

How to Reach Difficult Stretches and Nasty Chords, Part 1 of 2

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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 nasty chords.

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 be 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 image shows a musical score for measures 25 and 26 of 'Vals Venezolano No. 3' by Antonio Lauro. The score is written for guitar. Measure 25 is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The treble staff shows a melodic line with a 3rd finger pluck in the first half and a 4th finger pluck in the second half. The bass staff shows fret numbers: T (0, 1, 0, 3, 0, 1, 0), A (0), and B (3). Measure 26 is also in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The treble staff shows a melodic line with a 3rd finger pluck in the first half and a 4th finger pluck in the second half. The bass staff shows fret numbers: T (7, 8, 10, 8, 7), A (7), and B (7). A red box highlights the 4th finger plucking the A string at the 10th fret in measure 26.

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 written for guitar, with a treble clef staff and a bass staff. Measure 10 begins with a treble staff containing a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass staff with a single note. Measure 11 features a diminished chord in the treble staff, highlighted by a red box, and a bass staff with a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 3/4.

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

The first system of music for 'The Wind' consists of a treble clef staff and a guitar TAB staff. The treble staff is in 2/4 time and contains a melody starting with a quarter note G4 (fingering 4), followed by a quarter rest (fingering 7), another quarter rest (fingering 7), and a quarter note E4 (fingering 3). The guitar TAB staff shows the fretting for these notes: G4 is fret 4 on the 4th string, E4 is fret 2 on the 5th string, and the final E4 is fret 2 on the 6th string. The TAB staff also includes a sequence of fret numbers: 1, 0, 1, 1, 2, 0, 1, 1, with a circled '3' below the final '1'. A red box highlights the first two notes of the melody in the treble staff.

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

Musical score for Sor's Study No. 19, measures 1-2. The score is written for guitar in 2/4 time, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff is the treble clef, and the second staff is the bass clef. The first measure of the treble staff is marked with a '1' and a '6' over a sixteenth-note run. The second measure is marked with a '2' and a '6' over a sixteenth-note run. A red box highlights the first measure of the bass staff, which contains a difficult stretch of notes. The bass staff also has a '2' and a '6' over a sixteenth-note run in the first measure. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingerings.

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

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

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

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

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

The image shows a musical score for measures 22 and 23 of the *Prelude in Dm*, BWV 999. The score is in 3/4 time and features a treble and bass staff. Measure 22 is marked with a Roman numeral IX and measure 23 with VIII. A red box highlights the 4th and 5th fingers in measure 23, indicating the technique of leaning the fingers to the right to reach the high A on the 5th string.

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. The score is in 3/4 time and features a treble and bass staff. Measure 22 is marked with a Roman numeral IX and measure 23 with VIII. A red box highlights the 4th and 5th fingers in measure 23, indicating the technique of leaning the fingers to the right to reach the high A on the 5th string.

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

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

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

The image shows a musical score for measures 52, 53, and 54 of 'Vals Venezolano No. 4' by Antonio Lauro. The score is written for guitar in 3/4 time. Measure 54 is highlighted with a red box, showing a complex chord with a 4th finger on the 4th string and a 5th finger on the 5th string. The bass staff shows the fretting hand positions for measures 52, 53, and 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