

Right-Hand Little Finger (Part 2 of 2)

By Douglas Niedt

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Part 2: Using the right-hand little finger in pieces to pluck strings

A Short History of the Usage of the Right-Hand Fingers

The development of the technique and usage of the right-hand fingers follows the development of the music that is played:

1. The monophonic single-line music of the Middle-Eastern lute and oud was played with a plectrum (pick).
- 2a. The polyphonic contrapuntal music developed by the Europeans in the Renaissance required the use of the fingers. Nelson Amos, in *Lute Practice and Lutenists in Germany Between 1500 and 1750*, points out that the early sixteenth-century German lutenists still used the plectrum right-hand position. It was plectrum technique without the plectrum. A single down stroke of the thumb was substituted for the down stroke of the plectrum while the up-stroke of the plectrum was replaced by a plucking motion of the index finger.
- 2b. Amos explains that as the music became more complex, right-hand technique was extended to meet those needs. Lutenist Thomas Mace (in *Musick's Monument*, London 1676) was one of the first to describe the application of the middle and index fingers in more complex and specific situations.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the guitar overtook the lute in popularity and experienced a golden age of popularity. Many virtuoso composer/performers published a tremendous amount of music for the guitar and increased the technical demands needed to perform it.

3. In a research paper presented at the American String Teachers Association 1985 Guitar Symposium, Charles Postlewaite explains that the first known published collection of right-hand arpeggio studies was composed by Federico Moretti (c.1760-1838) in 1787 and printed for the first time in Naples, Italy in 1792. It contains 202 arpeggio patterns using the thumb, index, and middle fingers of the right hand.
4. In his *Method for the Spanish Guitar*, Fernando Sor (1778-1839) opposes the use of the "a" finger. He writes that using it requires a constrained position and puts "i" and "m" at a disadvantage. He restricts

its usage solely to playing 4-note chords but even then only if there is an unplayed string between the bass and the next note of the chord.

5. In 1812, Mauro Giuliani (1781-1829) published his *Metodo per Chitarra*. The 120 right-hand arpeggio studies freely use the “a” finger.

6. The first known mention of the little finger comes from Dionisio Aguado (1784-1849) in his method book, *Escuela de Guitarra*. However, his very brief instructions for using the little finger are not present in all editions of the method.

7. The first major endorsement of using the little finger comes from Argentine guitarist Domingo Prat (1886-1944) in his *The New Technique of the Guitar for the Practice of the Five Fingers of the Right Hand*. Prat’s use of the little finger did not become widely accepted, probably because of the radical changes he advocated in the positioning of the right hand.

8. Brazilian composer/guitarist Heitor Villa-Lobos takes a stand. In his book, *Heitor Villa-Lobos and the Guitar*, Turibio Santos quotes Villa-Lobos’ recollection of his first meeting with guitarist Andrés Segovia:

I met Segovia in 1923 or 24, I don’t remember well, in the house of Olga Moraes Sarmiento Nobre. There was a party there. There was a man with a lot of hair, surrounded by women, his appearance was strong and pretentious in spite of being friendly.

The Portuguese violinist Costa asked Segovia if he knew Villa-Lobos without saying I was there. Segovia said that Llobet, the Spanish guitarist Miguel Llobet, had talked to him and Villa-Lobos showed him some works. I had written a concert waltz for Llobet. Segovia said that my works were not guitaristic and that I had used some things that were not for the instrument. Costa said, “Of course Villa-Lobos, Segovia is here.”

I went immediately up to him and said, “Why do you think that my works are not guitaristic?” Segovia, half surprised—of course he couldn’t have known that I was there—explained that, for example, the little finger of the right hand was not used in classical guitar. I asked, “Ah. It’s not used? Then cut it off! Cut it off!” Segovia was furious and I went forward and demanded, “Give me your guitar. Give it to me.” Segovia never lends his guitar to anyone, even by force. I sat down, played, and finished the party.

