

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE



ARPEGGIOS

BUILDING BLOCKS

AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF GUITAR ARPEGGIOS

THEORY
TECHNIQUE
APPLICATION

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Introduction

Arpeggio derives from the Italian word *arpeggiare* which means ‘to play the harp’ (*Arpa* being the Italian word for harp). In modern music, it refers to a **playing a ‘broken’ chord**. Rather than strumming an entire chord shape, the notes within a chord are played in a sequence of individual notes.

An arpeggio is made up of the notes used to play the chord of the same name. For this reason you will often see notes of an arpeggio identified as **chord tones** as I will do here. These chord tones may be played in sequential order (up or down), or they can be played in different patterns.

Arpeggio Vs. Arpeggiating

There is a subtle difference to be aware of between playing an arpeggio as opposed to *arpeggiating* (or picking) a chord. If you pick out a chord shape and the notes ring together (*let ring*) this is ‘**arpeggiating**’ a chord:

Arpeggiating C major

Songs like ‘Everybody Hurts’ by R.E.M., ‘Dust in the Wind’ by Kansas, or ‘Hallelujah’ as performed by Jeff Buckley are great examples of this arpeggiating approach to chord progressions.

An **arpeggio** is slightly different with each note being played individually without the notes ‘bleeding’ in to one another. You want the guitar to sound like a vocalist with a single melodic line.

One way to play a C major arpeggio

Used subtly, arpeggios allow you to target chord tones and make your solos and improvisations more refined and more *musical*. Taken to the extreme, arpeggio shapes can be played at blistering face-melting speeds and are the staple of shred players' vocabulary. Check out players like John Petrucci, Yngwie Malmsteen, Nuno Bettencourt or Paul Gilbert for examples of this.

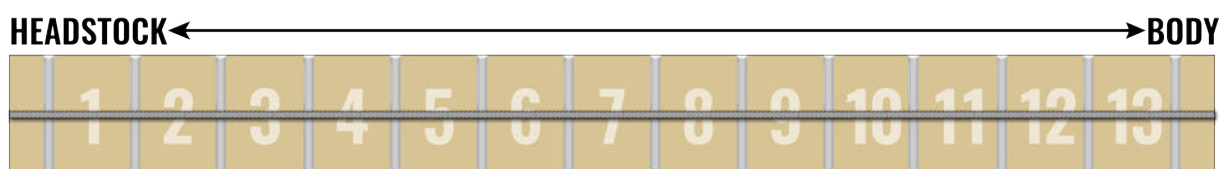
Arpeggios: Building Blocks will teach you the theory behind major key arpeggios and allow you to learn and apply them more effectively on the guitar fretboard with the help of my unique **Interval Colour System**. Each fretboard chart will be annotated with colour to highlight the relationship between each chord tone to help you better understand the theory of each arpeggio and why it appears so on the fretboard.

What You Will Learn

You will progressively learn the many ways to play all the three and four-note arpeggios found within **major scale theory** (with a couple of interesting additions):

- Major triad (R-3-5)
- Minor triad (R- \flat 3-5)
- Diminished (R- \flat 3- \flat 5)
- Augmented (R-3- \sharp 5)
- Major Seventh (R-3-5-7)
- Dominant Seventh (R-3-5- \flat 7)
- Minor Seventh (R- \flat 3-5- \flat 7)
- Half-Diminished Seventh (m7 \flat 5) (R- \flat 3- \flat 5- \flat 7)
- Diminished Seventh (R- \flat 3- \flat 5- $\flat\flat$ 7)

At each stage you'll begin with **horizontal vision** along a single string for a solid grounding in the construction of each arpeggio form:



Single String Scales

You'll then learn the different ways to approach arpeggios across a string pair and how these patterns repeat across multiple octaves along the fretboard. As well as starting from the Root notes you'll also learn the arpeggios starting from different chord tones (in their different *inversions*).

With a focus on the thinner strings you'll learn arpeggio forms across a three-string grouping before exploring the different ways to navigate arpeggio patterns to link up octave Root notes. Combining these patterns will complete the fretboard vision with the end goal of you playing arpeggio patterns effortlessly across the entire fretboard.

At each stage I'll suggest suitable practice exercises and give you tips on how to develop your own exercises and arpeggio practice routine.

Sound good? Then let's do this!

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Learning Essentials

Just before we launch in, here are some essential concepts that you need to know to help you get the most out of the book.

My 'House Style'

String names are identified by both string number and note name, e.g. string 4(D).

