

Know What You Are Playing—Sing!

By Douglas Niedt

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To play a piece of music well, one of the most important things is to “know how the song goes”. Perhaps the most basic element of knowing “how the song goes” is to know the melody of the piece. Surprisingly, many students do not know the melody of some of the pieces they play! Fortunately, there is an easy cure for this: SING. Yes my friends, simply sing the melody as you play the guitar. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have a good voice or don’t sing exactly on pitch. But, you do have to be able to carry a tune. If you’re self-conscious, lock yourself in a room where no one will hear you.

Sing the melody

To learn the technique of singing the melody of a piece, we will use the well-known *Study No. 5* (as numbered by Segovia in his *Twenty Studies for the Guitar* by Fernando Sor as an example. On many pieces, the melody will be very obvious, such as on the popular *Romanza* (the melody notes are notated in red):

Example #1:

Example #1

The image displays musical notation for a guitar study, Example #1. It is presented in two systems, each with four measures. The notation is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in treble clef, with red numbers indicating the notes to be sung. The guitar part is written in TAB format below the staff, with red numbers indicating the frets for the melody notes. The first system shows a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes, mostly on the 4th and 5th strings. The second system continues the sequence, with a 'V' and a circled '3' above the third measure, indicating a vibrato or a specific technique. The TAB part shows fret numbers (0, 7, 12, 10, 8, 5, 7, 8) corresponding to the melody notes.

But with other pieces such as our *Sor Study No. 5*, you may discover you really have little idea what the melody is. You must get out the music and figure it out. At first glance, it is actually not easy to tell from the score which notes are the melody and which are the accompaniment.

Example #2:

Example #2

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a guitar piece. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a tablature (TAB) staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system is marked with a 'II' and a dashed line. The second system is also marked with a 'II' and a dashed line. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the accompaniment is written in the tablature staff. The tablature staff shows fret numbers (0-4) and fingerings (1-4) for each note.

In the next example I have notated the melody notes in red:

Example #3:

Example #3

Example #3 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time, key of D major. The melody is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar tablature is for strings T, A, and B. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with some notes marked with red dots. The tablature shows fingerings for each note, with red numbers indicating specific fingerings. The first system covers measures 1-4, and the second system covers measures 5-8. The melody is a simple, ascending and then descending scale-like pattern.

Now, play just the melody notes so you hear what it sounds like:

Example #4:

Example #4

Example #4 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time, key of D major. The melody is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar tablature is for strings T, A, and B. The melody consists of a series of quarter notes, with some notes marked with red dots. The tablature shows fingerings for each note, with red numbers indicating specific fingerings. The first system covers measures 1-4, and the second system covers measures 5-8. The melody is a simple, ascending and then descending scale-like pattern.

Next, play just the melody in Example #4 and sing it at the same time. Do it over and over until you can sing the melody without the guitar. Your goal is to know the melody so well that you can walk down the street and sing it as easily and confidently as you can sing *Happy Birthday*, *Jingle Bells*, or your national anthem.

