

# Warm-ups for guitar

## Paul White

### Why warm up?

The first question with warm-ups is: why should my students warm up? The simple answer is that it will make them better musicians.

You can break the warm-up down into two distinct areas: the physical and the mental. The physical concerns your muscles and tendons, and how they need to be warmed up, in the same way that an athlete would do, in order to maximise what you can do with your hands, but also to prevent injuries. Warming up to play the guitar might not seem as obviously beneficial as it is for, say, a vocalist or a drummer, but is nonetheless very important if you want your hands to do what you want them to do.

The mental side is primarily about getting your students' brains into gear, and thinking in the right way to make the lesson as productive as possible.

### Time constraints

With lessons generally lasting 30 minutes or less, I'd suggest that if you are going to put these warm-ups into action, you will only be able to do two or three per lesson. With this in mind, I'd suggest tailoring the warm-ups to the student – if you have a student who has coordination problems, there are warm-ups for that, and if you have a student who doesn't know the notes on the fretboard, there are warm-up for that too.

It's about developing a good practice routine that your students can follow when they're at home, one that serves as both a warm-up and also has an educational value that will help them to become better guitarists.

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## Warm ups for different ability levels

### Easy and intermediate

These first warm-ups are suitable for Grade Initial/Debut through to Grade 3, but can be used for any ability level.

#### The Caterpillar

The first warm-up is one that's commonly called the Caterpillar, and it's a great one for beginners to practise using all their fingers. I find this exercise extremely useful to practise coordination between left and right hands, since it requires the student to use all the fingers on their fretting hand while also using all the strings.

Variations on this exercise would be to change the picking from all down-strokes to alternate picking, and to play the exercise legato both up and down. You can also use open strings to practise first finger pull-offs and hammer-ons. Equally, if this exercise is too difficult, you may leave out the notes on the fourth fret.

The Caterpillar

#### Major scale

The next example is a major scale over one octave, in this example in the key of C. This serves as both a warm-up and a method of learning scales. If your student is studying towards their grades, it would be beneficial to use any or all of the scales from their grade book here. These can also be played alternate picking/legato.

C Major scale

**Pentatonic scale**

The pentatonic scale is such an important scale for the guitar that the quicker a student can learn it off by heart, the better. To that end, practising it as a form of warm-up will only help to reinforce this.

Gm Pentatonic scale

**Open chords**

This pattern of open chords is designed improve your students' coordination. Most beginners find that changing chords quickly can be difficult, and exercises like these will help them not only to learn the names and shapes of chords, but also to also get their fingers moving in a coordinated and accurate way.

You can obviously change the chords to suit you and your students.

**Chords with a rhythm – aural or written**

Pick a chord and then play it one of two ways:

- ▶ **Aurally:** the teacher plays the chord in a rhythm lasting for one to two bars and the student repeats it. Or, the teacher plays a repeated rhythm and the student joins in and plays along.
- ▶ **Written:** write out a rhythm pattern (one to two bars) for your student to play. This will get the student used to reading rhythms and is a good way to get their brain into music mode.

**Dynamic picking**

Play one note in crotchets over two to four bars and start at *pp*, ending up at *ff*, then come back down to *pp*. To increase difficulty, do this while playing a scale up and down, or strum a chord pattern.

**Simple patterns**

This exercise is designed to warm up all four fretting fingers, while also helping with coordination. The idea is to play each fret with the appropriate finger, which is actually surprisingly difficult as it's unusual to play something in this way.

One fret at a time

**Play the note exercise**

This is a quick game, where the teacher calls out a note and the student plays the note as quickly as they can. This works well if you teach a shared or group lesson as it adds a bit of a competitive edge to it. To make things more difficult, say a note but ask the students to find two or more of the same note. (This should be tailored around the level of the student and what notes they have already learnt.)

**Advanced**

The next section is designed for more advanced students. Anyone from Grade 3 upwards should be able to cope with these exercises, but some of the scale exercises are more suitable for Grade 5 and above.

**Unusual patterns**

I found this exercise in a Joe Satriani book, and it's become an essential part of how I warm up to play the guitar. It's musically almost useless, but for coordination and picking accuracy, it's second to none. Because the pattern is so unfamiliar, it forces you to really concentrate on what you are doing and is a great warm-up for more advanced students who may have difficulty picking accurately while changing strings. It can be picked in a sweeping style (down down down down, up up up up, etc) or, for maximum effect, use alternate picking.

Fret reversing dexterity exercise

**Scales**

The next section uses scales as a basis for a warm-up, and for the examples, I've used the key of G major. You can obviously change the key to suit (and should try to do all 12 keys): this is just an example to show what patterns to use. The initial exercise is just the G major scale, though as before, play it with down-strokes, alternate picking and legato.

