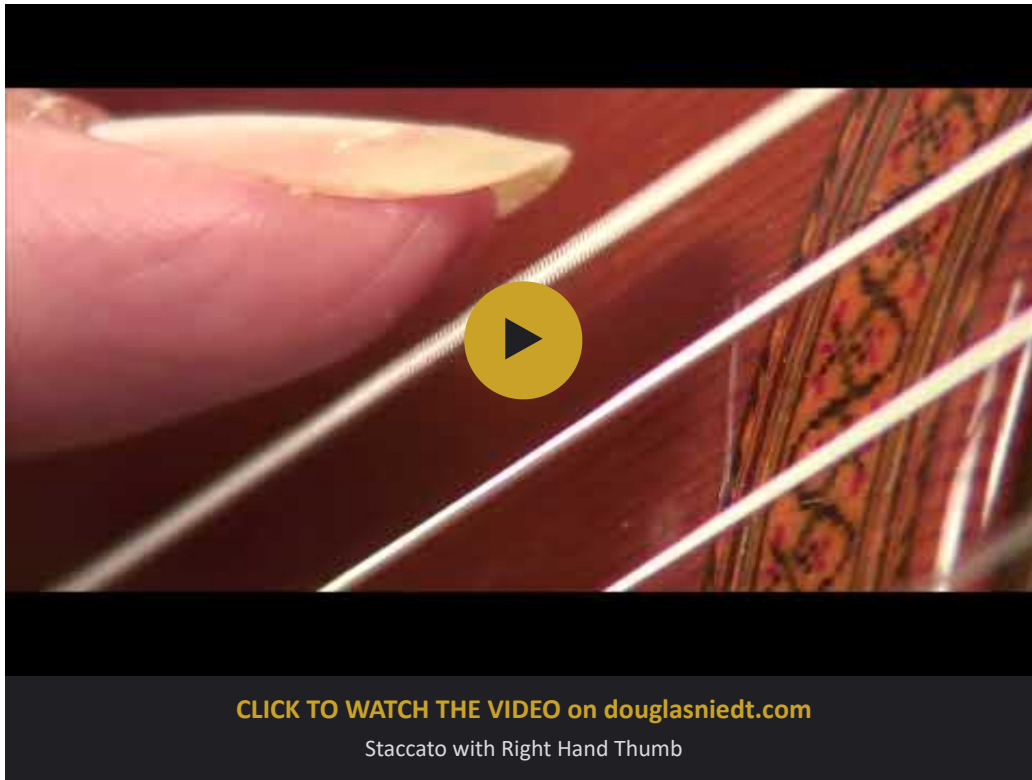
In most situations, the right-hand staccato technique will produce the best staccato sound. Right-hand staccato also produces greater *left-hand* stability and accuracy in staccato passages. The left-hand fingers generally *do not lift off the strings* when the staccato is produced by the right hand. Because the left-hand fingers stay in firm contact with the strings, stability and accuracy are maintained. Stability and accuracy suffer when the left-hand fingers lift off the strings to execute left-hand staccato.

Step #1: Staccato with the right-hand thumb

To understand right-hand staccato in its simplest form, we will begin by learning how to use the right-hand thumb to produce staccato. Watch this mesmerizing video. Who knew staccato could be this fascinating?

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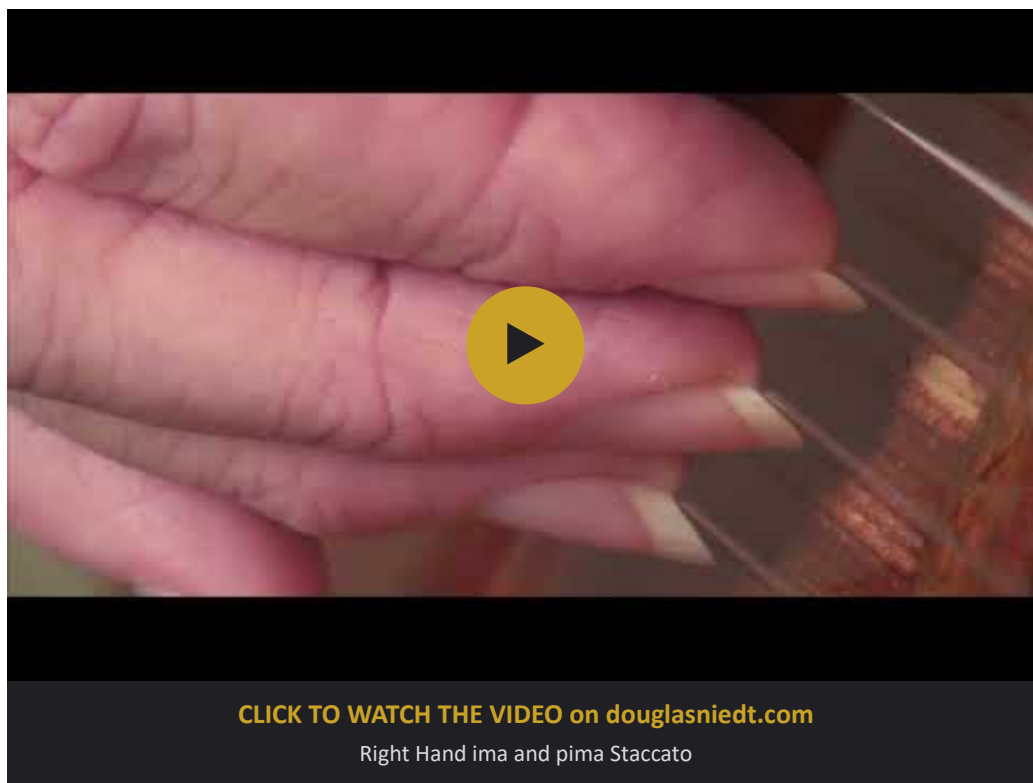


