

String Damping, Part 2 of 4

By Douglas Niedt

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Method #2 Use the back of the thumb to damp string X at the same time you pluck string Y

This is the method I use almost exclusively when going from a lower string to a higher string. Use the back of the thumb to damp the lower string as you pluck the higher string. The great advantage of this method is that the lower bass string is damped *at the same time* the higher bass string is plucked. There is no overlap of the two notes. When done correctly, it is perfectly clean and perfectly legato.

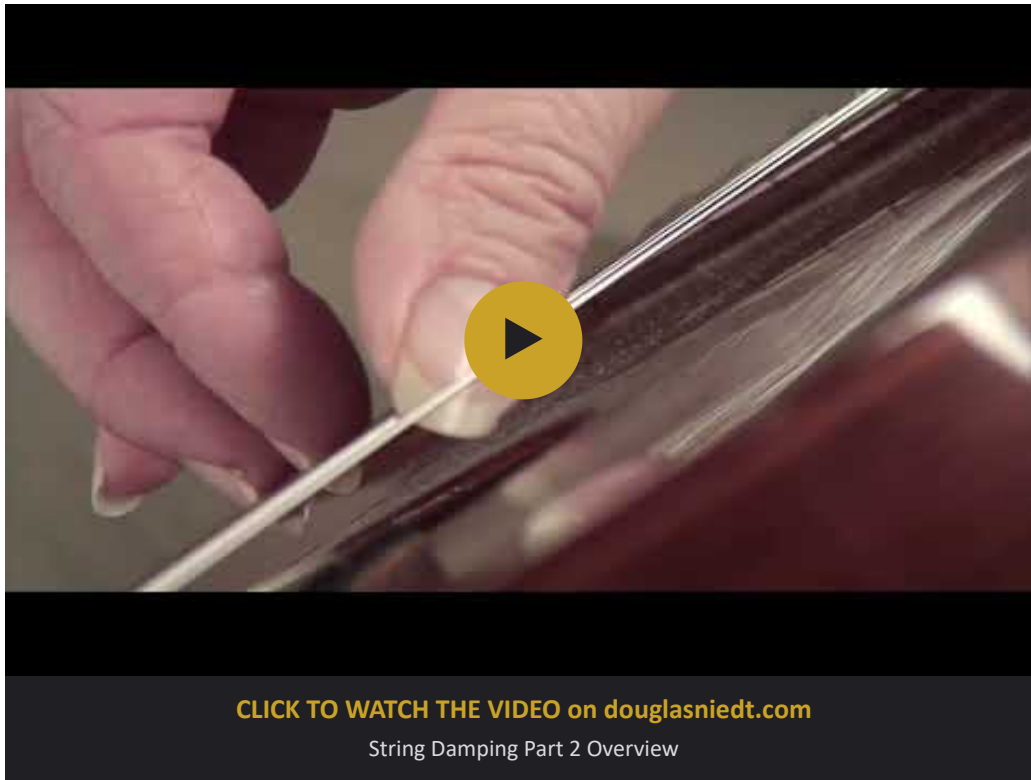
However, most teachers don't like this method because it requires a small change in the position of the right hand and thumb. The amount of the change of position will vary from player to player. It is easiest for those of us with relatively wide (fat!) thumbs and hardest for those with slim thumbs. If your thumb is too slim, try eating lots of cheeseburgers, shakes, Oreos, and Twinkies!

If your thumb is the right size, this method is vastly superior, easier, and more natural to execute than the preceding method.

This technique is difficult to describe in words. Please watch this video to learn how to execute this valuable technique. This could change your life. Or not.

If you don't see a video, refresh your browser.

Be sure to watch the video on full screen. Click the symbol to the right of "HD" in the lower right-hand corner after the video begins playing. Hit escape "ESC" on your keyboard to return to normal viewing.



Let's look again at *Twinkle*.

Example #12:

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

We need to damp the A as we play the D

T 2 2

A 0 2

B 0 0

As we go from measure #1 to measure #2, we need to damp the lower A string as we play the higher D string. By using the back-of-the-thumb damping technique we can now damp the open low A *simultaneously*

as we play the open D.

Example #13:

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Damp the open A SIMULTANEOUSLY as you pluck the open D.
Touch the 5th string with the back of the thumb to damp it.

