TAM LU

# ARRANGING SOLO GUITAR

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# THANK YOU!

Thank you all for supporting my music over the past years! We just recently hit one million views on my Secret base video. And so, as a gift, I would like to present you all with a step-by-step guide on how I arrange music.

Thanks again!
Tam Lu

# INTRODUCTION

## REQUIREMENTS

This instruction manual teaches arranging songs for guitarists.

First and foremost, there is no correct way to arrange music-- it depends entirely on the individual and their strengths. For example, my relative pitch is a lot more defined than my knowledge of music theory. Therefore, I primarily use my ear when it comes to reproducing song melodies. Other musicians might leverage their knowledge of music theory, or sight-seeing abilities, or whatever it may be.

This book is not for complete beginners. That said, although music theory will enhance the arranging process, it is not necessary. I have nearly no knowledge in music theory. However, from learning various fingerstyle songs over the past decade, meanwhile analyzing song structures and patterns, I've become well-versed in a different area that can be used to arrange music as well.

The material I've provided is recommended for those who already have a basic foundation in these subjects (I've noted which steps they're relevant in):

- Reading tablature (all steps)
- Open and barre chords (all steps)
- Fingerstyle patterns (steps 5 and 6)
- Rhythm strumming (steps 5 and 6)
- Chord transcription (step 4)

I will be using my arrangement of Anohana's ending theme, Secret Base, as a guideline to provide examples as we go through the steps.

After completing this instruction manual, you'll be able to create arrangements with a new perspective in the arranging process.

Without further ado, let's begin!

# STEP ONE
## STUDYING THE SONG

Before we even touch the guitar, we must understand what our song consists of (melody, chord progression, instruments, etc.). This is a step that applies to all stages of arranging. So if you're out of ideas in the upcoming steps, go back to this step and continue studying the song! I would suggest listening to live versions or other covers to see how each artists approach the song differently.

Here's a list of general things to keep an ear out for:

- time signature
- chord progression
- various textures from instruments
- drum patterns
- harmonies

Naturally, you might think it'll be hard to focus on chord progression, melody, drum patterns, and harmonies at the same time. But I'm not asking you to focus on all of them at the same time. Play the song over multiple times--each time focusing on something different.

In general song structures, there aren't too many prominent instruments playing in one sequence (imagine having multiple leading voicings occurring all in one moment; it would be too overwhelming for the listener). Therefore, in the rare case that there's more than one lead voice that plays a major part in a sequence, then it'll be easy to catch (e.g., a guitar riff running in the background as the vocalist is singing their solo).

# STEP TWO

## CHORD POSITIONING

Now that we have a firm understanding of our song, we'll break it into two parts: the chords and the melody. These two parts will serve as the foundation of our arrangement.

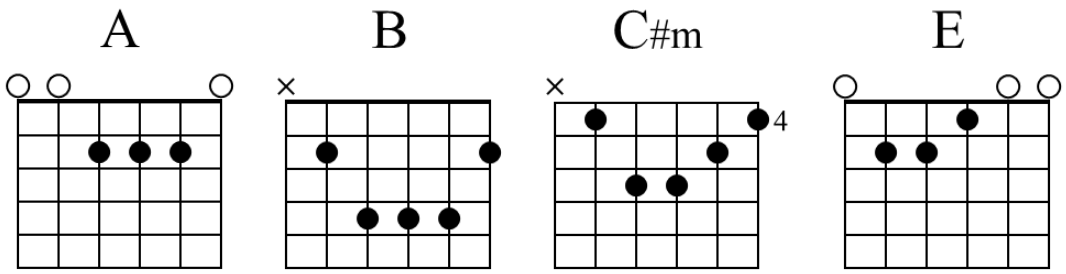
To find the chords, we'll first find their root notes by ear. The **root note** is the note that is the basis of a chord, usually positioned as the lowest note. Finding it might take a while if you don't have ear-training experience, but you will no doubt become faster with practice.

If you're unsure if the root note you've found is correct, then I suggest searching up the song's chord progression online.

