

Classical Guitar Technique

HOW TO USE REST STROKE WITH THE FINGERS TO BRING OUT A MELODY WITHIN AN ARPEGGIO

Part 1 of 2

By Douglas Niedt

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The perfect example of what I am addressing in this tip is in Fernando Sor's famous *Study No. 5 in B minor*. It is actually *Exercise No. 22* in Sor's *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Op. 35*. But Andrés Segovia renamed and renumbered it in his *20 Studies for the Guitar by Fernando Sor* as *Study No. 5*.

The piece is in three parts—melody, accompaniment, and bass. Here it is, and notice I have highlighted all the melody notes in red.
Example No. 1:

Example #1.

Study No. 5 in Bm (as numbered by Andrés Segovia)
from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Op. 35 No. 22* (Fernando Sor)

II ⑤

5

II ⑤ Or Full Bar

9

13

17

21

25

29

33

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a guitar piece in D major (two sharps). It consists of five systems, each with a musical staff and a corresponding guitar tablature staff. The tablature uses numbers 0-4 to indicate frets. Measure numbers 17, 21, 25, 29, and 33 are placed at the start of their respective systems. First and second endings are indicated by brackets and Roman numerals with superscripts (e.g., II 2, II 5). A 'Full Bar' ending is also present in measures 28 and 32. Some measures include 'or 1' markings, suggesting alternative phrasings. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and repeat signs.

37

II Full Bar

41

II Hinge Bar

IV ⑤

45

II Full Bar

or 4 on 3rd string B

T
A
B

8

One of the goals of this exercise is to teach the guitarist to bring out the melody more prominently than the arpeggio accompaniment and bass notes. When played properly, the first impression a casual listener will have is that two guitarists are playing. One is playing the chordal arpeggio accompaniment and the other is playing the single melody notes. Example No 1a:

Example #1a.

Study No. 5 in Bm (as numbered by Andrés Segovia)
from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Op. 35 No. 22* (Fernando Sor)

Measures 1-8, notated as a duet:

The image displays musical notation for measures 1-8 of 'Study No. 5 in Bm' by Fernando Sor, presented as a guitar duet. The notation is arranged in two systems, each with two staves. The key signature is B minor (two sharps: F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (measures 1-4) is labeled '1' at the beginning. The top staff, labeled 'GUITAR 1 (playing melody)' in red, contains a melody of half notes: B2, C#3, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4. The bottom staff, labeled 'GUITAR 2 (playing arpeggiated chordal accompaniment)' in blue, contains an arpeggiated accompaniment of eighth notes: B2, C#3, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4. The second system (measures 5-8) is labeled '5' at the beginning. The top staff continues the melody with half notes: B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5. The bottom staff continues the arpeggiated accompaniment with eighth notes: B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5. The notation uses red ink for the melody and blue ink for the accompaniment.

Watch me demonstrate how the piece produces the illusion of a guitar duet. Video No. 1:

Video #1: *Study No. 5 in B minor* (Fernando Sor)

Creating the illusion of a guitar duet.



Two methods may be used to emphasize the melody so that it stands out from the accompaniment.

Method #1, Today's Status Quo

Most guitarists today play the piece with all free stroke in the right hand. They bring out the melody by playing it louder (obviously) but also by making a conscious effort to play the accompaniment notes very quietly. This is made easier by the fact that "p" and "i" almost always play the accompaniment notes. Therefore, if the guitarist tells himself to play "p" and "i" with a feather-light touch, the melody notes will automatically be more prominent.

Method #2, The Old School Way

Another way to separate out the melody from the accompaniment is to play the melody notes with rest stroke and the accompaniment notes with free stroke. This is more of an old-school approach but is very effective, particularly in producing the illusion of a guitar duet being played on one instrument.

