Chapter 1

"AUTUMN LEAVES" COUNTERPOINT, PART 1

How to compose and improvise melodies over a chord progression

WELCOME TO STRING THEORY, a suite of lessons dedicated to imparting guitar-centric music theory concepts in a practical, useful way that you can readily apply to composing and improvising. Rather than show you a bunch of dry, abstract textbook examples of how chords are built from and live within various scales, I will try to keep things interesting and inspiring by presenting *etudes*, which are entertaining mini-compositions that serve to instruct and demonstrate musical devices and/or provide a technical exercise. (Those of you who have the patience for that kind of mathematical, from-the-ground-up learning approach can find hours of it in my *Mastering Fretboard Harmony* and *Mastering Fretboard Harmony, Part 2* DVDs, both available at the GuitarWorld.com online store.)

I'd like to start things off by showing you a traditional, surefire method of creating pleasing, satisfying melodies, using a repeating eight-bar chord progression that moves through the *cycle of fifths* (also known as the *cycle of fourths*) in the key of G major and its *relative minor* key, E minor, with increasingly complex melodic variations. I call it "Autumn Leaves Counterpoint" because it's based on the chord changes to the old jazz standard "Autumn Leaves" and demonstrates the use of *counterpoint*, which may be defined as two or more independent voices with different pitches and rhythms.

FIGURE 1 presents the basic theme, which, as you can see and hear, is very sparse and not unlike the beginning of the famous classical piece "Canon in D Major" by Johann Pachelbel. (Perhaps a good alternate title for my etude would be "Canon in G Major.") What I'm doing here is *targeting the third* of each chord, which, together with the root note—in this case played an octave and a third, or what is known as a *10th interval*, below the melody note—produces a sweet sound that positively describes a major or minor-type chord with just two notes: the bass line and melody. Having that octave separation added to each third creates a big, open, regal sound, like that of Paul McCartney's "Blackbird."

FIG. 1 classical whole notes ("Canon in G")

