

How to Reach Difficult Stretches and Nasty Chords

By Douglas Niedt

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[Stretching exercises](#) can be conscientiously practiced every day, but in themselves will not help you master difficult stretches or "nasty chords" (chords with difficult stretches or that are difficult to play clearly because of finger/string clearance issues).

Instead, you can use specific techniques to master difficult stretches and chords with difficult stretches.

To illustrate each technique, I will provide examples from the standard repertoire that students have brought to me in search of a solution. Some examples are used to illustrate several different techniques. This is because in most situations, you will employ more than just one technique to execute a difficult stretch or nasty chord. **Or, you will find you must test more than one technique to find which one (or ones) enables you to successfully execute a difficult stretch or nasty chord.**

Those of you with big hands, limber fingers, and short-scale guitars may ask what is the big deal with some of the examples I give. For you, the examples may present no struggle at all. But for others, these stretches and chords may be seemingly impossible to play or cannot be played reliably without buzzes or audible struggle. The solutions I provide will greatly increase the chances of any player's success.

The Preliminaries

- Practice passages with difficult stretches and chords *after you are thoroughly warmed up*. Your success rate will increase dramatically.
- You may find these passages are a little easier to play at certain times of day. For example, your muscles may be more limber later in the day than in the early morning. If your job requires strenuous labor with your hands, it may better to practice before work. Experiment.
- Practice in a comfortably warm room. Warm muscles perform better. Practicing in a cold room makes the muscles work harder.
- If you are finding that you are constantly having problems with stretches and difficult chords, your guitar may be a factor. Be sure the action is no higher than necessary. Try lighter gauge strings. Try out a guitar with a shorter scale length. Depending on the problems you are having, a wider or narrower

neck or a differently shaped neck might help. A guitar that is easy to play, that fits your hands and physique, can work wonders.

- Be sure you are learning repertoire suitable for your ability. Playing a piece that is too difficult for you in general will cause excessive hand tension which will make difficult stretches even harder to execute.
- Use correct sitting position. There are reasons classical guitarists sit the way they do! Sitting correctly makes everything easier.
- **Do not over-practice stretches and difficult chords.** A minute or two is enough. Move on and practice something else. After five minutes, return to the difficult passage. Practice the difficulty. Take a break. Practice the difficulty. Take a break. Practice the difficulty. Take a break. Your hand and fingers will perform far better, you will learn the passage more quickly, and the risk of injury will be greatly reduced.

The following techniques and solutions are discussed in no particular order of importance.

THE TECHNIQUES:

1. Place the Fingers in a Different Order

In measure #26 of the *Vals Venezolano No. 3* by Antonio Lauro, reaching the A on the 2nd string 10th fret with the 4th finger can be difficult (Example #1):

Example #1:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #25-26

The musical score for measures 25-26 of *Vals Venezolano No. 3* by Antonio Lauro is shown. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 25 shows a sequence of notes on the 2nd string (A, B, C, D, E, F#) with fingerings 0, 1, 0, 3, 0, 1, 0. Measure 26 shows a sequence of notes (G, A, B, C, D, E, F#) with fingerings 7, 8, 10, 8, 7. A red box highlights the 10th fret A note on the 2nd string, which is the 4th finger's position. A dashed line labeled 'VII' indicates a barre across the 7th fret.

To go from measure #25 into measure #26, normally I would instruct a student to place the fingers in the order in which they are plucked, i.e. place the bar first, then the 3rd finger, then the 4th finger, and the 2nd finger last.

But some stretches are only reachable by placing the fingers in a certain order. In this case, some players will be able to reach the A more easily if they plant the 2nd finger with the bar or the 3rd finger with the bar and then place the 4th finger. A little assistance can be provided by leaning the fingers to the right (this will be explained shortly).

To better understand how this principle works, plant the 4th finger with the bar and then try to place the 3rd finger. It is very difficult to place the fingers in that sequence.

Watch me demonstrate this technique in Video #1:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #1: Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Lauro) Order of Finger Placement



A similar example is found in measure #10 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 8* (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 31, No. 16 (Example #2):

Example #2:

Study No. 8 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 31, No. 16* (Fernando Sor) measure #10



In this case, it is easiest to place the 3rd and 4th fingers together first and then place the 1st finger. Leaning the fingers to the left and swinging the elbow to the right (both concepts will be explained shortly) makes the stretch even easier.

