

Sweep Picking

By Neal Nagaoka

This is a technique that was adapted to guitar from violin. A commonly used technique that is used to execute arpeggios. Many people tend to think that this technique sounds very Classical sounding which it can if used with a Classical sounding progression. Well hopefully this will break that myth but I suggest we take these in steps so we will start with the typically generic sounding Classical examples first.

Lets start with the basic triads. Major shape and the Minor shape. I usually tend to relate them with open chord shapes. What I mean by this is for example, take 1a. This pattern is a A major Arpeggio but if you look closely, the pattern reminds of an A Barre chord at the 12th fret or you can look at it as an open A chord but 12 frets higher. Example 1b. is an A minor arpeggio that looks similar to an open A minor chord. Example 2a looks like an E chord and 3a looks like a D chord while 2b looks like an E minor chord and 3b looks like a D Minor Chord.

1.a A Major Root Position

1.b A Minor Root Position

T
A
B

2.a E Major 1st Inversion

2.b E Minor 1st Inversion

T
A
B

3.a D Major 2nd Inversion

3.b D Minor 2nd Inversion

T
A
B

The key to executing these cleanly is basically to do them over and over but I highly recommend practicing these with a metronome at a slow speed. The object of making the sweeps sound good is to make sure they are even and in tempo. Lets take example 1a. Since this pattern contains 12 notes, we have to systematically break them up into 2 groups of 6s. Think of the ascending half as group one and the descending half as group two. Another thing to keep in mind is when there are 2 notes on a string, pick just the first note and hammer on the second note. The only exception to this is when you are actually using the second note as a pivot point like in the 7th note in the example below. Once you have mastered this, the technique will gradually become much easier to do with any arpeggio.

4a. A Major Root Position

T
A
B

Group 1 Group 2

Exercise 4b. shows the actual direction of the picking and which notes to hammer on and pull off. Just remember when you practice these to keep them as even as possible and in time.

Λ = Up stroke H = Hammer On
 V = Down stroke P = Pull Off

4b. A Major Root Position

T
A
B

V H V V V V Λ P Λ Λ Λ Λ

So now you have the basic idea of how to sweep an arpeggio but the next question usually follows, "How do I use them when I am playing a song or when I am improvising?". One common way to use them is to follow a chord progression. Lets take example 5 with a generic I vi IV V progression in the key of C Major.

Example 5a Generic progression in C Major

The next step is to decide which arpeggios to use to follow this progression. This ones up to you but for practical purposes, I reccomend mixing different inversions around so you dont have to jump around the entire fretboard to follow a progression. Below, I have given several possibilities to follow the progression so try to find one that you think feels most comfortable for you at first and then try experimenting.

Example 5b. Parallel motion

Treble clef staff with melodic line. Bass staff with fret numbers: 15, 20, 19, 17, 18, 17, 20, 17, 18, 17, 19, 20, 17, 22, 19, 20, 19, 21, 22.

6/8 Treble clef staff with melodic line. Bass staff with fret numbers: 10, 15, 14, 12, 13, 12, 15, 12, 13, 12, 14, 15, 12, 15, 14, 14, 13, 12, 17, 12, 13, 14, 14, 15.

Example 5c. Usage of Inversions

6/8 Treble clef staff with melodic line. Bass staff with fret numbers: 10, 15, 14, 12, 13, 12, 15, 12, 13, 12, 14, 15, 12, 15, 14, 14, 13, 12, 17, 12, 13, 14, 14, 15.

6/8 Treble clef staff with melodic line. Bass staff with fret numbers: 12, 15, 15, 14, 13, 13, 17, 13, 13, 14, 15, 15, 14, 17, 17, 16, 15, 15, 19, 15, 15, 16, 17, 17.

One other thing is that you don't always have to start from the bottom note. For a change, reversing the pattern can be a nice way to break the monotony.

15 12 13 12 14 15 10 15 14 12 13 12 12 17 12 13 14 14 15

17 13 13 14 15 15 12 15 15 14 13 13 14 17 17 16 15 15 19 15 15 16 17 17

Another possibility is to use smaller sized arpeggios or portions of the sweep arpeggios. Remember that they don't always have to be really large sweeps. Sometimes the smaller ones can be just as difficult or at times, even more difficult.

15 12 13 12 13 12 17 12 13 14 13 12 17 13 13 14 13 13 15 10 12 12 12 10

Advanced Sweep Picking

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In this section, we will try to use more complex shapes and patterns for sweep picking. Sweeping of 7th chord arpeggios is also a great way to use them to give it a more jazzy flavor.

