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The role of contemporary performers in the evolutionary development of electric guitar techniques and playing methods

Abstract. This article explored some of the most modern performance techniques on the electric guitar and examined their application by renowned musicians, including Tosin Abasi, Tim Henson, and Marcin Petrzalek. Tosin Abasi was examined as an advocate of the eight-string guitar and the “selective picking” technique, while Tim Henson was presented as a representative of the progressive metal genre. Meanwhile, Marcin Petrzalek, also known by his stage name “Marcin”, was highlighted as a prominent figure in fingerstyle guitar, focusing on his commitment to performance technique. The purpose of this article was a review of modern methods, approaches, and techniques of sound production on the electric guitar, with an emphasis on their application in the works of leading contemporary guitarists. Its significance and relevance lay in the clear systematisation and analysis of modern guitar techniques, enhanced by vivid examples and performance interpretation. It should be noted that this article addressed only the fundamental and popular methods of electric guitar performance, particularly in the works of prominent contemporary musicians, who employ these techniques as integral elements of their style. The article presented specific techniques, modern performance practices, and a concise analysis, alongside practical recommendations aimed at advanced specialists. The practical value of this study is closely linked to the teaching of modern electric guitar performance. The findings may be incorporated into educational courses on subjects such as “Electric Guitar”, “History of Guitar Performance”, “Modern Acoustic Guitar”

Keywords: beats; tapping; hybrid picking technique; fingerstyle; slap

Introduction

The modern electric guitar, in the context of global musical art, has established its position not only in traditional performance areas, such as rock, heavy metal, blues, and jazz, but has also gradually penetrated pop music, the works of contemporary academic composers, and various innovative performances with musical accompaniment. At the same time, structuring the latest techniques and methods poses significant challenges for two main reasons. The first is the sheer variety of techniques, which can broadly be classified into structural groups. The second, and primary, reason is the lack of an established electric guitar school in Ukraine, and, consequently, the limited practice of musicians striving to consistently develop, improve, and adopt foreign experience. The modern exchange of ideas and practices facilitated

the adaptation of contemporary performance techniques, whether consciously or unconsciously developed by contemporary musicians. While foreign studies on electric guitar performance techniques are increasing, there is a lack of research analysing the nature of performance, specific methods, and individual techniques employed by 21st-century performers. To address this gap, this article integrated personal performance experience with professional sources studying modern electric guitar techniques. In particular, it is important to highlight a comprehensive article by C. Griffiths (2023), which examined the specifics of modern performing techniques through the work of Tim Henson, an avant-garde guitarist, who successfully combined progressive metal with other rock genres as well as jazz influences. The researcher

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highlighted the hybrid picking technique, noting that it forms the foundation of Henson's performance style. Furthermore, Griffiths provided examples of Henson's work with the band "Polyphia", though, this represented only a small fraction of the diverse guitar artistry demonstrated by this young and highly promising musician. In 2020, one of the leading music sources, Musicradar, presented a methodological and pedagogical model focusing on the guitar techniques of Tosin Abasi (How to play guitar like..., 2020). This publication focused exclusively on the work of professional musicians, and its website contained a wealth of useful information not only about individual artists, but also about all elements of the "guitar performance" complex, including pedals, synthesisers, instruments, and manuals. Specifically, a methodological article on the work of Tosin Abasi was located in the section featuring textbooks and manuals related to playing the electric guitar. This demonstrated the scientific approach of the site's contributors, although their names were not provided by the editors. This source material deserved special attention, as the information presented in the article, when combined with practical experience, enabled the drawing of important conclusions about the musician's performance. G. Turner (2015) examined the identity and function of various playing techniques on the electric guitar. It should be noted that the author used the concept of "identity" deliberately, emphasising facts related to the origins of specific techniques in guitar performance practice or on other instruments. This dissertation also discussed modern inventions used in the design of the instrument or combination with it. The researcher highlighted the significance of these inventions and their connection to the development of new performance techniques. Additionally, among the relevant academic studies was the research of O. Lähdeoja *et al.* (2010), in which the scientists positioned the electric guitar as a central instrument in the context of the past sixty years and the popularisation of popular and rock music. The authors also noted that early integration of the electric guitar into orchestras occurred within jazz and rock styles.

