CHAPTER THREE

THE RIGHT HAND

◇ *Position and Movement of the Right Hand*

To speak of the function of one hand while excluding the other is not only difficult, but rather impractical, since only rarely do the right and left hands function independently. This is compounded by the fact that both hands utilize the same muscles and tendons, and as a result, have a very similar movement, so study of hand position and movement is actually more simplistic than it might appear.

However, both hands have a unique function, and most elementary guitar methods wisely begin the student by using the right hand alone, which helps isolate the right and left hand movements.

The position of the right hand is obviously somewhat dictated by our anatomical structure as humans. Nonetheless, the right hand position may vary a great deal, depending on the school of technique being taught.

While there are infinite variations of the right hand movement, there are basically two major schools of right hand technique: the *Closed Hand School* and the *Open Hand School*, and virtually every school of thought can be categorized as one or the other.

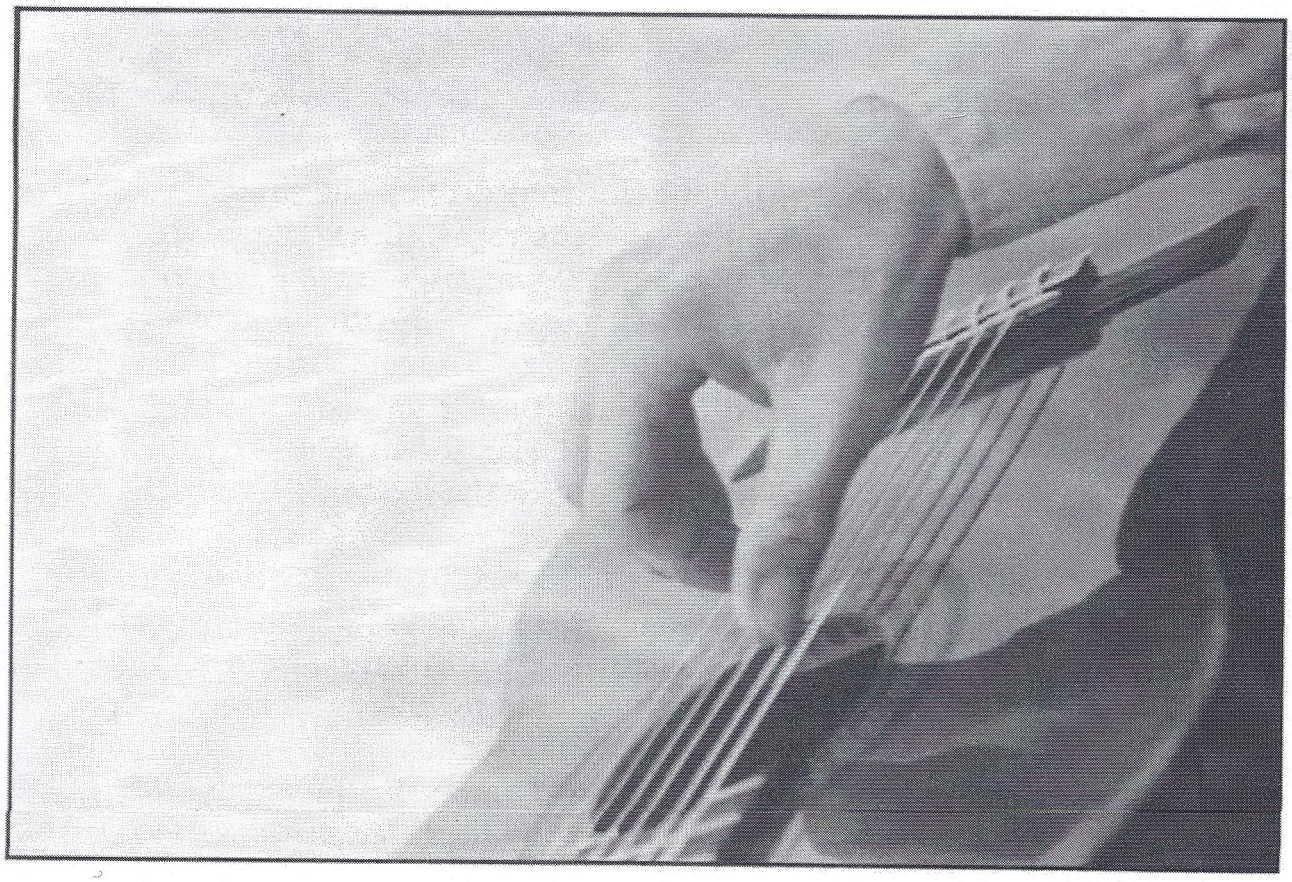
Closed Hand Technique [1]

This approach is most prominent in the "Andrés Segovia School" and his students. When the free stroke is used, the hand is shifted slightly more forward (toward the floor).

