

How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4

By Douglas Niedt

Part 3: HOW TO PRODUCE A BEAUTIFUL TONE WITH THE FINGERS ON THE BASS STRINGS

We are going to look at two aspects of using the fingers to play on the wound bass strings. One is how to produce a full tone. The other is how to minimize scraping sounds when playing on the wound strings. I use the word “minimize” very intentionally. You must realize that if you play with nails, it is very unlikely you will eliminate the scraping sounds entirely.

First, I would recommend that whenever possible, use the thumb to play on the wound bass strings. If shaped and used correctly, the thumb will automatically produce a better tone with less scraping noise than the fingers.

To work on reducing scraping noises, it is best to practice on the 6th string. The 6th string has the greatest potential for producing scraping noise because of the thicker and more widely spaced string windings. If you can appreciably reduce the noise on the 6th string, then the 4th and 5th strings will sound very good. I would practice on the C at the 8th fret or C# at the 9th fret to minimize sympathetic vibrations from the other strings. Sympathetic vibrations can make it difficult to hear fine detail.

Where do the scraping noises come from?

First, let's look at where the scraping noises are coming from. The scrape occurs when the nail moves across the string at an oblique angle, crossing the windings of the string. You can feel and hear this most easily on the 6th string. Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone Part 3 of 4 What Causes String Scrape? Video #1

Fingernail Placement and Hand Position

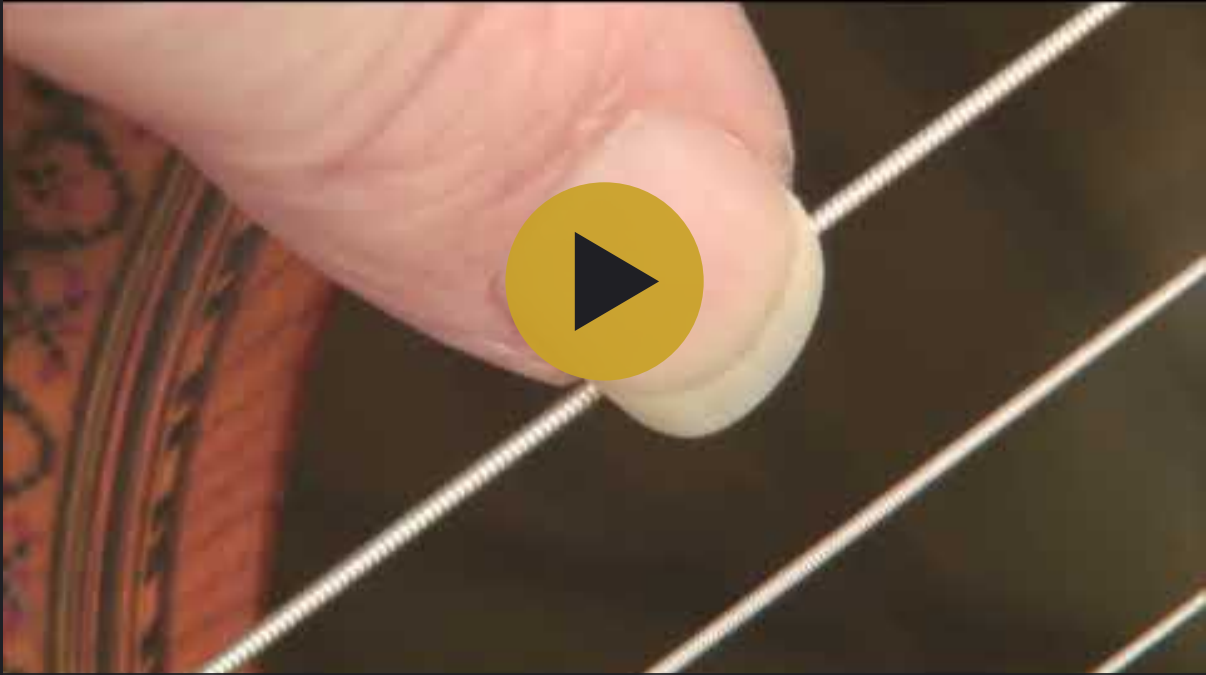
Therefore, our goal is to cross as few string windings as possible. As explained before in the two previous rest stroke and free stroke tone production technique tips, the finger must be placed on the string so that the string touches the left side of the fingernail. And, the string must contact the fingernail and the flesh simultaneously. These two requirements form the golden rule of good tone production on the bass strings as well.