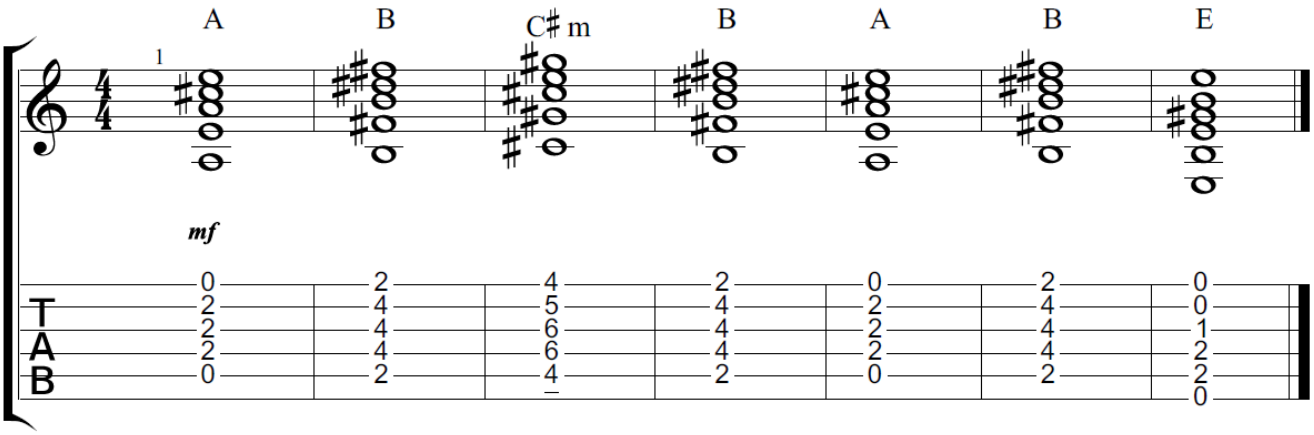
From the root note, we can identify other notes in the chord to figure out its chord type (major, minor, augmented, diminished, etc.). If you are struggling figuring this out by ear, playing through the chord types until one matches the songs' chord type is an alternative option.

Here are the chords I found from Secret Base's chorus.

**Chord chart:**




**Chord progression:**

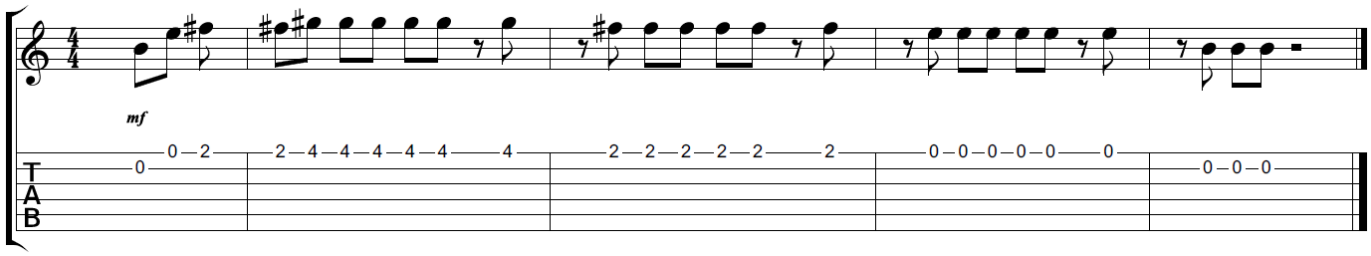


# STEP THREE

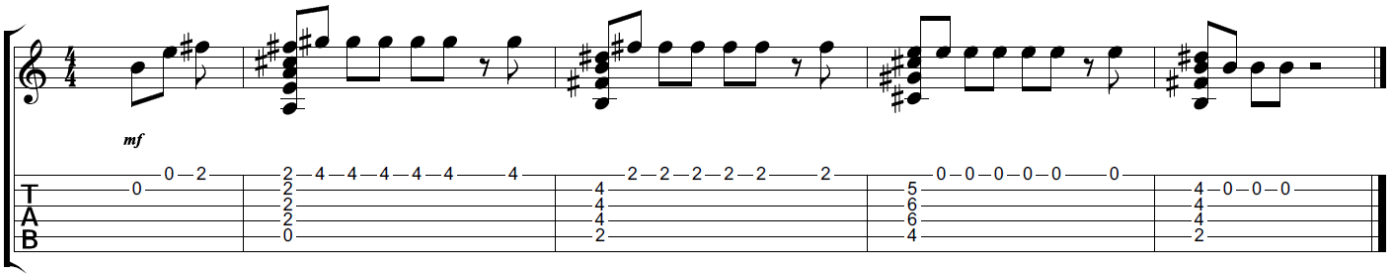
## COMBINING MELODY & CHORDS

Now we'll add in the melody line. This is where it gets a bit difficult: finding the right balance in our chords and our lead melody.

