

How to Choose Right-Hand Fingerings, Part 3

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Going from a Short Single Note to a Chord

This is a very specific situation, but comes up frequently. If you follow a few simple rules, you can eliminate mistakes and hand tension in these situations.

In the opening measures of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 12* from *Twelve Studies, Opus 6* we have a lone, quick 16th-note (high B on the 1st string) going to a three-note triad.

Example #49:

Study No. 12 from *Twelve Studies, Opus 6* (Fernando Sor)
(*Study No 14* in Segovia's "Twenty Studies")

The right-hand fingering shown is based on arpeggio-style fingering *AND* maintains separation between the voices by using the thumb to play the bass line, “im” to play the middle voice, and “a” to play the melody. The question is what finger should we use to play the 16th-note high B. Let’s look at the pros and cons of using each finger.

The “l” finger would be a poor choice. After playing the 1st string it would have to travel quite a distance to play its next note, which is on the 3rd string. The jump would result in frequently missing the 3rd-string C# that follows. The long travel time will also produce a less-crisp rhythm. That is usually the case in this type of situation. The “l” finger is a poor choice.

The “a” finger is a good choice because it would maintain the tone quality of the melody. Admittedly, the B is such a short note that most people probably won’t notice its tone quality. Another positive is that the “a” finger has already played four notes on the 1st string, so it “knows” where the string is. That helps accuracy. But some guitarists would argue that attempting to repeat the “a” finger at high speed will produce a less-crisp rhythm, will tense the hand, and tend to make the hand jump.

The “m” finger is also a good choice. It won’t maintain the even tone quality of the melody as well as “a” but again, since the note is so short, few people will notice. Some people may say “m” is better because then you have alternating fingers—you aren’t repeating the “a” finger. But actually, you are still repeating “m”. After playing the 1st-string high B, it still has to immediately play the 2nd string E in the chord. On the other hand, after it plays the 1st string, it will follow through to the 2nd string. Therefore, it will be in perfect position and ready to play the 2nd-string E. But there is another problem. Before it plays the high B on the 1st string, it must first play the 2nd-string E, *then* play the 1st-string B, and finally return to play the 2nd-string E. That could produce a fair amount of tension. The answer is to try both “m” and “a” and see what works best for you.

OR, we can change our entire approach and finger the piece with minimal use of the “a” finger.

Example #50:

Study No. 12 from Twelve Studies, Opus 6 (Fernando Sor)
(Study No 14 in Segovia's "Twenty Studies")

This fingering might be more natural or comfortable for some players. And, by using “m” on all the melody notes, it still maintains a nice even tone on the melody. But the thumb must frequently jump from the 5th or 6th string to the 3rd string. That can lead to missed notes. Also, care must be taken not to

play the 3rd string too loudly. The notes comprising the intervals in the middle voice should be equal volume. That requires very precise control.

If one were to adopt this fingering, which finger should be used to play the high B on the 1st string? Actually all three are useable.

The “a” finger is a good choice because it isn’t used before or after the high B. There is no issue of having to repeat a finger. However, for some guitarists, the “a” finger is a slow finger and the crisp rhythm might suffer. Also, the “a” finger will not have been used prior to playing the high B. If a finger has not been used for several measures, and is suddenly called into action, there is a greater chance of it missing the string.

The “m” finger is a good choice because it maintains the evenness of the tone of the melody. Since it has already played the 1st string four times, it “knows” where the string is. But, it must be repeated very quickly. Some may like that because their “m” finger is fast. For others it may cause their hand to jump or produce tension, resulting in a poor attack.

The “i” finger is also a possibility. It is fast, and after plucking the 1st string will follow through and will be ready to play the 2nd string E that follows. The downside of using “i” is that before it plays the high B on the 1st string, it must first play the 2nd-string E, *then* play the 1st-string B, and finally return to play the 2nd-string E. That is a lot of travelling!

Once again, the answer is to try different fingerings and see what works best for you.

Here is another example of the same problem of going from a fast single note to a chord.

