

How to Play the Double Thumb Stroke on Classical Guitar

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt. All Rights Reserved.

This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

Never Heard of It. What are You Talking About?

The "double thumb rest stroke" (and the double thumb free stroke) on the guitar is my shorthand for what bowed-string players (violinists, violists, cellists, and double bassists) would call a "double stop on adjacent strings". In other words, two adjacent strings are bowed or plucked simultaneously. The word "stop" implies that both strings are to be fingered (stopped), but in practice, either or both strings may be open. Technically, I should be calling the technique how to play a "double stop on adjacent strings with the thumb". But, "double thumb stroke" saves me some words, so that is what I am going to use in this article.

Watch me as I explain the basics of the double thumb rest stroke in Video #1:



Still Confused? Here are Examples.

You can watch me play each of these examples of the double thumb rest stroke in Video #2 following the musical examples below.

One of the most well-known examples of the double thumb rest stroke is found in *Leyenda* (Isaac Albéniz). (Example #1):

Example #1. m17-20, *Leyenda* (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz

The image displays a musical score for measures 17 through 20 of the piece *Leyenda* (Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 3/4. The notation includes a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The melodic line features a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with some measures containing triplets. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern. Red arrows and the text "Double thumb stroke" are placed above the bass line in measures 17 and 19, indicating the specific technique. The score is divided into two systems: measures 17-18 in the first system and measures 19-20 in the second system. The notation includes various fingerings and dynamics, such as *p* (piano) and *f* (forte).

Numerous examples are found in the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos. (Examples #2, 3, 4):

Example #3. m17-20, *Prélude No. 5* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Example #4. m52-54, *Étude No. 11* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Melody notes in the bass part are in blue.

52

i m a m i *i m a m i* *6* *6*

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

53

6 *6* *6* *6*

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

54

6 *6* *6* *6*

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Here are more examples by other composers. (Examples #5, 6, 7):

Example #5. m36-40, *Cavatina* (Stanley Myers)

Example #5. m36-40, *Cavatina* (Stanley Myers)

36

II III

Melody notes in the bass part are in red and played rest stroke by the thumb.

Double thumb stroke

39

I III

Double thumb stroke

Example #7. Final four measures, *El Testament d'Amelia* (harmonized and fingered by Miguel Llobet)

Melody notes are in red.

Natural Harm. 12th fret

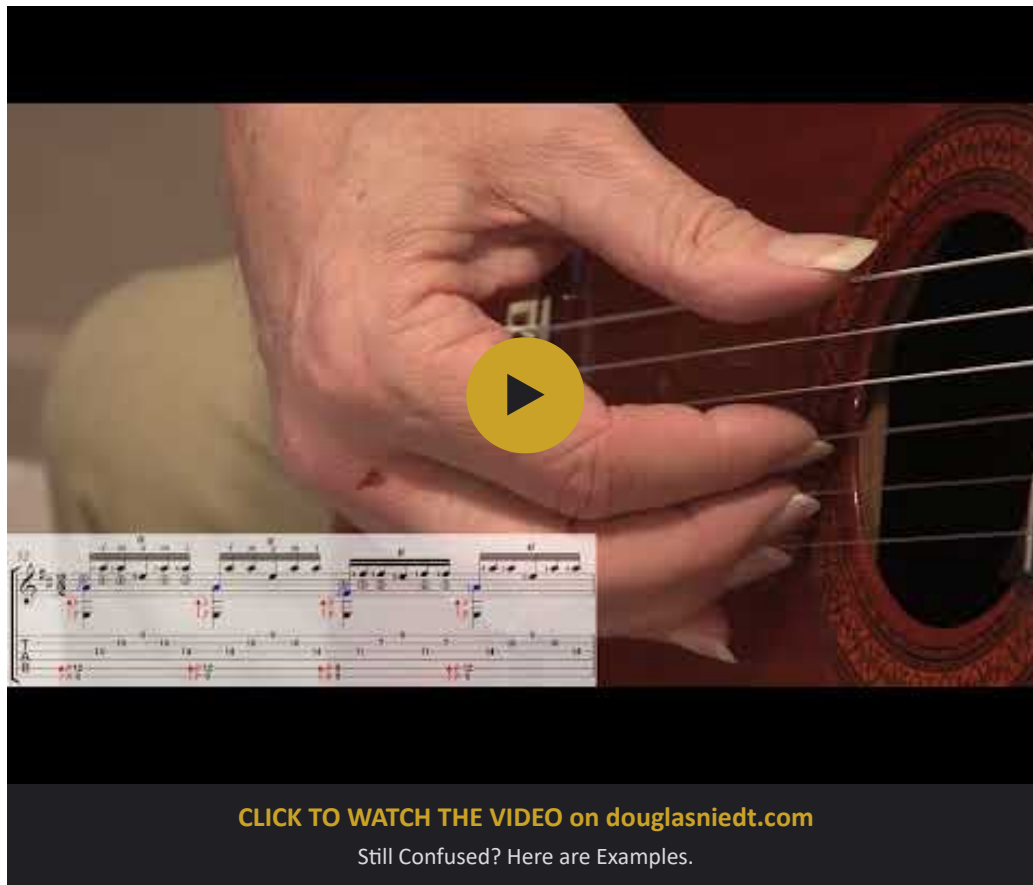
Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

