

## Another Approach to Right Hand Fingerings for Suzuki Book I 2/20

### OUTLINE:

#### I. Introduction

1. The “No Inverted” and “Inverted Approaches to Fingering Our Foundational Book 1 Repertoire
2. Dr. Suzuki’s Two Main Directives
3. Three Reasons for An Alternative To the “No Inverted” Approach
  - a. Too much memorization
  - b. Over-emphasis on “finger dragging”
  - c. The “inverted” approach is an easier solution
4. Recent Fingering Test (Diagnostic)

#### II. Comparisons With Dr. Suzuki’s Book 1 Approach

1. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives for Violin Beginning Repertoire
2. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives in the “No Inverted Fingerings” Approach for Fingering Guitar Beginning Repertoire
3. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives in the “Inverted” Approach for Fingering Guitar Beginning Repertoire
4. Comparison Conclusion
  - a. Too many exceptions = too much to memorize.
  - b. Why avoid a necessary skill?
  - c. How best do we prepare for the string crossing challenges in Perpetual Motion?

#### III. Answering Two Objections To the “Inverted” Approach

1. “Why start lightly row with M? You end up with all inverted string crossings.”
  - a. Starting with M
  - b. Too many inverted crossings.
2. “Forever Fingerings”
  - a. Not the same way twice
  - b. “Forever” fingerings are absent in the Violin Book 1.

#### IV. Conclusion And Proposal

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#### **I. Introduction**

I am including this information on this website for those teachers who are experimenting with right hand fingerings outside of those in our revised Book 1 (available Summer 2020?). There main issue driving the current right hand fingerings in Book 1 is that of inverted string crossings, which for this early repertoire can be defined as moving from a higher to a lower string with the fingering I-M. A second issue is the claim that starting our very earliest repertoire with M results in an unwanted downward deviated wrist, and therefore this repertoire should start with I. I will not address this second issue other than to say that I have started this earliest repertoire with M for years

and have not observed any beginners deviated wrist problem as being a result of starting with any particular finger.

This discussion will be limited to dealing with our foundational Book 1 repertoire (Twinkles through Perpetual Motion).

### 1. The “No Inverted” and “Inverted” Approaches to Fingering Our Foundational Book 1 Repertoire

Over time, as guitar teachers of young children deal with the issue of inverted string crossings and the dragging of fingers across the strings that often results, I believe we will eventually arrive at one of two possible solutions to this issue (besides ignoring the issue altogether). The first solution represented currently in our revised Book 1 foundational repertoire is an approach that might be called the “no inverted” approach. In this approach, inverted string crossings are carefully avoided in order to maximize non-inverted crossings. This is accomplished by the insertion of many “retake fingerings” (M-M or I-I). The rationale is that if the student’s fingerings are carefully “choreographed” to maximize experiencing non-inverted crossings, this will reduce “finger dragging” and help reinforce the habit of alternation of the fingers across the strings. Proponents of this approach also claim that the additional re-take fingerings also help create a better overall “finger awareness” in the student’s playing.

The second approach I am aware of for this foundational repertoire might be referred to as the “inverted” approach, where these inverted crossings are deliberately introduced to the student in the Pre-Twinkle period, and then the student is required to master this skill as they appear in this foundational repertoire.

I don’t mean to exclude anyone here - there may be other ways of assigning right hand fingering to this repertoire, but I am not aware of them. The teachers I have worked with over the years use either approach exclusively, or some combination of the two. The two approaches described above are both pedagogically informed, and as far as I know are the only two approaches that apply consistent methodologies for the handling of right hand fingerings in this repertoire. Both approaches have testimonials from teachers supporting their effectiveness for drastically reducing students “dragging” the same finger across the string to accomplish a string crossing, and for developing overall finger awareness in our students.

In this document I am making the case for the “inverted” approach that I personally use. I believe it is easier of the two to implement and is also closer to what Dr. Suzuki used in his violin Book 1.

The teaching points I raise about the violin Book 1 in this document have been confirmed with lengthy discussion with three respected American violin teacher trainers: Alice Joy Lewis, James Hutchins, and Timothy Durbin.

### 2. Dr. Suzuki’s Two Main Directives

There are many refinements of technique that take place as a student learns Violin Book 1, but Dr. Suzuki gives only two main “directives” or major rules to follow to his beginning violin students concerning the bow arm: 1) start with a downbow, and 2) keep the bow alternating. The exceptions to Dr. Suzuki’s two directives (retake bowings and starting with up-bows) are

- limited in number,

- fairly easy to manage for the violin, and
- intimately tied to the musical demands of the pieces.

