

Douglas Niedt's GUITAR TECHNIQUE TIP OF THE MONTH

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"



(Doug subtitled his Tech Tip as "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!)



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Good String Crosses Gone Bad

By Douglas Niedt

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Note: This tech tip applies to the RIGHT HAND.

When playing a piece with *i*, *m*, and *a*, and changing from string to string, we experience what I call "good" string crosses and "bad" string crosses. For example, using *m* to play the first string E and then *i* to play the second string B is a "good" string cross—it feels natural. But using *i* to play the first string E and *m* to play the second string B is a "bad" string cross—it feels awkward:

Example #1

Good String Crosses

Bad String Crosses

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a 'g' below it. It is divided into two sections by a double bar line. The first section, labeled 'Good String Crosses', shows a sequence of notes: E (fingered *m*), B (fingered *i*), E (fingered *m*), and B (fingered *i*). The second section, labeled 'Bad String Crosses', shows a sequence: E (fingered *i*), B (fingered *m*), E (fingered *i*), and B (fingered *m*).

You can detect the same feeling of right and wrong with *m* and *a*:

Example #2

Good String Crosses

Bad String Crosses

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a 'g' below it. It is divided into two sections by a double bar line. The first section, labeled 'Good String Crosses', shows a sequence of notes: E (fingered *a*), B (fingered *m*), E (fingered *a*), and B (fingered *m*). The second section, labeled 'Bad String Crosses', shows a sequence: E (fingered *m*), B (fingered *a*), E (fingered *m*), and B (fingered *a*).

And even with *a* and *i*:

Example #3

Musical notation for Example #3. The first staff is labeled "Good String Crosses" and shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: *a*, *i*, *a*, *i*. The second staff is labeled "Bad String Crosses" and shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: *i*, *a*, *i*, *a*. The notes are on a single staff in G-clef, 8va, with a double bar line between the two sections.

To feel the difference more dramatically, try playing on the first and third strings:

Example #4

Three staves of musical notation for Example #4, each comparing "Good String Crosses" and "Bad String Crosses".
Staff 1: "Good String Crosses" has fingerings *m*, *i*, *m*, *i*; "Bad String Crosses" has fingerings *i*, *m*, *i*, *m*.
Staff 2: "Good String Crosses" has fingerings *a*, *m*, *a*, *m*; "Bad String Crosses" has fingerings *m*, *a*, *m*, *a*.
Staff 3: "Good String Crosses" has fingerings *a*, *i*, *a*, *i*; "Bad String Crosses" has fingerings *i*, *a*, *i*, *a*.
Each staff has a double bar line between the two sections.

Most normal arpeggio patterns use "good" string crosses:

Example #5

Good String Crosses Bad String Crosses

Good String Crosses Bad String Crosses

Good String Crosses Bad String Crosses

Good String Crosses Bad String Crosses

Good String Crosses Bad String Crosses

So, when fingering pieces, it only makes sense to use as many good string crosses as possible for ease of playing and security.

There are three ways to "set up" good string crosses:

1. Make a conscious choice as to which finger plays the first note of a passage
2. Change the left-hand fingering
3. Insert left-hand slurs

The first method is to simply decide which finger to use first to produce the desired good string cross. In the following example, playing the very first open E on the first string with *i* produces two bad string crosses in the next measure:

Example #6 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Musical notation for Example #6, showing the first two measures of the *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first measure contains a slur over two eighth notes: an open E (fingered *i*) and an open A (fingered *m*). The second measure contains a slur over two eighth notes: an open E (fingered *i*) and an open A (fingered *m*). Below the staff, the left-hand fingering is indicated: 2 for the first measure, 1 for the second measure, and 0 for the third measure. Two arrows point to the notes in the second measure, labeled "Bad String Crosses".

But making the choice to play the very first open E with *m* instead of *i* produces good string crosses in the second measure:

Example #7 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Musical notation for Example #7, showing the first two measures of the *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first measure contains a slur over two eighth notes: an open E (fingered *m*) and an open A (fingered *i*). The second measure contains a slur over two eighth notes: an open E (fingered *m*) and an open A (fingered *i*). Below the staff, the left-hand fingering is indicated: 2 for the first measure, 1 for the second measure, and 0 for the third measure. Two arrows point to the notes in the second measure, labeled "Good String Crosses".

The second method, changing the left-hand fingering, can be as simple as changing a note from being on an open string to a fretted note on another string. Line one of Example #8 below shows the "incorrect" fingering from Example #6 that produced bad string crosses. But line two shows that simply changing the open E's to E's fretted on the second string (but retaining the same right-hand fingering we had before) now results in good string crossings:

Example #8 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

The image displays two musical staves for Example #8, *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 by J.S. Bach. Both staves are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The right-hand part (RHP) is written on a single staff, and the left-hand part (LHP) is written on a single staff below it. The RHP uses a consistent fingering of *i* (index) and *m* (middle) for the first two notes of each pair, and *i* and *m* for the last two notes of each pair. The LHP uses a consistent fingering of 2 and 1 for the first two notes of each pair, and 0 and 1 for the last two notes of each pair. The top staff is labeled "Bad String Crosses" and shows the original fingering. The bottom staff is labeled "Good String Crosses" and shows the modified fingering. In the bottom staff, the first and third notes of the second pair are circled with a "2" inside, and an arrow points to them with the text "Change from open to 2nd string".