Example #51:

Waltz in E, Opus 32, No. 2 (Fernando Sor)

The musical score for 'Waltz in E, Opus 32, No. 2' by Fernando Sor is shown in measures 17 through 20. The key signature is E major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/8. The notation includes a treble clef and a guitar-specific notation with a red box highlighting the notes G4 (1st string, 2nd fret) and B4 (1st string, 4th fret) in measure 17. Above the red box is the text 'Or "m"' and below it is 'i'. To the right of the red box is 'a'. The guitar tablature below the staff shows the fretting for each string: Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B). The tablature for measure 17 is: T: 0 3 2 0 7 3, A: 0 0 0 0 0 0, B: 0 0 0 0 0 0. The tablature for measure 18 is: T: 0 3 2 0 7 3, A: 0 0 0 0 0 0, B: 0 0 0 0 0 0. The tablature for measure 19 is: T: 5 3 2 0 0 0, A: 0 0 0 0 0 0, B: 0 0 0 0 0 0. The tablature for measure 20 is: T: 2 0 0 0 0 0, A: 1 2 2 0 0 0, B: 0 0 0 0 0 0.

Once again, the “i” finger is not a good candidate to play the 32nd-note F#. It has to travel too far to play the 3rd-string open G in the chord. But “m” or “a” may be used. Each has the same pros and cons as in the previous study.

Or once again, we can totally change our fingering approach to eliminate or reduce the use of the “a” finger.

Example #52:

Waltz in E, Opus 32, No. 2 (Fernando Sor)

Or "m" ?? m m

17 18 19 20

TAB

As before, changing to this type of fingering might change the overall sound of the phrase. But many guitarists will find it more natural and easier to play. And, either “a” “m” or “l” could now be used to play the 32nd-note F#.

Let’s look at a more challenging example. In the opening phrase of the first variation of Fernando Sor’s *Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Opus 9*, we have four instances of a single note (or two fast notes slurred together) followed by a chord. Two of the instances are particularly difficult (boxed in red).

Example #53:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart (Fernando Sor)

1 2 3

TAB

Let’s look at the first red box. The last note of measure #1 is an open E. This is followed by the B7 chord on the downbeat of measure #2. We definitely don’t want to use “i” to play the open E. It would have to travel too far to play the F# on the 4th string of the B7 chord. “m” or “a” would both be possibilities. I would choose whichever one is fastest and most dependable for you. *OR, you could change the fingering*

and make the D# to the E a slur instead of playing the E open. Since you wouldn't have to pluck a 32nd note open E, it would be easier for the right hand to execute the passage. You could easily use "m" or "a". "i" would be possible but wouldn't be my first choice. Unfortunately, the added slur can make the left hand more difficult! Once again, it will require much experimentation to discover what works best for you.

The difficulties in the 2nd red box are similar. I would avoid using "i" to pluck the G#/F# slur. Jumping from the 1st string to the 4th string is asking for trouble. But "m" or "a" are both reasonable choices.

To sum up, to decide what fingering is best in going from a fast single note to a chord, take into account:

1. The distance the finger must travel
2. Whether repeating a finger is helpful or detrimental
3. How fast a given finger can move
4. How much tension the fingering produces or if it causes the hand to jump
5. Tone quality

Thumb-Index fingerings

The alternation of "p" and "i" was commonly used by lute players, especially for playing fast passages. Some guitarists use this fingering instead of "im" to play fast scales. I think one must be careful in employing the technique in modern guitar repertoire.

For instance, I have observed a few well-known guitarists use "pi" to play the fast scales in the first movement of Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*. In my opinion, the scales should be flamenco-like, played rest stroke with a punchy, macho sound. Although "pi" is much easier to execute, it is weak compared to rest stroke "im". "pi" sounds anemic in that context.

On the other hand, guitarist Mak Grgic uses the "pi" fingering in certain scales of J.S. Bach's *Chaconne* to great effect. The original Chaconne is for violin solo. Some of the scales are played by the violin with aggressive down-up bows. These sound best when played with "im", "ia", or "ami" rest stroke on the guitar, with very few slurs. Other scales are played by the violin in long phrases with each downbow and upbow consisting of eight, twelve, or sixteen notes. The scales sound light and fluid. On the guitar, these can be played very successfully with "pi" free stroke, with or without the use of slurs.

"pi" is very useful on short groups of fast notes, especially on the bass strings. In *Canarios* by Gaspar Sanz, notice the use of "pi" in the basses (red notes).

Example #54:

Canarios (Gaspar Sanz)

The notes could also all be played with the thumb instead of using “pi”. However, if played at a very fast tempo, some guitarists may find that the repeated use of “p” tenses their hand or makes it bounce causing mistakes. For them, “pi” might work better.