Historical Considerations

Some guitarists and scholars would nix the entire idea of using rest stroke on any music written prior to Tárrega because it might not be "historically correct". I always study the historical performance practices of other eras, but in the end, my decisions on how to play a piece are based entirely on what sounds best on modern instruments. As a professional, I pay extra attention to how things sound on recordings and in concert halls.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Method

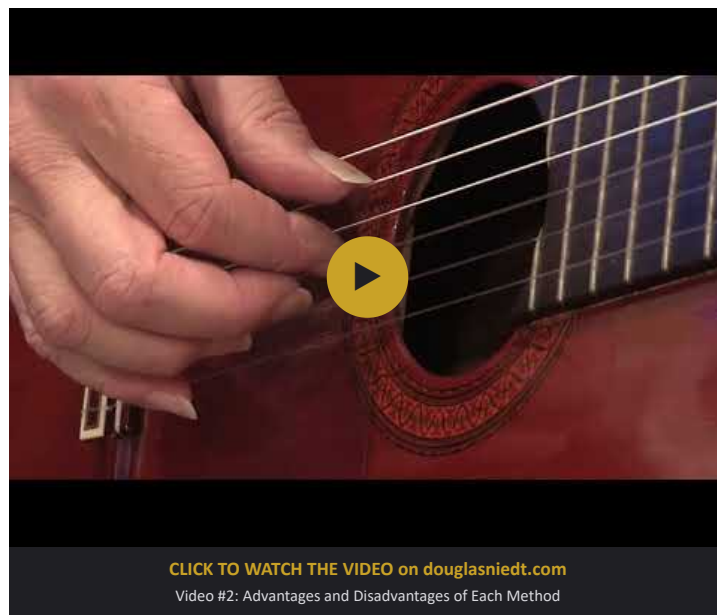
	ALL FREE STROKE	REST STROKE ON MELODY
LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY:	Easy to play.	Initially more difficult to learn the rest stroke technique.
DYNAMIC RANGE:	More limited dynamic range (loud and soft)	Wide dynamic range.

TEXTURE:	All notes ring freely as an arpeggio.	The note on the string below the melody note is damped by the rest stroke.
SEPARATION BETWEEN MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT:	The separation between the melody and accompaniment is not as apparent.	The separation between the melody and accompaniment is obvious, sometimes stunningly so.
TONE QUALITY:	The tone quality of the melody notes is not as good as rest stroke, especially in loud passages.	The tone quality of the melody notes played with rest stroke is exceptional, whether loud or soft.
SPEED:	Excellent for fast passages.	Can sound labored and too heavy on fast passages.
HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS:	In pieces from certain eras, free stroke may be more historically correct.	Historically correct or not, sometimes rest stroke makes the piece sound better.

Watch me demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of each method in this video. Video No. 2:

Video #2: Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Method

Rest Stroke vs. Free Stroke



How to Play Rest Stroke on the Melody Within an Arpeggio

We are going to learn this technique using Fernando Sor's *Study No. 5 in B minor* referenced above.

1. Set (plant) the thumb ("p") on the 4th string.

Place and leave the thumb on the 4th string.

2. Play the 1st string rest stroke with "m".

Example #2.

1. First, place the thumb on the 4th string and leave it there.

2. Play the open E's rest stroke with "m".

- A. Be sure the string is seated against the left side of the fingernail.
- B. The string should be in contact with the fingernail and flesh simultaneously.
- C. Relax the tip joint.
- D. Pull "m" and the string into the guitar.

Play the open E's with "m" rest stroke.

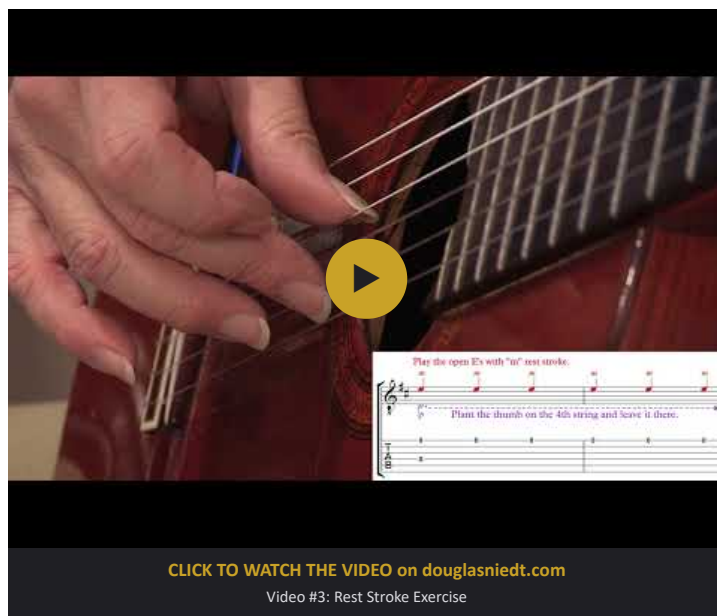
The image shows a musical score for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains six measures, each with a single eighth note on the first line (E4). Above each note is a red italicized 'm'. A dashed purple line with an arrow points from the first measure to the sixth, with the text 'Plant the thumb on the 4th string and leave it there.' written below it. The bottom staff is a tablature with three lines labeled T, A, and B from top to bottom. The first line (T) has five '0' characters. The second line (A) has an 'x' in the first measure. The third line (B) is empty.

