

Playing on the Tips of the Fingers

By Douglas Niedt

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Question from subscriber: "Should I try to be so precise with the left hand that I not touch adjacent strings ever? I mean, sometimes it does not matter because the adjacent string is not involved. But then again, I am still touching an adjacent string. What should I be trying to do in practice?"

The answer is both.

Learn to Place the Fingers Precisely. Do NOT touch the adjacent strings.

One should be able to place the fingers precisely so that they do not touch the adjacent strings. The problem is most acute when the adjacent string is open. It is important not only to place the finger on the absolute tip close to the fingernail, but also to be certain the *finger is placed vertically onto the string*. Such precision is necessary for passages such as these:

Example No. 1:

Leyenda (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

The open B's must not be damped by the 1st finger.

Watch me:



Tips of the Fingers Video #1 Ex 1 Leyenda

Example #2:

Leyenda (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

33

The 3rd string open G must not be damped by the 1st finger.

T	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A	0	9	10	12	9	10			
B	10	0	10	12	9	10			

Watch me demonstrate:



Tips of the Fingers Video #1 Ex 1 Leyenda

Tips of the Fingers Video #3 Ex 3 Carcassi Study 7

Example #4

Allemande from *Lute Suite No. 1* BWV 998 (J.S. Bach)

Fingered and played in campanella style. All the notes are held and allowed to ring together as much as possible.

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel. It features a guitar part on a treble clef staff and a bass part on a bass clef staff, both in 4/4 time. The guitar part includes a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a tempo marking of "Moderato". The score is annotated with fret numbers (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7) and names for the rings of frets: E rings (red), B rings (blue), C rings (green), B rings (purple), A rings (orange), G rings (brown), F# rings (teal), and E rings (pink). A text instruction "Hold bass notes together as a chord" is placed above the bass staff. The bass staff shows a sequence of notes and rests, with fret numbers 0, 3, 5, 7, 4, 0, 0, 0, 4. The guitar staff shows a sequence of notes and rests, with fret numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4.

Watch me:



Tips of the Fingers Video #4 Ex 4 Bach Allemande

Tips of the Fingers Video #5 Ex 5 Villa Lobos Prelude 1

Learn to Intentionally Lean the Fingers Over to Damp the Adjacent Strings

On the other hand, we often want the fingers to intentionally damp adjacent ringing open strings for melodic or contrapuntal clarity. In those instances we want to learn to lean the fingers over at will to intentionally damp the adjacent string.

Example #6:

Alman (Robert Johnson)

Damping open-string melody notes with left-hand finger leaning-over technique.

Play the melody cleanly by allowing a left-hand finger to lean over and touch the offensive open string.

As the left-hand 1st finger is placed on the 2nd-string 3rd-fret D, it leans over and touches (damps) the 1st-string open E

As the left-hand 3rd finger is placed on the 3rd-string 2nd-fret A, it leans over and touches (damps) the 2nd-string open B

As the left-hand 4th finger is placed on the 2nd-string 3rd-fret D, it leans over and touches (damps) the 1st-string open E

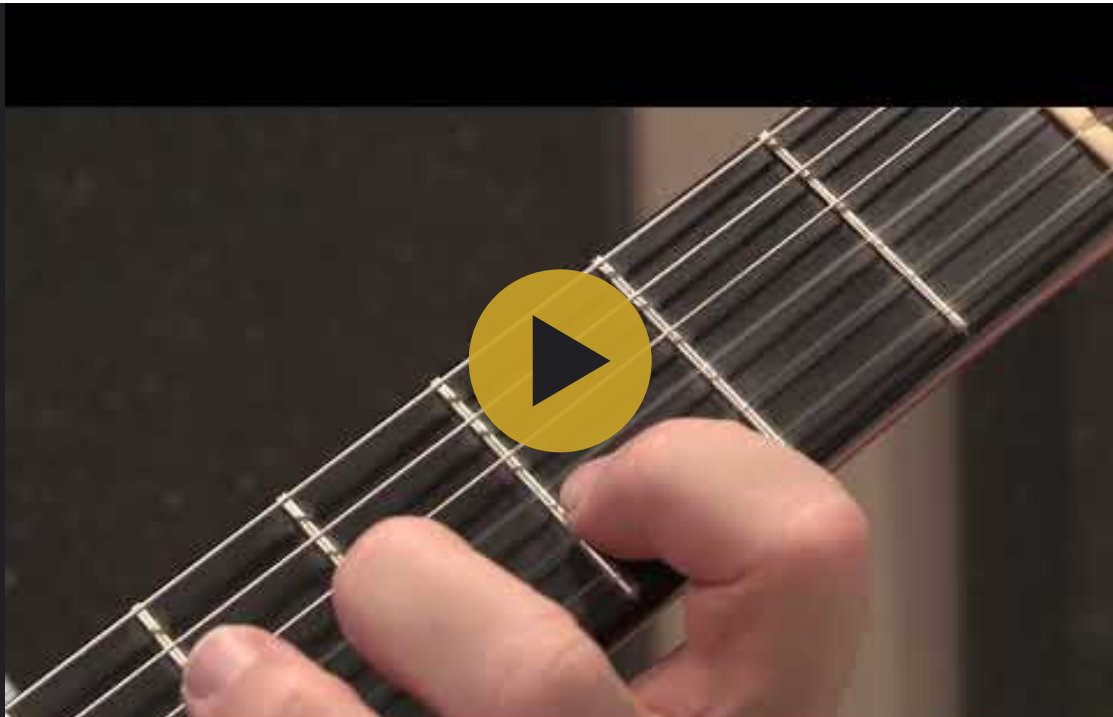
As the left-hand 2nd finger is placed on the 3rd-string 2nd-fret A, it leans over and touches (damps) the 2nd-string open B