Watch how I place my fingers in Video #2:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #2: Study No. 8 (Sor) Order of Finger Placement



This chord change in Matteo Carcassi's *Estudio, Op. 60, No. 3*, is difficult for many students to play cleanly (Example #3):

Example #3:

Estudio Op. 60, No. 3 (Matteo Carcassi) measures #13-14

Most students place the 3rd finger on the 4th-string F# first, then place the bar, and finally the 4th finger on the high A. But this does not work for many players.

Here is a solution that often works. Step 1: slide the 4th finger to the 5th fret at the same time the 3rd finger is placed on the 4th-string F#. Step 2: place the bar on the next note (3rd-string A). See Example #4:

Example #4:

Estudio Op. 60, No. 3 (Matteo Carcassi) measures #15-16

Watch me demonstrate the placement sequence in Video #3:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #3: Study No. 3 (Carcassi) Order of Finger Placement



The point to remember is that if you are having difficulty with a stretch, experiment with placing the fingers in different sequences or combinations to see what works best.

2. Lean the Fingers Left or Right, often with a Change of the Position of the Elbow

The left-hand fingers can be leaned to the left or to the right. This is usually done in conjunction with changes of the position of the elbow. This technique of leaning the fingers often enables a guitarist to reach difficult stretches and to play nasty chords.

LEAN THE FINGERS TO THE LEFT

Let's begin with J.S. Bach's *Prelude in Dm* (BWV 999), an obvious example of how helpful this technique can be (Example #5):

Example #5:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #10-11

The image shows a musical score for measures 10 and 11 of J.S. Bach's *Prelude in Dm*, BWV 999. The score is in 3/4 time and D minor. Measure 10 shows a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a bass line. Measure 11 features a diminished chord in the treble staff, which is highlighted with a red box. The bass staff continues with a bass line. The score includes fingerings and slurs.

To play the diminished chord in measure #11, the elbow will tuck in closer to your side and the fingers will lean to the left quite naturally.

Watch me in Video #4:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #4: Prelude in Dm (Bach) Fingers Lean Left



Towards the end of the coda of Fernando Sor's *Variations on a Theme by Mozart*, we have this chord (Example #6):

Example #6:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9 (Fernando Sor) Coda/Finale

HARM 12

TAB

HARM 12

If you have large hands, the chord is playable in a normal hand parallel-with-neck position. But, if your hands are small, the chord is far more easily played with the fingers leaning to the left with a slanted hand position.

Let me show you in Video #5:

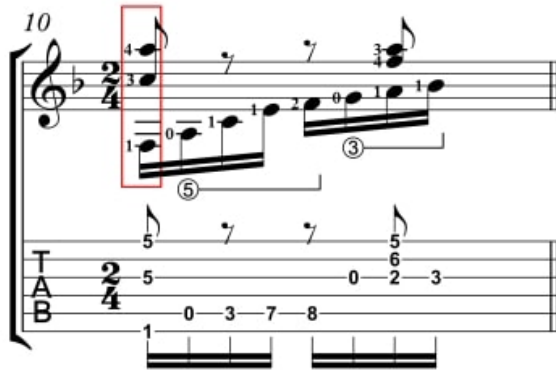
Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #5: Mozart Variations (Sor) Fingers Lean Left



Another example is found in Fernando Sor's *Study No. 8* (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 31, No. 6 (Example #7):

Example #7:

Study No. 8 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 31, No. 16* (Fernando Sor) measure #10



Leaning the fingers to the left with assistance from an arched wrist and possibly swinging the elbow to the right will make the chord much easier to reach.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #6:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #6: Study No. 8 (Sor) Fingers Lean Left



Or similarly, Sor's *Study No. 19* (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 29, No. 13 (Example #8):

Example #8

Study No. 19 (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 29, No. 13 (Fernando Sor) measures #1-2

The musical score for Example #8 shows measures 1 and 2 of Sor's Study No. 19. The right hand (RH) features a melodic line with sixteenth-note patterns and slurs. The left hand (LH) has a bass line with octaves and triplets. A red box highlights the first measure of the right hand, showing a chord with a flattened third (F#4, C#5, G#4, F#4). A dashed line labeled 'I' and '2' indicates a fingering or breath mark.

Again, leaning the fingers to the left makes the chord relatively easy to reach. Moving the elbow to the right is also usually helpful for most players.

For me, this passage from the *Fugue* from J.S. Bach's *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* (BWV 998) is unplayable without leaning my fingers to the left (Example #9):

Example No. 9

Fugue from *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* BWV 998 (J.S. Bach) measure #9

The musical score for Example #9 shows measure 9 of the Fugue from J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998. The right hand (RH) features a melodic line with eighth-note patterns. The left hand (LH) has a bass line with octaves and triplets. A red box highlights the first measure of the right hand, showing a chord with a flattened third (C4, E4, G4, C4).