Watch me demonstrate the details of this exercise. Video No. 3:

Video #3: Rest Stroke Exercise

Plant the thumb on the 4th string.

Play the 1st string with rest stroke. Allow the tip joint to slightly collapse (hyperextend).



Be sure "m" is pulling INTO the guitar to produce a full-bodied tone. Relax the tip joint enough to allow it to hyperextend slightly. In other words, allow it to bend backwards a little bit. Or, you can think of letting the tip joint "give". Or, think of it as collapsing slightly. Use whatever thought works best for you. Do NOT bend it or keep it stiff or straight. You can still play rest stroke with a straight tip joint, but the sound will be more hard-edged and percussive. In most pieces, we want a full and warm tone on the melody.

Be certain to use standard rest-stroke technique. Place the finger on the string so that the string touches the *left side only* of the fingernail. Also, be sure the string is in contact with the *flesh and fingernail simultaneously* before plucking the string.

If the string is getting caught in any way on the fingernail, you are most likely not contacting the string correctly. If both sides of the fingernail contact the string, the fingernail will catch. If the flesh contacts the string before the fingernail (instead of simultaneously), the fingernail will click and catch. In some instances, the nail may be too long or shaped incorrectly.

Guidelines for the thumb:

In my over 50 years of teaching, it seems to me that variations in length, width, joint stability, joint malfunctions, and other oddities occur more often in the thumb than any of the other fingers. For this reason, I find it difficult to give precise advice on how to place and use the thumb, especially in more advanced techniques such as this. But I will give it my best shot.

If your thumbnail is fairly long and well-shaped, its placement should be similar to that of "m". Contact the string simultaneously with flesh and nail. However, the string should contact the center to *right side* of the thumbnail, not the left side. Stay away from the left corner of the nail as it will often catch on the string.

A longer thumbnail makes it easier to get good contact with the string. If your thumbnail is short or non-existent, all flesh is okay but flesh+nail usually produces the best sound and is easiest to control.

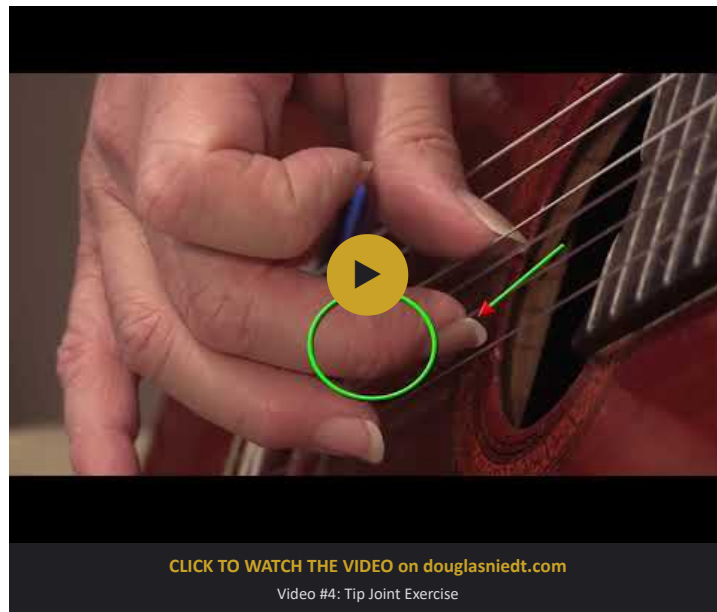
3. With "p" still planted on the 4th string, set "m" on the 2nd string. Bend and collapse the tip joint.

Be sure the left side of the "m" fingernail is seated on the 2nd string. Practice bending and collapsing the tip joint of "m". Do not let the finger leave the 2nd string. Keep the left side of the fingernail touching the string as you alternate bending the tip joint and then collapsing it. Do not pluck the string.

This is hard to describe in words. Watch me. Video No. 4:

Video #4: Tip Joint Exercise

Plant the thumb on the 4th string. Bend (flex) and collapse (hyperextend) the tip joint of "m".



