

Classical Guitar Technique

CHASING RAINBOWS, Part 2 of 2

Right-Hand Fingerings

By Douglas Niedt

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In Part 2 of "Chasing Rainbows" I will illustrate how changing the *right-hand fingerings* can make a troublesome passage playable. Remember, if you are unable to play a passage after months or years of practicing it, something is wrong. Our goal in playing the classical guitar is to experience enjoyment, reward, and fulfillment; not endless frustration.

As with left-hand fingering, if a passage is not dependably playable with a success rate of at least 95% after weeks, months, or years of practice, CHANGE THE FINGERING.

Simple Fixes

In general, finding and changing a right-hand fingering to make a passage playable is much simpler than changing the left-hand fingering. Sometimes it is as simple as making sure you are not repeating a finger in a fast passage. Often it is a matter of avoiding bad string crosses. [See this technique tip on bad string crosses.](#)

Usually, several right-hand fingerings are possible for a given passage. It takes patience, but I always recommend testing all the possibilities, especially in a difficult passage.

Here is an example of a relatively easy piece with many valid right-hand fingering possibilities. This is a Barcarolle by Anton Diabelli as it appears in Charles Duncan's excellent graded anthology of easy to intermediate solo pieces, [A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar Repertoire, Part One](#). Example #1a:

Example #1a. *Barcarolle* (Anton Diabelli) measure 1-4.

A balance between $\overset{a}{i}$ and $\overset{m}{i}$

Largo ♩ = 48

For the more spread apart 6ths, $\overset{a}{i}$

For the 3rds on adjacent strings, $\overset{m}{i}$

Note that the right-hand fingering is balanced between the use of "ia" and "im". For the intervals that are more spread apart (the 6ths) on the 2nd/4th strings and 1st/3rd strings, "ia" is specified. For the intervals on adjacent strings (the 3rds) "im" is specified. This is a very

commonly used approach and for many players, feels very natural for the right hand.

Let's look at a second right-hand fingering solution. Example #2b:

Example #1b. Barcarolle (Anton Diabelli) measure 1-4.

Using the "a" finger on the upper note of each interval for continuity.

For some players, the strong point of this fingering is the consistency of using the "a" finger to play the upper notes of every interval. In this case, "ia" is used for the more widely spaced 6ths but "ma" is used for the more closely spaced 3rds.

Finally, a third solution. Example #3c:

Example #1c. Barcarolle (Anton Diabelli) measure 1-4.

Favoring $\begin{smallmatrix} m \\ i \end{smallmatrix}$ Using the "m" finger on the upper string of each interval for continuity.

Players who prefer the stability and dependability of the "im" combination sometimes prefer this fingering regardless of the spacing of the intervals.

Which fingering is best? You must test each of them to see which one works best for you. If I were your teacher, I would have you learn the piece up to tempo with the first fingering for two weeks. Next I would have you relearn the piece with the second fingering and have you practice that for two weeks. Then, I would have you relearn the piece with the third fingering and have you practice that for two weeks. Finally, I would say okay, now you can use the fingering you like best.

The point is that it takes time to determine which of two or more fingerings is the best. You cannot test one for one or two days and say that's it. You must spend a significant amount of equal time on each one before making a decision. And that decision can be made only *after you are able to play the piece up to tempo with each fingering possibility*. The process is a lot of work but pays big dividends.

Let's move on to my personal experience with two examples from the advanced repertoire.

To Boldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before

The *Allegro* from J.S. Bach's *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro (BWV 998)* is a difficult piece.

I attempted to learn this piece in my junior year of music school. I was fortunate to have come across a handwritten copy, I think by the great Oscar Ghiglia, from one of the Segovia master classes back in the 1960's. The piece is certainly difficult for the left hand. I tried numerous fingerings to find a dependable solution.

But after a year or more of experiments with various left-hand fingerings, I still could not play the piece at even an 80% success rate. I think I remember hearing guitarist Christopher Parkening tell the students in one of his master classes that he didn't play the piece in concerts because the results were too unpredictable. But I was determined.

