

Guitar Acrophobia: Playing Past the 12th Fret

By Douglas Niedt

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Sometimes a piece of music takes us into the stratosphere—up into the area of the fretboard above the 12th fret. It doesn't happen frequently. But when it does, it is very important that your hand be stable and that the fingers are able to move freely and precisely amongst those very narrow frets. It is also a region where the action of the guitar (height of the strings above the fretboard) can be rather high. Although there aren't very many passages that go into that high region, those that do are usually very exposed. Just the fact that the notes being played are very high in pitch means that they are extremely noticeable within the musical context. Here is a good example:

Example #1: *Gymnopedie No. 1* (Erik Satie)

Transcribed by Christopher Parkening

The musical score is presented in three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a common time signature (C). It contains several measures of music, including a measure marked with a 'II' above the staff. The second staff continues the piece, starting with a 'VII' marking above the staff. The third staff concludes the excerpt. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals, with some measures featuring multiple sharps and fingerings (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4) indicated below the notes.

[Listen to the passage played by Christopher Parkening.](#)



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TechTipPlayingInHighPositionsChristopherParkeningGymnopedie1



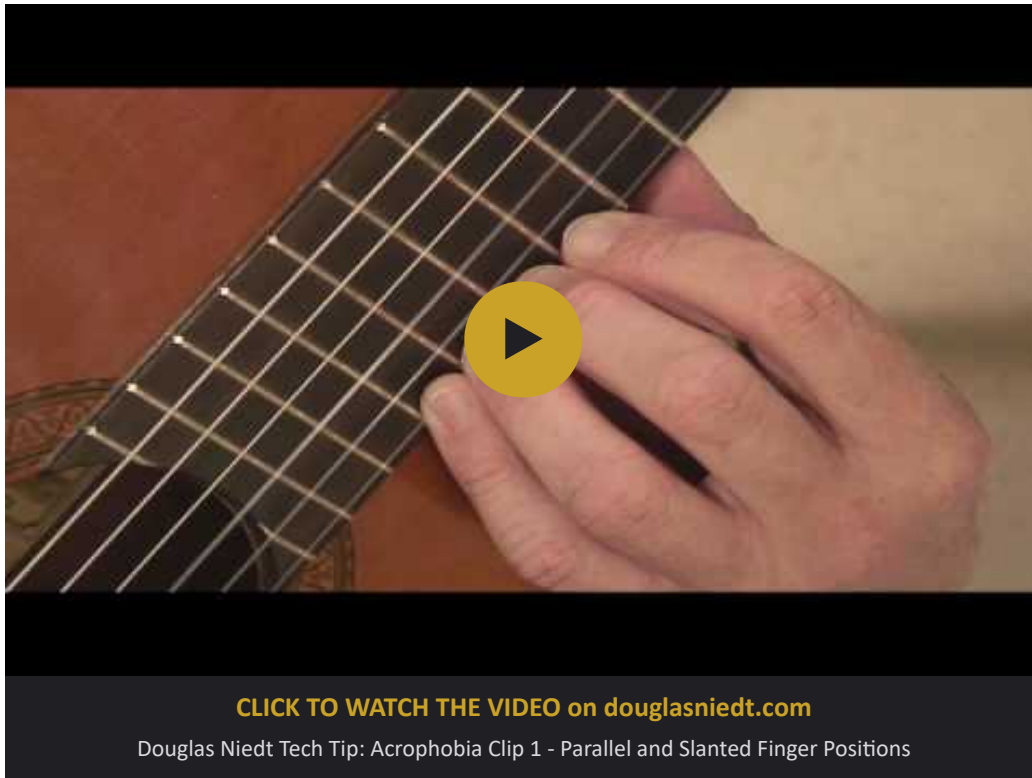
THERE ARE THREE MAJOR POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN PLAYING NOTES IN THE UPPER REGION OF THE FRETBOARD ABOVE THE 12TH FRET.

1. There are two basic finger positions you can use:
 - A. Parallel-with-the-frets position
 - B. Slanted position (I often call it the violinist's finger position)
2. It is usually a good idea to allow the tip joint of the left-hand first finger to "collapse" or "give." The anatomical jargon is: mildly hyperextend the tip joint.
3. The lower side of the guitar's upper bout is "your friend." It is not an obstacle. Use it to give the left hand stability past the 12th fret.