4. With "p" still planted on the 4th string, play the 1st string with "m" rest stroke and then the 2nd string with "i" free stroke.

Example #3.

Bend tip joint of "m" to prepare for "i" free stroke. Bend tip joint of "m" to prepare for "i" free stroke.

Rest Stroke *m* Free Stroke *i* Rest Stroke *m* Free Stroke *i*

Plant the thumb on the 4th string and leave it there.

Play the rest strokes loudly and the free strokes quietly:

Rest Stroke *m* Free Stroke *i* Rest Stroke *m* Free Stroke *i*

LOUD Quiet LOUD Quiet

A. Set "m" on the 1st string and hyperextend the tip joint slightly as described above. Pluck the 1st string with "m" rest stroke. Pull into the guitar and come to rest on the 2nd string. The tip joint should still be hyperextended

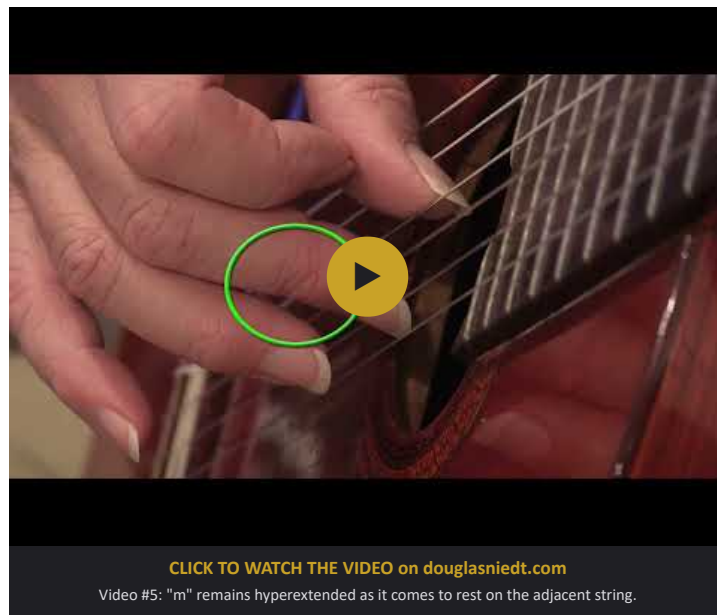
(collapsed).

I will show you in this close-up video. Video No. 5:

Video #5: "m" remains hyperextended as it comes to rest on the adjacent string.

With the thumb planted on the 4th string, play the 1st string with "m" rest stroke.

"m" should remain hyperextended as it comes to rest on the 2nd string.



B. Then, bend or flex the tip joint of "m" and bring the "i" finger into position to pluck the 2nd string.

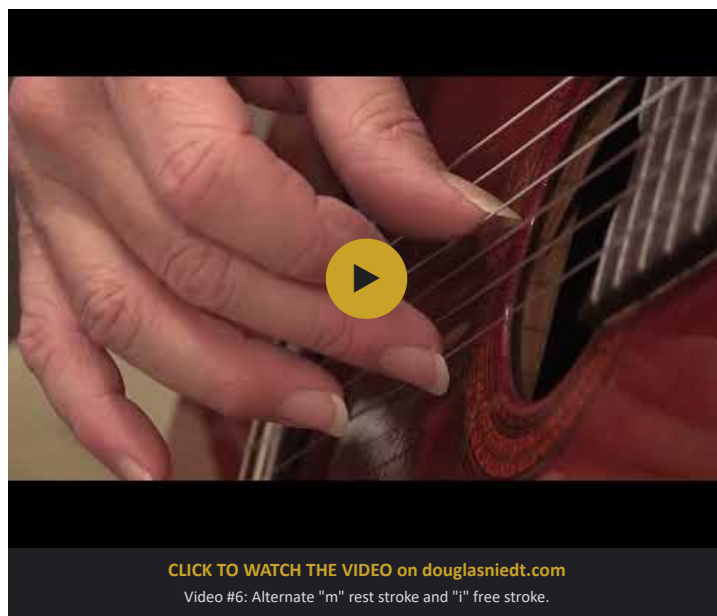
C. As "m" (in its *bent* fingertip state) is lifted off the 2nd string, pluck the 2nd string free stroke with "i". Play the "i" finger very quietly to train it to play its accompaniment notes quietly in the piece.

