

Interval and Chord Balance Part 3 (of 4)

By Douglas Niedt

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In the previous two months (Interval and Chord Balance Part 1 and 2) we have considered several methods to control the balance of notes within intervals and chords. In this article we will discuss some special techniques and examples involving the thumb.

In *Etude No. 7* by Heitor Villa-Lobos we find the following passage:

Example No. 1:

Measures 24-26. *Etude No. 7* by Heitor Villa-Lobos

Square-shaped notes are the melody notes

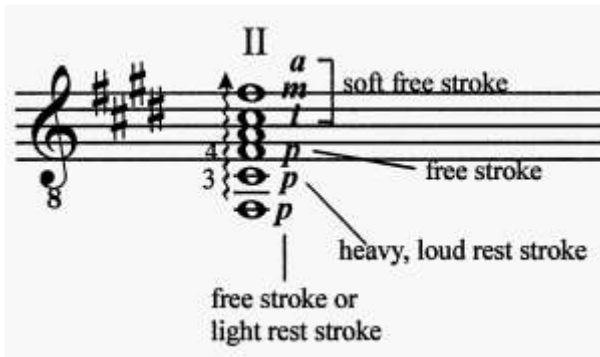
The melodic line, which Villa-Lobos has highlighted for us by placing accents next to each melodic note, occurs in an inner voice played by the thumb. While the B# and second C# in measure 24 and the E in measure 25 pose no difficulty since they sound alone, the others are problematic, particularly the first C# in measures 24 and 26. The C# on the fifth string in the F# minor chord (first beat of measure 24) is the first note of the melodic phrase and must sound distinctly and clearly as a melodic note, not just part of the F# minor chord. For this reason, simply strumming the entire chord with the thumb will not suffice.

The most effective way to play this chord would be to:

1. Play the low F# with the thumb free stroke or a very light rest stroke.
2. Play the melodic note C# with a heavy rest stroke with the thumb.
3. Play the F# on the fourth string with the thumb free stroke.
4. Play the A, C#, and F# with free stroke *i*, *m*, and *a* respectively.

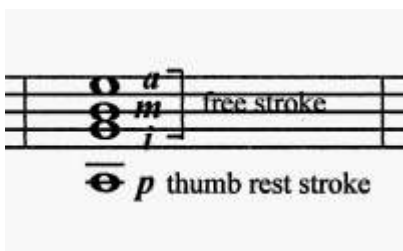
The entire chord would be arpeggiated:

Example No. 2



In order to master this technique of using the thumb rest stroke to bring out a note in the middle of a chord, I would suggest practicing in three stages. First, practice a four-note chord using the thumb rest stroke on the fifth string while using i, m, and a free stroke to play the treble strings:

Example No. 3:

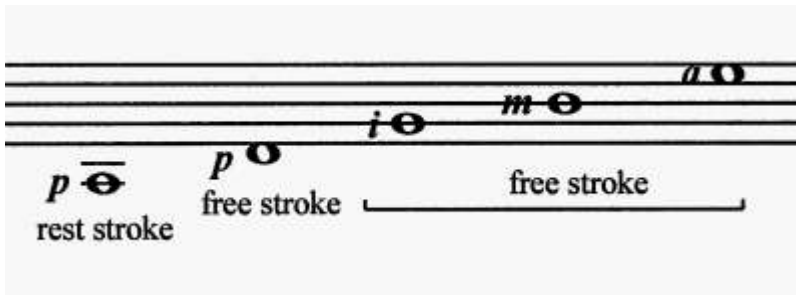


Practice without arpeggiating the notes. The thumb should come to rest securely against the fourth string after loudly playing the fifth string while the fingers very lightly brush the treble strings pianissimo. Once this feels secure, try arpeggiating the notes very evenly--no obvious space or pause between the fifth and third (p and i) strings.

