

How to Play Staccato, Part 2 of 3

By Douglas Niedt

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Step #4: Dealing with String Crossings

When it comes to staccato, string crossings (changing from one string to another) are really bad news. A huge wrench gets thrown into the works. Whether using the thumb and/or fingers to damp, the difficulty of executing staccatos that are evenly short increases exponentially when string crossings occur.

Ascending Passages

This is apparent when attempting to play a simple two-octave “Segovia scale” staccato:



As soon as we come to the first string cross or string change going from the D on the 5th string to the E on the 4th string, we hit a snag:

After *i* plucks the C, *m* stops the note, and *m* is resting on the 5th string.

m plucks the D, *i* stops the note, and *i* is resting on the 5th string.

Now we have a problem. *m* just played the previous D so if we are alternating, we don't want to use *m* again. We want to use *i*. But *i* is resting on the 5th string, unavailable to play this E.

Executing staccato with just *i* and *m* at this string cross won't work, especially at faster speeds. The first two notes on the 5th string, the C and D, are fine. But then the *i* finger is supposed to play the 4th string E. However, because we used the *i* finger to cut the 5th string short to make the D staccato, it is sitting on the 5th string, out of position to play the E on the 4th string. And, since we are alternating *i* and *m*, we don't want to repeat *m*.

The solution is to use the right-hand thumb to execute staccato at ascending string crosses on the note right before the string cross:

After *i* plucks the C, *m* stops the note, and *m* is resting on the 5th string.

m plucks the D. To make the D staccato, instead of using *i* to stop the note, **use the thumb.**

Now, because the staccato of the previous D was executed with the thumb, *i* is available to pluck the 4th-string E. *m* will stop the note, making it staccato.

m is sitting on the 4th string, ready to pluck this F. It will be stopped with *i* to make it staccato.

Use this rule for ascending passages

On a scale or single line passage like a melody, it doesn't matter if you begin the passage with *i* or *m* or if you use *ia*, *ai*, *ma*, or *am*. On the **ascending portion** of a scale or single line passage, the rule is that *the thumb executes the staccato on the note right before the string change*. This allows you to maintain finger alternation and fluidity.

Staccato with thumb

Staccato with thumb

Staccato with thumb

Staccato with thumb

Watch this video. You will more easily understand what I am describing:



Staccato Part 2 Ascending Scale

Descending Passages

Descending scales or single-line passages present similar problems at string crossings:



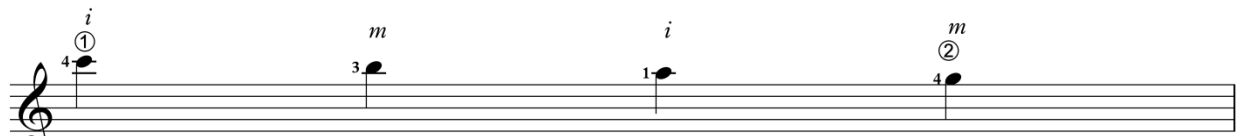
After *i* plucks the C, *m* stops the note, and *m* is resting on the 1st string.

m plucks the B, *i* stops the note, and *i* is resting on the 1st string.

i plucks the A, *m* stops the note, and *m* is resting on the 1st string.

Now we have a problem. *i* just played the previous A so if we are alternating, we don't want to use *i* again. We want to use *m*. But *m* is resting on the 1st string, unavailable to play this G.

The solution is to use the *a* finger to execute the staccato on the note before the string change or crossing:



After *i* plucks the C, *m* stops the note, and *m* is resting on the 1st string.

m plucks the B, *i* stops the note, and *i* is resting on the 1st string.

i plucks the A. **Use a finger to stop the string** making the A staccato.

Now *m* is available to play this G. *i* will damp the string to make the G staccato.

Use this rule for descending passages

On the *descending* portion of a scale or single line passage (like a melody) played with *im* or *mi*, the rule is that the *a* finger executes the staccato on the note right before the string change. This allows you to maintain finger alternation and fluidity with *i* and *m*:



Staccato with *a* finger

Staccato with *a* finger

Staccato with *a* finger

Staccato with *a* finger

Watch and I will show you how to do this:



Staccato Part 2 Descending Scale

Let's look at this passage from *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz:

from *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m i m p

OR, use the left-hand 3rd finger to cut E short.

i plucks the E. Use a finger to stop the string making the E staccato.

m plucks the C. Use *i* finger to stop the string making the C staccato.

T	7	9	10	12	10	9	7	9	8	4	7	6	2	5	4	1	3	2	3	2	4	4
A																						
B																						

This passage doesn't have to be played staccato. In fact the piano score does not indicate staccato. But I (and other guitarists) think playing it staccato or even pizzicato is a nice touch of contrast when played on the guitar.

