STRING DAMPING, Part 4 (conclusion)

By Douglas Niedt

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USING THE RIGHT-HAND FINGERS TO DAMP STRINGS.

Sometimes we come upon a situation where none of the previous methods of string damping works very well. This is where the right-hand string damping technique comes to the rescue.

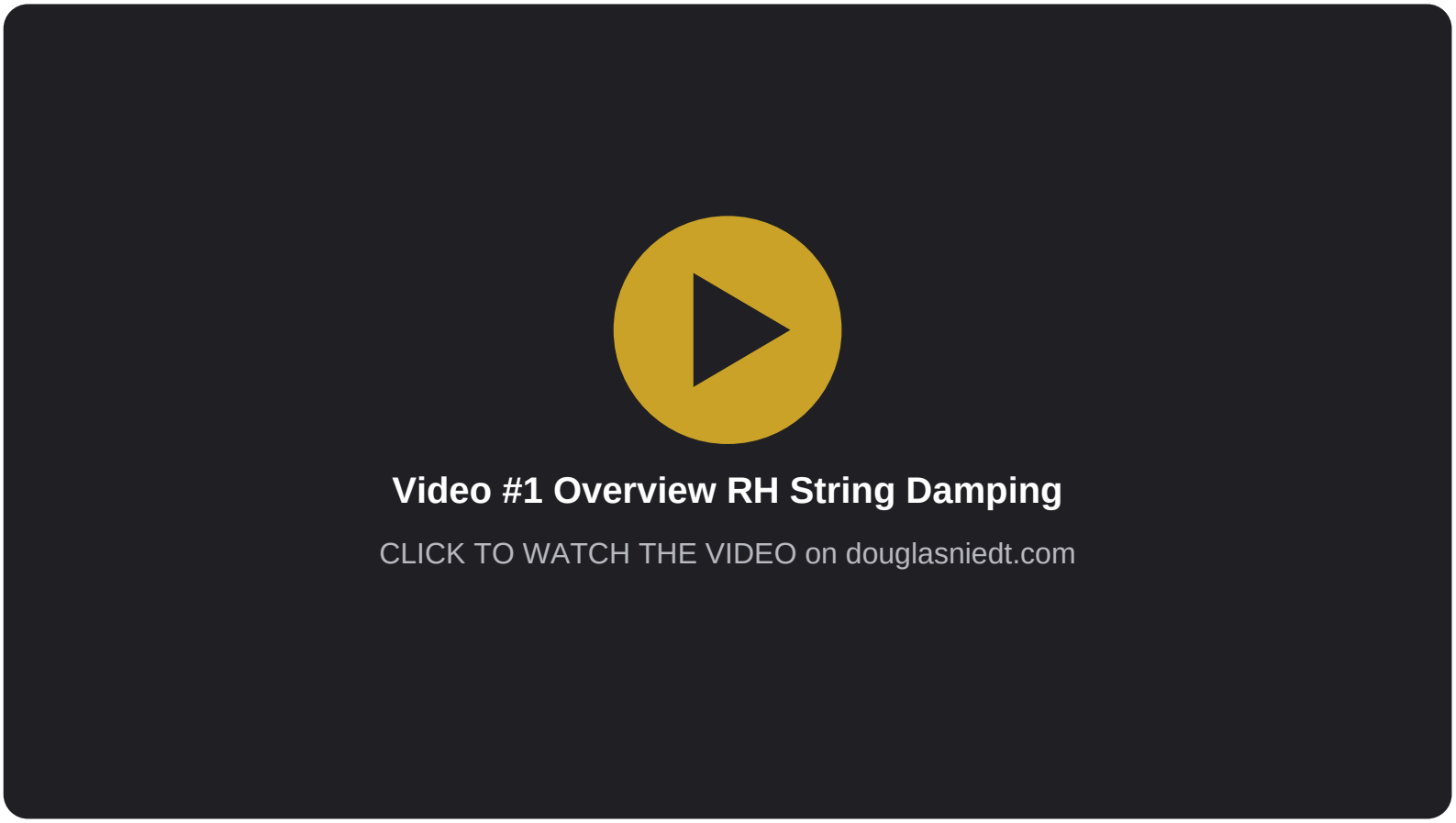
The right-hand finger damping technique is difficult to learn, but may become your favorite damping technique to use.

The right-hand string damping technique is definitely more complicated and difficult to learn than any of the other string damping techniques we have covered. At first, it will probably cause mistakes in your playing. You will need to be persistent and continue to practice the technique until it is second nature. Once learned, you may prefer it to other string damping techniques because *it doesn't affect the left or right-hand position or left-hand finger positioning and placement*. It also damps the offensive note *simultaneously* as the next note or chord is plucked.

Flesh/Nail contact of the damping finger

Whenever *i, m,* or *a* (alone or together) damp a string, or the thumb damps a single string, it is crucial that the finger(s) or thumb lands on the string flesh and nail together. It is no different from normal playing. The tendency will be to land on the flesh only when damping. This will not negatively affect the damp itself. But often, the finger or thumb that damps a string will pluck that same string after the string damp. If the finger or thumb is not against the nail, it must reposition itself on the string to play. This will negatively affect precision and speed. If the string damp is done with *c* (the right-hand pinky or little finger), it is not necessary to contact the nail. Flesh only will suffice.

VIDEO 1 Watch me introduce the basics and positive aspects of this technique.

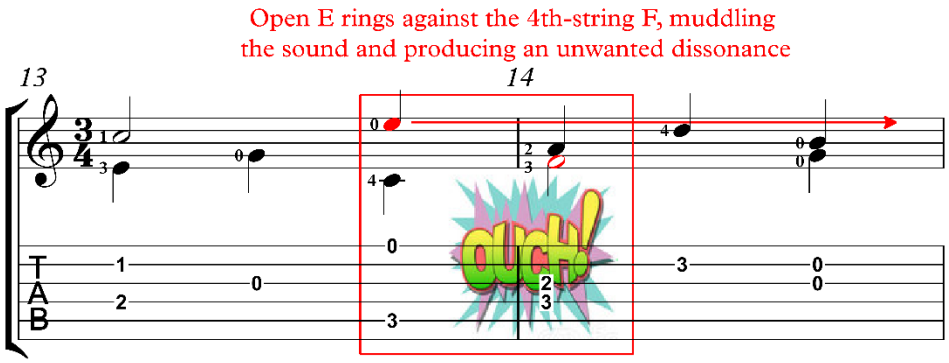


Damping higher string X simultaneously as lower string Y is plucked

Look at this example from Fernando Sor's *Progressive Lessons, Op. 31 No, 1*.

Example No. 46:

The open E on beat #3 of m13 ringing into m14 produces an unwanted clash or dissonance with the 4th-string F on beat #1 of m14. To stop the open E from ringing, we use a right-hand string damp.

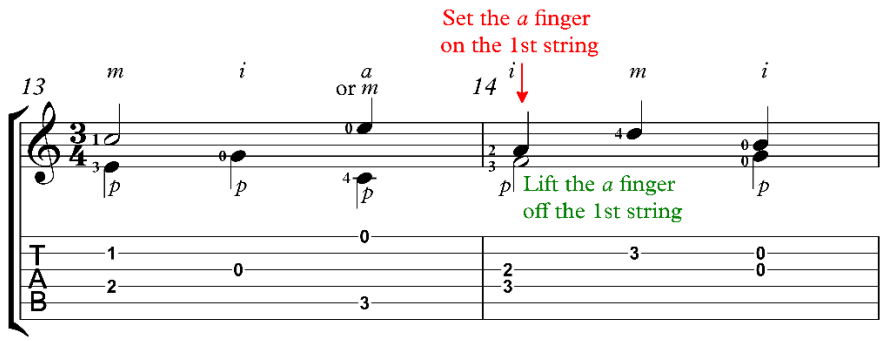


As noted in the example, we want to damp the open E so it doesn't clash with the 4th-string F natural on the downbeat of m14, or with the D that follows on the second beat of m14. On the downbeat of m14, the 2nd finger is on the 3rd-string A.

We could try to lean that finger over to damp the first string. But leaning over that far could cause the 3rd finger to also lean over too far which would damp the A. A safer and effective method to damp the open E is to use the right-hand *a* finger to damp the first string as *p* and i pluck the F/A interval on the downbeat of m14.

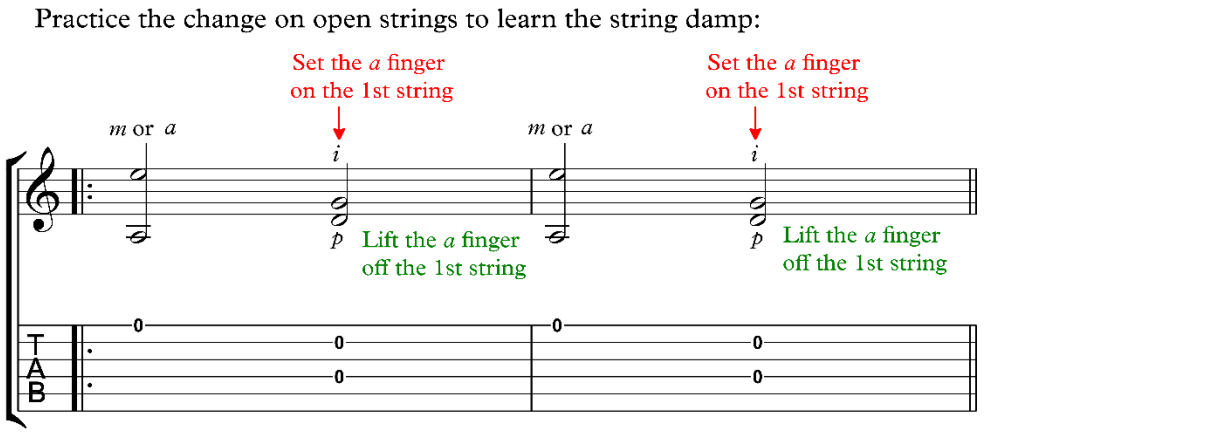
Example #47:

The string damp is performed by placing the *a* finger on the 1st string at the same instant the F/A interval is plucked by *p* and *i* on beat #1 of m14:



This can be a difficult and confusing technique to learn. Try doing it on open strings first. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together. By the way, don't worry about the ringing basses. Those strings will be fingered and will not ring when you play the piece.