FINGER POSITION

We use both the parallel-with-the-frets finger position and slanted finger position below the 12th fret all the time. But in a way, the decision of which position to use is even more critical past the 12th fret. The frets are much closer together and the height of the strings above the fretboard is much higher as we pass the 12th fret. The instrument is very unforgiving in this high region. Fingers must be placed precisely against the frets with firm pressure. Anything less results in buzzes or no sound at all and sometimes, total breakdown. And again, this is usually happening in a very exposed spot often at a climatic moment of a phrase, section, or even the entire piece.

Watch as I demonstrate the two basic positions in video clip #1:



It is impossible to generalize which position is best for various situations. There are just too many variables not just in the music, but also with the hand and body anatomy of different players. In some instances the choice is very clear--only one position will work at all, so there will be no question.

Some passages could be done either way but one position may give a slight edge. Here is an example of that in the seventh variation of Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal*:

**Example #2: *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Op. 70
(Benjamin Britten)**

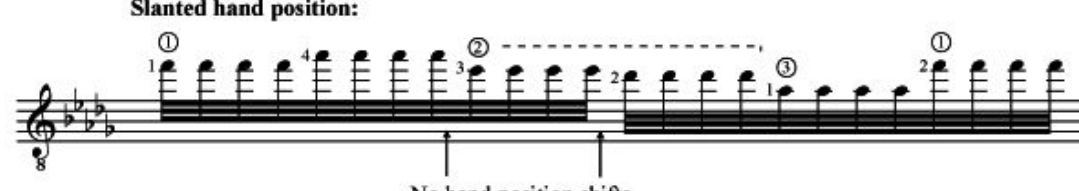
VII. Gently rocking

Parallel hand position:



Hand position shifts

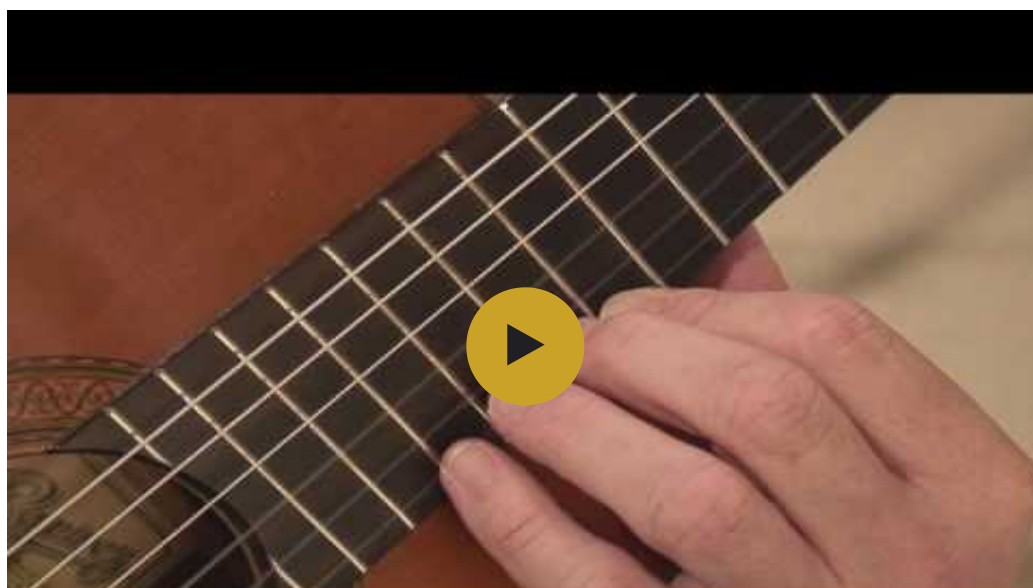
Slanted hand position:



No hand position shifts

The image displays two musical staves for a piece in 8/8 time. The top staff, labeled 'Parallel hand position:', shows a sequence of notes with fingerings (1, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2) and a dashed line indicating a shift in hand position. The bottom staff, labeled 'Slanted hand position:', shows the same sequence of notes with fingerings (1, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2) but without a hand position shift, as indicated by the text 'No hand position shifts'.

Watch as I demonstrate both finger positions in video clip #2:



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Douglas Niedt Tech Tip: Acrophobia Clip 2 - Finger Positioning For Nocturnal

The video player shows a close-up of a hand playing a guitar. A yellow play button is centered over the fretboard. Below the video player, there is a dark grey bar with white text that reads 'CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com' and 'Douglas Niedt Tech Tip: Acrophobia Clip 2 - Finger Positioning For Nocturnal'.

