

How to Choose Right-Hand Fingerings

By Douglas Niedt

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When we learn a piece, we tend to focus on left-hand fingerings. That's understandable since left-hand finger movements are usually more complex than those of the right-hand fingers. Many guitarists even let the right hand "find its own way" making few conscious decisions about specific fingering. That is a grave error. Bad right-hand fingering can cause dysfunctional tension in the hand, inaccurate playing by the right hand, inaccurate playing in the *left hand*, loss of speed, and poor tone quality.

Keeping in mind that in many cases there is no single correct fingering, I will give you some guiding principles to help you choose good right-hand fingerings.

Many of the musical examples I provide come from the studies of Fernando Sor. I chose them because they are relatively easy to read and understand, provide a wealth of examples of fingering problems, and have clear solutions.

Sidebar: I should mention that in his guitar method, Sor argues against using the "a" finger because it is weak, has little natural independence from "m", and when the hand is in playing position, does not lie in alignment with "pim". But, as Matanya Ophee points out in his introduction to the Chanterelle edition of *Fernando Sor, The Complete Studies for Guitar, Newly engraved from early editions*, "...the argument is usually taken out of context to mean that Sor *never* used the annular. There are many pieces in Sor's vast output that can be played with only three fingers and indeed are meant to be so played. On the other hand, there are many other pieces that simply cannot be performed without the annular. In fact, the penultimate chapter in the book is devoted to the R.H. annular and its use."

The bottom line is that in this technique tip I am writing about *modern* technique and *modern* fingering practices. In this article, I am not addressing old and sometimes antiquated techniques in order to adhere to historical performance practice. Therefore, I will include the liberal use of the "a" finger in the examples by Fernando Sor.

Arpeggio-Style Fingering

Right-hand fingering for the classical guitar is often based on arpeggio fingering. This is a traditional and common method of fingering. Here is a frequently encountered arpeggio pattern.

Example #1:

p i m a m i Or: *p i m a m i* Or: *p i m a m i*

This very natural configuration is often a good choice for passages with consecutive changes of strings as in the next example.

Example #2:

Lesson 1 from Twenty-Four Progressive Lessons, Opus 31 Book 1 (Fernando Sor)

The red notes in measures 1 and 2 are easily and comfortably played with arpeggio fingering. The "i" finger plays the 3rd string, the "m" finger plays the 2nd string, and the "a" finger plays the first string.

Here is another example of the same fingering style.

Example #3:

Lesson 2 from *Twenty-Four Progressive Lessons, Opus 31 Book 1* (Fernando Sor)

Once again, the "a" finger plays the first string, "m" the second string, and "i" the third string.

Or, here is a piece that uses basic arpeggio fingering, but on inside strings.

Example #4:

No. 1 from *Twenty-Four Little Progressive Pieces, Opus 44* (Fernando Sor)

In other words, this is the same pattern but "a" plays the second instead of the first string, "m" plays the third instead of the second string, and "i" plays the fourth instead of the third string.

In the next example, the "ami" arpeggio fingering determines the fingering for almost the entire piece. Measures 1 and 2 show the arpeggio fingering.

Example #5

No. 1 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 1* (Fernando Sor)

Measure 1: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (i), B4 (m), C5 (a), B4 (m), A4 (a), G4 (m), F#4 (i). Fingering: 3, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=1, A=0, B=3.

Measure 2: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (a), B4 (m), C5 (i), B4 (a), A4 (m), G4 (i), F#4 (i). Fingering: 4, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=3, A=0, B=2.

From then on, much of the time "a" plays the notes that fall on the 1st string, "m" plays the notes that fall on the 2nd string, and "i" plays the notes that fall on the 3rd string.

Example #6:

No. 1, *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 1*

Measure 1: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (i), B4 (m), C5 (a), B4 (m), A4 (a), G4 (m), F#4 (i). Fingering: 3, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=1, A=0, B=3.

Measure 2: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (a), B4 (m), C5 (i), B4 (a), A4 (m), G4 (i), F#4 (i). Fingering: 4, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=3, A=0, B=2.

Measure 3: Treble clef, notes G4 (i), A4 (a), B4 (m), C5 (i), B4 (a), A4 (m), G4 (i), F#4 (i). Fingering: 2, 3, 1, 4, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=1, A=3, B=1.

