



SPECIAL SYMBOLS USED IN SHEET MUSIC FOR THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

Sheet music is usually provided with symbols or designations indicating dynamics, tempo and the performance manner. We are going to talk about the latter in this article.

The performance manner is defined by the specific term called fingering. Fingering is a set of designations or symbols demonstrating the finger position and the method for extracting the sound: string number, fret number, fingers to be used, and playing techniques.

Let's start with the most frequently used designations: Arabic numerals.

Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4) demonstrate which finger has to be stopped on the neck (the fingers of the left hand, if the standard sitting position is used). Numeral "0" designates an open (unstopped) string, numeral "1" – the index finger, numeral "2" – the middle finger, numeral "3" – the ring finger, and numeral "4" – the little finger. The left-hand thumb is not used for holding down strings on the classical guitar so there are no designations for it.

Fingering is essential not only for beginners, but also for professional guitarists (at the very least to indicate which part of the neck the performer has to play on, since sounds of the same pitch may be extracted on various strings, at various points on the neck). That's why the lack of fingering designations negatively affects the speed at which you are learning musical compositions and makes it impossible to perform by sheet music without prior preparation.

But the same effect might occur if the sheet music appears to be overcrowded with fingering symbols. For example, if Arabic numerals are placed near every single note without exception. People who write sheet music for the guitar are well aware of this and try to reduce the amount of fingering designations... without harming the interests of the performer. So, if you don't see Arabic numerals near a note, it means that:

- A) you have to hold down the same finger as with the previous note of the same pitch;
- B) the note is held down by means of the "barre" technique (see more about "barre" below) and therefore doesn't require any designations since the "barre" technique is usually performed with the index finger barring the strings. But... it may also be performed by other fingers, not only by the index finger, so in this case, Arabic numerals must be placed;
- C) this is a note of the open sixth string, near which numeral "0" is usually not placed because you have no other way but to play it as a note of an open string. But... this rule only applies to the standard E tuning system. If the sixth string is tuned using an alternative tuning system, the arrangement of Arabic numerals shall comply with the rules specified above;

Unfortunately, some authors of sheet music often neglect fingering. In this case, I advise you to stop looking for better performance solutions and turn to other options on the Internet. For example, you can go on the website of [Andrey Nosov's Guitar School](#), where fingering is presented in its entirety, even in the free section. You may take a close look at the topic "Left Hand Fingering" in [Lesson 6](#) of the NGS*) where you will even find examples from real sheet music samples.

Roman numerals (I, II, III and etc.) indicate the fret number when playing the "barre" technique or the position of the index finger on the neck (see the topic in [Lesson 15](#) of the NGS). The numeral is often provided from the right with a line (continuous or dotted), which indicates how long you should hold down the "barre," or the duration of a technique in a particular position.

Just for reference, "barre" is the way to hold down several strings with just one finger. This topic is covered starting from [Lesson 20](#) of the NGS. Due to the large number of exercises, you will have a chance to learn not only this difficult playing technique, but also how to make sense of Roman numeral designations. For example, you will understand whether the Roman numeral is a recommendation for using "barre" or just advice to play in a particular position.

Latin letters (p, i, m, a, e) designate which fingers should be used for extracting the sound (the fingers of the right hand, if the standard sitting position with the neck to the left is used). Letter "p" recommends the thumb for extracting the sound, letter "i" – the index finger, letter "m" – the middle finger, letter "a" – the ring finger, and letter "e" – the little finger.

You should not expect these designations to be used throughout the whole sheet music. You are more likely to see them in difficult playing parts, in parts involving the "flamenco" playing techniques, or in training sheet music.

*) NGS – Andrey Nosov's Guitar School

That's all... The guitarist is supposed to be capable of dealing with the six strings (with regard to the 6-string guitar) and their own five fingers by themselves. It's said that the proper guitarist uses his right-hand fingers automatically while playing the guitar (if the standard sitting position is used), not looking at the hand even when the composition is being performed by sheet music. Of course, he does...if he has been taught how to correctly use his fingers. Like one would on the website of "[Andrey Nosov's Guitar School](#)". So, I invite everyone interested to undergo the training course (or even just to improve your skills). I also invite those who are taken with the idea of starting a solo career as a guitarist and those who consider the guitar merely an accompanying instrument. I want to tell the latter: "The art of the guitar accompanist is not limited to fingerpicking (the training starts from [Lesson 17](#) of the NGS) and strumming (see the topic in [Lesson 165](#) of the NGS). There are also intros, breaks and codas which are used in any vocal composition and require a lot of training.

