

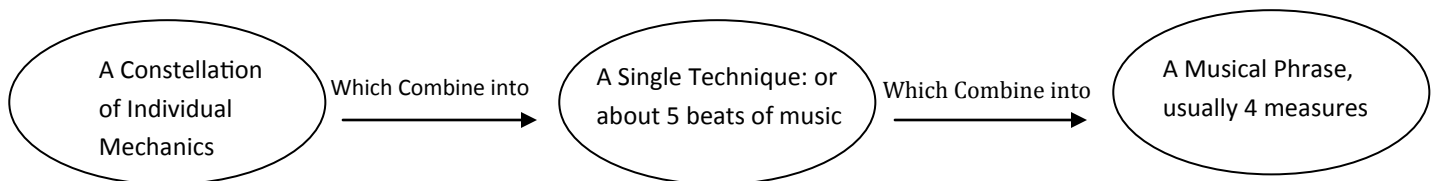
Right-Hand Fingering Conventions

First, some background. None of the following tips will work if the right-hand does not have a point of reference, in other words, if the hand is moving around the fingers will not easily find the correct strings. The best way to establish a point of reference is by consistently placing the right fore-arm in the same place on the guitar. Be sure to rest your arm just below the elbow and not on the ulnar nerve (a.k.a. the “funny bone”) or between the biceps and triceps muscles in the upper arm. As an intermediate step, the thumb can rest on the sixth string. Advanced players will have multiple/continual points of reference for the right-hand, but beginners should stick to only one. During your practice, turn your arm over and look for marks made by the left lower bout of the guitar. There should be only one.

You will see pictures of 19th century guitarists resting the pinky (4th finger) on the face of the guitar. Modern classical guitarists have discarded this practice after the discovery of the disabling properties of the Quadridge Phenomenon, and because of the transfer of dysfunctional tension (experienced as stiffness of the tip joints in both hands) found when the 4th finger is extended beyond the other fingers. In other words, the 19th century finger-picking with the pinky posted up on the guitar is just too slow for modern music .

Using consistent right-hand fingering conventions creates a reliable constellation of core mechanics (how we move each finger, each and every time), and is a critical first step for successful performance practice. The second step is combining 5-9 individual mechanics into techniques. Finally, we combine techniques into phrases.

Below is my sequential teaching model that I have used since the 1980’s.



The student will accumulate a set of right hand mechanics (a free-stroke with “a”, for example), which can be collected into techniques. (a “p-i-m-a” arpeggio, for example). The performance of both mechanics and techniques will become automatic at some point. Specifically, the conscious control of these motions will be transferred to the cerebellum, et al, becoming hard to break habits. If they are well learned, then these habit will be stage-secure. If the mechanics/techniques were poorly learned, then they will be automated poorly.

It’s been my experience that a reliable core mechanism can evolve into a general right-hand practice in two very different ways:

1) Some students will prefer the security found by memorizing every right-hand fingering for every piece. Everyone needs to do this a little, at least in segment practice. But for the dedicated user, the test becomes, “Can you play the piece with the right-hand alone, without mistakes”?

2) Other players will have an automated mechanism/technique that will allow them to trust themselves to play without conscious control of the right-hand, even in the early learning stages of the piece. Some players think that they are “winging it”, or improvising a right-hand fingering. This is not really the case, though, at least in my opinion. If the player has done their due diligence in acquiring a solid mechanism, then the general conventions formed from the combinations of those mechanics into techniques will still be valid, useful and automatic. Advanced players may not even have an awareness of what the right hand is doing for the entire piece. Every player needs to do this somewhat well, since this is what happens when we sight-read.

Personally, I coach the student to use the 2nd of these two practices, with the exception of when they are learning new right-hand patterns. Then they memorize, and the pattern becomes part of their general right-hand “cruise control”.

(continued)

Regardless of the above, there are some general techniques (combinations of mechanics, remember), that can be considered "Conventions" for right-hand fingerings. They are:

- 1) alternate fingers when you can, it is always faster.
- 2) "skip a string -skip a finger". For example, when playing "G" on the third string followed by "E" on the first string, use the index finger "i" followed by the ring finger "a".
- 3) when moving to an adjacent higher sounding string, use a finger that is one to the right [palm down] of the last finger used. The reverse is also true; when moving to an adjacent lower sounding string, use a finger that is one to the left [palm down].
- 4) if the stem of the note is down, use the thumb.

There are exceptions to the above conventions.

- 1) The first convention is suspended under the following circumstances.
 - You do not need to alternate fingers after a long sounding note. This length will be different for each player. For some, it will be very fast indeed, depending on the ability of the finger to recover.
 - You do not need to alternate fingers if you are playing a rest stroke (apoyando) and the following note is on the next lower string (called "dragging a finger").
- 2) The second convention is rarely ignored.
- 3) The third convention is regularly discarded. The resulting right hand "crossfingerings" will often need extra attention. This is one of the main benefits of scale practice, in my opinion. Some of the very best players in the world - such as Ricardo Cobo and the late Andre Segovia (and his disciples) avoid "crossfingerings" whenever possible.
- 4) The fourth convention is suspended in scale passages where the extra speed generated from alternating fingers is required. Also, in a 3 voice texture (melody, bass, and middle voice accompaniment), some editors will notate an inner-voice with the stems down, just to clarify the melody, but not necessarily to indicate the thumb. The thumb will sometimes play part of the interior voice, but not usually ALL of it.

Dr. Larry McDonald, D.M.A.

Author of The Conservatory Tutor

www.LarryMcDonaldGuitar.com

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