

Picking exercises

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music
christopher.smith@ttu.edu
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

These exercises were originally designed for developing flatpicking facility on 6-string guitar, but can be readily adapted to other instruments including bouzouki, cittern, and mandolin.

These exercises are primarily designed to develop right hand independence, relaxation, and wrist control. At all times when doing them, you should stay conscious of the musculature in your right forearm, biceps and shoulder. If they're tight, you're forcing the exercises, and need to stop, relax, do some loosening exercises, and begin again.

For best results, you need to be sitting upright, feet flat on the floor, arms unencumbered and hanging relaxed from the points of your shoulders. I'd suggest holding the instrument in a relaxed comfortable fashion such that it sits on your lap or chest without any contact from your arms (contact to hold the instrument can yield undesirable tension). So, either sit classical-style with the left foot up on a stool and the waist of the instrument on the raised left knee, or else use a strap to cinch the instrument up comfortably on your chest. Strap is best, because it holds the instrument at the same angle and elevation whether you are seated or standing.

These exercises primarily work the right hand. That being the case, we don't even bother to finger chords with the left hand (in my experience, the instant you finger a chord, you start trying to "make music" out of what you're playing. The goal is not music here: it's pure physiological training).

We're going to be working on the following ideal:

- * hand loose, floating over the strings
- * forearm rested only lightly on the face of the instrument, NOT gripping in any fashion
- * picking motion coming from a very relaxed wrist: the elbow and shoulder do not play a primary role. Rather, the wrist is the pivot point, with a sort of "springy" relaxation in the forearm and biceps. This way, when you're 'comping big chords, the forearm and biceps come into it more. But when you're picking complex lines, most of the back-and-forth motion is in the wrist.
- * strict picking patterns, determined on the basis of the fundamental subdivision of the beat.

If the basic subdivision is groupings of duple eighth-notes (2/4, 3/4, 4/4, etc), then we will use a strict alternate picking, with the downstroke on the emphasized downbeat.

That is:

D U D U D U D U D U etc

We maintain this alternating pattern no matter what kind of string-crossing is involved.

If the basic subdivision is groupings of triplet eighth-notes (6/8, 9/8, 12/8, etc), we will be using a regularly repeating by asymmetrical pattern which always places the downstroke on the emphasized downbeat.

That is:

DUD DUD DUD DUD DUD DUD etc

Note:

In playing, we will be forgetting all of this stuff and just thinking about the lines. But we're training the body here; we want to get the motions so intuitive and so comfortable and so controlled that we can be very relaxed with them, and yet still have very simple and consistent picking feel natural.

WARNING: Watch out for tension.

There's a simple equation here in terms of muscle control:

Lack of precision equals tension.

If you haven't quite got the control developed so as to be precise yet totally relaxed, the tendency is to tighten up in an effort to be more precise. And this starts a vicious circle, where the tighter we get, the tenser the muscles, and the more that relaxed precision deteriorates.

THE EXERCISES

You can do these exercises with a metronome going on quarter notes. Obviously, do them slowly enough that you're not tightening up to meet the tempo. We're not working on speed here. The metronome is not a yardstick to force us to play faster, but rather a point of reference, like a heartbeat, which we can listen for and rely upon so that we can get very relaxed, precise, and steady.

I. Picking 16th notes (D=down; U=up), starting on the low E string.

Open E: (16ths) DUDU

1st fret F: DUDU

2nd finger/fret F#: DUDU

3rd finger/fret G: DUDU

4th finger/fret G#: DUDU

CROSS to

5th string 1st finger/fret A#: DUDU

2nd finger/2nd fret B: DUDU

[continue similarly up to high E string until]

1st finger/fret F: DUDU

2nd finger/fret F#: DUDU

3rd finger/fret G: DUDU

4th finger/fret G#: DUDU

SHIFT up to 2nd position, and reverse direction on the high E:

4th finger/5th fret A: DUDU

3rd finger/4th fret G#: DUDU

2nd finger/3rd fret G: DUDU

1st finger/2nd fret F#: DUDU

CROSS (still descending) to B string: continue descending, and crossing strings, to the low E.

