

The background of the entire image is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of an acoustic guitar. The guitar's body is a warm, natural wood color, and its neck with frets and strings is visible. A blue graphic, consisting of a semi-circle and several parallel diagonal lines, is positioned over the upper part of the guitar. The text "BEYOND THE GUITAR" is centered horizontally across the middle of the image, with the blue graphic partially obscuring the word "THE".

BEYOND THE GUITAR

THE 3 PILLARS OF ARRANGING
#3: MUSIC THEORY

Pillar #3: Music Theory

Nathan Mills, Beyond The Guitar

Welcome to the 3rd and final part of my lesson series *The 3 Pillars Of Arranging*. This lesson is meant to supplement what you learned in my free training *Fretboard Freedom* where I taught you how to find and play chords anywhere on the fretboard ([if you haven't taken that training yet, you can access it here](#))

The 3 Pillars of Arranging are the 3 areas of musical knowledge that you need to familiarize yourself with in order to successfully create your own classical and fingerstyle guitar arrangements. Pillar #1 was *Ear Training* ([if you missed that lesson, here it is](#)), Pillar #2 was *Fretboard Knowledge* ([again if you missed it, here](#)) and today we're talking about Pillar #3: *Music Theory*.

Music Theory: Love it... Hate it... Need it! One of the most frequent complaints I hear from guitarists reaching out to me for advice is that they wish they had a stronger knowledge of music theory. **Music theory is one of those things that we all know we need, but don't know where to begin.** It's such a broad and all-encompassing subject that, without guidance, can be overwhelming and really difficult to determine which areas you need to focus on.

As with most subjects, there are more practical areas of music theory, and less practical areas. Those areas may vary depending on what your goals are with music and what styles you play, but my point is: **you don't need to know everything!**

My good news for you is that, to make your own classical or fingerstyle guitar arrangements, the core music theory knowledge that you need can be boiled down into only 2 main areas:

1. **Chord building** - Understanding how chords are built, and knowing how to build them anywhere on the fretboard
2. **Keys** - Understanding keys and key signatures, and knowing how to transpose a song into a different key that fits the guitar better



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You can develop the necessary fluency in both of these areas in only a few weeks of targeted study. I won't be talking about *Chord Building* in this lesson because I covered that in-depth in *Fretboard Freedom*. In this lesson, we'll be focusing on *Keys*, specifically:

- The importance of their role in the arranging process
- Which specific keys work best on the guitar
- How to transpose the original song you're arranging into a key that's more suitable for the guitar

I want to jump straight in to the good stuff in this lesson, so if you're completely new to keys and need a crash course in the basics, [here's a good introductory resource I recommend](#).

The Importance of Keys in the Arranging Process

Making your arrangement **feel and sound as natural as possible on the guitar should be your first priority**. That's where keys come in. Some keys fit the guitar better than others (*more on that in a bit*). You're making a mistake if you always default to keeping your arrangement in the same key as the original song.

Nobody in the audience cares if your arrangement is in the same key as the original song. They want it to sound like it was meant for the guitar!

At the beginning of my arranging process, I always spend a significant amount of time experimenting with playing parts of the theme in several different keys. After trying out a few, I'm able to decide which key feels and sounds best for that specific theme. Then I can move forward with the rest of my arrangement, setting everything in that key.

Sometimes, after experimenting, it works out that the original key is the best key for the arrangement, but that's rare.

There are **3 main elements** you're looking at when determining which key is the best fit for your arrangement:



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Open strings

Open strings are a lifesaver when you're trying to condense what's being played by multiple instruments down to something that can be played on one guitar. You want the freedom to play as many notes as possible at one time, but you only have 4 fingers to fret them with.

Playing in a key that allows you to use some or all of your open strings (*meaning some or all of the notes E, A, D, G, and B are neither sharp nor flat*) gives you the option to play those notes when you don't have a fretting finger available or within reach. **This is especially useful for bass notes.**

Range

Certain keys can set the range of pitches used in a piece of music too high or too low, so you lose the ability to play (*or comfortably play*) the required notes on the limited range of the guitar.

What are the highest and lowest notes of the melody?

What is the lowest bass note of the song's chord progressions?

Ask yourself these questions while you're experimenting with different keys to make sure that everything fits within the range of the guitar. **Ideally, you'll be able to choose a key that lets you play the theme in a couple octaves.** This certainly isn't required, nor is it always possible, but it's something to consider since it gives you options to add variety to your arrangement.

Jumping the melody up or down an octave is a great way to change the mood or intensity of your arrangement.

Playability

The availability of open strings and the range of a theme both impact the playability of an arrangement, but they aren't the only factors. **The same theme will generally feel very different in each key.** Whatever chords you need to play, for example, will take your fingers to different shapes and positions depending on the key.



