



CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEFT HAND

◇ *Position of the Left Hand*

While the position of the left hand will dictate the position of the fingers, left hand position and movement is *far* more consistent than the right hand, though there are two basic schools of thought, the *Turned Hand Position* and the *Flat Hand Position*.

Turned Hand Position

In this position, the left hand is fairly stationary, with the exception of one South American School.¹ Virtually every other school of left hand technique uses the Turned Hand Position, whereby the left hand knuckles stay more-or-less parallel to the edge of the guitar neck. This Turned Hand School seems to originate from post 19th-Century technique. The fingers reach across the neck *at the same angle as the frets*.

1. This school of left hand technique is found almost exclusively in the teaching of Abel Carlevaro. In this school, beginners are taught different left hand positions or "angles" in relation to the neck of the instrument—*i.e.* the hand is turned toward or away from the neck, depending on the passage being played. While admittedly, there are variations in the left hand position, *for beginners*, this approach can be an overcompensation to a *relatively minor problem*; at worst, this can throw a student's left hand totally out of position and can cause unnecessary errors.

Flat Hand Position

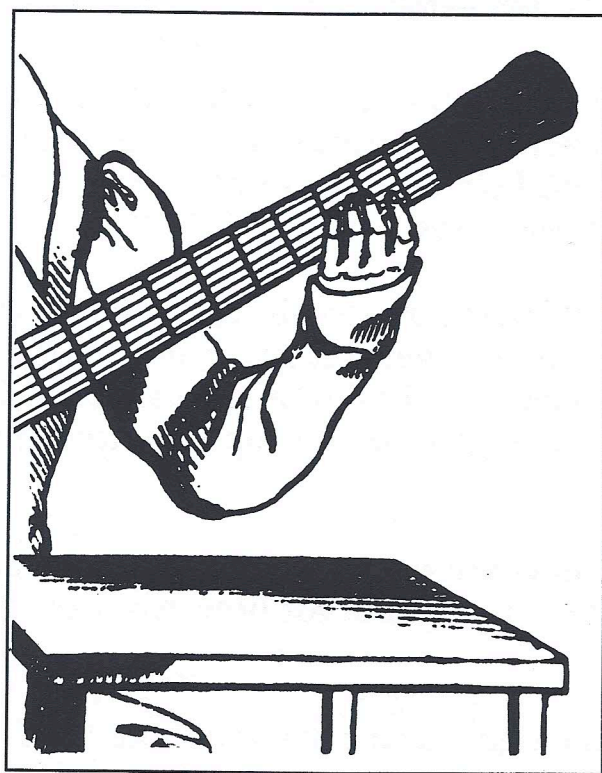
The other school—using a Flat Hand Position—is a slight variant of the more common position described above and seems to have its origins in the 19th-Century.

In spite of the rarity of this position today, it is an *invaluable* approach for beginners for a number of reasons that we will discuss later (cf. Chapter 6, “Left Hand Fingering” *The Fourth-Finger Approach*).

In the Flat Hand School, the side of the hand nearer the little finger is moved slightly closer to the neck. In other words, the left hand is kept *completely flat*, and raised directly up to the neck of the guitar.

While iconographic evidence can be misleading, it offers some support for this position. In pictures of the left hands of Sor and Aguado, we find that they both kept the part of the hand nearest the fourth finger closer to the neck.

Fig. 1. Sor’s Left Hand Position.²



2. Sor; *op. cit.*, 10.



CHAPTER SIX

THE LEFT HAND

Although the function of the left hand was discussed in Book I, there is very little that the teacher can do to prepare the left hand before it is actually put to use, since the left hand rarely functions alone in the beginning stages.

