

LEFT-HAND FINGER PREPARATION

On the Classical Guitar

By Douglas Niedt

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Frequently Asked Questions

Why is left-hand finger preparation important?

Left-hand finger preparation is a key part of an effortless left-hand technique and playing without mistakes.

How do I prepare my left-hand fingers?

Always lift fingers immediately to the specific location they are needed next. Lift and move them in a shallow arc.

How do I find opportunities for better left-hand finger preparation in the pieces I play?

Examine the spots where you make mistakes. Very often, mistakes are caused by not lifting fingers to where they are needed next. If the fingers are out of position, mistakes will happen.

A Principle of Left-Hand Finger Preparation:

NEVER just lift a finger.

Always lift fingers to the specific location they are needed next

Left-hand finger preparation is a key part of an effortless left-hand technique and playing without mistakes. The principle of moving the fingers to the specific location they are needed next is a sub-category of left-hand finger preparation in general.

Especially in a difficult or fast passage, the fingers should rarely lunge frantically into position at the last moment. Frantic, last-minute lunges usually produce mistakes. Once a finger lifts off note x, it should *immediately* begin its journey to position itself for note y. If the journey begins immediately, there is not a jarring and jerky movement at the last split second to reach the next note. For stability, when possible, position the finger above its target note at least a few milliseconds before you place it onto the string. The player must carefully choreograph the movements, so they are made quickly with a minimum of excess motion.

How Fast Should the Finger Move to Its New Location?

I always tell my students to move *immediately and quickly*. I believe this instills the thought in their minds and fingers to consciously and intentionally move the fingers proactively. I want them to see their finger arrive at its destination *before* the new note must be plucked. That way, they will begin to develop a clear understanding of where their fingers are going.

Other teachers disagree. Instead of moving immediately and the finger halting at its destination point ready to land, they advocate slower, more graceful movements. They say it is better to arrive at the new destination at the moment the new note must be played, not beforehand. They argue that this results in smoother, fluid movements. It is a good point.

I find that in real life, when playing a *fast* piece, yes, the fingers will arrive at the moment the new note must be plucked. There is simply no time to arrive early. In *slower* pieces, I think either approach is acceptable. Although, with beginning students, I still prefer to emphasize conscious preparation via quick intentional preparatory movements. That way they learn to *feel* the experience of conscious finger preparation.

The Spider Exercise

The spider exercise is an excellent illustration of the importance of lifting fingers to the position where they are needed next. Here is a basic spider exercise. Example #1:

Example #1. A Spider Exercise.

The exercise is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It consists of seven measures. The notes and fingerings are: Measure 1: G4 (finger 1), F#4 (finger 3); Measure 2: F#4 (finger 2), E4 (finger 4); Measure 3: E4 (finger 3), D#4 (finger 1); Measure 4: D#4 (finger 2), C#4 (finger 4); Measure 5: C#4 (finger 3), B3 (finger 1); Measure 6: B3 (finger 2), A3 (finger 4); Measure 7: A3 (finger 3), G3 (finger 1). The exercise is enclosed in a box with a circled 2 above and a circled 5 below.

One of the key ingredients to smoothly connecting the interval changes is to follow our principle: **when you lift a finger, move it to where it is needed next.**

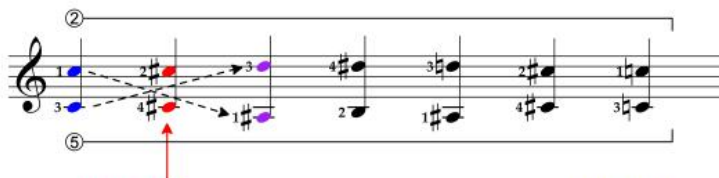
Here are each of the individual steps to follow:

Step 1:



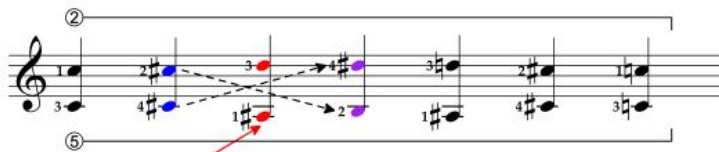
As **interval #1** is played, the 2nd and 4th fingers should prepare themselves precisely above the 2nd and 5th strings to drop into place for **interval #2**.

