

The Old Kleenex or Handkerchief Trick

By Douglas Niedt

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Here is a very simple way to check how you are playing individual voices in a piece.

When you work on a piece that contains two or more distinct parts, especially one in counterpoint, it can be difficult to hear how well you are playing a subsidiary part. We tend to focus on what we are familiar with. Here is a very simple way to check how you are playing individual voices in a piece.

A brief explanation:

The term "voices" (also called "lines") means the parts of the song. It comes from choir terminology: the upper voice (highest in overall pitch range) is the soprano voice or soprano part (often the melody, therefore also referred to as the melody line or upper voice); the lowest voice is the bass voice or bass part (the bass line or lower voice).

If a piece has more than two parts, the part directly below the sopranos is the alto voice or alto part or alto line (in choirs it is sung by females). The part directly above the basses is the tenor voice or tenor part or tenor line (in choirs it is sung by males). Therefore, a choir piece with the assignation SATB means it is for four voices--in descending order: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.

In guitar notation, the stems of the noteheads of the soprano and alto usually go up and those of the tenors and basses go down so you can tell which part a note belongs to.

Let's look at the *Bourrée* (or *Bourée*) from *Lute Suite No. 1* (BWV 996). Incidentally, BWV is an abbreviation for *Bach Werke Verzeichnis* which means Bach Works Index. It is an index that numbers the complete works of Bach.

When playing the *Bourrée*, most players tend to focus on the upper voice and don't really listen closely to the lower voice. After all, we know how the upper voice goes and can probably sing it from memory.

But what about the lower voice? Can you sing it from memory? Do you really know how it goes? Probably not. Even if you look at the music, you may not be able to sing it. Or if you play through the piece, can you sing the lower voice as you play both parts? Many people can't, and that is a real problem.

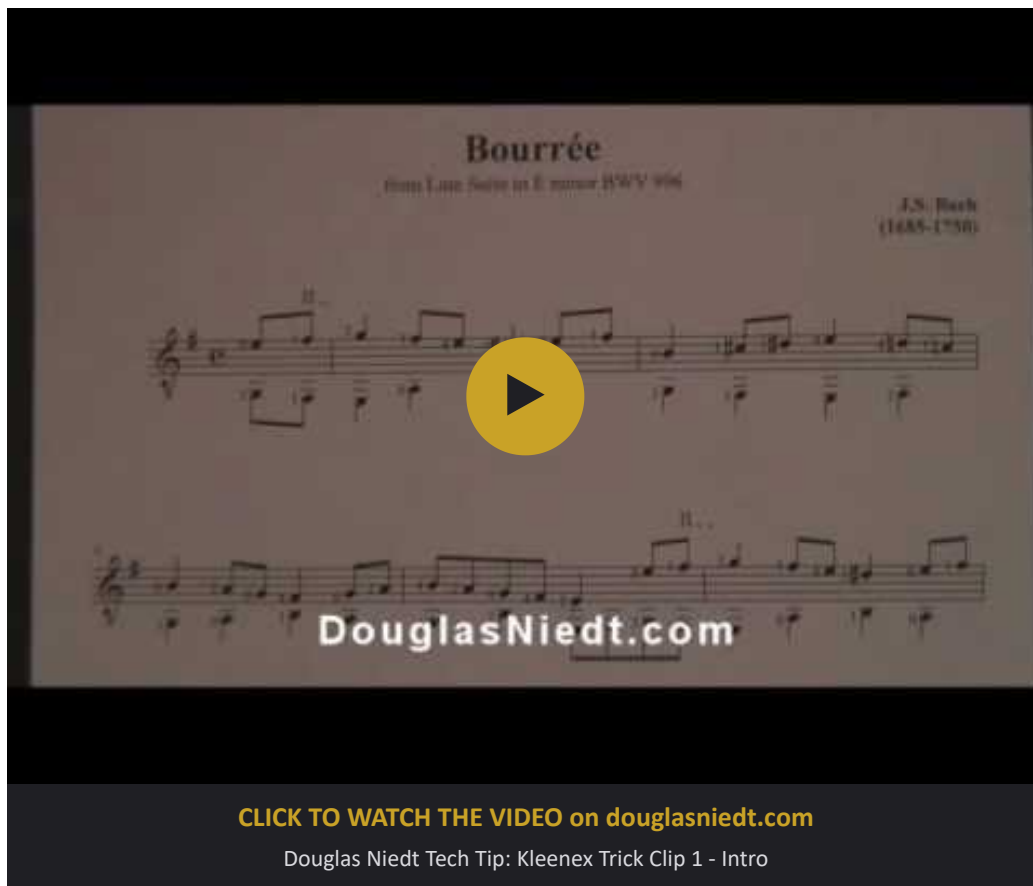
If you can't sing the lower voice, you probably aren't really listening to it when you practice. You probably have little idea as to how well or poorly you are playing it. Are you playing it smoothly? Are you connecting