LEAN THE FINGERS TO THE RIGHT

Many guitar transcriptions of *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz show the downbeat of measure #37 with this voicing of the chord (Example #10):

Example #10:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

The image shows a musical score for measure 37 of *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz. The score is written for guitar, featuring a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. Measure 37 is highlighted with a red box. The chord is a D major triad (D, F#, A) with a 4th finger on the D note. The score includes a guitar tablature below the staff, showing the fret numbers for each string: 12, 8, 9, 8, 10, 8. The tablature also includes a 3/4 time signature. The score is labeled 'VIII' and '37'.

Many students have trouble sounding this chord clearly. The technique of leaning the fingers to the right increases the reach of the 4th finger, enabling them to finally produce a clear chord. Winging out the elbow to the left can also be helpful. Some players also dip the left shoulder slightly or lean forward for extra leverage.

Watch me in Video #7:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #7: Leyenda (Albeniz) Fingers Lean Right



A very similar chord formation begins Fernando Sor's *Study No. 16* (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 29, No. 23 (Example #11):

Example #11:

Study No. 16 (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 29, No. 23 (Fernando Sor) measure #1

III

1 4 1 4 1 4

3 3 3 3 3 3

1 1 1 1 1 1

TAB

2 3 3 3 3 3

4 4 4 4 4 4

5 5 5 5 5 5

Once again, the reach of the 4th finger can be lengthened by leaning the fingers to the right making it much easier to reach the high B. Winging the elbow out to the left is very helpful.

This passage from Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 3* is playable by guitarists with large hands without any special changes of hand, elbow, or finger positioning (Example #12):

Example #12:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #49-51

The image displays a musical score for measures 49, 50, and 51 of 'Vals Venezolano No. 3' by Antonio Lauro. The score is written for guitar, featuring a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 3/4. Measures 49 and 51 are highlighted with red boxes. The notation includes various fingerings (1-4) and a high B note in measure 49. The bottom staff shows the guitar's fretboard with fingerings for each note.

But for the guitarist with smaller hands, leaning the fingers to the right and winging the elbow out to the left makes measures #49 and #51 much easier to play.

Watch me in Video #8:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #8: Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Lauro) Fingers Lean Right



In J.S. Bach's *Prelude in Dm* (BWV 999) leaning the fingers to the right helps the 4th finger reach the high A on the 5th string in measure #23 (Example #13):

Example #13:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #22-23

IX VIII

22 23

TAB

3/4

9 9 10 9 9 9 9 9 11 0 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 8 12 8

Yes, one could use this common alternate fingering, but the break in the sound on beat #3 is not as musical (Example #14):

Example #14:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #22-23

Alternate fingering for measure #23:

The image shows a musical score for measures 22 and 23 of the Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 by J.S. Bach. The score is in 3/4 time and features a treble clef and a guitar tablature below. Measure 22 is marked with a Roman numeral IX and measure 23 with VIII. A red box highlights the alternate fingering for measure 23, showing a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 4, 2, 5, 1, 4, 2, 5. The tablature below shows fret numbers 9, 10, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, 11 for measure 22 and 8, 10, 8, 10, 8, 10, 8, 7 for measure 23.

Leaning the fingers to the right contributes greatly to the successful execution of the chord and ornament in measure #12 of *Adelita* by Francisco Tárrega (Example #15):

Example #15:

Adelita (Francisco Tárrega) measures #11-12

The image shows a musical score for measures 11 and 12 of the piece Adelita by Francisco Tárrega. The score is in 3/4 time and features a treble clef and a guitar tablature below. Measure 11 is marked with a Roman numeral IV and measure 12 with VII. A red box highlights the alternate fingering for measure 12, showing a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. The tablature below shows fret numbers 4, 7, 12, 12, 11, 11, 12, 11 for measure 11 and 9, 11, 9, 7, 10, 7, 8, 9 for measure 12.

3. Change the Position of the Hand and/or Wrist

Sometimes, the position of the hand or wrist must be changed to reach a stretch or play a nasty chord.

Look at measures #3 and #4 of Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 4* (Example #16):

Example #16:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #1-4

The image shows a musical score for guitar, specifically measures 1 through 4 of 'Vals Venezolano No. 4' by Antonio Lauro. The score is written for a guitar, with a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The time signature is 3/4. Measures 1 and 2 are marked with a 'VIII' and a dashed line, indicating a change in position. Measures 3 and 4 are highlighted with a red box, showing a complex chord structure. The bass staff includes fret numbers (0, 2, 8, 10) and a 3/4 time signature.