Step 2:



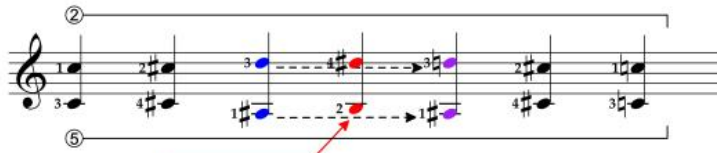
As **interval #2** is played, the 1st and 3rd fingers holding **interval #1** should lift and *immediately reverse their positions on the fretboard* to prepare themselves precisely above the 5th and 2nd strings to drop into place for **interval #3**.

Step 3:



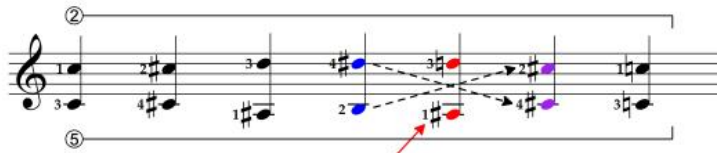
As **interval #3** is played, the 2nd and 4th fingers holding **interval #2** should lift and *immediately reverse their positions on the fretboard* to prepare themselves precisely above the 5th and 2nd strings to drop into place for **interval #4**.

Step 4:



As **interval #4** is played, the 1st and 3rd fingers holding **interval #3** should lift but *maintain their positions* precisely above the 2nd and 5th strings to drop back into place for **interval #5**.

Step 5:



As **interval #5** is played, the 2nd and 4th fingers holding **interval #4** should lift and *immediately reverse their positions on the fretboard* to prepare themselves precisely above the 5th and 2nd strings to drop into place for **interval #6**.

Step 6:



As **interval #6** is played, the 1st and 3rd fingers holding **interval #5** should lift and *immediately reverse their positions on the fretboard* to prepare themselves precisely above the 5th and 2nd strings to drop into place for **interval #7**.

It may be easier for you to understand by watching me demonstrate. Video #1:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #1: The Spider Exercise



As I demonstrated in the video, a finger should take the most direct route to its new destination. Don't lift a finger vertically, move it across the fretboard, and then drop it into place. Instead, move the fingers in shallow arcs.

By the way, you can [watch me demonstrate how to master the spider exercise in a 20-minute video in this technique tip.](#)

Left-hand finger preparation in easy pieces

Here is an example of lifting a finger *immediately* to its next destination point in an easy *Moderato* by Fernando Sor. Example #2:

Example #2: *Moderato* (Fernando Sor) m9-end.

9

12 The 1st finger is very busy here! Each time it lifts, it should move *immediately* to its next destination point.

15

Watch me demonstrate how to play the passage with good finger preparation. Video #2:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #2: Moderato (Fernando Sor)



Or, here is another piece for beginners, an *Allegro* by Mauro Giuliani. (By the way, I selected both the Sor *Moderato* and the Giuliani *Allegro* from Charles Duncan's excellent graded anthology of easy to intermediate solo pieces, [A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar Repertoire, Part One](#).) Example #3:

Example #3: *Allegro* (Mauro Giuliani) m1-9.

Each time you lift the 4th finger, lift it to where it is needed next.

1

4

6

Watch me demonstrate how to prepare the 4th finger in the *Giuliani Allegro*. Video #3.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #3: Allegro (Mauro Giuliani)



Left-hand finger preparation in an intermediate piece

Un Dia de Noviembre (Leo Brouwer)

In *Un Dia de Noviembre* by Leo Brouwer, we have a tricky transition from measure #2-3. Example #4:

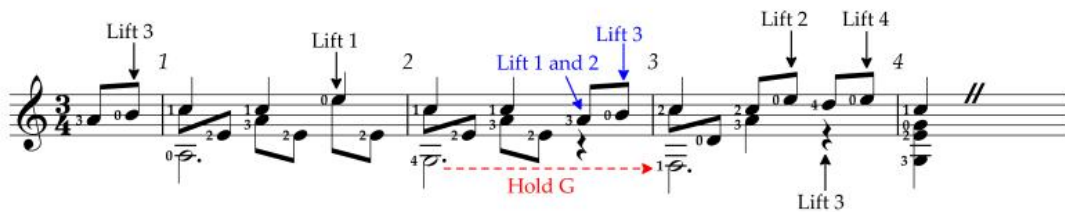
Example #4: *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) m1-4.

Many guitarists mistakenly lift the low dotted half note G early, leaving a gap in the bass line. That is not acceptable. The rests on the 3rd beat of measures #2 and 3 apply to the middle voice, not the bass voice. We want to connect the bass line seamlessly. Fortunately, we have two good solutions for transitioning from measure #2 to measure #3.

