

The Snare Drum Effect, Part 1 of 2

By Douglas Niedt

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One of the most fun percussion effects almost anyone (including beginners) can produce on the guitar, classical or otherwise, is the snare drum effect. It is a real showstopper and non-guitarists especially, will be in awe of you! You will rule.

The effect is believed to have originated from flamenco guitarists. I have a few recordings of flamenco guitarists who use the effect in their solo instrumental performances of the *Saeta*, a deeply religious song sung during public processions that sometimes uses drums and horns to accompany a singer. One of its most famous uses in the classical guitar world is in the *Jota Sobre Motivos Populares*, more commonly known as *Gran Jota de Concierto* or simply *Gran Jota* by Francisco Tárrega.

Listen to Pepe Romero execute a fairly literal reading of the passage:

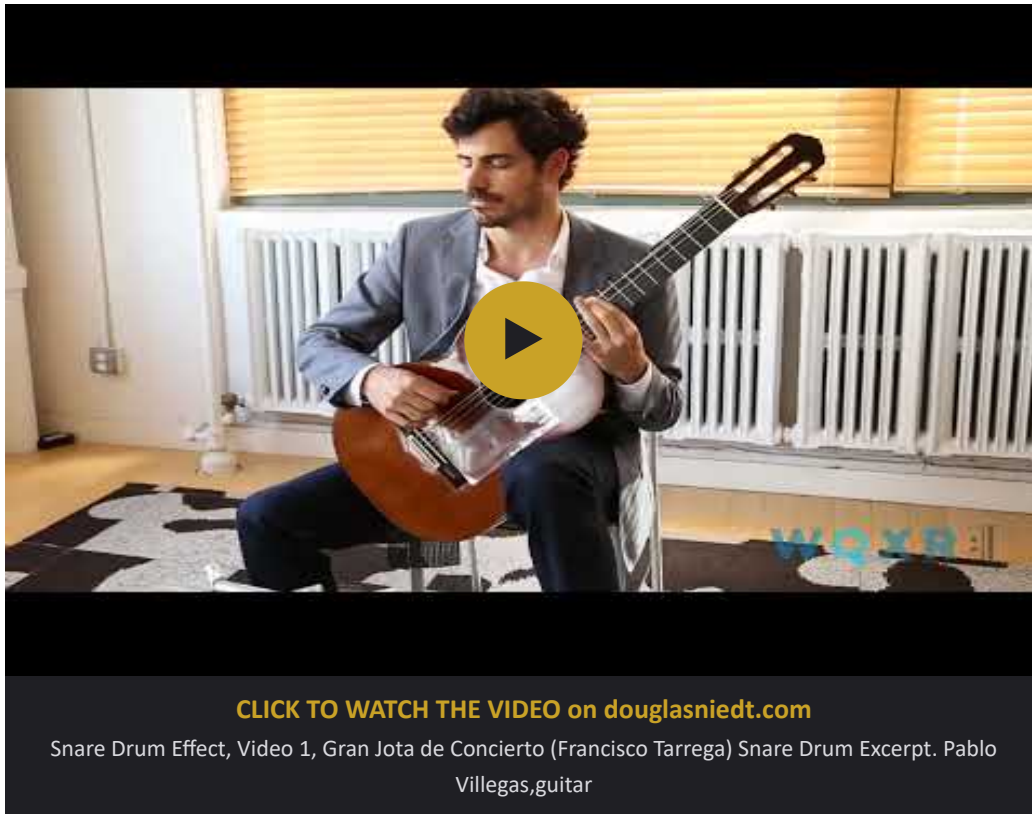


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SnareDrumEffectExcerptFromGranJotaDeConciertoPepeRomeroGuitar

1. Gran Jota de Concierto (Francisco Tárrega) Pepe Romero, Guitar

Towards the end of the passage, Tárrega specifies “Ad libitum y como si se alejara”. Watch as Pablo Villegas kicks it up a few notches with this extended snare drum rendition (Video #1).