I will show you in this close-up video. Video No. 5:

Video #6: Alternate "m" rest stroke and "i" free stroke.

Plant the thumb on the 4th string.

Alternate playing the 1st string with rest stroke and then the 2nd string with free stroke.



That's it! Repeat over and over, of course very slowly. Keep "p" planted on the 4th string. Play the "m" rest strokes loudly, and the "i" free strokes quietly.

SPECIAL NOTE: I try to use "m" on almost all the melody notes in this particular piece to maintain a consistent sound throughout. Other players (including Segovia) use "m" to play the notes that fall on the 2nd string and "a" to play the notes that fall on the 1st string. It is a good idea to practice these exercises both ways. Be able to play the rest strokes with "m" or "a". That way, you will be able to use either finger to play rest stroke on other pieces as well.

Why It Works

Many players and teachers maintain that rest stroke and free stroke can be played from the same hand position. That is absolutely true. However, that position is actually a compromise between the two and the rest stroke movement will be more across the string rather than into the guitar. It will still sound like a rest stroke but with a slightly percussive and harder-edged tone.

For a full-bodied rest stroke where one pulls into the guitar (which minimizes any percussiveness and maximizes its warmth), the hand position is different from the free stroke. The hand leans slightly back for the rest stroke and moves slightly forward (towards the floor) for free stroke.

But, in arpeggio passages where we choose to use rest stroke on the melody notes, we can minimize the hand position change by utilizing the flexibility of the tip joint. Remember:

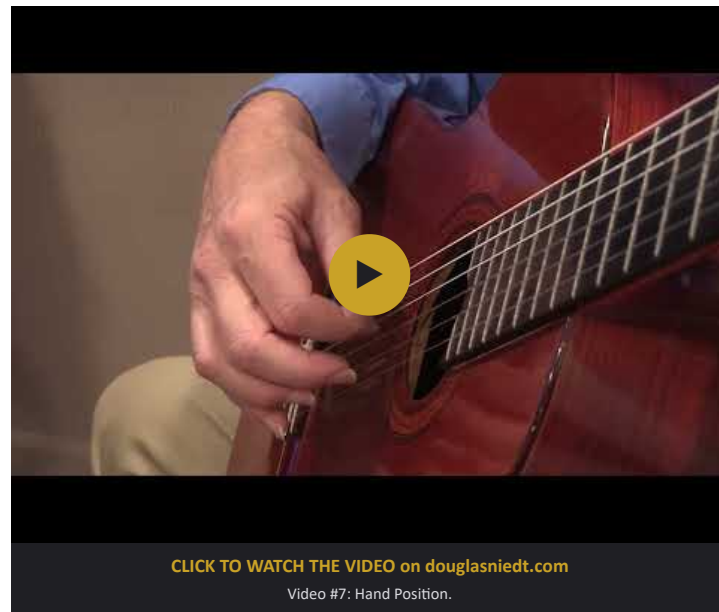
1. Collapsing or hyperextending the tip joint allows the finger to pull into the guitar to produce a full-bodied rest stroke.
2. Bending or flexing the tip joint after the finger rests on the next string alters the position of the hand, but only slightly. This enables the next finger to play its free stroke without making a major change in the hand position.

It is this collapse/bend of the tip joint of the rest stroke finger that enables the hand to play true rest strokes in conjunction with free strokes while minimizing hand movement.

Watch me demonstrate the subtleties of these hand position changes in the next video. Video No. 7:

Video #7: Hand Position.

Watch the subtle differences in the hand position for rest stroke and free stroke.



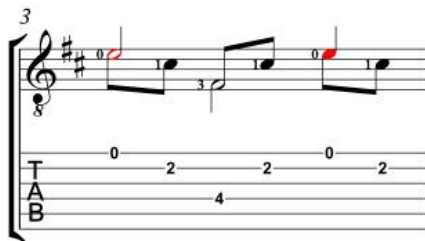
Incorporate the technique into an actual piece

Now, let's begin to incorporate the technique into one complete measure of our Sor Study, but still focusing on the right hand alone.

We will use measure #3 as our starting point. But of course, the technique and method of mastering it may be applied to many other pieces. Example No. 4:

Example #4.

Study No. 5 in Bm Fernando Sor) Measure #3 as written:



First, we must train "i" and "p" to play quietly.