TAB

4 3 0 3 2 3 5 8 5 0 12 12 12 12

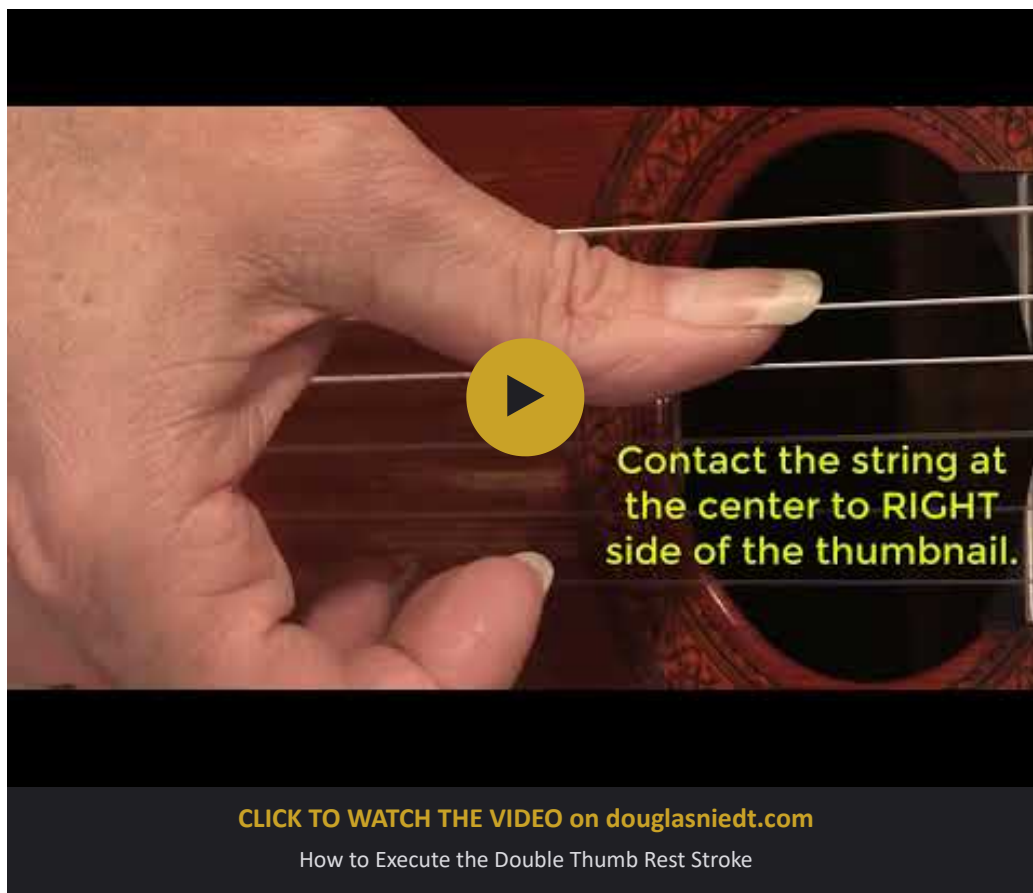
Watch me demonstrate the above musical examples in Video #2:



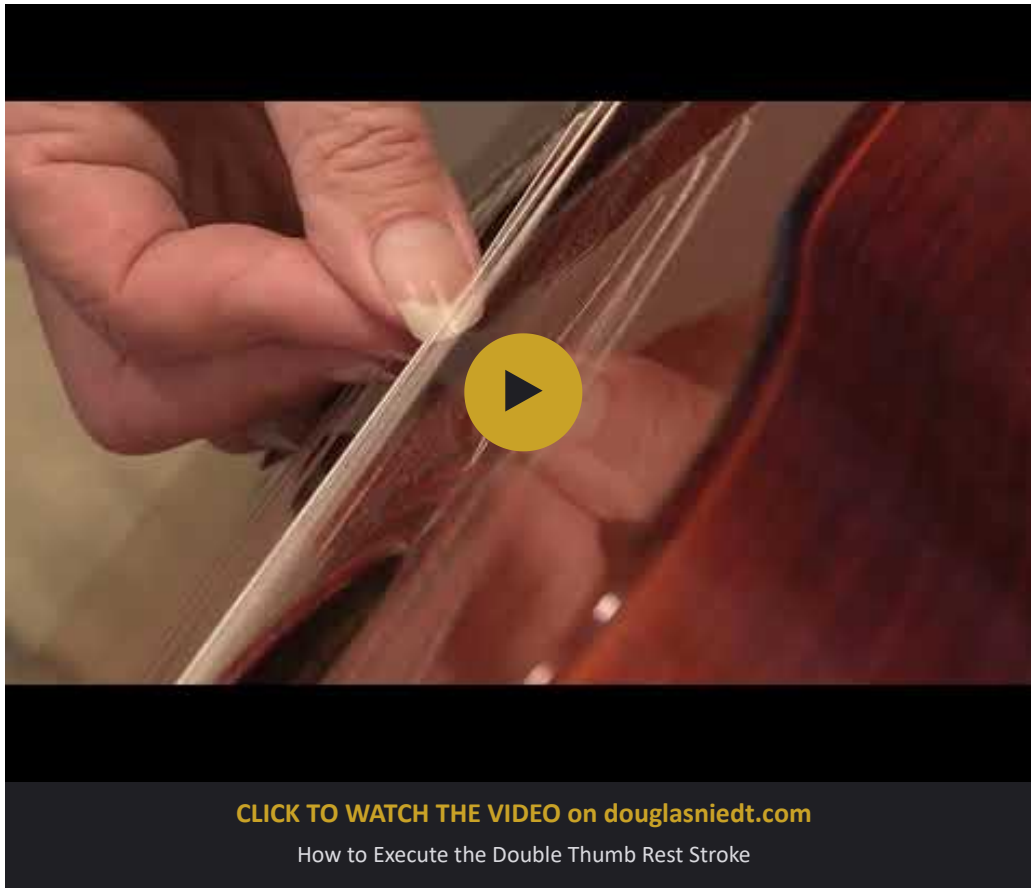
How to Execute the Double Thumb Rest Stroke

The best way to teach you to play the double thumb rest stroke correctly is to show you with these videos.

First, let's look at the basics of how to contact the strings with the thumb in Video #3. This is important!



Now, watch Video #4 to learn how to correctly execute the double thumb rest stroke:



The double thumb rest stroke is most commonly used on the wound bass strings. Occasionally, as shown below, it is used on the treble strings. (Example #8):

Example #8. Prélude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Più mosso

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

TAB

In Video #5 watch me demonstrate how to use the double thumb stroke on the treble strings:



Pros and Cons of Using the Thumb Double Stroke

On several of the pieces cited above (*Préludes 1 and 5*, *Cavatina*, *Gymnopedie No. 1*, and *El Testament d'Amelia*), rather than playing both strings with the double thumb rest stroke, one could play the double stops with the thumb and "i", "m", or "a". So why bother using a double thumb rest stroke?