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Snare Drum Effect, Video 1, Gran Jota de Concierto (Francisco Tarrega) Snare Drum Excerpt. Pablo Villegas, guitar

HOW IT IS DONE

The snare effect is produced by the strings rattling against each other and the frets. To get a good snare effect, it's important to have fresh bass strings on your guitar. If the strings are old and dull-sounding, your snare drum effect will not sound good.

Your Poor Fingernails!

Practicing this effect (especially on the bass strings which is the norm) will quickly wear down or rough up the fingernails. If I practice the effect for an extended period, I use the right sides of my nails so I don't wear down or rough up the good left sides. Or, I put on artificial nails [Best Artificial Nail System Yet \(RicoNails\)](#) to practice the technique.

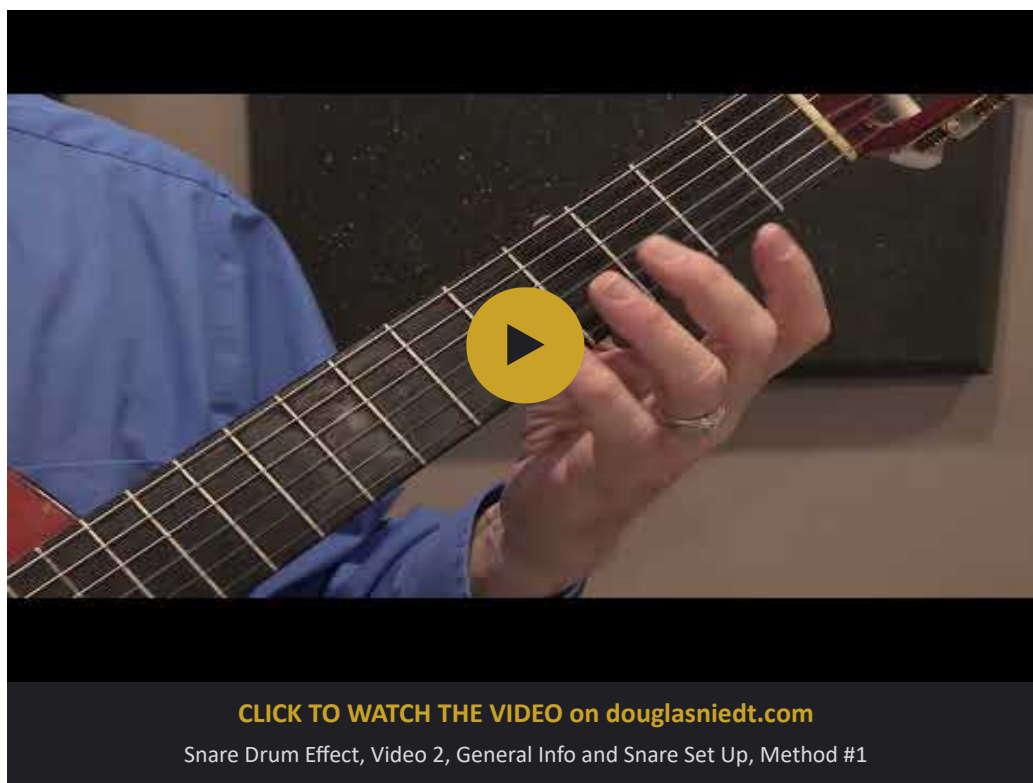
THE LEFT HAND

The effect is usually done on a pair of strings, most often the 5th and 6th strings as in Tárrega's *Gran Jota de Concierto*. But, it can be done on any pair of strings for different effects. It is usually done at the 6th, 7th, 8th, or 9th fret, and the string pair is usually held down by the 1st finger, although any left-hand finger may be used.

Setting Up the Snare Drum: Method #1

“p” and “i” grab the 5th string over the sound hole or at the fretboard, and pull and twist it over the 6th string. Both strings are immediately held down, usually by the left-hand 1st finger, in their wrapped-around-each-other or twisted formation at the required fret. “p” and “i” let go of the strings to produce the first snare hit.