For most players, the wrist must be arched and the hand rotated away from the neck to play these two measures successfully.

Watch me play the passage in Video #9:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #9: Vals Venezolano No. 4, m3 (Lauro) Arched Hand and Wrist



In measure #54 of the same piece, we have this nasty chord (Example #17):

Example #17:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #52-54



For the 1st finger to clear the open 5th string, the wrist must be very arched and the elbow moved forward.

Watch me demonstrate the technique in Video #10:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #10: Vals Venezolano No. 4, m54 (Lauro) Arched Hand and Wrist



A difficult stretch occurs at the beginning of the theme of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby* as arranged by Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening (Example #18):

Example #18:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

The image shows a musical score for measures 4 and 5 of 'Afro-Cuban Lullaby'. The score is written for guitar in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. A red box highlights the first measure of the second system, which contains a measure rest followed by a quarter note G4 (fingering 4), an eighth note A4 (fingering 1), and an eighth note B4 (fingering 4). The second measure of the second system contains a quarter note G4 (fingering 4), an eighth note A4 (fingering 1), and an eighth note B4 (fingering 4). The bottom staff shows the bass line with fingerings: measure 4 has a half note D3 (fingering 5), a half note E3 (fingering 3), and a half note F#3 (fingering 5); measure 5 has a half note D3 (fingering 0), a half note E3 (fingering 3), and a half note F#3 (fingering 5). The time signature 4/4 is indicated at the beginning of the first system.

Although I would choose to lean my fingers to the right to reach the high B, in this case that does not work for a lot of players. Instead, they choose to rotate the 4th finger side of the hand in very tightly to the neck, placing the fingers in a kind of reverse slant for the pinky to reach the high B.

Watch me demonstrate how this is done in Video #11:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #11: Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Marshall) Arched Hand and Wrist



4. Change the Position of the Thumb

Changing the position of the thumb or taking it off the neck entirely can be helpful in reaching difficult stretches and nasty chords.

In the *Afro-Cuban Lullaby* example above, for many players the thumb will assume an unusual position to the left of the index finger:

Watch me demonstrate the position in Video #12:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #12: Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Marshall) Thumb Position



Sometimes, difficult stretches are easier to reach with the thumb off the neck. For example, in the *Mazurka Apassionata* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré, we have this difficult stretch in m21 (Example #19):

Example #19:

Mazurka Apassionata (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measures #20-21

X^③-----

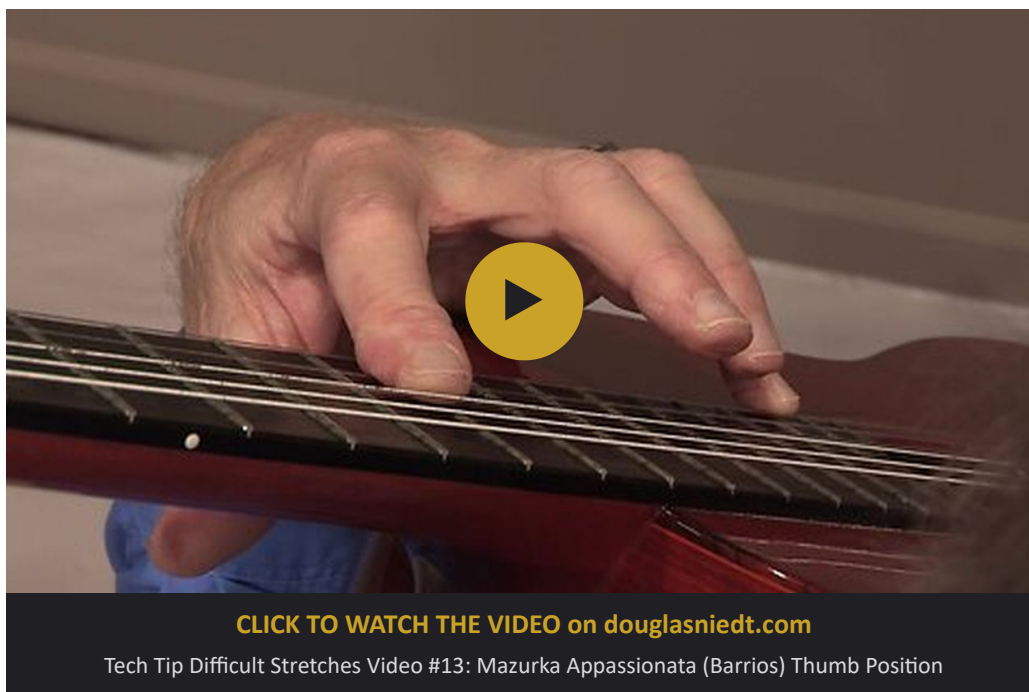


Hand	Measure	Fingering
T	20	10, 12
A	20	10, 12
B	20	0, 11
T	21	17, 15, 13, 12
A	21	10, 10
B	21	0, 10

For most players, taking the thumb off the neck makes it much easier to play the measure. When you are faced with a difficult stretch, try playing it with the thumb on the neck and off the neck. Use the technique that works best for you.

