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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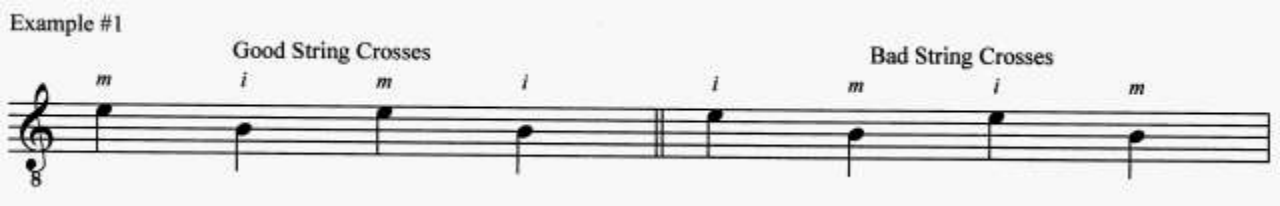
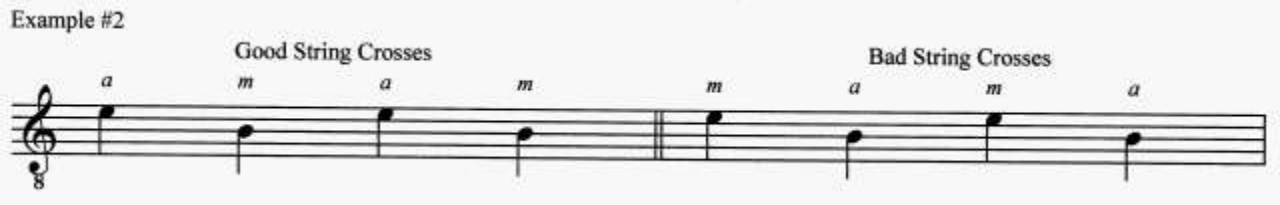
Note: This tech tip applies to the RIGHT HAND.

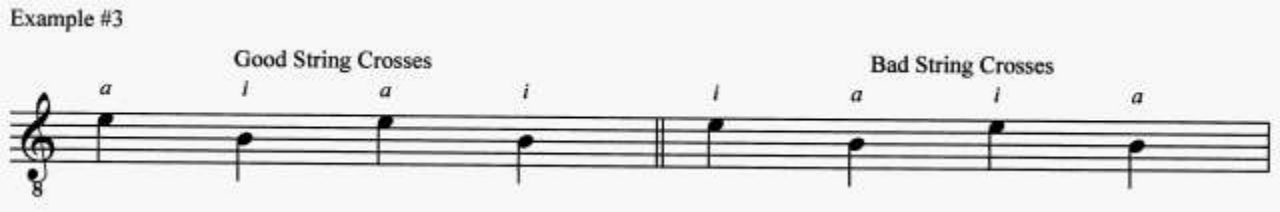
When playing a piece with *i*, *m*, and *a*, and changing from string to string, we experience what I call "good" string crosses and "bad" string crosses. For example, using *m* to play the first string E and then *i* to play the second string B is a "good" string cross—it feels natural. But using *i*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