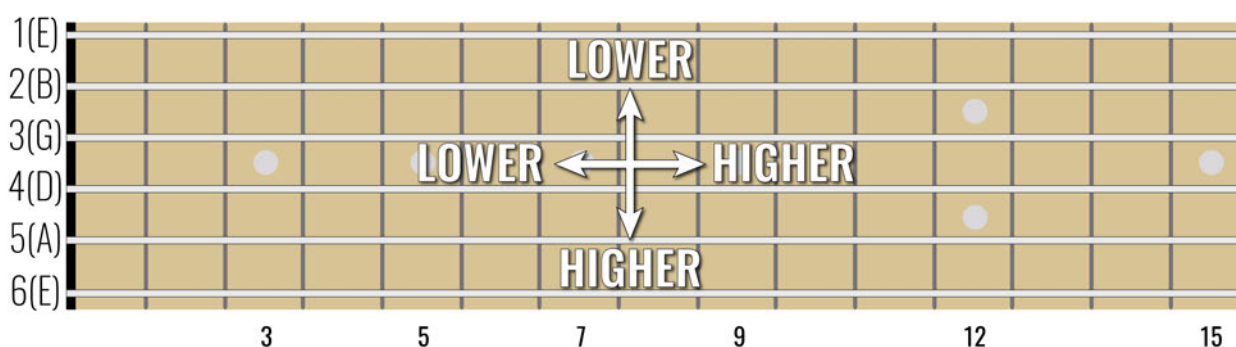
Whenever writing about intervals I use numbers in **bold**. For example the **5** (fifth) or **b3** (minor third) etc. **Root** notes will always appear in **red** and will often be shortened to **R** like the fretboard diagrams.

When explaining movement around the fretboard there are two axes to consider: **horizontally** on a single string and **vertically** across the strings.

On a single string horizontally, *higher* refers to a higher fret, nearer the guitar body (for example fret 7 to 10). *Lower* is a lower fret, towards the headstock (e.g. fret 5 to 3).

When moving across the strings vertically, I do so in the physical space, so a lower string is *physically* lower towards the floor as you play. For example, moving from string 2(B) to 1(E) is *down* one string.

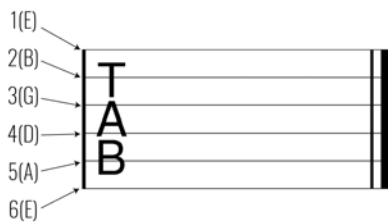
In the opposite way, moving *up* one or more string will refer to moving up towards the ceiling. For example, moving from string 2(B) to 4(D) is *up* two strings.



String Orientation

Reading TAB

As well as the fretboard charts, there will be accompanying TAB notation created with Guitar Pro 8.



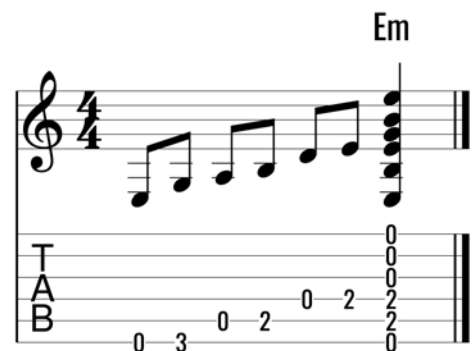
TAB (a diminutive of 'tablature') is a guitar-specific number notation method which indicates how the notes shown in the music ('standard notation') are to be played on guitar. TAB is also commonly seen without accompanying standard notation.

Unlike standard notation (which has 5 lines) TAB has six lines to represent the six guitar strings. The bottom line being string 6(E), the top line is string 1(E). If you are ever in any doubt, place your guitar face up on your lap. As you look down over the strings, this is how they are arranged in the TAB.

Numbers are placed on the lines to indicate that the string is played with a finger pressing at that particular fret number. A zero (0) represents a string that is played open (i.e. no fingers).

Numbers can be stacked on top of each other to show that they are played at the same time, like a chord.

Remember that the numbers refer to **fret numbers** *not* fingers. You will see numbers written in the standard notation either beside or below the noteheads to indicate which fretting hand finger to use.

Musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff is standard notation in treble clef, showing a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a chord. The chord is labeled 'Em' and consists of G4, B4, and D5. Below the standard notation is a TAB notation with six lines. The notes are represented by numbers: 0, 3, 0, 2, 0, 2. The chord 'Em' is represented by stacked numbers: 0, 0, 2, 2, 2, 0. The bottom line (string 6) has a 0, the 5th line (string 5) has a 2, the 4th line (string 4) has a 2, the 3rd line (string 3) has a 0, the 2nd line (string 2) has a 2, and the 1st line (string 1) has a 0.

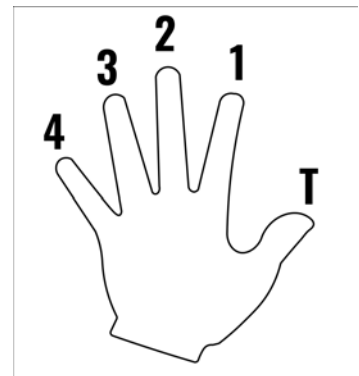
Wherever possible I will provide both standard notation and TAB. Whilst you might not yet be able to read music, be curious about how what you are playing is represented in the music. Reading music can only benefit you in your musical journey. Embrace it.

Playing Positions

As you learn arpeggios patterns (particularly across multiple strings), it's important to be confident with **playing positions** as I will sometimes instruct you where to place your hand using these labels.