Curved Line. Curved line has two basic meanings in the context of sheet music for the guitar: tie and slur indicating to play the "legato" playing technique.

1. If the curved line connects two adjacent notes of the SAME pitch (see Pic.1a), the two notes joined together are to be played as one note with the time values added together. It means the second note is not played by the right hand (from this point, hand names – left hand/right hand – are defined in accordance with the standard sitting position with the neck to the left of the performer). You may take a closer look at the instructions for a tie in [Lesson 21](#) of the NGS.



Pic.1a

2. If the curved line connects two notes of DIFFERENT pitches (see Pic.1b), the first note is played by the right hand and the sound of the second note you should produce with the "legato" technique. The curved line very often connects more than two notes together (see Pic.1c). In this case, the first note is also played by the right hand and the sound of the other notes, including the last, should be produced by the "legato" technique.



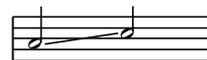
Pic.1b

Pic.1c

For reference, the "legato" playing technique is performed by the same hand with which you hold down the strings on the neck and used for giving smooth sounds to the music. The "legato" technique is subdivided into "hammer-on" (the training starts from [Lesson 37](#) of the NGS), "pull-off" (the training starts from [Lesson 47](#) of the NGS), and "hammer-on/pull-off" (the training starts from [Lesson 57](#) of the NGS).

It should be noted that "legato" is a basic technique for such musical elements as grace notes (ornaments), without which learning the classics, especially the best compositions of Spanish guitar music, is impossible. Grace notes include "appoggiaturas" (the training starts from [Lesson 68](#) of the NGS), "mordents" (the training starts from [Lesson 94](#) of the NGS), "gruppettos" (the training starts from [Lesson 126](#) of the NGS), and "trills" (the training starts from [Lesson 144](#) of the NGS).

The line between note heads indicates to use the "slide" playing technique or glissando (Pic.2). The technique consists of gliding the finger along the string from one part of the neck to another (without easing the pressure on the finger) to smoothly change the pitch. The two notes grouped together are to be played by the right hand, and in this case, the gliding speed depends merely on the current fragment of the specific composition. More detailed information can be found in [Lesson 66](#) of the NGS.



Pic.2

The line between note heads and the curved line indicate to use the "legato slide" playing technique (Pic.3). The technique is very similar to the "slide" technique, but you play only the first note with the right hand. The sound of the second note is achieved by the finger suddenly stopping the glide along the string. More detailed information can be found in [Lesson 67](#) of the NGS.



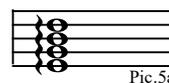
Pic.3

The curved line between Arabic numerals referring, as we know, to the left-hand fingering indicates that the finger of the left hand is more convenient to shift without removing it from the string (Pic.4). But... during the shift you have to ease the pressure on the string to avoid the "slide" effect, which is not appropriate in this case. This musical symbol should not be confused with the "slide" technique, which is a completely different thing.



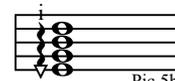
Pic.4

A wavy line placed before notes positioned one above another (Pic.5a) indicates to use the "arpeggiato" playing technique. The "arpeggiato" is a broken chord where the notes are consequently played one after another (unlike the typical chord where the notes are played simultaneously). And if the wavy line is not provided with Latin letters which designate which right-hand fingers to use, the performer is free to use any possible variant. For example, one may use one finger or all of them (each finger for different strings).



Pic.5a

It should also be noted that the "arpeggiato" technique is performed by default by consequently playing the strings from 6 to 1. But if the author wants to specify the direction of the consequent

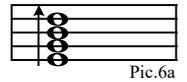


Pic.5b

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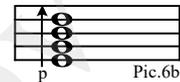
sounds, a V-shaped point indicating the desired direction is added to the wavy line, turning the line into an arrow (Pic. 5b). More detailed information can be found in [Lesson 48](#) of the NGS.

A straight line with a V-shaped point (arrow) placed before notes positioned one above another indicates the strumming extraction of the sounds (Pic.6a) The technique is performed with either one finger

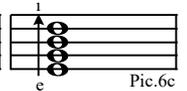


or many of them according to the "rasgueado" playing technique (see [Lesson 165](#) of the NGS). The arrow can point either up (in this case, the sounds are extracted by playing strings from 6 to 1) or down (from 1 to 6).

At the bottom, the arrow can be provided with Latin letters which specify which finger of the right hand you have to use (Pic.6b). If the letters are placed both at the top and the bottom of the arrow, they indicate with which finger you should start and stop playing the "rasgueado" technique (Pic. 6c).