In the second stage, add the fourth string (example four) played free stroke by the thumb. Begin by playing slowly, one string at a time. Be certain you maintain a heavy, secure

rest stroke on the fifth string resting snugly against the fourth string thus producing a very loud A. Then, be sure the thumb pulls up to play the fourth string free stroke producing a very quiet D:

Example No. 4:

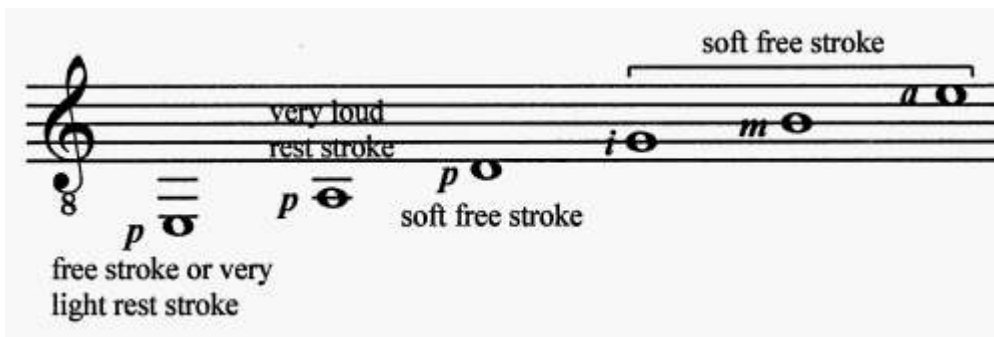


Gradually play the notes closer together until you produce the sound of an evenly arpeggiated chord with the fifth string sounding forte and the others piano.

In the third stage, add the sixth string (example five). The sixth string can either be played free stroke with the thumb or with a very light rest stroke. In either case, the thumb would barely brush the string, not pluck it. Again, begin by playing very slowly, one note at a time.

As an exercise, it would be a good idea to exaggerate the balance playing the fifth string fortissimo and all the others pianissimo:

Example No. 5:



Again, gradually play the notes closer together until they sound as an arpeggiated chord, the fifth string loud, the others soft. Finally, apply this technique to the F# minor chord in the Villa-Lobos *Etude No. 7*.

This same technique is useful in many other pieces as well. For instance, *Granada* by Isaac Albeniz opens with an E major chord in which the melodic note E is found on the third string:

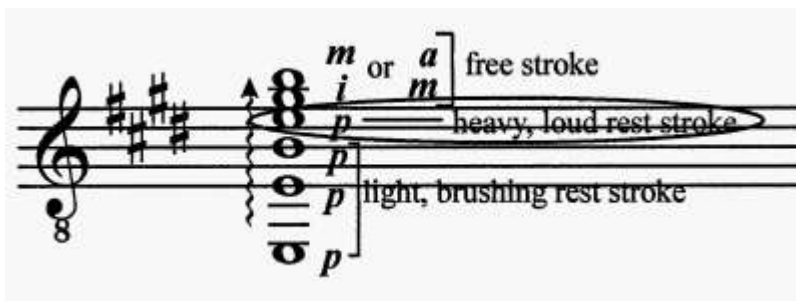
Example No. 6:

Measures 1-4 *Granada* by Isaac Albeniz



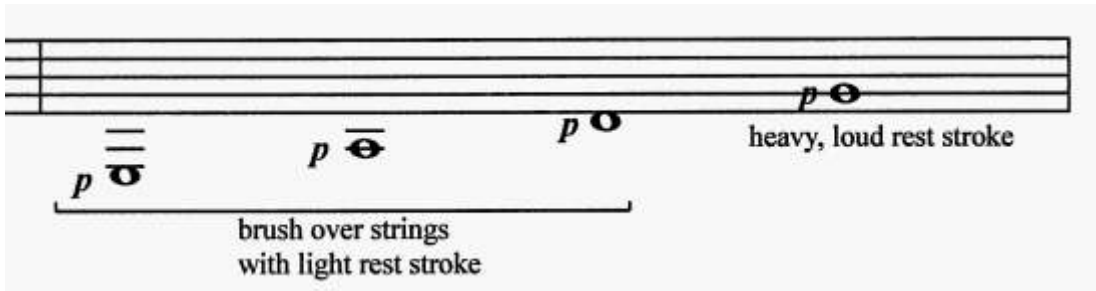
The chord could be arpeggiated in the following manner:

Example No. 7:



Stage 1: Begin by practicing the bottom four strings:

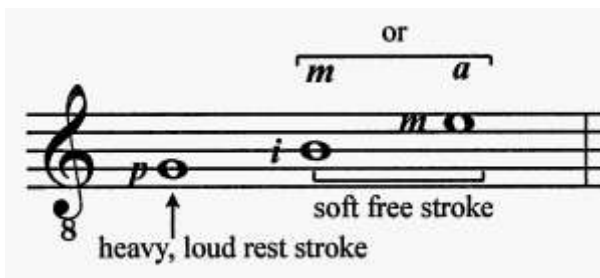
Example No. 8:



Playing very slowly with the thumb, simply brush over the sixth, fifth, and fourth strings very lightly. Upon reaching the third string, suddenly pull hard into the soundboard of the guitar producing a loud rest stroke, coming to rest securely against the second string. Gradually speed up until the four notes sound as an arpeggiated chord.