G Major scale

The next two exercises are great ones for a number of reasons. and I'd even suggest that you start teaching your students to play scales this way as early on as possible. The reasons for this are twofold. First, it really ingrains the notes of the scale into your students' brains and fingers. Secondly, playing scales in patterns such as these is very useful for improvisation, and will give students new ideas while also being a complete physical and mental warm-up.

The first one is a major scale in 3rds (scale degrees of 1-3, 2-4, 3-5, etc):

G Major scale in thirds

The first exercise is the G Major scale in thirds, presented in three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a 3/8 time signature, a guitar TAB staff, and a fretboard diagram. The first system covers the first six frets, the second system covers frets 6-9, and the third system covers frets 9-12. The TAB staff includes string numbers (T for Treble, B for Bass) and fret numbers for each note. The fretboard diagrams show the positions of the notes on the strings.

The next example is a major scale in 4ths (scale degrees of 1-4, 2-5, 3-6, etc):

G Major scale in 4ths

The musical score consists of five systems, each with a standard notation staff and a guitar tablature staff. The tablature includes fret numbers and bar lines. The first system shows the ascending scale: G (3), A (3), B (2), C (5), D (3), E (2), F# (5), G (2). The second system shows the descending scale: G (2), F# (5), E (2), D (3), C (5), B (2), A (3), G (5). The third system shows the ascending scale: G (5), A (2), B (4), C (3), D (5), E (2), F# (2), G (3). The fourth system shows the descending scale: G (2), F# (5), E (3), D (5), C (3), B (4), A (5), G (2). The fifth system shows the ascending scale: G (5), A (5), B (2), C (4), D (5), E (2), F# (2), G (3).

**Three-notes-per-string scales**

The next exercise uses a three-note-per-string major scale. Practise this with down-strokes or alternate picking:

G Major scale 3 note per string

3-5-7 3-5-7 4-5-7 4-5-7 5-7-8-7 5-7-5-4 7-5-4 7-5-4 5-3 7-5-3

**String skipping**

Developing this, we can use string skipping to create an exercise (in the style of the famous rock guitarist Eric Johnson) that's great for coordination and developing accurate picking across the strings:

G Major scale 3 note per string with string skipping

4-5-7 3-5-7 4-5-7 4-5-7 5-7-8-7-5 7-5-4-7 3-5-7 3-5-7 7-5-4-7 7-5-4-7 5-4 7-5-4 7-5-3 7-5-4 7-5-3



**Legato exercise**

The three-note-per-string way of playing the major scale is crying out to be played legato, and the following examples use this to great effect, providing a useful way to stretch your students' fingers out and improve their fretting hand strength. Try without picking at all for maximum benefit:

Legato exercise

The first exercise shows two measures of music. Each measure contains four groups of three notes, each group marked with a '3' above it. The notes are connected by slurs. The TAB staff below shows fret numbers 3, 5, and 7 for each group. The second exercise shows two measures of music. Each measure contains four groups of three notes, each group marked with a '3' above it. The notes are connected by slurs. The TAB staff below shows fret numbers 7, 5, and 3 for each group.

**Chords**

**Barre chord workouts**

Moving away from single notes and on to chords, this simple four-chord pattern is a great way to warm up your students' fretting hands and get them used to changing the main four barre chord shapes quickly and accurately. Adjust the tempo to suit:

**Barre chord exercise**

**Sus2 chords across the neck**

This is another chordal warm-up, inspired by Andy Summers of the Police. This one uses sus2 chord shapes that move up the neck and are great for stretching your students' fingers out and coordinating picking accuracy across the strings. Pick with both down-strokes and alternately.

**Add9 chord exercise**

**Major scale on one string using a pedal note**

This next exercise uses a major scale played on one string while pedalling from the open string. This also works very well played completely legato with no picking, developing fretting hand strength, and is a good entry into learning the AC/DC classic that's still popular with guitar students everywhere, 'Thunderstruck':

**Major scale from a pedal note**

Arpeggio exercises

**Diminished arpeggio**

This first arpeggio is one of my favourites to warm up with. Its symmetrical nature is rewarding to play, and it also works well played alternate picking or legato:

Diminished arpeggio

**Cycle of 5ths triad arpeggios**

These arpeggios are for more advanced students, and are designed to be both a physical and mental warm-up that encompasses the whole guitar neck. I came across this exercise when watching an interview with the guitarist Cory Wong, and I think it's a great way of warming up while also learning the notes on the neck.

The idea is to start in the key of C and play a three-octave arpeggio, before moving on to the relative minor (A minor) and doing the same. From there you progress around the cycle of 5ths, playing the major first followed by the relative minor. I have written out the next two, G and E minor, as an example.

