



GUITAR

A Little Slurring Never Hurt Anyone

by Jason Vanselow

As with bowed string instruments, slurs are an important tool for any guitarist. They add a musical dimension to any phrase by smoothing out potentially awkward articulations by easing the burden of the right hand and can also make faster passages easier to negotiate. They also are good for building general hand strength and accuracy.

In this column, I'm not going to talk about the specific mechanics of slurs. They are described in any number of incredibly useful publications such as Scott Tennant's must-have technical manual *Pumping Nylon*. But I would like to offer a progression of different exercises that I use to introduce slurs to students and get them comfortable with this particular skill.

The first slur exercise that I present to my class was suggested to me by Dr. James Flegel. This exercise, which he called "thumps," breaks down the motion of the ascending slur, also known as a "hammer on" to a very basic motion. Without using the right hand, the first finger hammers on to the first fret and sounds the pitch of that fret. After the pitch is sounded, the finger then lifts off the string and stops right above the fret so that it is ready to perform the hammer on again. This works best with a specific rhythm, a quarter note for the hammer on, and a quarter note for the recovery.

After performing two hammer ons with the first finger, move on to the second finger on second fret. Then third finger on third fret and so on. At first you can stay in first position and simply work on using the first four frets. But once a student is used to this, you can expand this out to the whole fretboard: perform the exercise on the first four frets and then shift first finger to fifth fret and perform the whole thing in fifth position, and then in ninth position.

The same basic exercise can be performed with descending slurs, known as pull offs. Start with first finger on the string, play the pitch as normal, plucking the string with right hand, and then pull the first finger off the string so that the finger rests for a moment on the fretboard next to the string. After the finger touches the fretboard, the finger resets on the string ready to play the pitch again. Try to discourage students from letting the finger lift off the string away from the fretboard. This awkward motion produces far less sound and pulls the finger out of position to play the next note.

Again, it works best if the student can perform this with a strict rhythm so that one hears the first fret pitch for a quarter note, and then the open string for a quarter note. As with hammer ons, students can practice this on the first four frets at first, and then expand it out to a whole chromatic scale up to twelfth fret and back.

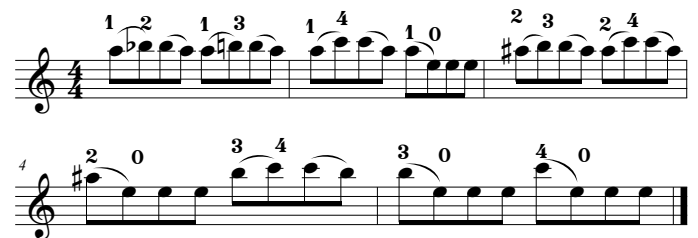
Once students are used to the basic motion of hammer ons

and pull offs, the next step is to either hammer on or pull off to other fretted pitches rather than open strings. The most basic way to do this is to have the student place first finger on a given fret, play that pitch and then hammer second finger on one fret higher. If you apply a basic rhythm to this, you hear the first finger pitch for a quarter note and the second finger pitch for a quarter note.

For pull offs, place both first and second fingers on the string on adjacent frets, play the second finger note and then pull off the second finger note so that the first finger note is heard. Again, keeping a steady beat will help students regulate the timing of the exercise.

After this basic concept is mastered, you can start introducing slurs into melodies. Students can generally hear the difference when slurs are used versus two picked notes. It can also be a lot of fun to listen to recordings with them and pick out times when the pros are using slurs.

By the end of a one-semester class, I generally am using slurs in most of the melodies that I have students play, but I also use the attached exercise. This exercise promotes more musicality in the use of slurs and can be flexible in terms of how it is used.



As you can see, it uses all the different finger combinations. I tend to use it in the middle of the fretboard, with first finger on fifth fret. But it can be transposed to anywhere on the fretboard. It also can be moved to any of the other strings. Using this exercise on the lower frets can also help students begin navigating the longer stretches that occur lower on the fretboard.

Slurs are a tool that every guitar player should have in their toolbox. Great players use them to enhance the musicality of phrases, alleviate awkward technical passages, and aid in the performance of speedier passages. While they can be challenging at first, they are ultimately a satisfying skill to master.

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