

## LEFT-HAND MOVEMENT: A BAG OF TRICKS

by Frank Koonce

To become an extraordinary player, you do not need extraordinary hands. In other words, while natural strength, agility, and speed may be advantageous physical attributes, knowing how to convert difficult movements into manageable ones is what distinguishes a great technician from the average player. Pepe Romero, referring to his own remarkable technique, once said to me: “Most people have the ability to move their fingers quickly. However, my fingers are like the pistons of a finely-tuned engine; they know when to fire and when to rest.”

Much discussion has occurred in recent years about concepts pertaining to coordination and movement of the right hand, such as “planting” techniques and synchronizing the preparation and execution impulses of different fingers. Meanwhile, it seems to me that concepts pertaining to the left hand—no less important—have largely been ignored, or at least they haven’t been fully incorporated into conventional methods of pedagogy. Perhaps the foundation is now being laid, however, through increased awareness of an extremely important concept called “aim-directed movement.”

### Aim-Directed Movement

Aaron Shearer describes aim-directed movement (ADM) as “a positive way to avoid confusion and error. Applied to the left hand, the essence of ADM is this: *knowing where and how to move before moving - seeing in your mind’s eye the movements you’ll make on the fingerboard before you actually make them...* By applying ADM, you avoid the faulty habits acquired through rote repetition.”<sup>1</sup>

The philosophy of ADM stresses the importance of forming positive habits through accuracy and careful practicing from the outset, as well as the avoidance of mindless and inaccurate repetition. You must first visualize the movements which are required, and try to understand them as fully as possible. Then, when actually playing, you must not allow your fingers to impulsively race ahead of your mind’s ability to control the movement. If you try to play too fast too soon, you will spend much of your time later having to undo the mistakes and poor habits you inevitably learned while practicing. Manuel Barrueco has said, “If you practice mistakes, you will perform mistakes.” How true this is!<sup>2</sup>

According to Neil Anderson, ADM is “an approach to guitar that stresses practicing movements to and from notes instead of merely learning the notes themselves. Essentially a memorization of motion, ADM can minimize your dependence upon consciously recalling notes, thus enabling you to think more about the interpretive elements of a performance.”<sup>3</sup>

When moving between notes it is essential to consider the sound quality you desire, and then determine the fingerings and technical solutions that best achieve your objectives. Guitarists

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Shearer, *Left Hand Training, Soundboard XVIII*, No. 1 (Spring 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Neil A. Anderson, *Aim Directed Movement, Guitar Player* (March 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

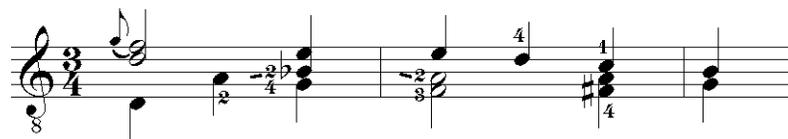
often are too easily satisfied with the sounds they first produce and are unable or unwilling to imagine a higher standard of excellence. It is easy to become oblivious to jerky hand movements, abruptly detached notes, extraneous string noises, unfulfilling harmonic resolutions, and similar deficiencies. If you wish to become more than just a passive listener of your own playing, you must first develop a discriminating ear. Refinement in your abilities to distinguish subtle nuances of timbre, articulation, rhythm, texture, etc., will give you the insights necessary to achieve higher standards.

Within any given piece of music there are many fingering possibilities, and seldom do any two players completely agree on all the best ones to use. This is because the interpretation and performance of music is largely subjective, formulated in part by individual aesthetic preferences and bound by individual physical capabilities. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify specific types of fingerings and movements that help achieve specific musical results. Good players are aware of their options and they choose the types which best accommodate their abilities and desired interpretations.

The following is a collection of techniques, my “bag of tricks,” which may be used for solving problems relating to movement and sound production, and which, when used conscientiously, may result in your achieving a greater sense of control and musicianship.

### **Pivot and Guide Fingers**

The concept of using “pivot” fingers and “guide” fingers is today relatively common in guitar playing. A pivot finger remains on the same string and fret during a change of the hand configuration. A guide finger stays on the same string but slides up or down to a different fret during a position change. The fingerings shown in Example 1 are those most commonly used for playing this passage by Fernando Sor. The second finger functions as a guide by sliding from A to B<sup>b</sup> and then back to A. It then becomes a pivot by remaining on A during the chord change in measure two:



Example 1  
*Study #1 (Op. 6, #8), Fernando Sor, mm. 16–18*

The use of pivot and guide fingers in Example 1 is readily apparent to anyone having a minimal amount of formal guitar study. However, in more complex passages, even experienced players may sometimes fail to see occasions in which pivot and guide fingers can be used beneficially. In Example 2a, for instance, the first impulse of most guitarists would probably be to play measures two and four with a partial barré (and this also is the fingering found in most printed editions of this study).