Set "m" on the 1st string with the tip joint bent or flexed, not hyperextended or collapsed. Play "ipip" very quietly with free stroke on the 2nd and 4th strings.

This is an excellent exercise to practice. Example No. 5:

Example #5.

Teach "i" and "p" to play the accompaniment notes quietly:

Keep "m" planted
on the 1st string

Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.

Next, we will extract the open strings of measure #3 to make our exercise for the *right hand alone*. We do not want to be distracted by issues with the left hand. Example No. 6:

Example #6. Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Measure #3 as written and rewritten as open strings:

Now, play the entire measure, still on open strings. Be sure to play "p" quietly. Example No. 7:

Example #7.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Practice measure #3, right-hand alone on open strings:

The musical notation for Example #7 shows a single measure of music for the right hand. The treble clef is used, and the key signature is B minor (two flats). The melody consists of a sequence of notes: a whole note on G4 (open string), a half note on A4 (open string), a quarter note on B4 (open string), a quarter note on C5 (open string), a half note on D5 (open string), and a whole note on E5 (open string). The notes are marked with 'i' for 'i' (free stroke) and 'p' for 'p' (free stroke). Above the staff, there are two red annotations: 'Rest Stroke m' above the first G4 and 'Rest Stroke m' above the last E5. Below the staff, there is a blue instruction: 'Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.' The bass staff shows the open strings: T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass), with the notes 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0.

Finally, play the measure both hands together. Example No. 8:

Example #8.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Practice measure #3, both hands together:

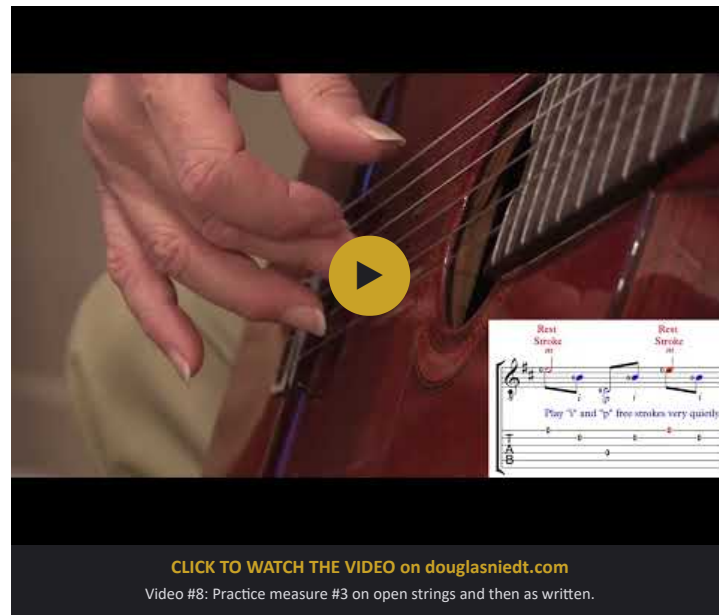
The musical notation for Example #8 shows a single measure of music for both hands. The treble clef is used, and the key signature is B minor (two flats). The melody consists of a sequence of notes: a whole note on G4 (open string), a half note on A4 (open string), a quarter note on B4 (open string), a quarter note on C5 (open string), a half note on D5 (open string), and a whole note on E5 (open string). The notes are marked with 'i' for 'i' (free stroke) and 'p' for 'p' (free stroke). Above the staff, there are two red annotations: 'Rest Stroke m' above the first G4 and 'Rest Stroke m' above the last E5. Below the staff, there is a blue instruction: 'Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.' The bass staff shows the open strings: T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass), with the notes 0, 2, 2, 0, 2, 2. The bass staff also shows the notes 0, 2, 2, 0, 2, 2.

Watch me demonstrate how to practice the technique on open strings and then as written. Video No. 8:

Video #8: Practice measure #3 on open strings and then as written.

Practice measure #3 on open strings and then as written.

Use rest stroke on the melody and free stroke on the accompaniment.



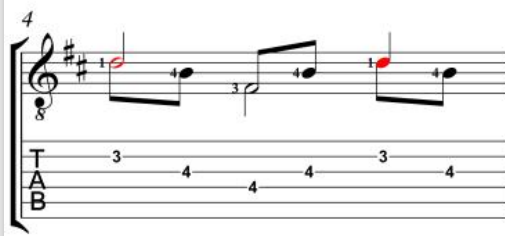
CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video #8: Practice measure #3 on open strings and then as written.