In Federico Moreno Torroba’s *Sonatina*, a rhythmic figure of four 16th notes is repeated throughout the third movement. When the figure falls on the bass strings, its execution can easily be done with “pi”.

Example #55:

Sonatina, 3rd Movement (Federico Moreno Torroba)

Left-hand fingering by Andrés Segovia

Natural Harmonic
12th fret, 6th string

The alternative to using “pi” is to use “im” or “mi” throughout the passage. Or, use the fingers for the first few notes and then switch to “p” on the second or third beat in measure #17.

“pi” is a viable fingering in many passages. Just be sure that its use enhances or fits with the musical character of the passage.

Using the right-hand little finger

Traditionally, the little finger is rarely used except for rasgueados. However, Dr. Charles Postleware is a strong advocate for its use on a broad basis. He states:

Right hand classical guitar technique has evolved from two fingers (thumb and index) in the Renaissance Period to the addition of the middle finger around 1600 and the ring finger around 1800. Various guitarists have attempted to add the little finger over the past two hundred years, most notably Spaniard Dionisio Aguado (1781-1849), Argentinean Domingo Prat (1886-1944), Brazilian Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) and Uruguayan Abel Carlevaro (b. 1919).

[His website](#) continues:

From 1985 to 1995, Postleware followed a six-hour per day practice routine to develop the strength and dexterity of the little finger and to integrate it with the other fingers. Over this period, he developed a set of five-finger right hand studies for the technical areas of scales, chords, arpeggios, tremolos and harmonics as well as researching the standard classical guitar repertoire for pieces that could take advantage of a five-finger technique.

Before continuing, let me note that the standard notation for the little finger is the letter “c” (“cuatro” meaning the 4th finger).

After reading Postleware’s writings and books, I decided to give it a shot. I didn’t put in the time that Postleware did, but I enjoyed working with his exercises. I did not succeed in incorporating its use on the scale that Postleware was attempting, but have found it to be useful in many situations, especially the music of Villa-Lobos and some of my own arrangements.

Villa-Lobos used “c” in his guitar playing. Amusing accounts can be found of the arguments Villa-Lobos had with Segovia over its use. Postleware writes:

In his first meeting with the great Spanish guitarist, Andrés Segovia, Villa-Lobos claims that Segovia told him that his compositions were not guitaristic because of his use of the right hand little finger. Villa-Lobos says that he retorted (other accounts say he screamed), “Ah. It’s not used? Then, cut it off!”...Segovia never convinced Villa-Lobos to stop writing for the little finger and Villa-Lobos never convinced Segovia to use the little finger; and, guitarists have always found a way to get around Villa-Lobos’ obvious use of the little finger.

Countless examples can be found in Villa-Lobos’ music where the little finger is an excellent solution for fingerings. Here are a few.

Example #56:

Prelude No. 4 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

5

⑤ 3 ⑥ ⑥ ⑦ p p p p

T A B

9 7 5 3 2 3 5 0 0 0

These chords are played by most guitarists with “pima”, but using “c” allows the thumb to be used exclusively for the bass voice, producing better separation between the parts.

Example #57:

Prelude No. 4 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Final two measures

Natural harmonics

7th fret 12th fret

⑤ ② ③ ④

T A B

0 <7> <7> <7> <12> <12> <12> <12> <12> <12> 0 0 2 5 3

In the final chord, using “c” makes it possible to play the notes together simultaneously, rather than playing a strummed or rolled chord.

Let’s look at a chord passage in Villa-Lobos’ *Prelude No. 3*.

Example #58:

Prelude No. 3 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

This is kind of confusing on paper. Just remember "c" plays the 1st string, "a" plays the 2nd string, "m" plays the 3rd string, "i" plays the 4th string, "p" plays the 5th and/or 6th strings

Sonatina, 1st Movement (Federico Moreno Torroba)

The chord can be rolled using the traditional “ppima”. But “pppim” is even better. If the traditional “ppima” is used, it can be difficult for whatever right-hand finger plays the high C# to “find” the string. It can easily miss. However, using “pppim” allows one to pre-plant the “a” finger on the first string, ready to play the first high C#. You can’t miss the string!