The image shows a musical score for a guitar exercise. The top staff is in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. It contains a sequence of notes: D4 (open), E4 (open), F#4 (open), G4 (open), A4 (open), B4 (open), A4 (open), G4 (open), F#4 (open), E4 (open), D4 (open). The bottom staff shows the fretting hand positions for the strings T, A, and B. The T string has fret numbers 0, 0, 2, 2, 0. The A string has fret numbers 2, 2. The B string has fret numbers 0, 0. A red arrow points to the 2nd fret on the T string, with the text 'Damp 5th string A here.' written below it. The first measure is marked with a '1' and the second measure with a '2'.

If you are new to this, I recommend practicing the technique on open strings as shown in the following exercises. I have also notated what this technique actually sounds like. Note that with this technique there is no overlap of the two notes.

Example #14:

Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:

All notes plucked and damped with thumb

Sounds like:
The two notes do not ring together but are seamlessly connected

Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:

Sounds like:
The two notes do not ring together but are seamlessly connected

Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:

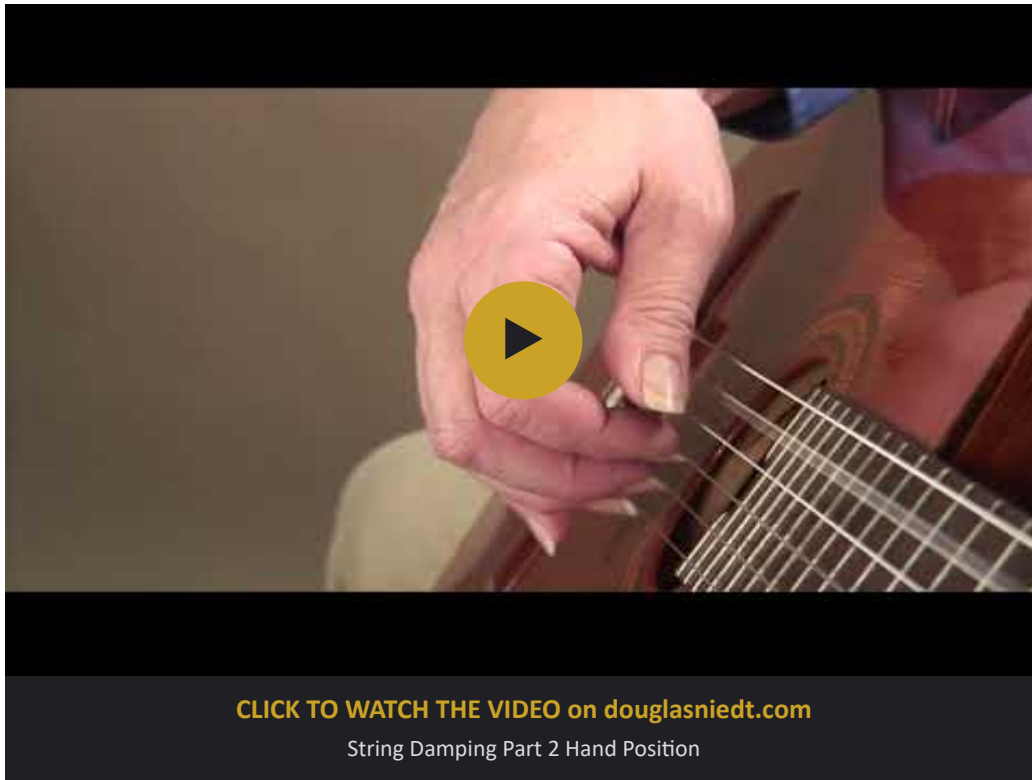
Sounds like:
The two notes do not ring together but are seamlessly connected

When you practice the exercises be very careful not to damp the first note a split second *before* playing the second note. The two notes should be connected (legato) with no dead space between them.

Watch me demonstrate the required changes in the hand position and how to execute the technique:

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To master this technique and to use it in real-life situations, it is important to learn to play notes on the treble strings with the fingers at the same time you play the bass notes with the thumb. I know. Practicing all these patterns may seem tedious.

NEWS FLASH. Sometimes, mastering technique often requires what seems like endless repetition. But practice smart. Focus. Practice each repetition slowly and correctly. You will master it quickly and be done with it. Then it won't be tedious.

Example #15:

Damping bass strings with the back of the thumb at the same time the fingers play other strings.
(Practice as presented—these are not in a random order).