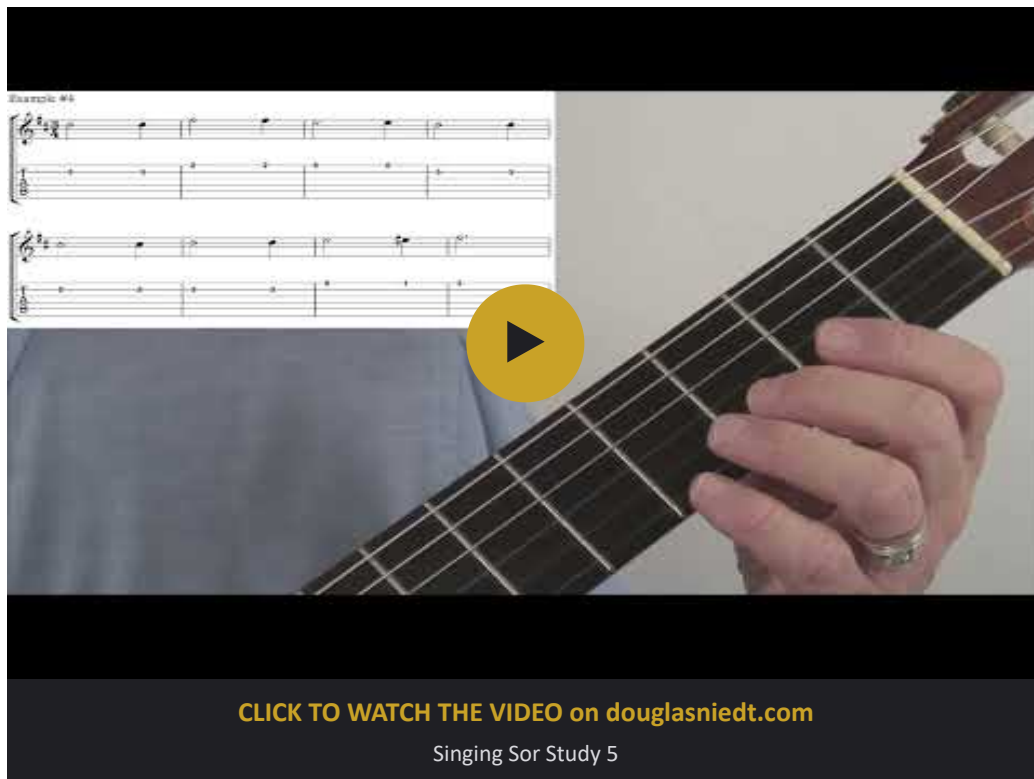
Then, play all the notes of the piece and learn to sing the melody at the same time. At first you might have difficulty doing both at the same time, but I assure you that with a little practice it will soon be easy to do. Once you have mastered the ability to sing the melody as you play, play the piece without singing.

Watch me demonstrate this process in this video. WARNING: I sing in this video. Remove all small children and pets from the area before watching...

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

You can also [download the video here](#).

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



Before and after

Once you have gone through these steps, you should notice that as you play, you hear the melody much more clearly than ever before. Your awareness of how the melody interacts and contrasts with the accompaniment will have increased.

In the case of Sor *Study #5* you will probably realize you have been playing all the notes at the same volume making the piece sound like one big arpeggio instead of sounding in three parts—melody, accompaniment, and bass. Before, there may have been very little separation of parts. Now that you are hearing the piece more accurately, you can bring out the melody louder and keep the accompaniment and bass quiet in the background. Now that you are clearly hearing the melody, you can focus on playing the melody notes evenly. Before, you probably were playing some melody notes louder or softer than others for no reason. You can also focus on playing each melody note with a nice tone quality.

More benefits

Glaring errors of interpretation can be prevented by singing the melody of a piece. Let's look at the second half of the first piece from *Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance* edited by Oscar Chilsesotti.

Example #5:

Example #5

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a guitar piece. Each system consists of a standard musical staff and a corresponding guitar tablature (TAB) below it. The first system is labeled 'II ③' and the second 'III ③'. In both systems, certain notes in the melody are highlighted with red dots. In the first system, a box encloses a sequence of notes in the melody that are incorrectly played in the TAB. In the second system, a box encloses a sequence of notes in the melody that are also incorrectly played in the TAB. The TABs use numbers 0-5 to represent frets on the strings T, A, and B.

I have notated the melody notes in red. Pay particular attention to the two boxed-in areas. Unfortunately, many people play the piece like this:

Example #6:

Example #6

Example #6

Not a melody note

TAB

7	2	4	5	4	2	0	3	0	2	3	0	0	3	3	5
			4			2	2	3	0	2	0	0	2	4	5

These are not melody notes

TAB

2	2	2	4	2	2	2	5	3	0	3	2	4	3	0	1
0				4	0			5	2		4			2	2

As I have noted, some of those notes are not the melody. Watch me demonstrate in this video. You will enjoy laughing at my singing.