Below, in Version #1, we interpret the note values literally. We don't allow melody notes to ring together. We lift each melody note as the next melody note is played, and we observe the rests in the middle voice of measures #2 and 3:

Example #5: *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) m1-4.

Version #1, Interpreting the note values literally:



The key to making a smooth chord change from measure 2-3 is to lift the 1st and 2nd fingers immediately to their new positions. The first finger must lift from the 2nd string and position itself above the 6th string 1st fret. The 2nd finger must lift from the 4th string and position itself above the 2nd string 1st fret. Example #6:

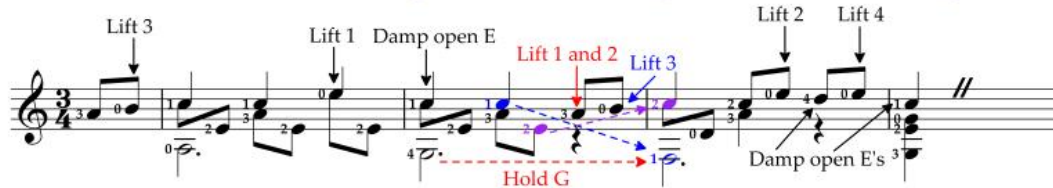
Example #6: *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) m1-4.

Version #1, Interpreting the note values literally.

The secret to connecting the change is to lift the 1st and 2nd fingers to where they are needed next:

The 1st finger lifts from the 2nd string to hover above the 6th string.

The 2nd finger lifts from the 4th string to hover above the 2nd string.



You will find it is very difficult to lift this, place that, hold this, move that. Here are the moves in a nutshell. Example #7:

Example #7: *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) m1-4.

These are the specific finger movements to make:

Hold these notes.
This is the chord you are holding in measure #2.

Lift 1 and 2

3 and 4 are still down

Move 1 and 2 to their new positions hovering above the 2nd and 6th strings while still holding down the 3rd and 4th fingers.



Watch me demonstrate all these points in the literal version of *Un Dia de Noviembre*. You will see and understand everything much more clearly. Video #4:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

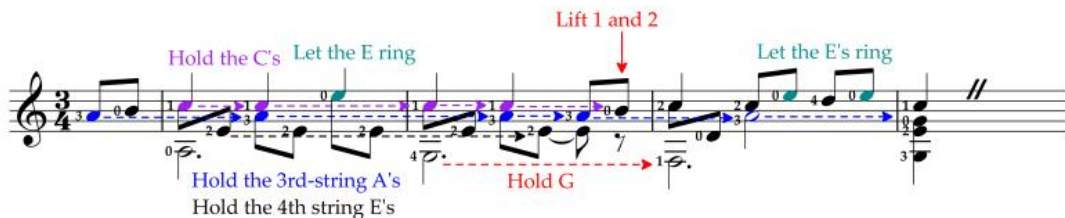
Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #4: Un Dia de Noviembre (Brouwer) Literal Version



The opposite approach is to let all the melody notes ring together and hold the accompaniment notes as long as possible, ignoring the rests. Some may say this more resonant sound is more guitaristic. Example #8:

Example #8: *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer) m1-4.

Version #2: More resonant, allowing the notes to ring freely:



But again, the key to making a smooth chord change from measure 2-3 is to *lift the 1st and 2nd fingers immediately to their new positions*. The first finger must lift from the 2nd string and position itself above the 6th string 1st fret. The 2nd finger must lift from the 4th string and position itself above the 2nd string 1st fret. Example #9:

Example #10: *Grand Solo, Op. 14* (Fernando Sor) *Allegro* m1-9.

The musical score is presented in three staves. The first staff (measures 1-3) begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It features a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with fingerings 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicated. The second staff (measures 4-6) is enclosed in a red rectangular box labeled "The Danger Zone!". This section contains complex fingerings, including 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and is marked with slurs and accents. The third staff (measures 7-9) continues the piece with various fingerings and slurs, including markings like *m*, *i*, *m*, *i*, *m*, and *m*.

When I encounter a passage such as this, I realize I will have to examine each finger's "travels" in detail. I must determine:

1. When must I lift a finger?
2. When is that finger needed again?
3. As soon as I lift the finger, where must I position it next?

One can tell just by looking at how many finger repositionings occur in these two measures, that this is a very difficult passage to play. And, it sounds its best at MM=126-138 for a quarter note. That's fast. The only way to play it accurately is to choreograph each finger movement precisely.