Watch me in Video #13:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #13: Mazurka Appassionata (Barrios) Thumb Position



A player with smaller hands will sometimes have to place the thumb far under the neck to reach difficult stretches (Example #20):

Example #20:

Study No. 16 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* (Fernando Sor) measure #1



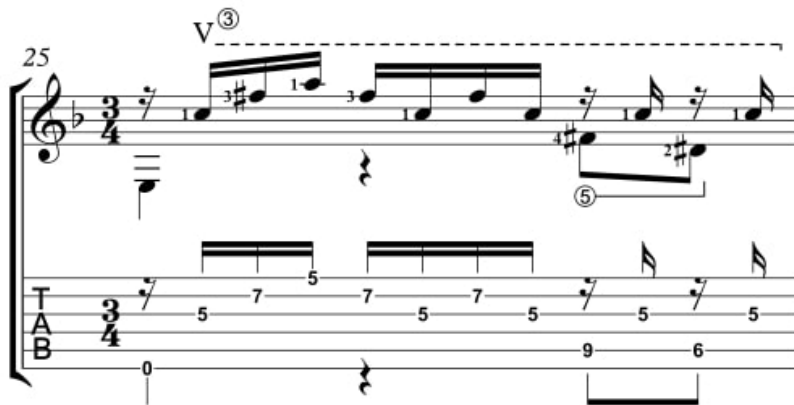
5. Allow the 1st Finger Tip Joint to Hyperextend on Half Bars and Partial Bars

A standard flat bar usually works fine for most bar chords. But when you encounter a nasty chord that requires a half bar (a bar covering three strings) with the first finger, hyperextending the tip joint of the first finger (allowing the tip joint to collapse and bend backward) can make a big difference in the ease and success of playing the chord. The usefulness of this technique is dependent upon how much one's index finger is able to hyperextend.

J.S. Bach's *Prelude in Dm BWV 999* contains several of these chords. One of the more difficult examples is in measure #25 (Example #21):

Example #21:

Prelude in Dm BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure #25



Or, one could use this common alternate fingering, but the break in the sound on beat #3 is not as musical (Example #22):

Example #22:

Prelude in Dm BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure #25

Alternate fingering for measure #26:

25

V ③

④ ③ ⑤

5 7 5 7 5 4 5 5

Hyperextension of the index finger on a partial bar is very useful in playing this F major chord in Francisco Tárrega's *Capricho Árabe* (Example #23):

Example #23:

Capricho Árabe (Francisco Tárrega) measure #35

⑥ = D

III ④ ⑤ ⑥ only

35

③ ② ③ ②

④ ③ ②

5 6 5 6 5 3 5 5

While many players can play the chord using a conventional full flat bar, for others it is not an easy chord to play clearly. Using hyperextension of the bar finger with assistance from an arched wrist provides additional reach for the 4th finger and more efficient use of hand strength for the bar.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #15:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #15: Capricho Arabe (Tarrega) Joint Hyperextension



6. Push a String Out of the Way

Some nasty chords may not contain wide stretches but may be difficult to play due to string clearance issues. The solution is to push a string out of the way to provide extra clearance.

A well-known example of this is in *Prelude 1* by Heitor Villa-Lobos (Example #24):

Example #24:

Prelude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measures #33-34

33 34

T 3/4 13 14 13 14 13 12 13 12

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B 12 13 14 13 12 11 13 12

The 3rd finger will tend to touch and damp the open 2nd string or cause it to buzz. To prevent that, push the 3rd string upward slightly to give extra clearance behind the 3rd finger for the open 2nd string to ring freely.

Watch how the technique is done in Video #16:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #16: Prelude No. 1 (Villa-Lobos) Pushing Strings Away

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #16: Prelude No. 1 (Villa-Lobos) Pushing Strings Away

A similar problem occurs in Julian Bream's transcription for guitar of Maurice Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (Example #25):

Example #25:

Pavane for a Dead Princess (Maurice Ravel, arr. Julian Bream) measures #11-12

VI ③④⑤ only

Here, there is a high probability that the 4th finger will touch and therefore damp the open 1st-string E. By pushing the 2nd string upward with the 4th finger, additional clearance is produced behind the finger so the open E rings freely.

