

Tambor

By Douglas Niedt

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The tambor (Spanish) or tambour (French) or tambora (Afro-Caribbean?) is an effect used in classical and flamenco guitar playing to imitate the sound of a tuned drum. (The tambora is actually a percussion instrument with a low range that makes a low deep sound--you could think of it as a bass drum.) Some writers liken the usage of the tambor effect in some pieces to the sound of the timpani. It can be notated in several ways.

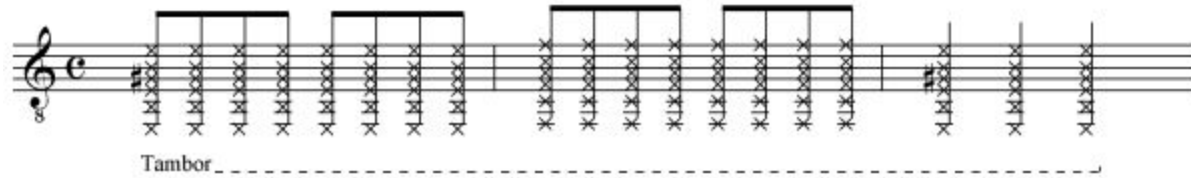
Note that the words Tambor, Tambora, Tambour or the abbreviations T, Tam, and Tamb (and probably others) may be used. The word or abbreviation can be followed by either a solid or dashed bracket:

Example #1

The image shows two musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff contains a sequence of guitar chords, mostly triads and dyads, with some chords marked with an 'x' to indicate the tambor effect. Below the staff, three horizontal lines represent different notations for the tambor effect: 'Tambor' followed by a dashed bracket, 'Tambora' followed by a solid bracket, and 'Tambour' followed by a dashed bracket. The second staff is identical to the first, but the notations below are abbreviated: 'T' followed by a solid bracket, 'Tam.' followed by a solid bracket, and 'Tamb.' followed by a dashed bracket.

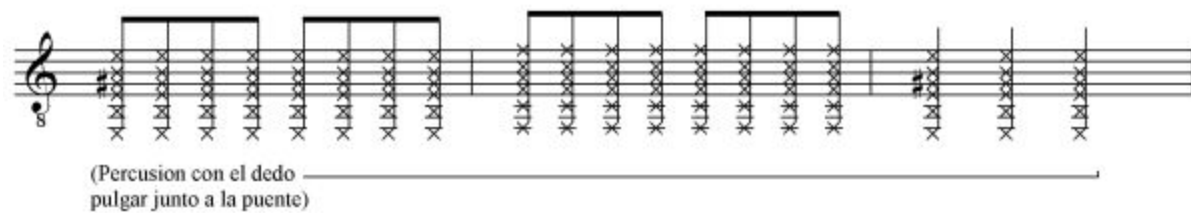
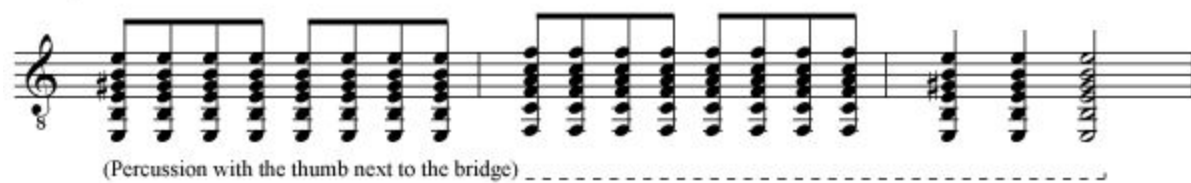
The note-heads may be written normally or as I prefer, with an "x" replacing the note-head:

Example #2



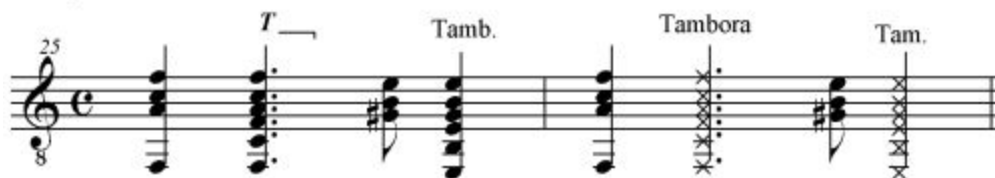
Sometimes it is more generically indicated as simply "Percussion" or in Spanish, "Percusion," again with the options of brackets or altered note-heads:

Example #3



If tambors are inserted between non-tambor notes or chords, it can be notated in several different ways:

Example #4



In its most basic function solely as a drum effect, it is usually produced by rapidly rotating the forearm, wrist, and hand as one unit, thumping the strings with the side of the right-hand thumb, parallel with and close to the bridge. It is important to rotate the forearm to execute the movement. Do not lift the arm off the guitar. Do not use the upper arm to make downward vertical hits or karate chops of the hand onto the strings. That produces extreme tension in the arm and hand, wreaking havoc with whatever follows the tambor passage. Such excessive tension also makes the execution of the tambor itself much more difficult than it should be.

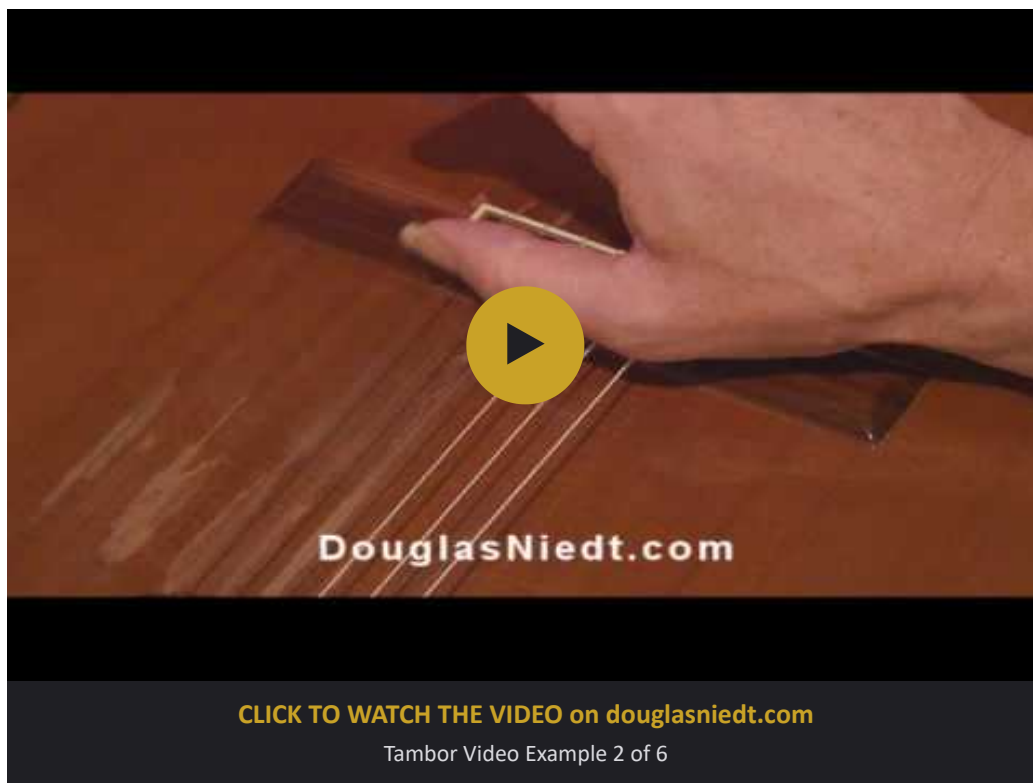
You just have to watch this (video clip #1).