Strumming the chord with the thumb produces an entirely different sound from the rolled chord. It’s a question of taste of which sound you prefer. Before strumming with the thumb, be sure to pre-plant on the first string whichever finger you are going to use to play the high C#. That pre-planted finger will also serve as a “stop” on the strum to prevent the thumb from accidentally playing the first string.

For a different situation, let’s look at the opening measures of the second movement of the same Torroba *Sonatina*. The first chord could simply be strummed with the thumb. But wait. In the previous example, the chord is part of the accompaniment, separate from the melody. In this example, some of the notes of the chord are part of the *lower voice*, and some of the notes are part of the *upper voice*.

Example #60

Sonatina, 2nd Movement (Federico Moreno Torroba)

Red notes=upper voice
Purple notes=lower voice

Tone quality of first interval
should match second interval

Ideally, we want the tone quality of the first interval to match the tone quality of the second interval (green box). Sometimes that can be difficult to do if the chord is strummed with the thumb. The tone quality of the thumb strumming the first and second string may not match the sound of the second interval played with “im”.

A solution is to play a variation of a strum. The thumb strums the 6th through the 3rd strings, but then “im” complete the strum, playing the 2nd and 1st strings. It must be practiced so there is no delay between the thumb and “im”. It should sound like a normal continuous strum. Because both intervals are played with “im”, you are assured the tone quality of the intervals will match perfectly.

Example 61:

Sonatina, 2nd Movement (Federico Moreno Torroba)

Red notes=upper voice
Purple notes=lower voice

Tone quality of first interval
should match second interval

The most common ways to play 6 and 5-note chords are to strum all the strings with the thumb or to roll them using “pppima” for 6-note chords and “ppima” for 5-note chords. But guitarists should be familiar with all the possibilities of right-hand combinations for 6 and 5-note chords.

Example #62:

Right-hand fingerings for 6-note chords

Right-hand fingerings for 6-note chords in 4/4 time. The notation shows six chords with their respective fingerings (p, a, m, i, c) and string positions (0 for open strings) for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs.

Right-hand fingerings for 5-note chords

Right-hand fingerings for 5-note chords in 4/4 time. The notation shows six chords with their respective fingerings (p, a, m, i, c) and string positions (0 for open strings) for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs.

Note that some of these combinations do not have to be rolled. The notes can be played almost simultaneously.

Let's put these fingering possibilities into practice. Many transcriptions of the *Prelude* to J.S. Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1* end with a 6-string D major chord. Several solutions to the right-hand fingering of this chord are possible.

Example #63:

Double Notes (Intervals) on the bass strings

Oftentimes in the guitar repertoire, we come across intervals on the bass strings. Several of these are found in Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 1*. The passage below has three intervals on the bass strings (red notes in the boxes).

Example #64:

Prelude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

The musical score for Example #64 shows measures 11 through 14 of Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 1*. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef staff and a bass staff. The bass staff is divided into three parts: T (Treble), A (Alto), and B (Bass). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes fingerings and a circled 4 in measure 14. Three intervals on the bass strings are highlighted with red boxes: a 3rd interval on the B string in measure 11, a 1st interval on the A string in measure 11, and a 3rd interval on the B string in measure 14.

All three could be played with “p” and “i” (or maybe “m”).

Example #65:

Prelude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Red notes are the melody

Measures 11-14 of the musical score for *Prelude No. 1* by Heitor Villa-Lobos. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes a treble clef and a bass staff. Red notes indicate the melody. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. Dynamics include piano (p) and mezzo-forte (mf). The bass staff shows fret numbers for each string (T, A, B).

The upside to using “p” and “i” is it is fairly easy and allows the two notes of each interval to be played simultaneously if that is important to you. The downside is the tone quality. All the single melody notes (in red) before and after the intervals are played with the thumb, which produces a fairly full sound on the bass strings. If they are played with the thumb rest stroke, they are *very* full. But then, when the intervals are played, the “i” or “m” finger playing the melody sounds quite different in character from those played with the thumb.

If both notes of the intervals are played with the thumb, the tone of the melody notes is uniformly full and powerful. The downside is that the two notes of each interval do not sound simultaneously. In fact, the third interval must be played by plucking the low E bass note as a grace note. It must be plucked in the previous measure (measure #15), ahead of the beat. Then, the thumb plucks the high E on the 4th string precisely on the first beat of measure #16.

