

Pedagogical Position Details

The 4th finger Approach

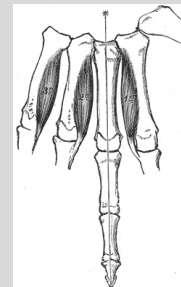
Defn. *The practice of teaching beginners to use the 4th finger on the third fret of the treble strings.*

Some years ago I read in Anthony Glise's seminal book, *Classic Guitar Pedagogy*, about Sor's 4th finger approach (this was adopted by Aguado in the following decade). After I examined Sor's method (1831), I found that Sor clearly indicated that the "D" on the 2nd string and the "G" on the first string should be played with the 4th finger, not the third. Since Sor's guitar was most likely a smaller 630mm scale Lacote, and as he was one of his generations finest guitarists, I doubt that he had difficulty reaching the 3rd fret with the 3rd finger. It seems to me that the only reasonable explanation for instructing the student to use the 4th finger on the 3rd fret is to reduce the amount of tension in the left-hand. For our larger, modern instrument, I include the third string "Bb" along with the "D" and "G" in the 4th finger approach. I teach the 3rd finger on "F", "C", and "G" on the 4th, 5th and 6th strings, respectively.



Dorsal
interossei
muscles

Palmar
interossei
muscles.



The interossei muscles on the sides of the fingers have a dual function; they help spread the fingers apart, and they also assist the lumbricals to flex the middle joint (PIP or proximal interphalangeal joint). If the interossei muscle is being used to maintain a *continuous* separation of the third finger from the second so that it can play the 3rd fret, then the flexion of the PIP joint is inhibited with a resulting and significant loss of speed and dexterity. Try it. Spread the student's fingers apart and then flex the middle (PIP) joints. They will feel these muscles "overload" (advanced players, not so much). To be clear, the PIP doesn't really flex much during introductory left-hand study, rather the finger maintains its shape whether it is "powered-up" on the string, or parked just above in a "ready" position. The actual action for beginners is a momentary "firming" of the PIP joint. I coach that the tension is "drained" between the notes. More flexion is needed for later study.

Using the 4th finger on the third fret in the early lessons allows for an easier establishment of the left-hand default position since this continuous dysfunctional tension is not present. It also allows for a parallel hand position. The "third finger approach" (if you will allow me to coin this phrase) often encourages pronation, especially if the high E string notes are introduced first. For the vast majority of students, it is the 4th finger that falls ergonomically on the 3rd fret when you finger notes on the first and second. I have found that the reintroduction of the 4th finger approach to be one of the most significant "advances" of the modern pedagogy.

The assignment of one finger to one fret (the "third finger approach") appears logical enough, but the practice doesn't appear to be supported by the physiology of the hand. Several of the currently popular published methods still hold to this idea (Hal Leonard, Mel Bay, et al). The establishment of the less useful 3rd finger approach seems to have begun with Carcassi in his method (1836) with his introductory scales. He clearly shows the 3rd finger on the 3rd fret, although he uses the 4th finger approach in the body of his work.