The right-hand fingering on the copy I had and other copies I came across all followed the standard procedure of incorporating all the fingers ("p, i, m, and a"). The theory is that the more fingers you use the less fatigued each individual finger will be. One of my early teachers explained to me, "If you pluck with one finger over and over, it's like trying to win a race hopping on one foot. You can't move very fast and you get tired very quickly. But if you pluck by alternating TWO fingers, it's like running a race with both feet. You can move much faster and your legs don't get tired as quickly." From that, teachers have extrapolated that if we use THREE fingers, "i" "m" and "a", we can play even faster with less effort. And this is certainly true in many cases.

However, and this is a BIG however: whenever possible (and musically appropriate), it is a good idea to *avoid the right-hand fingering combination of "mam" or "ama"*. Due to the anatomy of the hand, the "m" and "a" fingers do not have the natural independence and speed of movement that the "im" or "ia" combinations have. Indeed, a large amount of technical practice for the right hand strives to improve the independence between the "m" and "a" fingers. This is true of pianists and many other instrumentalists as well.

Therefore, in many instances it may not be advantageous to use all three fingers ("ima") instead of two ("im") if using all three results in instances of the "mam" or "ama" combinations.

Such was the case in the copy I was working with. Here is the fingering for measure 13-32 with the bad combinations highlighted.
Example #2b:

Example #2a. *Allegro* from *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* BWV 998 (J.S. Bach) measure 13-32.

A conventional right-hand fingering using "i" "m" and "a" on the upper voice.

This fingering contains several instances of the bad combinations "mam" and "ama".

Allegro ♩ = 192-208

⑥=D

The musical score displays measures 13 through 32. Fingerings are indicated by letters 'i' (index), 'm' (middle), and 'a' (annular). Red boxes highlight instances of the sequences 'm a m' and 'ama'. Roman numerals II, IV, and VI are used to denote fingerings for the lower voice. Measure numbers are placed at the beginning of each staff line.

Failures of the left hand can be caused by problems with the right hand

But still, here I was, frustrated with the lack of results of all the left-hand fingering options I had tested. Then, one day I remembered someone saying that sometimes failures of the left hand can be caused by problems with the right hand.

The left-hand fingering can be fine but if the right-hand fingering is faulty, it can transfer tension to the left hand causing left-hand failure.

So, the idea popped into my head, "What about changing the right-hand fingering to almost all "im" (thumb for the bass notes) and using the "a" finger only when absolutely necessary and avoid combinations of "mam" and "ama"?" Break the "rule" of right-hand fingering to use three fingers instead of only two that had been drilled into me early on. To boldly go where no man had gone before. (No, I'm not a Trekkie. Just couldn't resist). Here is the new fingering for measure 13-32. Example #2b

Example #2b. *Allegro* from *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* BWV 998 (J.S. Bach) measure 13-32.

An unconventional right-hand fingering using only "i" and "m" on the upper voice.

Allegro ♩ = 192-208

⑥=D

The musical score for Example #2b, measures 13-32, is presented in a single system with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' with a metronome marking of 192-208. The right-hand part (upper voice) uses unconventional fingering, primarily 'i' (thumb) and 'm' (middle finger), as indicated by the 'i' and 'm' markings above the notes. The left-hand part (lower voice) uses standard fingering, with 'i' and 'm' markings below the notes. The score is divided into measures 13-15, 16-18, 19-21, 22-24, 25-27, 28-29, and 30-32. The right-hand part is marked with 'i' and 'm' above the notes, and the left-hand part is marked with 'i' and 'm' below the notes. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Watch me play this passage from the Bach *Allegro* with the all "im" fingering. Video #1:

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #1: Chasing Rainbows Part 2 Bach Allegro ("im" only, no "a" finger)



It was such a simple idea. But because the standard system of fingering was what everybody unquestionably used and that was "the way it has always been done", it had not occurred to me as a possibility until I had exhausted every other option.

What happened? The feeling in my left hand was remarkably relaxed and effortless. The left-hand fingers skittered about the fretboard with almost unerring accuracy. The right-hand fingers moved with less effort. It turned out that the key was not necessarily using two fingers instead of three (although that was part of it) but eliminating instances of "mam" and "ama".