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

You can also [download the video here](#).

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



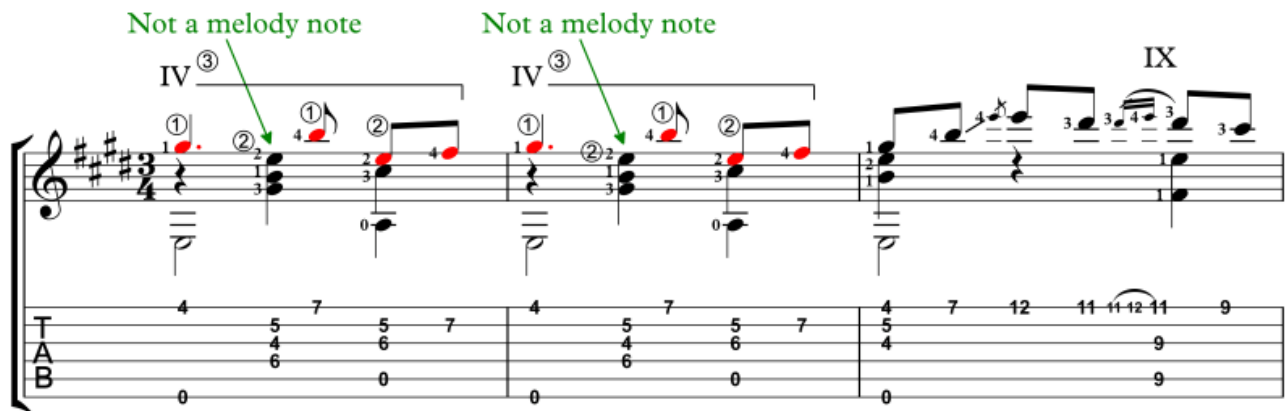
CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Singing Lute Piece 1

Oftentimes, singing the melody will enlighten you on how you should play a passage. Let's look at the second half of *Adelita* by Francisco Tárrega:

Example #7:

Example #7



Not a melody note

Not a melody note

IV ③

IV ③

IX

TAB

4 5 7 5 7 4 5 7 5 7 4 7 12 11 11 12 11 9

4 4 6 4 6 4 5 4 3 3 4 3 3 3

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

By singing the melody, we learn that in the first measure of this example, the E at the top of the chord on beat 2 is not part of the melody. It is part of the accompaniment. Therefore, contrary to the way 99% of guitarists play this measure, the chord should be played very quietly in the background so that the melody goes from the G# to the high B, then to the E followed by the F#. The melody is not G# to E and then the high B.

A short time later we have this measure:

Example #8:

