



GUITAR

Self Containment at its Best

by Jason Vanselow

One of the things that I like most about guitar is that it is a multi-faceted instrument. It can be both a single line and polyphonic instrument and it has the ability to both accompany other musicians or to play self contained solo pieces.

The beginning of any student's journey is focused on simply getting a melody to make sense or to get their fingers to make a chord actually sound good. But about eight weeks (and sometimes sooner) into the journey it becomes time to start playing self-contained pieces.

There are many different approaches to this transition but the way that I recommend features two different types of pieces that feature techniques that offer a fairly smooth transition to more advanced solo guitar playing.

The first type of piece is one that separates the melody and the accompaniment into two different voices. These voices are notated in the same way that choral music is sometimes notated: two voices share one staff, the stems of the notes from the higher sounding voice always pointed up, the stems of the lower sounding voice always pointed down.

These types of pieces generally feature a single line melody that is an extension of the types of melodies that the student has already played and a simple accompaniment.

As beginning students are usually still getting used to the idea of playing a coherent melody and the accompaniment is the new part of this process, it's a good idea to find pieces that have very simple accompaniments, maybe one or two notes per measure. Two of the most tricky concepts for beginning students are having the fretboard hand play two notes at the same time that are not part of a standard chord shape and playing two notes at the same time with the plucking hand. So the most successful pieces at this stage will feature accompaniments that do not have simultaneous attacks with the melody.

Example 1 features the first phrase of a piece with these characteristics. In this particular piece the melody is the soprano line and the accompaniment is the bass. This doesn't need to be the case, as a successful player will need to be able to play a melody in both the treble and bass ranges. Another thing to notice is the use of ties and rests in the accompaniment. It can be really difficult for a student to get both notes to ring long enough to overlap each other. The ties are meant as a reminder for the student not to immediately put their thumb back on the strings, which will stop the sound. On the flip side, stopping a string at a specific time is a very useful tool as well.



Example 1

These pieces can be really successful with beginning players because they are a natural extension of the melodic playing they most likely have already been doing.

The second type of piece is an arpeggio piece. Right hand arpeggios are one of the basic skills that every fingerstyle or classical player needs to develop and are used in almost every style of music that a guitar player will encounter from accompanying a singer in a pop song to playing an advanced level solo piece by Fernando Sor.

As well as being good right hand practice, these pieces are good for working on making basic chord shapes in the left hand, shifting from one chord to another and a good beginning exercise for recognizing chords written out in notation.

Arpeggio pieces are notated in a couple of different ways. In Example 2, all of the notes are stemmed exactly the same, so that the piece presents simply a series of arpeggios. In Example 3, the first note of the arpeggio is stemmed separately suggesting that the bass note is also a melody. This is a subtle difference, but depending on the skill set and goals of the student, focusing on having a melody and accompaniment together can be beneficial.



Example 2



Example 3

Both of these types of pieces can be found in a myriad of sources. Collections of the music of Aguado, Sor, Giuliani, and Sagreras all feature compositions of this type. I also recommend The Royal Conservatory of Music Guitar Series out of Toronto, published by Frederick Harris for a whole slew of compositions from all different musical eras.

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