

The Guitarist / Arranger

For many years my friends (students) have questioned me about my arranging techniques. How do I play this or that tune? How did you end up with that arrangement? Well, I have to admit that I find it a very easy procedure, and it's all based upon my awareness of the Cycle of Fifths (ref, The Guitar, My Way).

First I concentrate on the piece that I want to add to my repertoire. Purely for study's sake, lets take the slow movement from the Concierto de Aranjuez by Rodrigo.

I impress upon you that this article is strictly for study and educational research. I make this statement so that the owners of the copyright of the wonderful music of Snr. Rodrigo don't think that I'm nicking his marvellous tune, although it has been the common practice of many great composers through the centuries, such as Elgar, Dvorak, Vaughan Williams, Tchaikovsky, Bach, and even Lloyd-Webber, to 'borrow' old folk tunes which are not restricted by copyright and shape and adapt them for their own creations, and often, profit.

I rest my case.

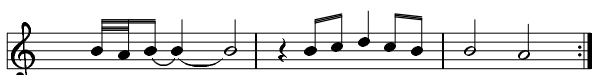
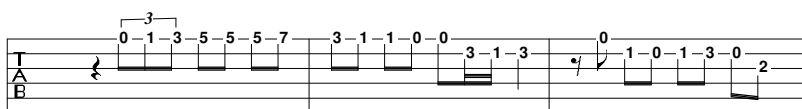
The process.

Rodrigo's theme is written in the key of D or B minor so my first concern is to make sure that it is playable. Well it is but to simplify things let's arrange it in the key of A minor. This will ma because firstly it's positioned at the open end of the fretboard, and secondly there are no sharps or flats to add to the confusion.

My next consideration is the Cycle fo Fifths. Those of you that know me know that I refer to this thing as my bible, and that is not meant as an insult to any other religion.

The Cycle of Fifths tells me everything I need to know to do my job correctly. By choosing the key of Am, and looking at it's position in the Cycle of Fifths I can see the harmonic family surrounding the Tonic. There is the Tonic (Am), the Sud-Dominant (Dm), and the Dominant (E7). To begin with that is all I need to know, and it is the simplest of working harmonic forms, it is the famous THREE CHORD TRICK. The tonic, sub-dominant and the tonic. In this case we are in a minor key so It's a bit like a sad rock and roll chord sequence.

Now let's look at the tune;





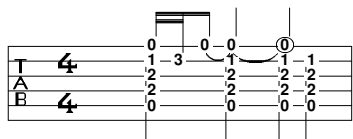
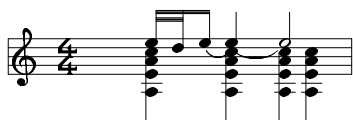
Having chosen the key of A minor to arrange the piece in I know that the melody will be made up from that scale. So I just work out the tune by ear. I have no tips for doing this but play the scale slowly, listen carefully, and try and find the starting note, and start from there. Ask yourself, "Does the melody go up or down? If it does, then by how much?" Now I work out the chords, this is also done by ear, but my Cycle of Fifths tells me the chords that will be involved in this the key.

From the sound of things it starts with the 'home' chord of A minor, try it, play it. Just strum it with your thumb. (Tip; only strum as far as the string that the melody note is on, if you play any strings above it you'll obscure it). So now we have this;



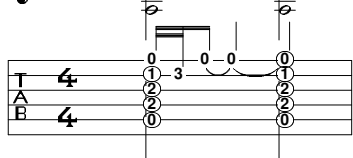
Am / / /

Now to put something below the melody that sound slightly classical or is in the style of the piece. The original starts out with a slow pulse of accompaniment, so why not try this;



Now it's starting to sound good. And with the music being Spanish, you could just strum the chords, or for added flavour try a light Rasguedo. (see my article; Flamenco Investigated).

But wait, the original accompaniment sounded slower and was in minims not crotchets. Well, this makes it even easier to play.



Now if we adopt this approach for the rest of the piece I think we will be getting close to sounding pretty good.

Right now in the music we have a change of chord, let's try Dm. It's closely related and if you're wrong you just try another one from the A minor family. By experimenting and listening carefully, you'll know that it's Dm. It is for part of the second bar and then it goes back to Am for the third. This is what I've now got;



0 1 3 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 3 3 3 1 0 3 0 0 0 0

1 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

So you can see that my approach is always a tune accompanied with a chord sequence. It is a simple way of putting things together and makes it very easy to remember the music.

Now to finish my arrangement of the first part;

Am Dm F7

E7-9 E7 Am

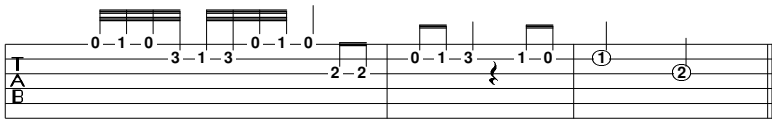
That nice little chord of F7 three bars from the end, and the parallel third intervals in the penultimate bar it sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Not to mention the flat 9th with the E7 three bars from the end. It's nothing clever, just a note of F on then 4th string.

Your home work now is to listen to the second part of the theme and harmonise it for yourself, it goes like this;

Fmaj7 Dm7 Em7

Am Dm

Am F7 E7 Am



You can make of that what you will, but try to keep the accompaniment consistant throughout.

Good luck, and try this approach with everything you play. It's easier to remember a tune and a chord sequence than three or four minutes of exact left and right hand fingering.

Keep playing , John.