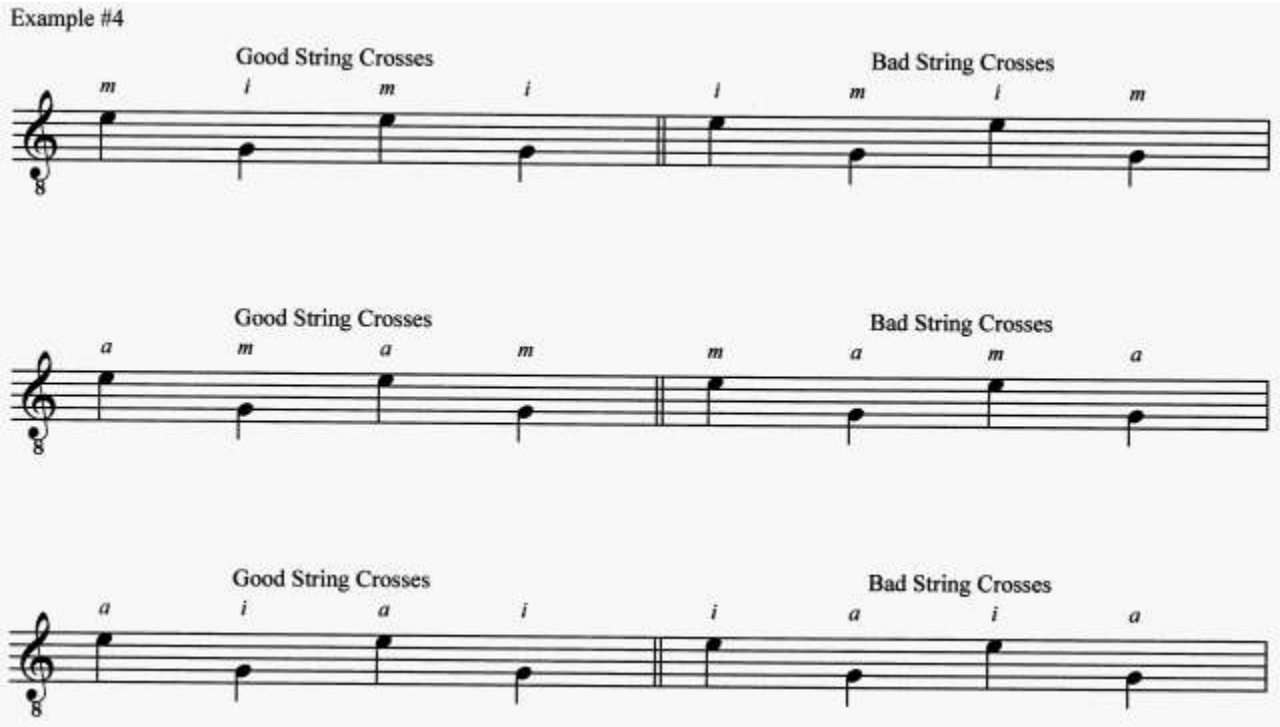
You can detect the same feeling of right and wrong with *m* and *a*:



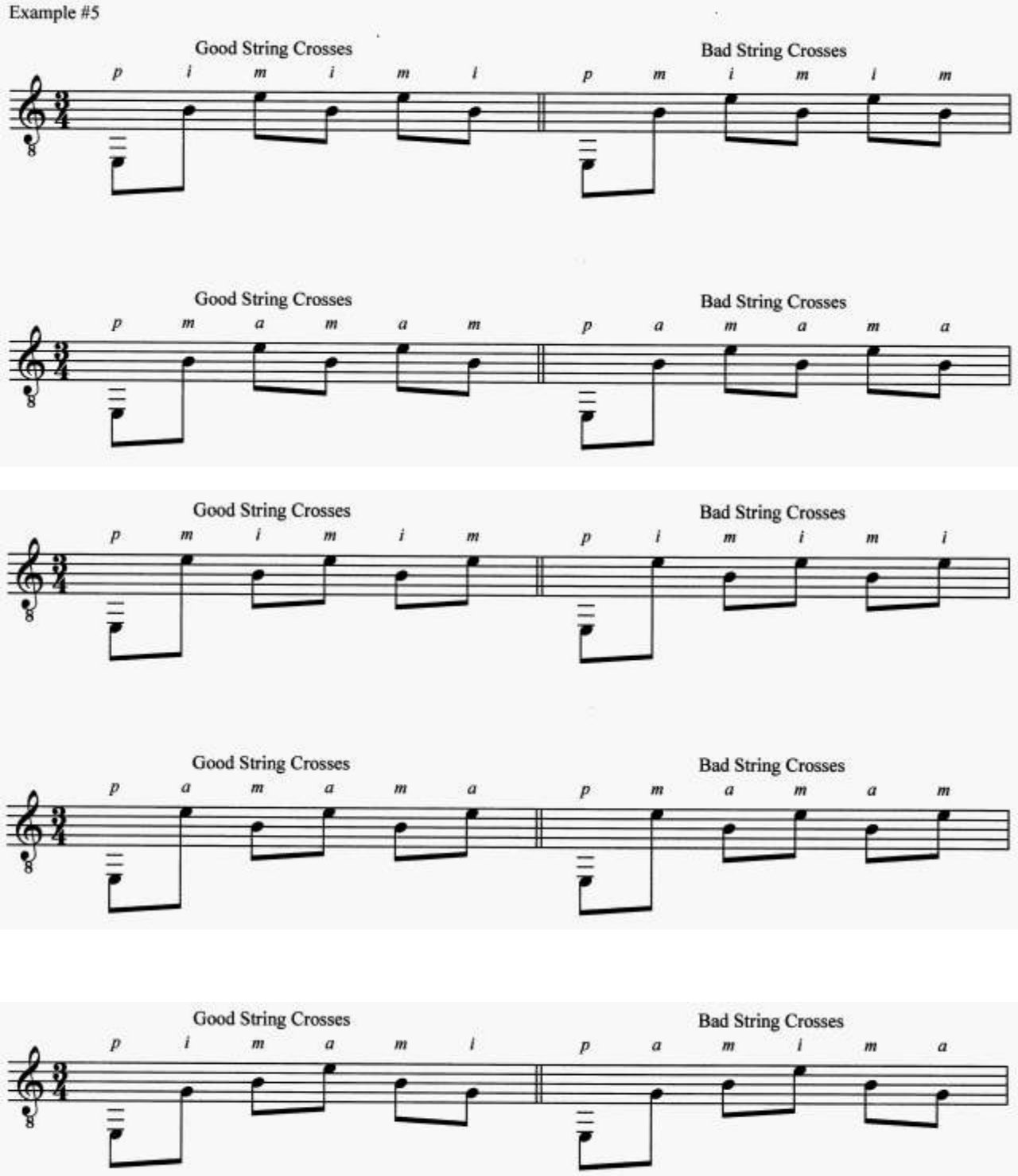
And even with *a* and *i*:



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



Most normal arpeggio patterns use "good" string crosses:



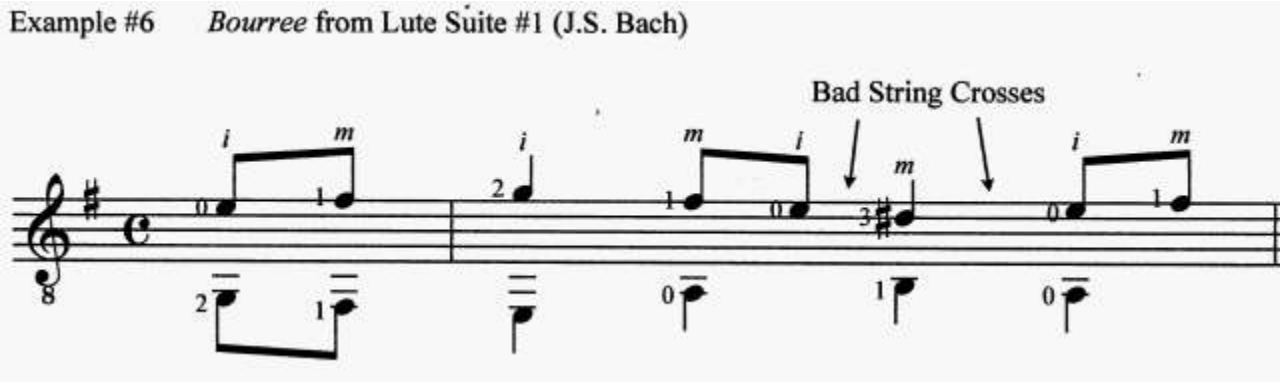
So, when fingering pieces, it only makes sense to use as many good string crosses as possible for ease of playing and security.

