

Left Hand Movement: A Bag of Tricks

Part II: Barrés

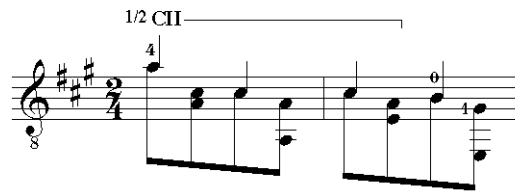
Frank Koonce

Full and Partial Barrés

The most commonly used notation for a full barré is a Roman numeral preceded by the capital letter C, for *ceja*—the Spanish word for barré (literally: “ridge”). A full barré at the fourth fret, for example, is notated as CIV. Similarly; a half barré is notated with the fraction $1/2$ placed before the C.

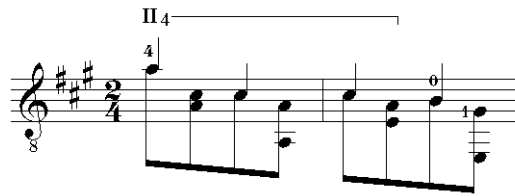
Unfortunately, this notation is vague in that a barré encompassing only five strings generally is considered to be “full” and it is notated in the same way as a six-string barré; furthermore, the “half” notation may refer to a barré that encompasses two, three, or four strings. Some editors, in fact, even choose not to make a distinction between full and half barré notation.

By observing the position of the lowest note, the guitarist must quickly determine the number of strings that need to be included under the barré. An efficient player will try to include only those strings that are necessary; however, sometimes this is not readily apparent. To make an adjustment once the barré has been placed is often clumsy and results in a negative audible effect such as an abrupt detachment of notes. Example 1a illustrates this point:



Example 1a
Study No. 3 (Op. 6, No. 2), Fernando Sor

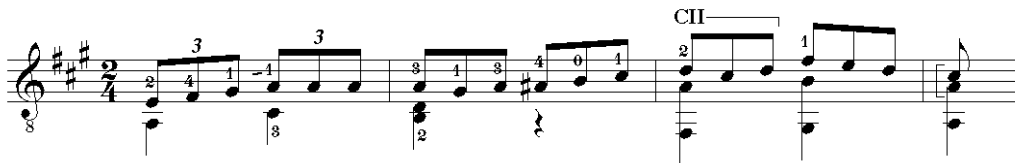
I believe that it is important to precisely notate the scope of the barré. In fact, when any technical requirements are left unclear by the notation of the printed music, the player should mark them immediately after the first reading so that the same mistakes aren't made twice. Remember, we learn through repetition and habit formation. Some may choose to notate partial barrés with specific fractions such as $2/6$ or $4/6$ placed before the C and Roman numeral. I prefer, instead, to write a small subscript Arabic numeral after the Roman numeral. To save clutter, I also prefer to omit the letter C, which I think is unnecessary [Example 1b]:



Example 1b

Preparatory Barrés

As shown in Example 2a, a barré is needed for the chord on the first beat of measure 3; however, it is more advantageous to prepare the barré in the preceding measure as shown in Example 2b. By doing so you eliminate extra movements of the first finger otherwise necessary both to play the C# and in repositioning to play the chord. In this particular example, the preparatory barré benefits from the preceding open B-string, which provides more time to form the chord:



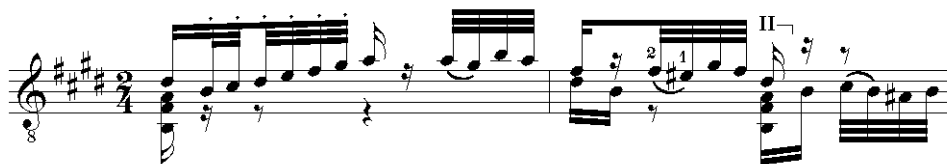
Example 2a

Variations on a Theme of Handel, Mauro Giuliani



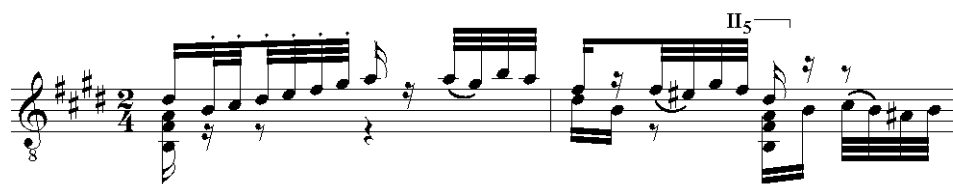
Example 2b

Similarly, the rapid and difficult movement required to position the barré in the second measure of Example 3a is facilitated by preparing it in advance, as shown in Example 3b.



