

Rasgueado Technique

By Douglas Niedt

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Here is Ukrainian flamenco guitarist Sledge Azem demonstrating a common 5-hit (c-a-m-i-i) rasgueado pattern we are going to learn:



Sledge Azem 5-hit Rasgueado

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It's a wonderful and impressive sound and I can't guarantee you will sound like Mr. Azem after reading this tech tip! But you will understand how it is done and the steps necessary to master it (or at least sound like you know what you're doing).

I love flamenco but I don't play flamenco. I'm a classical guitarist. In this technique tip I am only presenting the basics which will be sufficient for your needs in the classical repertoire. If you wish to delve deeply into the technique or into flamenco itself, I suggest you seek out a specialist on the topic.

Professional and amateur flamenco guitarists have their favorite rasgueado patterns. A guitarist may be a follower of a particular flamenco guitarist such as Paco de Lucia, Sabicas, Juan Serrano, Paco Pena, etc., and an advocate for their mentor's patterns and techniques. Likewise, different guitarists have different ways of teaching the rasgueado technique. Again, I'm a classical guitarist not a flamenco guitarist. But what follows is how I learned what little I know about the rasgueado technique.

Rasgueado comes from the Spanish verb *rasguear* which means to strum. Rasgueado means strummed. In Andalusian dialect or flamenco jargon rasgueado is also spelled/pronounced *rasgueo*, *rageo*, and *rageao*.

It is thought that rasgueado techniques were originally developed to produce as loud and strong a sound as possible to be heard above the vocals of the singer and the footwork of the dancer. Guitarists invented many patterns—some to produce maximum volume and others for quieter shadings that could still be heard above the other participants.

The Benefits of Rasgueado Practice

Rasgueados are a cornerstone of flamenco guitar playing but are not used much in classical guitar repertoire. Classical guitarists only need to be able to do a few basic moves. So why spend much time with them? Many teachers such as Pepe Romero, believe they are very beneficial to building right-hand strength, right-hand finger speed and independence, and general right-hand relaxation.

We have flexor muscles and extensor muscles. The flexors are what we use most in daily life and for playing the guitar. They are the muscles that bend or curl our thumb and fingers and that we use to grip objects. The extensor muscles straighten our fingers. The practice of rasgueados builds the strength of the extensor muscles so that the extensors and flexors are more balanced for guitar playing.

It is believed that one reason flamencos are able to play amazingly fast scales and arpeggios is because of their intense practice of rasgueados. For the right hand, speed is not only a function of how quickly the fingers pluck the strings. It is also dependent on how fast the fingers recover to get back into position to pluck again. By developing the extensors, the fingers recover faster (return to plucking position) after plucking a string.

Some players report that practicing rasgueado exercises improves their tremolo. It also improves your typing speed!

When properly played, rasgueados are very loud. The practice of rasgueados is very effective at driving inlaws or other unwanted people out of the house. Caution: It could work the other way around. YOU may find yourself thrown out of the house with your guitar and footstool.

If you have neighbors close by, you can mute the strings with the left hand. You should also mute the strings if you want your husband, wife, boyfriend or girlfriend to still be at home when you are done practicing.

Some flamencos say that a fun part of learning rasgueados is that you can practice them anywhere and without a guitar. They practice the patterns on their knee. They practice them on the top of the dinner table or on their desk at the office. They practice them on the steering wheel while driving. Talk about distracted drivers!

Don't over practice

In our daily activities, the extensor muscles are not used nearly as much as the flexors. We use our flexors all day, so they are much stronger than the extensors. **DON'T OVER PRACTICE RASGUEADOS.** Rasgueado are a strain on the hand. The fact that you don't use the extensors as much in daily life adds to the risk of injury. Flamenco players have a higher incidence of hand injury than other guitarists. My guess is that it is probably due to excessive practice of rasgueados.

Also, if you haven't worked on rasgueados before, your extensors will quickly become fatigued. Your arm will feel very tight. We call it extensor overload. Once the extensors are overloaded, it becomes more difficult to play. Your muscles will feel sluggish and you will quickly lose speed. Don't practice a rasgueado exercise more than 5 minutes at a time. Take breaks! Remember, creativity takes a fresh mind (and muscles). Taking a break is NOT giving up.