In other passages a mix of both positions is required. Let's look again at the passage from Christopher Parkening's transcription of Erik Satie's *Gymnopedie No. 1*:

Example #3: *Gymnopedie No. 1* (Erik Satie)

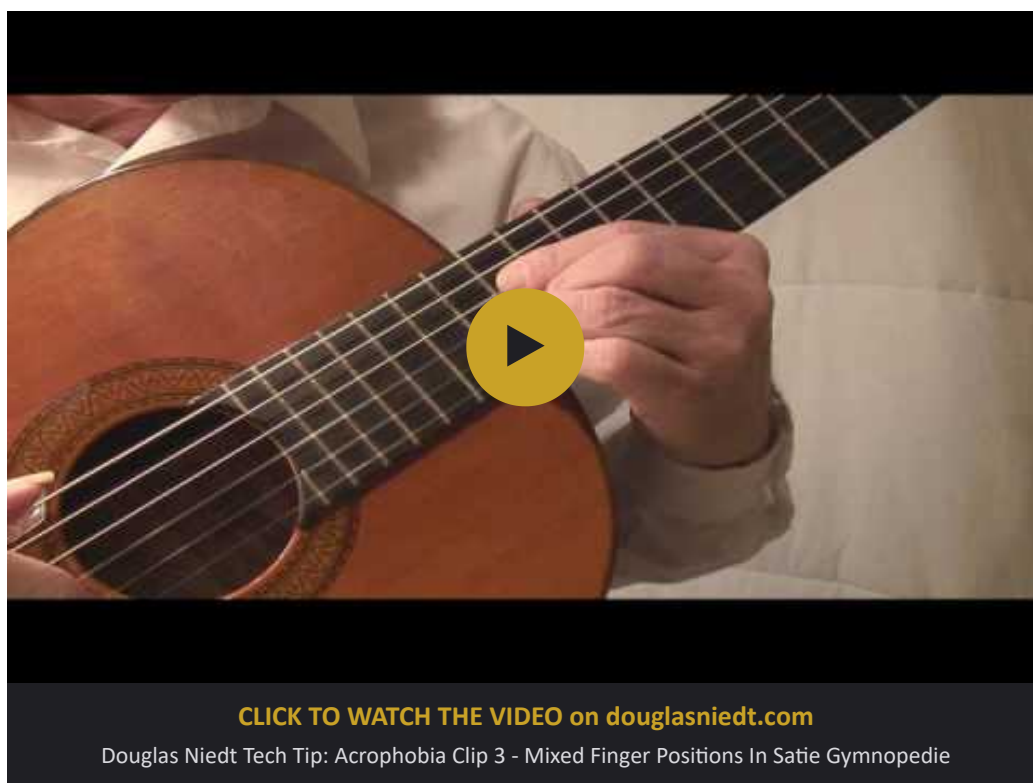
Transcribed by Christopher Parkening

Slanted finger position Parallel finger position

..... Slanted finger position

Harmonic 5th string
12th fret

Watch as I demonstrate the use of both positions in video clip #3:



But in many instances the best thing is to work the passage with both finger positions and see which works best.

COLLAPSING THE TIP JOINT OF THE FIRST FINGER

When playing in the upper positions, there are two problems that cause instability that are easily solved. First, the strings are less taut in the middle third of their length (which is where much of the upper region of the fretboard falls) than towards the nut or towards the bridge. Second, because the hand must arch up over the body of the guitar as it plays beyond the 12th fret, it is in a position with a rather high center of gravity. That, combined with the loose feel of the strings, presents a real danger of the fingers accidentally pulling the strings sideways, of held strings slipping out from under the fingertips, or of the fingers pulling the first string off the edge of the fretboard.