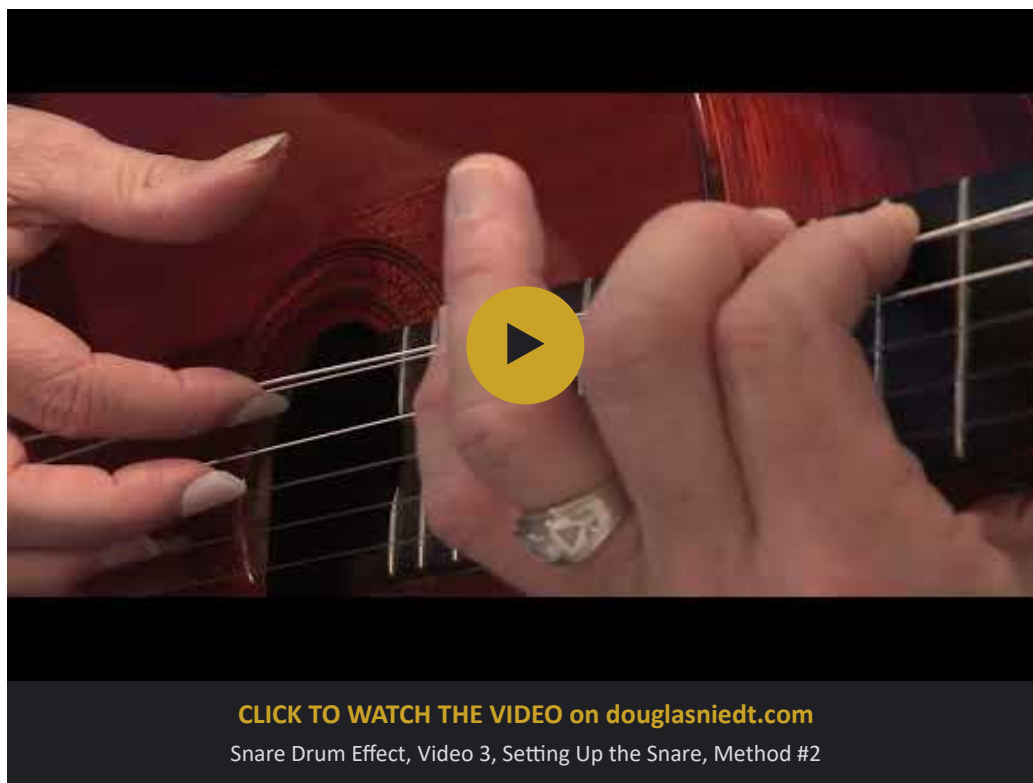
Watch me demonstrate (Video #2).



Setting Up the Snare Drum: Method #2

The left-hand finger (usually the 1st finger) grabs the 6th string and quietly pulls it over the 5th string. It can do this alone or with the aid of the “i” (or “m” or “a”) finger which can help by tugging on the 5th string a split second before, or at the same time the left-hand 1st finger grabs the 6th string. Or, “p” and “i” (or “m” or “a”) can both assist by twisting the strings at the same time the left-hand 1st finger pulls the 6th string over the 5th string. Any right-hand finger or the thumb may immediately execute the first snare hit.

Let me show you (Video #3).

