

**The Other Side of Guitar:
Applying Classical Right Hand Technique to Jazz Guitar
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The growing interest in finger style and right hand classical guitar techniques are shifting the harmonic palette of modern jazz guitarists. Following the lead of guitarists in other genres, many jazz guitarists have used their right hand fingers alongside their pick. Whereas pick style players are more closely related to the saxophone and trumpet with their intricate use of single line melodies, finger style players tend to approach the guitar in a more pianistic and/or orchestral manner.

The ability to use one's right hand within a jazz context will only help to expand their harmonic possibilities. Textures can be altered within the context of a single bar and the possibilities for chord melody playing are greatly expanded. Several legendary jazz players have solely used their right hands throughout their careers, such as Gene Bertoncini and Ted Greene, while others switch between a pick and their fingers like John Stowell and Lenny Breau (who used a thumb pick). Either way, one's ability to have a fundamental understanding of right hand technique can only help to push their playing to new and exciting levels.

Within the context of this article we will take a look at how classical guitarists approach right hand technique and how these techniques can be applied to jazz guitar performance.

Example 1

Classical guitarists label their right hand fingers to help them navigate through difficult passages. Since classical guitarists do not normally use their pinky finger, there are four different letters used for the right hand fingers, P = Thumb, I = Index, M = Middle and A = Ring. When playing arpeggiated passages, classical guitarists tend to use their thumb to play the 6th, 5th, and 4th strings, while the index plays the third, the middle the second and the ring the first. Here is how the right hand fingers line up to the open strings of the guitar.

Musical notation for Example 1, showing a 4/4 time signature with a treble clef and a guitar tablature below. The melody consists of six notes: P, P, P, I, M, A. The guitar tablature shows the corresponding fret numbers: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0.

Example 2

Now let us take this right hand approach and apply it to a simply I-V7, C-G7, chord progression. This chord progression is often used in classical right hand exercises, as they are the basis for Mauro Giuliani's book on right hand exercises, which is a staple of the classical guitarist's technical workout.

Musical notation for Example 2, showing a 4/4 time signature with a treble clef and a guitar tablature below. The melody consists of 14 notes: P, P, I, M, A, M, I, P, P, I, M, A, M, I, P, P. The guitar tablature shows the corresponding fret numbers: 3, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 2.

Example 3

In this example we will alter the previous pattern to give us a more interested arpeggio passage. Notice how the eight 8th notes are divided into three groups, 3+3+2, this is a common way to divide eighth notes within a bar that helps give a sense of $\frac{3}{4}$ within a 4/4 context. Notice how the pattern brings out the feeling of 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2, a common feel in pop, rock, jazz and classical music.

Musical notation for Example 3, showing a 4/4 time signature with a treble clef and a guitar tablature below. The melody consists of 14 notes: P, P, I, P, I, M, A, M, P, P, I, P, I, M, A, I. The guitar tablature shows the corresponding fret numbers: 3, 2, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0.

Example 4

Since the previous examples have all dealt with ascending arpeggios, we will now look at how this approach can be applied to descending arpeggios. This “staircase” pattern is found throughout classical guitar literature. For the purposes of this example we will only look at the 1-2-3-4 and 2-3-4-5 descending string pattern, though once you get the hang of this exercise feel free to also use the 3-4-5-6 pattern on the G7 chord with the G added on the 6th string to complete the chord.

Example 5

This next example will mix descending and ascending arpeggios, though now we have a triplet rhythmic pattern driving the exercise. Feel free to experiment with triplets and sixteenth notes with any of these exercises. We can also mix rhythms within a bar, which helps to create interest with the right hand while the left hand remains static.

Example 6

This next example shows how these right hand techniques can be applied to a common chord progression. Here we have taken right hand patterns from the above examples and applied them to the first eight bars of a popular jazz tune that we will call *All the Things You Ain't*. Once you get the hang of this concept try mixing in different right hand rhythms, triples, sixteenth notes etc, and added rests and longer note values to create more interest within the phrase.