Sometimes avoiding bad string crosses can involve extensive left-hand re-fingering:

Example #9 *Concierto de Aranjuez*, 1st movement (Joaquin Rodrigo)

The image shows a musical staff in G major, 8/8 time. The first measure has a slur over six notes with fingering *i m i m i m* and left-hand numbers 4, 3, 2, 1, 2. The second measure has a slur over six notes with *i m i m i m* and left-hand numbers 1, 2. An arrow points to the first measure with the label "Bad String Crosses". The third measure starts with a slur over six notes with *m i m i m i* and left-hand numbers 4, 3, 2, 1. An arrow points to the first note with the label "Start with m". The fourth measure has a slur over six notes with *m i m i m i* and left-hand numbers 4, 3, 2, 1. An arrow points to the first measure with the label "Good String Crosses". Below the staff, the text "Left-hand fingering changed" is written.

Usually, altering the fingering of one note here or there will have no negative or even noticeable effects to you or the listener. But with extensive refingerings, that may not be the case. You must then decide whether it is better to change the fingering to produce good string crosses and thus make the right-hand execution more dependable, or to retain the left-hand fingering and simply learn to execute the bad string crosses.

The third method to fix bad string crosses is to insert slurs at strategic points:

Example #10 *Concierto de Aranjuez*, 1st movement (Joaquin Rodrigo)

The image shows a musical staff in G major, 8/8 time. The first measure has a slur over six notes with *i m i m i m* and left-hand numbers 3, 4. The second measure has a slur over six notes with *i m i m i m* and left-hand numbers 3, 2. An arrow points to the first measure with the label "Bad String Crosses". The third measure has a slur over six notes with *i m i m i m* and left-hand numbers 3, 2. The fourth measure has a slur over six notes with *m i m i m i* and left-hand numbers 3, 2. An arrow points to the first measure with the label "Good String Crosses". Below the staff, the text "Same left-hand fingering but with added slurs" is written.

One must be careful adding slurs—although they can fix a bad string cross, they may introduce unintended consequences such as unevenness, accents on the wrong beats, difficulties for the left hand, or other inappropriate musical effects.

To some guitarists, repeating a finger is preferable to strictly alternating the fingers if the alternation produces a bad string cross:

Example #11 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Repeat *m* to produce good string cross

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is in common time (C). The notes and fingerings are as follows:

- Measure 1: 0 (open), *m* (finger 1), *i* (finger 2).
- Measure 2: *m* (finger 2), *i* (finger 1), 4 (finger 4).
- Measure 3: 3 (finger 3), *m* (finger 1).
- Measure 4: 4 (finger 4), *i* (finger 1), *m* (finger 1).

 Below the staff, the bass clef part shows fingerings: 8, 2, 1, 2, 0, 1, 0. An arrow points from the text 'Repeat *m* to produce good string cross' to the *m* fingering in the second measure of the treble staff.

However, one must be careful where the finger repetition is placed. If the notes being played are fast, repeating a finger might be a bad idea. It would be like running at a fast even pace and then deciding to repeat a foot:

Example #12 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Repeating *m* to avoid bad string cross here

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is in common time (C). The notes and fingerings are as follows:

- Measure 1: 0 (open), *i* (finger 1), *m* (finger 1).
- Measure 2: 2 (finger 2), *i* (finger 1).
- Measure 3: 1 (finger 1), *m* (finger 1), 0 (open).
- Measure 4: 3 (finger 3), *i* (finger 1).
- Measure 5: 0 (open), *m* (finger 1), *i* (finger 1).

 Below the staff, the bass clef part shows fingerings: 8, 2, 1, 0, 1, 0. An arrow points from the text 'Repeating *m* to avoid bad string cross here' to the *m* fingering in the third measure of the treble staff.

We can mollify the negative effects of unavoidable bad string crosses by choosing where we place the bad cross in the passage. Rather than place the bad cross between two fast notes, place it between two longer notes where it is less likely to cause problems for the right hand:

Example #13 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Bad string cross placed on long note to aid in execution

When a bad string cross cannot be eliminated, just knowing where it is in the passage will usually enable you to anticipate and play it with no problem. Others will require specific attention in your practice sessions. Practicing the right hand alone is very helpful:

Example #14 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)

Practicing the above two measures right hand alone

Bad String Crosses

Finally, I must point out that although we can eliminate a lot of bad string crosses with all these techniques, we must face the fact that in real life we cannot get rid of all of them. It is kind of like trying to rid your yard of weeds or crabgrass. You will just have to deal with them!

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