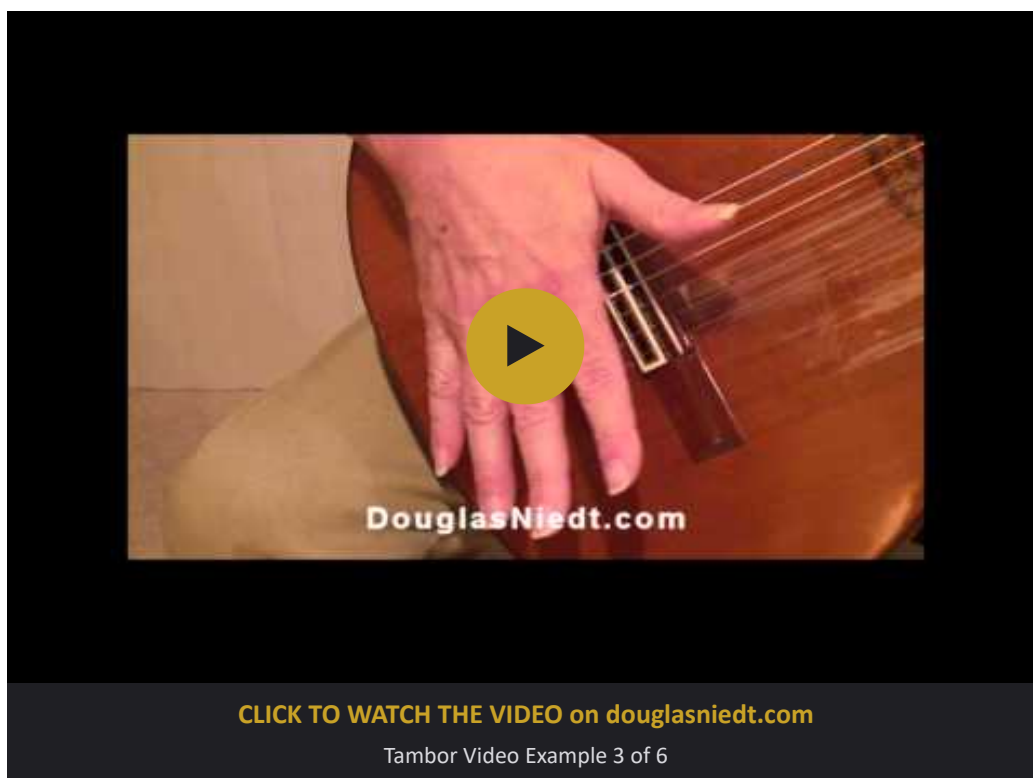
The tone quality of the tambor can be altered quite dramatically with two basic adjustments. The thumb position can be changed from parallel with the bridge to an angled position. We can also choose to use either more of the hard bony parts of the thumb or the fleshier softer parts to hit the bridge and strings. These adjustments enable the player to produce more or less "wood" and varying degrees of percussive attack in the sound.

Also, keeping the thumb close to the bridge produces the most drum-like sound. As the hand is moved away from the bridge and closer to the soundhole, the sound of the deep drum decreases and the sound of the strings becomes more dominant.

Watch as I demonstrate these variations (video clip #2).

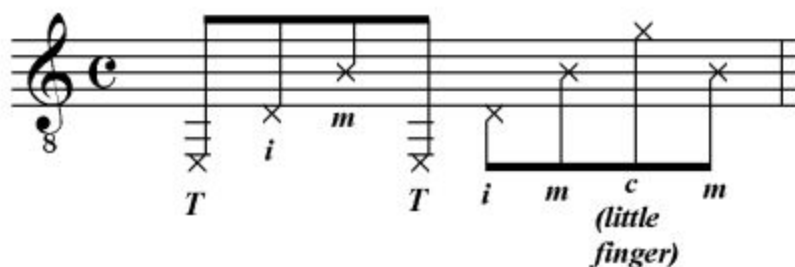


Keeping the thumb close to the bridge also presents the opportunity to mix the tambor effect with percussive hits on various parts of the soundboard using the other fingers. The effect can be greatly varied by what the left hand holds (or mutes) as the right hand executes the percussion.



Here is how these effects could be notated: (Composers and arrangers/copyists please note it is an excellent idea to provide a diagram indicating where on the guitar percussive hits are to be made. Such effects can be very difficult to describe in words.)