### 3. Three Reasons for An Alternative To the “No Inverted” Approach

a. Too much memorization. The first reason for an alternative to the fingerings currently being published in our revised Guitar Book 1 is that they run in direct contradiction to the experience many have of teaching young children. The required memorization of the many retakes that are being proposed in this approach seems excessively burdensome to the child and to the parent. There are some trainers who also believe that this approach is not consistent with Suzuki’s approach in his Book 1.

b. Over-emphasis on “finger dragging”. A second reason for questioning these Book 1 fingerings is that the purpose of these new fingerings, besides the development of overall finger awareness, is to eliminate dragging of the fingers in string crossing. This tendency is something that we should be aware of and seek to minimize, but in my experience an occasional dragging of the fingers is not a detrimental habit for our developing guitarists, a habit that will result in a “crippling” effect on their later development. My own sons are examples of this, and I wrote about their experience with finger dragging in my article for the SAA Journal titled “Don’t Let The Dragons Get You Down Or How I Made My Peace With The Issue of String Crossing”. A PDF of this article is included on this website. I make this point only to call into question the excessive retakes that are being proposed in the revised Book 1 in an effort to eliminate dragging the fingers. These excessive retakes are also being proposed in spite of the fact that to date I have not talked to any teacher who has completely eliminated the dragging of fingers in their student’s playing. I have to admit that this is true also of my own students.

c. The “inverted” approach is an easier solution. The third main reason is that there is another methodologically valid and time tested solution to this goal of establishing finger awareness, finger alternation, and reducing the dragging of fingers. Rather than carefully avoiding inverted fingerings as in the Book 1 revision, we can instead focus on inverted crossings from the very beginning in the Twinkles, starting with M, and continue this practice of starting with M for all of our foundational repertoire (Twinkles to Perpetual Motion). This requires only two directives from the teacher: 1) start all of this foundational repertoire with the M finger, and 2) maintain alternation (which also means avoid dragging the fingers). The only exceptions to this are the M finger retakes in Song of the Wind. This approach is a direct parallel of what Dr. Suzuki does in his book one.

The simplicity of an initial mastering of inverted fingerings liberates the beginning student’s (and teacher’s and parent’s) attention to deal with all of the other technical issues of getting started on the instrument. Initially allowing these inverted string crossings in the student’s playing does not later on negate the application of common sense in the fingering of more advanced repertoire; inverted string crossings in advanced repertoire are of course to be avoided if that can be easily arranged for the student, and in fast scale passages they are avoided if at all possible.

### 4. Recent Fingering Test (Diagnostic)

During the month of November 2019 as this issue was being discussed amongst our teacher trainers, I decided to conduct a “diagnostic” event with all of my students. At that time I had 3 group classes composed of

- four age 6-7 twinkler to early Book 1 students
- ten age 7-12 Book 1 to 4 students
- eleven age 12-17 Book 3 to 8 students

I began our individual private lessons with “let’s play all of your early pieces, Twinkle through Perpetual Motion if you’ve gone that far” (some of my youngest students have only played up to Aunt Rhody). I didn’t tell them anything about what I was looking for, only that I wanted them to “play their very best”. I said nothing about the right hand fingers.

What I found is that almost every one of my students - from Book 1 beginners to advanced - play these pieces with perfect alternation, with no dragging fingers whatsoever. In fact, some of them would forget to start the piece with our customary M finger, which resulted in having to deal with repeated back-to-back inverted string crossings (like at the end of the Aunt Rhody A section), and they even played these effortlessly with no dragging! I could not ask for a better confirmation that this approach I am suggesting is completely successful in accomplishing secure alternation skills, which is one of the stated goals for the new fingerings in the revised Book 1 with all the retakes. My students also have a clear understanding of the principles of string crossing, and pay careful attention to this when the music calls for it. Even the youngest can explain what “convenient” and “inconvenient” (inverted) string crossings are. Their finger awareness is fine. They do not just “throw” their fingers at the strings.

I noticed that the very few students of mine who did “drag” their fingers once or twice during this experiment were the youngest ones who are very impulsive types and have difficulty in their ability to focus. I think this category of child will always be a challenge to maintain on any secure technical track! Even so, these students of mine continue to be challenged to keep the dragging out of their playing as they progress through the repertoire, mostly for the sake of building the finger awareness we are seeking. As I mentioned, I have seen no detrimental effect on my student’s later playing because of occasional dragging of the fingers.