When the rest stroke is used, the hand shifts back (away from the floor) so that there is a sharper angle between the fingers and the strings. As a result, there are actually two different right hand positions.

This makes the use of rest and free strokes much more distinct: *rest*, being used normally for scale passages and louder notes, while *free* is used for virtually everything else. Not only will usage of both strokes be more distinct, but so will the sound: *free = lighter sound; rest = heavier sound.*

Fig. 1. Right Hand Position for Free Stroke.



1. Further discussion of the "Open Hand" and "Closed Hand" schools of technique will be given in Book II.

Fig. 2. Right Hand Position for Rest Stroke.

With the hand more forward (for free stroke), the fingers easily follow-through, and do not hit the lower strings. Likewise, when the hand leans back for rest stroke, the sharper angle of the fingers (in relation to the strings) makes them fall easily on the lower string.

Movement in the Closed Hand Technique varies somewhat between rest and free strokes. With free stroke, the movement initiates more from the middle joint. With rest stroke, the movement initiates at the knuckle.

This school of playing may have its origins in the flamenco style of playing, whereby the longer nails were traditionally used to achieve greater volume and a more percussive sound for the dancers to follow.

Using longer nails makes it *necessary* to angle the hand back when rest stroke is used, and angle forward when the free stroke is used (to avoid hitting the lower strings).

If this school is taught, the teacher must watch out for a common problem: if the nails are too long, the "rocking" back and forth between

the rest and free stroke will become too pronounced. This can obviously cause coordination problems between the right and left hands, as well as create an instability when the player shifts from rest to free stroke or *vice versa.*

With most students it is wise to avoid having them use nails at all, until they have established a stable hand position (this may be several years). This is especially true in teaching the Closed Hand School. Sometimes, even without nails, the rocking may occur. In these cases, avoid using the rest stroke until the hand position stabilizes.

Open Hand Technique

This school of playing usually involves using shorter nails, and as a result, little or no rocking in the hand position needs to occur between rest and free strokes. The minimal difference occurs in the rest stroke.

With the rest stroke, the fingers will slightly *straighten* so that the angle of attack toward the string is lessened, but the hand position itself will remain essentially the same. Thus, the only movement between strokes is a straightening of the fingers for rest stroke, and a slightly greater curve of the fingers for free stroke.

Explaining this to a student is quite simple; place the hand on a table, directly on the fingertips. Then have the student do "push-ups" with the fingers. These two positions are essentially the same as in playing: *i.e.* down for free stroke and up for rest stroke, but the hand position itself stays basically the same.

With Open Hand Technique there is little or no difference in sound between rest and free strokes, so the player is fully responsible for the desired attack, articulation, color, *etc.*, as opposed to the sounds that can inherently result from the two different hand positions of the Closed Hand School.

Because of all these factors (and the fact that the Open Hand approach eliminates a great deal of excess movement), the Open Hand School seems to be preferred by many professional guitarists.

The major disadvantage of the Open Hand School lies in the greater amount of time it takes to learn. This reason alone probably accounts for its unpopularity with amateur players and teachers.

With the Open Hand Technique, the movement for both rest and free strokes initiates at the knuckle.

The origin of this school seems to stem from the 19th-Century guitarists, notably Dionisio Aguado, Fernando Sor and Mauro Giuliani, as indicated in their writings. There has also been conjecture that many of the oral traditions of technique, which are still taught today in Central Europe (especially in Vienna and Budapest), may stem directly from these early 19th-Century guitarists.