Practicing rasgueado exercises may cause the skin around your finger nails and thumbnail to get sore. Although the nails take the brunt of the wear-and-tear, you may get abrasion on the skin too.

WARNINGS

Protect your guitar

Practicing rasgueados can be hazardous not only to your health, but to the health of your guitar. A guitarist learning rasgueados for the first time will not have very good control of the fingers. The fingers will be flying everywhere. **MAKE SURE THE TOP OF YOUR GUITAR IS PROTECTED.** I highly recommend Kling-On Clear Non-Permanent Removable Top Protectors [available here](#) and from other retailers.

This is basically a removable flamenco tap-plate with *no adhesives*. It is made from a thick 13-mil plastic material that will protect the top of your guitar from tapping and rasgueado marks. It adheres to your guitar by static only! Be sure to read the disclaimers and instructions on the website.

If you don't use this or something like it to protect your guitar top, you will most likely inflict gouges and fingernail marks in your finish.

Protect your fingernails

Flamenco players are not interested in producing a beautiful, round, lush, Segovia-like tone. They want a bright sound with volume and bite. For flamencos, nail care is mostly about coating the nails with hardeners or reinforcing them so they don't disintegrate under the punishment inflicted upon them by rasgueados and other flamenco techniques. Flamenco guitarists are not too concerned with perfect nail shape and smoothness.

Be forewarned that practicing rasgueados can tear up your nails. When you practice rasgueado exercises, if it doesn't mess up your hand position, I recommend that you tilt the hand a little to the right so you are playing on the mostly unused right sides of your nails. That way you won't wear down or rough up the good left sides.

You will also find it advantageous to grow a longer fingernail on the pinky finger. A longer nail (up to about 5 mm) puts the weak pinky on a more equal footing with the other fingers.

Watch:



Rasgueados Part 1: AA 021001play on right sides of nails and pinky fingernail

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The Strums or Strokes

We have downstrums or downstrokes and upstrums or upstrokes.

A downstroke is shooting the finger forward or down towards the ground.

An upstroke is pulling the finger backward or up towards the ceiling.

Duh. It isn't rocket science. HOWEVER, the notation for these two basic strokes can be confusing. Standard notation uses arrows to indicate down and up strokes. But the arrows *relate to the musical staff*, not the physical state of up and down as related to the floor and ceiling:

To play low pitches to high pitches
such as from the 6th string to the 1st string,
one must strum down towards the floor:

one must strum down towards the floor.



Therefore, an arrow pointing up from low pitches to high pitches is a down strum.

To play high pitches to low pitches
such as from the 1st string to the 6th string,
one must strum up towards the ceiling:

Therefore, an arrow pointing down from high pitches to low pitches is an up strum.

If you have difficulty with this, imagine setting your sheet music flat on a table. Think of the downstroke arrow $\downarrow$ as strumming away from you and the upstroke arrow $\uparrow$ as strumming toward you.

You will also see other symbols for down/up including up and down caret symbols, the notation used to indicate downbows and upbows, and even D for down and U for up:

Other symbols for downstrokes and upstrokes:

Sitting and Hand Positions

Rasgueados can easily be played in traditional classical guitar sitting positions. An interesting thing to note is that most flamenco sitting positions place the bicep of the right arm low on the lower bout. I'm not sure if this is conducive to executing flamenco techniques or if it is just tradition. Here is a summary of several flamenco sitting positions if you want to try them out.



Rasgueados Part 1: Flamenco Sitting Positions

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For the hand position, I strongly recommend a flat wrist. I do see advocates for a slightly arched wrist which makes the fingers play deeper into the top of the guitar, but the bend in the wrist puts additional stress on the tendons. For us classical guitarists who are not accustomed to working the extensor muscles and tendons so vigorously, I think keeping a flat wrist is a wise precaution even if some subtlety of flamenco tone is sacrificed.

