

Basic Rasgueado Techniques

by Ioannis Anastassakis, MA

Introduction

The “rasgueado” technique is without a doubt the most impressive and characteristic element of the flamenco guitar. In Spain, where flamenco originated, rasgueado means “strum” or, literally “to scratch”. In English, the same word is used to express the characteristic kind of rhythmically complex strumming that is emblematic of the flamenco guitar.

Rasgueado techniques were originally developed out of necessity in order to accompany flamenco dance and song. By strumming the guitar instead of plucking it, the guitarist could produce a much stronger, louder sound, and therefore could be heard above the resounding vocals of the singer and the throbbing footwork of the dancer. As the decades passed, the flaming flamenco virtuosos developed many different forms of rasgueados.

In this article, I am going to explain and demonstrate the basic, traditional rasgueado techniques for playing triplets, 16th notes, and quintuplets. Although there are many other patterns for rasgueados, these will give you the essential tools to experiment with this exciting technique.

Traditional Rasgueados

Ornamental Rasgueados

The most widely used rasgueado form, strangely enough, lacks a specific rhythmic structure! It does not have a specific rhythm breakdown of 16th notes, triplets, quintuplets or sextuplets and is used as an ornament with an accent on a specific beat instead of a repeating rhythmic structure. For the sake of rhythmic clarity, it will be notated as sextuplets. However, I want to make it very clear that this rasgueado is an ORNAMENT, not a specific rhythmic pattern! Its execution slightly precedes the targeted beat and resolves exactly on the downbeat.

The *eam* rasgueado:

Movement description: The thumb rests lightly on the 6th string. All other RH fingers are loosely curled in the palm in a very relaxed way. Then the little finger is flicked out, followed by the ring, the middle and finally, exactly on the beat, the index finger.

The musical notation shows two measures of music in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first measure begins with a downbeat chord (F#4, A4, C5) and is followed by a sextuplet of chords: i (F#4), i (F#4), e (F#4, A4), a (F#4, A4, C5), m (F#4, A4, C5), i (F#4). The second measure begins with a downbeat chord (F#4, A4, C5) and is followed by another sextuplet of chords: i (F#4), i (F#4), e (F#4, A4), a (F#4, A4, C5), m (F#4, A4, C5), i (F#4). Above the first measure, there are six upward-pointing arrows labeled 'eam i' corresponding to the six chords. Below the notation is a guitar tablature with strings T, A, B and fret numbers 0, 1, 2, 3.

Important Guidelines:

- 1) DO NOT move your hand up or down whatsoever. Movement should only occur in the fingers strumming the strings. The thumb, wrist and elbow should not move at all !
- 2) DO NOT drag your fingers across the strings. Think of little hammers striking the strings, not a gentle sweeping motion.

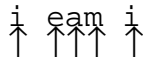
16th note traditional rasgueados

The *ieami* rasgueado:

This variation of the basic rasgueado was developed and honed to perfection by Juan Serrano. He developed it when he realized the need to have a consistent, rhythmically even rasgueado, that produces a steady stream of 16th or 32nd notes that will always correctly end on the beat.

Movement description: The hand position is the same as the basic rasgueado with the thumb resting lightly on the 6th string. All other RH fingers are loosely curled in the palm in a very relaxed way. The index finger is flicked out, then the little finger, followed by the ring, the middle and finally, exactly on the beat, the index finger.

VERY IMPORTANT: The secret to mastering this move is that at the same time the little finger strums, the index returns to its original position, poised and ready to strike again.



Here is an example with a duration of 2 beats:

Here it is over the course of 3 beats:

And here it is used in a continuous stream of 16th notes, totaling 4 beats:

i e a m i e a m i e a m i

↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

i e a m i e a m i e a m i

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

T 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

A 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

B 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

So, what is the best way to practice and internalize the patterns you have learned? Slowly! Constantly using a metronome.

Always practice these techniques very slowly at first, so that your fingers have the time to memorize the motions accurately and there is no hesitation between the strums. Use a metronome, initially playing quarter-notes, then eighth- notes, sixteenth-notes, and finally triplets! This kind of practice will give you superior control over the rhythmical effect of your rasgueado technique.

What makes a rasgueado sound very impressive and authentic is the evenness of the attack and the sense of being "exactly on time." The speed and the power will come as soon as the extensor muscles, which are the muscles responsible for flicking your fingers outwards, become stronger and better conditioned. This is a process that cannot be rushed.

A very good way to develop extraordinary rasgueado technique is to practice without the guitar. This is done by practicing strumming the various patterns while you wait in line or while walking. I used to practice these patterns while driving, using the seat belt I was wearing as an imaginary guitar. I would put on a tape or listen to the radio, then I would choose a pattern and start strumming it on my seat belt, playing eighth-notes, triplets and sixteenth-notes, while trying to stay in perfect time with the music. I received a fair share of peculiar looks from fellow drivers, but improved my rasgueados tremendously.

Be careful when first practicing rasgueados. These patterns use the extensor muscles of your right-hand, which are usually much less developed than the flexors, which are the muscles used when plucking notes on the guitar. It is very easy to overstress the extensor muscles. It is best if the exercises are done slowly in five-minute sessions. Practice each pattern for five minutes, taking a few minutes break before going on to the next. For those who are interested in more information about rasgueado technique, feel free to email me at anasti@otenet.gr