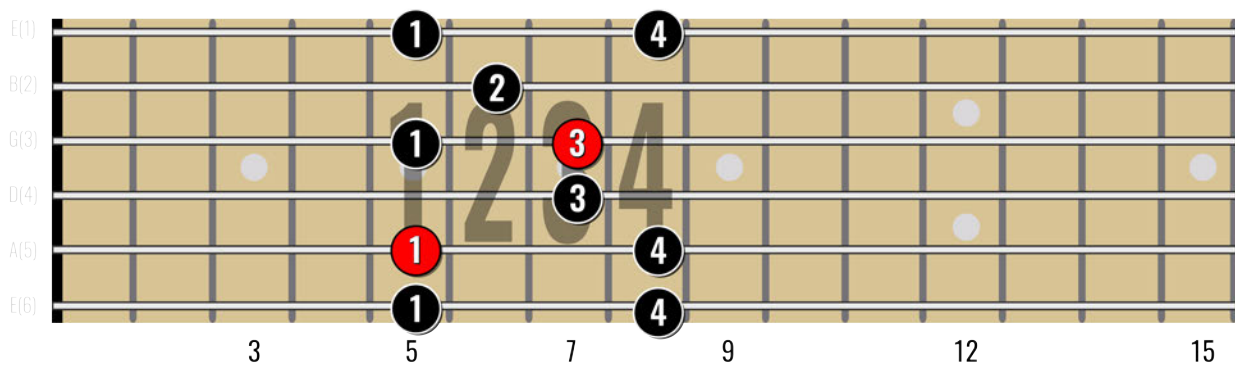
Arpeggio shapes will either be firmly in one playing position or will require **position shifts** (in which the fretting hand moves horizontally higher up or lower down the fretboard).

A playing position occurs when you are using all four fretting hand fingers across a four-fret area of the fretboard.



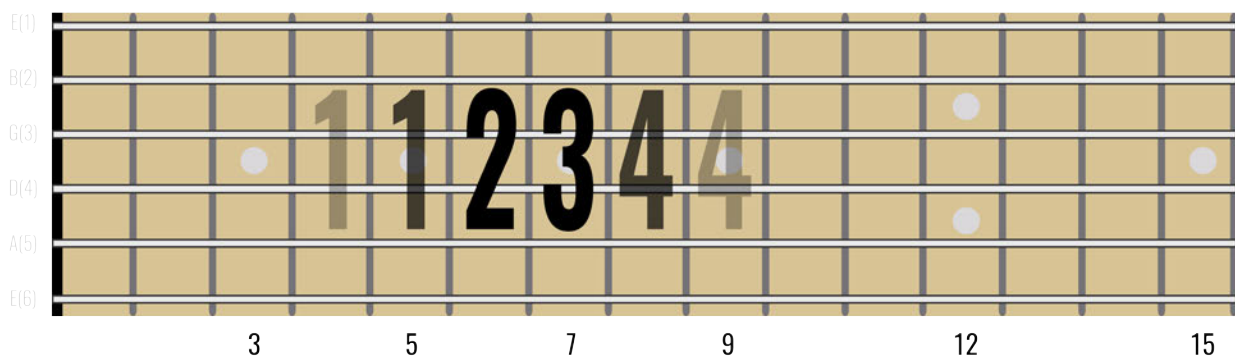
Fretting hand fingers

The position is numbered by the fret in which you place the index finger (1). For example, this following arpeggio pattern is in the fifth position (numbers represent the recommended fingering):



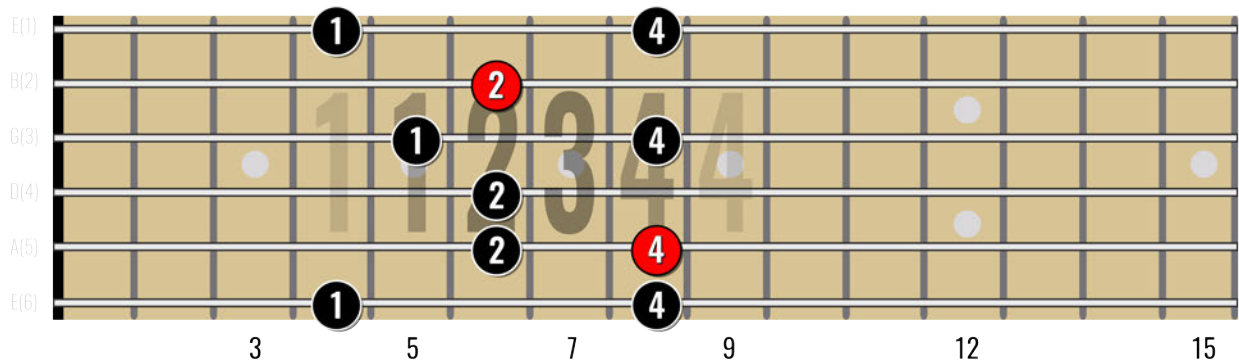
D minor seventh arpeggio in the fifth position

That's the easiest way to think about it. More specifically, a playing position is determined by the **fret immediately below the middle finger (2)**. The reason is that you can introduce stretches between fingers 1 and 2 and between fingers 3 and 4.