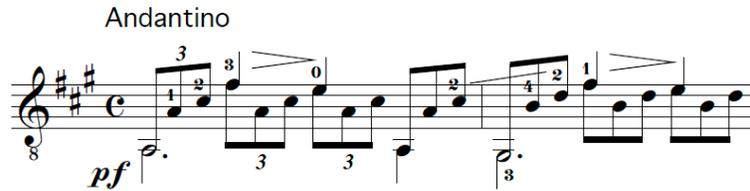
Example 2a  
*Study #19, (Op. 60), Matteo Carcassi, mm. 27–32*

Although that fingering can be satisfactory, it is difficult to avoid having abrupt note detachments or pauses when switching to and from the barré. Example 2b shows how a pivot finger can be used instead to eliminate this problem. Since the first and second fingers must assume an “inverted” position, this solution is a less familiar technique and is therefore less apparent to many players:

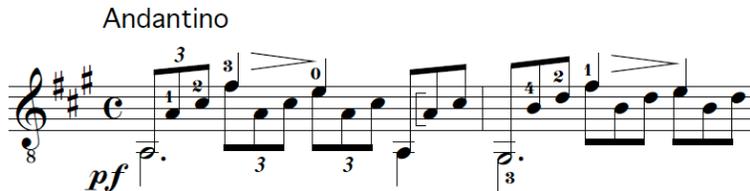
Example 2b

### Weight Transference

There are many examples in printed guitar music where guide fingers are indicated even though they may not always be the best options. In Carcassi’s third study, for instance, many editions call for the second finger to slide from the last C# in measure 1 to the D in measure 2 [Example 3a]. This fingering usually results in either the C being stopped abruptly as the finger crosses the fret, or the D being sounded by the fret ahead of when it should be plucked. I think a better option would be to switch to a two-string barré on beat four after the bass A [Example 3b]:



Example 3a  
*Study #1, (Op. 60), Matteo Carcassi, mm. 1–12*



Example 3b

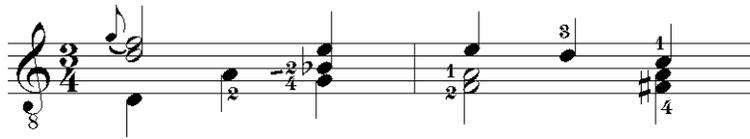
The preceding illustrates a principle of movement that I consider very important, but which surprisingly is not yet identified by a familiar and universally accepted term of reference. I refer to it as “Weight Transference” and describe it as “walking” with the fingers because, like walking, you step from one finger to another. In this example, you transfer the weight, or walk, on the fingerboard from the first to the third finger. This smooth exchange feels good to the hand and it eliminates problems associated with jumping or sliding. When you walk with the fingers, you maintain a point of contact with the fingerboard at the moment of the exchange and therefore you are better able to judge distance. When you jump from one finger to the next, you easily lose this perspective and have a greater possibility of missing the string or the fret.

In forming a chord, it is also important to realize that fingers often can be placed in sequence—as needed—instead of all at once. The ways in which you are able to do this are determined in part by the hand configuration, the tempo, and the rhythm of the piece. To play Example 4, for instance, walk from finger 1 to finger 4 (C to D# on the second string). This is made easier if you lift 3 off of the F# at the end of beat 3, at the same time as you are placing 4 on the D#. Then place fingers 1 and 3 on the third and fourth strings.



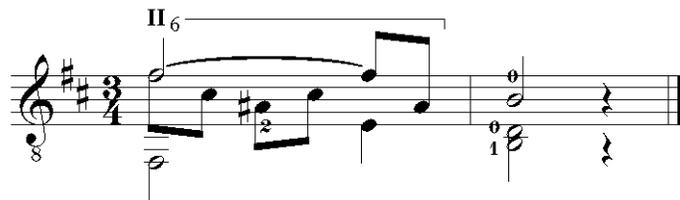
Example 4  
*Study #19 (Op. 60), Matteo Carcassi, mm. 5–6*

The fingering in Example 5 is an alternative to the use of pivot and guide fingers as shown in Example 1. Although both solutions are logical and provide technical security, the new fingering—by walking on finger 4 in measure 16 and on finger 3 in measure 17—eliminates a position shift and a jump with finger 4.



