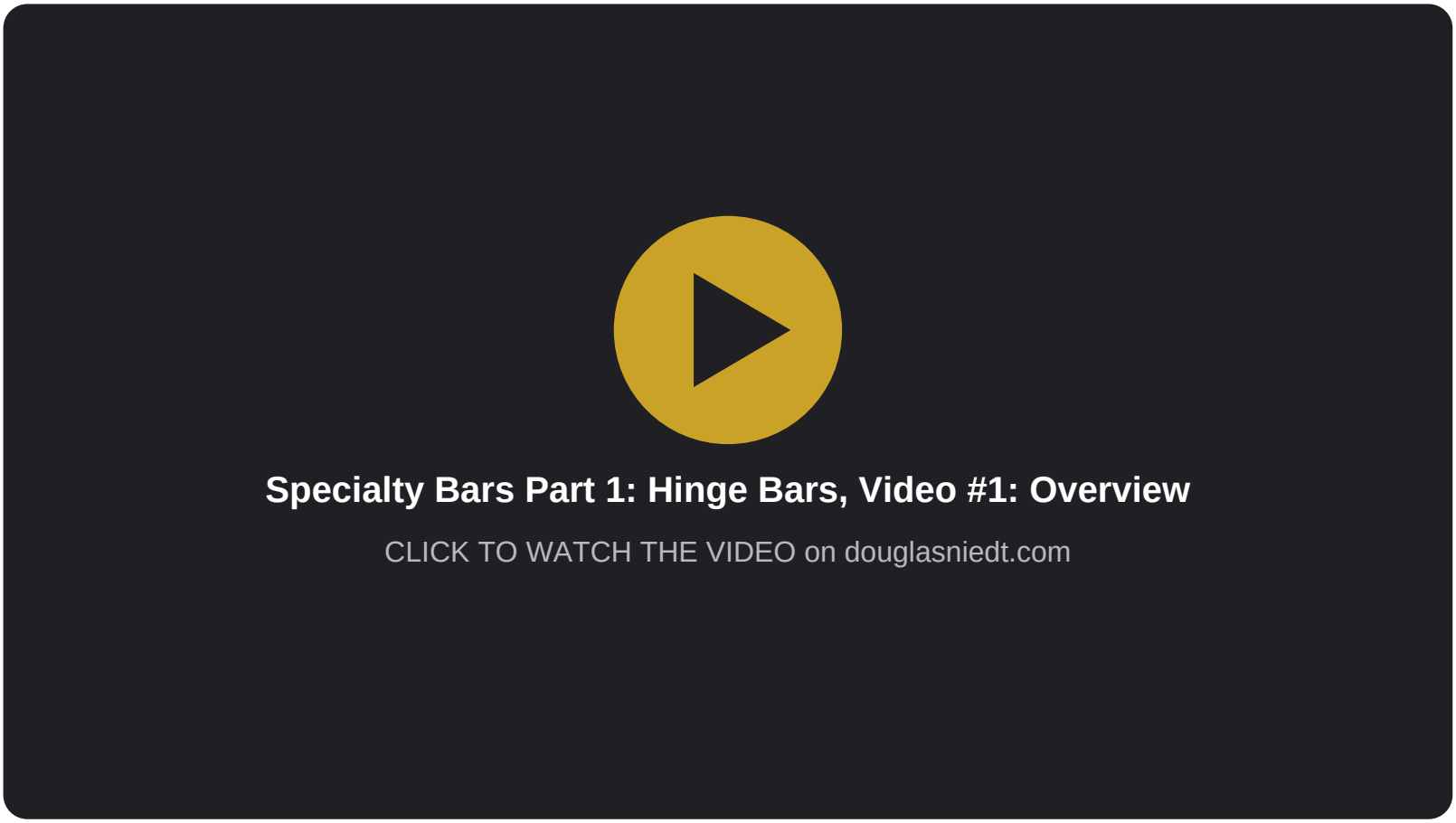
Specialty Bars Part 1: Hinge Bars

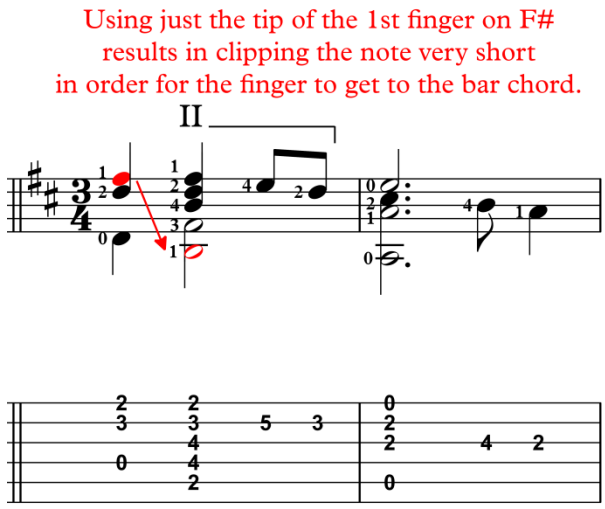
By Douglas Niedt

The hinge bar is a very useful technique for entering into and exiting out of other bars. The first string (sometimes also the second string) is fretted by the first finger as if it were a full bar, but the tip of the finger is lifted off the bass strings.