Stage 2: Practice the top three strings:

Example No. 9

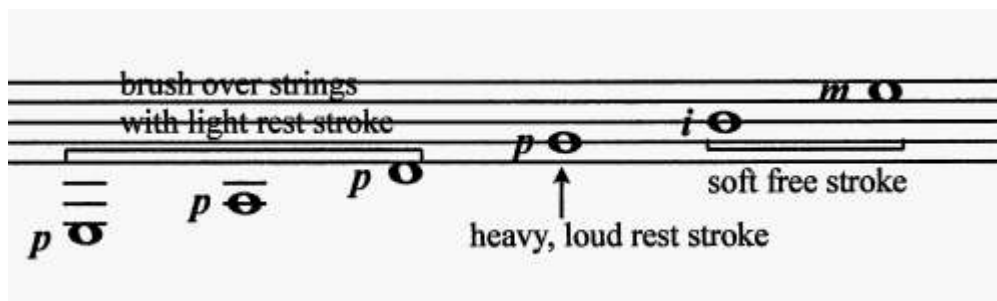


Playing very slowly and evenly at first, play the third string with the thumb with a heavy, loud rest stroke followed by the B and E played free stroke with i and m or m and a. Play the three notes faster and faster until they sound as an arpeggiated chord.

One note of caution: as you speed up the notes, be certain that the thumb is still playing the third string rest stroke, coming to rest securely against the second string. Because i (or m) is playing the second string free stroke immediately after the thumb stroke, many players will shy away from letting the thumb follow through into the second string. Rest assured that with correct practice, the thumb and finger will not run into or get in the way of each other. The thumb, having completed its rest stroke, will lift off the second string at the same exact moment the second string is plucked by the finger.

Stage 3: Finally, combine the first two stages of the exercise and apply the technique to *Granada* and other pieces containing similar passages:

Exercise No. 10



A second technique one could use in *Granada* is an entirely different approach to this passage. You could arpeggiate, i.e. sweep or strum the basses with the thumb, then continue the arpeggio (skipping the third string) with i and m or m and a playing the second and first strings, and then **play the third string last** with the thumb free stroke.

The chord on the first beat of measure five should sound very full and lush. This can be accomplished as follows:

1. Play the sixth and fifth strings rest stroke with the thumb. The thumb should follow through to rest securely against the fourth string.
2. Then play the third and second strings loudly (maintaining the correct overall chord balance by playing the melodic E loudly) with i and m or m and a.

The thumb rest stroke gives the chord a very full and strong foundation in the bass—a “strong bottom-end” and the fingers maintain the correct chord balance by matching the thumb’s power.

Returning briefly to *Etude No. 7* by Villa-Lobos, let us cover one more balancing technique. In measure 25 (the 2nd measure in the example below) on the first beat we find an F# on the fifth string (the melodic note) with an open low E beneath it:

Square-shaped notes are the melody notes

Both notes are played rest stroke with the thumb. But, brush the sixth string very lightly with the thumb. Then play the fifth string, also with rest stroke; but pulling (following through) hard into the fourth string. To produce the desired effect, it is essential that the thumb play deeply (into the soundboard) into the fifth string, coming to rest securely against the fourth string. Begin by practicing the notes separately, gradually increasing the speed until they sound together; the sixth string piano and the fifth string forte.

This technique can also be used in Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 1* as well as numerous other pieces:

Exercise No. 12

Measures 1, 12-13. *Prelude No.1* by Heitor Villa-Lobos

The image displays musical notation for Exercise No. 12, which consists of measures 1, 12, and 13 from Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 1*. The notation is written on a single staff in 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first measure (measure 1) begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. It contains a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The second measure (measure 12) contains a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The third measure (measure 13) contains a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The notation includes various rests and strokes with labels: 'thumb rest stroke', 'light, brushing rest stroke', 'p rest stroke', and 'rest stroke'.

In these three articles about interval and chord balance, we have covered the most common balancing techniques and examples found in intermediate and advanced repertoire. (There are many more chord balancing techniques and variations on the techniques already discussed, but their use is too subtle and involved to be explained on paper.)

Next month we will put these techniques to use by studying an entire piece measure by measure, examining how to properly balance the voices.