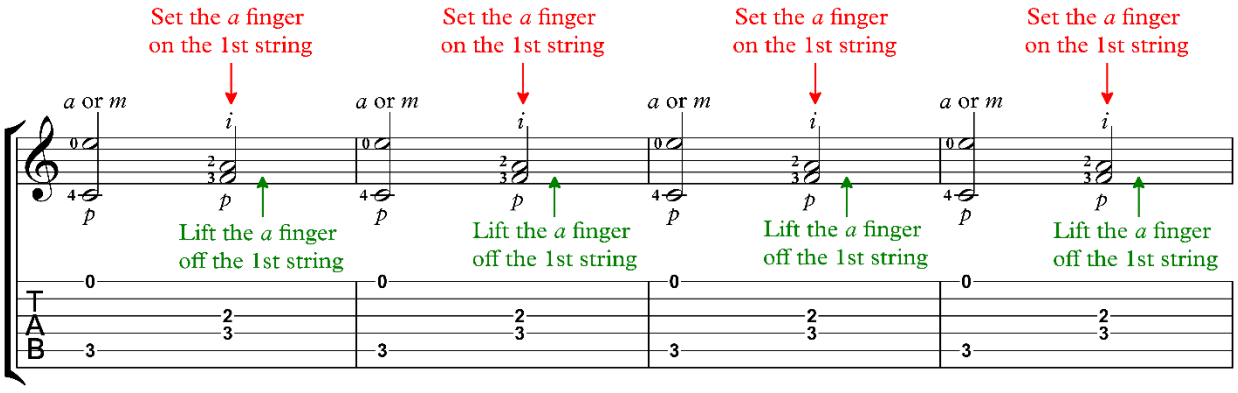
Example #48:



Be sure to damp the 1st string *exactly at the same moment* you pluck the 4th-string-3rd-string interval. Lift the *a* finger off the 1st string after plucking the interval.

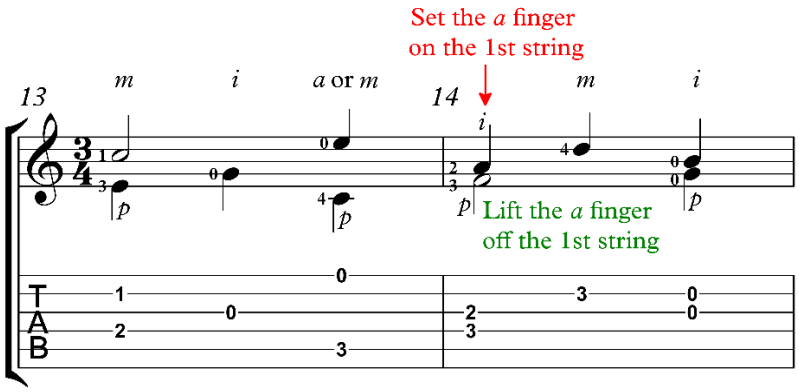
Next, practice the chord change that contains the right-hand string damp.

Example #49:



Once you can do the string damp on open strings and on the chord change itself, try it in the piece. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #50:



VIDEO 2 Watch me demonstrate these practice techniques.

Video #2 Sor Op. 31 No 2

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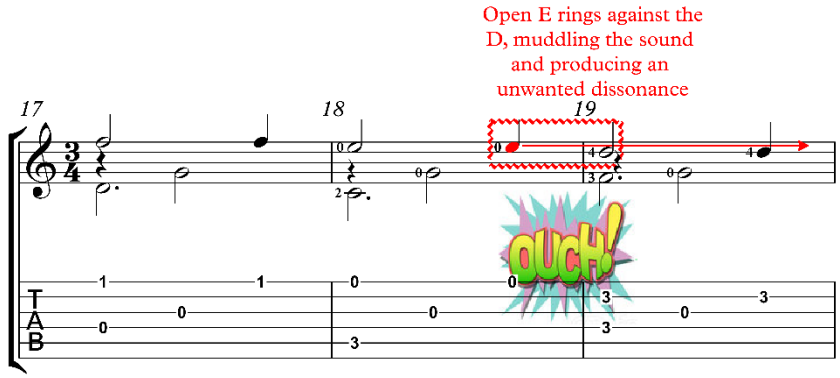
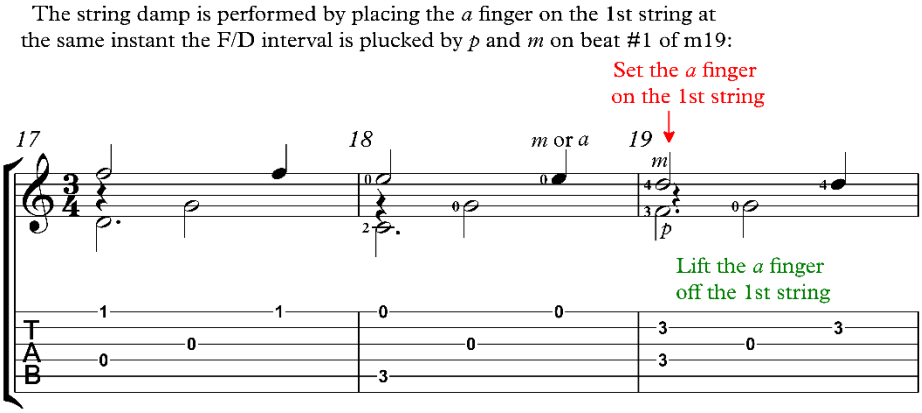
Another example occurs in the same piece from m18-19. We want to play our melody as a *line*—only one note ringing at a time. If we allow open-string melody notes to ring freely against other melody notes, we lose clarity. Sometimes, as in this example, the ringing open string produces unwanted clashes or dissonances.

Example #51:



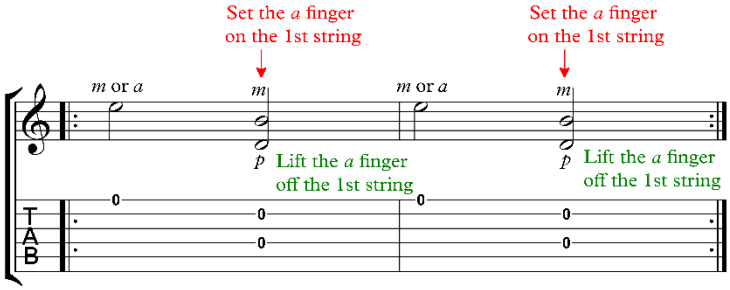
We could try to use a left-hand string damp by allowing the 4th finger to lean over and touch the open E. But it is highly likely that in doing so, the 3rd finger that is holding the F on the 4th string will accidentally damp the open G before and after the damp. A better method to stop the open E from ringing would be to use a right-hand string damp. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together. Here is how to execute the string damp.

Example #52:



Once again, if this is difficult or confusing to do, practice the technique on open strings first. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #53:

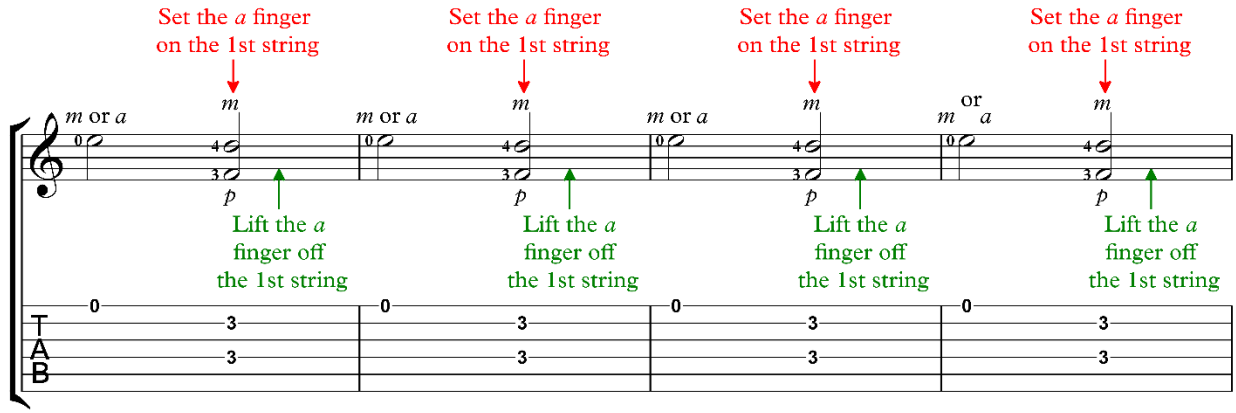


Be sure to damp the 1st string *exactly at the same moment* you pluck the interval.

Lift the *a* finger off the 1st string after plucking the interval.

Next, practice the chord change from the song and execute the right-hand string damp.

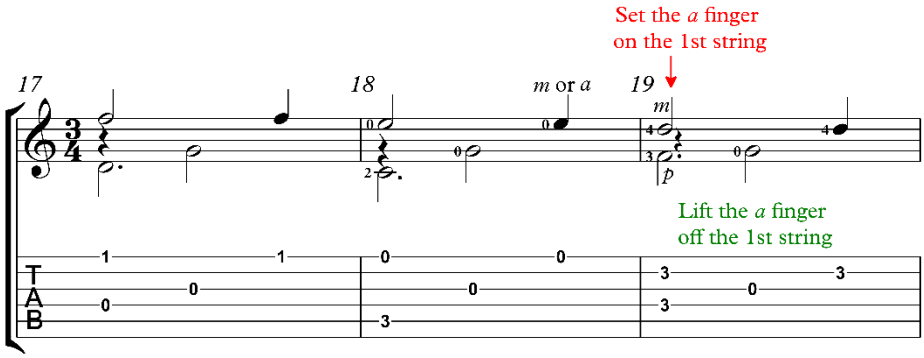
Example #54:



Once you can do the damp easily on open strings and on the chord change itself, try it again in the piece. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #55:

The string damp is performed by placing the *a* finger on the 1st string at the same instant the F/D interval is plucked by *p* and *m* on beat #1 of m19:



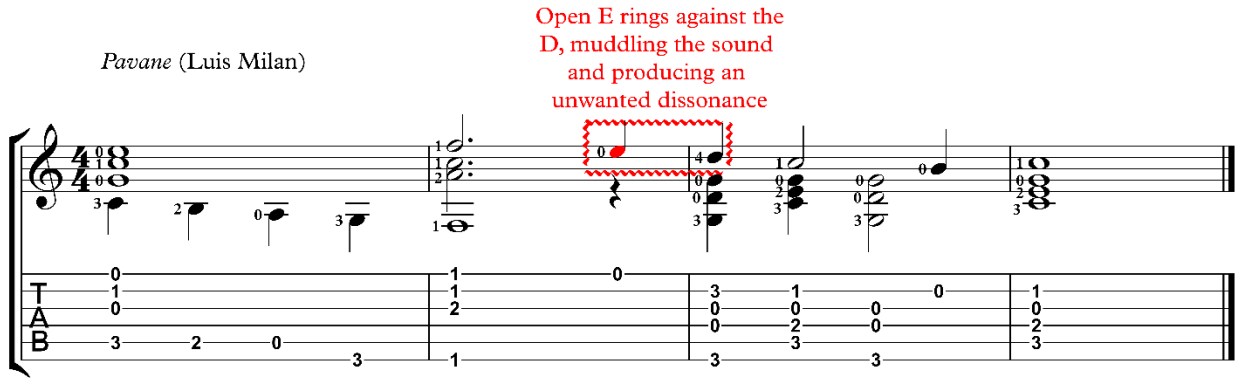
VIDEO 3 Watch me go through the process of learning this string damp.