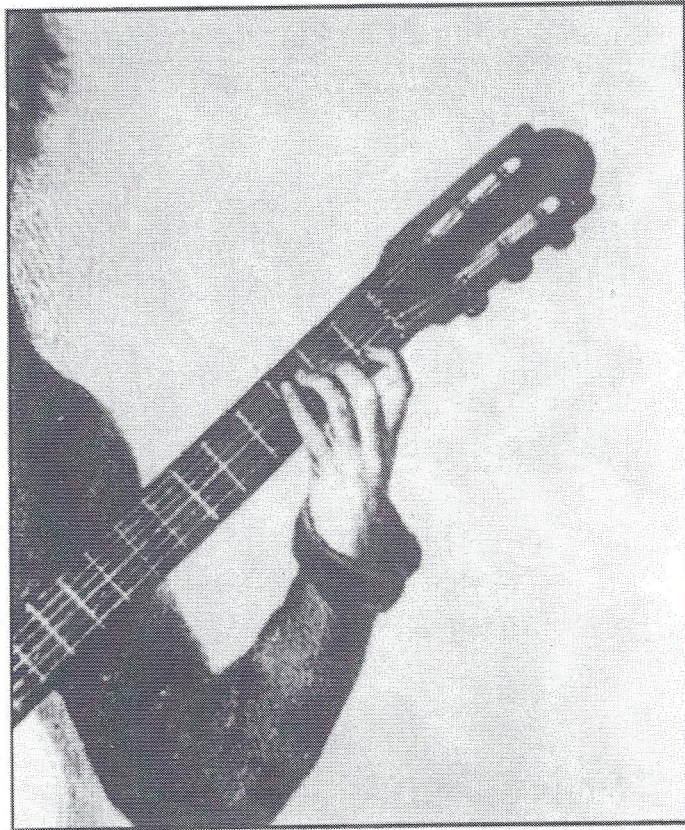
Nearly the only thing a teacher can do is assign the Scratching Exercise using the left hand, stress the similarity between right and left hand finger movement, and wait until notes in the left hand are introduced in the method.

◇ *Left Hand Fingering—“The Fourth-Finger Approach”*

In the chapter “Left Hand Position and Movement” (Book I), we found that both Sor and Aguado used a left hand position whereby, the part of the hand nearest the little finger, is held slightly closer to the neck. In this chapter we will see how a specific manner of fingering pieces for beginners promotes this or any variant left hand position.

These fingerings (which have been commonly disregarded in modern guitar methods) distinctly help establish a beginner’s left hand position. As a result, we must often change the fingerings in the method books that we use to achieve the best results for each student.

Fig. 2. Aguado's Left Hand Position.³



In using this position, students will find that the fourth finger is able to reach as far across the neck as the first, thus allowing for greater agility. This will also help keep the fourth finger on the tip which is a constant battle for beginners.

Using the Flat Hand Position, the player has four relatively equal fingers, rather than four fingers graded in usefulness by their size. To continually acknowledge that a shorter finger must be inferior by virtue of its size, will encourage it to develop into none other than a truly inferior member.

In Book II we will discuss several ways to develop this position early in a student's training, but for now, we need to remember two basic factors:

1. As with the right hand, the wrist should be fairly straight and flat to avoid collapsing the sheath around the tendon.
2. The left hand knuckles should be *at least* parallel to the edge of the neck (for the Turned Hand School) *or*, the fourth finger side of the hand should be slightly closer to the neck (for the Flat Hand School).

3. Aguado; *op. cit.*, 4.

◇ *Movement of the Left Hand Fingers*

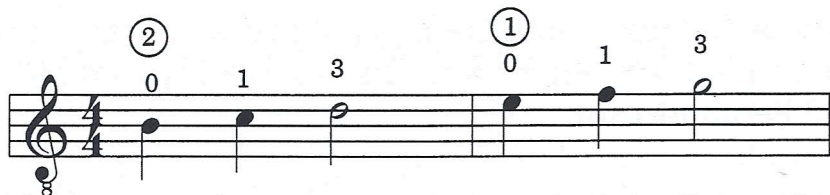
There is little debate that the left hand movement utilizes the *lumbrical* muscles/tendons, thus moving the entire curved finger from the knuckle. There are several advantages to this consistency between the hands if this approach is also used for the right hand (as in the Open Hand School). Most obviously, the student needs to learn only one type of movement for both hands.

Additionally, as advanced players are aware, the most difficult movements with the left hand are not those of stretching the fingers *lengthwise* (up and down the neck), but of finger *independence* (moving *across* the neck).

