



Music Degrees and Rock Guitarists, Part II

Earning a traditional four-year degree in music, and specifically classical guitar, can make guitarists better at rock music, but it usually takes some effort to transport what you've learned from the classical concert hall to the rock arena. The possible benefits to this education include:

- Knowing how to write variations
- Effective use of keys and more dynamic, sophisticated arrangements
- Writing multiple parts, including dual leads and harmony, more easily
- Significantly easier writing of lead guitar that is more melodic and does what you want it to

Writing Variations

An idea is the source of all artwork, and since a good idea is hard to come by, it's smart to make the most out of each. This is central to classical composition technique, and one thing students learn is to find variations by studying the music. An entire five-minute piece can be written from a single idea less than one measure long.

Variation is all about retaining some element of the original idea while other elements are altered, keeping music fresh and yet familiar. The variation does not have to be recognizable as such, though it helps, but listeners of different astuteness will notice different things anyway. The most important thing is that if you made more music out of your idea, you have avoided adding a second idea to the piece just to finish the writing. That second idea could have been a song of its own. It is fine to write music based on two different ideas, and this "theme 1 vs. theme 2" approach is widespread, but **both** ideas are then used as a source of variations.

Cosmetic variations are simple and don't involve manipulation of the material's structure, which is why untrained musicians often opt for this approach. One example is changing the instrumentation, such as the singer performing the melody, and then the guitarist doing it verbatim. Even extreme changes in instrumentation by all band members, while effective, are cosmetic. Progressive metal bands excel at this.

Structural variations are typically more sophisticated and involve breaking down a musical idea into its component parts, such as its harmony, rhythm, and melody. The most important of these is the melody, which can be further divided into several smaller snippets called "motifs". A motif is a short musical idea that is recognizable. A motif can be surrounded with different chords and keys, repeated at different pitches, and used as the basis for a new melody. The motif itself can also be varied, not simply repeated in different guises. This is an extensive subject to be covered in future articles.

Knowing how to write variations will not only make your music more compelling, but it can prolong your artistic life. Why waste ideas when you can mine the song for unexploited potential? How many bands sound like they're out of ideas after three albums? Lead guitar ideas can often be derived from something within the riffs, too.

Dynamic Use of Keys

A key change can be a powerful thing - or it can be largely pointless. In classical music, keys are used to define structure, add tension in either subtle or obvious ways, and for variation. These ideas appear throughout a music curriculum but are most prominently studied in Musical Form class. Each classical form, such as a fugue, sonata, or minuet, is defined in part by its key changes, and while you might not want to write an allemande, for example, the harmonic ideas within such a piece can still be applied to other genres.

Defining Structure: Writing a verse in one key and the chorus in another helps distinguish the sections from each other. The average listener won't be consciously aware of it, but it still affects them. Their sense of forward motion and the "You Are Here" feeling are stronger. Without key changes, a song may feel like it meanders. For two alternating sections of music, the most basic approach is derived from chord progressions and involves changing from I to V. In other words, if the verse is in A major (I), write the chorus in E major (V), so that when the verse (I) reappears, a V-I motion occurs. This is discussed in more detail in another article, "[Structural Chord Progressions](#)".

Adding Tension: When a song remains in one key throughout, it goes nowhere harmonically. By contrast, a song with key changes feels more dynamic. The goal of chord progressions is to return to the home chord (I), which is why all progressions end with it. The goal of key changes is that, once left, the home key is a destination-in-waiting, and the desire for the original key to return adds tension. This is why it is used structurally, too. Another option is to surprise the listener with a more audible/noticeable key change. They may not understand what happened, but the jarring or colorful change adds drama. This is also discussed in "[Structural Chord Progressions](#)".

Variation: Presenting the music in different keys makes it sound different because keys don't sound the same. Switching between two major keys, or two minor ones, works easily, but going from major to minor (or vice versa) often works well, too. Which key depends on an understanding of related keys and how to use a progression to change keys, and personal preference. For example, from E major, some obvious options are E minor, B major, A major or minor, and C# minor. Each has structural implications, and knowing how to return to E major later brings things to a resounding close.

Every key falls on the guitar differently, opening up some possibilities and closing others. Adapting your theme to fit can cause subtle changes in how it sounds (this is especially true of riffs). Working in different keys also changes your thinking, keeping your perspective and your playing fresh.

Writing Multiple Parts

Guitarists enjoy cleverly written guitar parts, especially when there's more than one at a time. Whether dual leads or layered rhythm guitars, writing such parts is much easier when you're very familiar with the internal structure of chords and have studied counterpoint. Both subjects are taught intensely in a music curriculum.