Differences Between the Two Schools

The primary differences between these two schools of technique have to do with *which* muscles are used to initiate the finger movement. If we recall our previous anatomical discussion, we see that the Closed Hand School uses almost exclusively the *lumbrical* tendon/muscle for rest stroke, and the *digitorum superficialis* for free stroke. The Open Hand School uses mostly the *lumbrical* for both rest *and* free strokes, while the *flexors digitorum superficialis* are used primarily to *position* the fingers for rest or free stroke (*i.e.* more curved at the middle joint for free or more straight for rest).

Similarities Between the Two Schools

Both schools are concerned with the sound that is produced, and much of this depends on the angle of the nail as it strikes the string. Because this angle can be adjusted by the player, both schools of technique can produce a good tone color—the responsibility rests ultimately with the individual player.

Both schools tend to agree that playing from the left side of the nail produces the warmest tone. Still, this theory falls into debate when we consider some of the fine guitarists who have come from the French-based schools—in particular, those who have come out of the *Conservatoire du Paris*—(who, by the way, tend to be more Closed Hand players) which recommend playing off the *right* side of the nail.

Both schools also tend to agree that the first joint (that nearest the tip) remains relaxed, but does not collapse or "cave in" for an obvious reason: if the first joint collapses as a string is sounded, there is a momentary delay between the time that string is touched, and then sounded. This results in severe problems in right and left hand coordination.

No matter what method book is used, it is always best to start the student with the right hand alone. This way he will, from the beginning, be able to make distinct pitches, work on getting a good sound, correct finger movement, and get used to reading music with open strings, all while concentrating on the right hand alone.

Obviously, a beginning student should *not* use nails! Among other things, he will begin to feel the distance between the strings with greater facility and begin feeling the fingertips of the right hand as they contact the strings.

The only objection to this no-nail approach will be from women with long, manicured nails. This and a host of similar problems must be dealt with as the teacher sees fit. Nonetheless, in the beginning, no nails is definitely the best approach.

How quickly a student technically progresses will vary a great deal and depends on a number of factors, but the following exercises work well with all types of students, and in most cases will speed progress. Keep in mind that any exercise may be substituted for another one of a similar nature depending on specific needs, *so be flexible!*

◇ *Scratching Exercise*

The Scratching Exercise will help beginning students develop a sense of the correct right hand finger movement and independence.

On a table (or any flat surface), place the right hand fingers on the tips with the wrist straight, and *p* out to the side. This position should look basically the same as the right hand playing position.

Remember to keep the fingers gently curved at all times. The extent of this curve will vary from school to school, but this exercise is easily adapted to different schools of right hand technique.

Next, have the student "scratch" the surface—with one finger at a time—returning it to the original position after each scratch. Keep all fingers in contact with the surface at all times. *This includes the scratching finger.*

Keep the non-scratching fingers still. The little finger is the only one which will not be on the surface; it should hover next to *a* and move with it.

Fig. 1. Scratching Exercise (Set Position).

