

Speed Exercises

for Guitar Tablature

This is an exercise that was bestowed on me by a great teacher in the Boston area, Mark White. Legend has it that this exercise was performed by John McLaughlin constantly after his first album, "Extrapolation". McLaughlin is one of the greatest advancing guitarists in the world today. Check him out sometime. This is an exercise that can be used by other instrumentalists as well.

Notice that the initial "tune" is a scale in 5ths. This means that we play the first note of the scale (the A major scale in this example) and go five notes ahead. Depending on what scale you're using, this may or may not mean that the "tune" is in perfect 5ths. In this example, we're using perfect 5ths. This means that from whatever note you start on, you can think of it as "Do" and the succeeding note would be "Sol". However, if you use a different scale, such as various diminished scales and altered scales, you won't always come up with perfect 5ths.

The idea is this: start on the first note of the scale, go to the note a fifth higher, then to the fifth higher than that, and keep going in fifths. You are not going to get more than 4-5 notes in succession this way. You have to skip a string to do this correctly. My first example shows this with 4 notes, all a fifth apart:

One Two Three Four

Play this at a moderately slow tempo, preferably along with a metronome or a drum machine. This exercise is about timing. When you feel that you've got this under your fingers, you can start filling in the missing notes between a starting note and its relative fifth.

One-ee - & - ah-Two Three Four

Keeping the first "tune" going, fill in the notes between the next two adjacent notes:

One Two Three - ee - & - ah Four

Again, keeping the "tune" going, fill in the notes in between the last pair:

Bear in mind, particularly for guitarists, this may only be an exercise for this particular fingering. You'll want to do this using different fingerings of the major scale as well as for other major scales.

Make sure to use this exercise with different major scale fingerings, different keys, and with different scales as well. The same exercise could be used with the modes, such as Dorian, Aeolian(Natural Minor), Phrygian, Mixolydian, Lydian, and Locrian, with a little editing to the examples I've shown here. In fact, in such cases, you could just change the key signature and have a different modal thing happening. Play these examples using the key of one sharp, effectively making this a Dorian exercise to begin with. Use the key of one flat to make it Phrygian, etc. Once you get the quarter note groove going in tempo, the 16th notes in between should become like one flourish as opposed to considering them as 5 separate notes. A timekeeper is really important for this exercise, so you may want to consider an investment in a metronome or a drum machine to keep you honest on note flourishes that are physically a little more difficult to play.