Video #3 Sor Op 31 No 1 m17-18

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

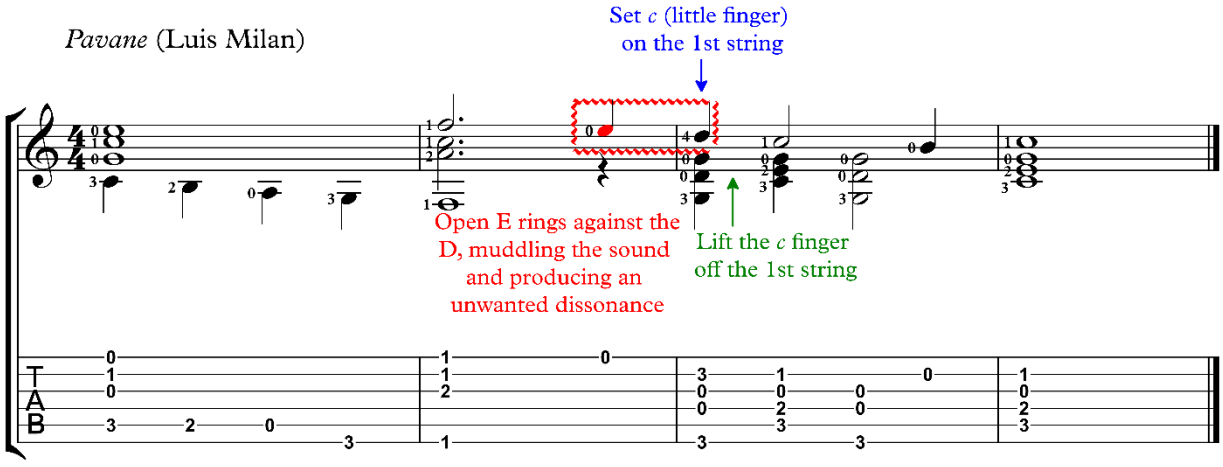
Right-hand damping works very well in chordal passages where an open string must be damped. Often *the little finger (pinky finger)* which I designate as "*c"* is used for string damping in four-voice textures. Here is the ending passage from a *Pavane* by Luis Milan.

Example #56:



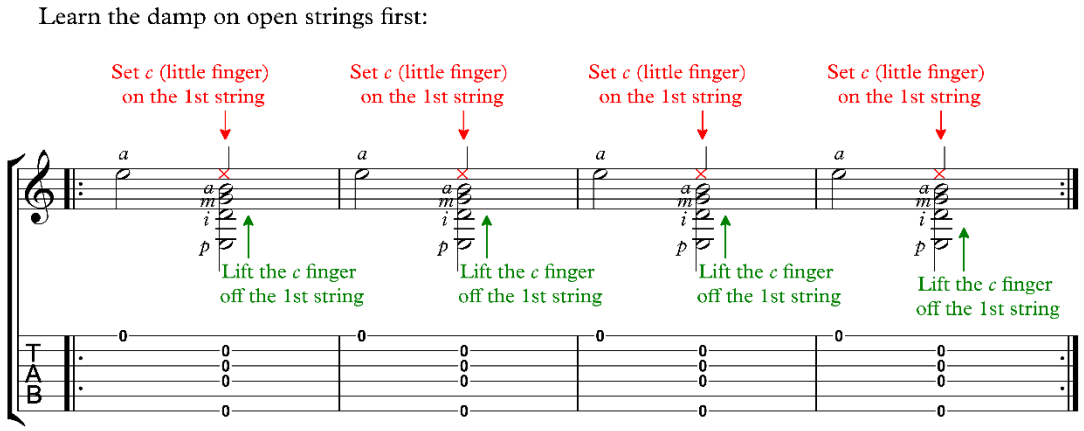
Once again, we could let the left-hand 4th finger lean over to damp the open E. But that jeopardizes the accuracy of the chord change. I prefer to use the right-hand *c* (little or pinky finger) to execute the string damp. When damping with the little finger, it is not necessary to touch flesh and nail together. Flesh only will suffice.

Example #57:



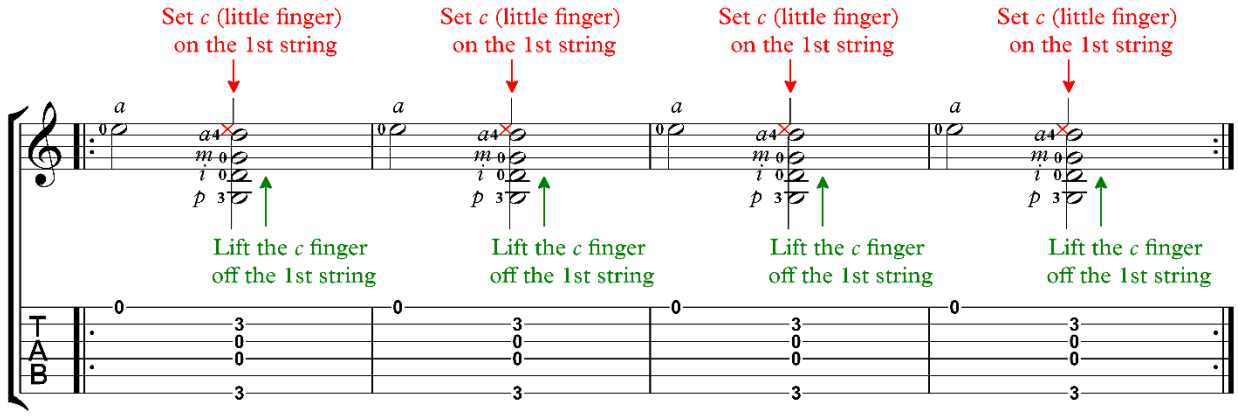
Once again, it is best to practice the damp on open strings first without the complication of having to execute the chord change too.

Example #58:



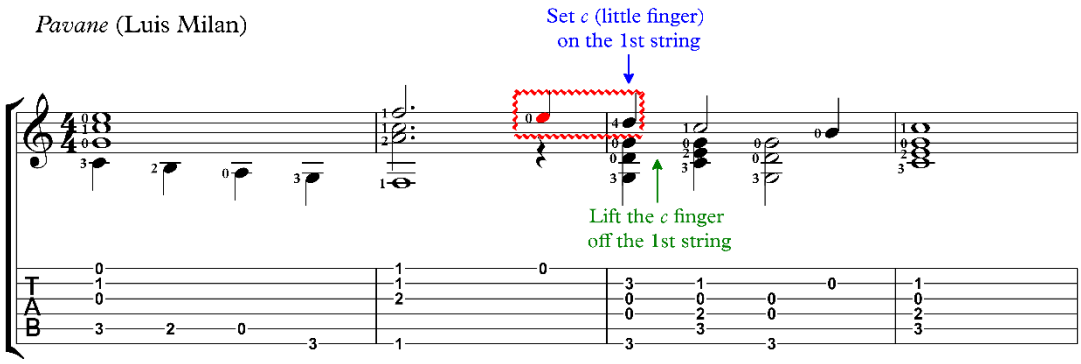
Next, practice the chord change both hands together with the right-hand string damp.

Example #59:



Finally, practice the chord change in context.

Example #60:



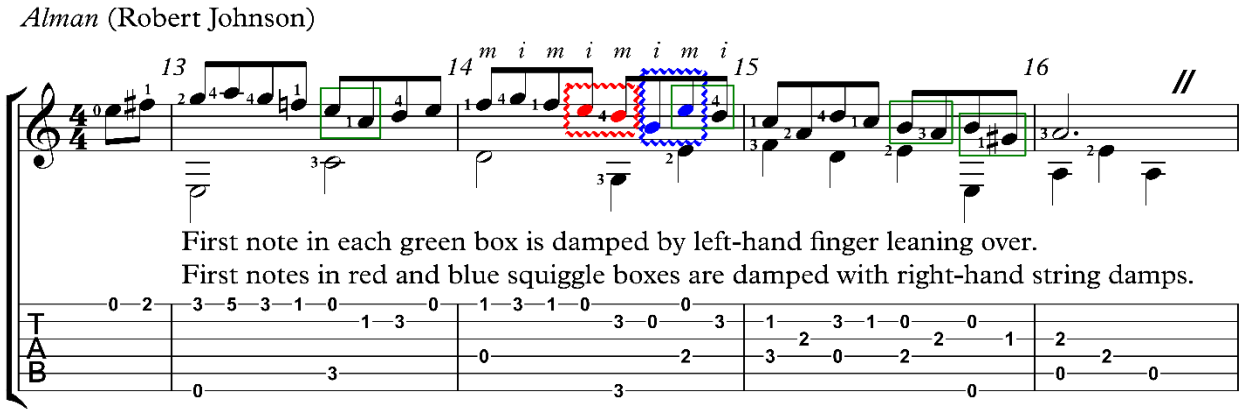
VIDEO 4 Watch me demonstrate the steps to learn the string damp in the Milan *Pavane*.