Example 5  
*Study #1 (Op. 6, #8), Fernando Sor, mm. 16–18*

In Example 6, it is important to produce a *legato* resolution of the A# since this is the leading tone and the final cadence of the piece. To do so, continue to hold 2 after you lift the barré, and then gently walk to 1. Be sure not to lift 2 until the instant you play the B-minor chord. By emphasizing this smooth transfer of weight from the barré to 2, and then from 2 to 1, the player can direct the listener’s attention away from the unavoidable detachment of the E on the fourth string:



Example 6  
*Study #5 (Op. 35, #22), Fernando Sor, mm. 47-48*

### Inverted Fingerings

Many of us began playing guitar in folk or popular styles and thus became familiar with common chord forms and their standard fingerings. As classical guitarists, we are still prone to fall back on those familiar left-hand configurations without giving due consideration to alternative choices. For instance, chords that call for two fingers in a single fret are usually played with the finger closest to the thumb on the lower string. An A7 chord, therefore, would usually be played with the fingerings shown in Examples 7a or 7b. The fingerings in 7c or 7d, which might be thought of as “inverted,” are less common and may feel uncomfortable at first.



Example 7

The most appropriate fingering for a chord such as the one above, however, can only be determined by examining it within its musical context. In other words, you must consider where the individual fingers are coming from and where they are going to in the music. In Example 8, the A7 chord in an inverted form would require less movement because of the preceding

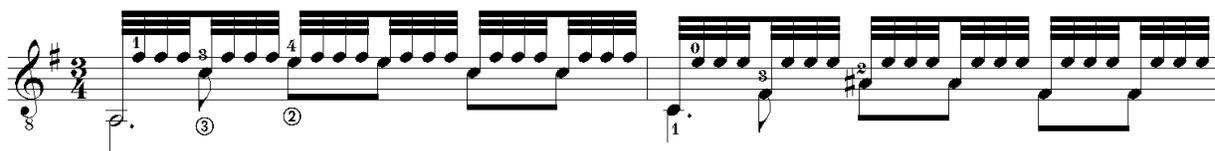
alignment of the first and fourth fingers. It would also be easier to play with a *legato* articulation because the first finger can be used as a guide on the second string:



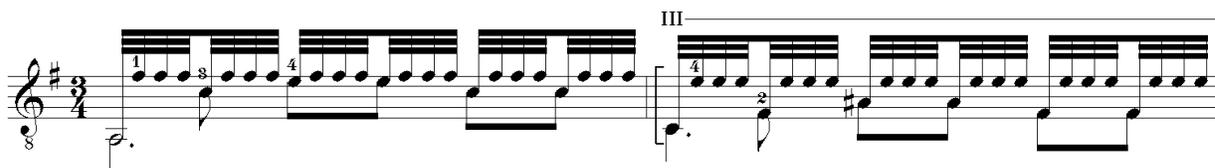
Example 8  
*Prelude #5*, Heitor Villa-Lobos, m. 22

(You may remember that Example 2b also had shown how an inverted fingering could be used to accommodate pivot and guide fingers for a *legato* effect and a technically secure performance.)

Examples 9a and 9b show fingerings given in two different editions of a well-known tremolo piece by Barrios. Both solutions require a large jump of the first finger between the two measures in the span of a thirty-second note. However, unless you play very slowly or use *tempo rubato*, it is impossible to play either solution without having an abrupt-sounding detachment or an unclear resolution of the harmony. The inverted fingering shown in Example 9c enables the player to walk from one finger to another and results in a relaxed and secure execution of the passage. (Another good alternative is simply to play the third-string F# with 4 and A# with 3):



Example 9a  
*Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios*, Agustín Barrios Mangoré



Example 9b

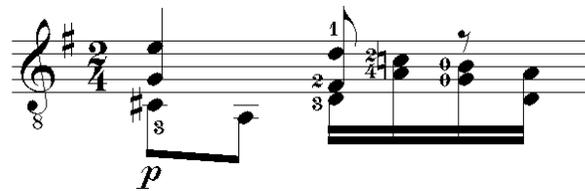


Example 9c

## Extensions

Classical guitar training for many of us has included careful study of the *Diatonic Major and Minor Scales* as fingered by Segovia.<sup>4</sup> Segovia's patterns are based upon the left hand assuming a block position encompassing four frets. To obtain notes beyond those within the block, the hand shifts along a string to a higher or lower position while maintaining its four-fret span. This is good basic training to establish disciplined and efficient habits of movement. Nevertheless, there are instances in which a different type of movement would be more appropriate—that of extending the block position to encompass more than four frets. This, too, should now be a part of basic training.