Example #8

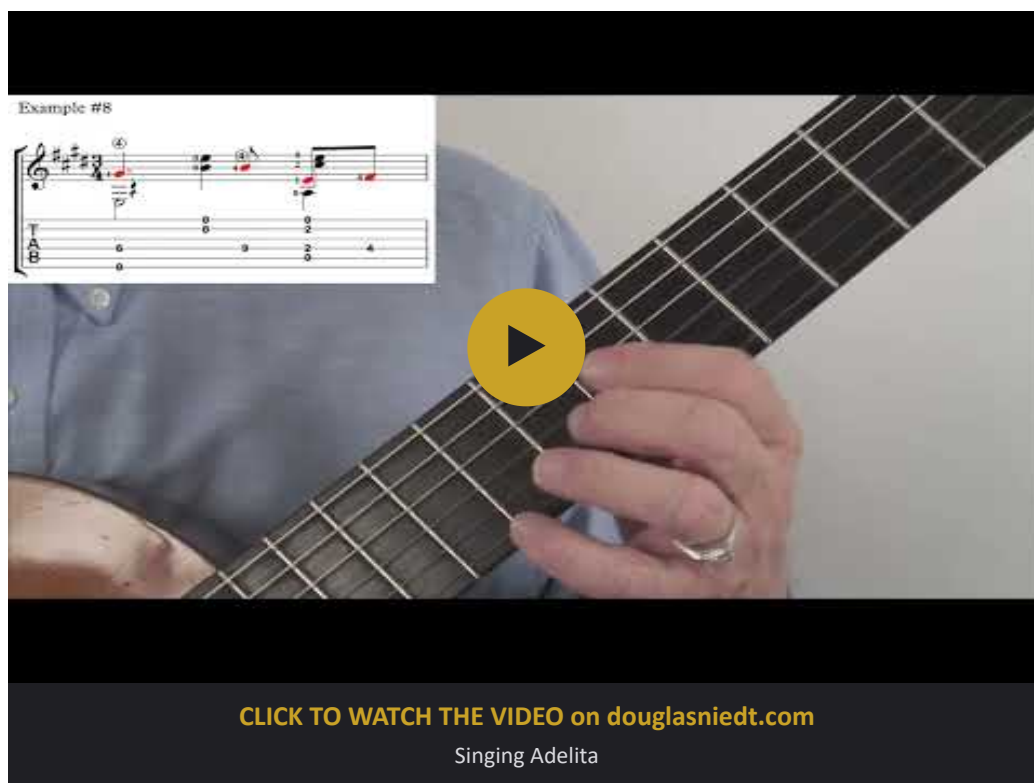
If you sing the melody in example #8 you will notice it is the same melody (down an octave) as example #7. Once you realize this, you will be careful to play the accompaniment notes quietly so the melody stands out.

Watch the video. Clear any innocent bystanders from the room so they can't hear me sing.

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

You can also [download the video here](#).

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Example #8

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Singing Adelita

A similar example occurs in the second half of *Vals Venezolano #3* by Antonio Lauro. If you sing the melody, you quickly realize you must keep the accompaniment notes quiet in order for the passage to make sense. Most guitarists just wail through the passage playing everything the same volume.

Example #9:

Example #9

Example #9 is a musical score for a guitar piece in 3/4 time. The score is divided into three measures, each with a Roman numeral (IV, II, VII) indicating a barre position. The first measure has a barre at IV, the second at II, and the third at VII. The bass staff shows fingerings for the left hand, and the treble staff shows fingerings for the right hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Singing is a game changer when performing Baroque and Renaissance music.

Baroque music is written in counterpoint—a melody on top of a melody on top of a melody. Actually, the proper term is “voice” or “line”. Let’s look at the well-known *Bourrée* from *Lute Suite in Em* (BWV 996) by J.S. Bach.

Example #10:

Example #10

The image shows two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first system contains 8 measures of music, and the second system contains 8 measures. Below each staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) line with fret numbers. The music is written in a style that suggests a guitar piece, with many notes and fingerings indicated.

This piece consists of two melodies or voices. If you have played the piece before, you could play it and probably sing the upper voice fairly well, especially this first half. In fact, if you haven't played the piece but have heard it several times, you could probably sing at least part of the upper voice.

But what about the bottom voice? I am guessing that fewer than 10% of guitarists who play the piece can sing the bass voice accurately as they play the piece. I am guessing that only 1% can sing it without the guitar, even while looking at the music. To really know a piece in counterpoint, you should be able to sing each voice by memory just as easily as you can sing *Happy Birthday*.

Once you can sing the bottom voice as well as you can sing the upper voice, a whole new world opens up before you. When you play the piece (without singing) you will suddenly hear the bottom voice like you've never heard it before. You will suddenly be aware of how the two voices interact together. You will also become aware of deficiencies in balance between the two parts and spots where you are not playing the lower voice clearly or cleanly.

