

How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 1 of 4

By Douglas Niedt

Part 1: HOW TO PRODUCE A BEAUTIFUL REST-STROKE TONE WITH THE FINGERS ON THE TREBLE STRINGS

My goal is to help you produce a drop dead gorgeous, rich, round, clear, full, warm tone. For me, the sound I seek is that of the great guitarist Andres Segovia when he played in concert. THAT is the sound I want. Not the sound on his recordings, because unfortunately they totally fail to capture what his tone really sounded like. A close approximation would be the recordings of Christopher Parkening. Other great guitarists such as Julian Bream produce an amazing variety of tone, but only Segovia had THAT SOUND. And, we aren't very concerned with getting a bright sound. That's easy. What is difficult is to get a full, warm, bell-like tone quality.

One of the most important elements in producing a good tone is to **have a clear concept of the tone you want in your inner ear**. To form a concept of a beautiful tone, listen to guitarists whose tone you love. Experience that beautiful tone by listening to those guitarists live or on good recordings. Memorize what it sounds like. Hear it in your head. When you have a crystal-clear idea and memory of that beautiful sound in your head, it will be much easier to produce it on the guitar.

In describing how to produce a beautiful tone Segovia once said, "This physical beauty of sound is not the result of stubborn will power but springs from the innate excellence of the spirit." That may well be, but for those of us who are lacking in the "excellence of the spirit" department, here are some tangible techniques you can use to produce a beautiful tone.

Do Your Nails

If your fingernails are not shaped correctly or not thoroughly polished, there is no way you will be able to produce a good tone. To learn how to shape and polish your nails, watch every minute of my three-part video, [How to Shape, Sand, Finish, and Polish Your Fingernails](#). **If you shape and polish your nails properly, you are 80% of the way there to getting a beautiful tone.**

Be Sure You Have Good Strings On Your Guitar

Defective treble strings emit odd or clashing overtones that will make your tone sound harsh. If the treble strings are worn, scraping sounds are produced as the fingernails are drawn across them. Old, worn bass strings will sound "thuddy" or dull.

Checking for worn strings is easy. To check a treble string, grab hold of the string with your thumb and index finger and run them along the length of the string, especially in the area between the fretboard

and the bridge. If you feel rough spots, change the string. If the bass strings have discolored spots or are no longer a bright silver color, change them.

Two tests must be conducted to determine if a string is free of defects:

Test #1

First, play the string as a natural harmonic at the 12th fret. Listen to the pitch. Then press the same string down at the 12th fret and play the normal note. Be very careful when doing this test. Be sure that you don't press too hard (which stretches the string sharp). Also be certain your finger is landing absolutely vertically onto the string. If you land the finger at an angle, it will stretch the string sharp or slacken the string flat. And of course, don't vibrato. If the pitch of the harmonic and stopped note isn't the same, the string is old or defective. Toss it out and put on another. If the pitch of the pressed down note perfectly matches the pitch of the harmonic, the string has passed its first test. Proceed to test number two.

Test #2:

Pluck the string above the 12th fret and watch it vibrate. You should see a very smooth vibration pattern that is relatively free of flutters. If you see wild or irregular fluttering as the string vibrates, it is defective. Get rid of it.

Right Hand And Arm Position

If your right hand or right arm is in the wrong position, your chances of getting a good tone are near zero. Watch my video, [How to Find a Good Right-Hand Position for Classical Guitar](#).

How To Do It:

It is best to cultivate your tone quality by practicing on the first string while holding down the F at the 1st fret, Bb at the 6th fret, or C at the 8th fret. This is because the 1st string is the least forgiving of bad technique in plucking a string. If the 2nd or 3rd strings are plucked incorrectly, they will sound bad, but not as bad as the 1st string. The reason we hold F, Bb, or C is that on the guitar, the sympathetic vibrations of A's, D's, and E's can help cover up bad tone quality. The sympathetic vibrations add fullness to what would otherwise be a thin, weak sound. The F, Bb, and C produce the fewest sympathetic vibrations, so you hear your sound more objectively.

Hold down the C on the 1st string at the 8th fret. Set the right-hand thumb on a bass string for support. Place the "i" finger on the 1st string above the rosette (the ornamental design around the soundhole) at the bottom of the soundhole. We don't want to play close to the bridge where the sound gets bright and we don't want to play over the soundhole where the sound gets dark. We want to develop our mid-range tone.

When playing a string two things must happen. First, the "i" finger must be placed on the string so that

the string touches the left side of the fingernail. Second, the string must contact the fingernail and the flesh simultaneously. These two requirements form the golden rule of good tone production.

