

The Right-Hand Little Finger

By Douglas Niedt

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Have you ever performed an activity reasonably well and effortlessly (tennis, running, batting, throwing a ball, swimming, etc.) and then had someone ask questions such as:

1. How far do you move your arm?
2. When do you breathe?
3. How far do you move your leg?
4. Which joint are you moving from?

You realize you've never thought about these things and when you analyze your movements to answer their question, you get all tangled up trying to recreate the natural movements you've always made without conscious thought.

The movements of the right-hand little finger are likewise something most of us rarely think about or notice. So I hope this article on how it is used doesn't cause confusion and tangle up your right hand!

First, the Terminology

The right-hand little finger or "pinky", or "pinkie", is designated by several different symbols. Here are a few:

- c=chiquito
- ch=chiquito
- d=dedo meñique (little finger)
- e=extremo. Spanish for last, terminal, final, end. (Thanks to reader Egor for enlightening me on this one!)
- x=Possibly another letter name for the Spanish word, extremo.

- q=meñique
- s=small or señalar (point)

Flamenco guitarist Juan Martín typically uses the letter e to represent the pinky. Paco Peña uses the letter x, and Juan Serrano uses the letter s.

The letter "c" is seen most frequently so that is what I use.

The Position of the Right-Hand Little Finger for Normal Playing

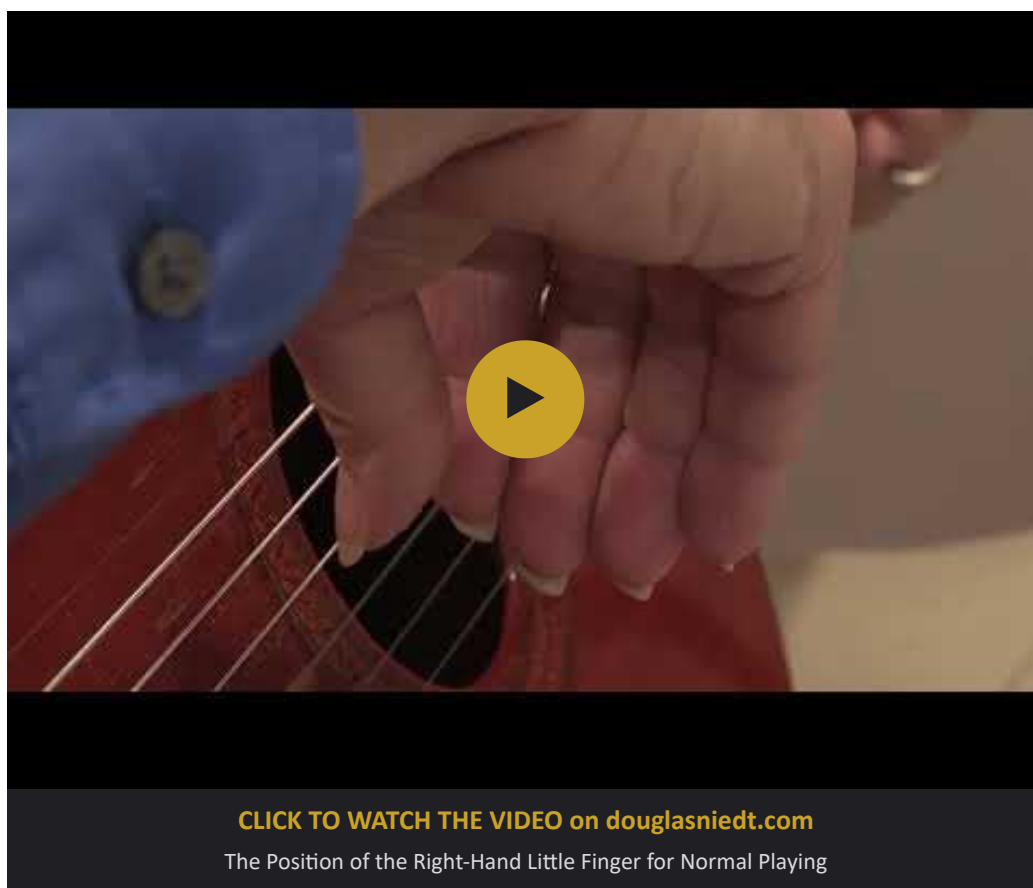
The goal is for the right-hand little finger to be totally relaxed. A tense little finger will probably add tension to the other fingers (especially the “a” finger) and hand. If it is sticking out, it is not relaxed. If it is curled in, it is not relaxed. Except for those with very thin fingers, it should naturally touch or lightly rub against the “a” finger. That is pretty straightforward and an easy diagnostic.

In addition, it may or may not move with the “a” finger. When it does move, it is a sympathetic, small, gentle movement. Most of the movement in the finger will be from the middle joint with some movement from the back joint. Some describe it as “moving as one” with the “a” finger. Some players have corrected their little finger from sticking out or curling up by practicing with a rubber band around the “a” finger and little finger (not too tight). Some achieve positive results in days. Some say it takes months. Others say it doesn’t work at all.

By the way, the reason I say that the little finger might not move with the “a” finger is that I have actually worked on making my pinky independent from the other fingers (mostly for percussion effects), so it moves very little and is *totally* relaxed when the other fingers play.

I am a proponent of the no follow-through school of right-hand finger movements. Therefore, my finger movements are small and the little finger’s movements are likewise small. If you have been taught to use fairly large follow-through movements, the movements of the little finger will be commensurately larger as well.

