

# Fingerpicking Concepts

In addition to strumming, a song's rhythm can be produced by fingerpicking, that is, using the right hand's fingers to pluck the strings in a certain order. Many people refer to this technique as arpeggios.

## Arpeggios or Patterns?

In the classical approach, however, arpeggios actually refer to a very specific pattern of notes (not strings) within a chord following the 1-3-5 principle, that is, sequentially playing just the notes that correspond to the first, third and fifth positions within a chord and not just to picking around the chord randomly. The numbers "1-3-5" do not refer to which string to pluck, but to which note to play within a chord.

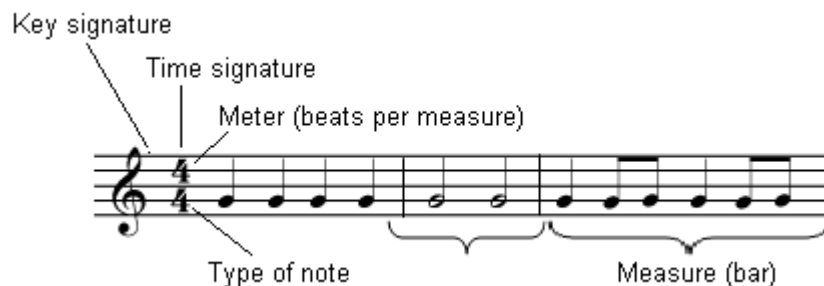
Non-classical styles, including folk, country, soft rock and others, often play different sequences of strings within a chord. The plucking sequence results in playing notes other than the first, third and fifth positions within the chord, in a repeated pattern. For example, a "5-3-2-1" fingerpicking pattern refers to which string to play within the chord, in sequence: fifth, third, second and first strings. Therefore, we will refer to this style as "picking patterns" instead of "arpeggios".

## Hand Position

Although there are no rules forcing you to use a specific finger for each string being plucked, the classical-style hand and finger positioning is recommended. In summary, the thumb plays the base strings (6, 5, 4), the index finger plays string 3, the middle finger plays string 2, and the ring finger plays string 1, in the order specified by the picking pattern. As in typing, using all fingers instead of just two allows you more fluidity and likely speed.

## Music Notation Concepts

Music is arranged with regards to time, and its speed defines its tempo. In musical notation, this information is spelled out at the beginning of the score, by a time signature:



The time signature tells you the basic rhythm (meter) of the song, and how (type of notes) it is written. The type of note determines how long a note plays (whole, half, quarter, eighth, etc.) A measure is a portion of the song (notes inside the bar), with a total value equal to the meter (number of beats). A measure can be counted. In a song, there is always the same number of beats in each bar.

Common time signatures are: 2/2, 3/4, 4/4 (or  $\text{C}$ ), 6/8, 12/8, etc.



## Determining a Picking Pattern

In order to determine which picking pattern to use, you must determine the meter, or count, of the song. It is the *top number on the time signature*. If there is no sheet music available, you can determine the meter by carefully listening to the song and counting the beats.

Once you have the count, find a picking pattern that plays the same number of beats as the count. For example, if the song's count is 4, you need a pattern that produces four sounds (e.g. strings 5-3-2-1). If the count is 6, you need a pattern that produces six sounds (e.g. strings 6-3-2-1-2-3). Keep in mind that a count, or sound, may be comprised of several strings plucked *at the same time* (e.g. strings 6+1-3-2-1).

After trying several possibilities, including variations (explained below), simply choose the pattern you think sounds best for the song.

## Patterns by Count

Here are some picking patterns organized by count. Practice these, independently of songs, to build up the necessary skills to consistently play the sequence in tempo.

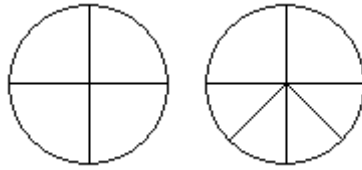
Count	Pattern (sequence of <i>strings</i> to play)
2	B - <u>3+2+1</u>
3	B - <u>3+2+1</u> - <u>3+2+1</u> <u>B+1</u> - 2 - 3
4	B - 3 - 2 - 1 B - 1 - 2 - 3 B - 2 - 3 - 1
6	B - 3 - 2 - 1 - 2 - 3 B - 2 - 3 - 1 - 2 - 3
8	B - 3 - 2 - 3 - 1 - 3 - 2 - 3 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

The letter “B” stands for the base (or alternate base) string (whether 6, 5 or 4) for the chord being played. The chord's fingering determines the notes produced by the sequence of strings being plucked. Thus, patterns for the same count will sound different depending on the song. Again, choose the pattern that you think sounds best, or create your own sequence but use it consistently within the whole song.