Using the "a" finger as an integral part of my fingering which produced "mam" and "ama" combinations caused low-level tension in the right hand of which I was unaware. But it was enough that it transferred to the left-hand fingers producing a reduction in mobility and precision. When I eliminated those evil combinations, the tension was eliminated, and the left hand executed its motions nearly flawlessly.

What is also interesting is that this all "im" fingering produces countless bad string crosses, but it still works better for me than mixing in more of the "a" finger. But remember, the important thing is to choose what works for YOU. What works for Douglas Niedt, John Williams, Ana Vidovic, or your teacher may not be the best choice for you. And, a theoretical system of fingering may look good on paper but may not always work in real life.

Does that mean we should reduce the use of the "a" finger in everything we play? Absolutely not. We must always work to improve the independence and strength of the "a" finger. But, in certain passages leaving it out is certainly an option to explore.

Add the "a" Finger When Everyone Else Only Uses "i" and "m"

"ami" Scales

Interestingly, the *opposite* strategy of *adding* the "a" finger to difficult passages that are traditionally played with "i" and "m" can also be a key to success.

I began learning the famous *Concierto de Aranjuez* by Joaquin Rodrigo in my sophomore year of music school. I did well with the first two movements. They contain fast scales that I successfully played with "im" rest stroke. But the third movement contains even faster scales. As everyone else did, I also played those with "im" rest stroke.

But I never felt comfortable with the third movement. I played the *Concierto* with symphony orchestras on several occasions for several years. But I always worried about that third movement. Playing the scales with "im" was doable, but I felt like I was at the limit of my technique, on the edge of the cliff.

Plus, playing with an orchestra is very different than playing a solo recital. If you mess up when you are playing alone, you can take time to pause and recover. But when you are playing with an orchestra and you mess up, you can't stop or pause because they keep going. You are also somewhat at the mercy of their tempo. Rodrigo specifies the quarter note at 164. I usually play it at 168. But if a conductor had let the orchestra get out of control and they started sprinting to the finish at 170+, I would have been in deep trouble using "im".

The year I was learning the *Concierto*, the great Spanish guitarist Narciso Yepes played a concert and gave a master class at our music school. In the master class, he explained the concept of using "ami" instead of "im" for fast scales. Some people think playing scales with "ami" is a relatively new technique. It's not. Yepes taught it to me in 1972. He had developed it and began using it many years prior to that. [Read this technique tip for more details.](#)

Playing scales with "ami" made quite an impression on me and I began using the technique on a handful of pieces. But I stubbornly stuck with using "im" on the third movement of the *Concierto* because once again, that's how everyone played it. That's how it had always been done.

Here is one of the scale passages beginning at rehearsal mark #11 fingered traditionally with "im" on the scales. By the way, a rehearsal mark is a large-font letter (rehearsal letter) or large number (rehearsal number) a composer places in the score, usually at musically significant points for quick reference in rehearsals. They are used in place of measure numbers and most commonly seen in orchestral and chamber music scores. Example #3a:

Example #3a. *Allegro gentile* from *Concierto de Aranjuez* (Joaquín Rodrigo)
Starting at Rehearsal Mark 11.

Allegro ♩ = 164

11

12

One day, after a few more years of struggle, I decided to try making the switch on the third movement to playing all the scales with "ami".

Here is how I re-fingered the passage with "ami" on the scales. Notice I also changed the left-hand fingering to neatly accommodate the "ami" fingering. Example #3b:

Example #3b. *Allegro gentile* from *Concierto de Aranjuez* (Joaquín Rodrigo)
Starting at Rehearsal Mark 11.

Allegro ♩ = 164

11

12

Watch me play the passage using the "ami" rest stroke fingering to play the fast scales. Video #2.

★ Be sure to watch on full screen. In the lower right corner of the video, click the full-screen icon:

Video #2: Chasing Rainbows Part 2 Rodrigo, excerpt from 3rd Mvt ("ami" rest stroke for scales)



It took about one hour to adjust to the new fingerings! By the end of the hour I was playing the scales with what seemed like zero effort for the right hand. And once again, the dramatic reduction in effort in the right hand resulted in liberating the tension from the left-hand fingers, allowing them to move with a feeling of precision, speed, and effortlessness that I had never experienced before in playing the third movement. My immediate response of, "This is amazing," was soon followed by, "What an idiot. Why was I so stubborn in sticking with "im" just because 'that is the way it is done'? Why did I struggle with this for years when I knew the solution all along? What an idiot."