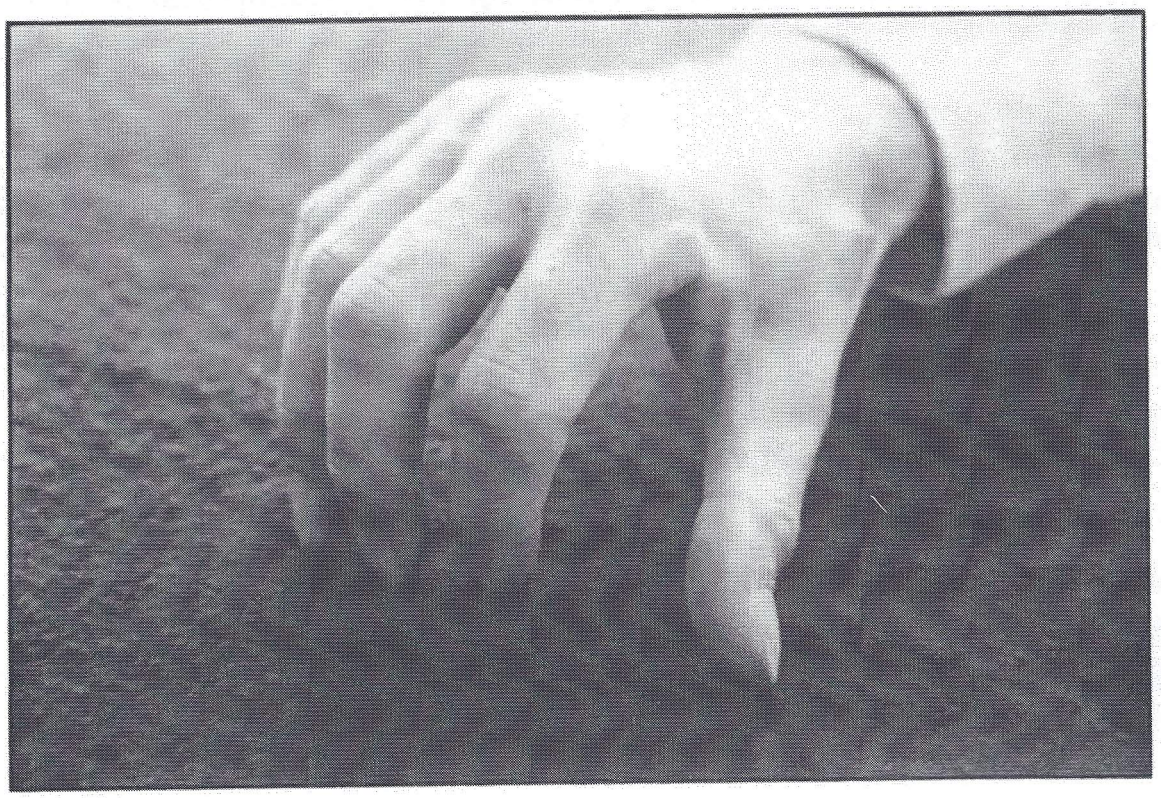
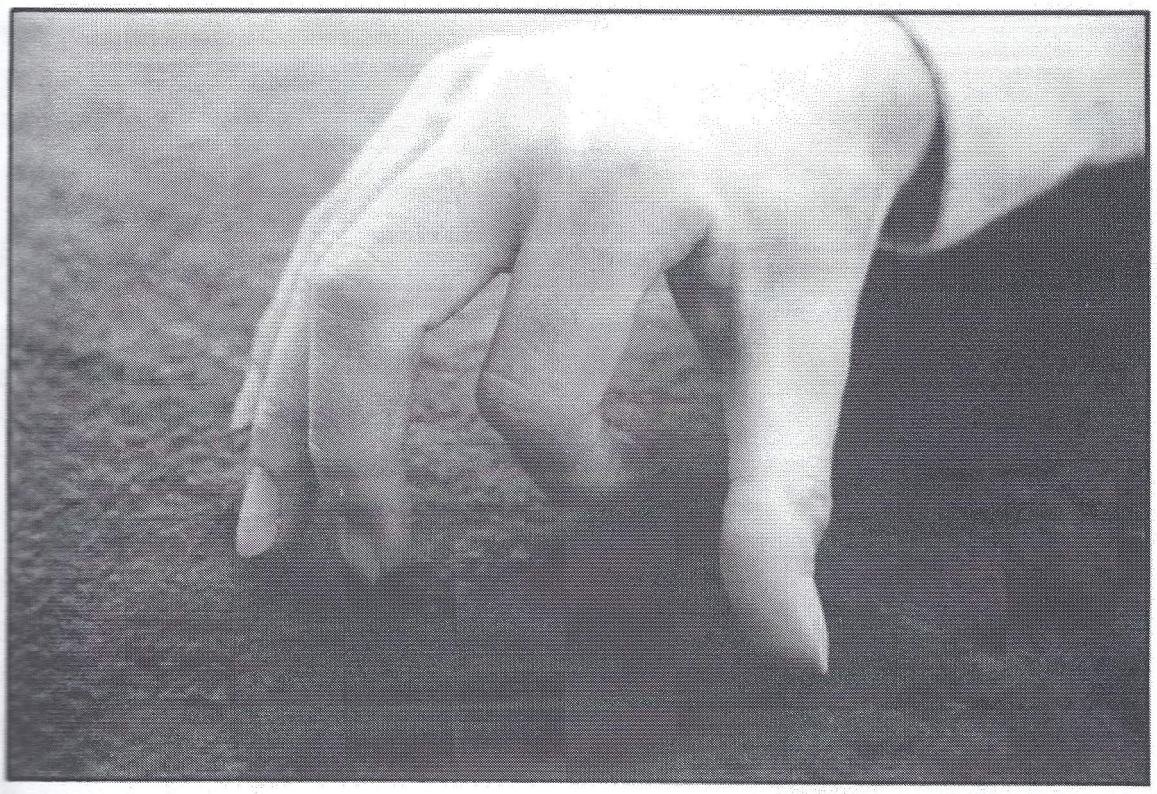


Fig. 2. Scratching Exercise (Execution).



