



Improving Picado Technique, Part 1

by Carlos Castilla

Welcome to the first of three articles covering the art of playing scales on the classical guitar. This month we are going to study the most basic and popular variant of the rest stroke technique: The traditional i-m or i-a alternation.

Before discussing rest stroke technique it is important to remember that the main technique used to play more than 90% of the music in our repertoire is the free stroke. I am mentioning that because the two techniques employ a different position of the right hand; therefore, in order to achieve maximum effectiveness in our playing, the transition between these techniques should be as smooth as possible.

The right-hand position that we apply when playing with free strokes should be the main posture of our playing and point of departure for the rest stroke. [The following video](#) shows in six simple steps how to transform the free stroke position into rest stroke:

1. Assume a proper free-stroke position planting the fingers on the first four strings.
2. Place the index on the high E string.
3. Keeping the index on the E string, lift the other fingers.
4. With the index planted on the first string, place the middle finger on the first string as well so that both fingers are touching the E string at the same time.
5. With both index and middle fingers planted, slightly change the right-hand angle until both fingers touch the string with the "sweet spot" between fingernail and flesh where the best tone is achieved.
6. To check whether this position will work, play the first string simultaneously with both fingers and then alternate (as shown on the video). The tone should be warm and powerful, and the stroke smooth.

Now let's start building a powerful rest stroke with the following exercises, each of which is accompanied by a video demonstration:

Building Stamina

Exercise/Video 1

What to Do:

Play solid repetitions on each string, using rest strokes with **i-m** and **i-a** alternation.

Purpose:

The purpose of this exercise is not only to develop the muscles involved in the two-finger rest stroke technique but also to internalize its right-hand position as mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Recommendations and comments:

- This exercise should be practiced at a comfortable speed, starting below the challenging point and gradually increasing velocity.
- Practice on every string to get used to their different tensions.
- Start with any of the fingers involved in the combination.

Exercise/Video 2

What to do:

Using the rest stroke technique, play fast grupettos on every string.

Purpose:

To develop an explosive response of the muscles involved with the two-finger rest stroke.

Recommendations:

Practice on every string.

- Start with any of the fingers involved in the combination as mentioned in the previous exercise. Practice the ossia (alternative) variations as well.
- Set your metronome at a comfortable speed where all the variations can be played, and try to land the 8th note on the downbeat in order to make the exercise easier.

String Shifting

Playing an actual scale usually involves several strings. Here, I'll introduce the concept of rest stroke preparation/anticipation or "play and prepare" (P/P). It's simply a slight but important variation of the standard motion that will help the performer to play with accuracy, and therefore more confidence.

First case: When the scale goes from the 1st string to the 6th.

Exercise/Video 3

The image shows a musical staff in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale starts on the first string (D4) and moves to the sixth string (D5). The notation includes fingerings (i, m, i, m) and 'P/P' markings above the notes, indicating 'Play and Prepare' technique. Below the staff, there are six numbered boxes (1-6) representing different string positions. Box 1 is for the first string (D4), box 2 for the second string (E4), box 3 for the third string (F#4), box 4 for the fourth string (G4), box 5 for the fifth string (A4), and box 6 for the sixth string (D5). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes across these strings.

* Play and Prepare

What to do:

In playing a D major scale with as many notes as possible in the 2nd position, it is also possible to think of the scale as the F# Phrygian mode. Instead of constantly lifting the right-hand fingers, once a finger's work on one string is complete, it can remain at rest on the adjacent string "prepared" for its turn to play again.

Recommendations and Comments:

- Always begin playing a scale with the starting finger already touching the string, or as close as possible to it. Attention to this detail improves accuracy and reduces fingernail noise.
- Be careful with right arm motion; both hand and arm should move according to the natural motion of the scale in order to preserve the same angle of the fingers and therefore uniformity of tone.
- Practice slowly and increase tempo gradually; remember that the idea is to make this technique second nature.

- Be aware that if the technique is correctly applied, a finger will be touching a string at every point of the scale passage. Both fingers should never be in the air at the same time.
- Since one stroke leads to the next, the execution of the scale should be more accurate and fluent.
- Practice with all possible scale patterns. The following exercise shows yet a different pattern.

Exercise/Video 4

Musical notation for Exercise 4, showing a scale with P/P markings and fingerings. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The scale is written on a single staff, and the P/P markings indicate the preparation of the next string. The fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes.

When the scale moves from the 6th string to the 1st

Note: Due to physical reasons, in this case the fingers are not prepared automatically on the next string as in the previous exercise. The reason for this is pretty obvious; since the fingers are playing notes on a string located above the previous one, it isn't possible for them to touch the next string as a consequence of their previous motion. It's a good idea then to develop the "anticipation reflex". It is not a strict "preparation" but more like a fast response to reach the next string. So, in order to play this example:

Musical notation for Exercise 4, showing a scale with fingerings. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The scale is written on a single staff, and the fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes.

The guitarist should practice as follows.

Exercise/Video 5

Musical notation for Exercise 5, showing a scale with fingerings and accents. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The scale is written on a single staff, and the fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes. Accents are placed over certain notes.

*** Just place the finger without playing this note.**
(Watch the video for a clearer explanation.)

What to do: Play an ascending F# Phrygian scale in 2nd position.

Purpose: To practice the anticipation technique on an ascending scale.

Recommendations and comments:

- Practice with the metronome at a comfortable speed.
- Play this exercise at different positions using the same scale pattern.
- After practicing this exercise, play the scale without stops.
- As mentioned previously, be careful with the movement of the right arm and hand as they should move according to the motion of the scale.

After studying these techniques it is important to see how applicable they are to a real music passage. Let's analyse the two first measures of the "Etude 7" by Heitor Villa-Lobos and the application of the first case.

Exercise/Video 6

The image shows a musical score for Exercise/Video 6. It consists of a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is an ascending F# Phrygian scale in the second position. The notes are: F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F#6. Above the staff, the fingering is indicated by letters: i, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, i, m, i. There are five 'P/P' markings with arrows pointing to the notes G4, B4, D5, F#5, and A5. Below the staff, the fret numbers are: 0, 2, 4, 2, 0, 4, 2, 4, 2, 1, 4, 2, 1, 4, 2, 0, 4, 2, 1. At the bottom, there are six numbered circles (1-6) with dotted lines extending to the right, likely indicating specific points of interest or techniques related to the exercise.

Keep in mind the previous recommendations when playing this passage.

It's also important to note that in the first case, the arm motion is very important for the articulation of the notes that were prepared. The stroke of the prepared finger is going to be triggered in part by the arm.

My next article will cover the execution of scales with multi-finger combination, using both free and rest strokes, but keep in mind that the mastery of the techniques covered in this article are necessary before incorporating more complex movements.

Thanks for your attention, and see you next time.

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