In one way, simultaneous flesh/nail contact is even more critical on the bass strings. The bass strings vibrate more widely than the trebles and therefore produce a louder buzz than the trebles if the nail hits the string before the flesh. But, “simultaneous” is not really quite the correct word. Actually, what should happen is the flesh should contact the string ever so slightly before the nail to cushion the vibrating string. This is done not by having the string slide on the skin into the nail which will produce a click, but by having the string indent the flesh and then contact the nail. We say it’s simultaneous because on casual observation it feels that way. But it really isn’t. Watch the close up shots in this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone Part 3 of 4 "Simultaneous" Contact With Nail and Flesh, Video #2

Notice that the string is contacting the nail on the left side. If I play straight on to the string, contacting the left *and* right sides of the nail, I roughly double the amount of scraping noise because the string scrapes on both sides of the nail. If I turn the finger too far left, it causes a slight “slice” and also increases the scrape noise. I find it best to be just barely on the left side, almost straight-on but not quite. This way the nail crosses fewer string windings producing less scrape noise. Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone Quality, Part 3 of 4 Contacting the nail slightly on left side, Video #3

I have very arched nails. If your nails are flat, the amount of scrape is reduced. In fact, those of you with flat nails may find you produce less scrape by playing straight-on than by playing on the left side of the nail! Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4 Arched Nails and Flat Nails, Video #4

Hand Position

In the previous tips on rest and free-stroke tone on the treble strings, I also explained how “slicing” (moving obliquely across the string) improves tone quality. On the bass strings however, it’s a whole new ball game. Any slicing motion will produce horrendous scraping noises. The position I recommended in the previous tips of having the knuckles off-parallel (which automatically causes the fingers to play obliquely across the strings) will not work well on the bass strings. You can reduce scraping noise dramatically by an adjustment of your hand position. In fact, this is really the key. You must focus on feeling how the fingernail travels across the string. The more the nail travels parallel with the groove between the windings, the less noise. The more windings the nail travels across left to right, the more noise. Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4 Hand Position and String Scrapes, Video #5

Producing a Beautiful Tone

Now that you've found a good hand position to minimize scraping noises, let's look at what you need to do to improve the fullness of your tone. To work on producing the fullest tone possible with the fingers on the bass strings, I recommend practicing on the 4th string on the Bb at the 8th fret or the C at the 10th fret. Of the three bass strings, the 4th string is the least forgiving of bad technique in plucking a string. The Bb and C produce the fewest number of sympathetic vibrations on the other strings. As described in my previous tips on tone, these sympathetic vibrations add fullness to the sound. They can mislead the ear and make the player believe he is producing a full and big tone when, in fact, the sympathetic vibrations are only covering up a weak, thin tone.

As with the treble strings, practice at the bottom of the soundhole over the rosette. We don't want to play close to the bridge where the sound gets bright and we don't want to play over the soundhole where the sound gets dark. We want to develop our mid-range tone.

For most players, it will be necessary to find a happy medium between the techniques we usually use to get a full, beautiful tone and the techniques we use to minimize string-scape noise. For example as I noted earlier, "slicing" the strings is a great technique for improving the tone on the treble strings but cannot be used at all on the basses since it produces so much scraping noise. Hand positions that improve the tone may introduce additional scrape noise. You will have to compromise in many instances.

As on the treble strings, on rest stroke we can lean the hand back so the fingers pull down onto the string (into the guitar) or we can move the hand forwards toward the floor so the fingers play more horizontally across the strings. Or, the fingers can pull the string anywhere in between those two extremes. Generally, the more you pull in, the fuller the tone. This variable should not affect the amount of string-scape noise. Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4 Leaning the Hand Forward or Back, Video #6

On both rest and free stroke, we can vary the tilt of the hand. We can lean left or keep the fingers in a vertical position (no tilt); or anything in between. Tilting the hand to the left will tend to improve the sound of the rest stroke but may have little effect on the free stroke. Hand tilt *can* affect the amount of string-scape noise. Watch this video:



How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4 Hand Tilt, Video #7

On rest and free stroke, we can vary the amount of tension in the tip joints. We can relax the muscles to allow the tip joints to give or collapse, or apply tension in varying degrees to keep the tip joints straight or even to bend them. Or, we can apply degrees of tension anywhere in between those extremes. In general, relaxing the tip joints will improve the sound on rest and free strokes. On free strokes, this technique is crucial to playing “on top of the strings” which I described in detail in the *How to Produce a Beautiful Tone With Free Stroke on the Treble*

Strings technique tip. Adjusting the tension in the tip joints should not affect the amount of string-scape noise. Watch the video:



How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 3 of 4 Varying Tip Joint Tension, Video #8

Summary

Playing on the bass strings will require you to deal with two problems at the same time: getting a good tone and minimizing string-scape noise. You will have to compromise between the techniques used to produce a good tone with the adjustments necessary to minimize the string-scape noise.

For most players, the ticket to producing the best tone with the fingers on the bass strings is to play almost straight-on to the strings but still on the left side of the fingernail, relax the tip joints, and pull into the guitar for rest stroke and play on top of the strings for free stroke.

As you did with practicing on the treble strings, focus on one finger at a time and play very slowly. Listen carefully to each stroke. After working with the “i” finger, experiment with the “m” finger. Then try the “a” finger.

Once you are able to minimize string scraping and produce a consistently beautiful tone with each finger individually, try alternating a pair of fingers and work to make each finger sound identical in tone. Practice “im”, “ma”, and “ia”. You should not be able to hear an alternation of tone as you alternate fingers.

As mentioned at the beginning of this tip, if you have a choice, use the thumb to play the bass strings. If the thumbnail is shaped correctly and the stroke properly executed (as I will explain in the next part of this series) you will get a more beautiful and fuller tone with far less effort.