Fm7 B^bm7 E^b7 A^bmaj7
 p p i m a m i p p i m a m i p p p p i m a m i p p i m a m i p p
 T 8 10 8 9 8 9 8 10 | 8 10 9 9 9 10 8 8 | 6 8 6 8 6 8 6 8 | 6 8 8 8 8 6 6
 A
 B 8 10 8 9 8 9 8 10 | 8 10 9 9 9 10 8 8 | 6 8 6 8 6 8 6 8 | 6 8 8 8 8 6 6

D^bmaj7 G7 D^b7 Cmaj7
 p p i m a m i p p i m a p p m i p p i m p i m a p i m a p i m a
 T 4 6 5 6 4 6 5 6 | 5 7 6 7 | 3 5 4 5 0 2 1 1 | 2 4 3 3 0 2 1 1
 A
 B 4 6 5 6 4 6 5 6 | 5 7 6 7 | 3 5 4 5 0 2 1 1 | 2 4 3 3 0 2 1 1

Example 7

Another approach classical guitarist's use when playing chords is the two at a time concept. Here we will divide a four note chord into two groups of two notes each by playing the first and third notes followed by the second and fourth notes each chord together. This approach is reminiscent of the ballad piano style of Bill Evans and can be heard in the playing of guitarists like John Stowell, Lenny Breau and Sid Jacobs.

Dm7 G7^b9 Cmaj7 A7^b9
 m a cont'd....
 p i
 T 1 0 1 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 3 0 3 | 2 3 2 3
 A 3 2 3 2 | 3 1 3 1 | 2 2 2 2 | 2 3 2 3
 B 3 2 3 2 | 3 1 3 1 | 2 2 2 2 | 2 3 2 3

Example 8

Here is another right hand pattern that we can apply to our ii-V-I-VI progression. We are now playing the outer two notes followed by the inner two notes. This is a great way to bring out the melody in a tune as the large interval below the melody note creates an accent that is clearly heard by the listener.

Example 9

The last two note example has our right hand playing the lower two and the upper two notes together. This is a great way to comp behind a horn player or singer, as the smaller intervals provide a more percussive sound than the larger intervals heard in earlier examples.

Example 10

In this example we will take the two at a time approach and apply it to our standard chord progression from example six. Notice that this approach is more suited for slower tempos, whereas the one at a time right hand patterns can be played over faster tempo tunes.

The image displays two staves of guitar music. The first staff is in 4/4 time and features four measures of chords: Fm7, Bbm7, Eb7, and Abmaj7. The top staff shows the chord voicings, and the bottom staff shows the fingerings for the top (T) and bottom (B) strings. The second staff continues with four measures of chords: Dbmaj7, Dm7, G7b9, and Cmaj7, also showing chord voicings and fingerings for the top and bottom strings.

The right hand techniques commonly used by classical and finger style players can be a valuable asset to a jazz guitarist. It enables one to open up the guitar, expanding it beyond playing chord grips or relying solely on single lines, to produce a sound that is more reminiscent of a pianist. When the situation is right using ones fingers can allow the guitar to emulate a keyboard, both in its texture and accompaniment patterns. This can be a very simple means of separating oneself from the crowd of plectrum guitar players as the expanded right hand variety allows for many new solo and chordal possibilities. Using our right hand fingers allows us to more easily develop chord melody sections and even gives us the opportunity to comp for ourselves during melody and solo sections. As well, the ability to change timbres from a pick to ones fingers allows for a larger palette when playing behind a soloist that can help push that soloist to new and exciting heights. Developing ones right hand and learning the harmonic possibilities that it supports can nicely complement a traditional pick style approach: who says both can't live in perfect harmony?

Fingerstyle Players and Essential Albums

Jazz

Gene Bertoncini – *Body and Soul*

George Van Epps – *Legends of Jazz Guitar*

Ben Monder - *Dust*

Ralph Towner - *Anthem*

Fingerstyle

Tommy Emmanuel – *Center Stage*

Muriel Anderson – *Hometown Live!*

Alex DeGrassi – *The Water Garden*

Brad Richter – *A Whisper in the Desert*

Classical

Andrew York – *Perfect Sky*

David Russell – *Air on a G String*

Sergio Assad – *Sergio and Omar Assad GHA*

Dusan Bogdanovic – *Mysterious Habitats*