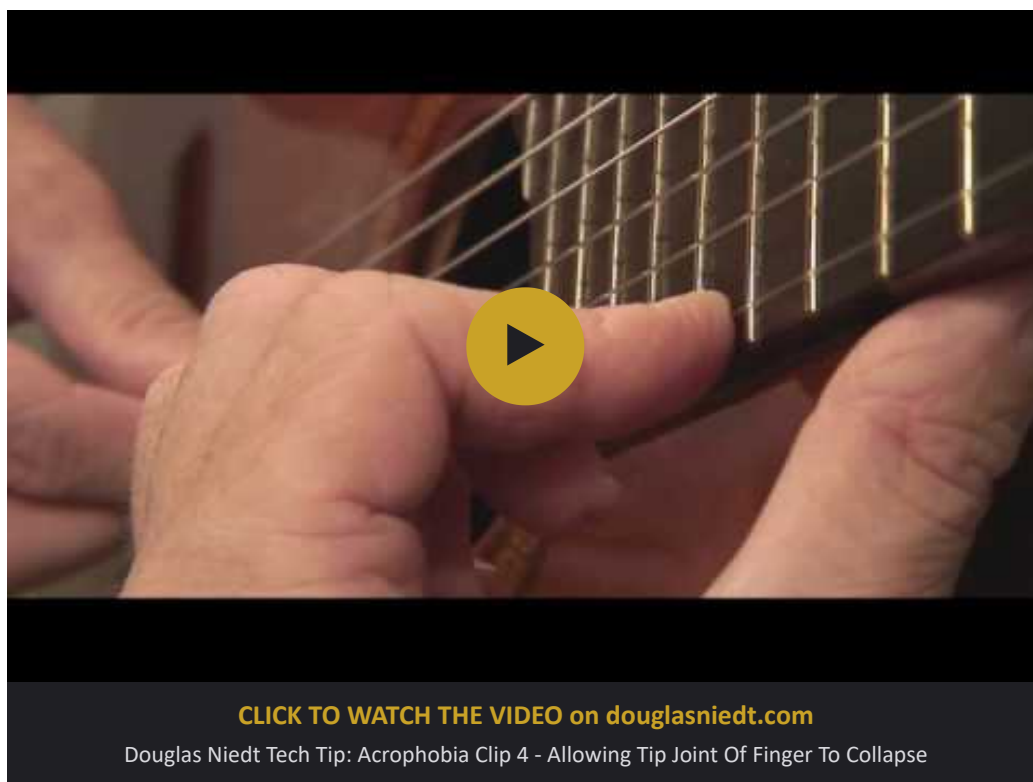
It is common practice to collapse a left-hand finger tip joint to hold a two or three-string bar. In the context of playing above the 12th fret, I am speaking of a slightly milder type of hyperextension of the tip joint of the first and sometimes the second finger to add stability when playing notes above the 12th fret, especially on the first string. By allowing the tip of the first finger to collapse, the string is pushed away from the edge of the fretboard. This also keeps the string from moving laterally during the execution of ornaments in high positions.

Here is a rather “dangerous” spot in Joaquín Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* with an ornament on the first string in the upper region of the fretboard:

Example #4: *Concierto de Aranjuez* (Joaquín Rodrigo)



Now watch as I demonstrate the hyperextension of the first finger and demonstrate its use in the above passage from Joaquín Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* in video clip #4:

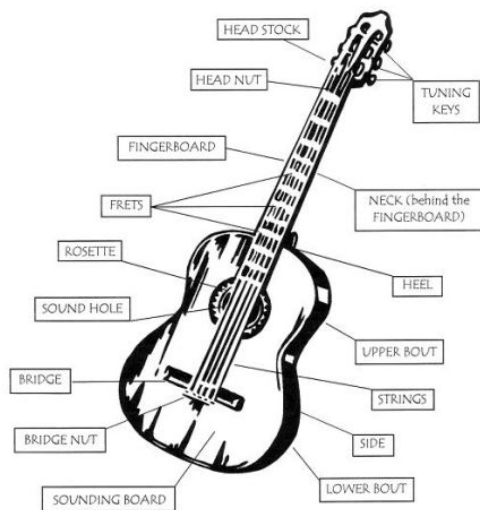


THE UPPER BOUT IS YOUR FRIEND

One problem guitarists have in playing in the region past the 12th fret is figuring out where and how to position the left hand. It's actually pretty simple most of the time.

First, let's take a quick glance at guitar anatomy so we are all on the same page terminology-wise. Here is a diagram reproduced with the kind permission of the Music Educators National Conference. On the right side of the diagram just below "Heel" and just above "Strings" it says "Upper Bout." That is the key part to which I am referring and is actually the lower side (closest to the floor) of the upper bout.