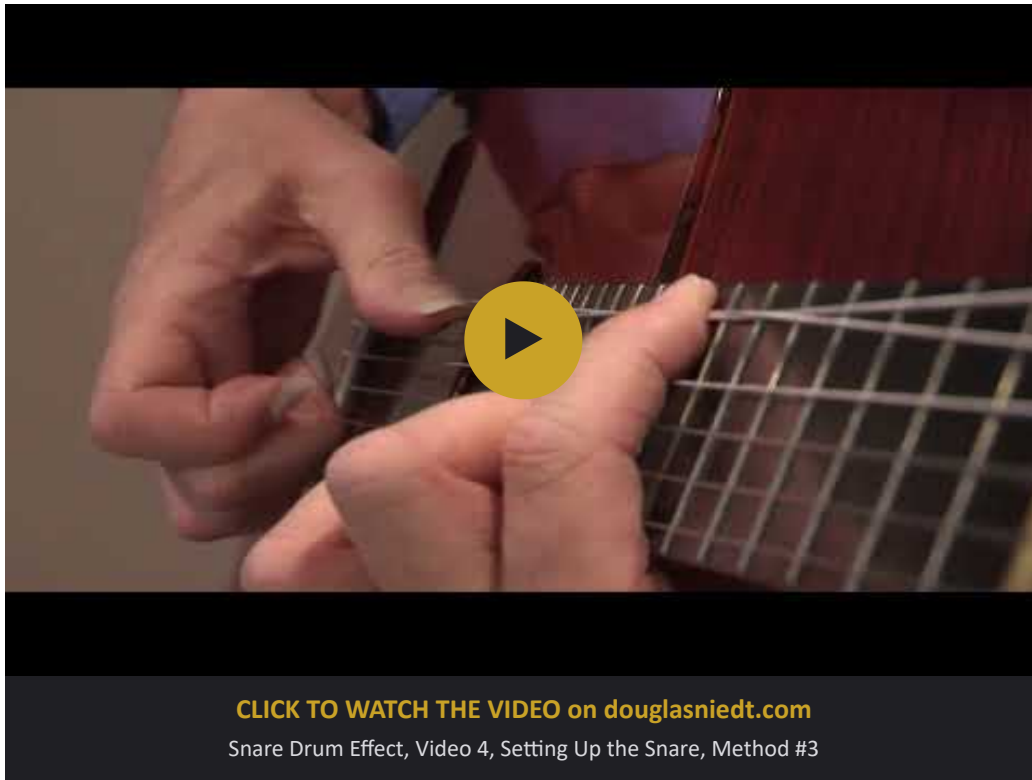


This method can be used in almost any situation and you may prefer it to method #1. It especially works well in situations where a quiet preparation is required, such as the transition from the *Arietta* to the *March* in Malcolm Arnold's *Fantasy for Solo Guitar, Op. 107* which we will examine later.

Setting Up the Snare Drum: Method #3

A rather awkward method is used by Pablo Villegas in his *Gran Jota* video above. He grabs the 5th string over the sound hole with the thumb and uses the left-hand 1st finger to help twist the strings around each other. If you watch closely, you can see that even this outstanding player struggles with it a bit and it takes a little too much time to prepare. I don't recommend it, but you never know, it may work for you.

Watch (Video #4).