Fifth position (finger 1 can reach back to the 4th fret, finger 4 can reach up to the 9th fret)

The arpeggio below would therefore *still* be in the fifth position, even though there are notes under finger 1 in the 4th fret:



F minor seventh arpeggio in the fifth position

Care should be taken not to confuse playing position with ‘scale position’. Some instructors (myself included) may refer to scale patterns as, for example, ‘position 3’ which refers to position 3 of 5 and not playing in the third position.

The Imperfection of Standard Tuning

A key concept when learning anything on the guitar is understanding why note patterns and shapes change as you move them across the different string sets.

The answer is that the guitar strings are not tuned evenly. Standard tuning is imperfect. There is not an even distance between each of the adjacent string pairs. The strings are tuned a perfect 4th apart (spanning four alphabet letters) except between strings 3(G) and 2(B) which are a major 3rd apart:

String Numbers	String Notes	Interval
6 to 5	E to A	Perfect 4 th
5 to 4	A to D	Perfect 4 th
4 to 3	D to G	Perfect 4 th
3 to 2	G to B	Major 3rd
2 to 1	B to E	Perfect 4 th

That’s why ‘relative tuning’ (or 5th fret tuning) is at the 5th fret...except you tune from the 4th fret on string 3(G) to tune string 2(B).

As a result there are **two key rules** that you need to know:

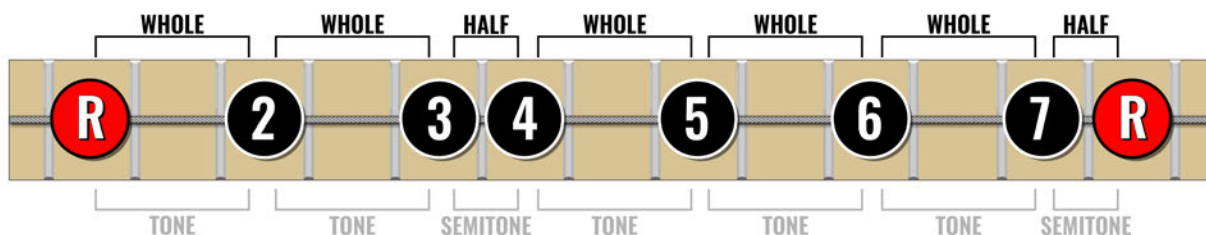
RULE 1: When moving an arpeggio shape vertically downwards across the string sets (towards the floor), any note(s) moving from string 3(G) to 2(B) must be **raised** one fret (towards the guitar body) for the intervals to remain the same.

RULE 2: When moving an arpeggio shape vertically upwards across the string sets (towards the ceiling), any note(s) moving from string 2(B) to 3(G) must be **lowered** one fret (towards the guitar headstock) for the intervals to remain the same.

We'll apply these rules to the arpeggio shapes as we progress to give this some context.

The "Ruler"

The ruler with which we 'measure' music is the **major scale**. All major scales, irrespective of the starting note name, are created by respecting the following formula of whole steps/tones (2 frets) and half steps/semitones (1 fret):



Whatever the starting **Root**, the notes of the major scale will always be numbered in this way by their **scale degrees**. These scale degrees are like the notches of a measuring ruler to **calculate the distance of any note from its Root**, known as an **interval**.

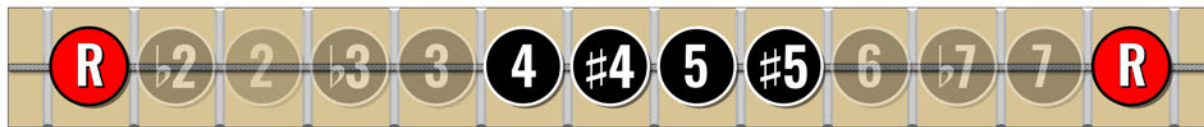
Frets falling *in between* the scale degrees are identified as **flattened** notes of the major scale, (a note is flattened by lowering it one fret towards the headstock):



Identifying each note in one octave relative to the major scale degrees

For example, any note three frets above a chosen **Root** is known as its **b3** ("flat 3" or "minor third"). Any note a whole step below a **Root** note is identified as its **b7** ("flat 7" or "minor seventh").

Certain intervals can also be considered as sharpened notes of the major scale (raised one fret towards the guitar body), most commonly the fourth and fifth scale degrees:



Common sharp intervals (not found in the pentatonic scales)

You shall see this as you learn about the **augmented** arpeggio.

The importance of context

As well as learning the physical layout of arpeggios on the fretboard, it's arguably as important to learn how each arpeggio **sounds**.