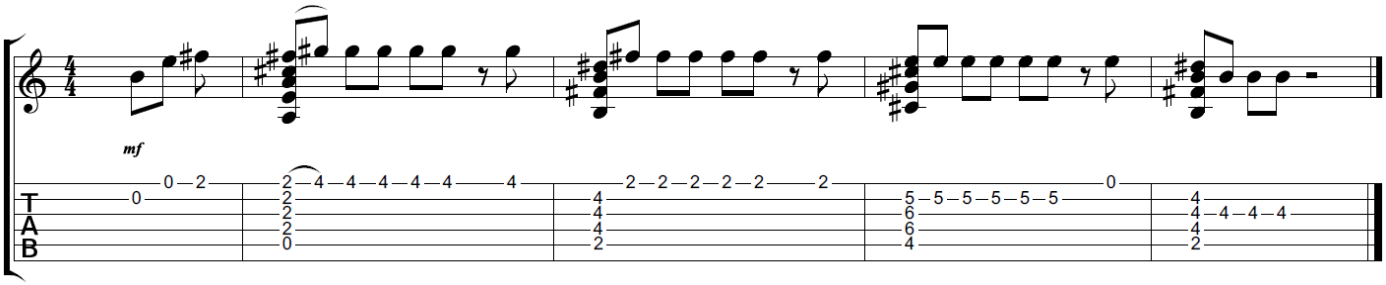
To find the melody, just listen to the song and match the single notes by ear:




Now, add in the chord shapes we acquired in the previous step.




You might reposition some of the melody fret placements for convenience/ effectiveness after adding the chords in. See the things I did with the melody for convenience and adding effects (e.g.,the hammer-on after the pickup bar):



# INTERMISSION

## THE DO AND THE DON'T

**The Do: Melody enhancements**

Generally speaking, you should always respect the song by understanding the intentions behind the melody and chords. That said, you should learn how to play the melody and chords how they were intended to be played before changing anything. After you've done this, do whatever you want with it, as long as your rendition and the original --at their cores-- are the same. People who don't follow this rule tend to create shallow arrangements that are thematically different than the original.

Here's a list of techniques to help you replicate the melody:

- Hammer-ons: legato
- Pull-offs: legato
- Sliding: glissando
- Palm-muting: staccato
- Use an open or fretted note: creates a tone with different harmonies

**The Don't: Playing Empty Chords**

Commonly, many musicians will create arrangements by only playing the melody and root notes with nothing in-between, completely ignoring chord structure. Although it sounds correct, there is no color to the chords. No one should approach it this way. Playing only the root note does not provide the listener with enough context to understand how the song is supposed to sound.

Finding chord types first will also help us keep an open mind about where and how the chord is played. Only after you've run out of chord options should you ever resort to playing only the root note and melody line. It's still not advised, though. We'll talk more about how chord patterns and textures can fix this later.

# STEP FOUR

## THE CAPO

Now that we've figured out one way to play the chord progression and melody of our song, let's see if there's a more efficient and chord-friendly way to do it by using a capo! The **capo** is a tool that clamps across all strings of the guitar to change the key of a song.

Notice how our current arrangement is a bit difficult to play due to the frequent barring below the melody. How about we put a capo on the 2nd fret? Here are the transcribed chord shapes that we'll play now:

**No capo:**

Amaj / Bmaj / C#min / Bmaj

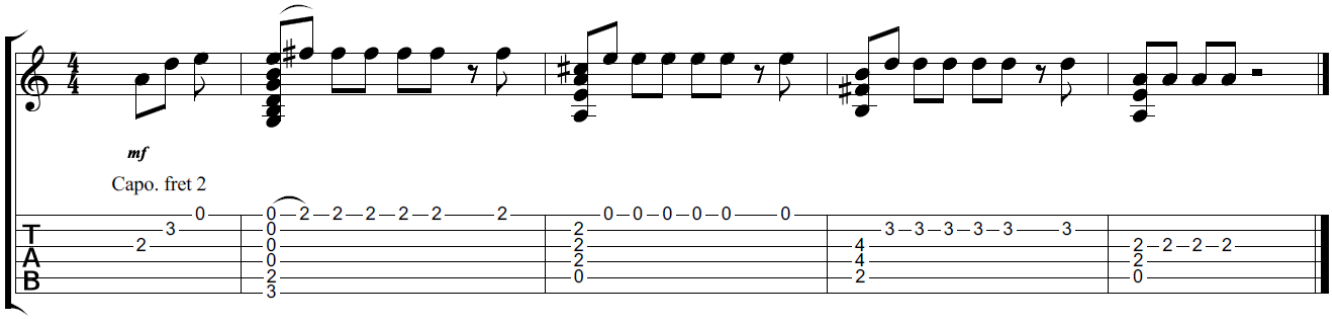
Amaj / Bmaj / Emaj

**2nd fret capo:**

Gmaj / Amaj / Bmin / Amaj

Gmaj / Amaj / Dmaj

Since the first 2 frets are now unusable, we'll have to reposition some of the finger placements in the melody line like so:




The G major is no longer barred and consists of open-string notes, making playing the melody a lot easier than previous times. This will also improve the tone of your sound when playing since the notes will naturally ring without your fingers barring them.

After arranging numerous pieces, you will be able to immediately do this step before steps 2 and 3.

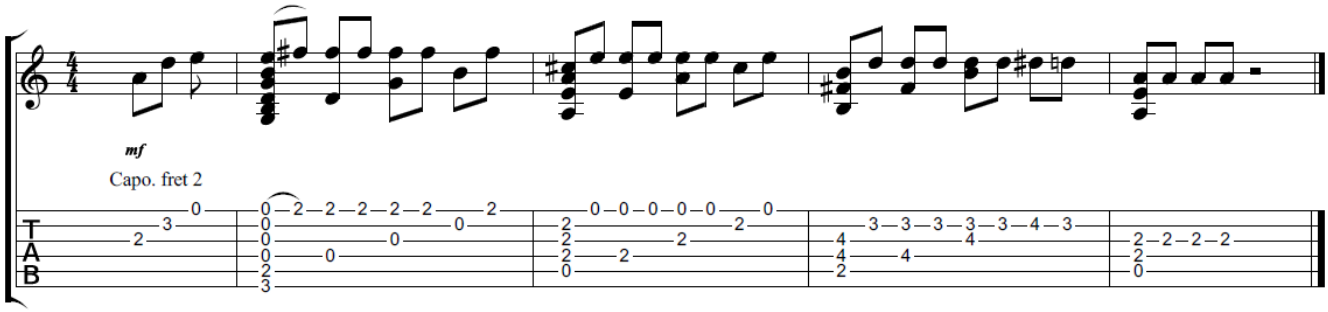
# STEP FIVE

## ADDING COLOR

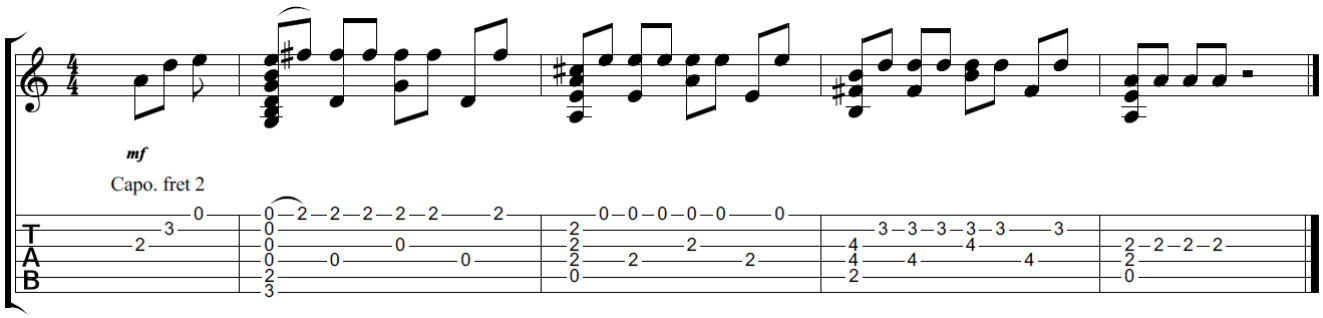
Now that we have the basic melody and chords of our sequence down, we can get into the creative part and add some of our own spazz.