Video #4 Milan Pavane

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

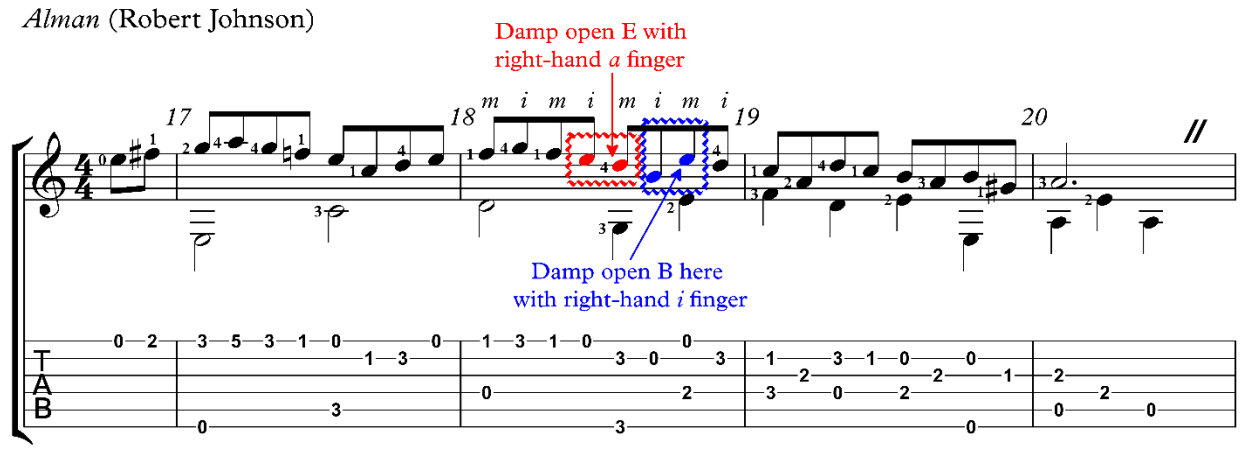
Revisiting Robert Johnson's *Alman*, we have this passage. Playing the upper voice as a pure line requires the following string damps.

Example #61:



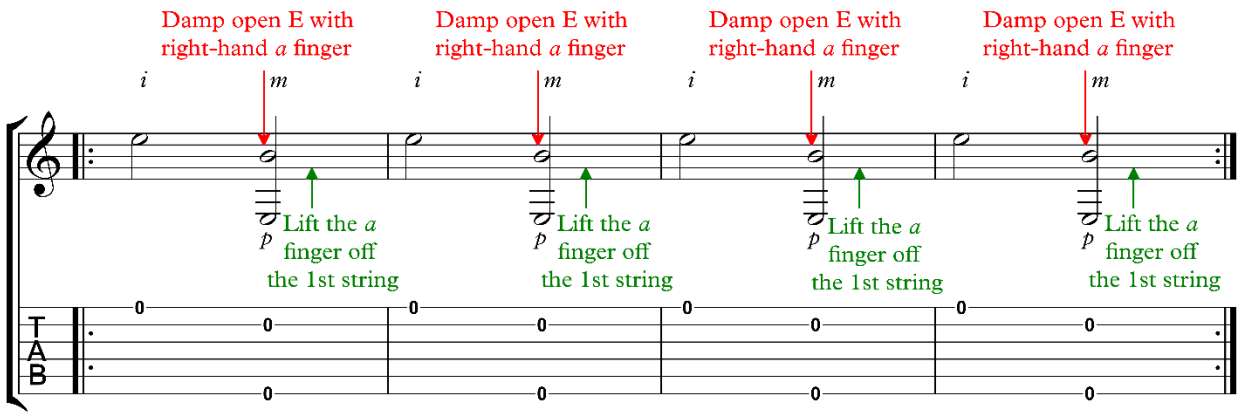
The damp in the red box and the damp in the blue box are right-hand string damps. They will be done like this.

Example #62:



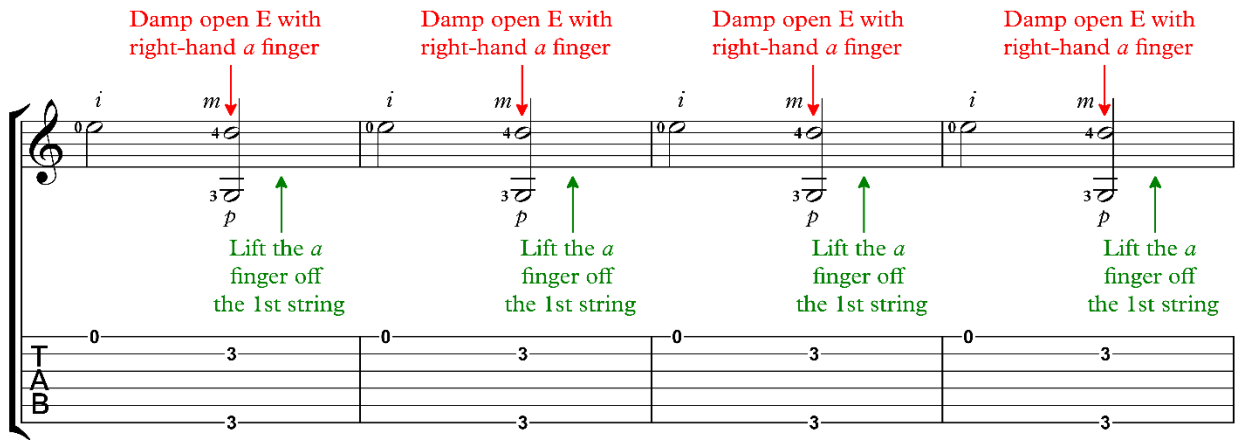
The first damp (red) can be practiced on open strings like this. This is a little tricky since you have a backwards string cross from *i* to *m*. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #63:



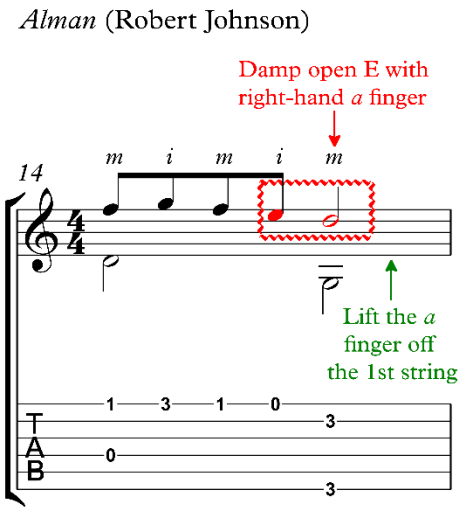
Next, practice the spot in the piece where the damp occurs, both hands together. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #64:



Now, practice the string damp in context.

Example #65:



VIDEO 5 Watch me demonstrate.

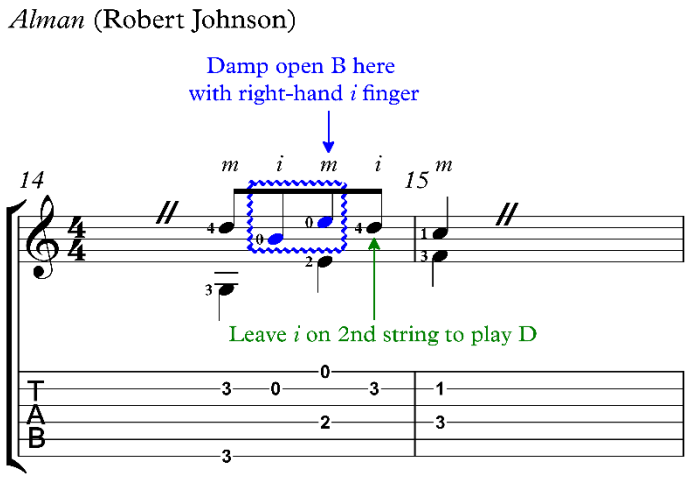
Video #5 Robert Johnson Alman First Damp

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Damping lower string X simultaneously as higher string Y is plucked

The previous right-hand finger damps we have discussed involved damps going from a higher to a lower string. The second damp in the above *Alman* requires a damp moving from a lower string to a higher string.

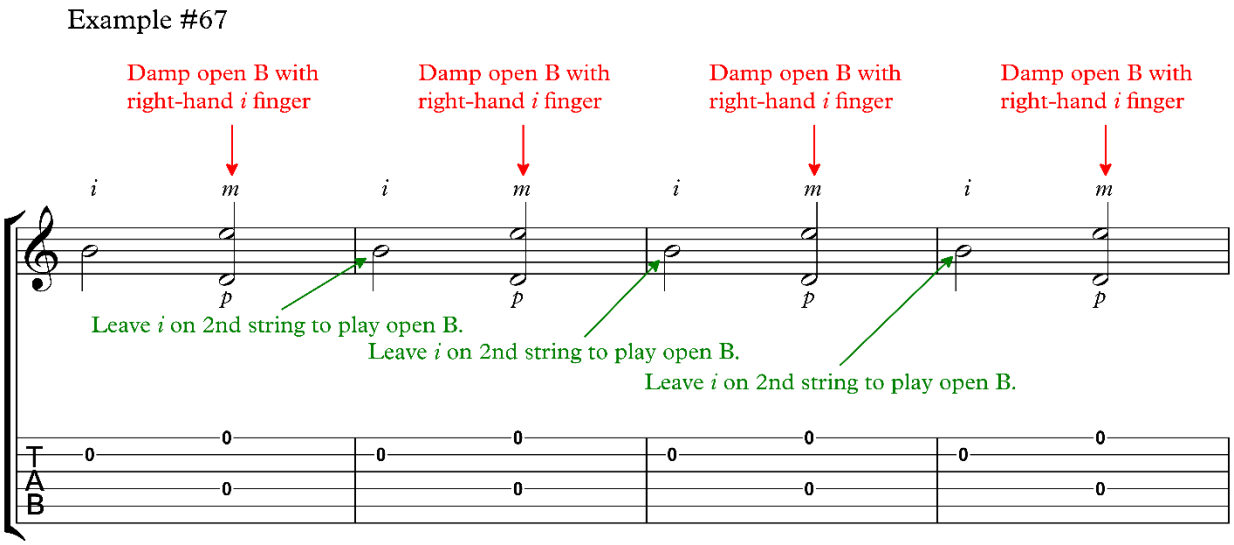
Example #66:



Notice that the string damp places the *i* finger on the second string. The following note, the D, is also on the second string. Therefore, after executing the string damp, leave *i* on the string to pluck the D. This is not an infrequent occurrence for right-hand finger damps. Always take advantage of such situations and leave the damping finger on the string to pluck the next note. This is why it is so important to execute right-hand string damps with flesh/nail together so that the damping finger is on the string properly without needing position readjustment to pluck the next note.

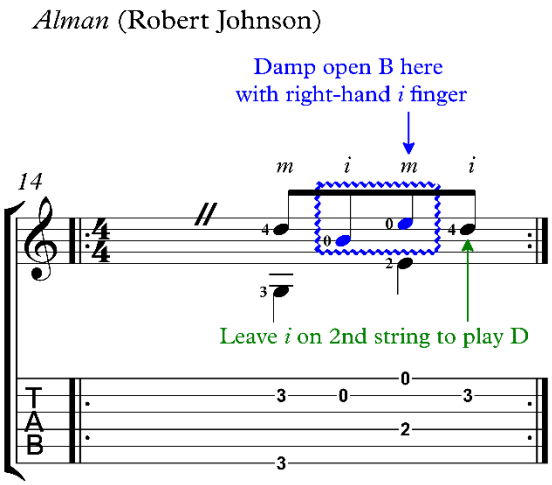
Once again, it is a good practice technique to learn this type of string damp on open strings first. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together.