The passage is easily executed with *im* staccato until the string change at the end of the third measure. The problem is how to play the 4th-string E staccato.

The technique that will produce the best crisp or short staccato is highlighted in red. Pluck the E with *i*. Stop or cut the E with the *a* finger. Continue alternating fingers by playing the C with *m*. Cut the C with *i* to make the C staccato. However, in this passage, this method is tricky. The *a* finger must be perfectly in position to execute the staccato.

A much easier method is highlighted in blue. Pluck the E with *i*. Then, simply use the left-hand 3rd finger to quickly damp the E, making it staccato. The 3rd finger is already on its way to playing the C on the 5th string, so it is a very natural motion. It isn't quite as crisp a staccato as the right-hand method, but is certainly easier.

Check it out:



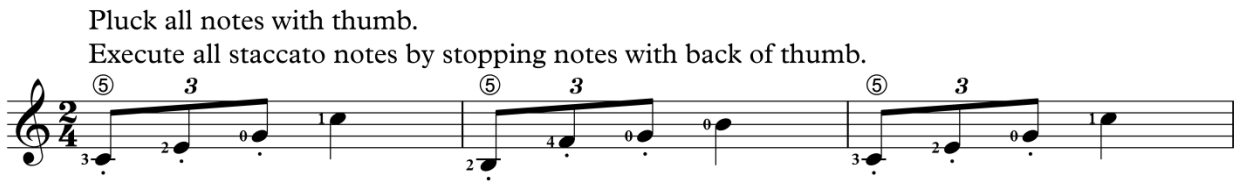
Staccato Part 2 Leyenda

Real-Life Decision Making

The lesson to learn here is that although right-hand staccato is usually more crisp and clean than left-hand staccato, it can be difficult to execute in the heat of battle. Sometimes it is better to sacrifice a little of the crispness of the right-hand staccato and use left-hand staccato to ensure getting through the passage without crashing.

Another Technique: Using the Back of the Right-Hand Thumb to Execute Staccato

Here is an example of how to use the back of the right-hand thumb to execute staccato on passages with many string crossings. All the notes are plucked with the thumb:



The hand is placed in a slightly different position from its norm. It leans back slightly and sinks down a little closer to the strings. Immediately after each note is plucked with the thumb, the back of the thumb damps the string producing a crisp staccato.

Watch me demonstrate how to do this:



Staccato Part 2 Back of the Thumb Staccato

Just to illustrate the use of this technique, let's look at a passage from *In the Hall of the Mountain King* by Edvard Grieg, played on the bass strings of the guitar with the thumb. Every note is to be played staccato:

In the Hall of the Mountain King (Edvard Grieg)
from *Peer Gynt, Suite No. 1, Op. 46*

If we play it in first position, several string changes or crosses arise which must be dealt with. On changes from a higher pitched string to lower pitched string, left-hand staccato is an easy solution. On changes from a lower-pitched string to a higher-pitched string, the back-of-the-thumb staccato technique works very well:

In the Hall of the Mountain King (Edvard Grieg)
from *Peer Gynt, Suite No. 1, Op. 46*

Passages like this can seem very complicated. But once the mechanics are worked out, the execution feels very natural. Watch me demonstrate:



Staccato Part 2 Mountain King

The back-of-the-thumb staccato technique is useful in many passages. Let's look at a passage from Fernando Sor's *Lesson 20* from his *Twenty-Four Progressive Lessons, Opus 31* (*Study No. 9* in Segovia's *Twenty Sor Studies*):

Fernando Sor's *Lesson 20* from his *Twenty-Four Progressive Lessons, Opus 31*
(*Study No. 9* in Segovia's *Twenty Sor Studies*):

The musical score is in 4/4 time and G major. The melody is in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Red arrows point to specific notes in the melody, labeled "Cut with back of thumb". The bass line includes fingerings for the thumb (T), index (A), and middle (B) fingers.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Treble	G4	A4	B4	C5	B4	A4	G4	F#4	E4	D4	C4	B3
Bass	G2	F#2	E2	D2	C2	B1	A1	G1	F#1	E1	D1	C1

The notes in red could be stopped simply by setting the thumb immediately back on the string just played. But, using the back of the thumb has the advantage of preparing the thumb to play the chord that follows.

Watch how it works:



Staccato Part 2 Sor Study 9

END OF PART 2.

More to come in *How to Play Staccato, Part 3* (the conclusion). We will look at playing staccato and legato at the same time—staccato in the melody, legato in the bass and vice versa. We will examine the use of staccato in playing contrapuntal music. And finally, I will show you that staccato is useful not just in playing classical music but for playing popular arrangements too!