"Part writing" in Music Theory class will make it clear that you can change chords simply by changing one pitch, not moving all of them. If you're holding A, F, D (a D minor chord in 2nd inversion), you can drop the D to a C to create an F major chord (A, F, C) in 1st inversion. This might not sound like much, and as a single guitar part, it may not be enough change, but if this is an additional guitar part, such simple motions can make great secondary writing. If it's a 3rd or even 4th guitar, the resulting sound can be rich, like this three-guitar and one bass example from my acoustic piece, "[The Joys of Spring](#)". It works with distortion, too, not just acoustic guitars.

Another version of multi-part writing is having several distinct lines in addition to the rhythm guitar's chords. This [short clip from my song "Epic"](#) demonstrates this with 5 guitar parts that enter one by one: the main riff, chords, a melody that becomes an ostinato, double-stops, the high E string, and finally a solo. This sort of writing is difficult without some training.

Dual or harmony lead guitar is much easier to understand as well. Classes in Music Theory, Counterpoint and Musical Form, with all the analysis and four-part writing, will make writing only two parts pretty easy by comparison. Playing a melody in strict 3rds is effortless, and writing two different melodies that work together (counterpoint), even over riffs that have melodies, too, is also more straightforward. Listen to this [clip from my song Journeys](#), where two call-and-answer leads work over the riff melody.

Easier Writing of Lead Guitar

A classical guitar degree will have you knowing the notes below the 9th fret fluently, and this can (but may not) help you play better lead guitar lines. For it to help, you must be able to think about what you're doing instead of playing by rote. This means abandoning the more common way of navigating the guitar neck for the second and more thoughtful way.

The more common approach among untrained musicians is to use scale patterns, chord shapes, and memorized fingerings to find your way. This helps players go everywhere on the neck, play the same thing in many keys just by moving the hand around, and compensates for unfamiliarity with the pitches. This is how most guitarists learn to play because we're in it for fun at first. Why waste your time learning all those notes when there's a shortcut? Because this can come back to haunt you later – as a crutch that prevents you from thinking about what you're doing.

The second way is to navigate via the notes on the neck. Non-guitarists might be surprised to discover this **isn't** how people do it, but old habits die-hard. Once you know the fingerings in E minor, it's hard to ignore them and focus on which notes you're holding, but there are reasons to change. Every pitch has a melodic and harmonic relationship to the root of the key (E in this case) and the other notes. For example:

You should be able to think, "I'll play a D# because it's the altered 7th of E minor, and it resolves up by step to the root if it's in the outer voice, and it's the major 3rd of the V chord in a V-I progression, which is what the riffs are doing in background. I'm on B major (V) now, and the next chord is E minor, so my next note should be E, even if only briefly. Maybe I'll quickly move up to a G to emphasize the minor tonality of the key. Or maybe I'll play a G#, making it sound like I'm in E major instead, though this will only work if the riff isn't playing a G natural. Since the chord is an E5 voicing of E and B, though, so it will work." If all of this isn't in the back (or front) of your mind before your finger lands on that D#, you are **not** playing by the notes on the neck.

It is not enough to be able to figure out what note you are playing at a given moment. You must have placed your finger at that spot **because of** its letter name and all the associated relevancies, but this won't happen automatically even after a degree unless you change your thinking (how to do so is a subject for another article coming soon). Even so, this multitude of knowledge about what **could be** done with pitches, if utilized, will make you a far more melodic and powerful lead player.

Coda

A traditional four-year degree in classical guitar, or another music specialty, is extremely valuable to longevity, versatility, and overall effectiveness as a musician. This is true even for rock guitarists, but

only if you are able to apply it to the rock genre. This requires some thought and ingenuity, and many of these subjects will be discussed in further detail in other articles. The techniques can be seen in virtually all of the music I write, some of which is available as a free download. [The annotated tablature](#) shows progressions, key changes, and variations, and [comes with an explanation](#).

Biography

Randy Ellefson is an instrumental guitarist with a Bachelors of Music in Classical Guitar, Magna Cum Laude. His debut album was released in June 2004 on Guitarosity Records, and he's endorsed by Peavey and Alvarez Guitars. The album's title, *The Firebard*, is a nod to his experience with tendonitis, which took away his playing for five years before he fully recovered it. For more details, mp3s, tabs, articles, videos and other cool stuff, visit the official site, www.randyellefson.com, or email Rand at mail@randyellefson.com.