I also recommend a straight wrist/hand position. Flamencos tend to use the bend-the-wrist-to-the-right position. But classical players these days favor the straight wrist for reasons of hand health and better tone quality. Flamenco actually demands a bright, percussive, rough tone quality which the bent hand position helps produce. But again, in the interest of injury prevention, I would recommend that classical players sacrifice some of that hard-edged tone quality and go with the straight-wrist hand position.

Remember, some studies have shown that flamenco players suffer more hand injuries than other types of guitarists.

Watch me demonstrate the straight wrist and flat wrist positions:



Rasgueados Part 1: Wrist Position Straight and Flat

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Symbols for the right-hand pinky or little finger

The pinky or little finger is often used in rasgueados. But it is designated by several different symbols. Here are a few:

c=chiquito

e=? No one I've asked seems to know what this stands for.

q=meñique

x=no reason

s=small

It seems to me that the letter c has been gaining ground the past few years so that is what I use.

How to Practice

1. Practice in short 5-10 minute sessions. **Hand injury may occur if you over practice these techniques!**
2. PRACTICE SLOWLY. The best flamencos say over and over, PRACTICE SLOWLY to learn the movements and details. Slow practice imprints the correct movements into the hands and brain.
3. Play solid, even rhythms.
4. DEVELOP EVENLY LOUD STROKES FROM EACH FINGER.
5. Always release the tension after every finger stroke.
6. The goal is to develop finger independence and to play loud and aggressively. Yes, "rasgueado" means strummed. But that is NOT what you want to do. We want to fire or shoot the fingers at the strings. A flamenco rasgueado is more of a percussive effect than a strum. Think of it as *hitting* the strings with the backs of the nails.
7. Use the speed-burst method of practice.

I will demonstrate all these points as we proceed.

Types of Rasgueados

Opinions vary greatly on which rasgueado patterns are most useful, in style, out of style, cutting edge, or old fashioned. It is amazing to me how many different patterns are used. One amusing but unproven theory for the many styles of rasgueado is that when competing guitarists performed at a venue, they didn't want the competition to steal their "licks", their rasgueado patterns. They would turn their backs so their colleagues couldn't see how they executed their amazing runs and rasgueados. But the competitor, remembering the sound in his head, would go somewhere quiet and try to figure out how the rasgueado was done. He would imitate the sound but produce it in his own way with a new finger pattern.

Other reasons for the numerous patterns are that different players have different natural abilities. A pattern that famous player #1 uses because he has amazing speed between i and a may not suit famous player #2 who has amazing speed between i and m. Some famous players were missing a finger on the right hand or had a finger injury. They created different patterns out of necessity.

The Two Basic Types of Rasgueados

1. Separated Rasgueado

In flamenco, the most prevalent type of rasgueado is the separated rasgueado. It is very percussive, rhythmically precise, and a challenge to master. As described in the exercises below, each stroke is separate from the preceding and following stroke. On downstrokes, each finger flicks or snaps out completely *before the next finger leaves the hand*. These are not strums. Each flick is a percussive strike that hits the strings of a chord simultaneously and instantaneously as if they were one string. It is a machine-gun-like attack.

2. Blended Rasgueado

The blended rasgueado is the style most often employed by classical guitarists. The blended rasgueado is a little lighter in sound. It doesn't have the machine-gun-like aggressive attack. The downstrokes are no longer separate and distinct hits. Instead, *each stroke begins before the preceding stroke is complete*, thereby producing a continuous or flowing blended sound.

For classical guitarists, the most common patterns are cami and ami. Although it is a blended rasgueado, we still need to hear that it is made up of separate finger strokes. The key to producing a well-executed blended rasgueado is to first develop the independence of the fingers by practicing the flicked separated rasgueados described below.

Watch me demonstrate the two rasgueados and listen to the difference:



The Separated vs the Blended Rasgueado

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Two Methods of Playing Flicked or Snapped Downstrokes

1. Flick out the fingers from behind the thumb.
2. Flick out the fingers from the palm.

Each of these methods is used by excellent flamenco guitarists. Choose the one that suits you best. The flicks-from-the-palm method doesn't work well for me at all. I use the flicks-from-behind-the-thumb method.

With either method, each stroke is separate from the preceding and following stroke. In other words, make sure each finger snaps out completely *before the next finger leaves the hand*. These are not