Several measures use this pattern, so you are well on your way to mastering the technique on this piece. The other pattern that is used in several measures is this one found in measure #4. Example No. 9:

Example #9.

Study No. 5 in Bm Fernando Sor)
Measure #4 as written:



If we extract the open strings, we have this. Example No. 10:

Example #10.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Measure #4 as written and rewritten as open strings:

The image shows two musical staves for guitar. The top staff is the original notation for Measure #4, featuring a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/8 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes: F#4 (1), A4 (4), G#4 (3), F#4 (1), A4 (4), and G#4 (3). The bottom staff is a tablature representation of the same measure, showing open strings (0) for the same sequence of notes. Green arrows connect the notes between the two staves. The tablature staff is labeled 'T A B' for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings.

All the practice techniques are the same but on a different set of strings. Examples 11 through 14:

Example #11.

Practice alternating rest stroke and free stroke:

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/8 time signature. The notation alternates between rest strokes (marked with a red 'm' and a green arrow pointing down) and free strokes (marked with a blue 'i' and a green arrow pointing down). The notes are F#4, A4, G#4, and F#4. A dashed line with a purple arrow indicates the thumb position on the 4th string. The tablature staff below shows the corresponding fretting: 0 for F#4, 2 for A4, 1 for G#4, and 0 for F#4. The tablature staff is labeled 'T A B' for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings.

Play the rest strokes loudly and the free strokes quietly:

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/8 time signature. The notation alternates between rest strokes (marked with a red 'm' and a green arrow pointing down) and free strokes (marked with a blue 'i' and a green arrow pointing down). The notes are F#4, A4, G#4, and F#4. A dashed line with a purple arrow indicates the thumb position on the 4th string. The tablature staff below shows the corresponding fretting: 0 for F#4, 2 for A4, 1 for G#4, and 0 for F#4. The tablature staff is labeled 'T A B' for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings. The dynamics 'LOUD' and 'Quiet' are written below the staff to indicate the volume for each stroke type.

Example #12.

Teach "i" and "p" to play the accompaniment notes quietly:

Keep "m" planted on the 2nd string

Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.

Example #13.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Practice measure #4 right-hand alone on open strings:

Rest Stroke *m*

Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.

Example #14.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Finally, play measure #4 both hands together:

Rest Stroke *m*

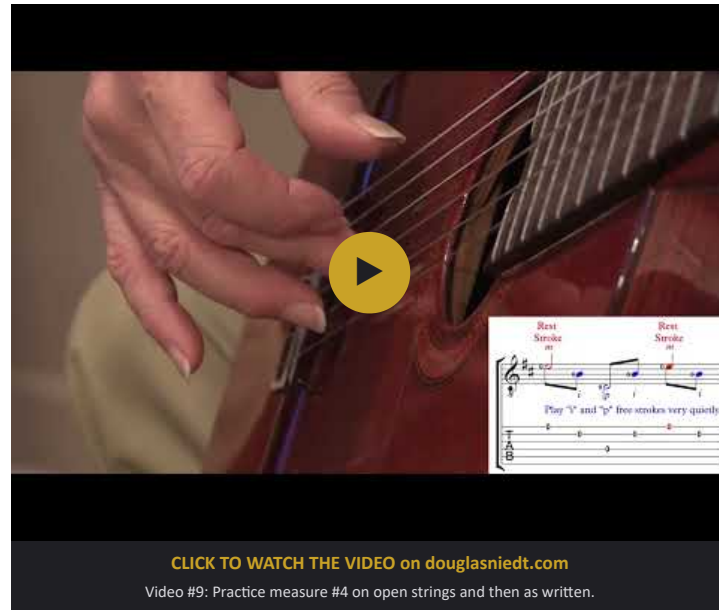
Play "i" and "p" free strokes very quietly.

To practice the technique, watch as I walk you through all the steps. Video No. 9:

Video #9: Practice measure #4 on open strings and then as written.

Watch as I go through all the steps to master measure #4.

I will show you how to use rest stroke on the melody and free stroke on the accompaniment.



Several other measures throughout the piece have slightly different configurations but all are played in the same way.

And once again, these same practice strategies may be applied to any other piece you play. If a passage consists of a melody contained within an arpeggio (or the entire piece is an arpeggio), you can use rest stroke with the fingers to emphasize the melody to any degree you desire.

This concludes Part 1.