This requires the arpeggios to be played in some sort of context...*harmonic* context. I'd recommend doing this as much as possible in your practice. This context is achieved by one of the following (using the example of a **C** major arpeggio):

1. **Constant Root note** on its own, known as a **drone** (C note)
2. **Chord** formed from the notes of the arpeggio you are playing (C major chord)
3. **Chord progression** in the instances where you are working on moving from one arpeggio to another, for example C-F chord working the visualisation of a C major arpeggio to an F major arpeggio

Drones and chord backing tracks can be easily found on [YouTube](#) or music streaming services like [Spotify](#).

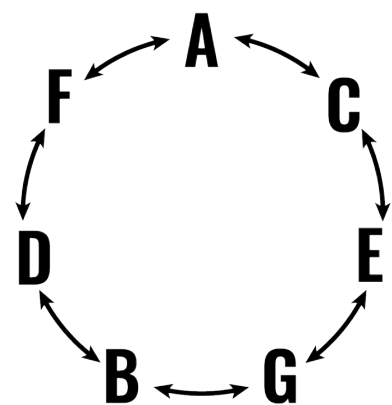
Wherever possible, work your arpeggio practice with this harmonic context. It makes it *so* much more fun!

Part 1: Essential Intervals

The focus of **Arpeggios: Building Blocks** is to teach you the construction of each of the different arpeggios and, more importantly, to show you how they all lay out on the fretboard. To do so we'll consider the musical distance from one note to the next in each arpeggio and you will learn how each of these **intervals** link up to form larger fretboard-spanning shapes.

There is one interval that needs to be mastered more than any other when studying arpeggios...the **third**. A third is a distance between two notes spanning three musical alphabet letters.

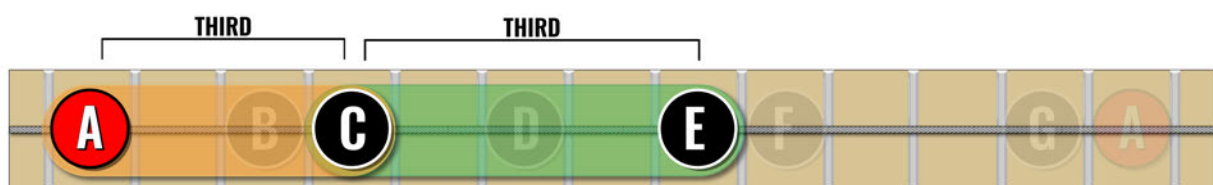
The **Circle of Thirds** (right) shows how the alphabet can be arranged in a never-ending loop of ascending thirds (clockwise) or descending thirds (counterclockwise).



Circle of Thirds

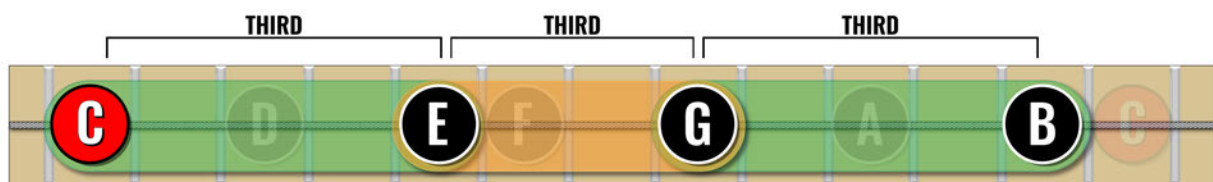
Make sure you're comfortable moving up or down through the musical alphabet in thirds. Say a few rounds of the Circle clockwise and counterclockwise (not so easy).

Chords and, in turn, arpeggios are created from **stacking thirds**. **Stacking two thirds** gives a three-note **triad arpeggio**. For example **A-C-E** are the notes of an A minor arpeggio.



A minor arpeggio (A-C-E) (**R- \flat 3-5**)

Stacking three thirds gives a four-note **seventh arpeggio**, for example **C-E-G-B** are the notes of a C major seventh arpeggio.

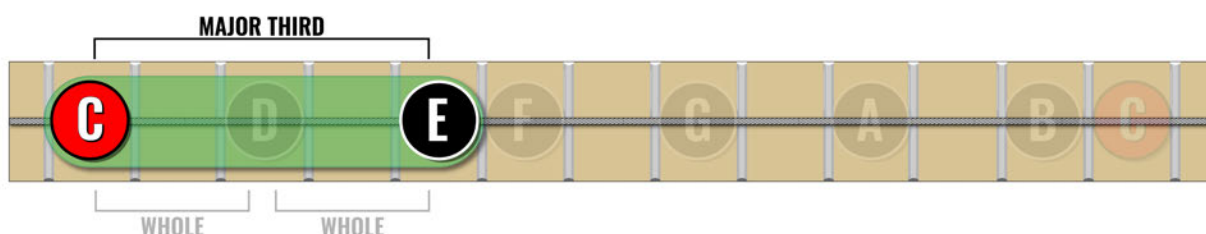


C major seventh arpeggio (C-E-G-B) (**R-3-5-7**)