Step #2: Staccato chords with ima and pima:

Now, let's learn to play staccato chords with ima on the first three strings while resting the thumb on the 6th string for support and stability. Watch this riveting video:

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Step #3: Staccato with alternating fingers

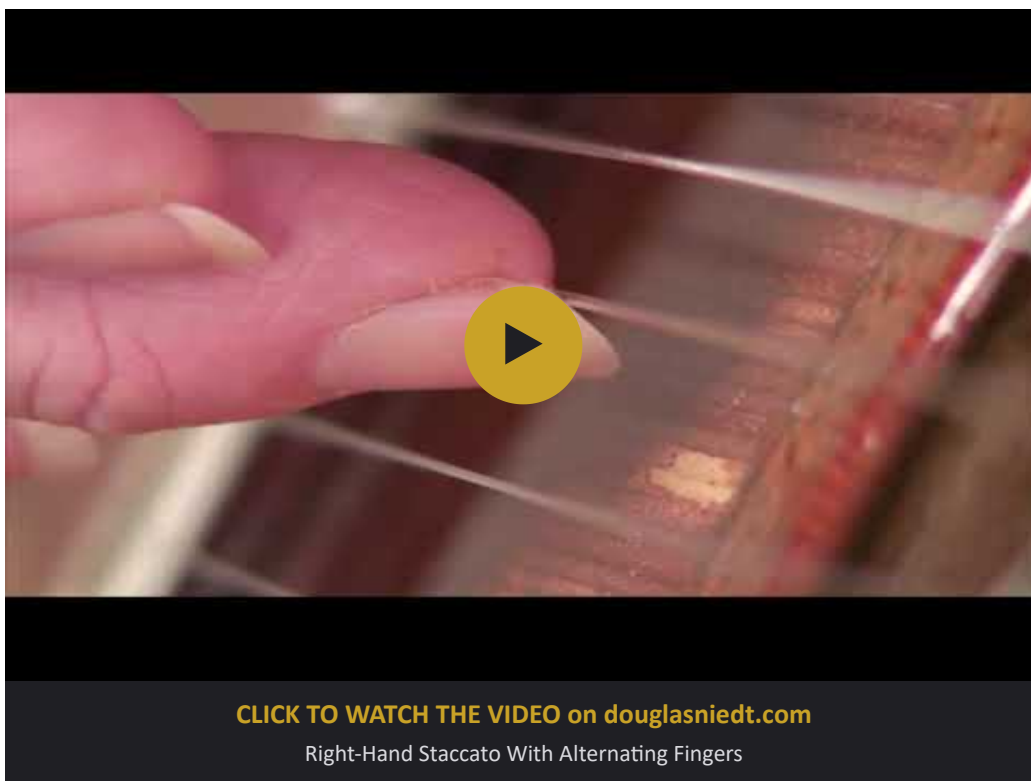
When using the right hand to play staccato, do not pluck and damp a note with the same right-hand finger. Doing so produces excessive tension when done repeatedly. It is also difficult to play a note staccatissimo in that fashion.

To play notes staccato with the right-hand fingers, the concept is to pluck a note with finger X and immediately damp the note with finger Y. Y is now sitting on the string so play the next note with finger Y and damp it with X. X is now sitting on the string so play the next note with finger X. Keep repeating the cycle.

Whoa, that almost sounds like high school algebra. Quick, watch the next video. This technique is much easier than algebra.

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END OF PART 1