One way to do this would be to add our own fingerstyle patterns to the chords while playing the melody. Here are a few common techniques used in fingerstyle arrangements:

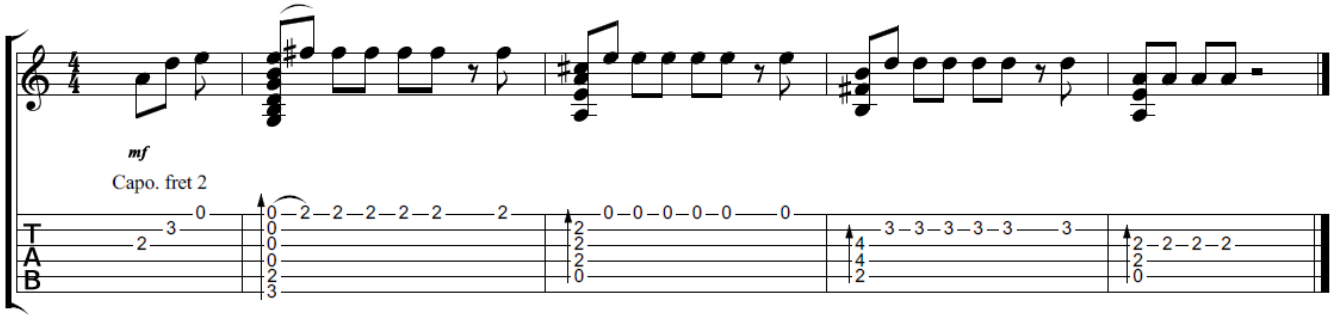
**The ascending arpeggio:**




**The ascending and descending arpeggio:**




**Strum-plucking:**




There are endless possibilities for patterns. I suggest messing around with all you can think of and then pick the most fitting one (try making one of your own too!). Learning already-existing fingerstyle arrangements is a great way to learn new patterns.

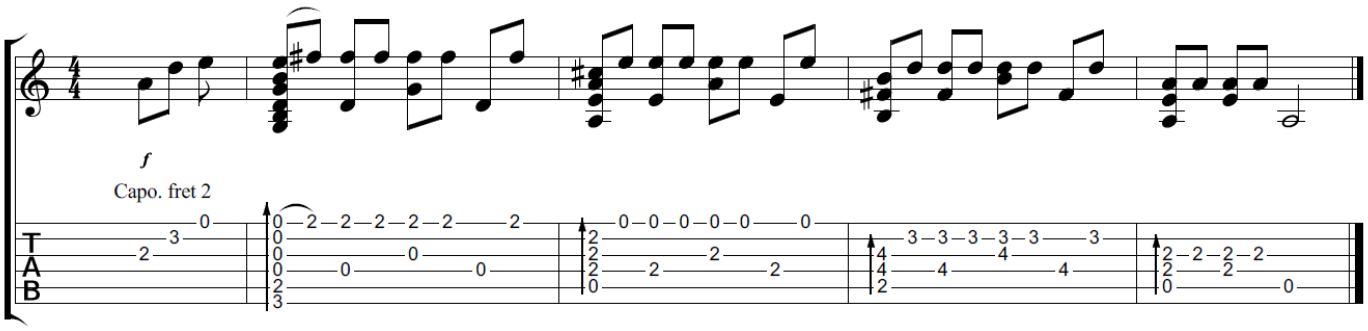
# STEP SIX

## DYNAMICS

Song dynamics are one of the most crucial parts to arranging. A song with the same volume all the way through would sound bland to the ear after a short period of time. Therefore, here are some techniques to make our arrangement full of varied dynamics.

### Amplitude

This may be obvious, but how loud we play will affect the dynamics. I would advise not to rely on this solely every time, though. There are many cases where using other techniques (discussed in the next page) combined with how loud we play would be much more impactful.

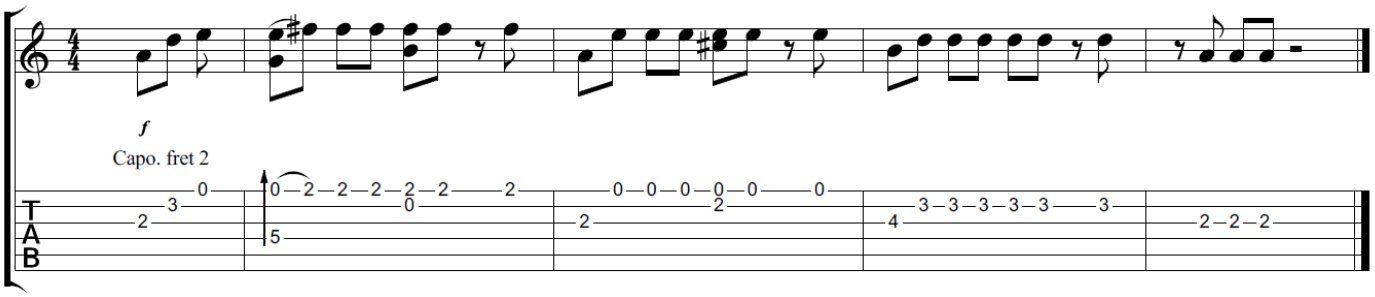



For the chorus, it's necessary that we play at a **forte** (loud), compared to a **mezzoforte** (moderately loud) verse. This will also allow more room to breath in-between the choruses.

