

Guitar Lesson: Learn To Play Classical Guitar Without Nails

Is it possible to play classical guitar without nails? I guess so as I often do it myself. Many guitarists today and in the past have also done the same. Let me tell you the advantages of no nails playing and give you some tips!

Sharon Isbin in her Classical Guitar Answer Book wrote...

"Classical guitarists can play without nails, but they should be aware that in doing so they are sacrificing certain possibilities of tone color and projection - all of which affect interpretation and musical presentation."

I have played classical guitar and also improvisational jazz and blues guitar for many years and have been teaching others professionally. I have played with long nails, shorter nails and no nails at all.

I have seen guitar students struggling with their tone on the guitar. Guitarists with problem nails, guitarists not taking care of their nails and subsequently with a terrible tone and some guitarists with perfect nails and still not a good tone because of faltering technique.

I have also met guitarists that were playing without nails and I have seen electric guitarists finger playing without nails like Mark Knopfler and others.

As with nearly everything there are pros and cons with the different approaches. I like playing without nails for these reasons:

1. It's a challenge to find the tone and get the most out of the guitar playing without nails. You have to play with more force to find the upper harmonics and you have to work even more with the guitar technique. No sloppiness is allowed!
2. I like the sweet sound of my fingers touching the strings. The sound created is mellow but the volume will still be satisfying if you play with force and with calousses developed by practising.
3. There is a special feeling involved in letting living flesh touch the strings on a guitar. You will come nearer the instrument somehow.
4. Of course you'll have the advantage of not risking to have your nails broken as you don't depend on them anymore.
5. You will be able to play piano with correct finger posture.
6. You can play electric guitar with your fingers without risking to destroy your nails.

I will now give you some of my own advice and experiences from playing without nails.

You might find some more information on the net as there are many other classical guitarists and lute players who want to play without nails. Here are my personal hints:

1. It will take a week or so to build callouses on your fingertips after having filed down your nails. This will improve your guitar playing and tone but until then you have to be careful not to play so intensely as to get blisters.
2. A way to build callouses is to play finger picking on electric guitar or steel string guitar. I have experienced that my blues guitar playing is much more musical and more dynamic as I play with my fingers instead of with a pick on my electric guitar. Sometimes I use to alternate between my thumb and index finger when playing scales and licks and other times my index finger and middle finger or in another classical guitar playing way.
3. You will get a softer and in many ways a more beautiful tone if you cultivate your playing without nails. However you might miss some of the higher frequencies. To compensate for this you can see to it that you always play with fresh new strings and if you are a rich man you might purchase a classical guitar with more treble and less bass.
4. When you use your nail sharpener (you should instead of just clipping the nails off!) to keep your nails short you might as well give your fingertips some grooming with the nail sharpener. This will improve your tone and stimulate your finger tips to become harder.

5. As you practice exercises on your guitar you need to play slowly and with a little more force to get a good tone. It is important that you don't build tensions as you play. All musicians benefit from learning relaxation techniques and stretching to prevent injuries.

6. Practice especially playing apoyando (support strokes) with all your fingers and listen to the tone and try to improve it as part of your playing.

If you feel that playing completely without nails is too hard for you, you might after this test period let them grow but you can keep them a lot shorter as your technique has improved. They will then work as the claws of a cat. Mostly not used but still affecting your tone and supporting your playing. As with long nails you will have to polish them and take care of them.

There are many more things to say about playing guitar without nails but personally this technique gives me a tone I like and an exciting and rewarding challenge.

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