Watch me play the passage in Video #17:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #17: Pavane (Ravel) Pushing Strings Away



7. Change the Position of the Guitar and/or Body

Some guitar instructors teach that the guitar should be held in one ideal, perfect position all the time. I don't believe in a static sitting position. I believe the player's body position should change according to the needs of the passage to be played.

For any given difficult stretch or chord, I always recommend experimenting with the position of the guitar and the position of the player's body.

Simple adjustments of the position of the guitar can make a huge difference in playing a stretch or chord clearly. Try moving the head of the guitar forward. Try moving the head of the guitar back. Try positioning the neck of the guitar more horizontally or at a steeper vertical angle. Try different combinations of all of these.

Changing the position of the left elbow can be especially helpful in reaching difficult stretches and playing nasty chords. Winging the elbow outward, tucking it into your side, or moving it forward is usually done in combination with other techniques such as changing the position of the hand or wrist and leaning the fingers to the left or right.

Watch me demonstrate these changes of the position of the body, guitar, and elbow in Video #18:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #18: Position of the Elbow and the Guitar



For some difficult reaches and chords, and especially for passages in high positions on the fretboard, it can be helpful to dip the left shoulder and/or lean the body forward. Check out the next three passages (Examples #26-28).

These can be played in a normal sitting position. But, for myself and many others, adjusting the position of the shoulder and body can make them much easier to play with less stress on the wrist. *Note that any change of shoulder or body position should be made as the passage is approached, not at the start of the passage itself. Anticipate!*

Example #26:

"Allegro Solemne" from *La Catedral* (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measures #85-89

In the next video, watch Jennifer Kim play this passage. Notice at the beginning of measure #85 in 4th position, that her head is up and shoulders horizontal. As she plays the next chord in 7th position, her left shoulder dips and her head comes down. At measure #87 her head lowers more and as she executes the last shift in the second half of measure #87, her chin is resting on the guitar and her left shoulder makes one last adjustment downward. As she plays the final two chords, her body resumes its normal playing position. This is an excellent demonstration of how to adjust one's body position to facilitate reaching difficult stretches, chords, and shifts.

Watch Jennifer Kim play the ending of *La Catedral* in Video #19:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #19: La Catedral (Barrios) Jennifer Kim, guitarist



Example #27:

Etude No. 7 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measures #28-30

28

29

30

tied

Example #28:

The Miller's Dance (Manuel de Falla) ending

The image displays a musical score for the ending of 'The Miller's Dance' by Manuel de Falla. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a standard musical notation in treble clef, featuring a melody with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a series of chords and a final measure with a fermata. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature, with six lines representing the strings. It includes fret numbers (0, 2, 3, 12, 10, 11) and a final measure with a fermata. The tablature is aligned with the musical notation above it.

Watch as I demonstrate how I use changes of body position to play the ending of Manuel de Falla's *The Miller's Dance* in Video #20:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #20: The Miller's Dance (de Falla) Positioning of the Body



8. Use a Bar or Change the Number of Strings that You Bar

Sometimes the music will specify that a certain number of strings is to be barred to play a chord. But sometimes, the chord may be played by barring fewer strings than indicated. Often, the chord may be played by barring more strings than indicated. Do not assume that a chord will be easier to play by barring fewer strings. Many times, a chord will sound clearer with less effort by actually barring more strings. You must experiment.

For example, in measure #14 of Matteo Carcassi's *Estudio Op. 60, No. 3*, we have a nasty chord that is difficult for many guitarists to sound clearly without buzzes or damped notes (Example #29):

Example #29:

Estudio Op. 60, No. 3 (Matteo Carcassi) measures #13-14

Although only three strings are required by the music to be barred, many guitarists find that the chord comes out best if more strings are barred. In general, barring additional strings can work wonders for making bar chords come out more clearly.