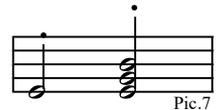


Pic.6b



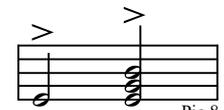
Pic.6c

The dot above the note stem or above the note head recommends using the "staccato" playing technique, which signifies a note of shortened value (Pic.7). The "staccato" may be played with both the left and right hand and can apply to a single note or a group of notes, as well. More detailed information can be found in [Lessons 152–154](#) of the NGS.



Pic.7

An arrow or wedge-shaped mark above the note stem or above the note head denotes an accent, which indicates to play the note with a sudden increase in volume (Pic.8). The accent can apply to a single note or a group of notes, and its loudness depends merely on the fragment of the specific composition.



Pic.8

A "dash" above the note stem or above the note head indicates to use the "portamento" playing technique (Pic.9). The "portamento" is a technique which signifies the extraction of the sound with an accent, the intensity of which depends of the current fragment of the specific composition, and is held for the full duration of the note value until the next sound starts being extracted. The "portamento" technique very often applies to several adjacent notes, and, despite the tendency of the adjacent sounds to affect each other, creates a clear separation of the sounds by means of the accents.



Pic.9

The given technique can apply to notes of both the same and different pitches. Notes of different pitches grouped together can be played by the "slide" playing technique, which consists of gliding the finger (holding down the string) along the string to smoothly change the pitch (the speed at which you are gliding the finger also depends on the current fragment of the specific composition).

The "repeat" sign (:||) is the symbol used to reduce the length of the sheet music. It means that you should play to the repeat sign and then repeat the passage once more from the beginning. Or if you see the sign facing the other way (||:), it indicates where you should begin the repeat. You might repeat one bar or an entire passage of the composition. Once you repeat the passage, you are supposed to continue playing as usual.

The "repeat sign" is sometimes provided with volta brackets, which correspond to the graphical size of one or several bars and are designated by numerals "1" (the first time bar) and "2" (the second time bar). The volta brackets indicate that the repeated passage has to be played with a different ending. So, first, you have to play the passage from the first time bar. Then, you have to skip the the first time bar and play the passage from the second time bar which is considered the ending of the repeat. After this, you are supposed to continue to play as usual. One composition can contain up to several "repeat" signs with volta brackets. In this case, the numeration goes on to "3", "4", etc.

The "Segno" mark (⌘) and the coda sign(⊕). The "Segno" mark (derived from the Latin word *segno* – a sign) and the coda sign are symbols that are also used to reduce the length of the sheet music. These symbols are usually paired (the symbol closest to the beginning and the symbol farthest from the beginning) and are used as follows:

1. First, you play to the farthest "Segno";
2. Then, you turn to the closest "Segno" and play from there to the closest coda sign;
3. Then, you turn to the farthest coda sign and continue to play as per usual.

There may be other ways to play repeats with "Segno", but all of these ways are always specified in the sheet music and need no further explanation. For example: "D.S. al Fine" (Play from the "Segno" to the word "Fine"). Or: "D.S. al Coda" (Play from the "Segno" to the word "Coda" and then turn to the coda itself, the beginning of which will be clearly designated).

*) NGS – Andrey Nosov's Guitar School

I completely understand that learning these symbols is a little bit difficult without the right approach, which is why I am providing the sheet music samples in the Guitarist's Library on the website of "Andrey Nosov's Guitar School" with a brief step-by-step instruction.

Other specified commentaries may include: "D.C. al Fine" (Play from the beginning to the word "Fine"). Or: "D.C. al Coda" (Play from the beginning to the word "Coda").

The information provided is intended as a reference guide and includes the most frequently used designations and symbols used in sheet music for the guitar. In order to get thorough knowledge about any issues related to the guitar, you have to undergo the training in "Andrey Nosov's Guitar School" (see the section "Guitar Lessons").

I wish you success, my colleagues!

Andrey Nosov



If you have downloaded this materials from somewhere on the Internet, now is the time to visit their home website and take a closer look at all the other interesting and useful materials.

Andrey Nosov's Guitar School presents:

1. Sheet music for guitar solo;
2. Sheet music for voice and guitar;
3. Sheet music for guitar ensembles;
4. Guitar lessons (learning the art of guitar playing and musical notation, analysis of musical compositions, know-how, and so on);
5. Vocabulary, reference materials;
6. Exercises for developing guitar playing techniques, guitar software and more.

I'd especially like to draw your attention to the online store where you can find a wide range of world-class compositions for guitar solo, guitar ensembles, and voice and guitar. Access to the website is free... The first page of the sheet music for any composition is available free of charge for listening and viewing... The prices will pleasantly surprise you...

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