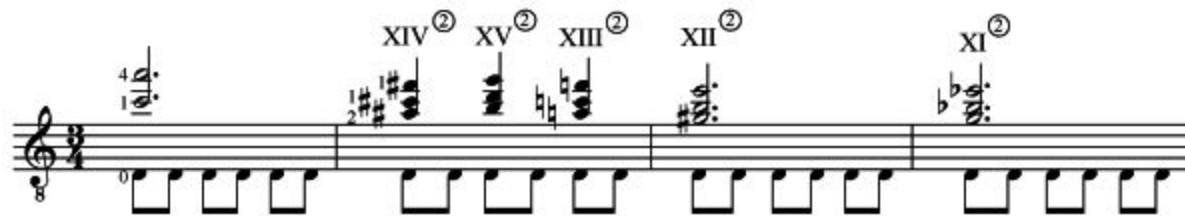
Parts of the Guitar



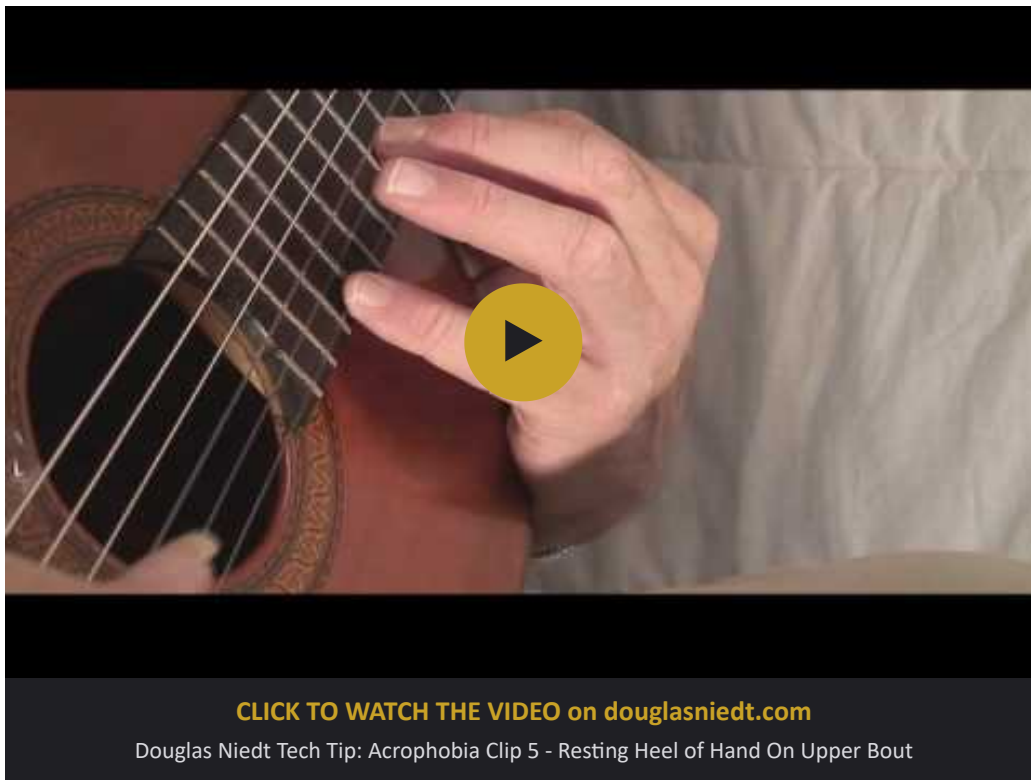
Don't look at the lower side of the upper bout as an obstacle. Don't think of it as being in the way. Instead, *use the lower side of the upper bout to give your hand stability*. You actually want to rest the heel of your hand on the lower side of the upper bout when playing in the upper positions past the 12th fret. (And whatever you do, don't purchase a nylon string guitar with a cutaway unless it's amplified and is to be used in pop groups or in clubs—they sound pretty awful without amplification).

Here is a passage from Alexandre Tansman's *Mazurka* in the upper region of the fretboard:

Example #5: *Mazurka* (Alexandre Tansman)



Now watch as I demonstrate how the upper bout is your very best friend in video clip #5:

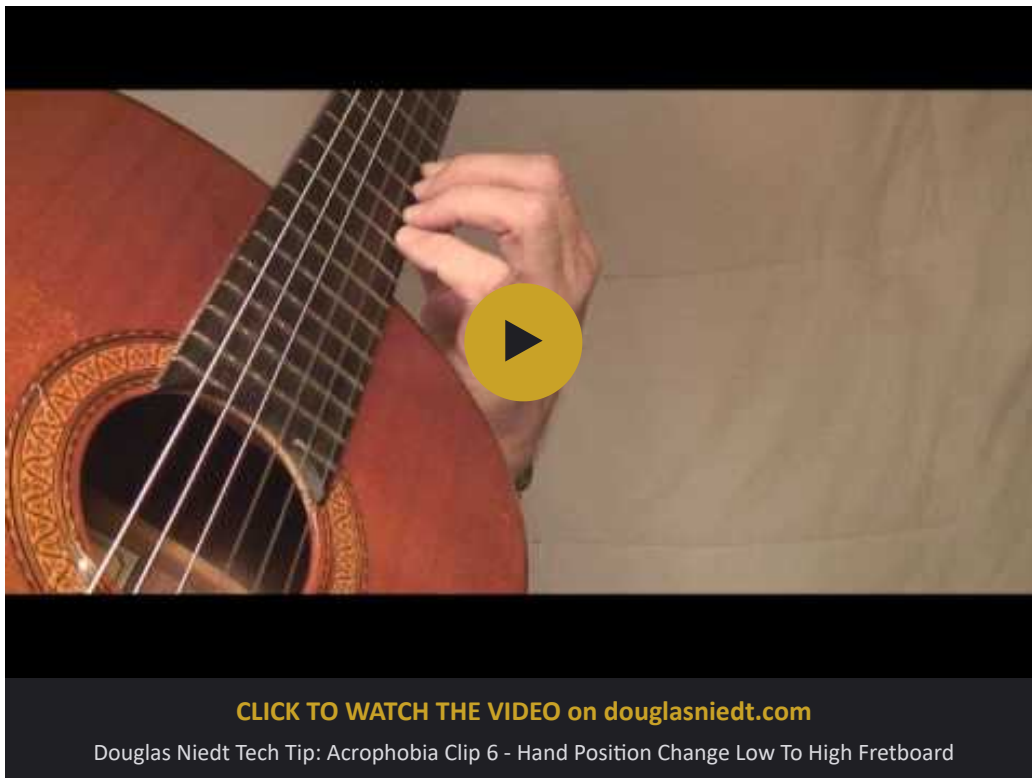


Sometimes the difficulty of playing past the 12th fret is not so much playing in the upper regions of the fretboard but in getting there from the lower positions. Guitarists have problems adjusting their hand and wrist position as they approach the 12th fret and lower side of the upper bout.

The trick is how to change the position of the hand from its close-in-to-the-neck placement for normal playing below the 12th fret to the new position it must assume for playing past the 12th fret. The hand must gradually move away from the neck as it ascends towards and past the 12th fret. As the hand moves away

from the neck and ascends on its shift, it should glide smoothly onto the lower side of the upper bout for support. The process is reversed as you shift back down below the 12th fret for normal playing.

It's easier to show to you than describe. And here is a great little exercise to use to learn how to make the transition from positions below the 12th fret to positions above the 12th fret and the reverse. Watch video clip #6:



OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Left-Hand Thumb Position

The position of the left-hand thumb when playing in the upper regions past the 12th fret will be very different from how it is positioned when playing below the 12th fret. There are two primary positions of the thumb in the upper regions of the fretboard. The choice of which position to use is for the most part dependent on whether the fingers will be in the parallel-with-the-frets position or in the slanted position. Aside from that broad generalization, exactly how the thumb is positioned depends greatly upon the passage being played, the size of the player's hand, and length of the fingers.

BE CERTAIN THE THUMB IS IN CONTACT WITH SOME PART OF THE GUITAR AT ALL TIMES! Never play with the thumb dangling in midair.

Watch as I demonstrate the variation of the left-hand thumb position in video clip #7:



"Body English"

Upper body and left-shoulder position will also vary from player to player when executing passages past the 12th fret. Whether the upper torso leans forward, to the left, or whether the left shoulder dips down or stays even with the right shoulder will depend on the player's anatomy, small differences in the shape of the guitar's body, and even the size of the guitar in relation to the size of the player's body. For stability's sake, the ideal would be to not vary the sitting position at all. But it would be a big mistake to adhere to a strict "the body must not move" rule if it just doesn't work for a particular player or for a particular musical passage.

So my friends, guitar acrophobia is easily conquered:

1. Choose the appropriate finger/hand position
2. Use tip-joint hyperextension

3. Make the upper bout your very best friend
4. Smoothly adjust the left-hand position as it approaches or leaves the upper bout
5. Be sure the thumb is in the best place for the finger/hand position you are using
6. Experiment with “body English”