Sometimes adding a bar where none is required can make a stretch easier and add consistency to the execution of a tricky chord change. In the well-known *Romanza* (or *Romance*, *Romance de Amor*) measure #27 can be played without any bar (Example #30):

Example #30

Romanza (Anonymous) measures #25-28

IX ③

25 26 27 28

No Bar

3

4 3 2 1 2 1 2 1

12 9 9 9 9 12 9 11 10 9 9 9 5 6 5 6 5 6 9 5 7 5 5 6

0 0 0 0

But it is a difficult shift and stretch coming from measure #26. Adding a half bar makes the shift far more dependable and the stretch easier (Example #31):

Example #31:

Romanza (Anonymous) measures #25-28

Fingering with added half-bar in measure #27

IX ③

25 26 27 28

V ③

Added Half-Bar

3

4 3 2 1 2 1 2 1

12 9 9 9 9 12 9 11 10 9 9 9 5 6 5 6 5 6 9 5 7 5 5 6

0 0 0 0

Measure #51 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 16* (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* presents a difficult stretch even for me (Example #32):

Example #32:

Study #16 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-51

The only way I can play the chord on the second beat of measure #51 is to slide the bar from the 5th fret on beat #1 to the 3rd fret on beat #2.

9. Use a Capo

A capo can be used to make a piece filled with difficult stretches and nasty chords easier to play. The capo shifts everything upward where the distance between frets is shorter. Christopher Parkening used a capo at the first fret to play his transcription of *Prelude No. 1* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

10. Change the Fingerings

Sometimes, simple fingering changes can alleviate or eliminate a difficult stretch or chord.

Earlier we looked at this chord in Fernando Sor's *Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9* (Example #33):

Example #33:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9 (Fernando Sor) Coda/Finale

The musical score for Example #33 is in D major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. It is labeled 'HARM 12'. The treble staff shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: 4, 1, 3, 2, 3, 4. A red box highlights a measure containing a chord with a circled '1' above it, indicating a fingering change. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with fingerings for the notes: 12, 9, 12, 9, 12, 9, 12, 10, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 10.

The stretch can be eliminated using this change of fingering (Example #34):

Example #34:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9 (Fernando Sor) Coda/Finale

Alternate fingering:

The musical score for Example #34 is in D major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. It is labeled 'HARM 12'. The treble staff shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: 4, 1, 3, 2, 3, 4. A red box highlights a measure containing a chord with a circled '2' above it, indicating a fingering change. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with fingerings for the notes: 12, 9, 12, 9, 12, 9, 12, 10, 0, 11, 12, 10, 11, 10.

In another example, earlier we examined measures #3 and #4 of Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 4* (Example #35):

Example #35:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #1-4

To play the passage with the original fingering, the wrist must be arched and the hand rotated away from the neck, which can be uncomfortable.

In cases like this, always look for an alternative fingering. In this case, those who can easily execute partial bars would be much better off using this fingering (Example #36):

Example #36:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #1-4

Alternative fingering for measures #18-19:

Example #38:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

John Williams' version:

2 is guide finger

4 p i m p i m

Or, same chord but different fingering for the arpeggio:

Keep 3 down Squeeze 4 behind 3. It's a tight squeeze! Keep 3 down

4 p i m p i m
or a or a

Andrés Segovia used a very different voicing (Example #39):

Example #39:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

Andrés Segovia's version:

2 is guide finger

p i m p i m

37

T 3/4 1 0 2 1

A 3/4 0 7 8 0 8 0 8 0 3 0

B 3/4 1 10 7 9 10 0

Watch me demonstrate these solutions in Video #21:

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #21: Leyenda (Albeniz) Altering the Notes

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #21: Leyenda (Albeniz) Altering the Notes

In transcriptions and arrangements, usually you will find you have a lot of latitude on note choices to make the music playable on the guitar.

But what about music written for the guitar? Some guitarists might cringe at the idea of changing the notes in a piece originally written for the guitar.

In measure #51 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 19* (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13*, we have this nasty chord (Example #40):

Example #40

Study No. 19 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-52

The image shows a musical score for measures 50, 51, and 52 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 19, Op. 29, No. 13*. The score is written for guitar in 2/4 time. Measure 51 is highlighted with a red box, indicating a complex chord. The score includes fingerings, a '6' (sixteenth) note, and a 'III' (triple) marking.

A solution is to transpose the 6th-string F# up an octave placing it on the 4th string (Example #41):

Example #41:

Study No. 19 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-52

F#'s in measure #53 transposed up one octave:

The musical score for Example #41 shows measures 50, 51, and 52. Measure 50 begins with a treble clef staff and a guitar-specific bass staff. The bass staff shows a 6th string G (fret 2) and a 4th string G (fret 2). Measure 51 is highlighted with a red box, showing a jump in the bass line from the 6th string G to the 4th string F# (fret 2) and back to the low G (fret 0) in measure 52. The score includes a treble clef staff and a guitar-specific bass staff with fret numbers and fingerings.