Watch as I demonstrate in this video:



Let's look at a passage from *Bianco Fiore (White Flower)* by Cesare Negri, one of the *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance* edited by Oscar Chilesotti. If the chord change is played with conventional technique, the first finger must lift suddenly off the F# in the first chord to make the bar required for the second chord. The result is that the F# is severely clipped short:



Watch as I demonstrate in this video.

Specialty Bars Part 1: Hinge Bars, Video #2: Bianco Fiore Bm Chord Conventional

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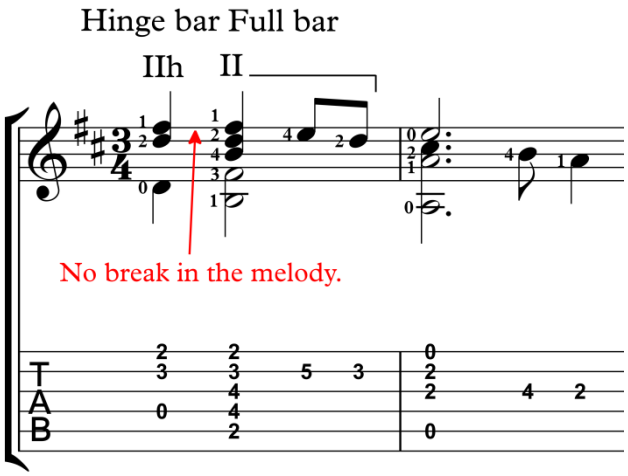
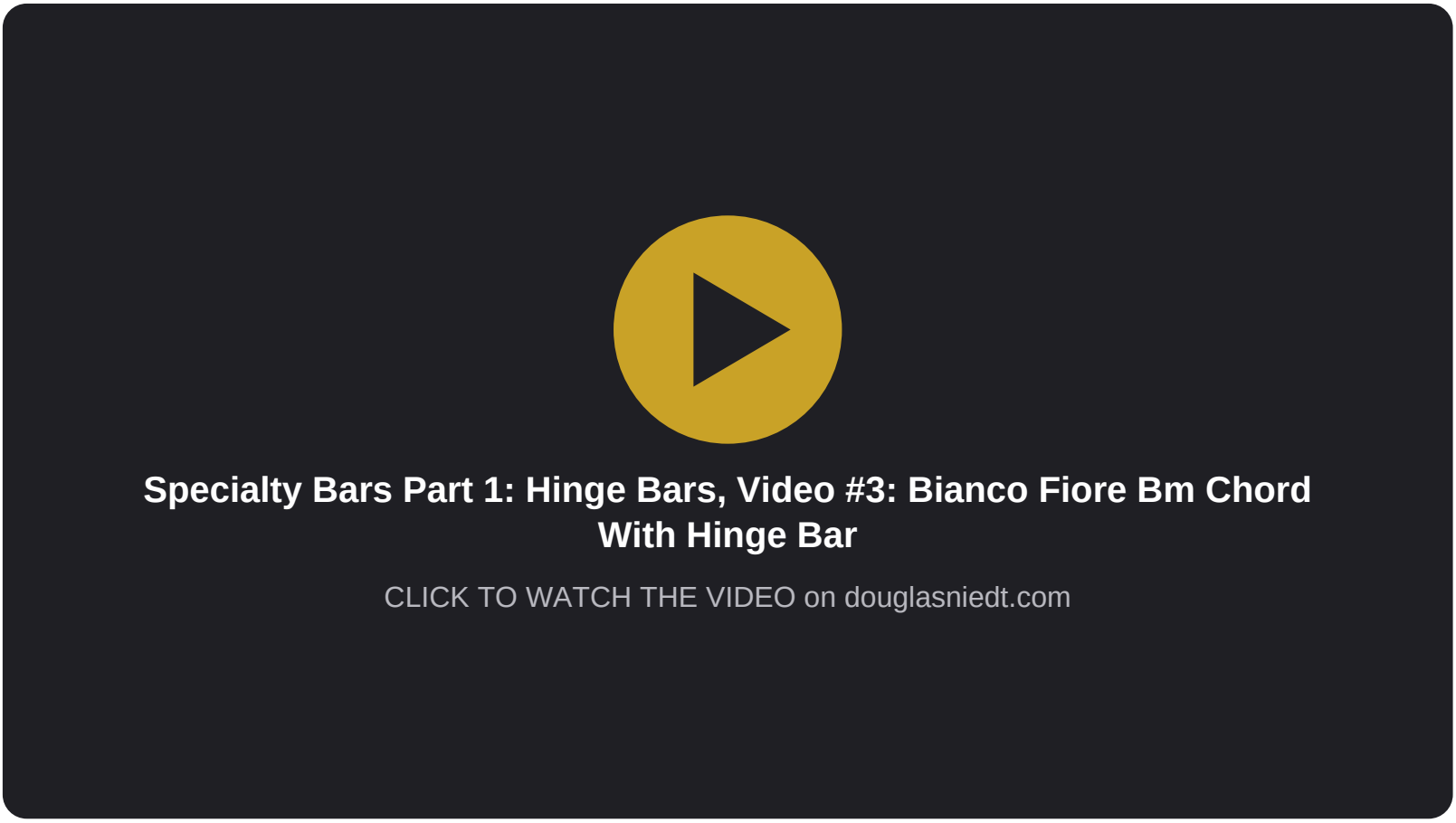
With the hinge bar technique shown below, the first chord is played with a hinge bar. Then, the tip of the finger is brought down flat onto the fretboard to form the bar required for the second chord. The result is a very smooth and effortless chord change with no break between the two F#s on the first string:



Watch as I demonstrate in this video.