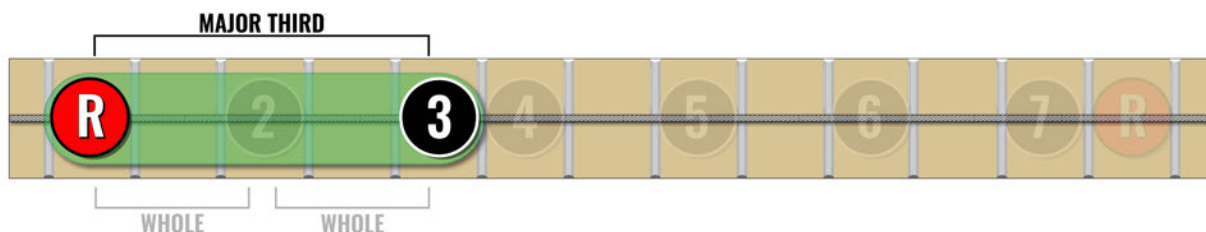
But all thirds are not born equal! There are two types of third and combining them in different ways gives you all of the different arpeggios.

Major Third (3)

The first interval is the **major third**, presumably named as such because it is the distance between the first and third note of any major scale:

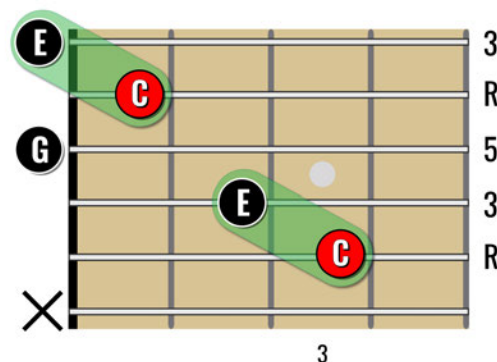


The major third spans three musical alphabet letters which are two whole steps apart. When identifying the interval, a major third above a **R** will be shortened to **3**.



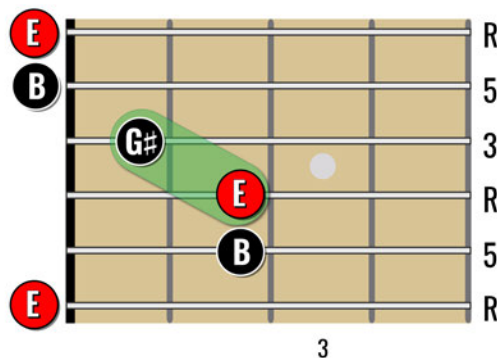
The **major third** interval will be green

Looking at the open **C major** chord, you can see what the major third looks like across an adjacent string pair.

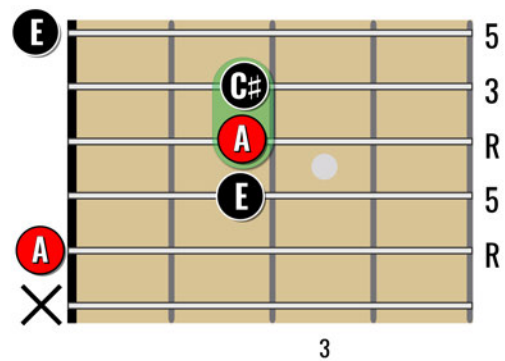


A **major third** above any **R** will be **one fret lower** on the string physically below.

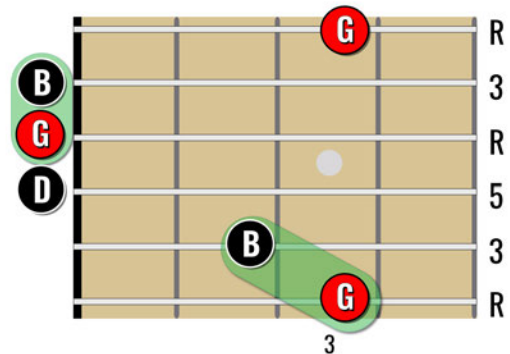
Here's another example in the open **E major** chord:



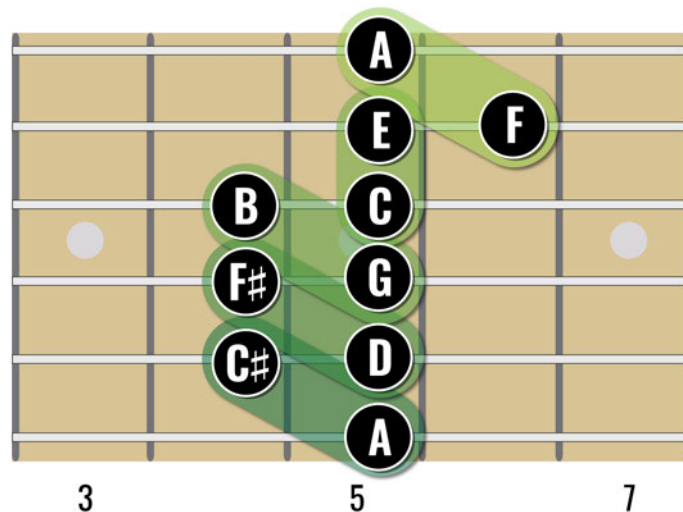
But, if you look at another familiar open chord you'll see that there is an exception. Here's **A** major:



Between strings 3(G) and 2(B) a major third will be in the **same fret**. You find a combination of these two third shapes in the open **G** major chord:



Here are major thirds across the string pairs from the 5th fret:

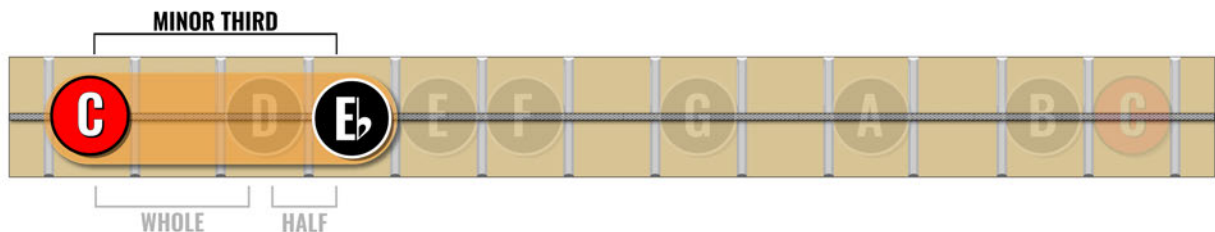


Notice how sometimes the major third will be a sharp note. For example the **3** above **A** is **C#**. So what is **A** to **C**? That would be a **minor third**.

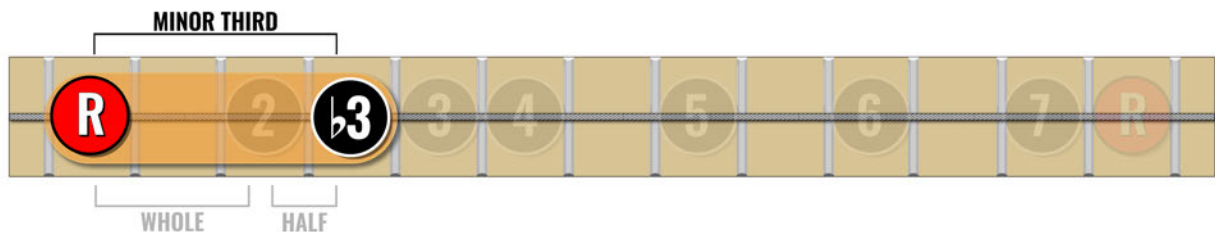
Minor Third (♭3)

When a **major** interval is *lowered* a half step (one fret) it becomes a **minor** interval.

A **minor third** also spans three musical alphabet letters a **whole step plus half step** apart (three frets horizontally on the same string).



When identifying the interval, a minor third above a **R** will be shortened to **♭3** (the flat symbol representing the flattening of the note one fret/half step).

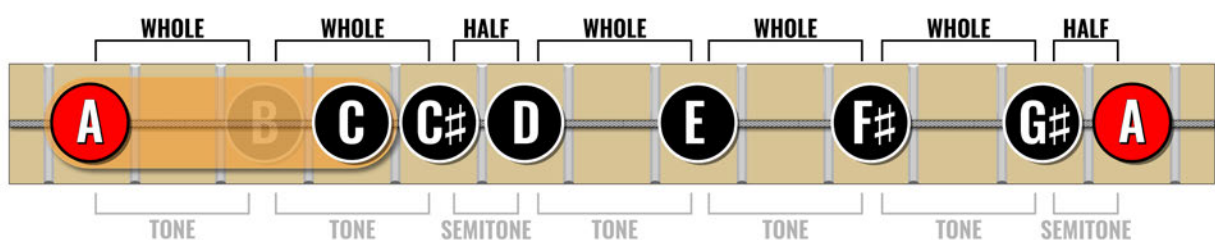


The minor third interval will be orange

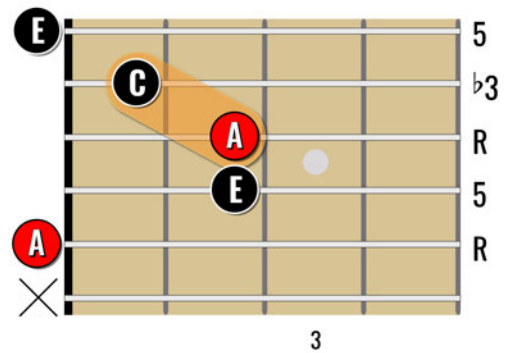
Be careful with the **♭3** label. It does not mean that a minor third has to be a 'flat' note, merely that the note has been **lowered a half step** (when compared to its major scale equivalent).

For example, **C** to **E** is a major third. **C** to **E♭** is a minor third...makes sense.