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This is why it's extremely important to take each arrangement on a case-by-case basis and experiment with different keys each time. While there are certain keys that universally work better on the guitar, no one key is guaranteed to always be the best choice for every musical scenario. Pay attention to what feels and fits better on the guitar.

Best Keys for Guitar

I've compiled all the major and minor keys that work best on guitar based on the availability of open strings that they offer. These are the keys that you should pick from when experimenting and determining which key works best for your arrangement. I've ranked them high-to-low based on how frequently I've used each key in my own arrangements (separating major and minor keys), but determining which key works best out of these for your specific arrangement has to be taken on a case-by-case basis.

Key	Key Signature	Chords						
		I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°
E Major	 F# C# G# D#	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
C Major	 none	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
G Major	 F#	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
D Major	 F# C#	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
A Major	 F# C# G#	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#dim
		i	ii°	III	iv	v/V	VI	VII/vii°
A minor	 none	Am	Bdim	C	Dm	Em / E	F	G / G#dim
E minor	 F#	Em	F#dim	G	Am	Bm / B	C	D / D#dim
D minor	 Bb	Dm	Edim	F	Gm	Am / A	Bb	C / C#dim
B minor	 F# C#	Bm	C#dim	D	Em	F#m / F#	G	A / A#dim



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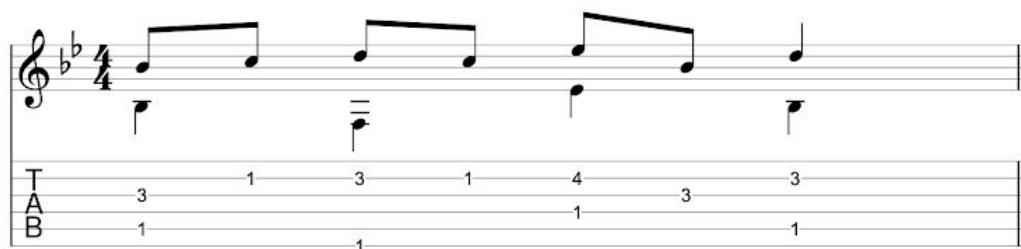
As you can see in the chart, I've also included **all the chords that naturally occur in each key** based on the scale degree. In minor keys, it's common to raise the 7th scale degree which changes the quality of the V and VII chords. That's why I included 2 versions for each. Depending on the piece, you might have a minor or Major V chord, or a Major or diminished vii chord.

How To Transpose

Now that you know which keys work best for the guitar, you need to understand how to transpose a piece from its original key into one of these new keys.

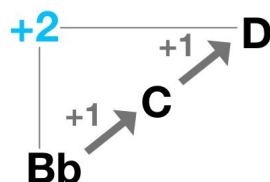
Thankfully, this is actually really simple!

Let's say we're working on an arrangement of a song originally in the key of Bb major. We've worked out the basic melody and bassline in the original key, and it goes like this:



Bb major is a terrible key for the guitar because it includes the notes Bb and Eb, meaning we're not able to use the open B, high E, or low E strings. Let's pick one of the keys that we know works well on the guitar from the chart on the previous page, and transpose the theme into that key.

For this example, I'm going to pick D Major. To determine how far we have to shift each note to transpose a theme, you just have to count the distance up or down between the original and destination keys. In this case, we're counting from Bb, up the scale, to D:



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So everything is going to shift up by 2 notes. Then you just need to reference the key signature of your new key to apply the sharps or flats to the necessary notes. For D Major, all C's and F's are sharp. So we need to make sure that any notes in our newly transposed theme that are now C's or F's are adjusted to C#'s and F#'s.

Notice how the exact same theme is **much easier to play in the new key** with all our bass notes on open strings. This is a perfect example of why it's worth experimenting with different keys when starting out an arrangement.

You can follow the same process when thinking in terms of chords rather than individual notes. If our chord progression in the key of Bb Major is:

Bb Major F Major Eb Major Bb Major
(I) (V) (IV) (I)

, then you shift each chord up by 2 notes to the key of D major and add the necessary sharps if applicable:

D Major A Major G Major D Major

Bb Major F Major Eb Major Bb Major
(I) (V) (IV) (I)



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With my *Fretboard Freedom* training and these *3 Pillars of Arranging* lessons you **have everything you need to get started** with your own classical and fingerstyle guitar arrangements.

My biggest piece of advice to you after all of this is to **just start!** Pick a song that you love, and start piecing together an arrangement bit by bit using the concepts I've been teaching you. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be fancy. You just need to start. All these concepts will start to click for you even more clearly as you work through the arranging process yourself.

Don't worry, though, I'm not leaving you with just this. I'm going to continue to send you weekly free lessons that will help you improve as a guitarist and arranger, so keep an eye on that inbox! Thanks again for being a student and subscriber.

Nathan Mills

BeyondTheGuitar.com



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