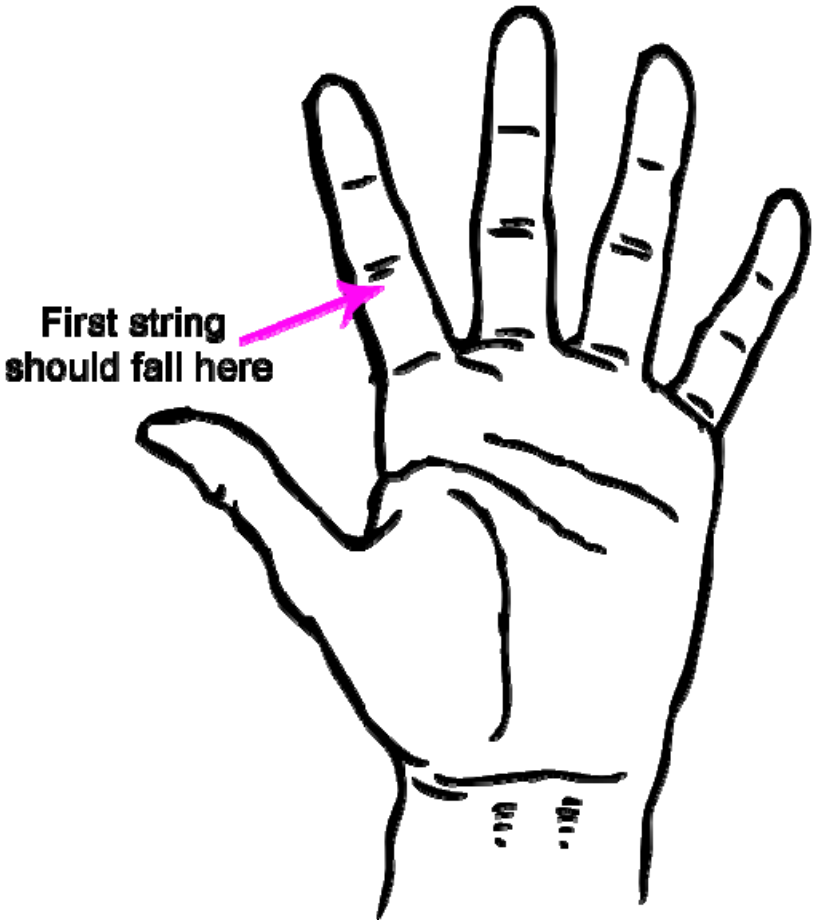


> *For most people, when the hinge is brought down on to the fretboard as a normal flat bar, the bar will cover all six strings.*

In most circumstances do NOT try to go from the hinge bar to a five-string or worse yet, four-string bar. **Allow the bar to cover all six strings regardless of how many strings need to be barred in the music**. Trying to go to a smaller bar will affect the stability of the hand and make things difficult. In the few rare instances (some are illustrated below) where you *must* go from a hinge bar to a bar of four or five strings, you will have to curl the hinge finger and slide on the joint to get to the smaller bar.