This is a clear indication to me that the approach I am suggesting here imparts the finger awareness we want for them, it firmly establishes alternation, and it accomplishes the desired result of minimizing or even in some cases completely eliminating dragging the fingers.

## **II. Comparisons With Dr. Suzuki’s Book 1 Approach**

It is important to understand that these comparisons below are not attempting to exactly equate bowing a violin string to playing a guitar string. What is being compared here is the number of directives the student is being asked to put their attention on and remember.

### **1. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives for Violin Beginning Repertoire**

The pieces below with the \* indicate that the student is provided with the simplicity of following Dr. Suzuki's two simple directives stated above (start with downbows, and maintain alternation of the bow). The challenging exceptions to these two directives, when they do appear, are given below each piece.

Violin Repertoire:

- \*1. Twinkle Variations
  - \* Twinkle Theme
- \*2. Lightly Row
  - 3. Song of the Wind
    - First introduction of retakes, one retake between the A and B sections, over a rest, both sections start with downbow on the downbeat.
- \*4. Go Tell Aunt Rhody
  - 5. O Come, Little Children
    - Introducing starting with an upbow. All phrases start with an upbeat, therefore all phrases start with an upbow.
    - Double upbows are between rests, starting the next phrase.
- \*6. May Song
  - 7. Long, Long Ago
    - One retake over the rest going into the downbeat starting B section
- 8. Allegro Suzuki
  - Same retakes as Song of the Wind (after each section, starting the downbeat in the following section)
- \*9. Perpetual Motion

As I stated, there are two exceptions to Dr. Suzuki's two directives regarding bowing (the parallel to our right hand) presented in this foundational violin repertoire. These are the retakes, and starting with up bows. These irregularities are deliberately limited, and they are also made manageable in that when they appear, they are always clearly determined by the musical demands of the piece: the "weight" on the beginning of a phrases is consistently given to the down bow, and the student needs to occasionally employ a retake or else an upbow in order to arrive at a downbow which accomplishes this musical requirement. Memorization of bowings in the violin book one is therefore driven and supported by the musical demands of the pieces. In contrast, with the exception of Song of the Wind, the starting fingers as well as the retake fingerings in our revised Guitar Book 1 are only supported by the student's rote memorization. There are no musical demands in the music to attach these fingerings to. There's nothing for the student to rely on, except what seems to be an excessive amount rote memorization that is not connected to cues within the music itself.

These exceptions required by Dr. Suzuki in his Book 1 – retakes and starting with upbows - are also easily observed and followed in the violin teacher's movements as they lead the child in the lesson or in group. On the guitar, generally speaking, all phrases do not logically start with any particular finger, nor are they as easily cued by the teacher as they are with the violin.

There is only one exception to the rule of starting this foundational violin repertoire with a downbow: O Come Little Children. I am told by violinists that dealing with this one exception is a constant “maintenance issue” for them. They also state that when playing together in a group situation (especially at a workshop), the differences in bowings among students with this piece are a common evidence of this maintenance challenge. It is difficult to make a case that the same maintenance is not required for children to remember all of the many rote retakes (as well as whether to start with either I or M) in the current revised Guitar Book 1.

Both approaches – “no inverted” and “inverted” – accept the necessity of retakes in Song of the Wind, and I’m sure proponents of both approaches are aware of the occasional maintenance of those fingerings. The violinists I spoke with also state that retake fingerings - representing as they do an exception to the rule of maintaining alternation - require less maintenance than do the upbows in O Come Little Children, but that retake fingerings do require maintenance occasionally. As I stated, all of these “maintenance demands” in the violin method are manageable in that:

- they are limited in number
- they are tied to the musical demands of the piece
- both exceptions (retakes and starting with upbows) actually represent necessary technical skills on the violin, and
- are easily modeled by teachers and imitated by students in both private and group lessons.

One of the main teaching points of the Violin Twinkle variations is to maintain alternation of the bows in spite of differences in the string crossings presented by the different variations. It is interesting to note that for this reason, the Variation B is the most difficult to master for the violinists, as is the case with the guitar. So there are in fact some real connections to be made between violin bowing and sounding the guitar string.