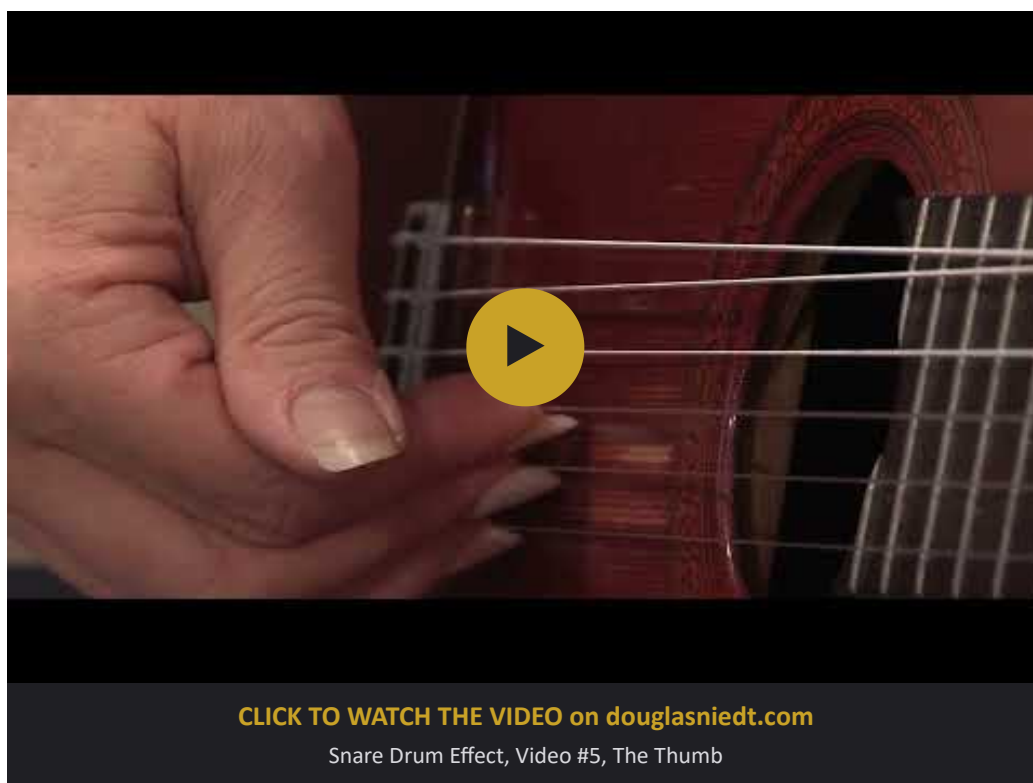
THE RIGHT HAND

Whether using the thumb or the fingers, the two twisted strings are plucked simultaneously as if they were one string.

The Thumb

The thumb is usually used to play snare hits of longer duration. It may play with any combination of rest stroke or free stroke with simultaneous flesh/nail contact or flesh only. To choose which one to use on a particular passage, try them all! Each sounds different. And, you may find that a certain combination is easier to execute for a particular passage. The strings are usually plucked at the bottom of the sound hole or closer to the bridge for a crisp attack. The strings are commonly damped by the thumb immediately after each hit. Usually the standard thumb downstroke is used, but conceivably one could use down and up strokes.

Watch me (Video #5).



The Right-Hand Fingers

The “im” or “ia” fingers are alternated in passages that require faster and articulated staccato snare hits. They are played with simultaneous flesh/nail contact. However, instead of playing on the left sides of the nails, I play straight on to the nails. In other words, when a finger is on the string, the string is in contact with the left AND right sides of the fingernail, not just the left side. This produces a brighter and focused snare hit and also reduces wear on the left sides of the fingernails.

The fingers may play with rest stroke or free stroke depending on the musical passage and the sound desired. It is often helpful to plant the right-hand thumb on the guitar (close to the 6th string) when playing the snare effect on the bass strings.

To mimic the characteristic short hits of a snare, it is important to alternate the fingers and play the strings staccato. After one finger plucks the strings for the first hit, the other finger is immediately placed on the strings to damp them. The finger that just damped the strings then plucks the strings for the next hit. Here is how you would use this technique to play the 5th-string open A in this staccato style.

Example #1:

Plant m on 5th string to damp string. Plant i on 5th string to damp string. Plant m Plant i Plant m Plant i Plant m Plant i