Damp the lower bass string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher bass string:

Four musical exercises in 4/4 time, each showing a simultaneous damping and plucking action on the bass strings. The exercises are as follows:

- Exercise 1:** Pluck the 4th string while damping the 5th string. Fingering: *a* (4th), *m* (5th), *i* (4th).
- Exercise 2:** Pluck the 4th string while damping the 5th string. Fingering: *a* (4th), *m* (5th), *i* (4th).
- Exercise 3:** Pluck the 3rd string while damping the 4th string. Fingering: *a* (3rd), *m* (4th), *i* (3rd).
- Exercise 4:** Pluck the 5th string while damping the 6th string. Fingering: *a* (5th), *m* (6th), *i* (5th).

Practice the rest of the combinations in the same way.

Damp the first bass note with the back of the thumb at the same time you pluck the second bass note.

Repeat each measure until secure, consistent, and confident.

A series of musical exercises in 4/4 time, organized into four rows of four exercises each. The exercises are as follows:

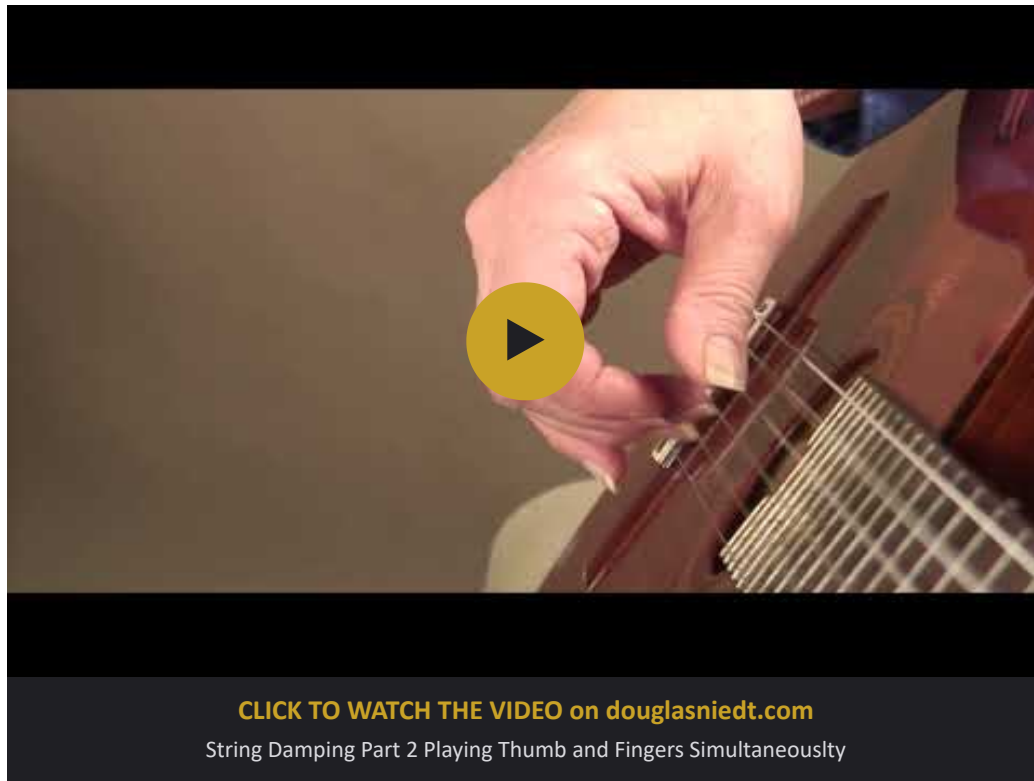
- Row 1:** Exercises 21-24. Each exercise shows a simultaneous damping and plucking action on the bass strings. Fingering: *a* (4th), *m* (5th), *i* (4th).
- Row 2:** Exercises 25-28. Each exercise shows a simultaneous damping and plucking action on the bass strings. Fingering: *m* (4th), *m* (5th).
- Row 3:** Exercises 29-32. Each exercise shows a simultaneous damping and plucking action on the bass strings. Fingering: *a* (4th), *a* (5th).
- Row 4:** Exercises 33-36. Each exercise shows a simultaneous damping and plucking action on the bass strings. Fingering: *i* (4th), *i* (5th).

Again, be careful not to damp the first bass note before playing the second bass note. There should be no dead space between them. Some of these combinations can be tricky to execute and some may feel awkward. Fear not.