In Example 10, extension is necessary to sustain the treble D on the second beat for its full value. Giuliani's original manuscript provides no fingerings; however, note durations and stem directions in this excerpt clearly show his intention that the melody note, D, and the harmony note, C, should be played on different strings:



Example 10  
*Sonata in C Major, Op. 15, Mauro Giuliani*

Extensions are sometimes used to eliminate unnecessary shifts. Undesirable shifts are those that serve no musical purpose and that, among other things, can interrupt rhythmic continuity, detach notes that should be sustained, produce undesirable accents or string noises, or simply increase the likelihood of mistakes. In the second measure of Example 11a, fingers are twice required to jump strings on consecutive notes. As shown in Example 11b, the first jump can be avoided simply by using fingers 3 and 4 on the first half of beat one. The second jump, on the second half of beat two, can be avoided by using an extension instead of a shift. Be sure to walk with the fingers to allow each voice to sustain until the time of its resolution. This would not be possible with the fingering shown in Example 11a. Although the fingering in 11b may at first seem more difficult, once you are used to making the extension you should find that it is smoother, more reliable and, in fact, easier than the shift:

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<sup>4</sup> Andres Segovia, *Diatonic Major and Minor Scales* (Washington DC: Columbia Music Co., 1953).

Example 11a  
*Study #13, Matteo Carcassi, mm. 19–21*

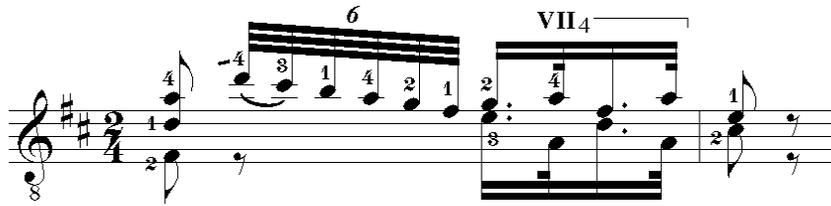
Example 11b

## Shifts

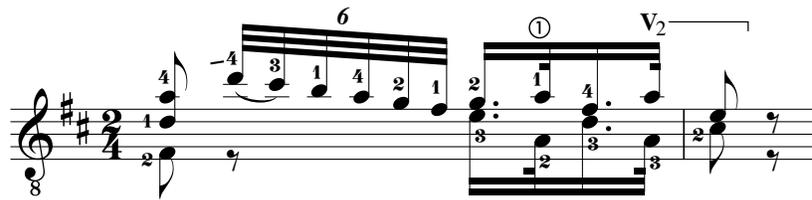
Shifts, however, sometimes are not only necessary but also desirable since a well-placed shift can provide technical security or add a sense of drama or excitement to the music. It is important to determine in every instance whether you wish to draw attention to a shift or whether you wish for it to be inconspicuous. The fingerings you choose will often vary accordingly.

One way to make a shift inconspicuous is to have it occur during a rest or a natural pause in the music, such as between phrases. Another way is to shift after plucking an open string. For instance, referring back to Example 11b, all of the necessary shifts can be synchronized to occur immediately after the bass notes on the open E string are plucked. This will hide the sound of the shifts; however, if the left hand moves before the bass notes are plucked, then the shifts become noticeable.

In determining the placement of a shift, its impact on the music should always be taken into consideration. A shift or a major change in hand alignment should not occur between notes that are closely attracted to one another, melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically. For example, short notes normally are attracted to successive notes of longer duration. In dotted rhythms, therefore, short notes that follow dots are attracted to the following downbeats. To place a shift between those notes might create a sense of activity where a natural sense of relaxation should occur instead. If a shift is necessary, however, its placement should not be after the short note, as in Example 12a, but after the dotted note, as in 12b. All or part of the dot's value then can be used to make the shift:



Example 12a  
*Andante Largo*, Fernando Sor



Example 12b

## Conclusion

The present article only serves as an introduction to the complex and multi-faceted study of left hand movement. Many of the preceding examples can be considered from perspectives other than those I have presented. For instance, one might argue that the fingering in Example 12a can provide a sweeter tone quality and the opportunity to use vibrato—advantages that may outweigh the simplicity of movement in 12b. A skilled player could still achieve the desired release of tension through manipulation of the rhythm and dynamics. The logic of any fingering, as previously stated, is always dependent upon the desired interpretation and the priorities of the performer.