Measure 4: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (a), B4 (i), C5 (p), B4 (a), A4 (i), G4 (p), F#4 (p). Fingering: 0, 4, 0, 3, 0, 4, 0, 3. Bass clef: T=0, A=3, B=0.

Measure 5: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (i), B4 (m), C5 (a), B4 (m), A4 (a), G4 (m), F#4 (i). Fingering: 3, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=1, A=0, B=3.

Measure 6: Treble clef, notes G4 (m), A4 (a), B4 (m), C5 (i), B4 (a), A4 (m), G4 (i), F#4 (i). Fingering: 4, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=3, A=0, B=2.

Measure 7: Treble clef, notes G4 (i), A4 (m), B4 (p), C5 (i), B4 (a), A4 (m), G4 (i), F#4 (i). Fingering: 2, 3, 1, 4, 1, 0, 2, 1. Bass clef: T=2, A=3, B=0.

Measure 8: Treble clef, notes G4 (a), A4 (m), B4 (i), C5 (p), B4 (a), A4 (i), G4 (p), F#4 (p). Fingering: 1, 0, 0, 3, 0, 4, 0, 3. Bass clef: T=1, A=0, B=3.

Red notes and red fingering=Arpeggio-based fingering:

"a" plays 1st string

"m" plays 2nd string

"i" plays 1st string

9 *m i a i* 10 *m i m i* 11 *m i a i* 12 *m i m i*

TAB

3	0	0	0
2	3	2	3

13 *m i m i* 14 *m i a i* 15 *m i m i* 16 *m i m i*

TAB

0	0	1	0
3	0	2	3

17 *a i a i* 18 *a i m i* 19 *a i m i* 20 *m i m i*

TAB

3	0	1	0
2	0	2	3

21 *a i a i* 22 *a i m i* 23 *a i m i* 24 *m i p p*

TAB

3	0	1	0
2	0	2	3

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Rose Tree". It consists of two systems, each with four measures. The top system covers measures 25 to 28, and the bottom system covers measures 29 to 32. Each measure contains a vocal line (treble clef) and a guitar accompaniment line (simplified notation with letters T, A, and B). The lyrics are written in red text above the notes. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *p* (piano).

System 1 (Measures 25-28):

- Measure 25:** Vocal: *m i m a*; Guitar: T=1, A=0, B=3.
- Measure 26:** Vocal: *m a i m i*; Guitar: T=3, A=0, B=2.
- Measure 27:** Vocal: *i a m i*; Guitar: T=1, A=3, B=3.
- Measure 28:** Vocal: *m i m i*; Guitar: T=0, A=0, B=2/3. Dynamic: *p*.

System 2 (Measures 29-32):

- Measure 29:** Vocal: *m i m a*; Guitar: T=1, A=0, B=2.
- Measure 30:** Vocal: *a i m a*; Guitar: T=0, A=3, B=3.
- Measure 31:** Vocal: *m i m i*; Guitar: T=0, A=1, B=3. Dynamic: *p*.
- Measure 32:** Vocal: *a m i*; Guitar: T=1, A=0, B=3. Dynamic: *p*.

Note that the very last measure is arpeggio-based fingering but, as in example #4, "a" plays the 2nd string, "m" plays the 3rd string, and "i" plays the 4th string.

Also notice that arpeggio-style fingering encourages the use of "i" and "a" on string jumps from the third to the first string and vice-versa. The string jumps from the preceding piece are highlighted in the next example with purple boxes.

Example #7:

Red notes and red fingering=Arpeggio-based fingering:

"a" plays 1st string

"m" plays 2nd string

"i" plays 1st string

9 *m i a i* 10 *m i m i* 11 *m i a i* 12 *m i m i*

TAB: 3 0 0 0 | 3 0 0 0 | 3 0 0 0 | 3 0 0 0

B: 2 3 2 2 | 2 3 2 2 | 2 3 2 2 | 2 3 2 2

13 *m i m i* 14 *m i a i* 15 *m i m i* 16 *m i m i*

TAB: 0 0 1 0 | 3 0 0 0 | 0 0 1 2 | 0 0 0 0

B: 3 0 2 3 | 3 0 2 3 | 3 0 2 3 | 3 0 2 3

17 *a i a i* 18 *a i m i* 19 *a i m i* 20 *m i m i*

TAB: 3 0 0 1 | 0 0 3 0 | 0 0 1 0 | 0 0 0 0

B: 2 0 3 2 | 2 0 3 2 | 2 0 3 2 | 2 0 3 2

And again towards the end of the piece.

