How to Use Reflex Practice to Master Fast, Difficult Passages Other than Scales

By Douglas Niedt

In last month's tip I explained how to use reflex practice or reflex bursts to learn to play a scale at high speed. This month I will explain how to use reflex practice to learn other types of passages.

Remember, we do not use a metronome in reflex practice. The idea is to practice small note groups at extreme speed—as a single gesture or reflex. Small note groups are then combined into larger groups also played at extreme speed until the entire passage is mastered. The note groups and passage are learned at a tempo faster than that required by the piece. Each note group is memorized as it is practiced. Mastery of each note group is very quick, usually a matter of minutes. Mastery and memorization of the entire passage by stringing the note groups together is achieved in days or less.

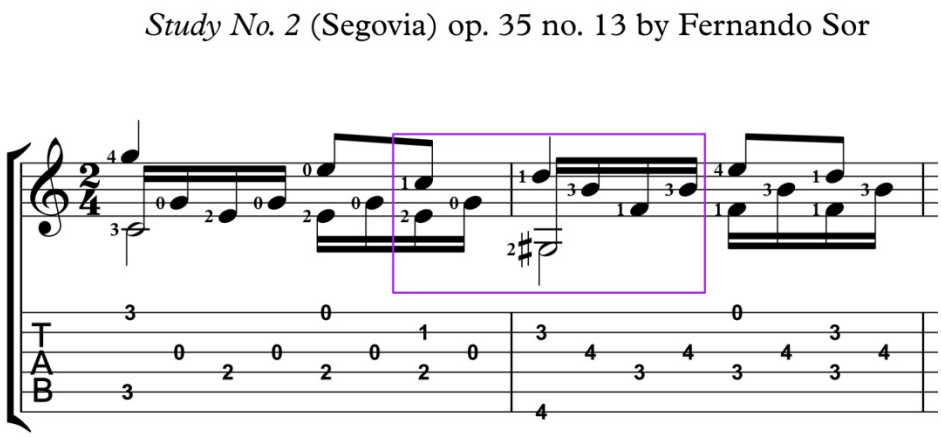
In explaining how to use reflex practice, I am assuming you already have the ability to produce a good tone, know how to properly execute rest and free strokes, have good left hand-right hand coordination, and play in a generally relaxed manner.

Don't try to learn too large a note group at a time. If you try to practice too large a note group, you will make mistakes, try too hard, and build up tension. Tension is an enemy of playing with effortless speed.

Also, as I emphasized last month, rest in between repetitions of a note group. Let the muscles in both hands relax. Wiggle the fingers around, stretch them, or shake them out—whatever it takes to rid them of any residual tension. In fact, be sure *all* of you is free of tension. Check your neck, shoulders, jaw, etc. The rest period (a count of 2-5 seconds) is very important. Continuously repeating a note group at high speed over and over builds up tension resulting in mistakes, conscious effort, and slower execution. You will defeat yourself. Pausing between repetitions allows the muscles to recover and the mind to clear so that each repetition is always done from a state of repose, relaxation, and effortlessness.

How to Use Reflex Practice to Learn an Arpeggiated Chord Change

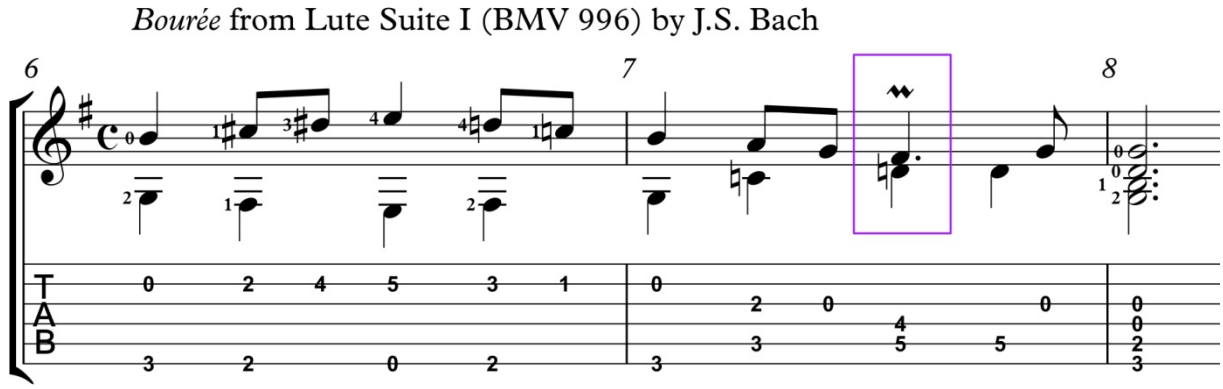
In Fernando Sor's *Study*, op. 35, no. 13 (*Study No. 2* as numbered by Segovia) a difficult chord change occurs in the last part of the piece:



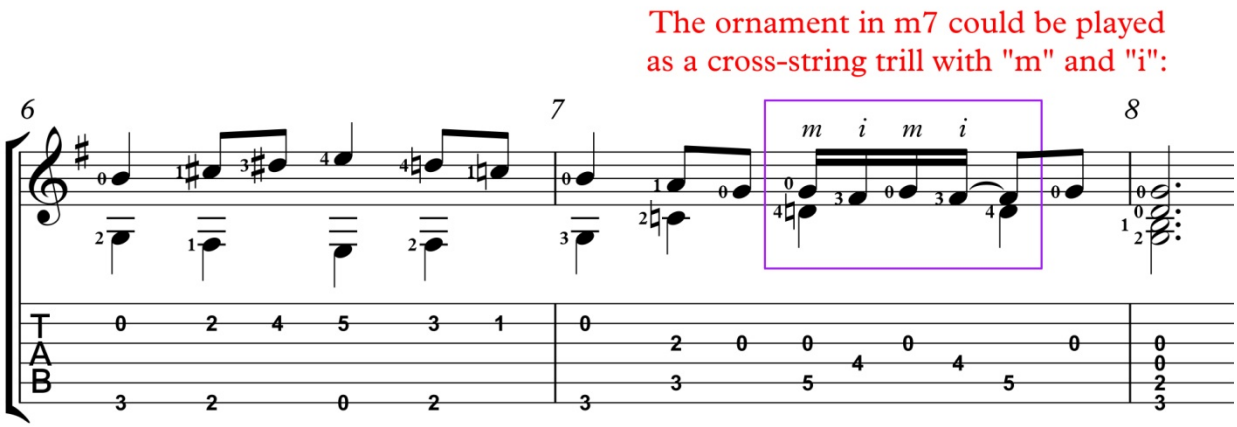
A great way to master the chord change is to practice it with reflex practice. Watch me demonstrate:

How to Use Reflex Practice to Learn an Ornament

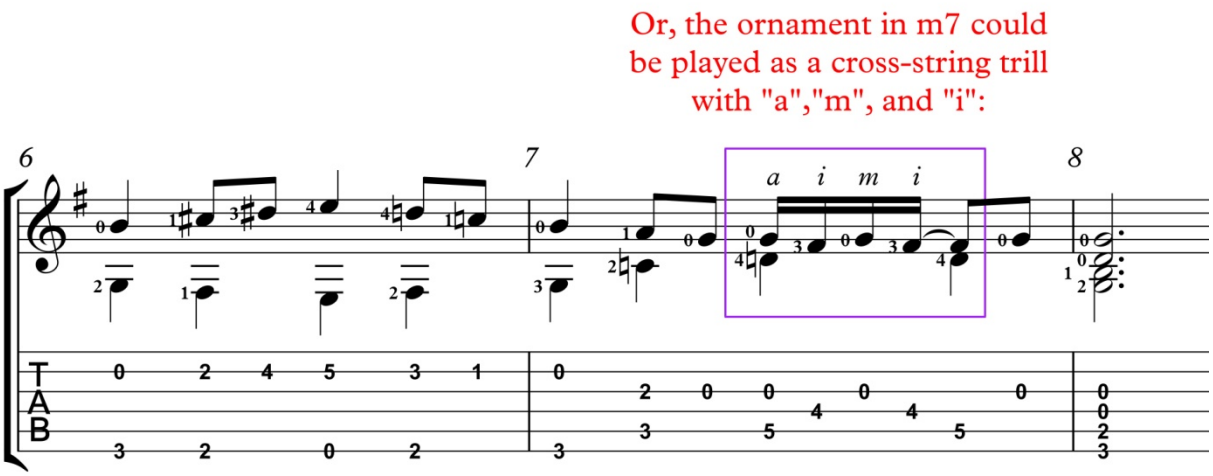
At the end of the first part of the *Bourée* from J.S. Bach's Lute Suite I (BMV 996) is a measure with a mordent:



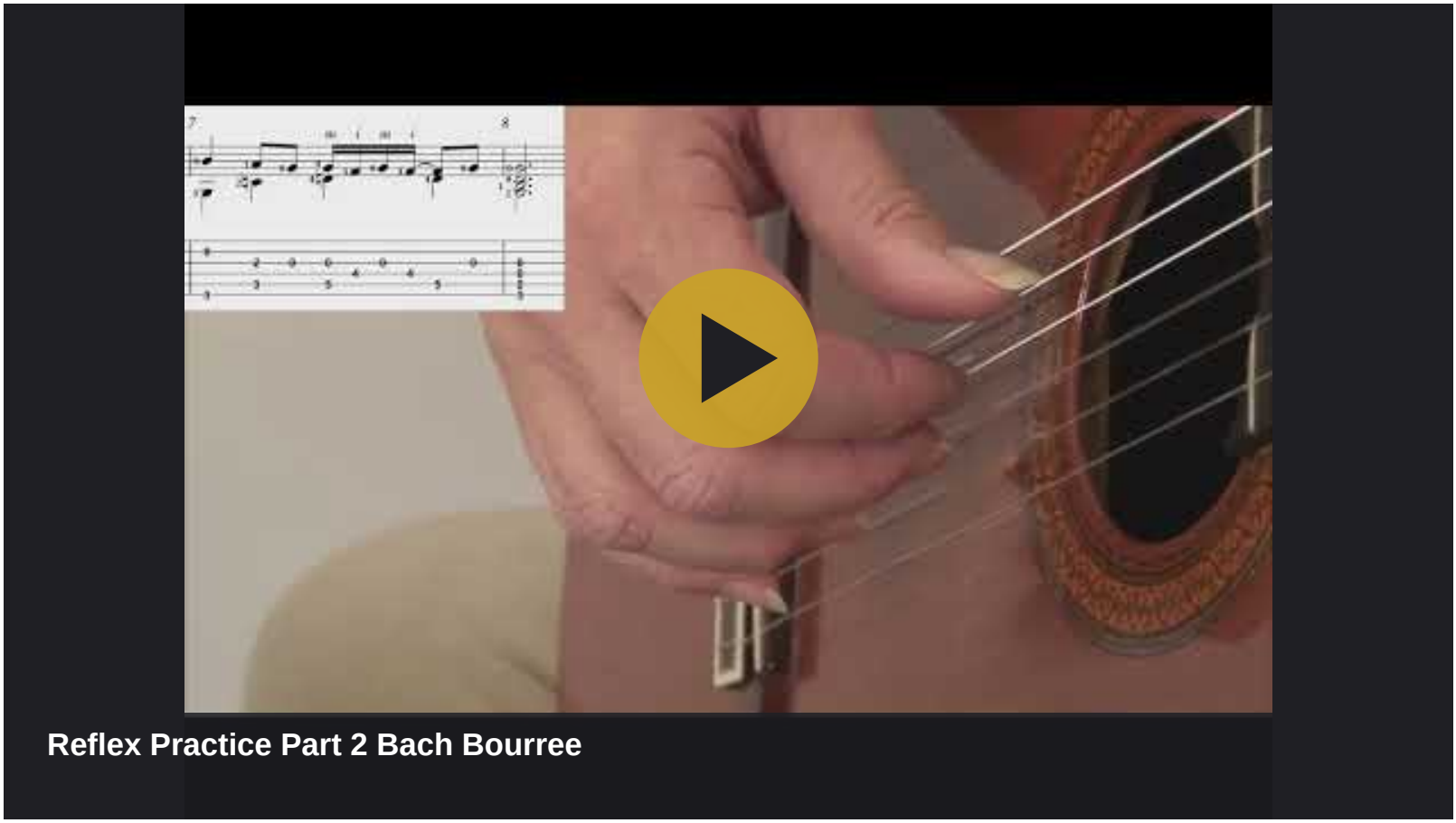
One way to play the ornament is to use a trill instead. It is more difficult to play but I think it sounds better:



Some players may prefer to use this right-hand fingering to execute the trill:

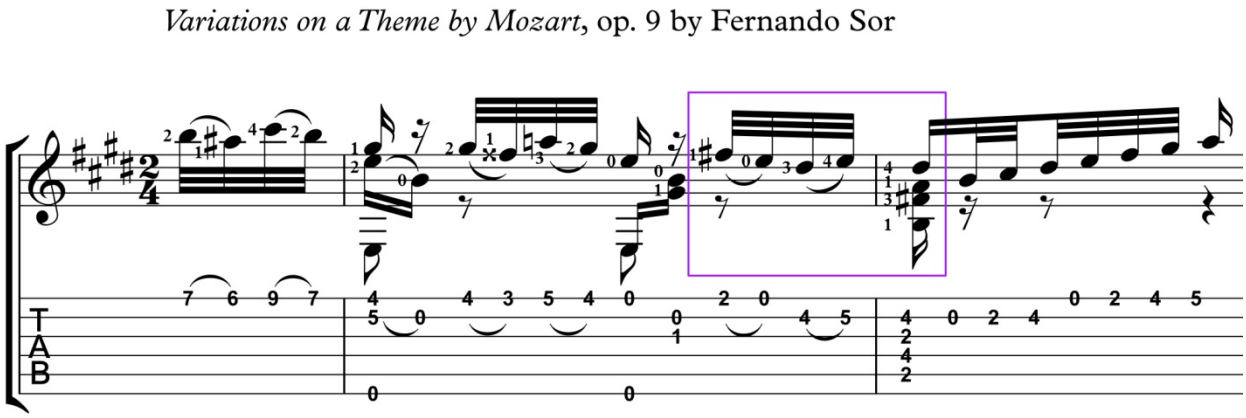


Both are good fingerings. Which one should you use? The fastest way to find out is with reflex practice. You will know within minutes which fingering will work best for you. Watch this video to learn how to master the trill using reflex practice:

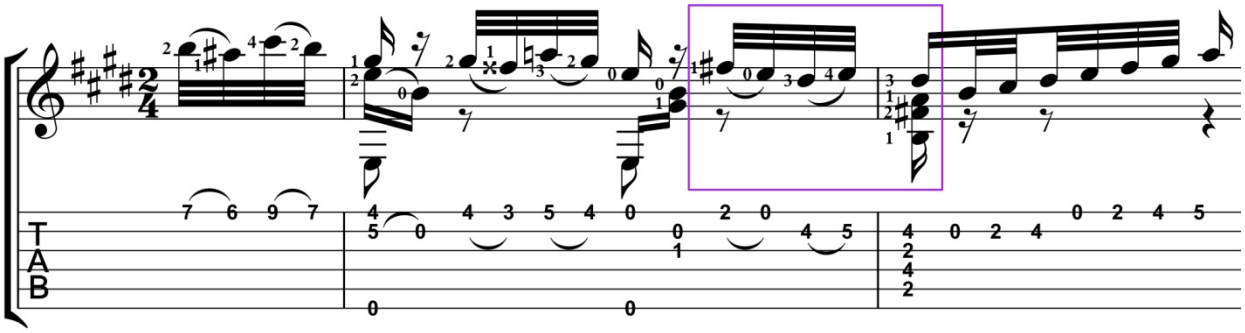


How to use Reflex Practice to Master a Generic Difficult Passage

In variation #1 of *Variations on a Theme by Mozart* (op. 9) by Fernando Sor, a difficult passage occurs going from the 1st to the 2nd measure. Here it is as fingered by Andrés Segovia:

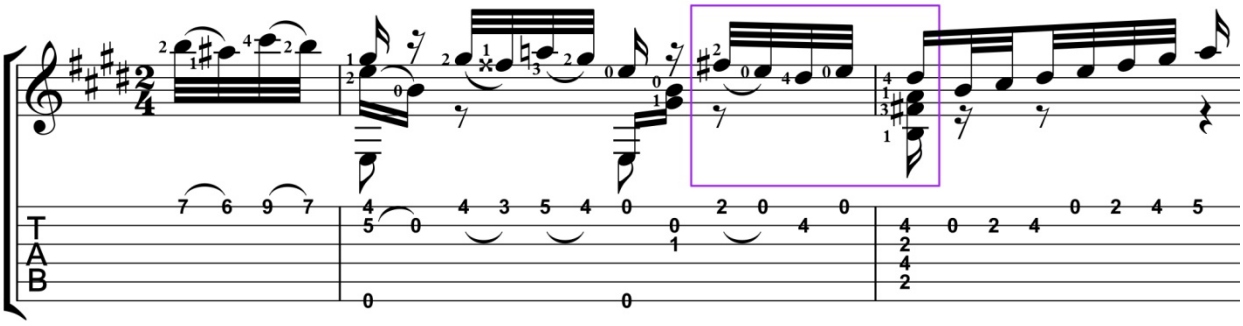


Personally, I find his fingering difficult because the 3rd finger has to jump from the 2nd string D# in the slur to the 4th string F# in the chord. An improved fingering would be:



The 3rd finger can stay on the 2nd string D#. The 1st and 2nd fingers are available to “pounce” on the chord.

Or, the fingering I prefer is to eliminate the D# to E slur. I use the 4th finger on the D#. It stays down, ready for the chord. The 1st and 3rd fingers are available to "pounce" on the chord:



Again, you can use reflex practice to quickly determine which fingering will work best for you. Watch this video to learn how you can master this type of passage with reflex practice:

As you can see, reflex practice is not just for learning fast scales. It can be used to master many different types of passages. The principle is the same:

Begin with one small manageable note group. Add one note, one chord, or one beat. Continue building the note group by adding a single note, chord, or beat at a time. Or, break a longer passage down into small, manageable parts and then string them together.

1. Walk through the note group to familiarize both hands with the fingerings. Be sure to be consistent with your right-hand fingering. If string crossings are involved, choose right-hand fingerings that minimize bad string crosses.

2. Play the note group as fast as you can. Don't think about it. Don't try. Let it happen. Just do it. Remember; think about playing the note group in a single movement or gesture, not as individual notes. Accent the last note of each burst so it feels like the downbeat or arrival point.

3. Rest. Wiggle the fingers around, stretch them, or shake them out so no residual tension remains.

4. Repeat. If you get confused on fingerings, play the note group slowly until the fingerings are clear.

5. It will usually be necessary to individually practice the note groups involved in a string crossing or string change. If the right hand is sluggish or has a problem with accuracy, practice the right hand alone.

6. Finally, put both hands together again. If you are practicing correctly, within seconds or just a few minutes you will be able to play each note group at extreme speed with no effort and no mistakes. By playing each note group over and over, you will automatically memorize the notes and fingerings.

I Repeat from Last Month's Technique Tip, the Benefits of Reflex Practice:

Efficiency

You learn to play a passage in a short period of time with reflex practice.

Play Effortlessly

You learn to play the passage from a state of relaxation and effortlessness. The habit of playing with zero tension is maintained from the first two notes you play.

Extreme Speed

You learn to play the passage at a speed exceeding what is required in the actual piece.

Play With Precision

You learn to play without making mistakes. Practicing in small note groups develops the habit of playing perfectly almost every time.

Effortless Memorization

You can easily memorize the passage. Because small note groups are practiced over and over, each note group and ultimately the entire passage are automatically memorized as they are learned.

Builds Confidence

Reflex practice builds confidence. You will be amazed when you realize you can play a short reflex burst effortlessly and accurately at extreme speed. You will really be amazed when you begin stringing together the small bursts into larger bursts and are able to play the entire passage accurately at high speed with little effort. Knowing you can play the passage faster than the piece requires gives you confidence. It eliminates the thought: “Uh oh, here comes the hard part.”

Test New Fingerings

Reflex practice is ideal for testing out fingerings on both hands. No longer do you have to spend hours, days, or weeks learning a new fingering and bring it up to tempo with a metronome notch by notch only to find out weeks later that it doesn’t work for you. With reflex practice you get instant feedback. You will know within minutes whether a new fingering works or not. To find the best right-hand fingering for a given passage, practice the options with the right hand alone on open strings.

Test Hand Positions

Reflex practice can give you instant feedback on whether a different hand position (left or right) helps or hinders your performance of a passage. You can do a reflex burst 10 times with your old hand position and 10 times with a new hand position. Whichever position produces the greatest number of perfect bursts wins!