

Don't Let the Dragons Get You Down  
or  
How I Made My Peace With The Issue of String Crossing

The challenge that most guitar teachers face with right hand string crossing is the problem of students dragging the fingers from higher to lower strings instead of maintaining alternation. When working with young children I like to refer to these as “drag-ons” for the obvious reason.

These happen when fingers are required to cross to a lower string with a nonadjacent finger: for example, playing the first string with the index, and then the next stroke being the middle finger on the second string. This is sometimes referred to as an “inverted crossing”. In this situation, young players especially sometimes have the tendency to play the first string with the index and then just drag the finger across the second string instead of maintaining strict alternation. Crossing strings with the more convenient adjacent fingers is sometimes (for lack of a better word) referred to as “normal” string crossing. Finding a comfortable stance to take with my students on this string crossing issue was a long process for me, and I hope the following thoughts will be helpful in the ongoing discussion of this subject.

Early on in my teaching I noticed that I really couldn't tell the difference in the sound of my Book 1 players when they would occasionally lapse into “dragging”. I wanted my students to be proficient at alternating their fingers, but I began to wonder if my concern about maintaining strict alternation might be more attached to a desire for them to just “look good”, rather than a concern for where they were headed with their technique. I decided on an experiment: I would continue to press all of my students to maintain strict right hand finger alternation on their repertoire, with the exception of my own sons who at that time were part of my program. I was curious to see what would happen with my sons' right hand technique if just “left alone” when it came to this particular issue. I felt fairly confident that I wasn't going to negatively affect their training in any serious way, and that any problems that might develop could be taken care of with some simple remedial work.

This wasn't the first time my sons had served as my guinea pigs, and luckily they seem to not have fared any worse for the experimentation!

My oldest son Adam was the worst finger dragging offender of my three boys. When he came back home for Thanksgiving after his first semester as a guitar major with Elliot Frank at Eastern Carolina University, the first thing I asked him was what Elliot had said about his finger dragging. There had been a lot of dragging going on in his playing when he left home in the fall, especially his Aranjuez Concerto and Prelude to the 4th Lute Suite. Elliot asked him "Did you mean to do that fingering?" When Adam replied "yes", Elliot gave his OK, going on to state that Pepe Romero teaches this practice as a legitimate approach to string crossing in some instances. Adam is currently working on his PHD with Bruce Holzman at Florida State. He tells me that the "dragging" technique is commonly used among many of his contemporaries, especially in Baroque trills. He says he also continues to use this technique occasionally in fast scale passages. My other two sons, Sam and John, don't remember this being much of an issue in their playing, and don't use this technique in their playing now.

Well, where did that leave me? After that Thanksgiving I wasn't going to just take an "anything goes" attitude about this issue with my students. On the other hand I didn't agree with the analogy, held by some teachers, to the violin bow - that all the fingers had to be moving in exactly the same direction in group class, just as the bows do in violin group and in the orchestra. I knew I wasn't completely satisfied, however, with how I dealt with this issue in my teaching, and I believed that the answer was somewhere in between these two positions.

I finally arrived at the conclusion that I needed to spend more time working with the Twinkle Variations, where this issue should be dealt with. I came up with a more organized approach. I've described some of these activities at the bottom of this article. So here is my punch line: I just tweaked the Twinkles. I extended the pre-twinkle period a bit with some new challenges for the students, some are

listed below, and I threw out some of the less productive activities I was using. I saw the improvement and was satisfied with the results. My personal experience is that with a thorough grounding of finger alternation in the Twinkles, students tend to maintain alternation in later Book 1 repertoire, with only a very occasional drag. I don't worry about the infrequent dragons with my Book 1 students (I'm not talking about advanced repertoire here), and I don't believe this represents low teaching standards. When the music calls for strict alternation (Perpetual Motion Doubles, for example), these students have no problem rising to the occasion. We still talk about the dragons when they appear, but I don't obsess about them anymore

After several years of pondering this issue, I also finally realized that in my own playing I never, and in fact no one I know ever worries about "the dragons" when they play.

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### A Few Suggestions For Taming the Dragons

Dealing with string crossing is only one of the many skills dealt with during the pre-Twinkle and Twinkle period. Here are some challenges for the student that will deal specifically with developing proficiency with inverted string crossings:

1. Teach the 3 "doorbells."

Students should practice both normal and inverted string crossings during and after the Pre-Twinkle Period. The goal is for students to be able to execute both normal and inverted string crossings with equal ease.

Book One repertoire fragments are useful pre-twinkle repertoire, and one of my favorites is the doorbell sounding "B-G" notes at the end of the A section of Rhody. My students practice these with three fingerings:

- a. middle-index (the "easy" doorbell)
- b. index-middle (the "tricky" doorbell)
- c. index-index, or middle-middle (the "dragon" doorbell).

Practicing the "dragon" doorbell does not make it more likely to be used by the student in their playing. Instead, it makes them very aware of how it feels, enabling them to more easily recognize and self

correct this stroke if it shows up in their playing.

2. Starting the Twinkles with the middle finger.

Starting the Twinkles with the middle finger requires the student to deal with an inverted string crossing “right out of the gate”, the very first time they move from a higher to a lower string in their repertoire. This fingering puts this issue right up front and reinforces it as a major skill to be examined in these initial pieces. If dealing with inverted string crossings is a major consideration of "passing" the Twinkles, it will be less of an issue later.

3. Start the various pre-Twinkle “Moonwalk” variations with the middle finger.

This is a useful pre-Twinkle piece that students can be challenged to “graduate” from before beginning the Twinkle variation associated with that rhythm. This offers the same inverted string crossing challenge described with the Twinkles above. Most Suzuki teachers use this piece which I believe was written by Australian guitarist Peter Draper. It is played on the open strings:

Notes, give here in the Twinkle Theme rhythm: GG BB EE BB GG  
Chordal Accompaniment: Em G C B7 Em