Example #8:

22 *i a m i* 23 *m i m i* 24 *m i m a* 25 *a i m a*

TAB: 1 3 1 0 | 0 0 2 0 | 1 0 1 0 | 0 0 3 1

B: 2 3 2 3 | 2 3 2 3 | 2 3 2 3 | 2 3 2 3

Next, is a piece whose right-hand fingering can be determined 100% by arpeggio fingering.

Example #9:

No. 10 from Introduction to the Study of the Guitar, Opus 60 (Fernando Sor)

i 1 a m a i m p i p 2 p i m a m a 3 a m i p p i m a 4 a m i p i

Arpeggio-based fingering can also be used in non-arpeggio style passages. Look at this example (No. 11 in Segovia's "Twenty Studies by Fernando Sor").

Example #10:

Study 3 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 (Fernando Sor)

Notated in 2/4 meter for clarity. Original in 4/4.

The musical score for Study 3 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 by Fernando Sor is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 4, and the second system contains measures 5 through 9. The notation is in 2/4 meter. The score includes a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass line is shown with tablature for strings T, A, and B. Fingerings are indicated by 'm' (middle), 'a' (annular), and 'i' (index). The score is in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time.

Once again, the "a" finger plays notes that fall on the first string, "m" plays notes that fall on the second string, and "i" plays notes that fall on the third string. Or, as in measures 4 and 8, they play the inner strings: "a" plays the second string, "m" plays the third string, and "i" plays the fourth string.

Arpeggio-style fingering can suggest fingering for intervals on non-adjacent and adjacent strings

As noted above in example #7 and 8, non-adjacent string jumps, say from the third to the first string are often played with "i" and "a". Likewise, arpeggio-style fingering may be used in passages of consecutive intervals.

Example #11:

No. 12 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 1* (Fernando Sor)

⑥ = F !!

"a" plays 1st string
"m" plays 2nd string
"i" plays 1st string

⑥ = F !!

5 4 5 1 0 1 3 0 1 1 1 5 5 4 3 1 3 1 0 5 4 5
5 4 5 2 0 2 3 3 2 2 5 5 4 3 2 3 2 0 1 1 5 4 5
0 0 0 3 3 3

5 6 7 8

"a" plays 2nd string
"m" plays 3rd string
"i" plays 4th string

1 0 1 3 0 3 1 5 3 1 0 1 1 1 3 0 1 1 0 3
2 0 2 3 3 3 2 5 4 2 0 2 2 2 3 0 2 3 2 3
0 0 0 2 2 3 3 3 3

Once again, the right-hand fingers line up nicely—"a" plays notes on the first string, "m" plays notes on the second string, and "i" plays notes on the third string. Or, as in measure seven beat 2 through measure eight beat 4, "a" plays notes on the second string, "m" plays notes on the third string, and "i" plays notes on the fourth string.

Moving away from traditional arpeggio-style fingering

The traditional arpeggio style of fingering feels very natural to the right hand. The fingers fall naturally and predictably on their assigned strings. In general, it is fairly effortless. But it does have shortcomings.

Spanish guitarist Narciso Yepes (a contemporary and "competitor" of Segovia) was an early proponent of alternative fingerings to the traditional arpeggio style of fingering. Yepes rebelled against the idea of "assigning" certain fingers to play certain strings.

The following example shows Sor's *Study No. 2* (as listed in Segovia's "20 Studies by Fernando Sor") fingered with Segovia's traditional arpeggio-style fingering.

Example #12:

No. 13 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 1* (Fernando Sor)

The piece is written in 3 voices:
 Melody (blue notes),
 Accompaniment (black notes--the "Alberti bass" pattern)
 Bass (green notes).