A Major 7th

Musical notation for A Major 7th sweep picking exercise. The top staff shows a treble clef, key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5, D5, C#5, B4, A4, G#4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The sequence of frets is: T (12, 16), A (14, 13, 14, 14, 14, 13, 14), B (12, 16).

A Minor 7

Musical notation for A Minor 7 sweep picking exercise. The top staff shows a treble clef, key signature of one flat (F), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The sequence of frets is: T (12, 15), A (14, 13, 14, 13, 17, 16, 17, 13), B (12, 15).

A Domanant 7

Musical notation for A Domanant 7 sweep picking exercise. The top staff shows a treble clef, key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5, D5, C#5, B4, A4, G#4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The sequence of frets is: T (12, 16), A (14, 12, 14, 14, 12, 15, 17, 15, 12), B (12, 16).

A Minor 7b5

Musical notation for A Minor 7b5 sweep picking exercise. The top staff shows a treble clef, key signature of one flat (F), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The sequence of frets is: T (12, 15), A (13, 12, 14, 13, 11, 15, 17, 15, 11), B (12, 15).

Another possibility, sweeping 7th's with slides and in octaves pairing. This method will allow you to do those really long and continuous sweeps once you master the technique.

C maj 7th

T
A
B

8 12 10 9 10 14 12 12 13 12 12 14 10 14 12 13 12 15 19 20 19 15 17 17 16 17 19 15

Gliss.

Same idea but in a minor key

C min 7th

T
A
B

8 11 10 8 10 13 12 11 13 11 12 13 10 13 12 11 13 16 15 18 20 18 15 16 17 15 17 18 15

H P H H Gliss. P P

A sequenced set of 7th arpeggios. One of my personal favorites. Below are examples of combining different arpeggios in a sequential pattern.

Diminished 7th Sweeps

Last but not least, no sweep picking method would be complete without the Diminished 7th arpeggios.

The diminished 7th arpeggios are very distinct sounding arpeggios which are derived from the Harmonic Minor. Due to the dark quality it possesses, many people tend to think that it sounds very Neo-classical. Due to the nature of this arpeggio being evenly divided by 4 minor 3rd intervals, the arpeggio is very symmetrical in shape, (Hence the term "Symetric Diminished Scale"). Here are a few examples using the Diminished 7ths.

Musical notation for a diminished 7th sweep in 4/4 time, starting on the 11th fret. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff, and the guitar fretboard is shown below with fingerings for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings. The fret numbers are: T: 10, 13, 10, 12, 13, 10; A: 12, 10, 13; B: 11, 14, 12, 13, 10, 12, 13, 10, 12, 14, 11.

Musical notation for a diminished 7th sweep in 4/4 time, starting on the 13th fret. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff, and the guitar fretboard is shown below with fingerings for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings. The fret numbers are: T: 13, 10, 12, 10, 16, 13, 15, 13, 19, 16, 18, 16, 22, 19, 21, 22, 19, 22, 21, 19; A: 13, 10, 13, 12, 10, 13, 15, 16, 13, 16, 15, 13, 19, 16, 19, 18, 19, 16, 19, 21, 22, 19, 22, 21, 19; B: 13, 10, 13, 12, 10, 13, 15, 16, 13, 16, 15, 13, 19, 16, 18, 16, 22, 19, 21, 22, 19, 22, 21, 19.

Musical notation for a diminished 7th sweep in 4/4 time, starting on the 4th fret. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff, and the guitar fretboard is shown below with fingerings for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings. The fret numbers are: T: 10, 13, 16; A: 9, 12, 10, 13, 16; B: 4, 7, 5, 8, 6, 9, 7, 10, 9, 12, 10, 13, 16.

The image shows a musical score for guitar, consisting of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with four measures, each starting with a sixteenth-note triplet. The notes in the first measure are G4, A4, B4, C5, with a sharp sign above the second note. The second measure has G4, A4, B4, C5. The third measure has G4, A4, B4, C5, with a flat sign above the first note. The fourth measure has G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass staff contains a bass line with four measures, each starting with a sixteenth-note triplet. The notes in the first measure are G2, A2, B2, C3. The second measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The third measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The fourth measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The score is marked with a repeat sign at the beginning and end. The guitar parts are labeled T, A, and B on the left side of the bass staff.