The movement should carry the finger far enough toward the wrist that it is obvious to the student that the movement is from the knuckle, though again, the exact distance of the movement will vary depending on the school of technique. The return of the finger to its original position should be slower than the initial scratch, to create a sense of relaxing, rather than an active movement.

Needless to say, this exercise is easy enough to be learned in minutes, yet it will help develop perfect right hand finger movement from the very first lesson, for students of any age or level.

With younger students, it is easy to make a game of this. Have them close their eyes as you gently touch one of their knuckles, at which time they should scratch, using that finger. As always, if a parent is involved with younger students, you can expect faster progress. This "game" can be played at home and will, from the first lesson, accustom both the student *and* parent to setting aside a specific, and subtly-monitored practice time.

◇ *Moving Exercise*

The next step is to have the student make the same scratching movement *with the right hand on the strings.* Planting each finger on its own string (*p, i, m* & *a* on ⑤, ③, ②, and ①, respectively), slightly move each finger slowly as if it were going to sound the note, *but do not release.*

Next, slowly relax the finger and allow the tension of the string to push the finger back to its original position.

Fig. 3. Moving Exercise (Set Position).

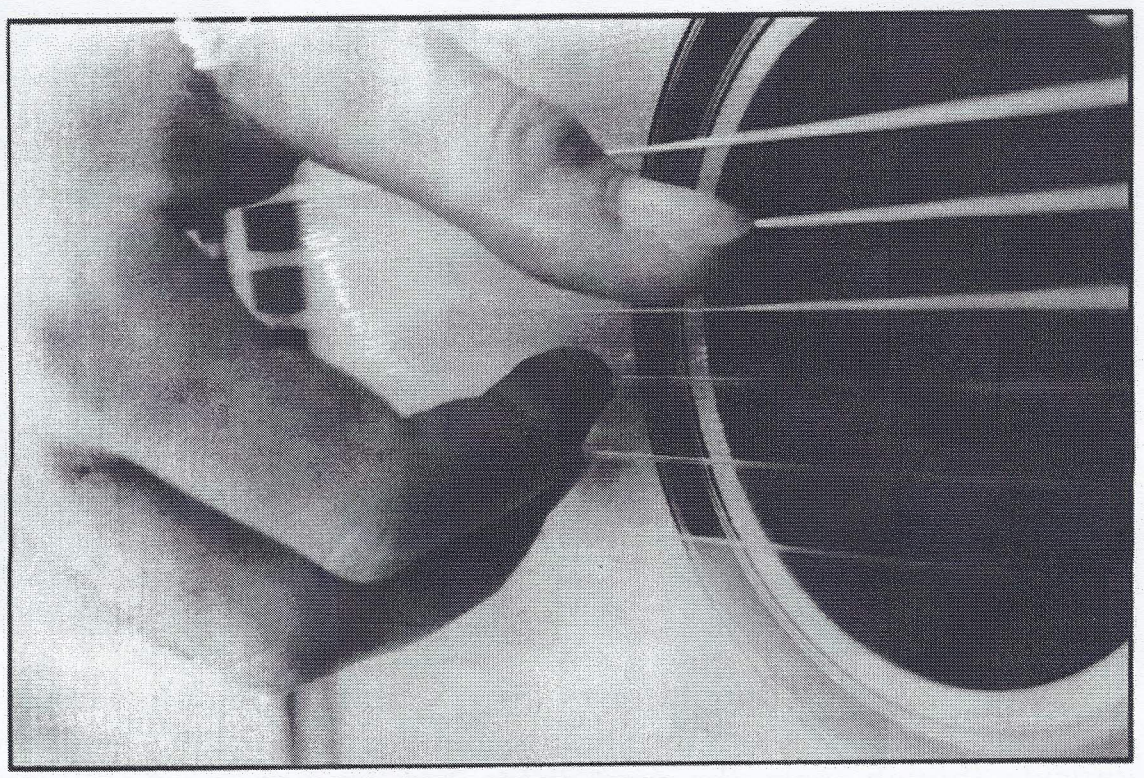
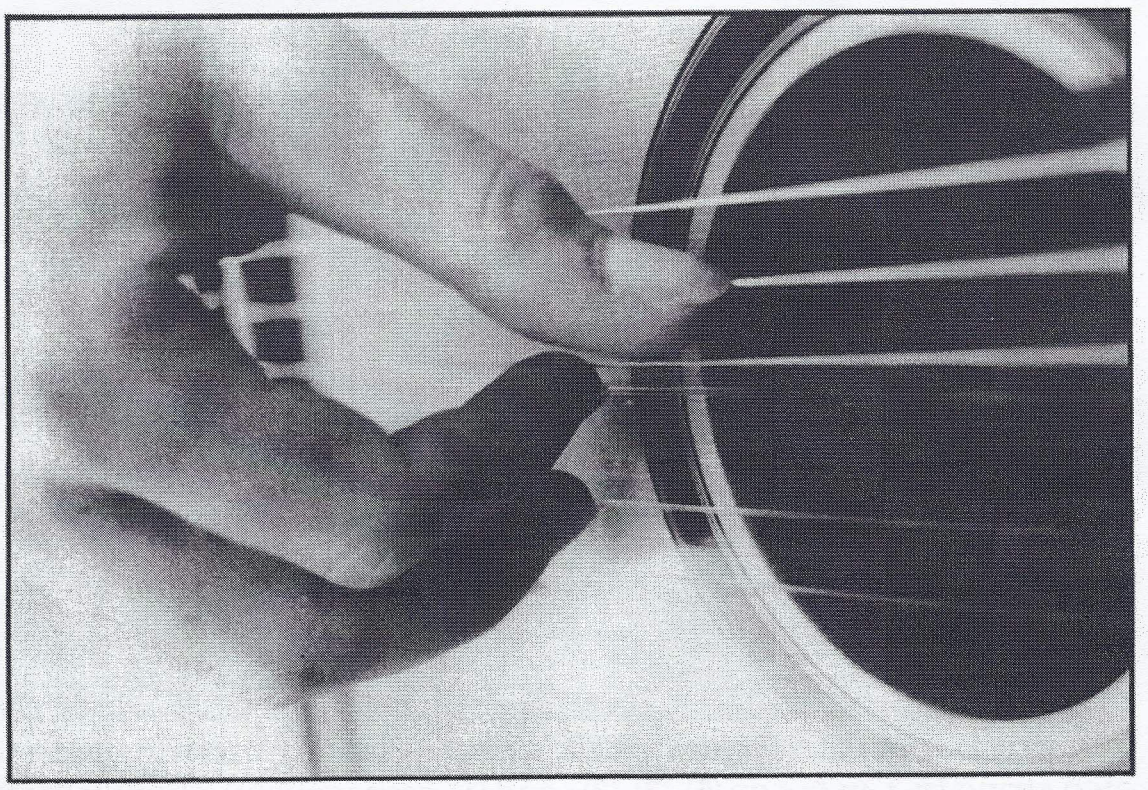


Fig. 4. Moving Exercise (Execution with *i*).



Be careful that the first joint of the active finger (the joint nearest the fingertip) stays relaxed, but does not collapse. This should be practiced one finger at a time, then in varying combinations, such as any arpeggio patterns.

When *p* is used, make sure the student feels the difference between *p* moving the string and the weight of the arm moving the string. Using the weight of the arm *can* be a legitimate way of sounding the string with *p* (for a very dark or heavy sound), but should not yet be introduced since this is too different from the way the other right hand fingers are used, and the confusion can cause the student to alter the hand position when *p* plays—which *must* be avoided!

There are several reasons for the Moving Exercise. First, the fingers will begin to feel how much pressure is needed to displace the string. Second, by leaving all the non-active fingers still (planted on their respective strings), a student can begin to feel the fingers work independently.

A danger of this exercise is, since it is isometrically based, some excess tension can be created. Also, with this gentle pulling motion, there is a tendency for the student to "dig" under the strings. However, if the Scratching Exercise is also practiced while the Moving Exercise is learned, any potential problems will be counteracted.