Example #67:



Now, you are ready to practice the string damp in context, both hands together.

Example #68:



VIDEO 6 Watch me demonstrate how to execute this type of string damp.

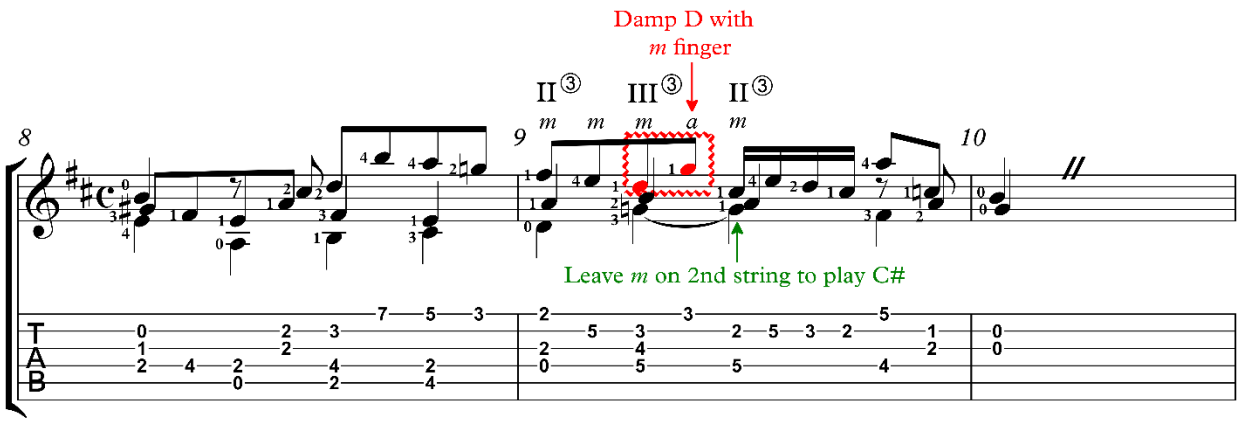
Video #6 Robert Johnson Alman Second Damp

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Another example of a right-hand string damp going from a lower to a higher string occurs in the *Fugue* from J.S. Bach's *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998*.

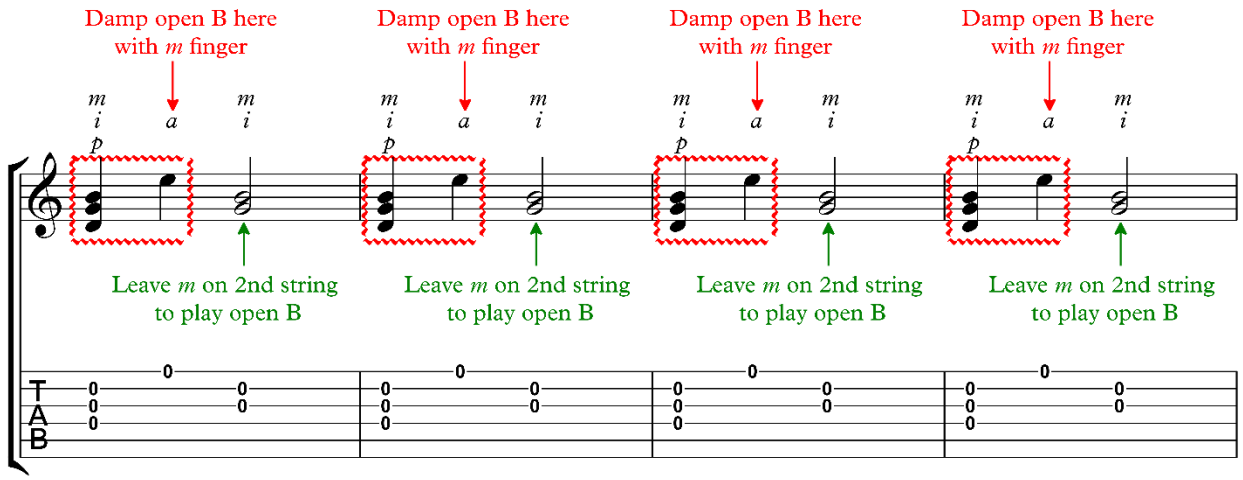
Example #69:

Fugue from Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998 (J.S. Bach)



Practice the damp on open strings first. Be sure the damping finger lands on the string flesh and nail together. By the way, don't worry about the ringing basses. Those strings will be fingered and will not ring when you play the piece.

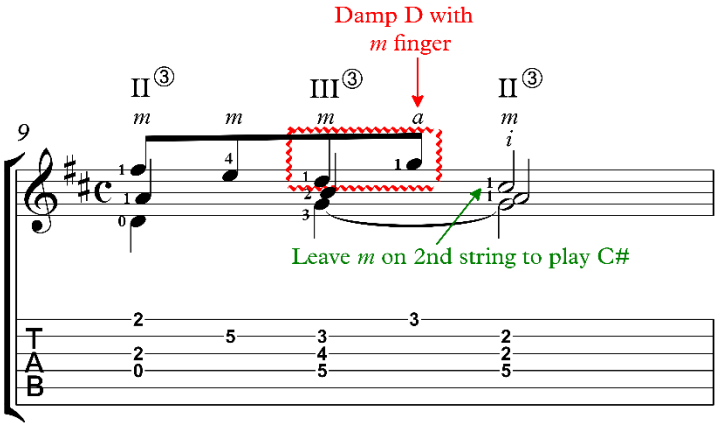
Example #70:



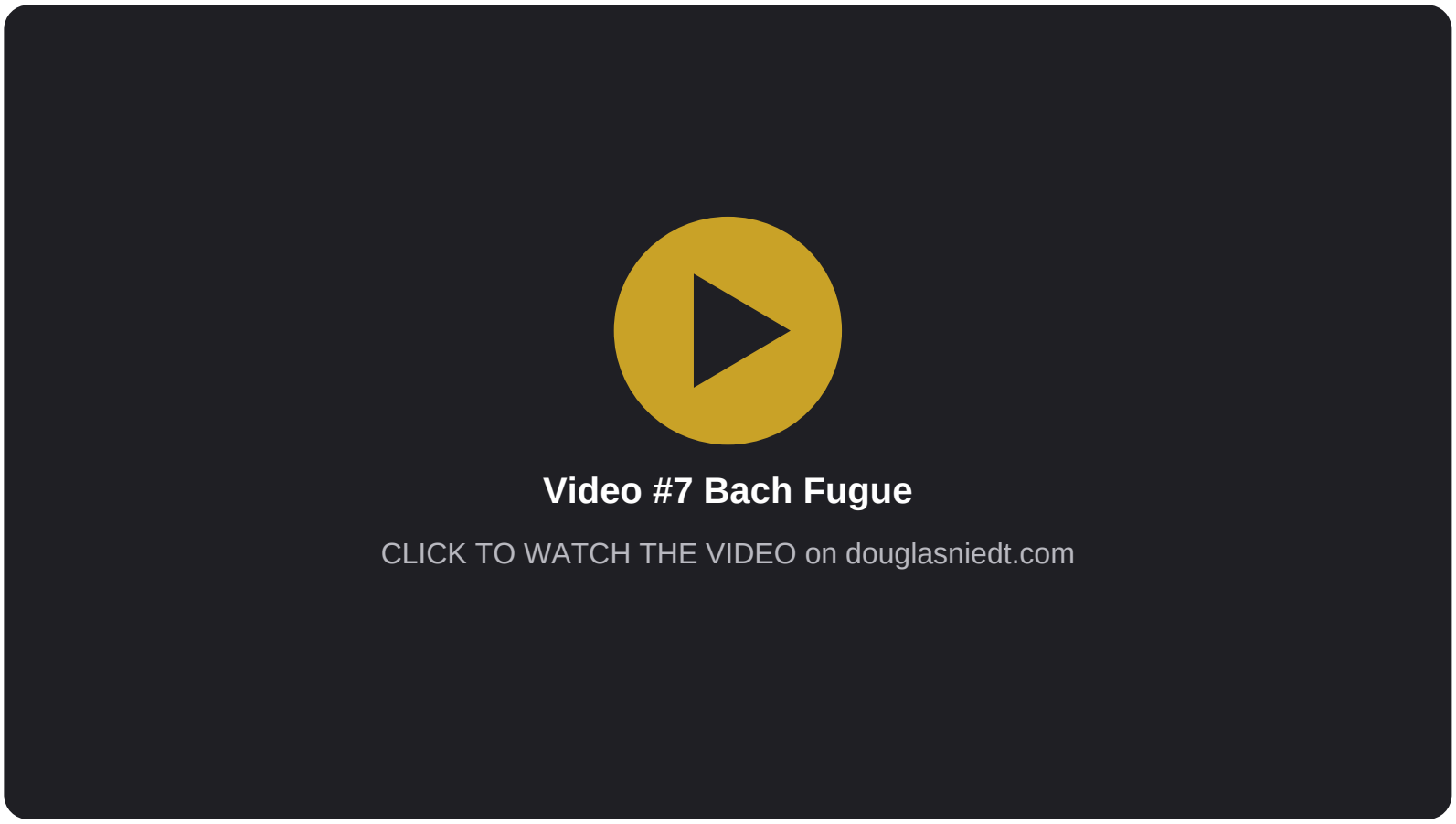
Now, practice the string damp in context.