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

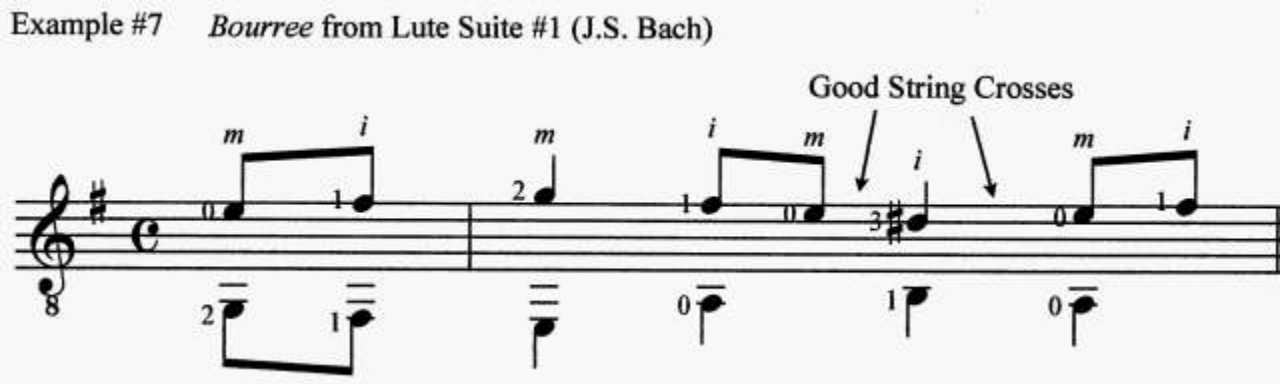
The first method is to simply decide which finger to use first to produce the desired good string cross. In the following example, playing the very first open E on the first string with *i* produces two bad string crosses in the next measure:

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

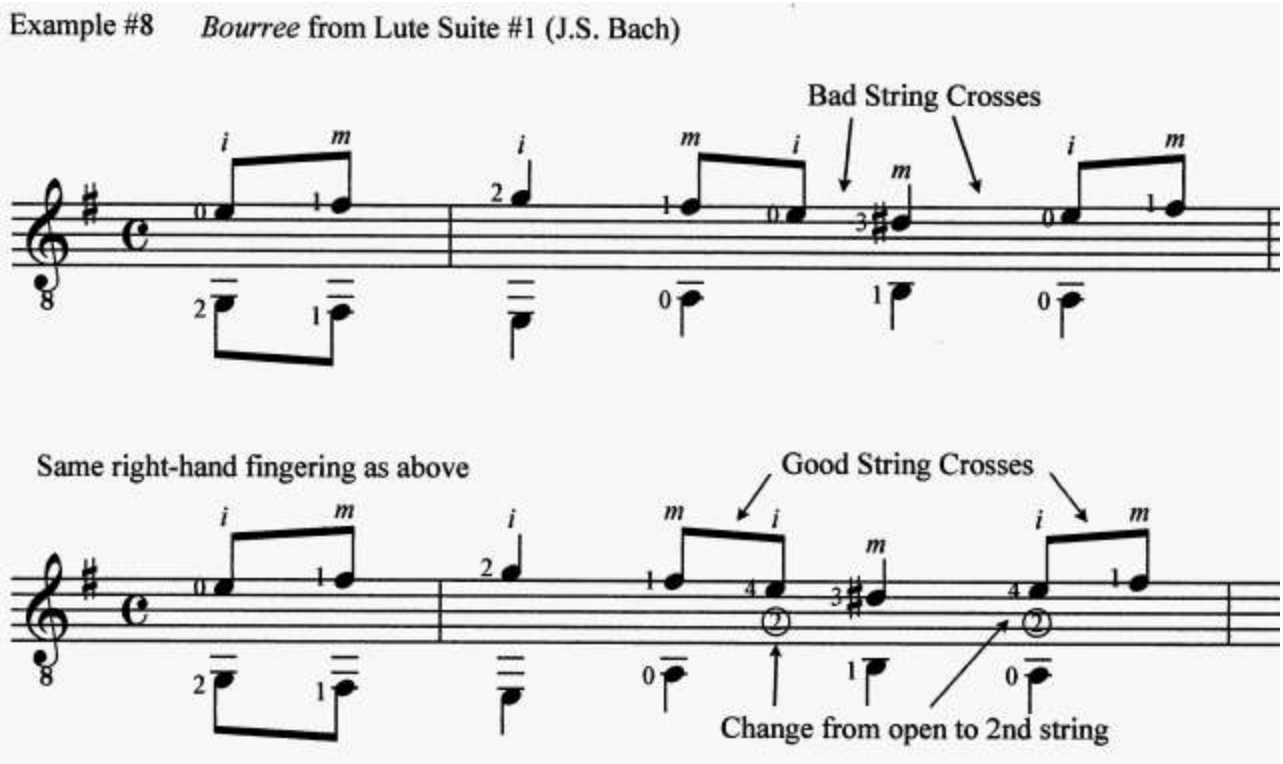


But making the choice to play the very first open E with *m* instead of *i* produces good string crosses in the second measure:

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

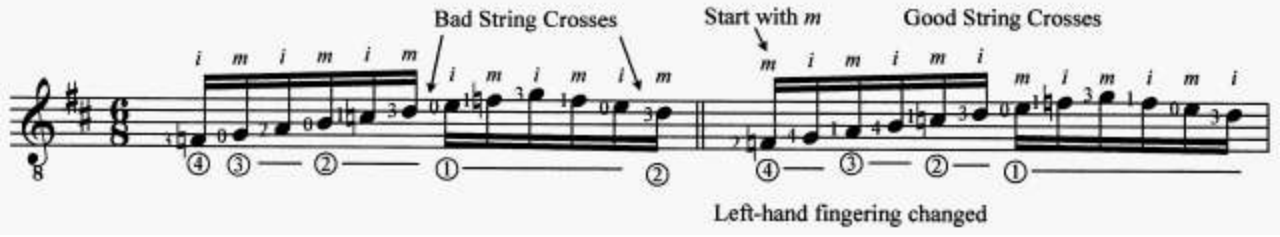


The second method, changing the left-hand fingering, can be as simple as changing a note from being on an open string to a fretted note on another string. Line one of Example #8 below shows the "incorrect" fingering from Example #6 that produced bad string crosses. But line two shows that simply changing 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:



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

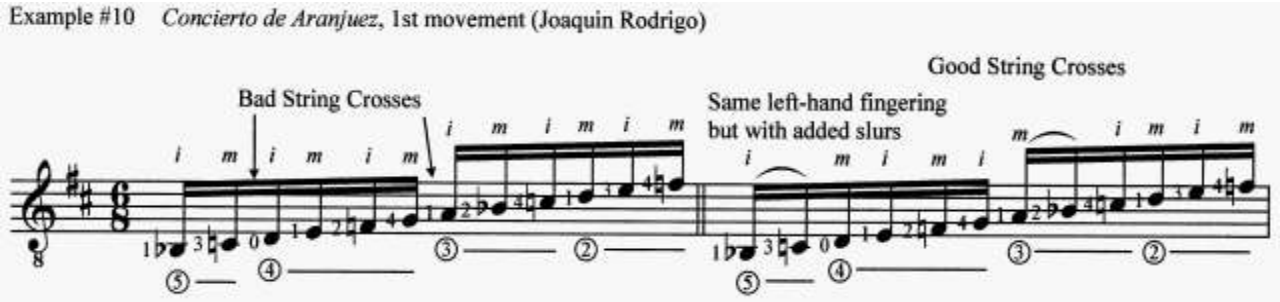
Example #9 *Concierto de Aranjuez*, 1st movement (Joaquin Rodrigo)



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:

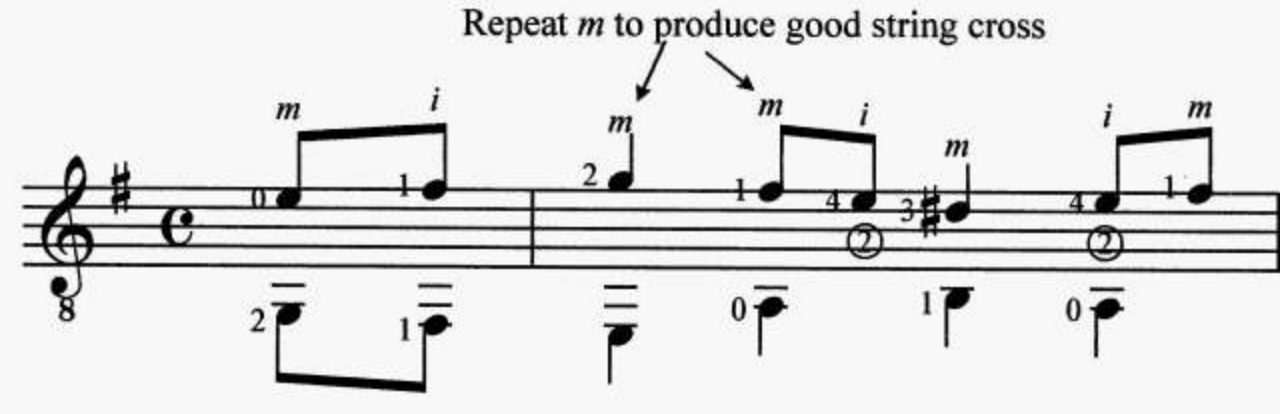
Example #10 *Concierto de Aranjuez*, 1st movement (Joaquin Rodrigo)