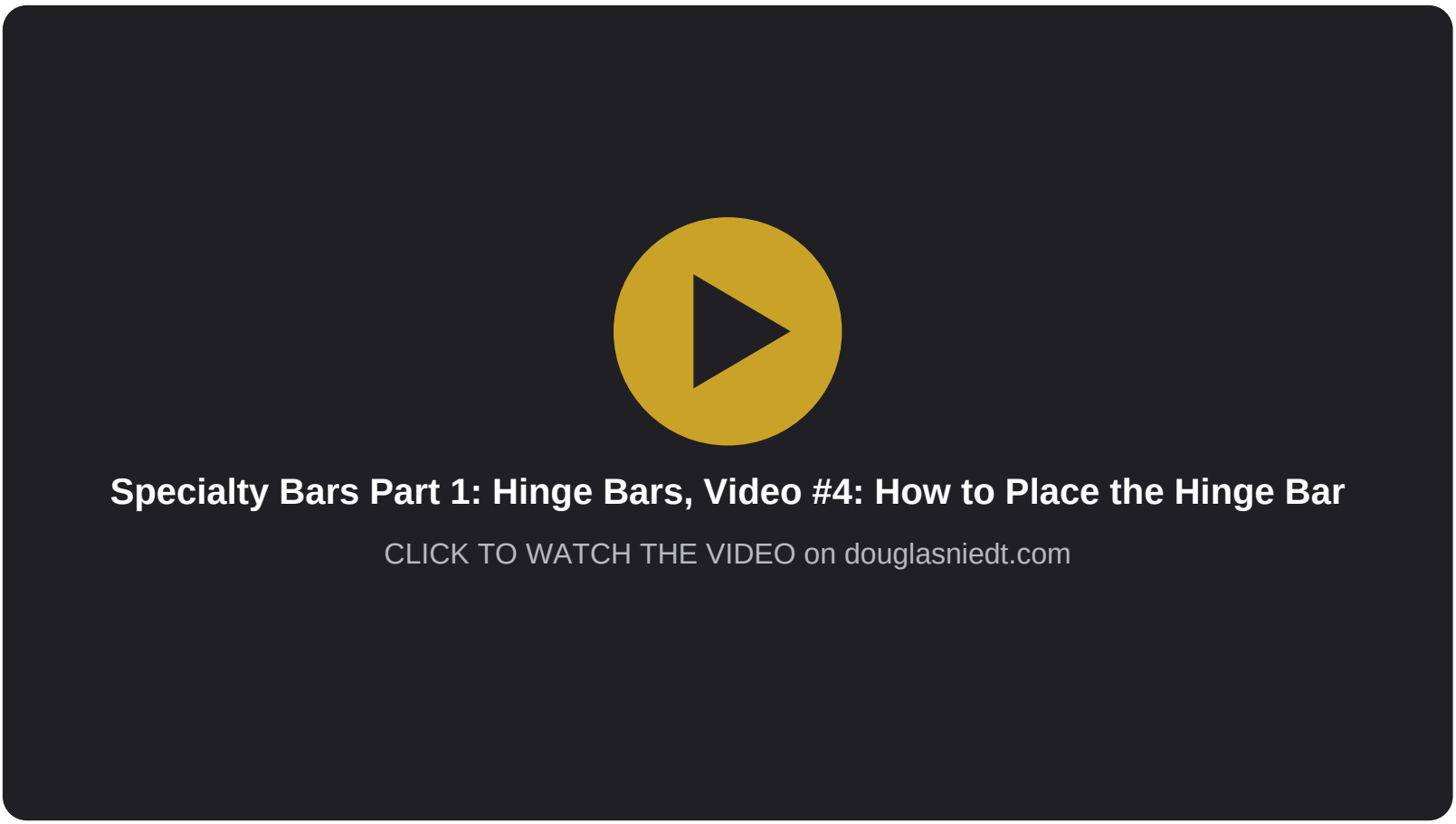
How to Place the Hinge Bar

When done correctly, hinge bars require very little effort. The important thing is to place the bar so the first string falls behind the middle joint of the index finger. See the illustration:



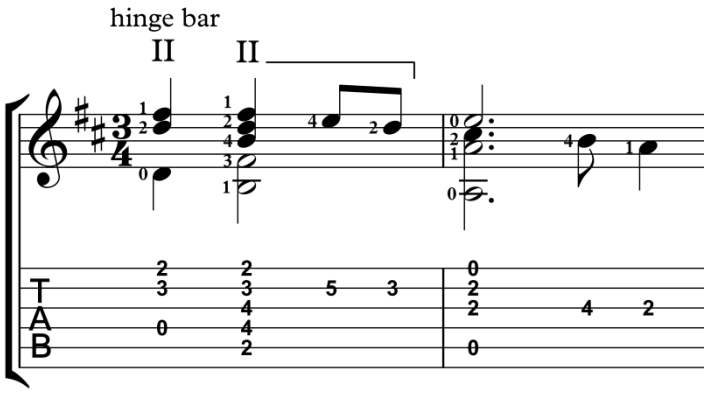
Don’t let the string fall on the joint or above it. When placed correctly behind the middle joint, the hand itself will hang from the knuckle bone on the edge of the neck. The first string will be held down by the weight of the hand with no effort from you.

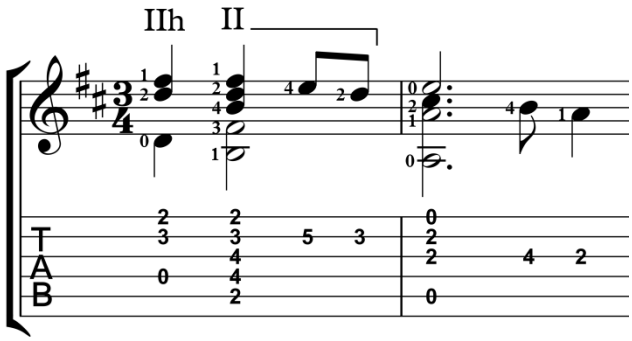
Watch as I demonstrate in this video.