## 2. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives in the “No Inverted Fingerings” Approach for Fingering Guitar Beginning Repertoire

It is difficult to list our guitar repertoire and comment on it similarly to how I listed violin repertoire above, because in our new Book 1 we are unable to parallel Dr. Suzuki’s first directive of “always start with a downbow” (in the case of guitarists, starting with the same finger). In contrast to the beginning violin repertoire, our revised Book 1 is laid out with different starting fingers for the student to remember:

- Starting With I: Twinkles, Lightly Row, Aunt Rhody
- Starting With M: Song of the Wind, May, Song, Allegretto, Perpetual Motion

Concerning a parallel to Dr. Suzuki’s second directive, alternation, the only pieces the student has the simplicity and security of being able to follow the parallel guitar directive of maintaining finger alternation are the Twinkle Variations, May Song, and Perpetual Motion. In addition to the Song of the Wind retakes that are also accepted in the “inverted” approach, we now had additional retakes in:

Twinkle Theme - five in this piece

Lightly Row - one in this piece  
Aunt Rhody - two in this piece  
Allegretto - one in this piece

Comparing the “no inverted” approach used in our revised Book 1 to that used in the beginning violin repertoire, as well as the comparison below to the “inverted” approach, the additional complexity of memorizing different starting fingers and the many retakes in the “no inverted” approach is obvious.

### 3. Number of Exceptions to Right Hand Directives in the “Inverted” Approach for Fingering Guitar Beginning Repertoire

The pieces below with the \* indicate that the student is allowed the simplicity and security of following parallels to Dr. Suzuki’s two simple two directives stated above, which in the case of the guitar is “start with M, maintain alternation of the fingers”.

#### “Inverted Fingerings” Approach:

- \*1. Twinkle Variations
- \* Twinkle Theme
- \*2. Lightly Row
- \*3. Go Tell Aunt Rhody
- 4. Song of the Wind  
Start with M, retakes after each phrase
- \*5. May Song
- \*6. Allegretto, M. Giuliani
- \*7. Perpetual Motion, S. Suzuki

### 4. Comparison Conclusion

a. Too many exceptions = too much to memorize. The reason behind the success I have experienced with the “inverted” approach is obvious when you compare the number of exceptions to Dr. Suzuki two directives that are found in the two guitar fingering approaches outlined above. The contrast between Dr. Suzuki’s approach and the current Book 1 fingerings is the basis for much of the resistance to these fingerings.

b. Why avoid a necessary skill? Inverted fingerings are a necessary skill that must be mastered by the guitarist. This approach recognizes that fact from the very beginning of the student’s training, and my experience is that students take to it easily.

c. How best do we prepare for the string crossing challenges in Perpetual Motion?

We might also consider that in the new revised Book 1 fingerings, the student’s first requirement to play an inverted fingering is in Twinkle Variation B. The next is at the final notes of the Song of the Wind “A” section, moving at a fast tempo, and this inverted fingering is positioned directly next to an important retake fingering. The next challenge for this skill of handling inverted string crossings are the last notes of Allegretto, and then we arrive at the many requirements for this in Perpetual Motion - most notably the inverted crossing from the end of the C section back to A section, an inverted crossing from the first to the third string, again at high speed. We might question whether the

limited opportunities to practice inverted string crossings are the best preparation for the extreme challenges to this skill found in Perpetual Motion.

### **III. Answering Two Objections To the “Inverted” Approach**

1. “Why start lightly row with M? You end up with all inverted string crossings.”

a. Starting with M: There are two reasons for starting with M. The first is that I am following Dr. Suzuki ’s example of allowing the student the simplicity of starting all of these pieces with the down bow. For these pieces up to Perpetual Motion, if we decide to start with one particular finger, the most logical one is M. Starting all of these pieces with M (rather than I) when maintaining alternation takes into account the best approach to the string crossing involved when all of these foundational pieces are taken into consideration.

b. Too many inverted crossings: I agree that there are many of these, but if given the proper foundation on the Twinkles, students will play these inverted string crossings (a necessary skill) consistently and effortlessly in this early repertoire. This is also true for the A section of Aunt Rhody, another trouble spot I have been warned is too problematic for this approach. I am not saying that I never see a finger dragging, but they are very rare. As I mentioned above, I also sometimes see my students forget to start with M, and even when starting with I, they consistently handle the resulting repeated back to back inverted string crossings effortlessly.