Whereas **A** to **C** is a minor third (**not A** to **C♭**). The reason being that, as we saw previously in the open chord shape, a major third above **A** is the note **C♯**. Flattening a sharp note makes it 'natural' (**C♯** flattens to **C**).

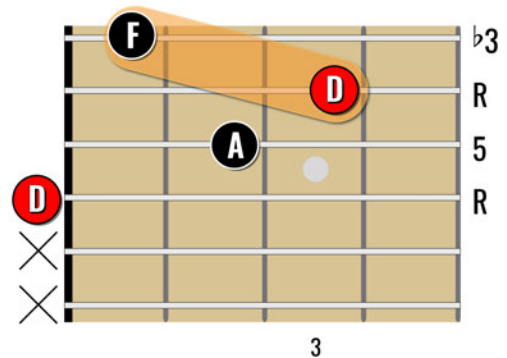


Looking at the open **A minor** chord (**Am**), you can see that the minor third in the chord shape resembles a major third across strings 3(G) and 2(B). The minor third between strings 3(G) and 2(B) is **one fret lower**.

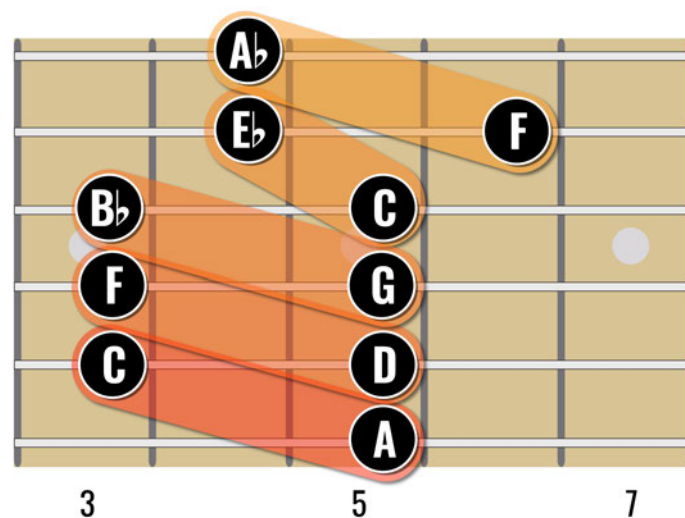


Remember that this string pair is the *exception*.

Between all other string pairs a minor third above any Root note will be **two frets lower** on the string below. Here's an example of that in the open **D minor** chord (**Dm**):



And here are minor thirds across the string sets from the 5th fret:



Minor thirds across the string pairs

That's the thirds done. Now it's time to start combining them to play some arpeggios.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

Random Note

See if you can identify the note a major third above a random note. Find the **3** both on the same string and the string below. Do the same with a different note, this time finding the minor third (**b3**). Repeat until you are confident with identifying both thirds above any note.

As preparation for what's to come, try these 'stacking' exercises:

Stacking Thirds

Try playing a constant stream of **major thirds** up and down an individual string and crossing vertically across the string pairs. Make a mental note of the starting **Root**.

You should be back on the Root every 3 notes (when moving in the same direction - higher or lower in pitch).

Here's an example from the open string G(E), with each instance of the E note highlighted in red in the TAB:

The diagram illustrates the concept of stacking thirds on a guitar fretboard. The strings are labeled E(1), B(2), G(3), D(4), and A(5). The frets are numbered 0, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, and 15. Green shaded areas connect notes on adjacent strings that are a major third apart. Red circles highlight the E notes at frets 0, 7, and 12. The musical score below shows the notes in standard notation and a guitar tablature with red numbers indicating the fret positions for the E notes.

Fret	String	Note
0	E(1)	E
3	A(5)	A
5	D(4)	D
7	G(3)	G
7	E(1)	E
9	B(2)	B
9	G(3)	G
12	E(1)	E
12	B(2)	B
12	G(3)	G
15	D(4)	D
15	A(5)	A

The musical score is in 4/4 time and shows the notes in standard notation and a guitar tablature. The tablature has red numbers indicating the fret positions for the E notes: 0, 7, and 12.

Now try a constant stream of **minor thirds** up and down an individual string and vertically across the string pairs. Again, make a mental note of the starting **Root**. You should be back on the Root every 4 notes (when moving in the same direction).

Here's an example, again from the open string 6(E):

The diagram shows a guitar fretboard with strings labeled E(1), B(2), G(3), D(4), and A(5). Frets are marked at 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, and 15. Red circles indicate the root notes (E) at frets 0, 7, and 12. Orange arrows show the path of the sequence: 0 (E) → 3 (F) → 5 (F#) → 7 (G) → 9 (G#) → 12 (A) → 15 (A#). The musical score is in 4/4 time with a treble clef. The notes are: E4, F4, F#4, G4, G#4, A4, A#4, B4, B#4, C5, C#5, D5, D#5, E5. The TAB line shows the fret numbers: 0 3 6 9 | 7 10 8 6 | 9 8 6 9 | 12 14 11 8 | 9 11 8 5 | 7 4 6 3 | 0.