When the lumbrical muscles/tendons are used to actually depress the string to the fingerboard (thus moving from the knuckle), the remaining side-set of tendons will be freed to help keep the fingers acting independently, both *across* the fingerboard, and *up and down* the neck. Again, this movement will be discussed further in Book II.

To begin with, we should look at the left hand fingerings used in modern guitar methods. To my knowledge, every 20th-Century method for guitar gives the following fingering on ① and ②.

Fig. 1. Left Hand Fingering in 20th-Century Methods.



This fingering is somewhat logical since each finger plays on consecutive frets, but one problem consistently arises with beginners: as any adept teacher will agree, the lower part of the hand (that nearest the little finger), has a tendency to “drift” away from the neck of the instrument. If this is not corrected, the hand often ends up so far from the neck that it is impossible for the student to keep the third finger properly curved when playing.

In defense of the student, this is natural because the length of the third finger will tend to push the hand *away* from the neck of the guitar. Needless to say, this is an extremely serious yet common problem for beginners.

The other problem that occurs with modern fingering is that, by the time the fourth finger comes into use, the left hand position is already very established. While the left hand may be close enough to the neck for the *third* finger to be properly curved, this rarely guarantees that it will be close enough for the *fourth* finger to be properly curved.

Theoretically, since the fourth finger is shorter, *that side of the hand should be closer to the neck* so that all the fingers (*especially* the fourth) can remain curved.

If the third finger is used on the third fret (on ① and ②), a beginner will seldom achieve the proper position and as he progresses, must relearn the left hand position to properly use the fourth finger. However, if the fourth finger is used on the third fret (on ① and ②), a beginner will naturally pull that side of the hand *toward* the neck of the guitar, resulting in a nearly perfect left hand position from the very beginning.

The only argument against using the fourth finger comes from teachers who feel that using the third finger helps “stretch out” the hand. However, as any established player will attest, reaches up and down the neck are easily developed; reaches *across* the neck—*i.e.* left hand finger independence—are the most difficult. Thus, trying to “stretch” a student’s left hand (especially at this stage) is absurd.

The basis for this “Fourth-Finger Approach” (as I mentioned earlier) is found in the methods and studies of, most notably, Dionisio Aguado and Fernando Sor.

As the brilliant guitar historian, Dr. Brian Jeffery, has often pointed out, much of our guitar technique thought to be inventions of the 20th-Century, goes back at least as far as Aguado and Sor, and it appears that this type of fingering (for the sake of a beginner’s left hand position) originated at this time.

In his *New Guitar Method*, Lessons 3 and 4, Aguado gives the following fingering for chromatic and diatonic scales.

Fig. 2. Aguado. Lesson 3.¹

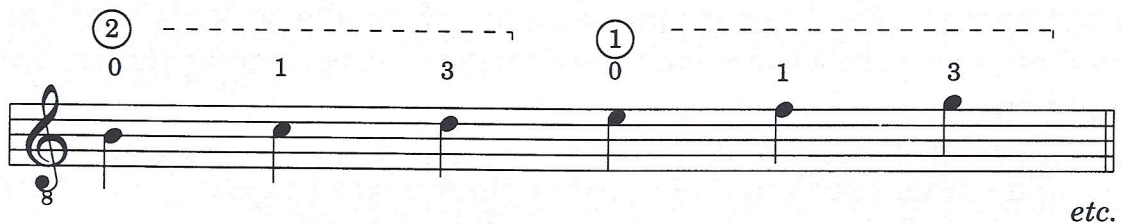
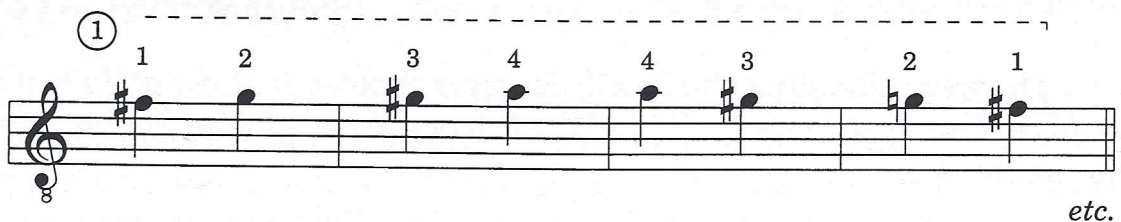


Fig. 3. Aguado. Lesson 4.²



1. Dionisio Aguado, *New Guitar Method* (Madrid, 1843), trans. Louise Bigwood, ed. Brian Jeffery (London: Tecla Editions, 1981), 17. Used by permission.