Example 3a

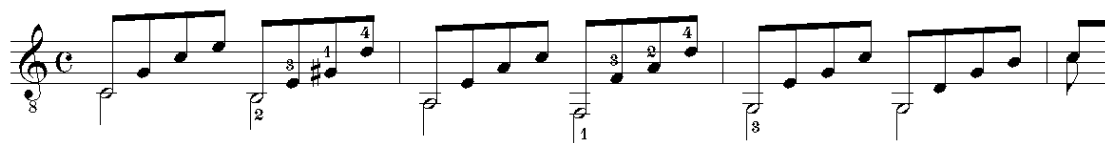
Variations on a theme of Mozart, Op. 9, Fernando Sor



Example 3b

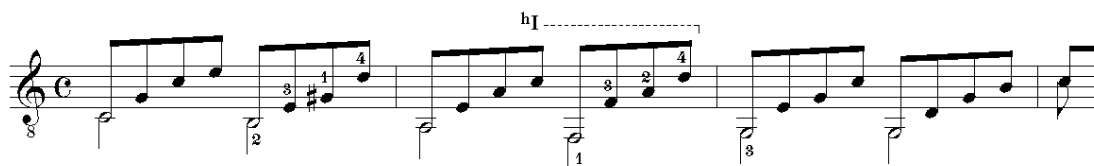
Hinge Barrés

A hinge barré works like the hinge on a door; it remains attached at one end of the finger while the other end is lifted to accommodate open strings. This very useful technique allows a skilled player to have more control over the articulation and sustain of multiple voices. A hinge barré often is particularly helpful when used in conjunction with a preparatory barré. For instance, the chord change in the second measure of Example 4a can be made more smoothly by using the preparatory hinge barré shown in Example 4b. I have added a small superscript h in front of the barré symbol to indicate the hinge. All of the other chord changes in this example can be made easily by “walking” with the fingers as discussed in Part I.



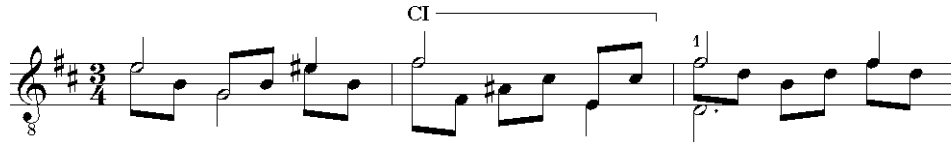
Example 4a

Study No. 1, Op. 60, Matteo Carcassi



Example 4b

In Example 5a, the final C# in measure 2 must be detached abruptly when the barré is lifted to re-position the fingertip on the first string. This causes an audible and unmusical gap to occur before the downbeat of measure 3:



Example 5a
Study No. 5 (Op. 35, No. 22), Fernando Sor

The problem can be avoided, as shown in Example 5b, by converting the barré into a hinged position after playing the C#. Simply lift the first finger from its middle joint while keeping the base segment of the finger attached. Notice that the line marking the duration of the barré becomes dotted at the point where the hinge takes effect:



Example 5b

Hinges also can be employed on inner strings, as in Example 6, or on lower strings, as in Example 7, by collapsing (hyper-extending) the tip joint of the first finger while bending (flexing) the middle joint. This is sometimes called as a double-stop when fretting two strings and a triple-stop when fretting three. I like to use a square bracket to encompass the designated notes.

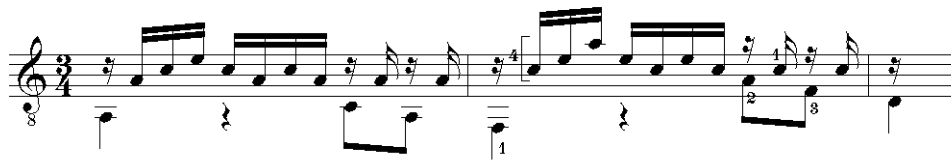


Example 6
Study No. 2, Heitor Villa-Lobos

The types of barrés shown in the preceding examples are generally considered to be well within the parameters of conventional classical guitar technique. The "trick" is in knowing where it is most effective use them to your technical and musical advantage. The remaining examples, however, show special barrés, which are less common—but which also could prove to be extremely useful in solving difficult fingering problems.