Example #66:

Natural Harmonics

Therefore, in general, use the fingers to pluck any natural harmonics on the treble strings and the thumb to pluck any natural harmonics that fall on the bass strings. All the general guidelines on choosing right-hand fingering apply to natural harmonics. For example, in a phrase consisting of several harmonics, consideration can be given to using arpeggio-style fingering or using the same finger over and over for consistency of tone and touch. Even “pi” can be used in rapid passages. In a five-note chord, using “c” might be a good choice if you are adept at using it.

Right-Hand Harmonics

The rules for right-hand harmonics (which include artificial harmonics) are a bit more variable. I find that results vary from player to player. Regardless of whether the harmonic is on a bass string or treble string, some guitarists play right-hand harmonics more consistently with “p” while others play them better with “a”. (By the way, do not use “m”. It isn’t even a contender.) If a player is skilled at both, then the natural harmonic rule applies—the “a” finger will sound better plucking right-hand harmonics on the treble strings and “p” will sound better plucking right-hand harmonics on the bass strings.

Fast Scales

Fast scales are traditionally played “im” rest stroke. Some players prefer “ia” because of the similar length of both fingers. Some players also like to use “ami”. I personally don’t recommend “ami” for general use, but it is very useful in many situations. For more information on the “ami” technique, [read my technique tip](#). As I mentioned previously, some players use “pi”. But use caution with this option. In my opinion it is musically unsuitable for many scale passages.

When playing scales with “im” or “ia”, follow the rules of fingering I have already outlined. It is especially important to take string crossings into account.

Tremolo

The traditional fingering for a four-note tremolo is “pami”. A handful of players use “pima”. Three-note tremolos are usually done with “pmi”. A few players use “pim”. Five-note flamenco-style tremolos are traditionally done with “piami”. There are other tremolo patterns that are rather exotic and not used very often. To read more, see my technique tip, [Tremolo Patterns You Never Knew Existed](#).

Another possible fingering for the traditional 4-note tremolo is to use “pimi” or “pmim”. You can read more in my Tremolo Technique Tips. [Part 1 is here](#). I will quote from the first few paragraphs:

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 to achieve.

By eliminating the “a” finger from the tremolo pattern, you are now using the strongest fingers on the right hand 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” pattern 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.

Personally, I use the traditional “pami” pattern for fast tremolo passages and the “pimi” pattern on moderate-tempo passages.

Dramatically Improve Your Playing:

WRITE IN YOUR RIGHT-HAND FINGERINGS!!

Then, FOLLOW THEM!

Sorry for the textual shouting, but this is so important. Most of us are fairly diligent about writing our left-hand fingerings in our music. *But most of us fall short on writing down our right-hand fingerings.* One way to dramatically improve your playing is to consciously decide on your right-hand fingerings, write them down, and FOLLOW THEM!

If you have read this entire technique tip, you know that there are such things as good fingering and bad fingering. For example, choosing fingerings with the best string crossings will greatly improve the speed, accuracy, and evenness of your playing. Good right-hand fingering also improves the accuracy and performance of your *left hand*. Take the time to make conscious fingering decisions for the right hand.

Then, WRITE THEM DOWN. If you don’t, you will forget them. I don’t care if you’re young or old—right-hand fingering is notoriously difficult to remember.

Then, *be sure you are following the fingering you have written down.* Many times we will choose a good right-hand fingering. But we all know that fingers have minds of their own. Sometimes they will do a

different fingering from the one you have chosen. If you have your fingerings written down, you can periodically check to be sure your hand is following them.

Here are more reasons to write down your right-hand fingering:

1. If you have found two or three fingerings that might work, write them all down so you can experiment over time with them. If you don't write them down, you will probably forget the options.
2. When you discover two or three fingering options, you will obviously choose the one that immediately works. But things change. For example, as you increase the tempo of the piece or change dynamics, the option that originally seemed to be best may fail. One of your other options may work better. If you have them written down, you can retest them without having to try to remember what they were.
3. Sometimes you will learn a piece and later drop it for a few months or even years. But if you have meticulously written in your fingerings, you won't have to start all over to recall your original fingerings.
4. When you make conscious fingering decisions and write them down, your fingers are more likely to follow them.
5. Leaving right-hand fingering up in the air or allowing the right-hand fingers to just "do their thing" is a recipe for disaster, especially under the stress of live performance.
6. If you don't write in your right-hand fingering choices, you will probably forget them.