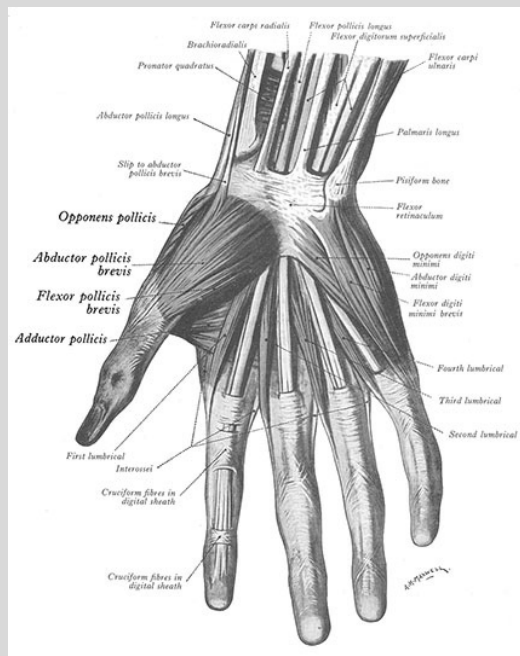


In the photos, notice the flexion of the middle (PIP) joints. In the top photo, the PIP are flexed much more than those shown in the lower, allowing the knuckle (MCP) to efficiently operate the finger, much like a piston. Examine the position of the large knuckle joint (metacarpal phalangeal joint, or MCP) of the 4th finger. In the 4th finger approach, the weight of the finger is over the string, which makes the finger-fall much more efficient, as well as graceful. Also compare the relaxed wrist in the upper photo with the maximum flexion of the wrist joint in the lower. Lastly, notice the position of the left-thumb; it is the subject of the next page.

Left-Thumb Position

The function of the left-thumb is to provide a counter-force to counter-poise the fingers, especially the fourth, without adversely affecting dexterity. If the instructor is using the “older” third finger approach, then the thumb needs to provide greater support to the weaker hand position caused by the re-assignment of the interossei muscles. Most do this by positioning the left-thumb behind the second finger to support the fourth. Passing the thumb into the palm -by flexing the carpometacarpal at the wrist-joint (CMC) and extending the next joint (MCP) will, in most students, introduce dysfunctional tension into the palm. By flexing the thumb (into the palm) we press the thenar eminence group (includes the opponens pollicis, abductor pollicis brevis, and flexor pollicis brevis) and the adductor pollicis into the tendons and the lumbrical muscles in the palm, restricting the flexion of the fingers. Most students will also fight an impulse to straighten the fingers (Urshalmi, pg. 67). Nonetheless, this thumb position is still the default today if one hasn’t adopted the “newer” 4th finger approach. There are some who flex the thumb tip and make contact on the bone past the tip joint (distal interphalangeal joint or, DIP) on the back of the neck. This compromise can relieve some of the dysfunctional tension in the hand.

If the instructor adopts the modern 4th finger approach, the thumb does not need to “post-up” behind the second finger to counter-poise the 4th finger. In fact, it can assume a much more naturally relaxed position behind, or even to the left of, the 1st finger, a symmetry elegantly mirroring the right-hand. In other words, **the distance between the thumb and forth finger is the same for both approaches**. Since the interossei muscles are now actively engaged flexion instead of spreading the fingers apart, the thumb can be relieved of some of its more distant support duties, and no dysfunctional tension is introduced into the hand from the adduction of the thumb. This is why the “thumb-to-the-left” position is a companion to the 4th finger approach.



One way I demonstrate this companionship is to have the student play a “D” on the second string with the 4th finger, *without* the thumb on the guitar. Be sure that the other fingers are emptied of tension. The student will feel the counter pressure from the right-forearm. Have the student “drop” the thumb into place; it will invariably “drop” behind the first fret.

The Fundamental Mechanics are the Same Regardless of style.

Fundamental mechanics instruction is not just how to move a finger, but how to do so in the most efficient manner, allowing the student to progress to the highest levels in any chosen style. This means speed; finger-fall speed in the left-hand and a “ballistic, fast-twitch” in the right. “Speed happens” -in the absence of dysfunctional tension, and we value speed in any style.

But effortless fundamental mechanics is also about gracefulness and ease. Perhaps you’ve heard “slow is smooth, smooth is fast.” It’s true. Playing efficiently also means using multiple muscle groups (Ortmann). Using only a few muscles makes our mechanism “angular” and inefficient, and fatigue becomes an issue.

Any discussion of fundamental mechanics must include an awareness of dysfunctional tension. For example, the 4th finger approach allows the student from the earliest lessons to understand and rectify dysfunctional tension. I also recommend slow practice by setting the metronome to 60bpm and use 4 clicks to the note, even for 16ths. The first click is to play the note, the second click is to preposition the finger(s) for the next note(s). The third and fourth clicks are to empty the residual tension from the hands and body not directly used to play the note(s). I do this so that the body does not remain under continuous tension, but learns to relax between the notes (Rubenstein). We continue with 3 clicks, then two, and so on until the student has internalized the memory/feeling of effortless playing. Not every student needs to do this, of course.

Let me continue with an another example concerning the 4th finger approach and dysfunctional tension.

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