2. “Forever Fingerings”

Another argument against this approach is that it results in fingerings that a more mature player might not use. I have been told “I want whatever fingering they use in these pieces to be their ‘forever fingerings’ that they will play into their adult lives.” There are several reasons why this argument doesn’t stand up to scrutiny:

a. Not the same way twice: These pieces are so simple that most mature players will play these pieces completely intuitively, without much thought at all to right hand fingering. They will probably never play these pieces the same way twice unless they are a Suzuki teacher and actually think about this all of the time. These pieces are so simple that they might very well even “drag” the fingers occasionally in their string crossing!

b. “Forever” fingerings are absent in the Violin Book 1: Suzuki himself didn’t set up “forever fingerings” in his foundational pieces. Because of his desire to establish the skill of alternating the bow in his beginning students, as well as to keep things simple, Suzuki actually adopted many “immature” bowings that the mature player probably would not use. Because of Suzuki’s decision to whenever possible maintain strict alternation, we see examples of these immature bowings in the following pieces, included here with suggestions as to how a more advanced player would probably play them:

- Twinkles - Variation B would probably be played with double up bows to accommodate the phrasing

- Lightly Row - there are phrases in this piece that are started with up bows only because of the adherence to alternation. A more mature player might very well re-bow these with retakes or slurs to start all phrases with down bows.



- Song of the Wind - a mature player would probably avoid the very quick retake in the B section final phrase by the insertion of a slur, but the Suzuki violin student at this point has not yet learned to slur.

- Aunt Rhody - if this was being played in a more advanced setting, the bowing would most likely be changed so that the piece ended with a down bow instead of an up bow (the end of final A section).

- O Come Little Children - a more advanced player would probably play the eighth notes as double up bows instead of maintaining alternation here. Suzuki evidently wanted to limit his introduction of the double up bow only to the beginning of the phrase in this piece, instead of also including it also on these eighth notes.

#### **IV. Conclusion And Proposal**

I believe the success that teachers of both of these approaches have experienced with the improvement of student general finger awareness comes from the fact that, in comparison to the early days of our Suzuki Guitar teaching, teachers are now being more consistent with their approach to right hand fingering now that the reasoning behind these two approaches have emerged. I don't doubt the sincerity of proponents of the "no inverted" approach when they speak of their success. I can't help being convinced however that of these two approaches, starting instead with a simpler approach of mastering this necessary skill of inverted string crossings (one that avoids many retake fingerings), and starting this from the very beginning of the child's training, is more logical. I think I have also demonstrated here that this approach I am calling the "inverted" approach is far more consistent with that used by Dr. Suzuki. The great success I have had with this approach and the simplicity of its use is its final proof. I am convinced that this approach produces the same and possibly even better results than these current revised Book 1 fingerings, and with less effort on all involved – for the teacher, student, and parent. I am therefore suggesting that this other approach also be represented for the moment at least in our Book 1 training.

A compromise was reached recently between these two approaches by an agreement to remove some of the retake fingerings in the new Book 1. I objected to this, suggesting that this diluted the integrity of the "no inverted" approach as well as made the book less useful for those using this approach. I suggested these fingerings be kept in for those who wanted to use this approach, but that we also include in the book something similar to the following note, displayed prominently and in several languages:

"The fingerings in the first six pieces in this book, from the Twinkle Variations and Theme up to and including Allegretto, have been selected for teachers who would like their students to avoid "inverted" string crossings in this repertoire. For teachers wishing to instead focus on inverted crossings in this beginning repertoire, they are advised to start all of these pieces with M and direct their students to maintain alternation. The goal in both cases is to develop finger awareness in our students."

An agreement was made to at least add a short note, something to the effect that "trained teachers might sometimes offer legitimate alternative fingerings to those in the book". This note will at least encourage experimentation and allow those teachers who do experiment to avoid criticism from parents and even colleagues who might challenge them for not doing things "exactly by the book".

I am writing this analysis so that teachers can have a clear understanding of the current research of our Suzuki guitarists worldwide. Open communication, transparency and honesty about the status of what Dr. Suzuki used to refer to as our “research” is the foundation for the continuing development of our methodology. What I am suggesting is that teachers experiment and come to their own conclusions. Trainers will hopefully faithfully present all of the currently used “Suzuki research” in their training of other teachers, though of course will be free to also express their own personal bias.

Sincerely,  
Bill Kossler, 2/16/20

If you have any comments or questions about this issue please contact me at [kosslerw@gmail.com](mailto:kosslerw@gmail.com).