Tablature:

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T 0 2 3 5 3 1 0 1 3 1 0 3 0 1 3 1 0 0 2 1 2 2 //
A 0 3 0 5 2 3 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 //
B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 //
  
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Watch me:



Tips of the Fingers Video #6 Ex 6 Robert Johnson Alman

Example #7:

Bourée (J.S. Bach)

As the left-hand 2nd finger is placed on the 6th-string 3rd-fret G, it leans over and touches (damps) the 4th-string open D.

As the left-hand 1st finger is placed on the 6th-string 2nd-fret F#, it leans over (almost into a bar) and touches (damps) the 3rd-string open G.

As the left-hand 1st finger is placed on the 5th-string 2nd-fret B, it leans over (almost into a bar) and touches (damps) the 2nd-string open B.

T	4	0	3	2	1	0	3	3
A				0				
B	3	2			3	2		

Watch me demonstrate:



Tips of the Fingers Video #7 Ex 7 Bach Bourree

Doug's Incredibly Frustrating Exercise to Learn to Play on the Tips of the Fingers

For most of us, leaning the fingers over and touching (damping) the adjacent string is easy. But, placing the fingers on the very tips and *not touching the adjacent string* is much harder to do and in some instances can be downright difficult.

To improve your precision in your left-hand finger placement try the exercise below. Players with thin fingers won't have too much trouble with it. But those with normal to pudgy fingers will quickly understand why I titled it, *Doug's Incredibly Frustrating Exercise to Learn to Play on the Tips of the Fingers*.

Example #8:

Doug's Incredibly Frustrating Exercise to Learn to Play on the Tips of the Fingers

Exercise continued on next page...

5 *p i p i*

④

T
A
B

7 *p i p i*

⑤

T
A
B

9 *p i p i*

⑥

T
A
B

Tips:

1. Your left-hand fingernails must be filed short. Don't file them too short. Just be sure they don't get in the way.
2. Some players' fingers become swollen at certain times of the day. Mine are slightly swollen after waking in the morning. Practice the exercise after the swelling subsides.
3. You will have better results if your left hand is in a parallel position with the neck. You will probably need to arch the hand/wrist a little more than normal, but don't overdo it.

4. *DO NOT* focus on listening to the open string to determine if you are cutting it off. Instead, focus on *feeling* whether or not the adjacent open string “tickles” the back of the left-hand fingertip.

5. Play the exercise leaving each finger down as you ascend.

6. Then practice the exercise and lift each finger as you ascend. *Be sure you are connecting the notes.* For example, don’t lift the 1st finger before you play the 2nd finger. Lift the 1st finger AS you place the 2nd finger. Lift the 2nd finger AS you place the 3rd finger, etc.

Watch me demonstrate:



Tips of the Fingers Video #8 Ex 8 Doug’s Incredibly Frustrating Exercise

Kick It Up to Extreme Frustration

Practicing the exercise in higher positions is even more difficult. This is because the strings are higher above the frets in the upper positions than in the lower positions. This will vary from guitar to guitar. This exercise will be especially difficult if your guitar has high action (the 6th string 6+ mm above the 12th fret).

Warning: Practicing this exercise might result in foul language and possibly throwing pencils, sheet music, and other objects across the room.