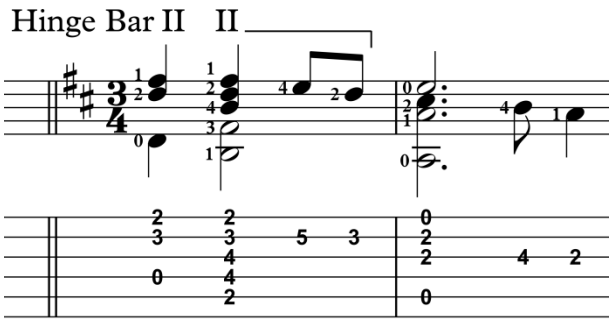


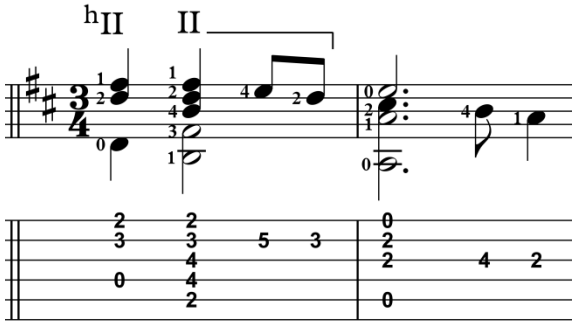
Notation for the Hinge Bar

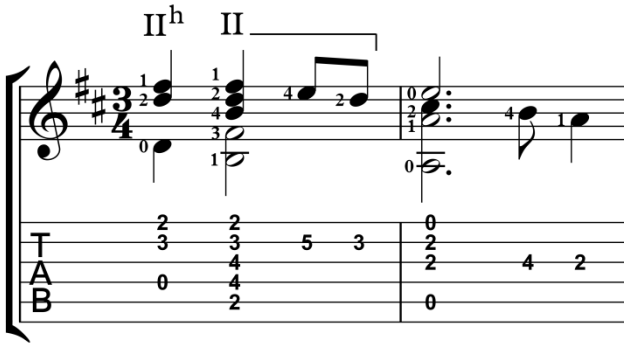
There is no standardized notation for the hinge bar. Here are some examples of currently used notation:





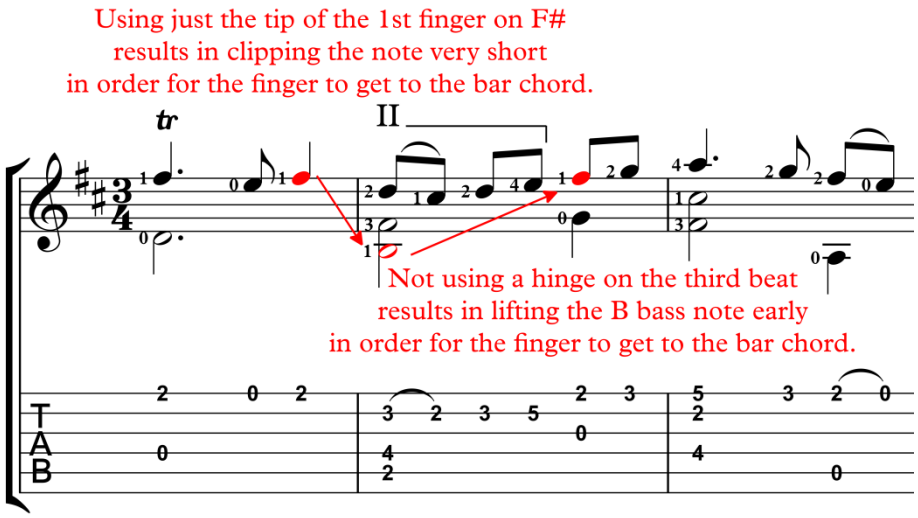




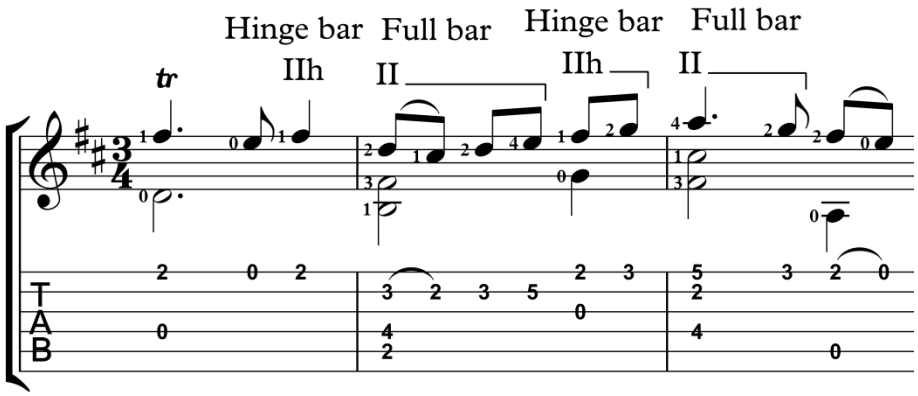


More Examples of Hinge Bars

Hinge bars can follow a full bar or precede a full bar. Here is an example of both in the same passage from *Bianco Fiore*. First I show the passage with conventional fingering and illustrate the resulting problems:



Here is the same passage using hinge bars. Note how the sound of the passage and ease of execution is tremendously improved:



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Specialty Bars Part 1: Hinge Bars, Video #5: Bianco Fiore Using a Hinge Bar After the Trill

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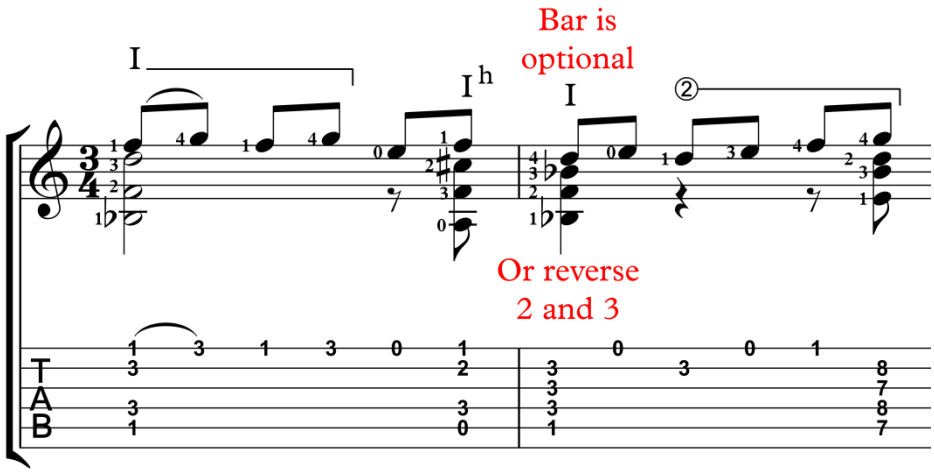
Finally, here is an example from a more modern piece, the *Fandanguillo* by Joaquin Turina:



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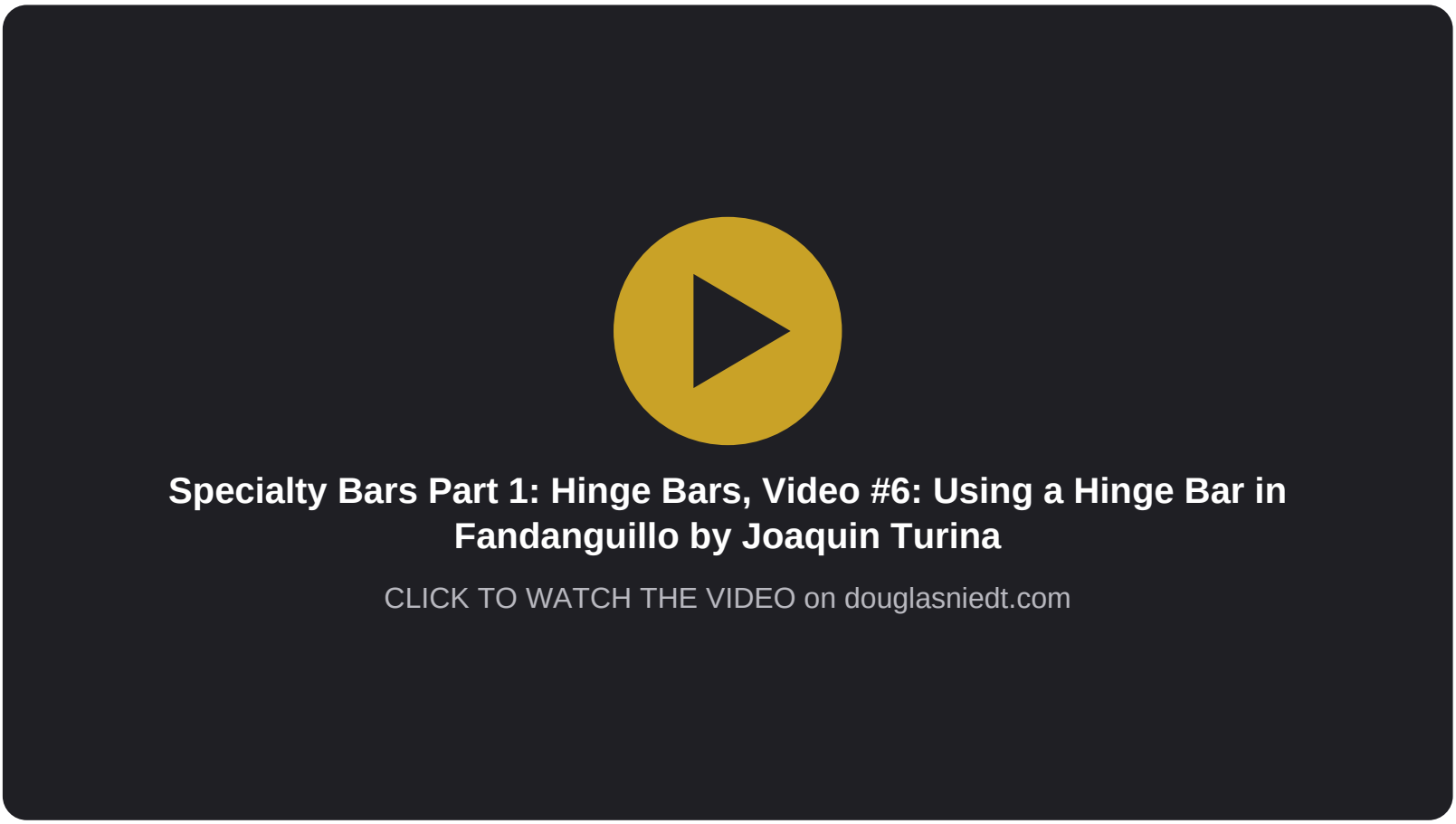
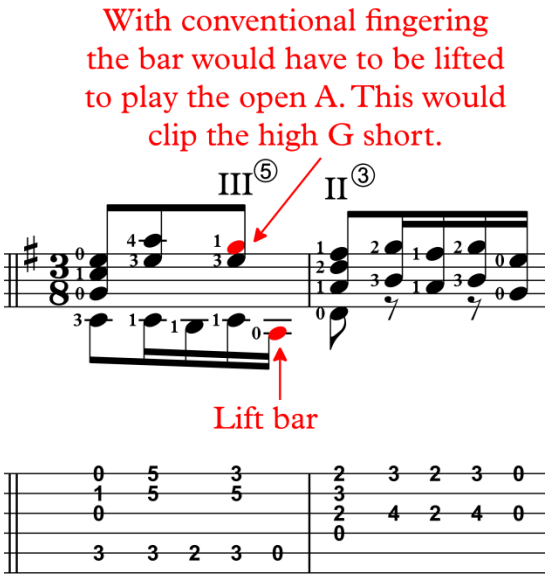