From then on, playing the *Concierto de Aranjuez* was a relative breeze. I no longer sweated over that third movement. By the way, I still played the scales in the first movement with "im". Although they can be played with "ami", the correct rhythmic grouping of the notes within each scale passage is thrown off. The scales don't sound quite right played with "ami".

The point being once again, don't chase rainbows. If something is not working for you after a few weeks or months of correct and solid practice, change the fingering.

Tremolo: Get rid of the "a" finger

Eliminate the "a" finger and use "pimi" or "pmim" or "pimi/pmim/pimi/pmim" as your tremolo pattern.

I quote here from my technique tip [How to Master the Tremolo, Part 1](#):

Usually, the "a" finger is the source of most problems when trying to play an even tremolo. In order to play the traditional "pami" tremolo pattern evenly, one must have exceptional independence between the "m" and "a" fingers. The "m" and "a" fingers do not have the natural independence between them that "i" and "m" have, or "i" and "a". Independence between "m" and "a" must be developed independently of working on the tremolo and usually takes many months or years to achieve.

By eliminating the "a" finger from the tremolo pattern, you are now using the strongest fingers on the right hand ("im") that already have very good independence between them from the get-go. .

I spoke with the outstanding guitarist, Ana Vidovic about her tremolo. She uses "pmim". I asked her how she came to use that pattern. She told me that early in her studies she couldn't get the traditional "pami" pattern to work for her. No one told

her to try "pmim". She just did it. It worked, and she has used it ever since.

I told Ana that I used "pimi". She thought that was odd. So, I asked her, "If you had to choose, which of your fingers is strongest, 'i' or 'm'?" At first, she didn't want to admit that either one was stronger. After all, it's kind of a badge of technical mastery to say that all of one's fingers are equally strong and independent. But reluctantly, she finally admitted that "m" was stronger. I said, "Yes, that's why I use 'pimi'."

The third note of the pattern should have a slight accent since metrically, the thumb is the downbeat and the third note is the upbeat in the 4-note group. Therefore, my pattern makes more sense since it puts the stronger "m" finger on that slightly accented third note. She understood my point but thought her pattern felt more natural to play. It was a fun discussion and we both agreed to try each other's pattern.

But the point is that a "pimi" or "pmim" tremolo pattern, omitting the "a" finger, will inherently be more even and controllable than the traditional "pami" pattern. The downside of the "pimi" or "pmim" patterns is that some players may have difficulty playing them at fast speeds or may have problems with finger fatigue since one finger must be used twice in each cycle of the pattern.

One solution to the finger fatigue problem was suggested by Jean Feys, a faithful subscriber to my technique tips. Jean ingeniously suggests alternating the patterns: pimi/pmim/pimi/pmim etc. That way, the load of repeating "i" or "m" is evenly distributed.

Here are all four fingerings applied to the first measure of *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* by Francisco Tárrega. Example #4:

Example #4. *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* (Francisco Tárrega) measure 1-4.

Original right-hand fingering:

1 *p a m i p a m i p a m i p a m i p a m i p a m i*

Douglas Niedt right-hand fingering:

1 *p i m i p i m i p i m i p i m i p i m i p i m i*

Ana Vidovic right-hand fingering:

1 *p m i m p m i m p m i m p m i m p m i m p m i m*

Jean Feys right-hand fingering (alternating between "pimi" and "pmim"):

1 *p i m i p m i m p i m i p m i m p i m i p m i m*

It is enlightening to know that even the great Ana Vidovic, whose technique is second to none, simply changed the fingering of her tremolo when the traditional pattern did not work for her.

It usually takes six months of focused practice for 30 minutes every day to truly master the "pami" tremolo. It will take longer if your practice time is limited. But if you have been at it for years without good results, this is a solution you will want to explore. And again, you can keep practicing the traditional tremolo to improve your technique. But changing the fingering might provide a quicker solution.

