

INSTRUCTION

Evan Hirschelman Lesson

The classical guitarist explains how he integrates slurs, arpeggios, and large interval leaps into his compositions. **With video.**

By Scott Nygaard

**WITH A PRECISE AND PRODIGIOUS**

technique and influences ranging from Julian Bream and Michael Hedges to Steve Reich and Pink Floyd, classical guitarist Evan Hirschelman has been quietly making a name for himself in the contemporary classical guitar world as a composer and virtuoso performer who is not afraid to incorporate steel-string and metal techniques into his music. Starting his guitar life in Detroit, Michigan, as a young metalhead and continuing with classical guitar studies at Indiana University, the University of Arizona, and USC, Hirschelman's playing has been honored at the Stotsenberg Classical Guitar Competition, and his writing has caught the ear of guitarists like Xuefei Yang and Scott Tennant. After hearing Hirschelman's solo guitar piece "Homage to Michael Hedges,"

Tennant commissioned a piece for the LAGQ (Los Angeles Guitar Quartet), "Lament and Wake," which appears on the group's Grammy-winning *LAGQ's Guitar Heroes* recording. Hirschelman's own interpretations of his music, as well as pieces by Reich, Hans-Werner Henze, and Roland Dyens, can be heard on his album *Water in Darkness*, which includes a couple of duets with Tennant. We talked to Hirschelman during a trip to the San Francisco Bay Area last fall about how he combines techniques from all his musical influences.

Your compositions feature a lot of complicated combinations of techniques, particularly slurs and arpeggios, with a lot of movement up the neck. Can you give us an example?

HIRSCHELMAN Sure. This is an excerpt from "Homage to Michael Hedges" [Example 1]. It's a good introduction to slurs with arpeggios. It starts with a basic ascending arpeggio, and then some variations on the ascending right-hand patterns, alternating p-i-m-a and p-p-i-m-a, and then a variation of that i-m-a pattern again, with hammer-ons thrown in. When the line descends in the last measure, you'll see an a-m-i-p with some descending slurs. It starts in second position and moves up to tenth position, so there is a shift, but the open strings give you enough time to connect the lines while moving up. This whole example is *l.v.* or "let vibrate," so you let everything kind of run together.

Would you suggest practicing the hammer-ons with each finger?

HIRSCHELMAN Absolutely. You don't want to be limited to three fingers, otherwise you'll be limiting your musical lines. You have to practice all the permutations. Here's another variation on that first example [Example 2]. This one's a little trickier because in the third measure, starting with the pickup to the 7/8 measure, once again it's *l.v.*, so all your fingers need to let the adjacent strings vibrate. You really have to play on the tips of your fingers for this one. If you play on the pads, you'll mute the line.

The whole point is to hear all of the sympathetic vibrations.

So keeping a good arc on your left hand is really important?

HIRSCHELMAN Yeah. The idea is that I'm playing on the tips of my fingers and my tip joints and mid joints are arched, and it's a pretty heavy attack, which I use a lot in my compositions.

And that's really typical of any kind of polyphonic music. Whenever you want to get into adjacent strings ringing out, you really have to have this technique refined.

Those hammer-ons remind me of the steel-string and electric guitar techniques you use, with two-handed slurs and hammer-ons with really large melodic leaps. Can you play an example of those?

HIRSCHELMAN This [Example 3] is from the same piece, and it starts with a "hammer-on from nowhere," meaning you hammer-on a note without a pluck beforehand. The passage does involve right-hand plucking, so you're still arpeggiating some notes, and there's also a harmonic arpeggio. This one is l.v. too, but it's written out in divisi parts to emphasize the sustaining of the low D. The articulation [hammer-ons] of the D to D is the melody. That's why it's written that way, so it can have a heavier weight to it. For the harmonic arpeggio, I stretch my fourth finger out and prepare a half barre at the seventh fret. The trick is to make sure you don't mute any strings while you're doing it. You have to make sure you lift your finger off the harmonics so it rings through. If you leave it down too long, you will mute it; it won't create that sonority.

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Tuning: D A D G B E (Ex. 1-3)

Ex. 1 L.V. (let vibrate)

Ex. 2 L.V.

Ex. 3 Harm.

Do you change your right-hand attack to play the harmonics?

HIRSCHELMAN I do, but for this one, I wanted a pretty punchy attack. Generally when I do harmonics, when they're more lyrical, I want them to sustain for a long period, so I'll use more nail and less flesh. Here, I'm using flesh and nail to create that "puh" quality, that round articulation. For a brighter articulation I'll use all nail. The quality is totally different. It almost sounds like a harpsichord. When I'm doing slow lines with harmonics, I'll use the brighter attack. They don't need the heavy attack, and they cut through really clearly.

You're in dropped-D for that piece, and I know you use some alternate tunings. Do you have any other favorites?

HIRSCHELMAN There's a tuning I've become pretty fond of where I retune the second string to Bb, to create sonorities with that open string. It works well in D minor and G minor, and it creates a real easy way to get dissonance with the open strings. Here's an excerpt from my piece "Pace and Approach." This one is different from "Homage to Michael Hedges" in that the bass line is the melody and the top line is more of the accompaniment, but they're interdependent. Even though one is melody, the loudness level is pretty close in both of them [Example 4].

Is that how you approached writing the piece—you decided to write a piece with the melody in

The slurs are grace notes, some of which, when they hammer on to a note, get muted right away, for a real quick cutoff, and some of them sustain through.”

EVAN HIRSCHELMAN'S GUITARS AND GEAR

- **CLASSICAL GUITARS:** 2004 David Daily with an Engelmann spruce top and Indian rosewood back and sides, used for the solo pieces on *Water in Darkness*. “It has a very large timbre range with sweet trebles,” Hirschelman says. Cedar and Indian rosewood David Daily. Double-top (European spruce) and Indian rosewood Kenny Hill Signature model with a tapered body and truss rod.
- **STEEL-STRING GUITAR:** Circa Guitars Evan Hirschelman signature model built with a European spruce top, Madagascar rosewood back and sides, and an estate ivory bridge (stock models use mammoth tusk). “Luthier John Slobod created this model, which is geared toward prewar Martin and classical guitar lovers alike,” Hirschelman says. “It’s a 000-style guitar with a slightly wider fingerboard than normal. It is built very lightly, for optimal resonance, projection, and a light string gauge, so guitarists can play with their natural nails. It sounds rich, creamy, and well balanced.”
- **STRINGS:** GHS La Classique hard-tension nylon strings. GHS phosphor bronze (with an unwound G string) steel strings in custom gauges.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Audix SCX-1 and SCX-25 condenser mics, live and in the studio.
- **FLIGHT CASE:** Karura.

[Evan Hirschelman: What He Plays](#)

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