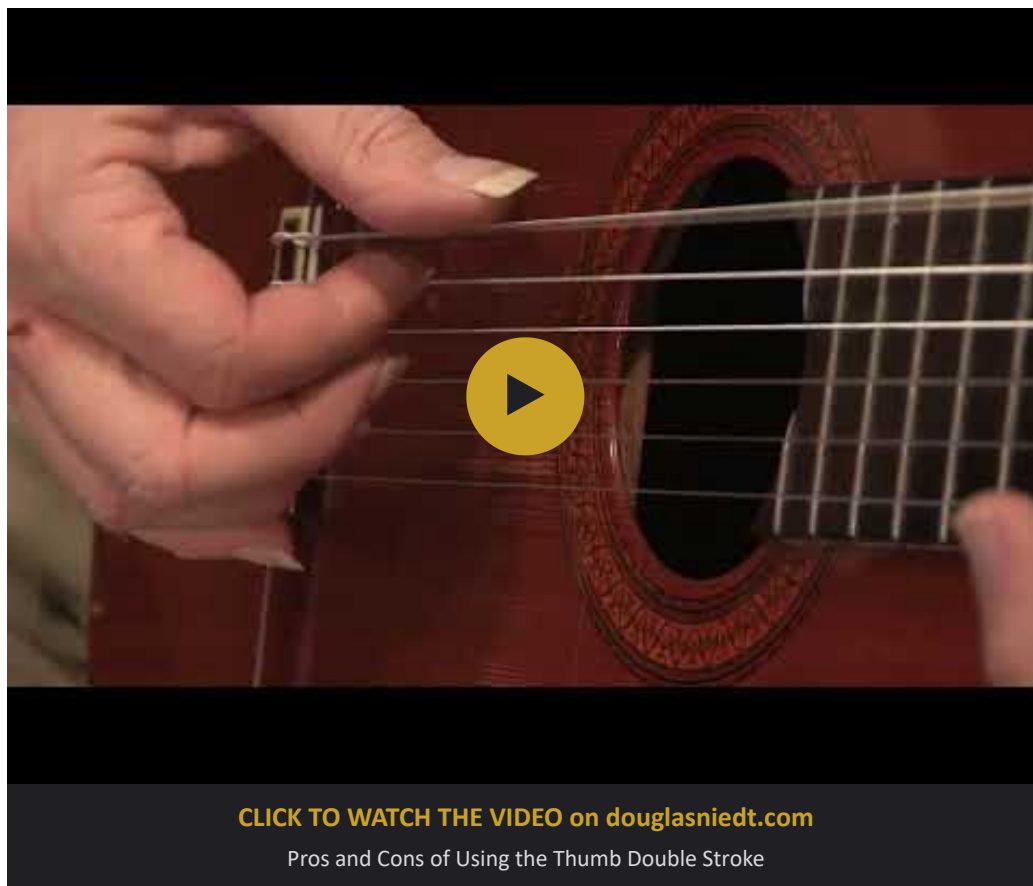
Tone Quality

The tone quality can sound rather "scratchy" and/or thin when a finger (instead of the thumb) is used to play a melody note on a wound bass string. The thumb double stroke will often sound far better.

Plucking the Two Notes Simultaneously

However, try as we might, the thumb double stroke can never pluck both strings truly simultaneously. If absolute simultaneous sounding of the two notes is essential, then use the thumb and the "i", "m", or "a" finger to play the double stop.

In Video #6, watch me demonstrate and explain the Pros and Cons of using the double thumb rest stroke.



Rest Stroke or Free Stroke?

In all the previous examples of double stops on adjacent strings, the note that is *higher* in pitch is the melody and should be louder than the note below it. This is usually the case in most double stops played with the double thumb rest stroke. In these instances, the thumb double rest stroke should be executed with rest stroke (watch the video and you will learn why).

But occasionally, you will come across a double stop where the note that is *lower* in pitch should be emphasized. (Example #9):

Example #9. m6-8, *Prélude No. 1* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

The image displays a musical score for measures 6-8 of Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Prélude No. 1*. The score is written for guitar, featuring a treble staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. Below the treble staff is a bass staff, and further down is a guitar tablature staff with six lines labeled T (Treble), A (Acoustic), and B (Bass). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings. Red annotations highlight 'Double thumb stroke' at measures 6, 7, and 8. Blue annotations highlight 'Melody is bottom note of double stop' at measures 6, 7, and 8. A purple annotation 'Melody on top.' is at measure 6, and another purple annotation 'Melody back on top.' is at measure 8. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string, with some strings being muted (indicated by '0').

Watch me demonstrate in Video #7 how to emphasize the melody with the double thumb free stroke when it is on the lower pitched string.



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Pros and Cons of Using the Thumb Double Stroke

And sometimes, it could go either way.

In the fast arpeggio section of Villa-Lobos' *Prélude No. 2*, is the melody the *upper* note (5th string) of each interval? (Example #10):

Example #10. m35-39, *Prélude No. 2* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Are the BLUE NOTES (the *upper* notes of each double stop) the melody?

35 *Più mosso* OR: *p i m a m i p* *i m a i a m i* *i m a* *i m a*

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

37 OR: *p i m a m i p* *i m a i a m i* *i m a* *i m a*

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Double thumb stroke

Or, is the melody the *lower* note (6th string) of each interval? (Example #11):

Example #11. m35-39, *Prélude No. 2* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Or, are the PURPLE NOTES (the *lower* notes of each double stop) the melody?

The musical score for Example #11, measures 35-39 of *Prélude No. 2* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 35 and 36, and the second system covers measures 37 and 38. The music is in 2/4 time, key of D major, and marked *Più mosso*. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The score includes fingerings (i, m, a) and articulation marks (p, 3, 1) for the double thumb stroke. Purple notes are highlighted in the treble clef, and red notes are highlighted in the bass clef. The score is divided into two systems, measures 35-36 and 37-38.

If you hear the 5th string as the melody, double thumb REST strokes will help you to emphasize the 5th string. But, if you hear the 6th string as the melody, double thumb FREE strokes will help you to emphasize the 6th string.

In Video #8 listen to how you can manipulate the sound of a passage by how you use the double thumb stroke. I also give a brief summary at the end. Watch:



Summary

1. The double thumb stroke is a technique commonly used in the classical guitar repertoire.
2. It must be executed with precision to be effective.
3. It is usually used to bring out the melody on the higher pitched string of a double stop. But it can also be used to emphasize the melody in situations where the melody falls on the lower pitched string.
4. It is usually used on the bass strings but may also be used effectively on the treble strings.