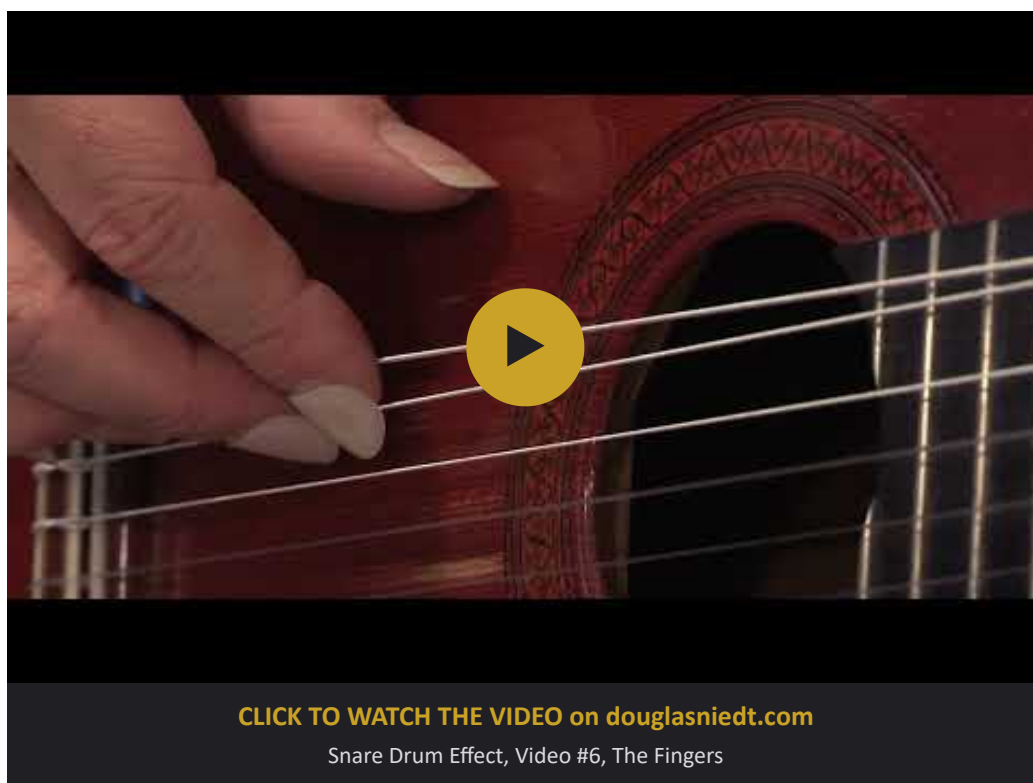
The technique is used the same way to play the snare effect except that you will pluck the two strings of the snare simultaneously and damp both strings simultaneously.

Example #2:

Plant m on 5th and 6th strings to damp snare. Plant i on 5th and 6th strings to damp snare. Plant m Plant i Plant m Plant i Plant m Plant i

Snare Drum Effect:
Cross the 5th and 6th strings around each other and hold both strings together at the 8th fret. Strike both strings with "i" or "m" simultaneously.

Watch me demonstrate (Video #6).



Drum Rolls

Drum rolls can be executed with “ami”, “pami”, “amip”, fast down-up finger flicks with a single finger, possibly with fast “im” or “ia” alternation, or with a flamenco-style continuous rasgueado pattern ([see my tip on continuous rasgueados to see the patterns](#)).

If you use a fingering that doesn’t use the thumb, it is often helpful to plant the thumb on the guitar, close to the 6th string.

My favorite way to play a drum roll is with an “ami” continuous rasgueado.

Example #3:

↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓

a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i a m₃ i

⑤

⑥

Snare Drum Effect:
Cross the 5th and 6th strings around each other
and hold both strings together at the 8th fret.
Strike both strings with "i" or "m" simultaneously.

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

TAB

8 8

Dynamic swells and releases can be very effective on drum rolls.

Watch me demonstrate snare drum rolls (Video #7).



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Snare Drum Effect, Video #7, Drum Rolls

THE ROLE OF THE LEFT HAND

In addition to its role in helping to twist the strings around each other and to fret melody notes, the left hand often serves as a safety stop, especially on drum rolls. For example, if a snare drum roll is done on the 5th and 6th strings, it is a very good idea to allow the left-hand finger that is holding the strings to lean over enough to lightly damp the 4th and sometimes even the 3rd string. With those strings damped, you don't have to worry about accidentally plucking them when your right hand is executing the roll, especially when you use a continuous rasgueado.

A left-hand finger can also lean on or be placed on strings to eliminate extraneous resonance. This results in a clean, crisp, authentic snare drum effect.

Let me show you (Video #8).



END OF PART 1.

Coming next month, Part 2:

I will show and demonstrate examples of how the snare drum effect is used in the classical guitar repertoire and how it is notated by various composers and guitarists.