By the way, in the opening measures of *Étude No 7, Op. 61* by Matteo Carcassi, there is absolutely no reason to use a "pami" tremolo fingering. Use "pimi" or "pmim" instead. Example #5:

Example #5. *Study No. 7* (Matteo Carcassi) measure 1-2.

1

~~*p-a-m-i-p-a-m-i-*~~

Better options:

p m i m
or
p i m i p i m i

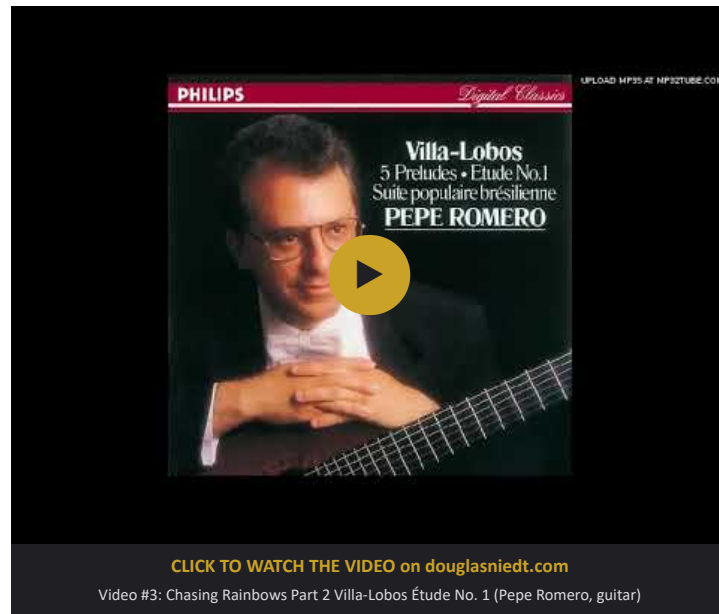
More on Eliminating the "a" Finger

When it's all about speed

Many students dream of playing Villa-Lobos' at the speed Pepe Romero plays it (about 160-165 bpm).

Listen to him play it. Video #3.

Video #3: Chasing Rainbows Part 2 Villa-Lobos *Étude No. 1* (Pepe Romero, guitar)



What these students may not know is that Romero does not use the right-hand fingering Villa-Lobos specified. Instead, he eliminates the "a" finger (eliminating the dreaded "ama" combination) and uses only "p", "i", and "m". Example #6:

Example #6. *Étude No 1* (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measure 1.

Original right-hand fingering by Villa-Lobos:



Super-fast right-hand fingering by Pepe Romero (no "a" finger, no bad fingering combinations):



Of course, you are welcome to use the original fingering to develop your finger independence between "m" and "a". But if you want quicker results, right-hand stability, and reduced right-hand tension, eliminating the "a" finger is the route to take. By the way, practicing Romero's pattern is a great way to develop faster "im" alternation speed on fast "im" scales. Also, there is a much better way to develop "ma" finger independence than practicing Villa-Lobos' arpeggio pattern. [Read the tip here.](#)

Even the obvious can be changed

Sometimes it pays to reexamine even the most obvious examples of "this is the way it has always been done" right-hand fingerings. Let's look at the *Prelude in D minor BWV 999* by J.S. Bach. Everyone knows this is the arpeggio pattern that is supposed to be used. It is the pattern everyone has used since the beginning of time. Example #7:

Example #7. *Prelude in D minor BWV 999* (J.S. Bach) measure 1-2.

The conventional right-hand fingering.



Indeed, there is nothing wrong with the pattern. Except that it does contain the evil combination of "mam".

Once again, I bring up Charles Duncan, author of the groundbreaking book on classical guitar technique, [The Art of Classical Guitar Playing](#), and expert on the physical aspects of playing the guitar. We had an email exchange about thinking out of the box to discover unconventional fingerings for the purpose of fluency and musical enhancement. He offered this alternative fingering for our beloved *Prelude*. Example #8:

Example #8. *Prelude in D minor BWV 999* (J.S. Bach) measure 1-2.

Charles Duncan's alternative right-hand fingering.