Example #5

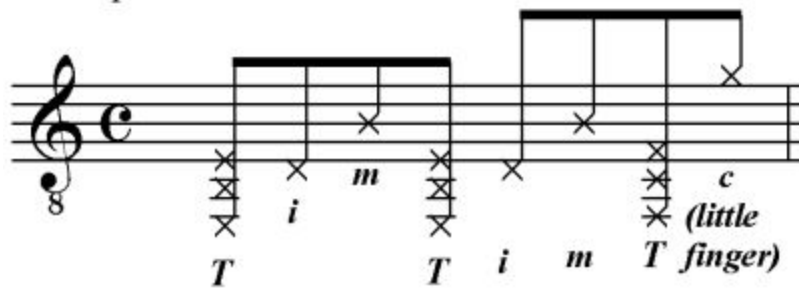


This photo shows where each finger is to hit the guitar:



Notation for same type of effect but holding chords on left hand:

Example #6



Instead of using the thumb, the tambor can also be executed by hitting the strings with any of the other fingers or even the edge (side) of the palm below the little finger. For that matter you could also use the face of some or all the fingers together as one unit. You can produce very fast tambor hits or drum roll effects by alternating two individual fingers (usually "im").

Watch as I demonstrate some common techniques in video clip #4:



Playing a Melody with a Simultaneous Tambor

A commonly called for effect in guitar music is to play a melody, chordal accompaniment, and tambor all at the same time. This is done by fingering the melody (usually on the first and second strings) and chordal accompaniment with the left hand and simultaneously executing the tambor with the right-hand thumb.

But there is a key difference in execution that sets this effect apart from other tambor effects. The melody has to be brought out to sound markedly louder than the accompaniment and drum effect. To do this, the thumb and arm are kept rotated much more to the left so the thumb is almost upside down in relation to the top of the soundboard.

To thump the strings with the thumb, the player still moves the hand by rotating the forearm. But now, the back of the thumbnail strikes and bounces off the treble string which results in accentuating the melody. At the same time, the rear of the thumb hits the strings close to the bridge or the bridge itself to produce the tambor and to resonate the strings of the held chord.

This is fun. Watch video clip #5:



Here are some notational examples of its use:

From *Gran Jota de Concierto* by Francisco Tárrega:

Example #7:

This musical score consists of three staves in E major (two sharps). The top staff features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a double bar line and a 'C.2.' annotation. The middle staff has a similar melodic line with a 'Tambora.' annotation below it. The bottom staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords. A bracket labeled '1ª' spans the final measures of the middle and bottom staves.

From *Aconquija* by Agustin Barrios Mangore:

Example #8:

This musical score is for guitar in E major and is divided into two systems. The first system starts at measure 49 and includes a melodic line with fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) and a 'CX' annotation. Below it, a 'tambora' line shows a sequence of chords. The second system starts at measure 52 and includes another melodic line with fingering numbers and a 'CVII' annotation, with corresponding chords below. The score uses a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps.

From *Chopi* by Pablo Escobar in E-major guitar tuning:

Example #9

Chopi (Pablo Escobar) revised Jorge Morel

Open E major Tuning:
1st string=E
2nd string=B
3rd string=G#
4th string=B
5th string=G#
6th string=E

Tambora -----

V-----



A Variation on Playing a Melody with Tambor Accompaniment

In a correctly-executed tambor, the rotational movement of the forearm allows the hand to stay relatively steady. Therefore, should the music require it, one could use the fingers to play a simple melody at the same time the thumb produces a tambor accompaniment. This technique enables the execution of independent rhythms between the melody and tambor and more contrast of volume between the melody and accompaniment than the common simultaneous melody/tambor explained above. I have rarely seen this technique used, but it is certainly worth exploring.

Watch this one (video clip #6).



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

A Variation on Playing a Melody with Tambor Accompaniment

The tambor is a very colorful technique. As you can see, it can be executed in a variety of ways depending on the demands of the music and the sound desired by the performer.