◇ *Releasing the String*

The next step is to teach the release of the string with the same movements practiced in the Scratching Exercise. It is a good idea to have students audibly recite the four basic movements which occur when a string is sounded.

Fig. 5. Basic Right Hand Finger Movements.

1. Touch *(plant the fingers on the strings)*

Pulse [1]
2. Move *(as in the Moving Exercise)*
3. Release *(as in the Scratching Exercise)*
4. Return

1. The concept of "pulsing" will be discussed in the chapter "The Right and Left Hands." This is a critical element in precision playing and in developing speed, but is a concept far-beyond the grasp of most beginners.

Reciting these four steps out loud makes the student aware of the correct movements in sounding the strings. It also insures that he will practice slowly, since he will only be able to play as quickly as he can speak. In many cases, this is the *only* thing that will keep a student from trying to play too quickly!

Watch that the hand position does not change when the student alternates from *i* to *a*, since a slight "rocking" in the hand position often occurs.

In order to better understand these exercises, we should take a moment to examine these four specific movements separately.

1 Touch
At this moment, the finger plants on the string.

2 Move
"Moving the string" is the best way to describe the initial action of the fingers. The only comparable word in English is "pull," but this concept often results in a student pulling the strings *away* from the instrument (digging under the strings). It's usually much better to use the words "move" or "push."

It is interesting to note that by using the words "move" or "push," we imply that the *finger* is putting forth the effort. Another effective idea is to tell a student to *"feel the weight of the string."* This subconsciously puts the activity on the *string*, rather than the *finger*—as if the *string* were moving the *finger*. Naturally this is physically impossible, but with some students who have a tendency to exert too much force when sounding a string, this subliminal concept is highly effective.

3 Release
The best way to describe this, is to tell the student to think of his fingertip as a ball swinging on the end of a long string, and to imitate the feeling of that "swooping" motion. The direction of the release will vary depending on the specific school of technique being taught (*i.e.* moving the fingers near the palm for the closed hand school, or keeping the movement nearer the strings for the open hand school). Regardless, the Scratching and Moving Exercises will put the student on the right track no matter which school is preferred.

The amount of follow-through will vary with the school of technique (Closed Hand or Open Hand), but in either case, more follow-through than normal is usually best at this stage. This will guarantee that the movement is initiated from the knuckle, since it is *impossible* to have a wide follow-through and not move from the knuckle.

4 Return

There are essentially two ways to get the finger to return. Some schools teach that the finger should be actively pushed, or "kicked" back into position. Other schools teach that the finger immediately relaxes and simply "falls" back into position.

The latter method is by-far the best for beginners because half the energy is used—the finger simply relaxes and falls back into position. This avoids a "push/pull" effect which (for beginners) can nearly double the necessary tension.

Naturally later, especially for fast passages and scales, the fingers are sometimes gently and quickly "kicked" back into position, but for a beginner it is more important that he be able to discern the amount of power it takes to set the fingers in motion as opposed to when the fingers are "neutral," or relaxed.

Playing with *p* is exactly the same as the fingers, though in the *opposite* direction (toward the floor). In spite of this contradiction, *p* will nearly always imitate the feeling of the other fingers, and is almost never a problem.

◇ *Additional Exercises*

Once a student understands these basic movements, the following exercises may be introduced.

Using each finger on its respective string (*p*- ⑤, *i*- ③, *m*- ②, *a*-①), write out several right hand arpeggios such as those below:

p i m a, p i m a *sim.*
or: p a m i, p a m i
or: p m i a, p m i a
or: p a i m, p a i m

In the beginning, have the student practice an arpeggio by only moving the string (as in the Moving Exercise), but *not* releasing. Then later teach the release of the string using the *Individual Full Plant* then, the *Full Plant*, the *Sequential Plant* and finally *Free* (allowing some months or more between each planting technique). These various arpeggio techniques will be explained further in the section, "Arpeggios."

This is often a good time to introduce the *120 Right Hand Studies, Op. 1, A* by Mauro Giuliani. Even without using the left hand, the various right hand patterns may be easily learned. Since these studies will be with a student for his entire playing career, it is usually best to introduce them as early as possible.