As fingered by Segovia with arpeggio-style fingering.
 "a" plays the 1st string
 "m" plays the 2nd string
 "i" plays the 3rd string.
 The thumb ("p") plays the bass strings.

The musical score is presented in two systems, each containing four measures. The first system is numbered 1-4, and the second system is numbered 5-8. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is written in blue notes, the accompaniment in black notes, and the bass in green notes. Fingerings are indicated by letters 'a', 'm', 'i', and 'p' above the notes. The bass line is an Alberti bass pattern. The score is written for guitar, with strings T, A, B, and G indicated.

Narciso Yepes pointed out that the tone of the "a" finger is different from that of "m". This is true because of anatomical differences and the fact that "a" is closer to the bridge than "m". The difference in tone can also be a result of the different fingernail characteristics of a player's "a" and "m" fingers.

He believed that slavishly following arpeggio-style fingering was not a good idea on passages containing a relatively slowly moving melody. He noticed that the brighter tone of "a" amplified the difference in tone between the strings. Melody notes that fall on the brighter first string are supposed to be plucked with the "a" finger which makes them even brighter than the melody notes on the darker second string that are played by "m". He didn't like the unevenness of tone that resulted from melody note to melody note.

Instead, he advocated the use of *one finger to play all the melody notes* in a passage regardless of which string the melody note was on. Here is the same study with "m" playing all the melody notes to produce a smoother, more tonally-even melody line.

Example #13:

No. 13 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 1* (Fernando Sor)

The piece is written in 3 voices:
Melody (blue notes),
Accompaniment (black notes--the "Alberti bass" pattern)
Bass (green notes).

As fingered by Narciso Yepes.
"m" plays the melody, regardless of which string it is on.
"i" and "p" play the accompaniment.
"p" plays the bass voice.
The "a" finger is not used.

9 m i p i m i p i 10 m i p i m i m i 11 m i p i m i m i 12 m i p i m i p i

13 m i p i m i p i 14 m i p i m i m i 15 m i p i m i m i 16 m i p i p i p i

Using "m" instead of "a" to play the melody notes on the first string tones down the brightness of the first string. This helps the first-string melody notes blend better with those that fall on the darker second string.

Sor's famous *Study No. 5* (as listed in Segovia's "20 Studies by Fernando Sor") is a similar situation where the use of "m" on all the melody notes might produce a more even-sounding melody.

First, here is a passage from the middle of the piece with Segovia's traditional arpeggio-style fingering.

Example #14:

No. 22 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 2* (Fernando Sor)

Arpeggio-style fingering as fingered by Andr s Segovia

25 *m i p i m i* 26 *a i p i m i* 27 *m i p i m i* 28 *m p p i m i*

29 *m i p i m i* 30 *a i a i m i* 31 *m i p i m i* 32 *m i m a*

Here is the same passage with "m" playing all the melody notes to produce a smoother, more tonally-even melody line.

Example #15:

No. 22 from *Twenty-Four Very Easy Exercises, Opus 35, Book 2* (Fernando Sor)

Using "m" finger to play all melody notes

25 *m i p i m i* 26 *m i p i m i* 27 *m i p i m i* 28 *m p p i m i*

29 *m i p i m i* 30 *m i m i m i* 31 *m i p i m i* 32 *m i m a*

In an arpeggio-style fingering, If the "a" finger must play most of the melody notes in a passage, it can be a good idea to use it to play *all* the melody notes in the passage, again for consistency and evenness of tone. Such is the case with the *Afro-Cuban Lullaby* as arranged by Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening.

Example #16

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening)

⑥=D *a a a a* *m i* *a a a a* *m i* *a a a a* *m i* *a a a a* *m i* *i i*

Avoiding the "a" finger in arpeggio-style fingering

We do not have the same degree of independence between "ma" as we do between "im". Therefore, it makes sense oftentimes to avoid the use of "a". For instance, using a traditional arpeggio-style fingering in the next piece, while logical, feels awkward and sluggish. It promotes tension in the hand. This is due to the natural lack of independence between "m" and "a".

