

## **Left-Hand Fingering for CBOMs**

### **Arguments and methods supporting the development of consistent left-hand fingering methods on various instruments.**

An article by:

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As a player of plucked strings (bouzouki, tenor banjo, and guitar for Irish traditional music) who is interested in imitating as closely as possible the articulations, phrasing, and interpretation of the core instruments of pipes, flute, and fiddle, I have developed a consistent fingering method which for my purposes best facilitates these goals.

Essentially, there are two common approaches to fingering these longer-scale plucked strings: one is based in fiddle and mandolin approaches, and the other is based in cello and guitar approaches.

I use what is sometimes referred to as "mandolin" fingering, wherein the basic "home" position of the left-hand is in "II position", with the first finger poised above the second fret and the thumb roughly in the middle of the back of the neck. In the mandolin fingering approach, the first finger covers notes on the 1st and 2nd frets, the second finger covers notes on the 3rd and 4th frets, the third finger covers notes on the 5th (and sometimes 6th) frets, and the little finger covers notes on the 7th (and sometimes 6th) frets. This is analogous to what mandolinists and fiddlers do on their much shorter-scale instruments. The advantage to the approach is that it is a close imitation of how fiddlers finger, and facilitates ornamenting, articulating, and phrasing in a close approximation of the fiddle. The disadvantage is that on the longer scale, it can become awkward or nearly impossible to make the requisite stretches with ease and speed.

Others use what is often referred to as the "cello" fingering, wherein the basic "home" position of the left-hand is, similar to the above, in "II position", with the first finger poised above the second fret and the thumb roughly in the middle of the back of the neck. In this approach, the first finger covers the 1st and 2nd frets, the second finger covers the 3rd fret, the third finger covers the 4th fret, and the little finger covers the 5th fret. In other words, with the exception of the first finger, each finger in the left hand is responsible for covering only the notes on a single fret. This is analogous to what cellists and classical guitarists do on their similarly long-scaled instruments. The advantage is that it precludes the necessity of much shifting of position, and is

very efficient, with 1 finger assigned to each fret. The disadvantage is that it does not facilitate quick access above the 5th fret (though this is not an issue if playing on a five-course instrument, where one simply hops over one more string to reach higher notes), and does not encourage close replication of idiomatic fiddle phrasing.

Beyond the two main methods described above, with their cited advantages and disadvantages, there is nothing wrong with working out an individualized method. "Mandolin" fingering facilitates my own personal goals, which are to strive as much as possible to develop a technique that lets me replicate the idiomatic approach to Irish fiddle (see other articles on this site for arguments regarding why this might be a desirable goal).

However, people should use what enables them to play how they want to play. To my mind, it's more important to at some point think critically, analytically, and methodically about all the various aspects of one's technique. "What's helping me? What's hindering me? What am I not doing because my technique prevents it? What do I WANT to be doing, and what technique/method/exercises will help accomplish that?" Those questions are going to get different answers from everyone. The most important thing is not the specific answers at which one arrives, but rather the simple process of asking the questions and then coming up with logical, realistic, and applicable responses you can then put into practice.

Moreover, I think consistency, reliability, and practice are all tremendously valuable in endeavoring to become really free with one's instrument. In learning jazz improvisation, for example, there is tremendous emphasis put on developing and woodshedding a standardized fingering scheme (on horns, keyboards, guitar/bass) because when spontaneously composing a melody, one wants to be able to concentrate on hearing and replicating the sounds, not splitting the attention to simultaneously figure which combination of fingering possibilities works.

This split attention is less of an issue if you're only ever going to play tunes that you've worked out/worked up in the practice room: you just build the individualized fingering pattern into the gestalt of learning and concretizing the rest of your approach to that tune. But in a session situation, where your attention naturally should focus on hearing and replicating what you're hearing, it's nice not to have to split attention and think about fingerings. This is where a standardized, methodical method that is employed consistently from one tune to the next comes in handy. However, if you're not spending much time trying to lift tunes on the fly, and mostly only play things you've practiced, memorized, and fine-tuned in advance, it's probably not much of an issue.