Kick it up a notch

If you want to have some fun with this piece, try these variations:

1. Finger the left hand normally but pluck only the lower voice with the right hand. *Sing the upper voice at the same time.*

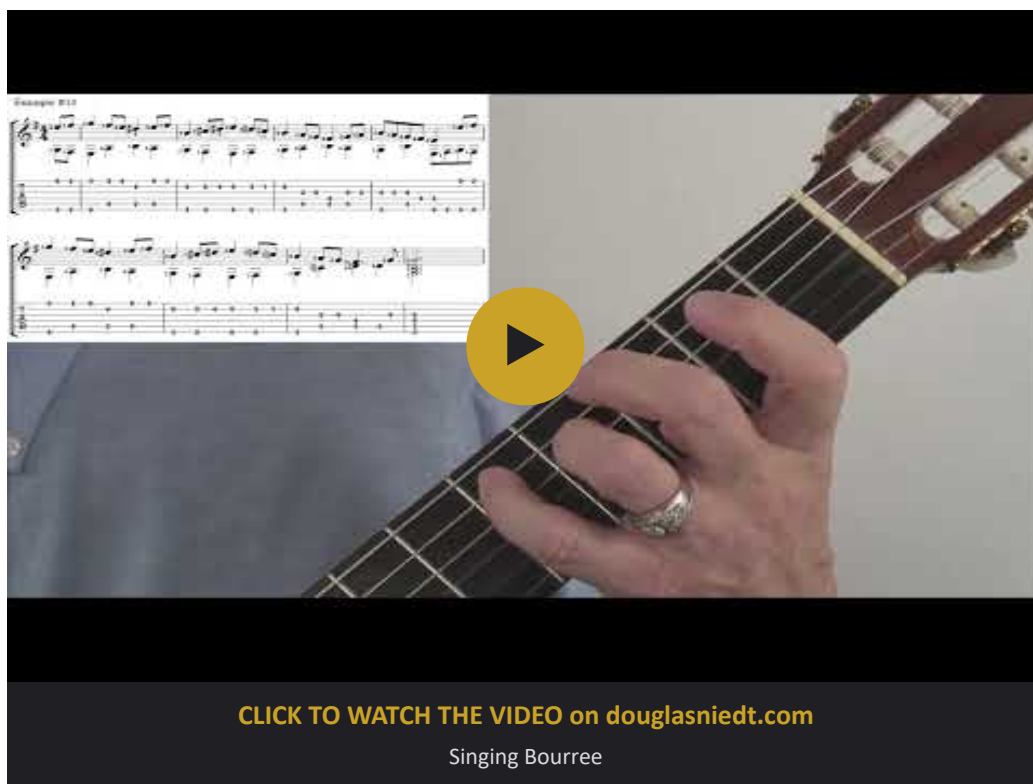
2. Then reverse—finger the left hand normally, but pluck only the upper voice with the right hand. *Sing the lower voice at the same time.*

Watch as I demonstrate these amazing feats!

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

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Although these tricks may be a little over the top, they do increase your awareness of the interaction of the voices.

On pieces or passages consisting of three or four voices, it is similarly important to be able to sing the inner voices as well as you can sing the upper and lower voices.

Chords

If a chord doesn't seem to sound right, singing the individual notes of the chord can often help. As you hold the chord, play one of the notes in the chord, sing the note, then play the chord again. Singing the note pinpoints the pitch in your mind. Then, when you play the chord, you will hear whether or not it is present or if it is too quiet or too loud. Do this with each note in the chord. By increasing your awareness of the pitches within the chord your right hand can make subtle adjustments to balance the volume of the notes properly.

Summary

The ability to sing the melody of the song you are playing is a basic requirement of good musicianship. The awareness gained by singing the melody will help you make correct fingering decisions and interpretative decisions. The ability to sing each of the voices in a contrapuntal passage is essential to understanding the passage and playing it well. It doesn't matter if you're a terrible singer. And, if you sing your pieces frequently, your singing will actually improve along with your guitar playing!