Watch as I demonstrate:

If you don't see a video, refresh your browser.

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Now, go back to *Twinkle* and try the string damp using the back of the thumb.

Example #16:

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Use the back of the thumb to damp the open A
SIMULTANEOUSLY as you pluck the open D.

1 *m i m i m i m*

2 *m i m*

Damp 5th-string A here.

Once again, here is the entire piece with the string damps marked. Use the back of the thumb to execute the string damps. Note that these are only the string damps going from a lower string to a higher string. We will cover how to do the damps going from a higher string to a lower string in a later section of this technique tip.

Example #17:

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star Damping

Damp lower string X with back of thumb AT THE SAME TIME you pluck higher string Y:

1 *m i m i m i m*

2 *m i m*

3 *i m i m*

4 *i m i*

5 *i m i m*

6 *i m i*

7 *i m i m*

8 *i m i*

9 *m i m i*

10 *m i m*

11 *i m i m*

12 *i m i*

5th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

5th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

6th string is damped here

Watch this video as I execute these string damps on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* using the back of the thumb. And to think, I studied at Juilliard and the Segovia Master Classes for this...

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SPEED DOESN'T MATTER

The back-of-the-thumb damping technique may be used very easily in fast passages. Unlike the technique of damping after a note is plucked, no decisions have to be made about when to execute the damp. String X is *always* damped at the same moment string Y is plucked. We don't have to delay damping an offensive-sounding bass string because of technical speed issues. It can be damped cleanly as the next note is played with no over-ring. Look again at the Sor piece.

Example #18:

Introduction to the Study of the Guitar, Op. 60, No. 5 (Fernando Sor)

1 2 3 4

5th string is damped here regardless of tempo

6th string is damped here regardless of tempo

5 6 7 8

5th string is damped here regardless of tempo

Remember *Romanza* aka *Romance* aka *Romance de Amor*? With the other technique, we had three options of when to do the string damps. The choice was dependent on the tempo you chose to play the passage and your skill at coordinating the damping movement with playing the other notes. And, no matter which option you chose, there was still over-ring of the offensive bass notes.

You don't have to worry about any of that with the back-of-the-thumb damping technique.

Example #19a:

Romance (Anonymous)

Measures 5 through 8 are shown. Measure 5 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody begins with a triplet of eighth notes (F#, A, C) followed by a quarter note (D). The bass line consists of a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 6 continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes (E, G, B) and a quarter note (A). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 7 features a triplet of eighth notes (C, E, G) and a quarter note (F#). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 8 continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes (D, F#, A) and a quarter note (G). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. A red arrow points to the damper symbol in measure 7, with the text "6th string is damped here regardless of tempo".

And, example #19b:

Romance (Anonymous)

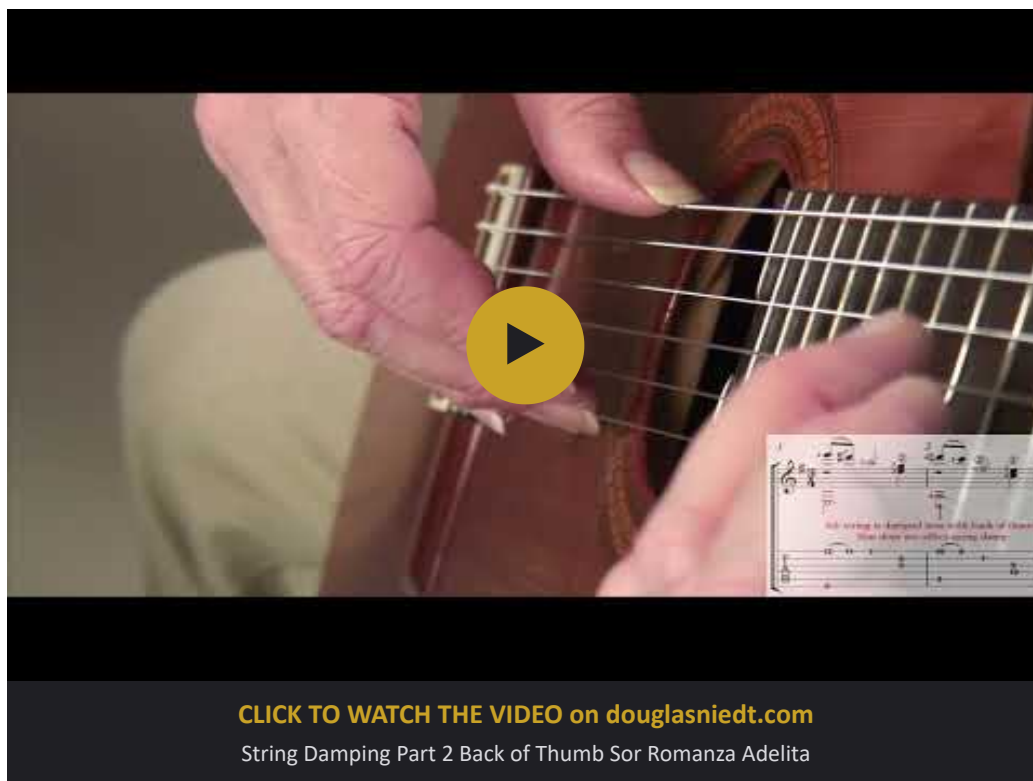
Measures 11 through 14 are shown. Measure 11 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody begins with a triplet of eighth notes (F#, A, C) followed by a quarter note (D). The bass line consists of a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 12 continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes (E, G, B) and a quarter note (A). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 13 features a triplet of eighth notes (C, E, G) and a quarter note (F#). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. Measure 14 continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes (D, F#, A) and a quarter note (G). The bass line has a single note (F#) with a damper symbol. A red arrow points to the damper symbol in measure 13, with the text "6th string is damped here regardless of tempo".