Watch how I do it. Video #6:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #6: Grand Solo (Fernando Sor)



Leyenda (Asturias)

In *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz, we have several spots where lifting fingers to the location they are needed next makes all the difference in the world between success and failure.

The first example contains a difficult bar chord that causes endless troubles for countless guitarists. But those troubles can be greatly reduced by training the 4th finger to move to its next destination as quickly as possible. Example #11:

Example #11: *Leyenda (Asturias)* (Isaac Albéniz) m37-39.

One of the keys to playing this passage with precision, is to move the 4th finger to where it is needed next:

Each time the 4th finger lifts off the 4th-string C at the 10th fret, it must *immediately* launch itself across the fretboard up to the 12th fret to position itself above the 1st string, ready to play the high E.

Each time the 4th finger lifts off the 1st-string high E at the 12th fret, it must *immediately* shoot across the 12th fret to the 4th string, ready to play the D.

Watch me demonstrate how to make the execution of the passage far more reliable by following our principle of moving the fingers to the location they are needed next. Video #7:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #7: *Leyenda* (Albeniz)

Always lift the fingers to where they are needed next!

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #7: *Leyenda* (Albeniz)

Next, the transition from measure #39-40 is also difficult. In this case, an important ingredient for success is to hold a finger at its current location rather than shooting it off to a new destination. Example #12:

Example #12: *Leyenda (Asturias)* (Isaac Albéniz) m39-40.

Sometimes a finger must hold its position above a certain string and not be allowed to move laterally across the fretboard:

When the 3rd finger is lifted off the G, it will want to move towards the treble strings. Instead, train it to hold its position above the 5th string so it is ready to play the F#.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #8:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #8: *Leyenda*, Transition from Measure 39-40

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Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #8: *Leyenda*, Transition from Measure 39-40

Then, in measure 41, we have a problem spot where the melody goes from the purple 4th-string B to the blue 5th-string F#. When the 3rd finger lifts off the red A#, some players position the finger above the 4th string or worse yet, the 3rd string. If that happens, the player must lift the 4th finger early to make room for the 3rd finger to lunge onto the 5th string. The result is an audible choppy gap between the two notes. Example #13:

Example #13: *Leyenda (Asturias)* (Isaac Albéniz) m41.

The secret to connecting the B-F# melody notes is to lift the 3rd finger to where it is needed next: the 5th string.

VII

Lift the 3rd finger off the 4th string A# as the 4th finger plays the 4th-string B. When the 3rd finger is lifted, move it to a position above the 5th-string F# at the 9th fret.

Watch me demonstrate how lifting just one finger to where it is needed next prevents choppiness in measure #41. Video 9:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #9: *Leyenda*, Measure 41

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #9: *Leyenda*, Measure 41

Finally, a similar problem spot occurs in measure #42 (see below). Here, the melody goes from the purple 4th-string C to the blue 5th-string G. When the 3rd finger lifts off the red 4th-string B, some players position the finger above the 4th string or worse yet the 3rd string. If that happens, the player must lift the 4th finger early to make room for the 3rd finger to lunge onto the 5th string. The result is an audible choppy gap between the two notes. Example #14:

Example #14: *Leyenda (Asturias)* (Isaac Albéniz) m42.

The secret to connecting the C-G melody notes is to lift the 3rd finger to where it is needed next: the 5th string.

VIII

Lift the 3rd finger off the 4th string B as the 4th finger plays the 4th-string C. When the 3rd finger is lifted, move it to a position above the 5th-string G at the 10th fret.

Watch me demonstrate how the simple act of lifting one finger to where it is needed next makes this measure sound great. Video 10:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #10: *Leyenda*, Measure 42

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Left-Hand Finger Preparation Video #10: *Leyenda*, Measure 42

How do I find opportunities for better left-hand finger preparation in the pieces I play?

1. Examine the spots where you make mistakes. Very often, mistakes are caused by not lifting fingers to where they are needed next. If the fingers are out of position, mistakes will happen.
2. Examine spots that make you feel tension or where it seems that your fingers are working harder than they should. Chances are, one or more fingers are out of position because they are not lifting to where they are needed next.
3. Examine passages that make you feel like you are on the edge of your seat—that you could crash at any moment. Lifting fingers to the precise position they are needed next will help alleviate that feeling.
4. Examine a piece *measure by measure*. Track the movement of each finger. Note its starting location and when/where it is needed next. Observe whether or not you are lifting the finger immediately to its new location. It's a tedious process, but it works.