The two reconciled the next day, became friends, and Villa-Lobos went on to write his famous *Twelve Etudes* for Segovia and of course many other guitar works as well.

9. In our time, the foremost proponent of using the right-hand little finger is Dr. Charles Postlewate. Postlewate's important and innovative research work on the utilization of the little finger in the right hand technique of the classical guitar began in the summer of 1985. From 1985 to 1995, Postlewate followed a six-hour per day practice routine to develop the strength and dexterity of the little finger and to integrate it with the other fingers. Over this period, he developed a set of five-finger right hand studies for the technical areas of scales, chords, arpeggios, tremolos and harmonics as well as researching the standard classical guitar repertoire for pieces that could take advantage of a five-finger technique.

Ricardo Iznaola has been interested in the possible use of the fifth finger for many years. He contributed two pieces to Postlewate’s *Contemporary Anthology of Solo Guitar Music for Five Fingers of the Right*

Hand and includes suggestions on using the little finger in the appendix to his *Kitharologus: The Path to Virtuosity*.

Is Using the Right-Hand Little Finger Really Necessary?

In *Classical Guitar Magazine* Colin Cooper makes this point:

Bottom line is that unless composers find a truly innovative and rich content that makes the use of the fifth finger indispensable, why bother? History shows that an instrumental technique is developed to meet the demands of the composer, not the reverse. You do not develop a technique and then look for someone to compose music for it...I suspect that, notwithstanding the enthusiasm, dedication, and sheer hard work of pioneers like Charles Postlewaite, it will not be until some really unmissable music appears that positively requires the fifth finger, that the guitar world will begin the serious work of regarding the smallest finger as a digit of equal importance.

The other elephant in the room is the quality of the tone of the little finger. Due to its size and the fact that it is closer to the bridge than the other fingers, I find the tone quality of the right-hand little finger to be rather thin and bright. It doesn't blend very well with the other fingers. Of course, people said that about the "a" finger when it was brought into use! But the difference in the size, length, and mass of the little finger compared to "ima" is very significant. Also, some players have very short little fingers making it even more difficult to use the finger without a major change of the right-hand position.

There are some who argue that the development of the right-hand little finger can improve the technique of the entire hand. But in my experience the advantages are exaggerated. The other brutal fact to acknowledge is that none of the great guitarists, modern or past, has pursued the use of the little finger or needed to in order to develop a good technique.

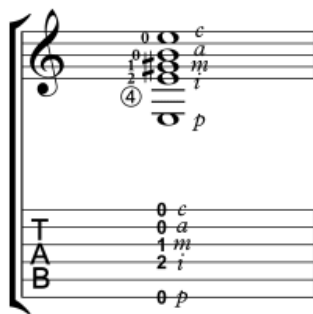
In What Pieces Can I Use the Little Finger if I Want to Give It a Try?

One of the most common potential uses of the little finger is to play 5 or 6-note chords.

Example #1 shows an E major chord played at the first and second frets. Because the 5th string is not played, the only way to play the five notes of this chord absolutely simultaneously is to employ the right-hand little finger:

Example #1

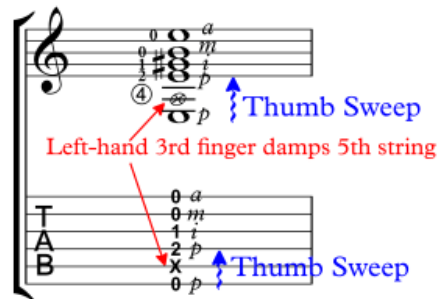
Using the right-hand little finger makes it possible to play all five notes simultaneously



Possibly, the left-hand 3rd finger could be used to damp the 5th string to allow the thumb to sweep across the bass strings eliminating the need for the right-hand little finger as shown in Example #2. It is tricky, but can be done. However, the sound is different. The notes are not truly sounded simultaneously as they are when we use the right-hand little finger:

Example #2

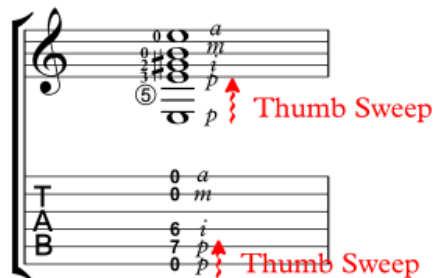
Left-hand 3rd finger damps 5th string to allow thumb sweep instead of using right-hand little finger.