The back-of-the-thumb technique of string damping is straightforward with no over-ring of the offensive bass notes.

Or, remember the problems encountered with *Adelita* because of the slur? No more.

Example #20:

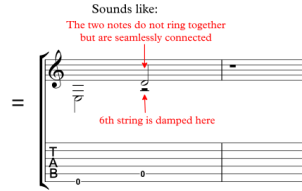
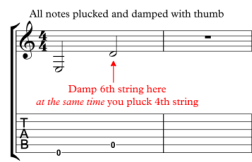
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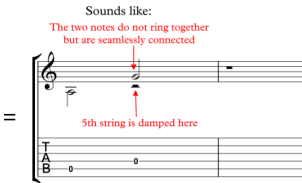
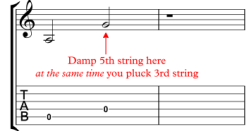
The technique of damping with the back of the thumb works relatively easily when damping an adjacent string as in the examples above. It is a little more difficult and can be awkward on string jumps such as the following. Fortunately, you will not encounter these very often. When you do, you can use alternative methods of executing the damps.

Example 21:

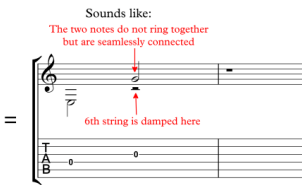
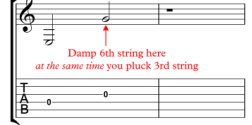
Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:



Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:



Practice damping the lower string *simultaneously* with the back of the thumb as you pluck the higher string:



These require a pronounced distortion of the thumb and hand position as you will see in the video that follows. For that reason, many guitar teachers would be appalled that I would suggest the use of such a technique. But if you have the right thumb anatomy, it works. I don't care how it looks as long as it's useful and sounds good.

Using the back of the thumb to damp wide string jumps is even more difficult and awkward when other notes must be played with the bass notes.

Here is an example at the beginning of the *Gagliarda* from *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance* transcribed by Oscar Chilesotti.

Example #22:

Gagliarda from Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance (Anonymous, trans. by Oscar Chilesotti)

⑥ = D

6th string is damped here with the back of the thumb

If this is too awkward or your thumb anatomy does not support back-of-thumb string damping, you could always damp the 6th string *after* playing the E.

