Fingernails and Calluses

Is it possible to play without using fingernails?

Classical guitarists can play without using 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. The nail, when used alone or with the flesh of the fingertip, adds clarity to articulation and aids in projection, from the softest to the loudest passages. For example, a pianissimo passage played only with the flesh will sound fuzzy and indistinct, yet the same dynamic shaped with the nail projects beautifully, even in a large hall.

The nail is also useful in achieving a variety of timbral colors. By varying the angle of the attack, the amount of flesh used with the nail, and the position of the attack relative to the bridge and fingerboard, for example, a player can achieve an enormous, even orchestral spectrum of sounds, from metallic to hauntingly sweet. Without nails, the range is far more limited.

Players who question using nails because theirs are hooked or brittle and breakable should first determine if their problem is correctable, either by nutritional changes or by applying a hardener to the upper third of the nail. Extra care to prevent nail damage might also solve the problem: Wear gloves while doing carpentry, washing dishes, lifting heavy items, gardening, painting, or using harsh solvents; open doors and dial the telephone with your left hand. And don't pick any fights! Shape nails with a good file and use a fine grade of sandpaper (preferably the silicone-coated variety) daily to keep edges smooth.

If none of the above works, another option is to wear false nails or carefully shaped Ping-Pong–ball cuttings affixed with Krazy Glue. I once had a student who even used his wife's toenails! Keep in mind when using Krazy Glue that the glue contains cyanoacrylate. Consult your doctor or a chemist to determine the toxicity potential of this chemical when it is repeatedly absorbed into the skin. A more immediate hazard, of course, is that skin bonding can occur. That means you should apply the glue carefully to avoid gluing your fingers and hands together, or having the table become part of your anatomy.

For players without professional aspirations, gluing on nails may not be worth the bother or the health risk that could result from regular use. In such cases, simply enjoy nailless playing without being concerned about the demands of concertizing. After all, many famous 19th-century players, performing on gut strings in small halls, used only flesh.

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I tore a nail on the day of a show. What could I have done to fix it well enough to at least get through the gig?

If the nail is torn but still attached, I highly recommend the new Savarez Nail Making and Repair Kit, which includes a special self-adhesive silk, resin, and applicators. Or you can affix a patch of China Silk (made by IBD, Inc., and sold in the nail-repair departments of drugstores) with Krazy Glue on the top side of the nail. In order to preserve a good tone, wait a few minutes for the glue to harden and then sand the edge with 500-grade (or finer) silicone-coated sandpaper until it is perfectly smooth.

If you lost the nail, the Savarez nail kit shows you how to build another. Or you can cut to shape a Player's Nail (made by Balcan Music and Accessories, 67-11 Yellowstone Blvd. #1C, Flushing, NY 11375)—or a Ping-Pong–ball substitute—and affix it with Krazy Glue to the underside of your nail. Again, smooth the edge with sandpaper.

Avoid soaking the mended nail in water for any significant length of time. If the nail does get wet, treat it with another dose of glue to ensure that it will remain intact during the gig.

Do you have any advice about caring for left-hand fingertip calluses? I build up pads that catch on strings, tear off, and leave tender, painful fingertips.

This is a common problem, especially in climates that are particularly cold or dry. You can usually keep the calluses smooth and "catch-proof," however, if you file them lightly with an emery board whenever they begin to show signs of peeling or flaking. (It's best to do this when the calluses are dry rather than waterlogged.) In cases where the air is so dry that deep cracks or fissures form in the callus, try bathing the tips in Vaseline (covering them with a glove or Band-Aids) whenever you're not playing or not embarrassed to be seen. Be sure to wash everything off thoroughly before playing, however, or your guitar will have a very slippery neck. If your calluses are prone to fissures, treat them regularly before the problem starts.

How do you avoid, or at least diminish, squeaks in the bass strings?

You can avoid left-hand squeaks by preventing your calluses from scraping against the coils. There are three basic ways to do this: lift the finger, slide on the flat part of the finger pad, or slide at an angle on either side of the fingertip.

Lifting is a viable option *only* if it does not disrupt the lyricism of a line, or if you don't wish to play a portamento (a connective wisp of sound between two notes). To lift without squeaking, raise the finger in a perpendicular line just high enough to clear the string, and then shift in an arclike motion to the next note. Any initial motion short of 90 degrees will brush against the coil and cause a squeak. If you shift one or more fingers on a treble string, slide on the string(s) in order to keep the hand anchored.

The flattened–finger-pad approach is ideal in situations where you want a portamento on one string but don't want the adjacent string to ring. When sliding, the finger can be either parallel to the frets, at an upward angle, or at a downward angle, depending