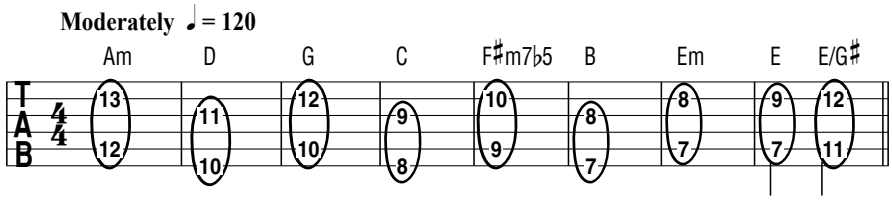


FIG. 2 half notes, introducing sevenths

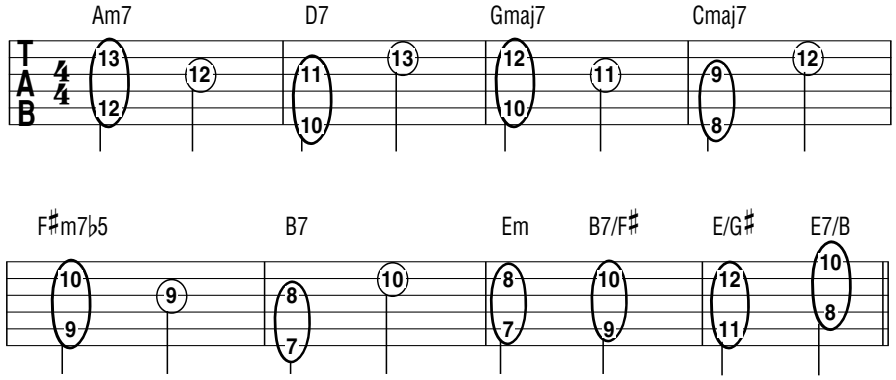


FIG. 3 quarter notes with melodic motion and bass line inversions

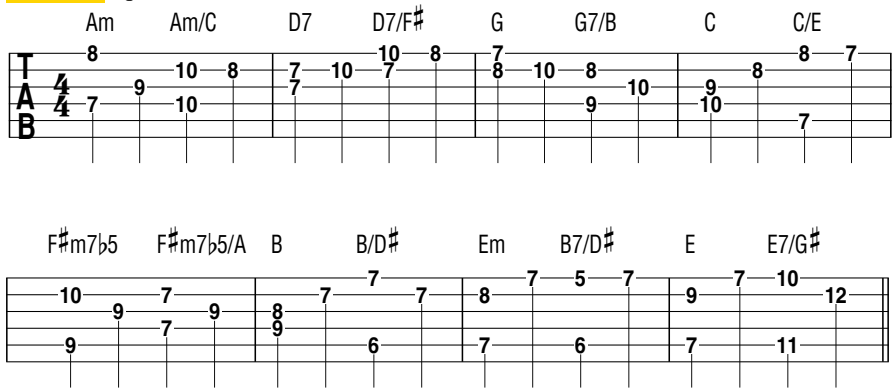
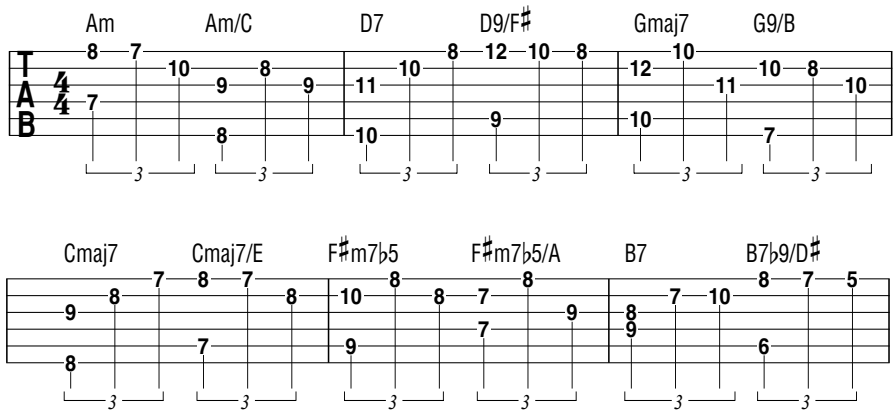


FIG. 4 quarter-note triplets, "Renaissance" style



I'm using *hybrid picking* (pick-and-fingers technique) to sound the bass note with each melody note on nonadjacent strings and provide a satisfying self-accompaniment. As an alternative, you could have someone play the bass notes while you pick only the melody notes, adding some soulful finger vibrato and perhaps grace-note slides or hammer-ons into each note from below, similar to the way a seasoned slide guitarist like Warren Haynes, Derek Trucks or Bonnie Raitt would decorate a melody line. While you're at it, you may want to dial in a thick, overdriven tone to get some creamy sustain and compression, à la Carlos Santana on "Europa" or Gary Moore on "Still Got the Blues." (Both of these songs, by the way, are based on this very same chord progression, albeit played in different keys.)

Okay, here's where things start to get really interesting. **FIGURE 2** has you playing almost the very same theme but with half notes added, which introduce the *seventh* of the chord on beat three of each bar while providing more *melodic motion* and creating a true counterpoint, which, as I mentioned earlier, is defined as two or more independent lines with different pitches *and* rhythms. Notice also the B7 chord added in bar 7. This harmonic device, which momentarily "backpedals" through the cycle of fifths, serves to effectively add a feeling of *tension and release* to the otherwise static Em chord.

FIGURE 3 presents the next variation on the theme, moving to a melodic rhythm of quarter notes and introducing *inversions* in the bass line. The term *inversion* means putting a chord tone other than the root in the bass line or on the bottom of a chord voicing. In this case, the bass note moves from the root on beat one of each bar to the third on beat three, as the melody, in a very calculated way, moves to the root, in essence trading places with the bass line's function—third/root versus root/third. For the quarter notes on beats two and four of each bar, I'm using a combination of chord tones, or *arpeggios*, and scale tones to fill out the rhythm. This is the "science" aspect of melody construction, distinct from the "art" aspect, for which other, more subjective considerations come into play.

FIGURE 4 shifts into a higher gear, switching to a quarter-note-triplet rhythm for the melody, which, with this progression, creates a kind of quaint, Renaissance feel, in reference to the music of late-medieval Europe, circa 1400–1600. This more complex counterpoint is technically more challenging to play than the previous figure, so you may want to either slow down the tempo and/or omit the bass notes on beats one and three. Notice that, in the previous figures, the melody still touches upon the very same notes—the third in each case—at the beginning of each bar, and that, with its added passing tones, describes, or *outlines*, the progression in more detail, making it more of a stand-alone melody. Also notice the addition of the G9 chord in the second half of bar 3, which provides a more compelling harmonic "push" into the Cmaj7 chord that follows.

