

How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 2 of 4

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Part 2: HOW TO PRODUCE A BEAUTIFUL FREE-STROKE TONE WITH THE FINGERS ON THE TREBLE STRINGS

The basics

The basic requirements for producing a good free-stroke tone are identical to producing a good rest stroke-tone. The nails have to be properly shaped and polished, you must have good strings on your guitar, hand and arm position must be correct, and contact with the string must be on the left side of the nail, flesh and nail together. If you contact only the flesh, you will hear a click as the string moves from the flesh to the nail. If you contact only the nail, you will hear a buzz as the hard surface of the nail contacts the hard surface of the vibrating string.

Hand position

As with rest stroke, surprisingly, the Segovia hand position is not the ideal position for getting a good free-stroke tone for most players. I'm not knocking Segovia—far from it. He had the most beautiful tone ever. The position worked for him and does work for some players. But for most, that hand position makes the fingers hit the strings straight-on, which causes both sides of the nails to contact the string. The result is a bright, thin tone. If the Segovia position works for you, that's great. But again, for most people a straight wrist with the knuckles off-parallel is the best position. Make a point of especially checking that the "a" finger is touching on the left side of its nail. The "a" finger will tend to hit the string more straight-on than "i" or "m".

The Secret

The best free-stroke tone is produced by using what some players call a false rest stroke or what Julian Bream calls playing on top of the string or what the Segovia school describes as pushing down onto the string or pushing into the string. Playing on top of the string is very much like playing a rest stroke. The preparation looks and feels like a rest stroke.

Place the finger on the top surface of the string and push the string into the guitar just like a rest stroke. Keep your tip joint straight or relax it so it "gives" or collapses. The more you relax the joint (the more it "gives" or collapses) the fatter the tone. As you stiffen the tip joint, the tone becomes a little harder-edged. For a full tone, don't bend the tip joint. If you bend the joint, the finger will play from behind or underneath the string and as you pull up or out, will produce a brighter tone. It isn't necessarily a bad sound, it's just different. When you want a brighter or thinner sound, that's one way you can produce it.

On execution, the finger doesn't follow through and come to rest on the adjacent string as in rest stroke. Instead, after pushing the string into the guitar the finger releases the string with very little follow through. When you play your free stroke with this technique, it will sound as good as your rest stroke! However, as volume is increased it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the rest stroke-like tone quality. At that point it is best to switch over to rest stroke. Great players such as John Williams will intentionally begin a passage with light free stroke (playing from behind the string) and as they crescendo, will switch over to playing on top of the string and finally switch to rest stroke for a "turbocharge" to the climax of the passage.

This type of free stroke is easiest to use on slower passages. As the tempo increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to push into the strings and release. However, even at faster speeds one can still play on top of the strings (without pushing in on each finger stroke) rather than from behind or underneath.

You have to watch the video

This type of free stroke is very difficult to describe in words. Watch this video for the details on how it's done.



How to Produce a Beautiful Tone Part 2: Free Stroke On the Treble Strings

Summary

The core, basic requirements for producing a beautiful free-stroke tone on the treble strings are to have good flesh/nail contact on the left sides of the nails and to *play on top of the strings*. But also, experiment with:

- Adjusting the hand position. Experiment with different positions of the hand. We can place the hand so the knuckles are parallel with the strings (Segovia position) or we can place the hand off parallel with a straight wrist. Try those two extremes and everything in between.
- Adjusting the tilt of the hand. For rest stroke, I find that tilting or leaning the hand to the left improves my tone quality. But on free stroke it doesn't help me at all. But test it out for yourself.
- Slicing. Just as on rest stroke we can play straight across the string, slice left, slice right; or anything in between.
- Adjusting the amount of tension in the tip joints. Controlling the amount of tension in the tip joints and thus the amount of bend in the joints is a crucial element of playing on top of the strings.

For the fattest, fullest free-stroke tone most players will play on the left side of the nails flesh and nail together, use the straight-wrist (knuckles off-parallel) hand position, not tilt the hand, relax the tip joints, slice right or left, and play on top of the string.

Tips for practicing

As with the rest stroke, practice on the first string at the 1st fret (F), 6th fret (Bb) or 8th fret (C) to minimize sympathetic vibrations. Play over the rosette at the bottom of the soundhole, not over the soundhole or close to the bridge.

Focus on one finger at a time and play very slowly. Listen carefully to each stroke. Discover how different ways of playing the string changes the tone.

After working with the "i" finger, experiment with the "m" finger. Then try the "a" finger. Be sure the "a" finger is playing on the left side of its nail.

Once you are able to produce a consistently beautiful tone with each finger individually, try alternating a pair of fingers and work to make each finger sound identical in tone. Practice "im", "ma", and "ia". You should not be able to hear an alternation of tone as you alternate fingers.

An excellent exercise to cultivate your free stroke tone is to play a few rest strokes with "i" and then play a few free strokes with "i". Try to make your free strokes match the fullness and beauty of tone of your rest strokes. Do the same with "m" and then "a". When you can do that, you've got it.