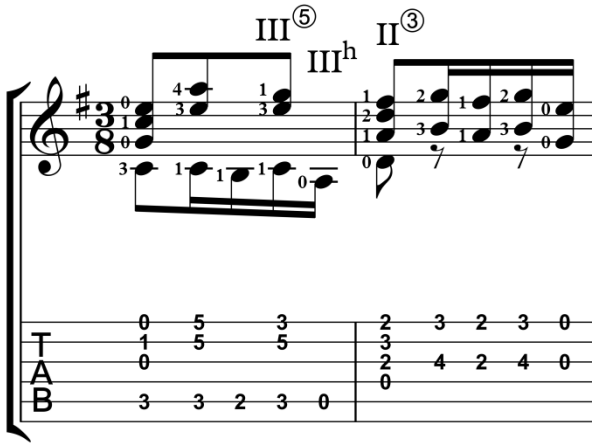
Difficult Situations

I already stated that in most circumstances you should not try to go from a hinge bar to a bar of fewer than six strings. The reverse is also true: don't go from a bar of fewer than six strings into a hinge bar. Trying to come from or go to a smaller bar is awkward and is difficult to consistently execute correctly. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to do just that.

Here is an example from J.S. Bach's *Prelude* of *Lute Suite No. 1* (BWV 996) as edited and fingered by Julian Bream that involves the difficult circumstances of approaching the hinge bar from a bar of fewer than six strings *and* continuing on into another bar of fewer than six strings. First I show how using conventional fingering results in poor execution:



The next example shows how Bream fingered it with a hinge bar to make the passage sound much more musical:



Watch:

Specialty Bars Part 1: Hinge Bars, Video #7: Hinge Bar, Prelude of Bach Lute Suite BWV 996, Ex 1

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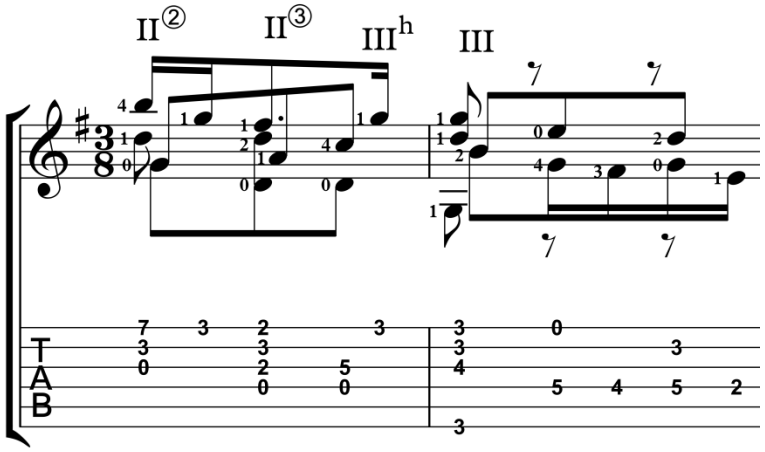
Here is another example from the same piece where the hinge bar is approached by a three-string bar:



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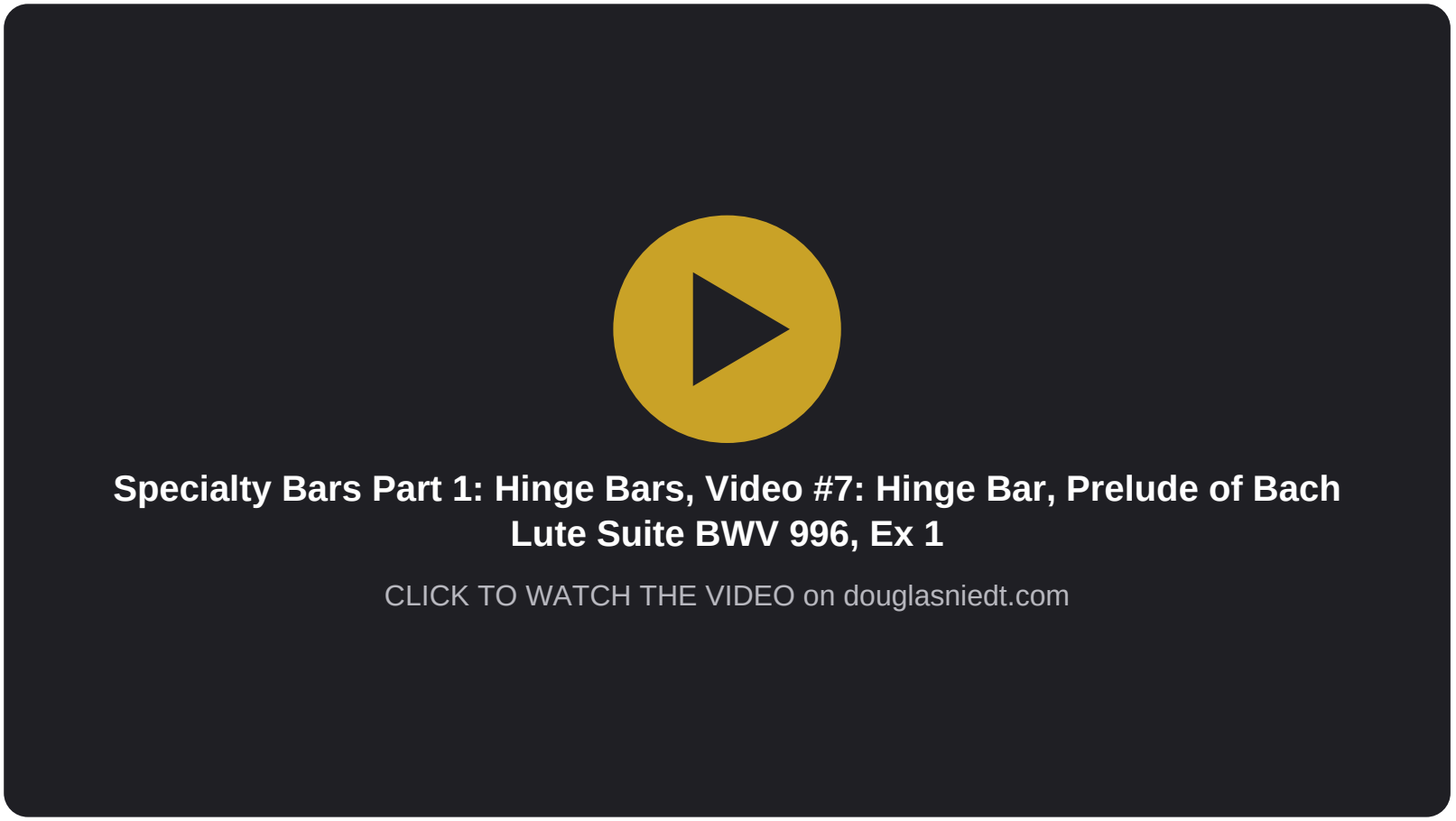
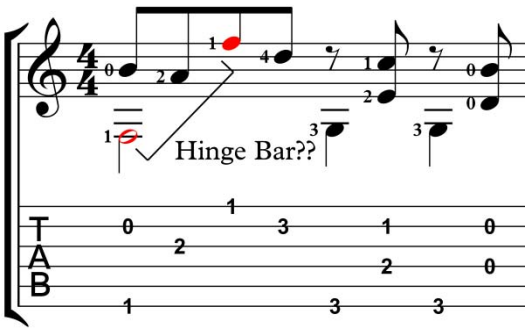


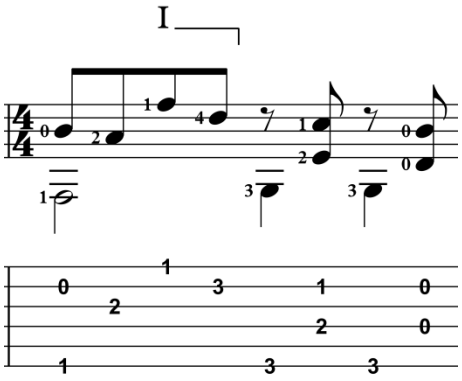
Misuse of the Term Hinge Bar

The following examples have been described by some writers as hinge bars. To me, these are nothing more than normal bars being placed and momentarily lifted. They require no unique technique or positioning as does the true hinge bar.

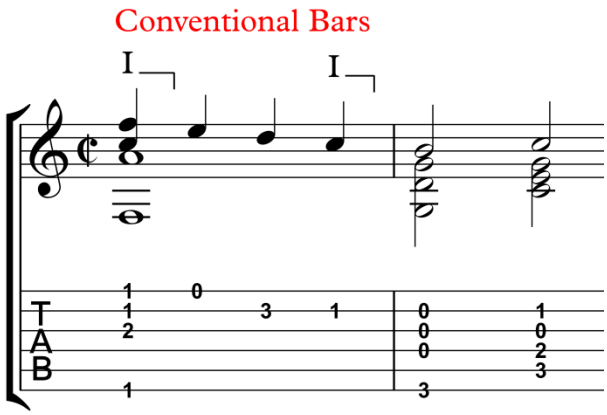
Here is an example from the *Allegro spiritoso* of Mauro Giuliani's *Sonata in C Major*, op. 15. The movement of holding the low F and then making a full bar to play the high F (while continuing to hold the low F) is said by some writers to be a hinge bar:



I don't see this passage as anything out of the ordinary and would notate it as nothing more than a normal bar:



Likewise, in this passage from Pavan No. 3 by Luis Milán the bars are described by some as hinge bars. To me it is nothing more than the first finger making a full bar that is held for the first beat, lifted on the second beat as the low F and A are held, and then lowered as a full bar on beat four to hold the C:



Don't get me wrong. This is no big deal. It isn't anything I lose sleep over. I just like to use the term hinge bar for one specific technique.

Other Uses of the Hinge Bar

The hinge bar can also be used as a guide during shifts and to avoid string noise from the bass strings during shifts. See my tip How to Use a Hinge Bar as a Guide Finger.

More to Come

Hold on to your hats folks. There is more to come next month— Specialty Bars Part 2: The Cross-fret bar and Partial Bar.

I know, I know. You're on pins and needles just thinking about it…