Example #71:

Fugue from Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998 (J.S. Bach)



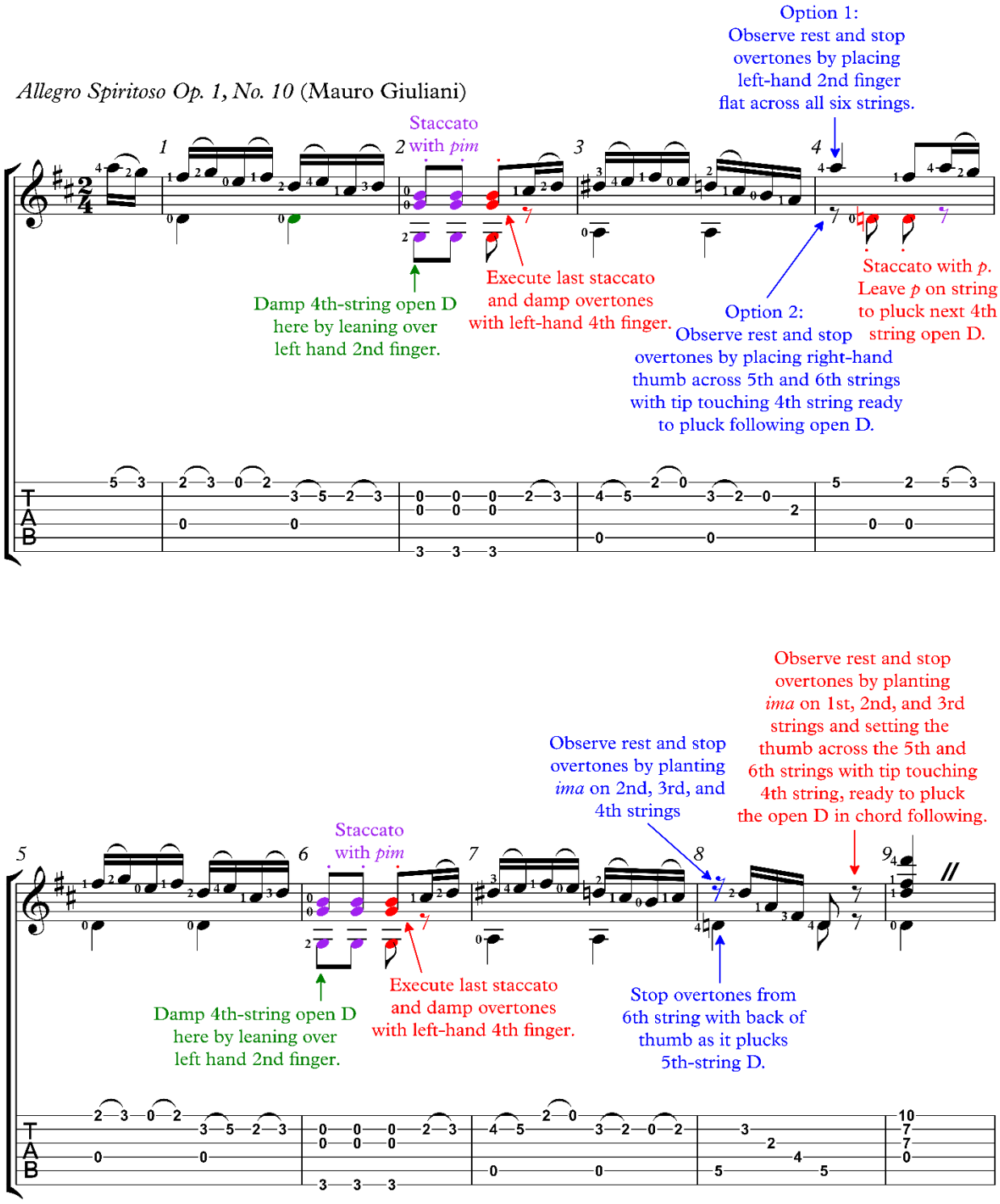
VIDEO 7 Watch me demonstrate how the Bach *Fugue* string damp is done.



Using String Damping to Observe Written Rests

Although rests are often notational conveniences, not to taken literally, in some pieces they are an integral part of the sound. Look at Mauro Giuliani's *Allegro Spiritoso Op. 1, No. 10*. The staccatos and rests make the piece come alive. The rests eliminate offensive notes from ringing too long and produce a clean and articulate sound. Try playing it without the staccatos and rests and you will see what I mean.

Example #72:

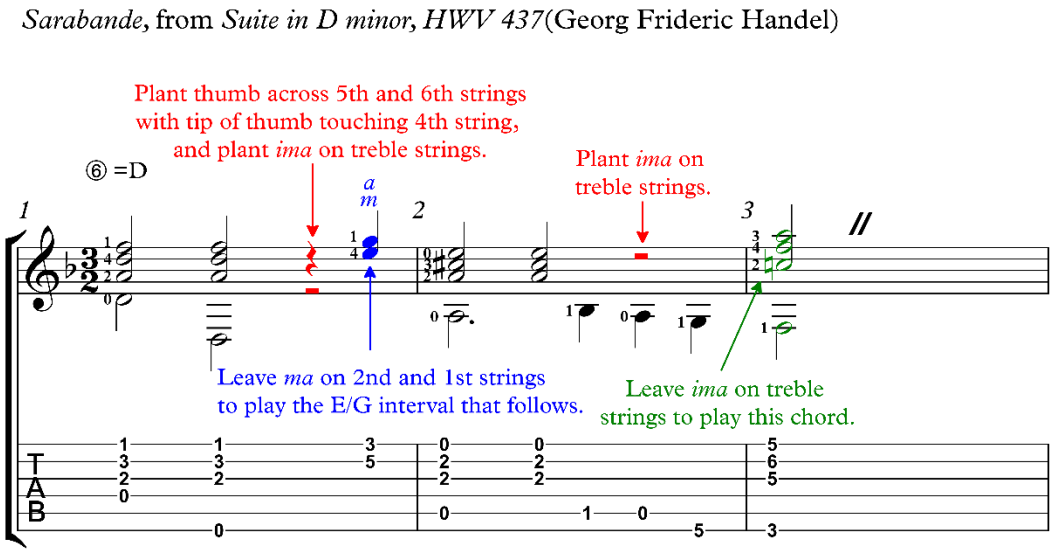

Allegro Spiritoso Op. 1, No. 10 (Mauro Giuliani)
Staccato with *pim*
Option 1: Observe rest and stop overtones by placing left-hand 2nd finger flat across all six strings.
Damp 4th-string open D here by leaning over left hand 2nd finger.
Execute last staccato and damp overtones with left-hand 4th finger.
Option 2: Observe rest and stop overtones by placing right-hand thumb across 5th and 6th strings with tip touching 4th string ready to pluck following open D.
Staccato with *p*. Leave *p* on string to pluck next 4th string open D.
Observe rest and stop overtones by planting *ima* on 2nd, 3rd, and 4th strings
Observe rest and stop overtones by planting *ima* on 1st, 2nd, and 3rd strings and setting the thumb across the 5th and 6th strings with tip touching 4th string, ready to pluck the open D in chord following.
Stop overtones from 6th string with back of thumb as it plucks 5th-string D.

Oftentimes, it is not enough to damp only the strings that are obviously ringing. Harmonics or overtones on adjacent strings must also be damped to produce a clean damp or clean rest. And, as always, be sure the damping finger or thumb lands on the string flesh and nail together.

VIDEO 8 Watch me demonstrate how to “play” the rests and the staccatos. Play it without the staccatos and rests and then with to hear difference.

The next example is another instance where the rests are usually interpreted literally. These are the opening measures to Christopher Parkening's transcription of the *Sarabande* from Georg Friederic Handel's *Suite in D minor, HWV 437*.

Example #73:



Damping with the thumb

As in the example above, the usual way to damp all three bass strings is to lay the thumb across the 5th and 6th strings and set the tip of the thumb against the 4th string flesh and nail together. That will completely damp the bass strings and will also keep the thumb out of the way of the 3rd string and the *i* finger. It will also be prepared to pluck the 4th string if the situation calls for it to do so.

Similarly, if the situation requires the thumb to damp four strings, lay the thumb across three of the strings and set the tip of the thumb against the fourth and highest string, flesh and nail together.

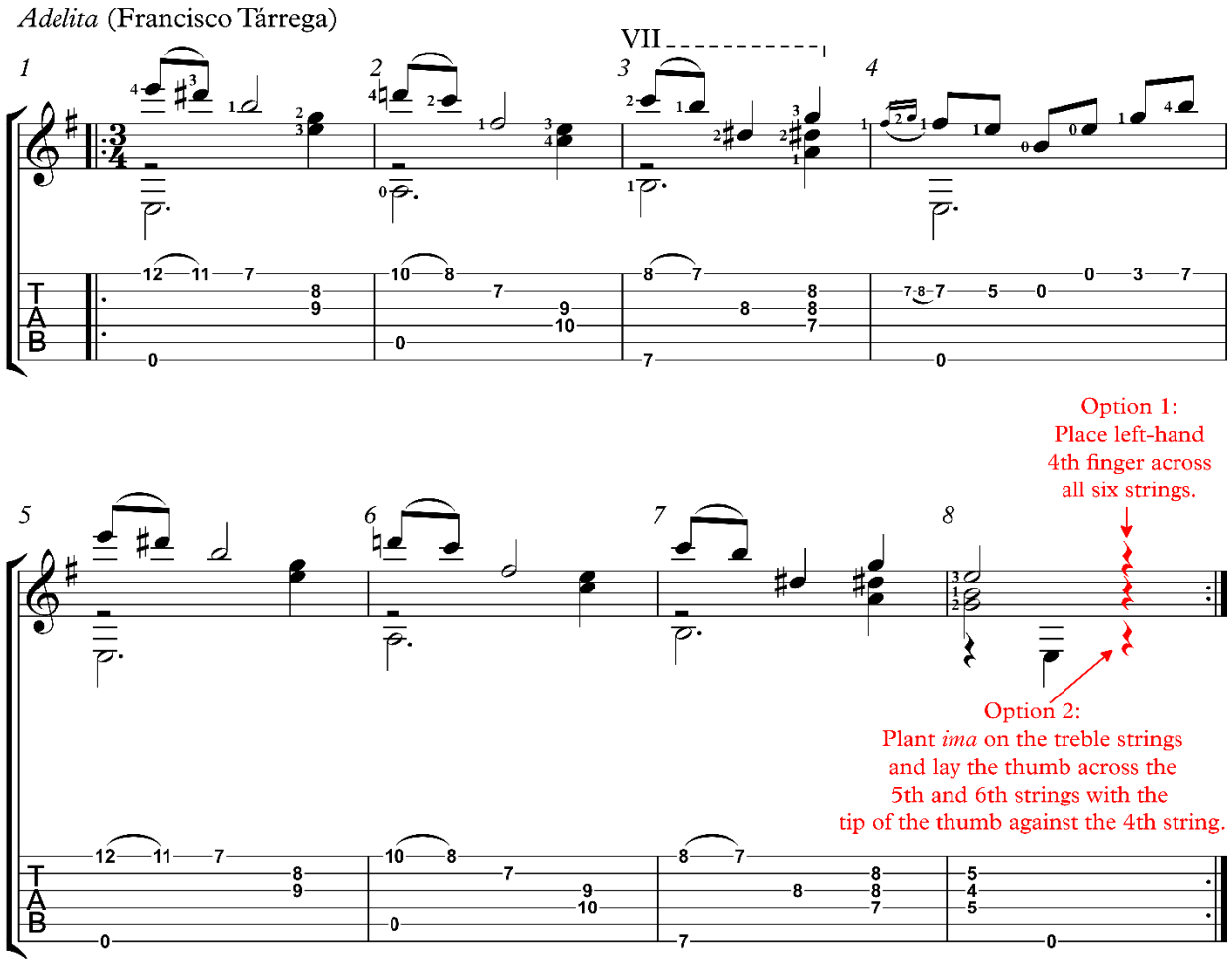
To damp only two adjacent bass strings, set the back of the thumb against the lower string and the tip of the thumb against the higher string flesh and nail together.