Or, we could re-finger the chord in the middle of the neck so there is no skipped string as shown in Example #3. This would allow us to use the thumb to sweep across the 6th and 5th strings, again eliminating the need for the right-hand little finger. But once again, the notes are not truly sounded simultaneously. Therefore, the sound is different from that where the notes of the chord are played simultaneously using the right-hand little finger.

Example #3

Left hand re-fingered to allow thumb sweep instead of using right-hand little finger.



The notes of the C7 chord in Example #4a may be played simultaneously by employing the right-hand little finger to pluck the first string. Or in this case, the left-hand third finger can easily be used to damp the 5th string to allow the thumb to sweep the bass strings and eliminating the use of the right-hand little finger. But again, the thumb sweep produces a different effect:

Example #4a

T	0	c
A	1	a
B	2	i
	3	p

Example #4b

Left-hand 3rd finger
damps 5th string

Thumb Sweep

Thumb Sweep

T	0	a
A	1	m
B	3	i
	2	p
	x	
	3	p

Even on a chord not requiring any left-hand finger damping, the results are the same. The simultaneous pluck of all five notes using the right-hand little finger (Example #5a) sounds different from the use of the thumb sweep (Example #5b):

Example #5a

T	0	c
A	0	a
B	1	m
	2	i
	0	p

Example #5b

Thumb Sweep

Thumb Sweep

T	0	a
A	0	m
B	1	i
	2	p
	0	p

Six-string chords require the use of a thumb sweep regardless of whether the right-hand little finger is used or not (Example #6a and #6b):

Example #6a

Example #6a shows a musical notation for a thumb sweep across 2 strings. The treble clef staff shows a chord with notes C, A, and G. The bass clef staff shows a chord with notes C, A, and G. Red arrows indicate a thumb sweep across 2 strings in both staves.

Example #6b

Example #6b shows a musical notation for a thumb sweep across 3 strings. The treble clef staff shows a chord with notes C, A, and G. The bass clef staff shows a chord with notes C, A, and G. Red arrows indicate a thumb sweep across 3 strings in both staves.

As previously mentioned, Heitor Villa-Lobos freely used the right-hand little finger. Almost any 5-note chord in his music can be played using the little finger (Examples 7 through 10):

Example #7

Prélude No. 4 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Example #7 shows a musical notation for a 5-note chord in the treble and bass clefs. The treble clef staff shows a 5-note chord with notes C, A, G, F, and E. The bass clef staff shows a 5-note chord with notes C, A, G, F, and E. The notation includes fingerings and dynamics.