the notes or chopping them up? Are you allowing notes to ring together that should be muted? This is a voice, a bass line. Therefore only one note should be allowed to ring at a time.

It is in these types of situations that "The Old Kleenex Trick" comes in handy.

HOW TO DO "THE OLD KLEENEX TRICK"

First, to get a better idea of what you are trying to accomplish, watch stunning video clip #1 (Surely worthy of an Oscar nomination):



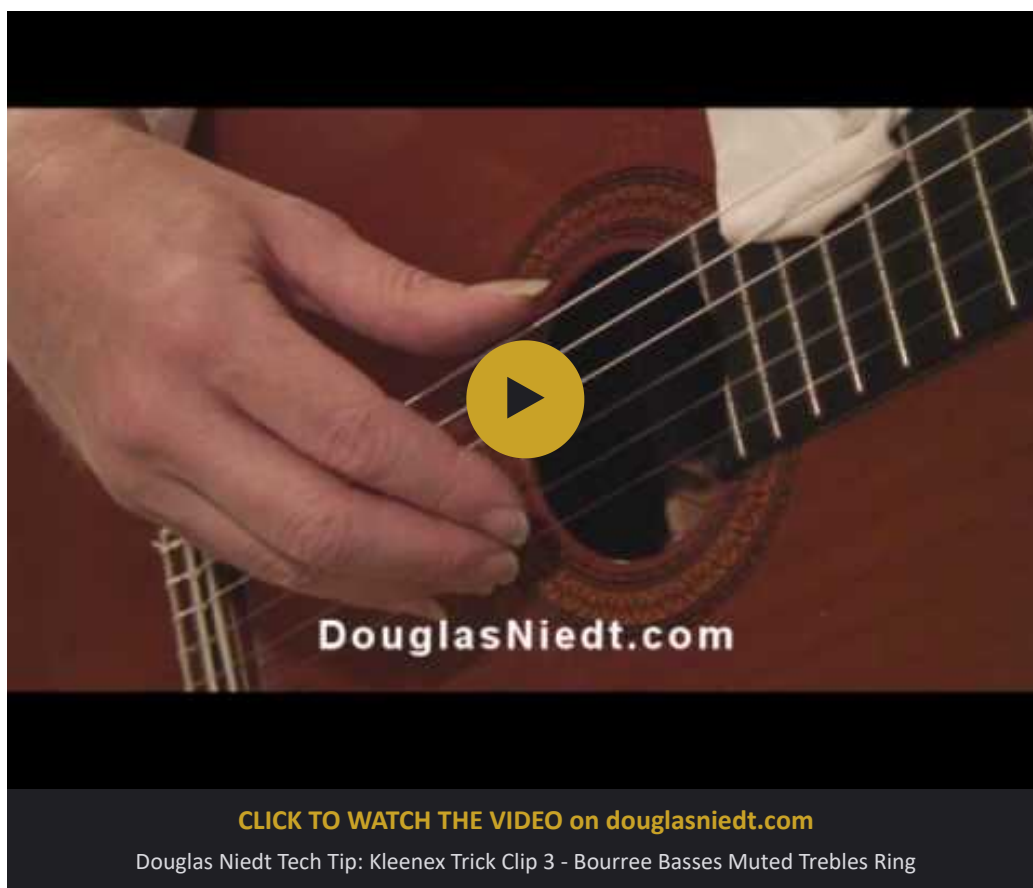
To really hear how you are playing the lower voice, try this. Fold a piece of Kleenex (I use the term generically, you can use any brand) several times and then insert it under the treble strings around the 15th to 19th fret to mute them. Play the Bourrée normally, fingering and plucking both voices. Because the Kleenex is muting the treble strings, you will hear only the lower voice, and you will hear it with crystal-clear clarity.