### Changing the octave of the root note

Often times, changing the octave will drastically change how you play a sequence, but can create very impactful dynamic transitions.

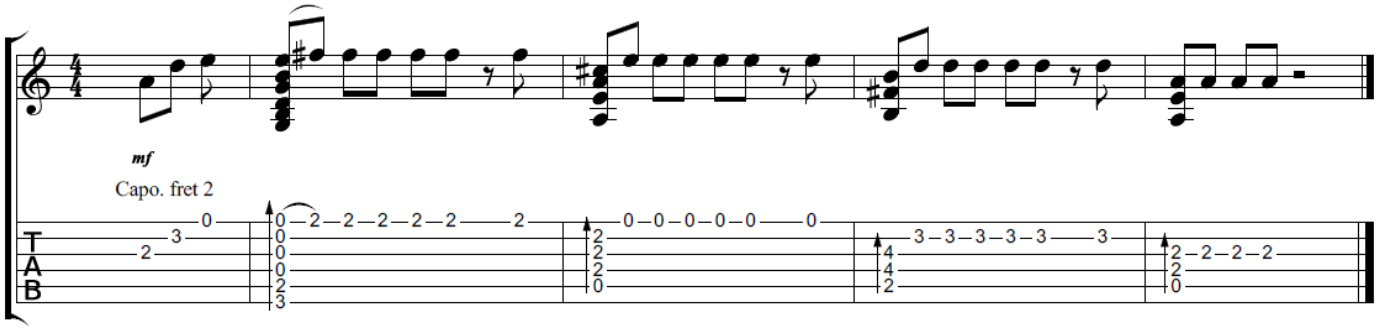
For instance, if we increased the root note of our sequence by an octave, we'll get a completely different tone. Like so:



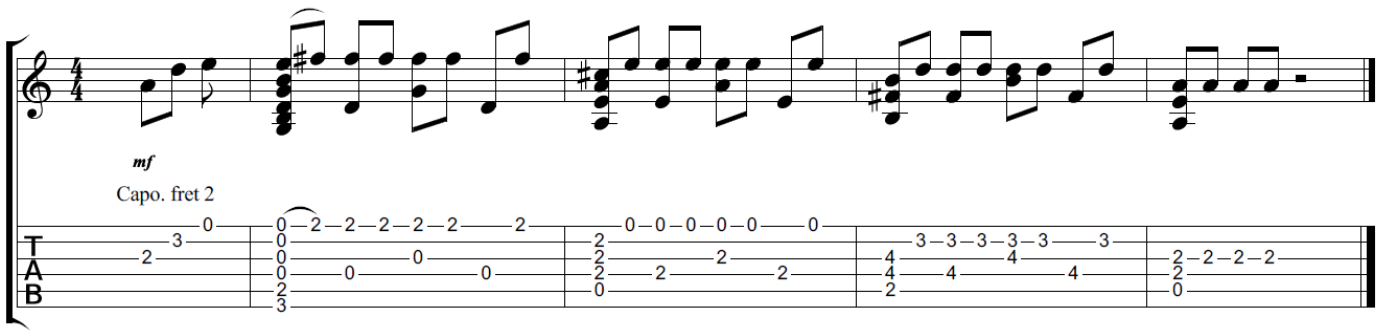

### Fingerpicking patterns

Increasing the intensity in fingerpicking, or not doing so at all to let the strings ring, can also create a good effect.

If we remove the arpeggios in-between the chords, then we'll have a softer effect:




Contrarily, if we increase the amount of notes per measure, then we'll be able to increase the intensity:



# CONCLUSION

## ... AND YOU'RE SET!

My intention creating this guide is to help expose you to another method of arranging. However, learning the chords and melody, capo setting, and finding the right fingerstyle patterns is only the beginning!

If you're interested in more ways to enhance your arrangements, I suggest looking into different types of tunings, chord variations, percussion, and harmonics.

But for now, you're set! Keep studying, keep challenging yourself, and most importantly, keep playing.