VIDEO 9 I'll show you.

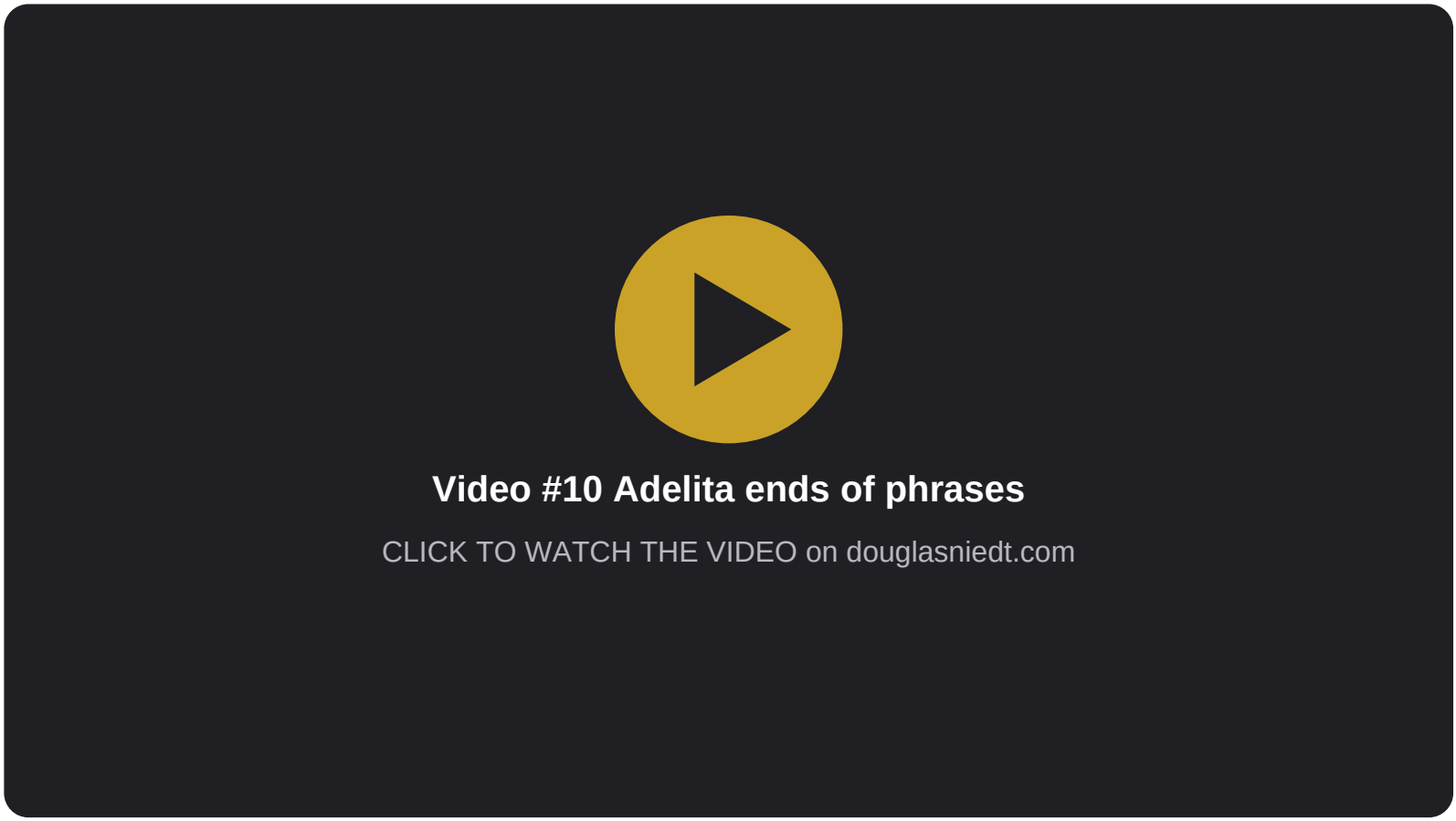
Using string damping to clarify endings of phrases

If we were singing a song, the end of a phrase would be where we stop to take a breath to begin singing the next phrase. In other words, there is a period of silence when we take the breath. In Francisco Tárrega's *Adelita*, he inserts a rest at the end of the phrase for us to "take a breath". We can use the left or right hand to damp the strings.

Example #74:



VIDEO 10 Watch me demonstrate. Caution: I will be singing in this video. Remove dogs from the room to prevent howling.



The style and context of the music affects the use of string damping

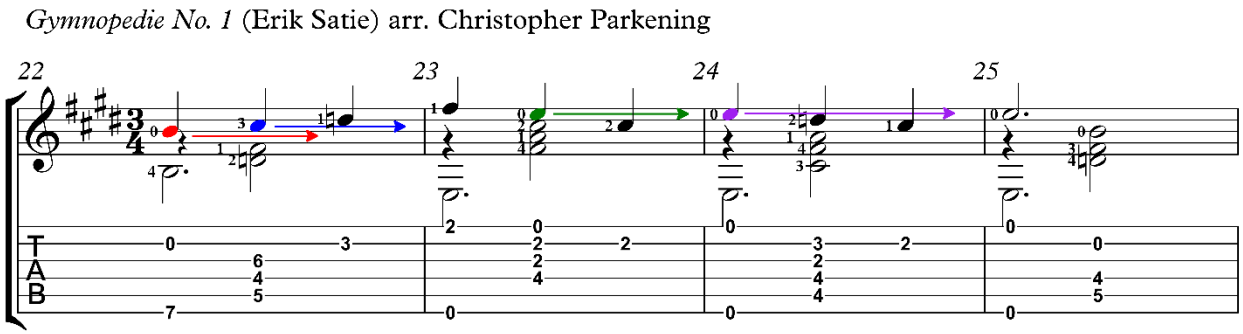
String damping is not used to the same degree in all styles of music. For instance, it is used more frequently in polyphonic and contrapuntal music than in Impressionistic and modern music.

Impressionistic Music

The *Gymnopedie No. 1,* originally for piano by Erik Satie, is an example of Impressionistic music. Many Impressionistic pieces written for the piano make liberal use of the sustain pedal. The sustain pedal allows notes to ring together even after the fingers are lifted from the piano keys. It allows notes to ring together and create dissonances and heightened resonance. It is kind of like what would happen if we had an open string for every note of the guitar and all the strings were allowed to ring together.

The dissonances and added resonance are *desirable* in Impressionistic music. Therefore, when a guitarist plays the *Gymnopedie*, little string damping should be used (except perhaps in the bass) and notes should be allowed to ring together as much as possible.

Example #75:



Notice how the notes should be held down or open strings allowed to ring wherever possible to produce the dissonances and resonances characteristic of Impressionistic music.

VIDEO 11 Listen as I demonstrate.

Video #11 Satie Gymnopedie

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Renaissance and Baroque Music

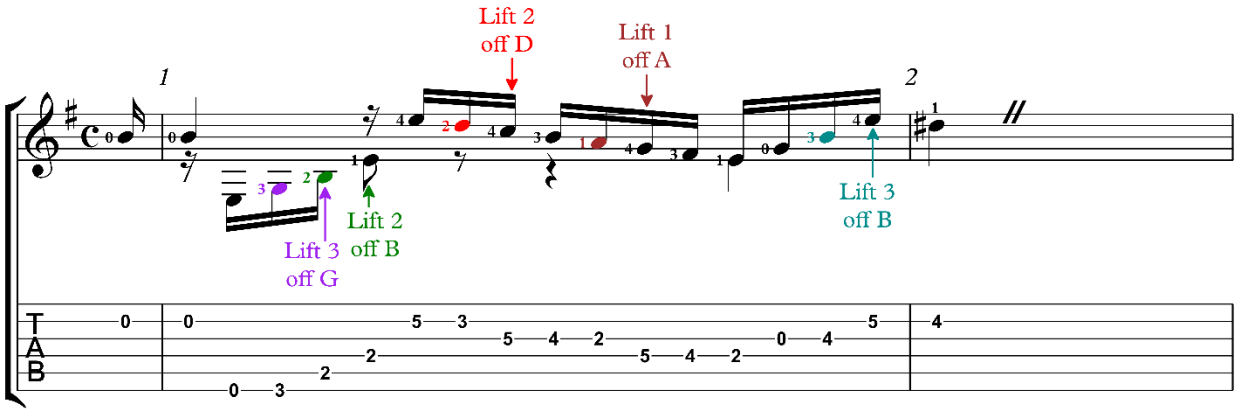
But even in Renaissance and Baroque music, where one would normally use a tremendous amount of string damping to preserve the clarity of the counterpoint, there are exceptions. Here are two versions for executing the opening measure of the *Allemande* from *Lute Suite No. 1 BWV 996* by J.S. Bach.

First is the traditional by-the-book method of execution. It is fingered and played so that only one note can ring at a time in either voice. Notes within a voice do not ring together. This preserves the clarity of the two separate voices.

Example #76:

Allemande from *Lute Suite No. 1 BWV 998* (J.S. Bach)

Fingered and played as strict counterpoint. Each note is played its precise written value.
No notes within a voice are allowed to ring together.