Watch this breathtaking demonstration (video clip #2). I said breathtaking not yawn-inducing.

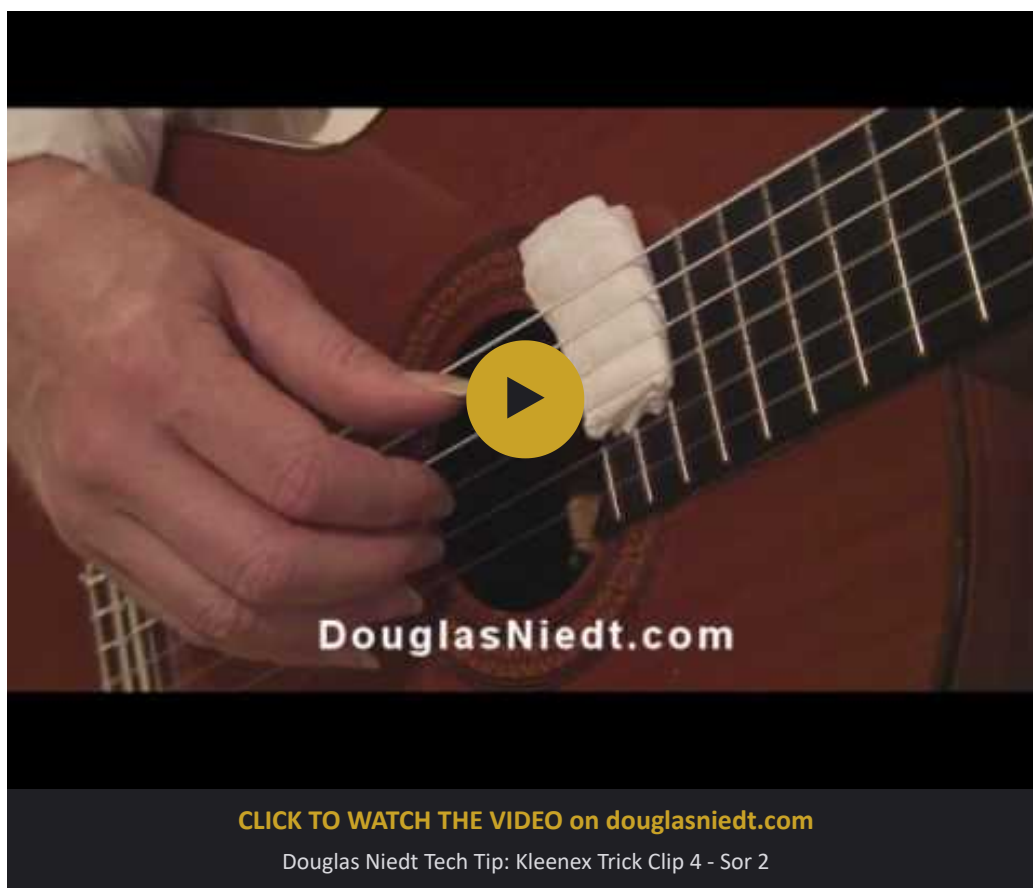


You can reverse the procedure, stuffing the Kleenex under the bass strings in order to clearly hear the upper voice.

Watch me demonstrate in video clip #3. Hold onto your seats for this one folks.



If you haven't nodded off yet, watch as I use the Kleenex trick to isolate the parts in Fernando Sor's *Study No. 2* (video clip #4):



The trick works with varying degrees of success depending on how the parts divide themselves among the strings. And you might have to adjust the Kleenex to cover different sets of strings for different sections or measures of the same piece. Nevertheless, it is a very practical and helpful way to clearly hear exactly how you are playing the individual parts or voices of a piece. Very LOW-tech, but it works!