Several things can go wrong:

1. If the string touches the left *and* right side of the fingernail (which means you are striking the string straight-on), the tone will be bright and thin.
2. If the string touches flesh only, the string will travel on the flesh and then you will hear a click at the moment when the string slams into the fingernail.
3. If the string touches the fingernail only, as you play the string repeatedly you will hear a buzzy sound. This is the result of the hard surface of the fingernail touching the vibrating string with no cushioning of the string with the flesh.

Therefore, the contact point of the finger on the string must be flesh and nail together on the left side of the fingernail. (Sidenote: Because of nail shape and other reasons, a very few guitarists prefer to play on the right side of their nails. But they too must obey the rule of simultaneous flesh/nail contact.)

This is one reason hand position is so important. The hand must be in such a position that the fingers *automatically contact the string on the left side of the fingernails*. For most players, this means **the wrist will be straight and the knuckles of the hand NOT parallel with the strings**. This is different from the traditional Segovia hand position. Segovia (and some other excellent players) cricked his hand to the right to line up the knuckles of the right hand parallel with the strings. It worked beautifully for Segovia because the position made his fingernails contact the strings in the desired manner--flesh and nails together on the left sides of the nails. But, for most players, that hand position makes the fingers hit the strings straight-on, which causes both sides of the nails to contact the string. The result is a bright, thin tone. If the Segovia position works for you, that's great. But again, for most people a straight wrist with the knuckles off-parallel is the best position. Make a point of especially checking that the "a" finger is touching on the left side of its nail. The "a" finger will tend to hit the string more straight-on than "i" or "m".

The best practice method for improving your tone is to *focus on one finger at a time* and play VERY SLOWLY. In the video which follows I will show you how your tone is affected by using different types of "slice", changing the hand position to vary the depth of attack, tilting the hand, changing the hand position to vary the contact point of the fingernail on the string, and varying the amount of tension in the fingertips. As you try these techniques yourself, note how they affect your tone and critique each adjustment you make.

Watch my video as I demonstrate how to get a good rest stroke tone on the treble strings. I think this may be one of the best videos I've done yet. Try to stay awake so you don't miss the stunning camera work in the close-ups.



How to Produce a Good Tone on the Guitar With Rest Stroke

Again, work with one finger at a time. After working with the “i” finger, experiment with the “m” finger. Then try the “a” finger. Be sure the “a” finger is playing on the left side of its nail.

Once you are able to produce a consistently beautiful tone with each finger individually, try alternating a pair of fingers and work to make each finger sound identical in tone. Practice “im”, “ma”, and “ia”. You should not be able to hear an alternation of tone as you alternate fingers.

Summing It Up

As you saw in the video, we have five parameters that will affect our tone quality:

- First, we have the slice variable. We can play straight across the string, slice left, slice right; or anything in between.
- Second, we can place the hand or fingers in a vertical position or lean (tilt) to the left; or anything in between.
- Third, we can vary the position of the hand. We can place the hand so the knuckles are parallel with the strings (Segovia position). For most people this will make the string contact the nail on both the left and right side of the fingernail (straight-on) and produce a very bright sound. Or, we can place the hand off parallel. For most people this will make the string contact the nail on the left side which is most desirable for a full, rich tone. Or, we can place the hand anywhere in between those two positions.
- Fourth, we can vary the amount of tension in the tip joints. We can relax the muscles to allow the tip joints to give or collapse, or apply tension to keep the tip joints straight or even to bend them. Or, we can apply degrees of tension anywhere in between those extremes.
- Fifth, we can lean the hand back so the fingers pull down onto the string (into the guitar) or we can move the hand forward toward the floor so the fingers play more horizontally across the strings. Or, the fingers can pull the string anywhere in between those two extremes.

In real playing, we use all five parameters simultaneously. For the fattest, fullest tone most players will play on the left side of the nail (knuckle position off-parallel), lean the hand back, dip the hand to the left, relax the tip joints, and slice right or left.

For the brightest tone, most players will play straight-on to the fingernail (knuckles parallel with the strings) but still flesh and nail together, bring the hand forward toward the floor, place the hand vertically not tilted left, stiffen the tip joints, and play horizontally across the string (not into the guitar).

In working to produce the richest, fullest tone possible you must understand how each parameter affects the sound so you can alter each one to the circumstances of your own hands and fingernails to produce the best tone possible.

Next month I will explain how to produce a beautiful free stroke tone with the fingers on the treble strings.