Changing note 5 from the traditional "m" to "i" eliminates the bad "mam" combination. This immediately enhances the relaxation of the hand.

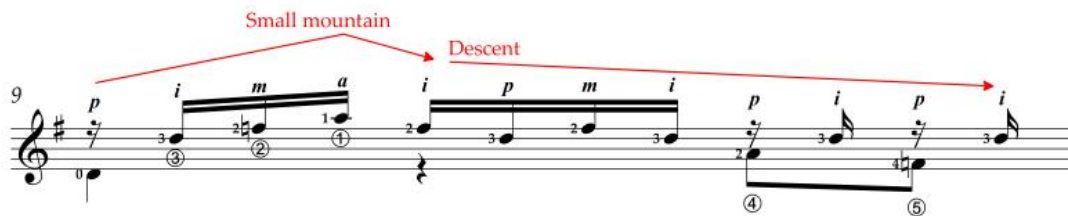
Duncan went on to point out:

"Musically, the fingering produces a more interesting accentual contour that groups the initial cluster of five notes into a shape resembling a small mountain followed by a cluster of seven notes with a succession of progressively lower peaks.

Example #9:

Example #9:

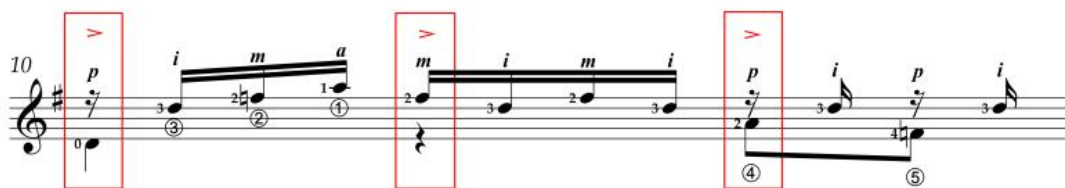
The contour of the measure



That's in contrast to the 3 groups of 4 under the beams that if played with the usual fingering naturally produces strict metric accents. Example #10:

Example #10:

The conventional metrical accents

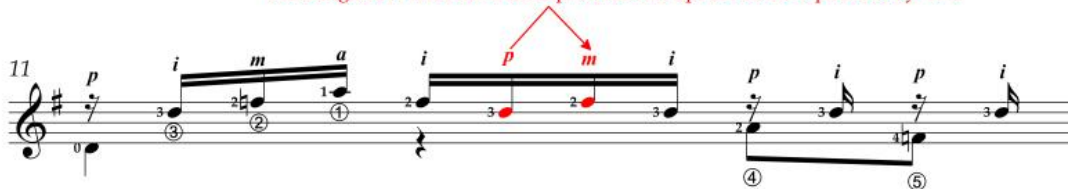


Plucking note six of the measure with the thumb breaks things up by making it a significant upbeat instead of just an "and".

Example #11:

Example #11:

Plucking the D with the thumb produces an upbeat to the F plucked by "m".



And to carry the logic all the way, suggests the desirability of phrasing off the "and" of 1 at the beginning of each measure as well, rather than just nailing the downbeats." Example #12:

Example #12:

Motif begins here, not on D bass note.

The motif

Motif begins here, not on D bass note.

The motif

Motif ends here.

Keep in mind this is all done in a very subtle fashion almost on a subconscious level. The fingering itself does all the work. Do not purposely accent the 6th note with the thumb. The thumb will do that on its own.

While following the traditional right-hand fingering of a piece may indeed be the best way to play it, you can sometimes reap rich rewards by looking for alternative solutions.

Final Thoughts

Some may derogatorily call fingering changes such as these misguided shortcuts or cop-outs. But take note that outstanding guitarists such as Ana Vidovic and Pepe Romero (and many others) use them.

And in every one of these examples, the music is enhanced by the changes.

The music sounds better and is easier to play. To me, that's not a cop-out. That's a win-win choice.

Not only that, but it puts an end to chasing rainbows. No more working on a passage for months or years thinking that maybe one day we will be able to play it. No. We want rewards, rather than frustration. We want to move on rather than being stuck on the same song. We want joy in making music.