Back-of-thumb string damping is useful in this chord change from *Study in A Op. 60, No. 3* by Matteo Carcassi:

Example #23:

Study in A, Op. 60, No. 3 (Matteo Carcassi)

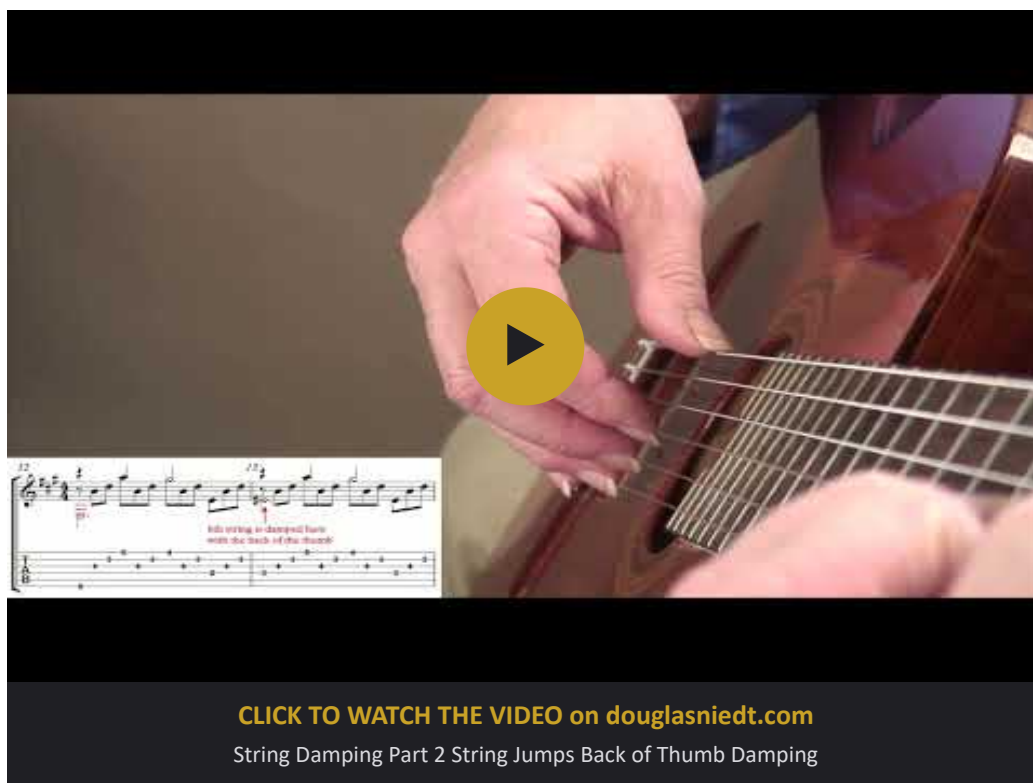
6th string is damped here with the back of the thumb

Damping with the back of the thumb may be a little awkward going from the 6th to the 4th string, but in this instance I prefer it to the alternative of damping the 6th string *after* playing the E#.

Watch as I demonstrate how to use the back of the thumb damping technique on string jumps in general and specifically on the Carcassi study. If you get nauseous viewing distorted hand positions, just turn your head away...

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THE BIG PICTURE, CLEANING UP THE BASS WITH THE RIGHT-HAND THUMB. Going from a lower bass string X to a higher bass string Y.

A. You have the option of damping the lower bass string X with the thumb *after* playing the higher bass string Y.

PROS:

1. The technique can be used by anyone, regardless of their hand/thumb size and anatomy.
2. Works well on wide string jumps.

CONS:

1. Does not produce a super-clean bass line. The two notes will ring together, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. The bass line can still end up sounding muddy.
2. Can be difficult to use in fast passages, arpeggio passages, and passages containing slurs.
3. A decision must be made in each case exactly when to damp the offensive note. Several options may be available, none of them optimal.

B. You have the option of damping the lower bass string X with the back of the thumb *at the same time* you play the higher bass string Y.

PROS:

1. Produces a very clean bass line. There is no over-ring of the offensive note and the notes will be perfectly connected.
2. Easy to use in fast passages, arpeggio passages, and passages containing slurs.
3. No decision has to be made about when to damp the offensive note. It is always damped precisely as the next bass note is played, resulting in a perfectly legato and clean bass line.

CONS:

1. Requires an alteration of the basic hand and thumb position. Sometimes that alteration is dramatic.
2. Can be difficult or impossible to do if your thumb is slim, your hand small, or your fingers short.
3. Difficult or awkward to use for wide string jumps.
4. There is a danger of accidentally damping note X a split second before note Y. This will result in a disjointed connection.

More to come:

- How to clean up the bass voice when going from a higher string to a lower string.
- Left-hand string damping.
- How the style of a piece affects the use of string damping
- Observing written rests
- Controlling sympathetic vibration and unwanted harmonics
- Damping several strings at once

- Damping on scales
- Notation of damping

All explained and illustrated with great musical examples and stunning videos