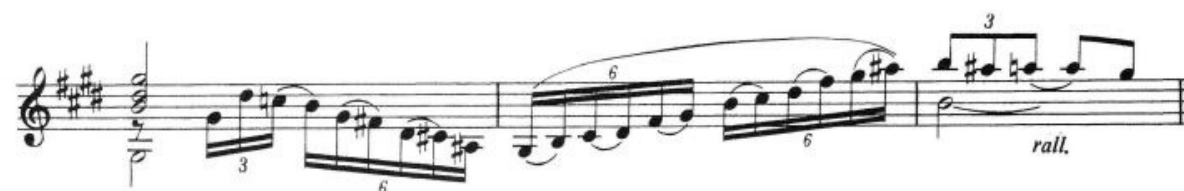
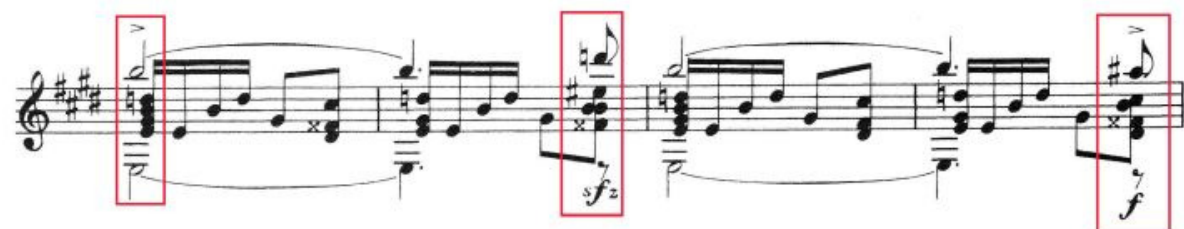
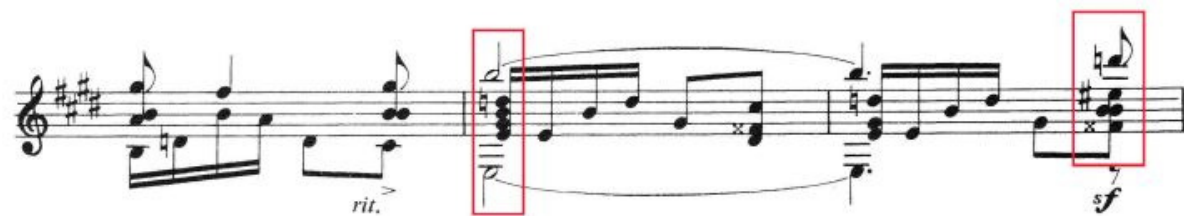
Example #8

Prélude No. 4 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Final Chord

The image shows the final chord of the piece, written for guitar. The notation is presented in two systems. The top system is a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The chord is a C major triad (C-E-G) with a C major 7th (B) added, resulting in a C major 9th chord (C-E-G-B-A). The notes are written as a whole chord, with a 'C' above the staff and a '7' below the staff. The bottom system is a guitar-specific notation showing the fret positions for the strings: Treble (T) 0, Alto (A) 0, Bass (B) 2, and Bass (B) 5. The notes are written as a whole chord, with a 'C' above the staff and a '7' below the staff.

Example #9: *Etude No. 8* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)



Example #10: *Prélude No. 3* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

84

Prélude N°3

in A minor

Heitor Villa-Lobos

Andante

mf *rall.* *a tempo* *rit.*

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Some guitarists believe Villa-Lobos intended the arpeggio in *Prélude No. 2* to be executed using the right-hand little finger (Example #11):

Example #11

Prélude No. 2 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Piu mosso

p i m a c a m i p i m a p i m a p i m a c a m i p i m a p i m a

p i m a c a m i p i m a p i m a p i m a c a m i p i m a p i m a

p i m a c a m i a m i a m i a m p i m a c a m i a m i a m i a m

p i m a c a m i a m i a m i a m p i m a c a m i a m i a m i a m

Guitarist Kazuhito Yamashita uses the little finger in his transcription of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It is marked with *ch* in the score. Here is an excerpt (Example #12) from *The Old Castle*:



Although I know of no evidence that Mauro Giuliani wrote or spoke of using the little finger, it could be used in these passages from *Papillon*, op. 50, no. 17 and 18 shown in this scan of an early edition (Example #13):

Allegretto.
N^o 17.

Allo.
N^o 18.

The Bottom Line

The right-hand little finger is commonly used for rasgueados, string damping, and percussion techniques. Some guitarists use it for the execution of right-hand harmonics. It can be used to great advantage to play five and six-note chords, particularly in the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos. Although very few guitarists have ever used it as an integral component of right-hand technique, I applaud those who continue to explore its possibilities.