The jump in the bass line from the 6th-string G in measure #50 up to the 4th-string F# and then back to the low G in measure #52 could be considered jarring, but I consider this a fairly benign alteration since the harmony/voicing is not changed.

In measure #28 of Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 3* we have a very difficult stretch (Example #42):

Example #42:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #27-29

The musical score for Example #42 shows measures 27, 28, and 29. Measure 28 is highlighted with a red box, showing a very difficult stretch in the bass line. The score includes a treble clef staff and a guitar-specific bass staff with fret numbers and fingerings.

Some very fine guitarists let go of the low G to reach the high C which of course results in severely chopping off the low G making it barely an 8th note.

A solution I came up with for my students is to change the written low G to an open 6th-string E (Example #43):

Example #43:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #27-29

Altered bass note:

The image shows a musical score for three measures (30, 31, 32) of a piece in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Measure 30 shows a melodic line in the treble staff and a bass line in the bass staff starting with a low G (open 6th string). Measure 31 is highlighted with a red box, showing the alteration of the low G to an open 6th-string E. Measure 32 continues the melodic line. The bass staff includes fret numbers and a 'T A B' label.

Some may take exception to changing the note. However, it does not change the harmony, only the inversion (the inversion is determined by what note is on the bottom of a chord). It is still an E minor chord. I personally prefer the low G as written, but only if it is held its full value of two beats. I think the low E sounds much better than a chopped off low G.

Sometimes, it is necessary to consider altering notes even in the music of J.S. Bach. Let's look again at his *Prelude in Dm BWV 999*, this time at measure #15 (Example #44):

Example #44:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #14-17

The musical score for Example #44 shows measures 14 through 17 of the Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 by J.S. Bach. The score is written for guitar in 3/4 time. Measure 15 is highlighted with a red box and contains a red annotation: "Bar with 4th finger at 5th fret". The score shows the treble and bass staves with fingerings and fret numbers.

The Fmaj7 chord in measure #15 is very difficult to play for many players. Some guitarists must chop the low F off as a 16th note in order to hold the 4th-finger bar at the 5th fret. Another solution is to transpose the low F up an octave (Example #45):

Example #45:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #14-17

Altered version. Low F in measure #15 transposed up one octave:

The image displays a musical score for measures 14 through 17 of the Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 by J.S. Bach. The score is written for a single melodic line on a treble staff and a bass staff. The time signature is 3/4. Measure 14 begins with a treble staff containing eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass staff with a single note and fingerings. Measure 15 is highlighted with a red box, showing a red note on the bass staff labeled 'F transposed up one octave'. Above measure 15, a 'V' is written, indicating a breath mark. Measures 16 and 17 continue the melodic and harmonic progression with various fingerings and articulations. The bass staff includes fingerings and a 'V' marking above measure 15.

Some might consider this sacrilege. For others, it enables one to hold the F for a full beat or even all the way through the measure if desired, without changing the harmony.

For one more example, let's revisit the difficult stretch at the beginning of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby*. For some, it is very difficult to produce a clear-sounding chord in measure #5 (Example #46):

Example #46:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

A simple solution is to delete one note. Delete the 2nd-string D on beat #2. This allows one to play the rest of the accompaniment notes as open strings (Example #47):

Example #47:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

Altered chord:

Yes, it is a noticeable change. But, why struggle to play the original version if all the notes sound clearly on only one out of ten attempts? I would rather go with the sure thing. Play the altered version where success is probable on ten out of ten attempts!

My philosophy is to use every technique possible to play a passage as written. But if it is not working, if the success rate is poor, it is time to alter the music to make it playable. Life is too short to keep hoping or thinking, "If I just keep working on it a few more months, I'll get it." If that is what you are thinking, you are in denial. Admit that it is not working, and change the music. Then, you will experience success and you can move on.

Summary

If you have experienced problems with difficult stretches and chords for months or years, a shorter-scale or better-adjusted guitar may be an answer.

When encountering a difficult stretch or nasty chord, test out each of the eleven techniques I covered in this article. You might be able to use more than one technique at the same time. To recap:

1. Place the Fingers in a Different Order
2. Lean the Fingers Left or Right, often with a Change of the Position of the Elbow
3. Change the Position of the Hand and/or Wrist
4. Change the Position of the Thumb
5. Allow the 1st Finger Tip Joint to Hyperextend on Half Bars and Partial Bars
6. Push a String Out of the Way
7. Change the Position of the Guitar and/or Body
8. Use a Bar or Change the Number of Strings that You Bar
9. Use a Capo
10. Change the Fingerings
11. Alter the Music

Remember, do not over-practice stretches and difficult chords.