Watch me demonstrate how the little finger should look and work:

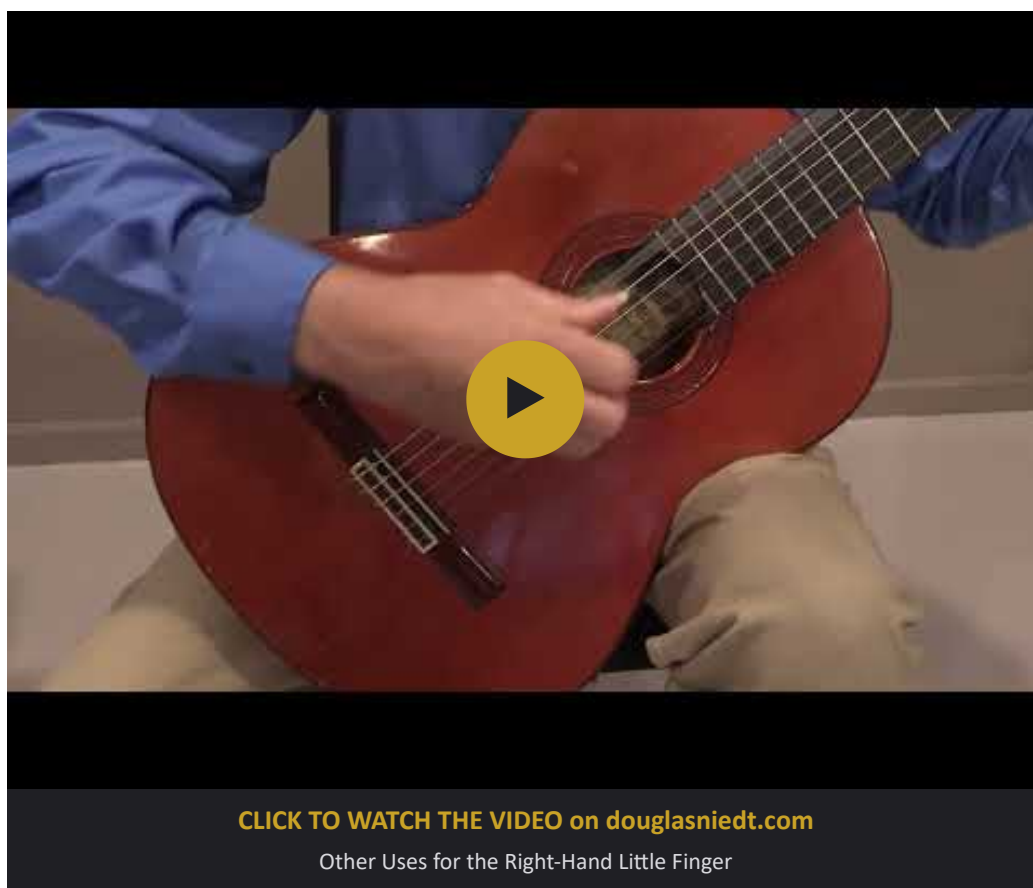


When I play a traditional “pami” tremolo, my little finger follows the movements of the “a” finger. But, if I use a “pimi” or “pmim” tremolo pattern, the little finger moves very little.

Other Uses for the Right-Hand Little Finger

Percussion techniques

The right-hand little finger is sometimes employed in percussion passages. Watch me demonstrate a percussion excerpt from Jorge Morel’s arrangement of *Carioca*:



Rasgueados

The little finger is often used to play rasgueados. [Read my technique tip on Rasgueados to learn more.](#)

String Damping

If you have read my [technique tip on String Damping](#), you learned that one of the steps of polishing a piece is the application of string damping throughout the piece. A great way to clean up your playing is to damp unwanted resonances and clashes of notes and harmonies. The right-hand little finger can be very useful for this type of string damping.

Using the right-hand little finger as an anchor finger

The little finger is commonly used as an anchor finger in pizzicato effects. [See my technique tip on Pizzicato.](#)

However, a *very few* players advocate the use of the right-hand little finger in normal playing as an anchor to rest on the guitar itself! They cite the fact that many 19th-century players set their little finger on the soundboard as their default hand position for stability. However, on older instruments the strings were

closer to the soundboard than they are today. Setting the finger on the guitar would not have distorted the position as much as it would on a modern classical guitar. Also, at that time the “a” finger was not used very much. And since anchoring the little finger has little effect on the mobility of “im” it could indeed have been a beneficial technique in those days. However, anchoring the little finger absolutely affects the mobility of the “a” finger. Today, because the “a” finger is used nearly as much as “i” or “m”, the loss of mobility precludes the use of the little finger as an anchor for normal playing.

Yes, some fingerstyle jazz and steel-string acoustic players such as Martin Taylor plant the little finger on the guitar as an anchor. But Taylor actually recommends that you not do it. And again, the steel-string guitar is quite a different animal from the classical guitar. The strings are very close to the soundboard or pick guard so using the anchor results in little distortion of the hand position.

I also think the viability of using the little finger as an anchor is greatly dependent on the length of the finger. If a player has a relatively short little finger compared to the others, using it comfortably as an anchor will be difficult.

Right-hand and artificial harmonics

Some guitarists say they can produce better-sounding right-hand and artificial harmonics by plucking them with the little finger instead of the “a” finger. I have never found that to be true, but you can give it a try for yourself.

Part 2 coming next month! How to use the right-hand little finger to play passages in pieces.