## Variations

You can also accomplish a slightly different sound by performing some “calculations” on the count. For example, a count of 6 could also be played as two patterns of three ( $6 \div 2 = 3$ , e.g. strings 6-3-2, 5-2-1), or two counts of 4 as a pattern of eight ( $4+4=8$ , e.g. strings 6-3-2-3-1-3-2-3).

Sometimes patterns that match the count may sound a bit empty, or too slow. In that case, it is possible to include more sounds in the same count by playing faster notes. You may think of it as taking a pizza cut in four slices, and further slicing two - you still have the same total but some slices are smaller:



In the case of picking patterns, a count of 4 can be “calculated” as six sounds: “1 / &2 / 3 / &4” (e.g.  $\underline{6+1} / 2-3 / \underline{6+1} / 2-3$ ). If it becomes too difficult to play, you can always substitute some of the fast counts for “silences”, which are pauses you let happen instead of plucking a string. Any arrangement will work as long as the count matches the song’s meter.

## Melody and Rhythm

Melody and rhythm are two of the four elements of music. *Melody* is defined as a “successive line of single tones or pitches perceived as a unity”. For practical purposes, let’s say it is the notes that make the song itself, as when you sing the lyrics (tune). *Rhythm* is defined as “measured flow or movement”. For practical purposes, let’s say it is the beat of the song, as when you clap along or tap your foot to the song.

When playing guitar, rhythm comes from strumming or from the picking pattern you choose. The chord simply provides the notes that sound to the rhythm as *accompaniment*, that is, as support or background for other musical parts. However, neither strumming nor picking a chord provides the melody.

When playing guitar, the melody often comes from singing or from another instrument. To play the melody, you must specifically play only the notes found in the song’s unique “successive line of single tones”. You can find such notes in the song’s sheet music or in the song’s tablature. Again, playing the melody is pretty much playing the exact notes you would sing as you sing the song or its harmony.

If the melody and accompaniment are played in the same key, they share the same group of pitches. Thus, somewhere in the chords played you can find the notes that make up the melody.

## Playing “classical-style”

“Classical-style” guitar playing allows you to simultaneously provide both the melody and the accompaniment. In order to accomplish this, you must be able to play the notes of the tune *at the same time* you play other notes within the chord that provide background and rhythm.

This is not the same as consistently plucking a picking pattern for a sequence of chords: it is playing the melody while “filling in the blanks” with a pattern. The notes in the melody must be played at their exact time, and the accompaniment must fill the rest of each measure or bar to correctly match the song’s meter or count all through the song.

When actually playing classical guitar, that is, for those able to read musical notation, it is all spelled out: the meter, the notes, the sequence to play and how long to play each note – including the notes that make the melody, the notes that make the harmony, and the notes that become the accompaniment.

However, if you cannot read music, you can still play the song “classical-style”. It takes a good ear, practice and patience. If you want to try, follow these steps:

1. Select a song you are familiar with, or familiarize yourself with a song you like.
2. Find a reliable tabbed version of the song. If you can, find also the sheet music.

3. Learn to play the melody only. It will sound like a “kiddie” version of the song. Still, you must be able to play it in tempo.
4. Learn to play the accompaniment (chords). Get a good feel for the rhythm – some songs sound better strummed, others with picking patterns.
5. If you only strummed, you must determine the song’s meter, select a picking pattern, and practice it until you are able to keep your tempo.
6. Once you are independently comfortable with the melody and the picking, identify and mark the notes that make up the melody *within* the notes tabbed for the chords.
7. Within each measure, play the melody’s notes and fill the rest of the measure by playing the selected pattern on the corresponding chord. Remember to *always play the melody’s note* when it is time for it. Remember *not to exceed the count* per measure as you fill in with the accompaniment.
8. Practice until you can play fluidly.

Putting it together takes practice, and it takes a good ear to measure your timing, but it is well worth it!