

How to Use Rest Stroke with the Fingers to Bring Out a Melody Within an Arpeggio

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* from 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

II^②

25

II^⑤

29

II Full Bar

33

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:

1

GUITAR 1 (playing melody)

GUITAR 2 (playing arpeggiated chordal accompaniment)

5

[Watch me demonstrate how the piece produces the illusion of a guitar duet. Video No. 1:](#)



Video 1 Sor Study No. 5. 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.

In my world, just because a technique might not have been used during the era of the piece I am playing, does not preclude me from using it now. My bottom line is to do whatever it takes to make the piece sound its best.

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

How to Play Rest Stroke on the Melody Within an Arpeggio

We are going to learn this technique using the Sor *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 displays musical notation for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 8/8. It contains six measures, each with a single eighth note on the first line (E4). Above each note is a red italicized 'm'. A purple dashed 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 TAB (Tuning, Action, Barre) staff with three lines labeled T, A, and B from top to bottom. It shows the fretting for the exercise: the first measure has a '0' on the T line and an 'x' on the A line; the second measure has a '0' on the T line; the third measure has a '0' on the T line; the fourth measure has a '0' on the T line; the fifth measure has a '0' on the T line; and the sixth measure has a '0' on the T line.

[Watch me demonstrate the details of this exercise. Video No. 3:](#)



Video 3 Plant p on 4th string, m rest stroke on 1st string

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 Bend and collapse of m tip joint

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.

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*

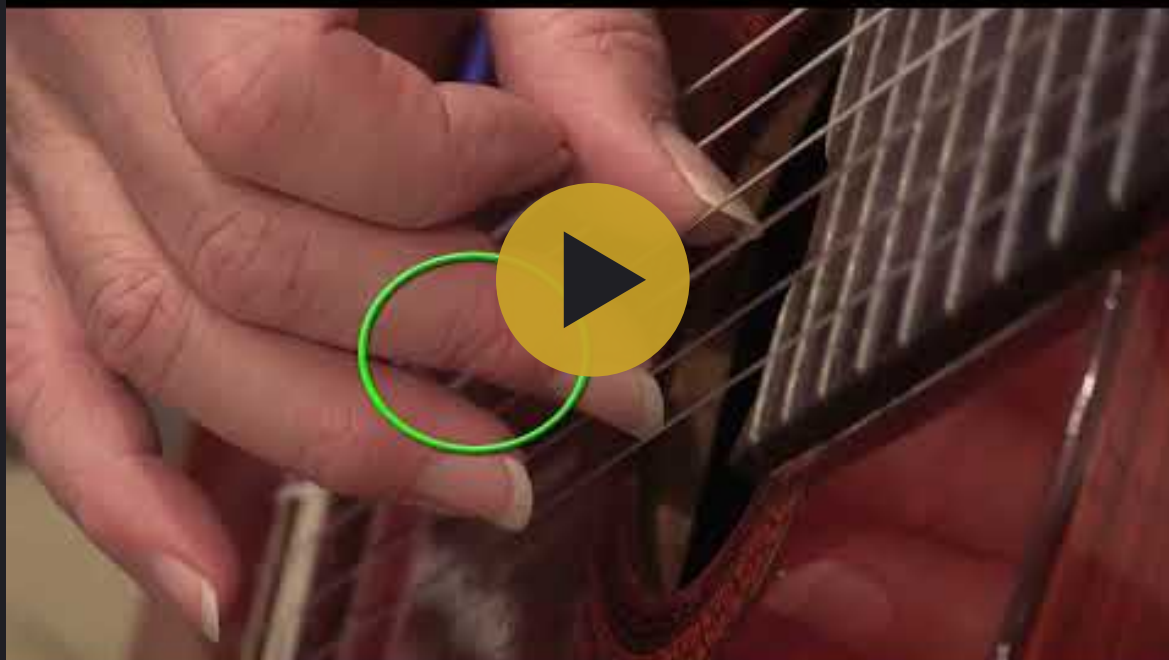
Rest Stroke *m*

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 set m hyperextend then pluck rest stroke

- 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.

[Watch me demonstrate what I mean. Video No. 6:](#)



Video 6 play m rest stroke then i 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

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 left 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:



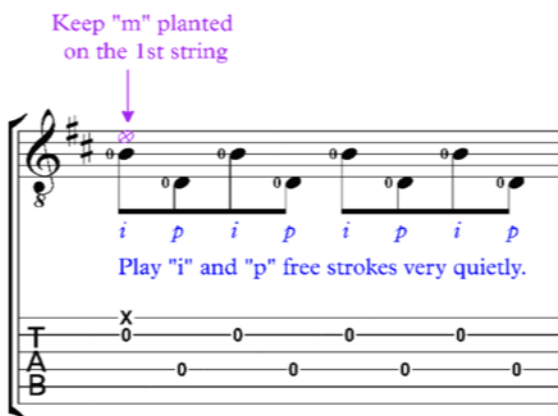
First, we must train "i" and "p" to play quietly.

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:



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:

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:



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

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



Video 8 Sor Study No. 5, measure 3

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:

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:

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

Rest
Stroke
m

Free
Stroke
i

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

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

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:

The musical notation for Example #13 shows a right-hand practice measure #4 on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The measure contains a sequence of notes: a whole rest (labeled 'Rest' and 'Stroke' in red), followed by a half note (labeled 'i' in blue), a quarter note (labeled 'p' in blue), a half note (labeled 'i' in blue), a quarter note (labeled 'i' in blue), and a whole rest (labeled 'Rest' and 'Stroke' in red). Below the staff, a text instruction reads: "Play 'i' and 'p' free strokes very quietly." Below the staff, a tablature for the guitar shows the strings T, A, and B. The fret numbers are: T (0), A (0), B (0) for the first half, and T (0), A (0), B (0) for the second half.

Example #14.

Study No. 5 in Bm (Fernando Sor)

Finally, play measure #4 both hands together:

The musical notation for Example #14 shows a both-hands practice measure #4 on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The measure contains a sequence of notes: a whole rest (labeled 'Rest' and 'Stroke' in red), followed by a half note (labeled 'i' in blue), a quarter note (labeled 'p' in blue), a half note (labeled 'i' in blue), a quarter note (labeled 'i' in blue), and a whole rest (labeled 'Rest' and 'Stroke' in red). Below the staff, a text instruction reads: "Play 'i' and 'p' free strokes very quietly." Below the staff, a tablature for the guitar shows the strings T, A, and B. The fret numbers are: T (3), A (4), B (4) for the first half, and T (3), A (4), B (4) for the second half.

[To practice the technique, watch as I walk you through all the steps. Video No. 9:](#)



Video 9 Sor Study No. 5 measure 4

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.