Example #17:

Study 5 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 (Fernando Sor)

"mam" combination sluggish

The musical score for Example #17 consists of two systems, each with two measures. The first system shows measures 1 and 2, and the second system shows measures 3 and 4. Each measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (m, a, m) followed by a quarter rest. The 'mam' triplets are highlighted with red boxes. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 'i' for the first note, 'm' for the second, and 'a' for the third. The bass line is shown with fingerings 0, 1, 2, 3.

A more comfortable fingering eliminates "a". Fernando Sor himself probably would have chosen the next fingering. (Remember, Sor avoided the use of "a" as mentioned in the sidebar at the opening of this article).

Example #18:

Study 5 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 (Fernando Sor)

"imi" combination faster and nimble

The musical score for Study 5 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 by Fernando Sor is presented in 4/4 time. The melody, written in the treble clef, consists of eighth notes with fingerings 'i m i' and 'i m i' repeated. The bass line, written in the bass clef, consists of eighth notes with fingerings '3 2 0 1' and '3 2 0 1' repeated. The score is divided into four measures, each starting with a measure rest. The first measure is marked with a '1' and the second with a '2'. The third and fourth measures are marked with a '3' and a '4' respectively. The 'imi' combinations are highlighted with red boxes.

A similar situation occurs in Sor's well-known *Study No. 17 in E minor* (as numbered in the Segovia edition of the "Twenty Studies by Fernando Sor"). Segovia indicates an arpeggio-style fingering using the "a" finger. But it includes several widely spaced "ia" jumps from the 4th to the 1st string and several "ma" jumps from the 3rd string to the 1st string that some players may find awkward.

Example #19:

Study 11 from *Twelve Studies, Opus 6* (Fernando Sor)

As fingered by Andrés Segovia

1 *i m a i m a i m a i m* 2 *a i m a i m a i m*

3 *p i m a i m a i m a i m* 4 *a p i m p i a p i m p i*

5 *p i m a i m a i m a i m* 6 *a i m a i m a i m p i m*

7 *p i m a i m a i m a i m* 8 *a p i m p i a p i m p i*

It is certainly playable that way and indeed a generation of guitarists has learned that fingering. However, eliminating the use of "a" has its advantage in eliminating "ma" sluggishness especially if the

piece is played fairly fast. Also, using "m" for all the melody notes results in a more even-sounding melodic line.

Example #20:

Study 11 from *Twelve Studies, Opus 6* (Fernando Sor)

"m" on all melody notes

1 *p p i m p i m p i m p i* 2 *m p i m p i m p i m p i*

3 *p p i m p i m p i m p i* 4 *m p i m p i m p i m p i*

5 *p p i m p i m p i m p i* 6 *m p i m p i m p i p i m*

7 *p p i m p i m p i m p i* 8 *m p i m p i m p i m p i*

But some would say using "m" to such an extent produces as much tension in the hand as using "a". In that case, reverting back to the basic "a" plays the 1st string, "m" plays the 2nd string, and "i" plays the

3rd string might be the preference of many. It also eliminates the awkward 4th string to 1st string "ia" jumps and 3rd string to 1st string "ma" jumps in Segovia's fingering.

Example #21:

Study 11 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 (Fernando Sor)

Basic arpeggio fingering: "a" plays 1st string, "m" plays 2nd string, "i" plays 3rd string

1 *p p i m p i a p i a p i* 2 *a p i m p i m p i m p i*

3 *p p i m p i a p i a p i* 4 *a p i m p i a p i m p i*

5 *p p i a p i a p i a p i* 6 *a p i m p i m p i p p i*

7 *p p i a p i a p i a p i* 8 *a p i m p i a p i m p i*

The Bottom Line

So again, traditional arpeggio-based fingering is logical and works very well much of the time. But sometimes it can be improved by eliminating or reducing the use of the "a" finger. Evenness of tone can be improved, and sometimes, speed can be increased and right-hand tension reduced. Remember, when tension is decreased in the right hand, accuracy and fluency are increased in the left hand.

End of Part 1

More to come:

How string crossings affect right-hand fingering choices

How multiple voices in a passage affect fingering choices and considerations

Fingering for fast scales

Tremolo fingerings

Use of the pinky

Thumb-index lute fingering

Fingering for harmonics

Using the thumb to play double stops

Demonstration of these fingering principles in pieces by Albéniz, Tárrega, Brouwer, Barrios, Lauro, and others!