FIG. 5 classical, Bach-style eighth notes

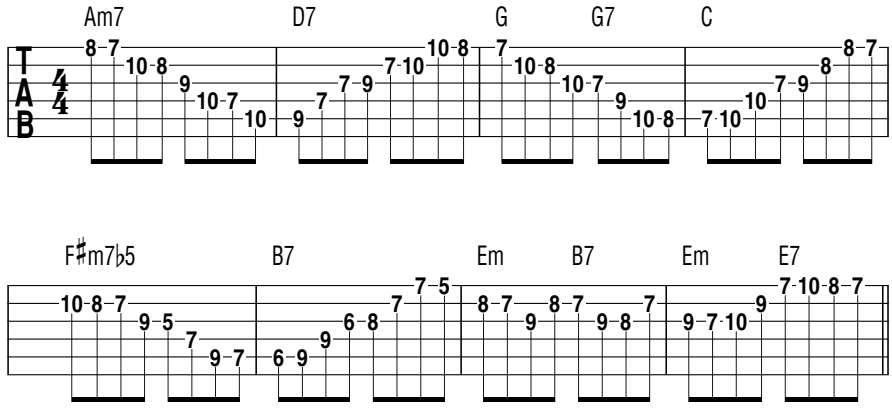
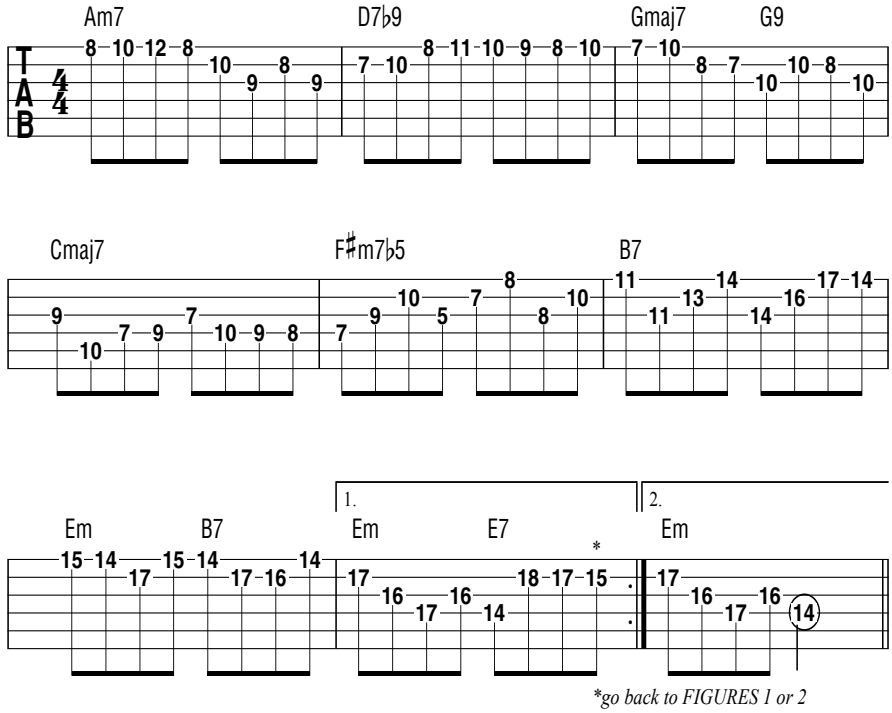


FIG. 6 jazzy eighths with chromatic passing tones



**go back to FIGURES 1 or 2*

Bar 8 of **FIGURE 4** has us shifting rhythmic gears once again, this time to steady eighth notes, transitioning to the "busier" Johann Sebastian Bach, baroque/classical-style melody presented in **FIGURE 5**. This line, with its flowing rhythm, clearly outlines the implied chord progression in an elegant manner and features a roller coaster–like *melodic contour* that incorporates scalar passing tones used as "fill" between chord tones. Once again, we're still targeting the third of the chord on the downbeat of each bar, in some cases an octave lower than before, as led by the melody. I perform this line mostly with alternate picking, occasionally using two consecutive downstrokes, depending on the tempo. Use whichever combination of pick strokes works best for you.

FIGURE 6 presents our "grand finale" variation, which is a somewhat jazzy-flavored line that incorporates *chromatic passing tones* (bars 2–4) and a climactic, jagged "climb" up the neck in bars 5 and 6, for which I employ an angular fretboard shape to create a *syncopated melodic rhythm* that accents every third note—"threes on fours," as this kind of phrasing is sometimes called. The figure ends with a return to a more Bach-like resolution to Em, and the first ending gives you the option of a "turnaround" phrase that takes you back to the beginning of either **FIGURE 1** or **FIGURE 2**.

Next chapter: eighth-note triplet and 16th-note *shred* variations, *à la* Steve Morse.