Example #9:

The Exercise in 8th Position:

Measure 1: Treble clef, key of D major (F#), 3/4 time. Notes: D8 (p), E8 (i), F#8 (p), G8 (i), A8 (p), B8 (i), C#8 (p), D9 (i). Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1. A slur covers the last four notes. Bass staff: 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0. A slur covers frets 10-11.

Measure 2: Notes: D9 (p), E9 (i), F#9 (p), G9 (i), A9 (p), B9 (i), C#9 (p), D10 (i). Fingering: 4, 3, 2, 1, 3, 2, 1. A slur covers the last four notes. Bass staff: 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0. A slur covers frets 10-11.

Measure 3: Notes: D10 (p), E10 (i), F#10 (p), G10 (i), A10 (p), B10 (i), C#10 (p), D11 (i). Fingering: 3, 2, 1, 3, 2, 1. A slur covers the last four notes. Bass staff: 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0. A slur covers frets 10-11.

Measure 4: Notes: D11 (p), E11 (i), F#11 (p), G11 (i), A11 (p), B11 (i), C#11 (p), D12 (i). Fingering: 4, 3, 2, 1, 3, 2, 1. A slur covers the last four notes. Bass staff: 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0. A slur covers frets 10-11.

Exercise continued on next page...

5 *p* *i* *p* *i*

④

T
A
B 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0

7 *p* *i* *p* *i*

⑤

T
A
B 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0

9 *p* *i* *p* *i*

⑥

T
A
B 8 0 9 0 10 0 11 0 10 0 9 0

Watch me demonstrate:



Tips of the Fingers Video #9 Ex 9 Kick It Up to Extreme Frustration

Neutralize the Enemy

In an actual piece of music, rather than struggling with trying to place the fingers accurately to avoid touching the adjacent strings, look for other ways to finger the passage to eliminate the problem altogether:

Example #10:

Leyenda (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

Re-finger the passage so you don't have to play any notes on the 3rd string.
This gives you plenty of clearance to allow the open B's to ring freely.

Example #11:

Leyenda (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

33

Omit the open G in the chord. Who's going to know!!
(Some transcriptions don't even include the doubled G.)

T 12 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
A 9 0 10 0 12 0 9 0 10
B 10 0 12 0 10 0 10 0 10

Example #12:

Etude in A minor, Op. 60, No. 7 (Matteo Carcassi)

16

First, try using the 3rd finger
instead of the 4th finger

T 1 0 1 0 0 0 4 0 0 0 7 0 0 0
A 2 1 0 0 0 0 5 0 0 0 1 0 0 0
B 0 0 0 0 0 0 4 3 1 0 0 0 0 0

Example #13:

Etude in A minor, Op. 60, No. 7 (Matteo Carcassi)

16

If the preceding does not work,
re-finger the passage and play the
descending melody on the 3rd string.

T
A
B

2 1 0 0 1 0 0 0 4 0 0 0 7 0 0 0 5 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

8 7 5 0 2

0

Watch me demonstrate examples 10 through 13:



Tips of the Fingers Video #10 Ex 10 thru 13 Change the Fingering

Sometimes you can avoid touching adjacent strings by pushing the fretted string upwards (as in toward the ceiling) to give more clearance behind the finger. This will sharpen the pitch of the fretted note, but it is usually not very noticeable.

Example #14:

Prelude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

18

Using the left-hand 3rd finger (which is on the 3rd string throughout), push the 3rd string slightly upwards (as in toward the ceiling) just enough so that the 3rd finger clears the 2nd string.

T	13	14	13	14	13	12	13	12	13	12	11	12	11	12	11
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	12	13	14	13	14	13	12	13	12	11	12	11	12	11	10

21

Using the left-hand 3rd finger (which is on the 3rd string throughout), push the 3rd string slightly upwards (as in toward the ceiling) just enough so that the 3rd finger clears the 2nd string.

T	10	11	10	11	10	11	10	11	10	11	10	11	10	11	10
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	9	10	11	10	11	10	9	11	10	11	10	9	11	10	11

Watch me demonstrate:



Tips of the Fingers Video #11 Ex 14 Push the Strings Out of the Way Villa Lobos Prelude 1

Conclusion

1. Most of the time, use a comfortable left-hand position and don't worry about whether the fingers touch adjacent strings.
2. Learn to lean the fingers over to intentionally damp adjacent strings.
3. Learn to place the fingers precisely so they don't touch adjacent strings.
4. If you encounter a situation where it is too difficult to avoid touching the adjacent string, try to find a different fingering that neutralizes the problem. Or, use the finger to push the fretted string upward (as in toward the ceiling) to produce additional clearance behind the finger.
5. If all else fails, go ahead and damp the adjacent string and pretend that is exactly what you intended to do!