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.

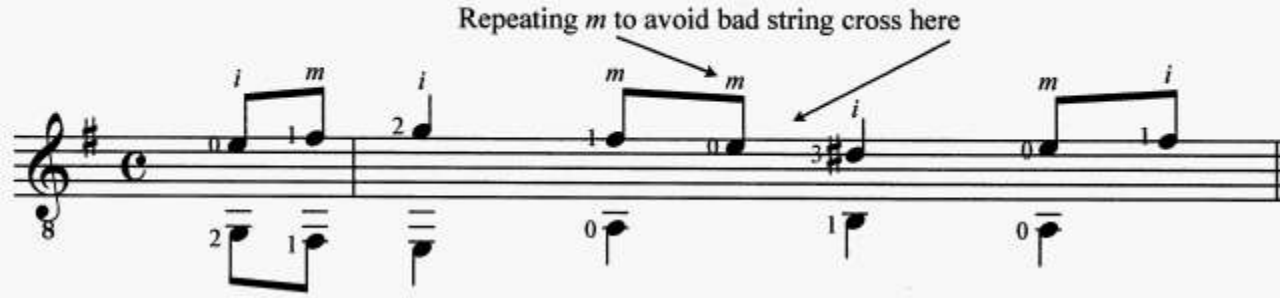
To some guitarists, repeating a finger is preferable to strictly alternating the fingers if the alternation produces a bad string cross:

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



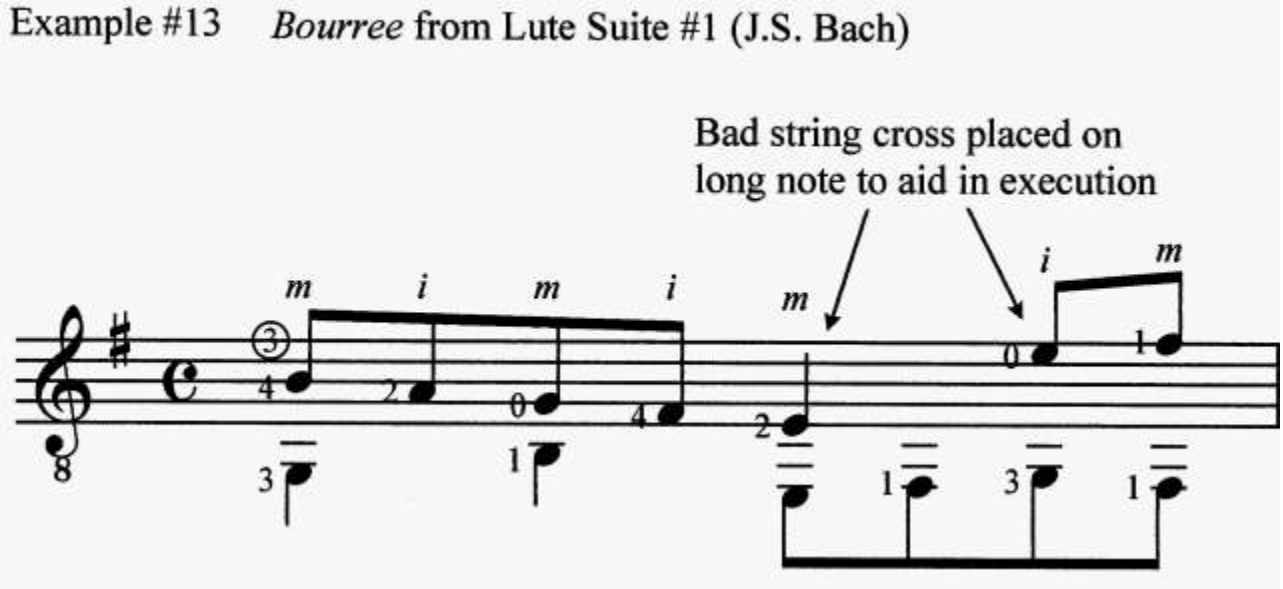
However, one must be careful where the finger repetition is placed. If the notes being played are fast, repeating a finger might be a bad idea. It would be like running at a fast even pace and then deciding to repeat a foot:

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



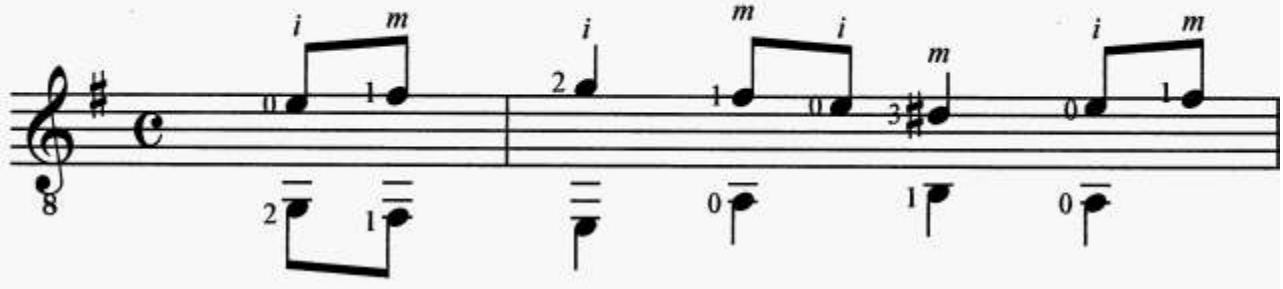
We can mollify the negative effects of unavoidable bad string crosses by choosing where we place the bad cross in the passage. Rather than place the bad cross between two fast notes, place it between two longer notes where it is less likely to cause problems for the right hand:

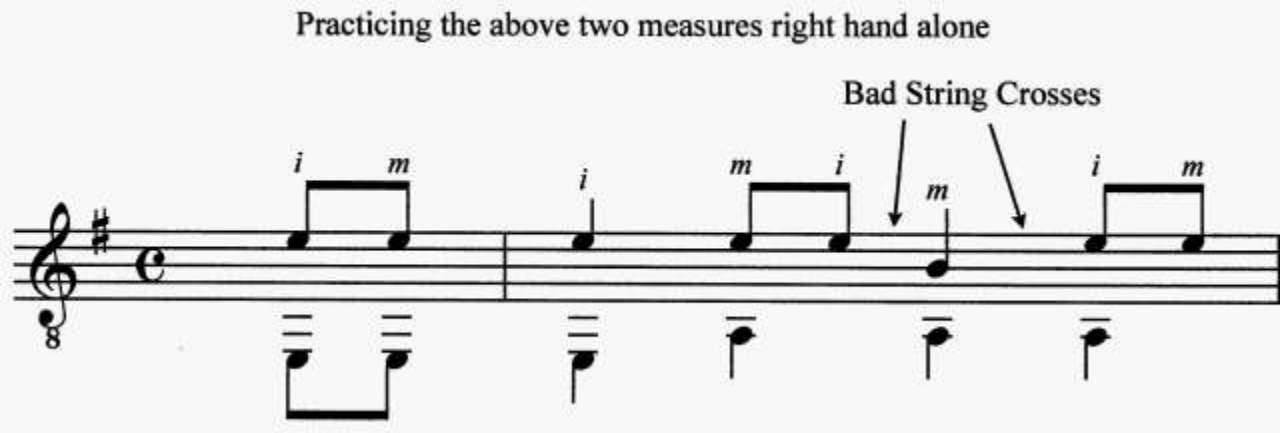
Example #13 *Bourree* from Lute Suite #1 (J.S. Bach)



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)





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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