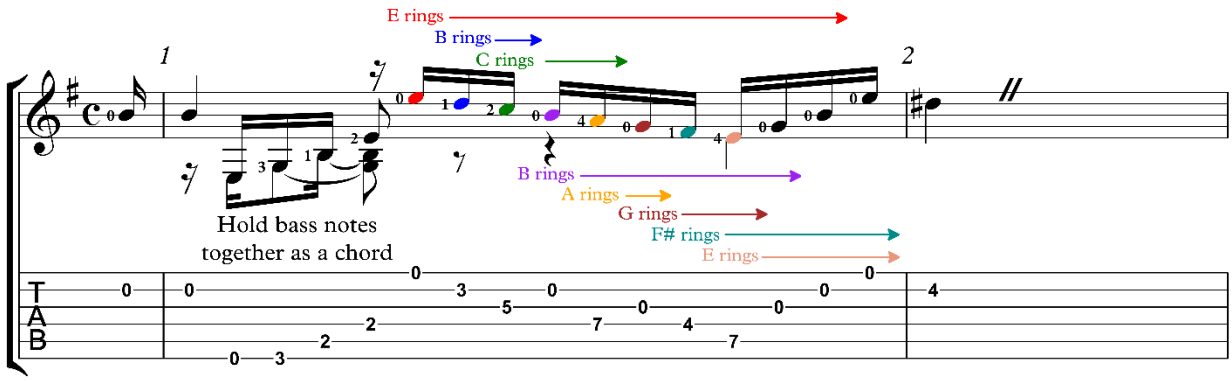
The next version is an example of campanella fingering. Campanella means little bell. It is a technique thought to have originated with lutenists. The idea is to play each note of a passage (often a scalar segment) on a different string so that each note overlays the previous ones and the maximum resonance, sustain, and often dissonance is achieved in the passage. I think it is a great effect, but one that shouldn't be overused or it loses its impact.

Here again is the first measure of the *Allemande* fingered so that the notes ring together as much as possible.

Example #77:

Allemande from *Lute Suite No. 1 BWV 998* (J.S. Bach)

Fingered and played in campanella style. All the notes and held and allowed to ring together as much as possible.



The two versions sound totally different but both are legitimate interpretations. In fact, many guitarists combine elements of both.

VIDEO 12 Listen as I demonstrate.

Video #12 Bach Allemande

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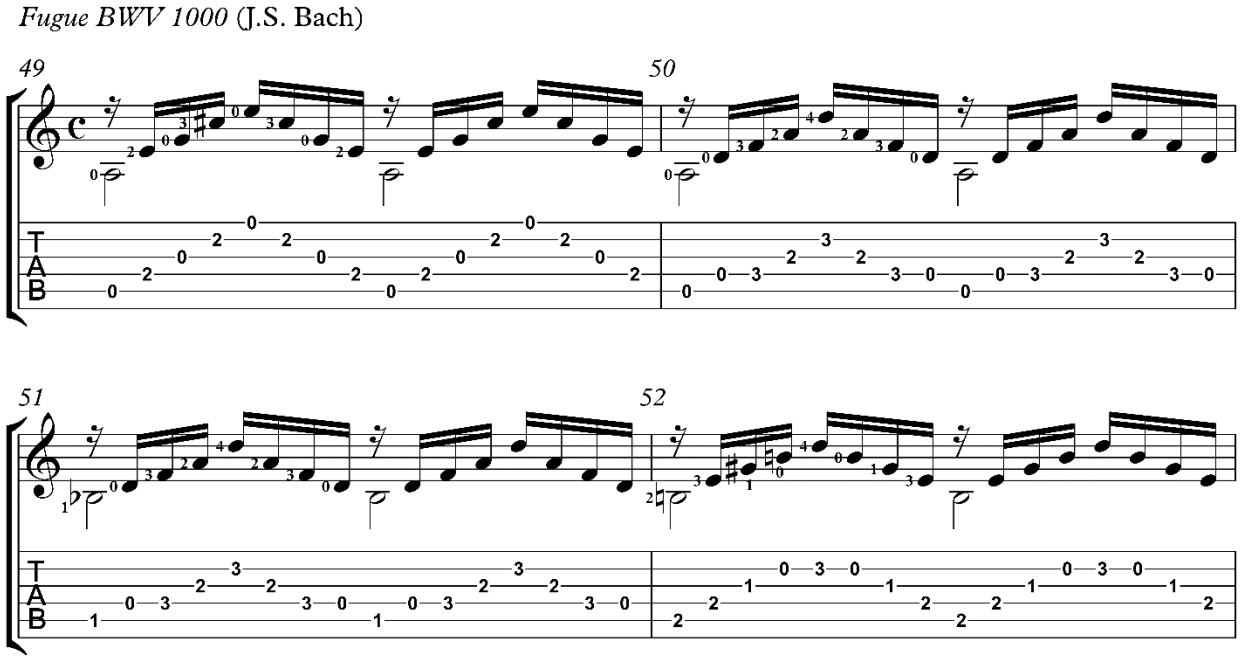
I should also mention that oftentimes, what is notated as a single voice or two voices in Baroque or Renaissance music is meant to be played as an arpeggio, with no string damping. These passages are usually obvious. Here is one that occurs in the middle of the *Fugue BWV 1000* by J.S. Bach. By the way, if you are thinking this is a violin piece and therefore freely ringing arpeggios would be inappropriate, the piece also exists in a version for the lute, making the use of arpeggio passages totally acceptable.

Example #78:



In general, you will usually not go wrong by playing Renaissance and Baroque music in polyphonic style (especially if it was written for keyboard), damping and lifting notes so that two notes within a voice do not ring together. But once in a while a campanella passage can be used to spice things up. Or, a passage may sound better played as an arpeggio or as a chordal texture instead of as a clean line. Passages played as arpeggios, campanellas, and as chordal textures are more common in music written for lute, vihuela, and the baroque guitar. Use your own judgment and determine what sounds best on the particular piece you are playing.

Classical and Romantic Period Music

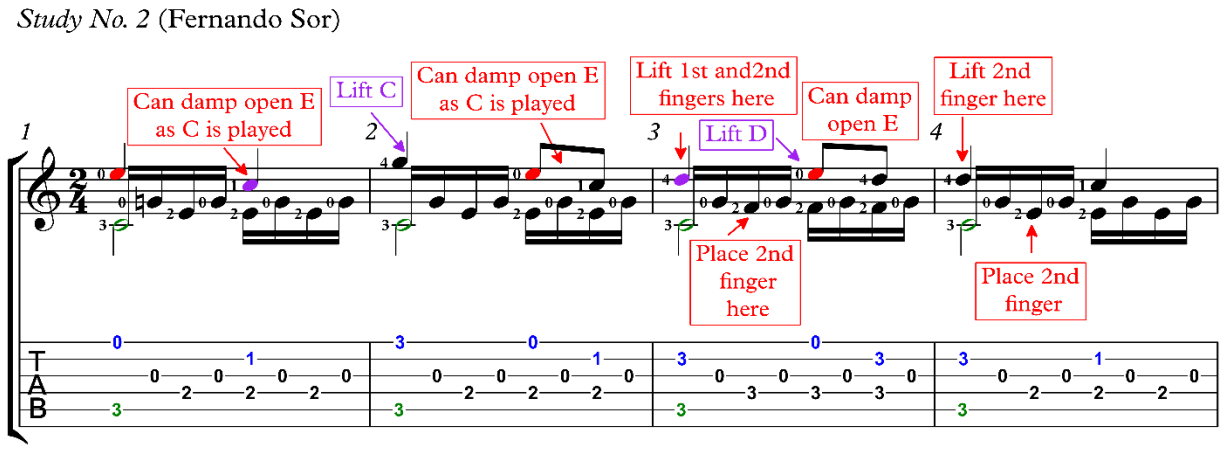
Music of these periods is usually a mixed bag of passages played as chords and arpeggios requiring small amounts of damping, and passages or parts played as clean lines which require extensive damping. It is your job as the performer to make conscious decisions how you want to play these passages. Give it some thought, try different approaches, and listen to what sounds best for the passage and piece.

Resonance

With the guitar, there is also the resonance factor. Even melodies in Classical and Romantic-period music can be played with no string damping to add pleasing resonance. Even dissonances can contribute to the overall effect. And once again, it is your choice. What sounds to one person like a dry, dead-sounding performance (where damping is used) sounds to another person like a very refreshingly clean performance. What sounds like a mishmash of clangorous sounds to one listener sounds like a pleasing resonant texture to another.

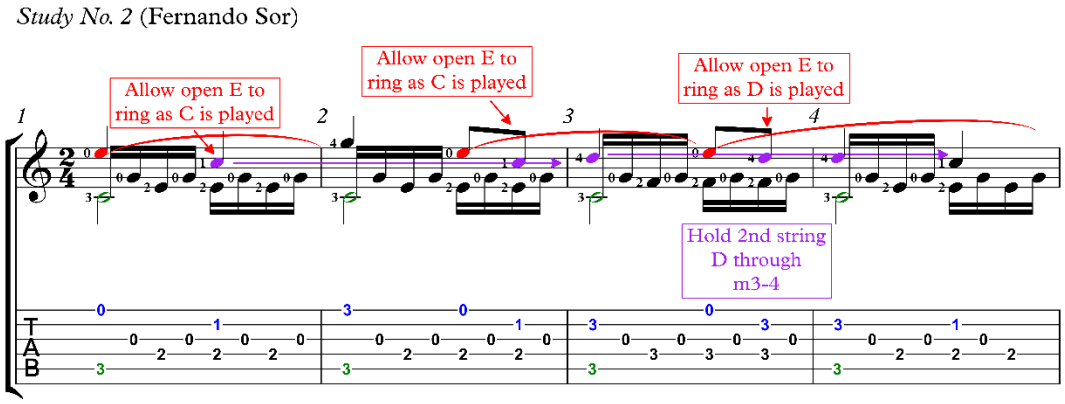
Fernando Sor's *Study No. 2* (as numbered by Segovia in his edition of *Twenty Studies for the Guitar by Fernando Sor*) can be approached either way. In the first version, the open E's are damped, producing a clean melody line. None of the notes within the melody ring against each other.

Example #79:



On the other hand, one could eliminate the damping and allow the open E's to ring freely.

Example #80:



VIDEO 13 Listen to me play both versions.

Video #13 Sor Study No. 2

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Both sound good. The first is certainly a bit cleaner sounding. But the second, while not as clean, has a nice resonance suitable to the guitar. One again, it is your call on which way to play the piece.

A few final tibits

There is no universal system of notation for string damping. I recommend you make up your own that makes sense to you.

Using string damping to control unwanted resonances and clashes between notes is crucial in recording situations and any time you play with a mic. In a good recording with sensitive mics, you will easily hear strings that ring too long and produce unwanted dissonances, or over-ringing bass strings and overtones that muddy the sound. A sound reinforcement system in particular will exacerbate resonance and clashes and often encourage feedback (that ear-splitting squeal). The intelligent use of string damping will moderate these problems.

The best news

Eventually, if you spend time learning string damping on many pieces, it might become automatic. In my case, after years of using all of the string-damping techniques I have discussed, I can damp strings automatically without a second thought. If I am sight reading something that needs to be played cleanly, I get 95% of the damps the first try with little thought. I can't guarantee this will happen for you, but honestly, these techniques are not that complicated. And, as you have seen, some are quite natural to execute.