◇ *Alternation*

The subject of alternating, like most other facets of playing, usually involves several steps before the student achieves the final stage. The method book chosen by the teacher will dictate when alternation is introduced. Still, if the student can be given at least several weeks (to first develop arpeggio patterns and correct right hand finger movement), alternation is much easier to learn.

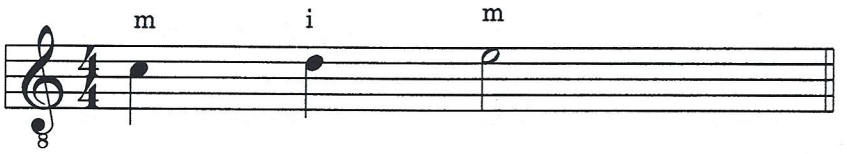
In the first stage, it is usually best to have the student alternate *i* and *m*, making sure that the finger that has just played returns to hover over the string *before the next finger plays.* This insures that the fingers are moving independently.

It is naturally easier at the beginning if the alternation is confined to only one string and fortunately this is usually the case with most beginning methods. When right hand string crossings are finally introduced, the teacher *must* make sure that the alternation matches the string crossings. As we will see in the next section, "Right Hand Fingering," this is a critical factor for beginners.

The next stage in teaching alternation (sometimes a year or so later) is, rather than waiting for the finger to return before the next one plays, the student alternates the fingers so that they actually exchange position. A good explanation of this is to imagine pedaling a bicycle, or perhaps walking or ice skating.

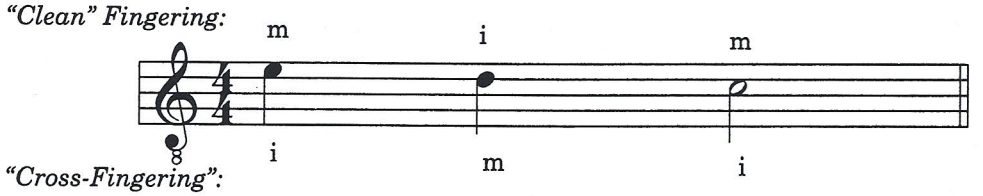
For a moment we need to look at how right hand string crossings are best fingered for beginners. First, assume that all the right hand fingers are planted on their own strings. Every time you change from one string to another, *make sure that a finger that is already in that direction plays the next note on the next string.*

Fig. 6. Example of "Clean" Right Hand Fingering (Ascending). [2]



In the example above, if *i* plays the D, then *m* is the closest finger in the direction of the next note, open E—if we assume all the fingers are in the order of their planted position. Remember, in writing "clean" fingerings, *always think of this in relation to where the fingers would be if they were planted on their "home strings."* Descending lines are fingered the same way.

Fig. 7. Right Hand Fingering (Descending). [3]



In Figure 7, all the fingerings above the staff work fine, however, the fingering below the staff of Figure 7, shows an example of cross-fingering. If *i* has just played the E, then the only finger remaining on the lower side of *i* is *p* (which is hardly appropriate for beginners), thus, *m* must reach *behind i* to play the following D on ②. This is an example of a "cross-fingering."

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2. Anthony Glise, *The Child's Guitar, Vol. I,* (St. Joseph/Vienna: Aevia Publications, 1994).

3. Glise, Ibid.

As we know from playing, cross-fingerings are not necessarily bad, and after minimal practice they are no problem at all. However, cross-fingerings should be avoided for beginners! It is not that a beginner cannot easily learn to play cross-fingerings, but by using "clean fingerings" for the right hand, the student will more easily develop a sense of feeling with the right hand fingers when moving from one string to another in alternation.

Clean fingerings will also help to establish a more solid right hand position. After this, the slight complication of a cross-fingering will be even less of a problem because of the improved agility in feeling distances between the strings. Beginning exercises in most method books are usually easily re-fingered to avoid cross-fingerings, and it is *well* worth the trouble!

◇ *Conclusion*

As teachers and performers who already have considerable facility on the guitar, we often forget how complicated some things can appear to a beginner. Remember that many of the topics we automatically understand may take students weeks or months—or more—to grasp.

Be patient, keep it simple and push the student—*but gently!* For most students, it's far more traumatic to begin taking lessons than to quit, so if they've made it far enough to come to their first lesson, they're obviously serious about learning—it's up to you to keep lessons interesting enough that they will want to keep coming back each week.