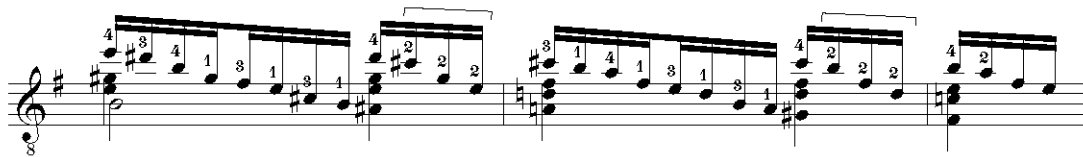
Barrés With Fingers Other Than the First

In Example 7, a partial barré with the fourth finger is used to overcome an otherwise impossible stretch for the left hand:



Example 7
Prelude in D Minor, BWV 999, J. S. Bach

A barré with the second finger, a technique common to jazz guitarists, provides a suitable alternative to the awkward extensions, compressions, and slides that would otherwise be needed to play the excerpt in Example 8:



Example 8
Concerto For Guitar and Small Orchestra, Heitor Villa-Lobos

Cross-Fret Barrés

Cross-fret barrés sometimes are the best solution for playing other difficult passages such as those shown below. The most common type of cross-fret barré requires the lowest note, played with the fingertip, to be a fret higher than one or more of the treble notes—played with the base of the finger. In Example 9, try bending the tip and middle joints of the first finger and leaning the hand to the left to facilitate this technique:



Example 9
Le Rossiniane, Op. 119, Mauro Giuliani, mm. 25–27

In Example 10a, the fingering requires an extension of fingers 3 and 4 to occur simultaneously with the placement of fingers 1 and 2 during a position change. The fingering shown in 10b, which uses a cross-fret barré, is substantially easier:

Example 10a is a musical score for guitar in D major, 6/8 time. It features a sequence of chords and melodic lines. A barre labeled 'CII' is placed over the first two strings. Fingering numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are indicated for various notes. The passage includes a shift from a lower position to a higher one, requiring simultaneous extension of fingers 3 and 4 and placement of fingers 1 and 2.

Example 10a
El Noi de la Mare, trad. Catalan melody, arr. by Miguel Llobet

Example 10b is a musical score for guitar in D major, 6/8 time, identical to Example 10a. It uses a cross-fret barré technique, indicated by 'II₅' and 'IV/V' markings above the staff. This technique allows for a smoother transition between positions compared to the standard barre in Example 10a.

Example 10b

When playing at an extremely fast tempo, shifting can prove to be both difficult and risky, especially when two or more shifts occur in rapid succession. The cross-fret barré in Example 11b eliminates both of the shifts that occur in Example 11a. As previously mentioned, it is easier to curve the first finger and lean the hand to the left:

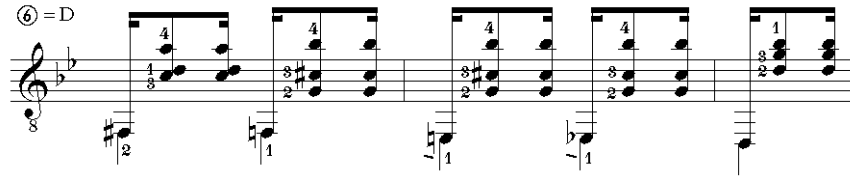
Example 11a is a musical score for guitar in D major, 2/4 time. It features a sequence of chords and melodic lines. Three partial barres labeled '1/2 CII' are shown above the staff. Fingering numbers 2, 3, 4, and 1 are indicated for various notes. The passage includes two shifts in rapid succession.

Example 11a
Estudio Brillante, Francisco Tarrega, mm. 1–2

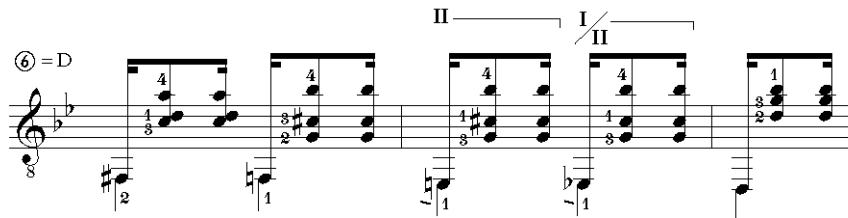
Example 11b is a musical score for guitar in D major, 2/4 time, identical to Example 11a. It uses a cross-fret barré technique, indicated by 'I/II₃' marking above the staff. This technique eliminates the two shifts that occur in Example 11a, making it easier to play at a fast tempo.

Example 11b

A very rare type of cross-fret barré is one in which the tip of the first finger plays a bass note one fret behind other notes under the barré. Its application in Example 12b provides the only workable alternative to the fingering shown in Example 12a, which is virtually impossible for players with average-sized hands:



Example 12a
Choro da Saudade, Agustín Barrios Mangoré



Example 12b

Conclusion

To perform barrés and many of the other intricate movements discussed in Part I of this article, your hands must be conditioned and trained through countless hours of practice. Your hands are remarkable tools; however, and they are capable of serving your musical needs in the most amazing ways. It is not your hands, but your imagination that is the single most limiting factor in achieving excellence as a musician. By opening up your mind, you can discover principles of movement with which your hands will permit you to achieve aesthetic ideals. To this end, I hope this little "bag of tricks" will spark your imagination.