When playing this, there are a number of ways that each arpeggio can be played, and the exercise works just as well with the notes fretted in any position. Personally, I think it works best spread out as below, since it forces the student to learn the notes all over the fretboard. This makes it a good all-round work out, and a tough one for any student to complete fully, so maybe stick to a few keys at a time.

Circle of Fifths Arpeggio exercise

C Am

G Em

Etc.....

### Trills

Trills are a simple and effective way of warming up your students' fretting hands, while also increasing their strength. Use trills between all fingers in all combinations: 1-2 1-3 1-4, 2-3 2-4, 3-4. Also try trills to and from open strings to maximise their effect.

### Finger picking – patterns across the strings

The examples given so far have concentrated more on contemporary electric picked guitar playing, but they can work just as well finger-style. Classical and finger-style guitarists will also want to work on the picking hand and practise different combinations of picking patterns, for example: **pima piam pmia pami**. These can be used over different strings or kept on the same string, with emphasis on different notes in the pattern.

### Play the note game for advanced students

The same game can be used for more advanced students, but now when you ask them to play a note, they should be able to play it in every position on the neck. To make this even more difficult, do the same but with chords instead.

### Warm-ups with a particular focus

You will always want to tailor your lessons to the students you're teaching, so make the warm-up fit the student too. If you have someone who struggles with picking accuracy, then find the exercises that will best help them. Likewise, if one of your students has trouble getting into the right frame of mind for the lesson, one of the more mental-based warm-ups might be best.

### Warm-ups to literally warm up muscles

The following exercises are designed just to warm up the muscles and get the student ready for the playing the guitar.

First, there are ways of stretching the hands that don't involve the guitar. Stretching out the palm of your hand on a table or compressing a tennis ball in your hand are common ones that I've seen used. Shaking hands out and stretching them out into a star shape also works well to enliven them and get them ready for playing.

It's also a good idea to wash your hands before you play, and although it's not really practical during a lesson, it could be a good thing to encourage your students to do it on the way to the lesson. Washing your hands increases the blood flow and wakes them up, while also stopping dirt and other residue getting on the guitar strings and making them sticky and harder to play. This will also keep strings fresher and make them last for longer.

The act of cleaning guitar strings itself could also be classed as part of the warm-up, as it prepares the instrument for being played and ensures your students get into good habits.

### Warm-ups that don't require a guitar

There are a lot of different warm-ups that don't require a guitar. Due to space constraints, I won't go into all of them, but here are a few that work well.

#### Clapping games to improve rhythm

These can be played with a guitar, too, but sometimes I like to just clap rhythms and put the guitar down. You can start by simply clapping a rhythm and getting your student to clap it back. Start with a simple two-bar rhythm for beginners, and move up to more complex rhythms for more advanced students. A good variation on this is to use one hand to clap a pulse on your thigh, and your other hand to clap different rhythms against it on the other thigh. This will help to improve time-keeping and coordination.

#### Music knowledge warm-ups

Another universal warm-up is to look at music knowledge in the form of a short quiz. I find these are usually best when they're unexpected, so just throw one in every now and then to keep your students on their toes.

Here are some ideas of things you could ask about:

- ▶ Musical signs and symbols
- ▶ Parts of the guitar
- ▶ Chord construction
- ▶ Scale construction
- ▶ Keys and time signatures
- ▶ Genres of music and key artists/musicians

#### Listening warm-ups

It can be overlooked in peripatetic lessons, but a huge part of being a musician is not playing at all, but listening. As an alternative to Instrument-based warm-ups, why not put on a piece of music and try some of the following questions?

- ▶ Can you clap along with the beat?
- ▶ What is the style/genre?
- ▶ What Instruments can you hear?
- ▶ Can you work out the time signature?
- ▶ Can you distinguish the guitar, and could you attempt to work out what it's playing?
- ▶ Using your guitar, can you work out the tonal centre or key?
- ▶ Can you then work out some or all of the chords?
- ▶ Can you work out some or all of the melody line?

#### Aural skills warm-ups

Here are some more ideas you could try that just involve listening, and clapping and/or singing. All the examples can be varied in difficulty level depending on the student you are teaching:

- ▶ Sing a major scale from a given note using do re mi etc.
- ▶ Clap a rhythm and have the student clap it back.
- ▶ Play a simple diatonic melody on the guitar and ask the student to sing it back.
- ▶ Play a major/minor/diminished/augmented chord and ask the student if they can recognise what it is.
- ▶ Play some intervals and ask the student to name them.

#### A warm-down

I hope you find these exercises and ideas useful in your lessons. You should feel free to adapt them to fit how you teach, and use whichever ones work for you and your students. There is no right or wrong way to warm up. Indeed, a lot of guitar teachers don't do a specific warm-up with the students and prefer to get straight into playing pieces. This can also be fine, but I'd suggest that spending a few minutes on some well thought-out exercises will definitely make your lessons more productive, and help your students become better all-round musicians.