Then reverse direction, pick 4 16th notes on each chromatic note ascending.

Work your way up to 9th position, and then work all the way back down. The whole process takes about 10 minutes.

These are steady 16th notes to the quarter note pulse. You're picking with a relaxed wrist from the low E: E-F-F#-G F-F#-G-G# F#-G-G#-A etc. Goal is that the wrist remain relaxed, the picked notes very consistent in attack and volume, whether down or up, and that your alternate picking and its consistency continue across strings and thru positions.

II. We're going to use pairs of open strings. eg:

Low E & A

A & D

D & G

G & B

B & E

Pick DUDU on each pair in 16th notes.

So: EAEA EAEA EAEA EAEA

Then reverse AEAE AEAE AEAE AEAE

[NOTE: this means DOWN on the A string, and UP on the E string.

Keep it consistent and relaxed]

Then pick UDUD on each pair in 16th notes.

So: EAEA EAEA EAEA EAEA

[NOTE: this means UP on the E string, and DOWN on the A string,

consistent and relaxed]

AEAE AEAE AEAE AEAE

The goal is that we're trying to separate moving across the strings from the direction of the pick. So that we can jump "downwards" from the E to the A, while picking "upwards" on the E, and down on the A.

Do this with each pair of strings. Then do it with non-adjacent pairs, eg:

E & D

A & G

D & B

G & B

Now we're going to use "matched pairs," eg:

E & D

A & G

A & G

D & B

D & B

G & E

So, for example, pick DUDU:

EDAG EDAG EDAG EDAG

Then pick UDUD:

EDAG EDAG EDAG EDAG

Then pick DUDU:

AEGD AEGD AEGD AEGD

Then pick UDUD:

AEGD AEGD AEGD AEGD

Continue thru all matched pairs.

Then reverse the direction:

G & E

B & D

D & B

A & G

A & G

E & D

Picking in all combinations of string pairs and pick direction.

III. Now we're going to work with 8th-note triplets instead of 16ths, on sets of 3 strings.

For example:

EAD

ADG

DGB

GBE

We're going to pick in all possibilities of alternate picking on triplets, eg:

DUD UDU DUD UDU UDU DUD UDU DUD

We are not going to break the strictness of the alternate picking when we cross strings, or when we begin a new triplet.

Using each set of 3 strings, picking consistently DUD UDU etc.

EAD EAD EAD EAD DAE DAE DAE DAE

This means that we're going to be picking down on the D, up on the A, down on the E, up on the D, down on the A, up on the E, etc.

Work thru each set of three strings, moving in all alternate picking "starting directions," and in all string orders.

Then we're going to pick on adjacent sets of 3 strings, eg:

EAD

ADG

EAD

ADG

EAD

ADG

EAD

ADG

(using strict DUD UDU alternate picking).

ADG EAD

ADG EAD

ADG EAD

ADG EAD

DAE GDA

DAE GDA

DAE GDA

DAE GDA

GDA DAE

GDA DAE

GDA DAE

GDA DAE

Work through all "adjacent sets" of 3 strings:

EAD ADG

ADG DGB

DGB GBE

Use strict DUD UDU alternate picking; start in all combinations:

EAD ADG

DAE GDA

ADG EAD

GDA DAE

IV. From here you can probably develop more exercises. The idea is to be completely relaxed. If you tighten up, stop, shake out the shoulder/arm/ wrist, slow the tempo, start again. Always with strict alternate picking, even when jumping awkward directions across strings. These exercises of course are fantastic for bluegrass flatpicking, but they also do great things for developing the ideal "floating wrist" (ie, not anchored). Also, you get a lot more precise, a lot more relaxed, and you can control the dynamic of the pick attack much more: drive the top when you want a big sound, relax and lighten up when you want dynamic contrast.

I got these exercises from jazz guitarist Dean Magraw (now working with John Williams) many years ago. Thanks to Dean for early inspiration and great teaching.