2. Aguado; *op. cit.*, 18. Used by permission.

At first, the fingerings here seem to refute the Fourth-Finger Approach, until we notice that Aguado says these lessons are used for the student "...to discover where the sounds are on the guitar..." and to "accustom them to plucking and stopping the strings without looking."³ No mention is made of anything other than the student becoming familiar with the notes. In Lesson 5, we have the first actual study in Aguado's *Method*.

Fig. 4. Aguado. Lesson 5.⁴ (note bracketed areas)



(N.B. fingering: Aguado, brackets: mine)

Here we find that Aguado consistently (with the exception of measures 11 and 12) uses the fourth finger on the third fret (on ① and ②).⁵ Unfortunately he gives little to no reason for this fingering other than the brief explanation in Lesson 5:

*"It seems natural to use the third finger for G and D in bars 1 and 7 [cf. Fig. 4] but it is more comfortable and more useful to use the fourth finger."*⁶

Anyone even vaguely familiar with Aguado's precision as a pedagogue would question him doing anything merely for "comfort," and as far as this fingering being "more useful," the most obvious reason is that it helps to properly develop a beginner's left hand position.

3. Aguado; *op. cit.*, 19. Used by permission.

4. Aguado; *loc. cit.* Used by permission.

5. In these instances, the use of the third finger is necessitated by the following note(s), which are also on the third fret, but on a different string. Thus, the third finger is used to avoid the fourth finger jumping from D to G (or *vice versa*) on adjacent strings.

6. Aguado; *loc. cit.* Used by permission.

In the studies of Fernando Sor (Op. 31 and especially Op. 60), we find the same type of left hand fingering for beginners. One of the best examples is given below.

Fig. 5. Sor. Op. 60, no. 1.⁷

The image shows two staves of musical notation for Sor's Op. 60, no. 1. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a common time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4. Brackets labeled '4' are placed above certain notes, indicating a specific fingering approach. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values and fingerings, also featuring brackets labeled '4'. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

(N.B. fingering: Sor,
brackets: mine)

This Fourth-Finger Approach is used consistently by Sor, though (as with Aguado), he gives no explanation for this fingering other than to say (in the preface to Op. 60) that he feels these simple studies contain “...essential principles of technique that form the basis necessary to play the most difficult guitar music.”⁸

Since the single-most consistent element in these studies is the blatant use of the fourth finger on D and G, it is probable that Sor is, at least in part, referring to this Fourth-Finger Approach and its constructive effect on a beginner’s left hand position.

It is also important to note the size of the guitars used in the 19th-Century. The majority of surviving instruments have a string length of *ca.* 62-63 centimeters. Modern instruments average between 64 (such as those built by Gioachino Giussani and Hermann Hauser) and 66.3 *cm.* (such as those by Miguel Rodriguez and José Ramírez).

7. Fernando Sor, *The Complete Works of Fernando Sor*, published in facsimile, ed. Brian Jeffery (London: Tecla Editions, 1982). Volumes reprinted at various dates thereafter. Used by permission.

8. Sor; *op. cit.* Used by permission.

This observation further establishes the need to use the Fourth-Finger Approach with beginners. Since reaches on 19th-Century guitars would have been *much* easier (due to the smaller scale length), it is evident that using the Fourth-Finger Approach in this period was not out of necessity, but a conscious choice. If this fingering was preferred, in spite of their smaller guitars, how much more should we be concerned, given the size of our larger instruments today?!

It appears that the Fourth-Finger Approach and its positive influence on a beginner's left hand position was well understood and practiced in the 19th-Century. Adopting this approach to our 20th-Century teaching not only helps refine our pedagogical practices, but more importantly, will help students easily acquire a correct and stable left hand position.