J. Hardy (2024) referred to the period, during which the electric guitar was created, specifically highlighting the 1930s and mentioning the name of Adolf Rickenbacker, who should be regarded as one of its originators. The researcher noted that this was the era of big bands, within the context of jazz stylistic development. It was a period, when the lower tessitura of the instrument gained greater prominence in the ensemble, particularly, when compared to the sound of brass and drums.

Contemporary musicologist M. Brain (2024) also examined the history of the emergence and development of the electric guitar, but structured his research primarily around the instrument's construction, the specifics of its sound, and its explanation using physical terms, phenomena, and concepts. The article "Modern electric guitar techniques: What you need to know" (2021) presented

the fundamental performing techniques for the electric guitar in an accessible and concise form. It focused on adolescent learners, – as this stage provided student with the opportunity to better master the instrument's intricate performance subtleties, given its complexity in both acoustic and technical aspects. The significance of this article lies in its concise exploration of the most popular modern guitar techniques, including tremolo, fingerstyle, tapping, sweeping, vibrato, and others. Scientists T. Ciszak & S.F. Josel (2019) approached the issue of multiphonics on an acoustic guitar in an innovative manner, as they first analysed the performance of multiphonics on woodwind instruments and then on strings.

An important focus of this study was the spectral content and morphology of multiphonic performance. For the first time, the article also explored the performance of multiphonics on each of the six strings of an electric guitar. It should be noted that the chosen research topic arose not only due to its limited prior exploration, but also in the context of the significant interest among musicians in the potential of modern techniques and methods for playing the electric guitar.

Materials and Methods

Among the scientific research methods used in this article, the experimental (i.e. empirical) predominated, which was formed from authors' practical observations of existing modern methods and techniques of playing the electric guitar, as well as the method of generalisation, which allowed the entire auditory and visual practice of guitar playing to be transformed into a scientific study, supported not only by practical facts, but also by theoretical arguments. The method of abstraction was employed to interpret the distinct performance practices of guitar playing, which cannot be confined to strict theoretical doctrines or adhere to specific techniques and methods, considering the human element and the creative factor. The methods of analysis applied in the context of this study were as follows: historiographical – in the study of performing techniques and methods on the electric guitar in the context of their chronological appearance and practice. In particular, the performing practice and the applied methods of playing the electric guitar promoted in the work of Tosin Abasi should be regarded as fundamental from the perspective of performing chronology. In addition, Tim Henson, as the youngest representative of the three musicians considered, combined the most modern methods and performance techniques in his playing. Analytical – in the context of performance theoretical analysis of methods, techniques, and techniques of sound production and performance on the electric guitar. For example, if Tim Henson was considered a proponent of the plectrum technique, his contemporary, Marcin Petrzalek, was recognised for his use of fingerstyle. Comparative – in the context of a comparative analysis of modern performing techniques, methods, and techniques on the electric

guitar, namely: selective picking, fret-tapping, fingerstyle, and the plectrum technique used in progressive metal. Stylistic – in the consideration of the performance style of each individual guitarist, whose work were analysed in this article. For example, Marcin Petrzalek frequently incorporated well-known works of academic music into his pieces, giving them a completely different “role in his hands” before processing. At the same time, Tim Henson promoted various types of rock, and Tosin Abasi’s work appeared to be generally opposite in style to that of the previous two musicians. This study was constructed from the standpoint of subjective practice, with methods, techniques, and approaches selected from the available performance experience, as well as in support of and promotion of the outlined figures – modern representatives of guitar performance.

Results and Discussion

Tosin Abasi (born 1983) is among the modern progressive musicians directly involved in the development of electric guitar technology. This American virtuoso is known, first and foremost, for his role as the founder of the band “Animals as Leaders”, as well as for his progressive performance methods and techniques in advancing guitar playing, despite the lack of professional education. It should be noted that the development of guitar performance from the Renaissance to the emergence of rock stylistics was considered in the book by T. Evans & M.A. Evans (1982), which also featured significant guitarists, many of whom lacked formal professional education. An advanced and creative musician emerged in the 2020s as an innovator of the “selective picking” technique. The musician identified as a supporter of the eight-string guitar, and his performance was notable for its rhythmic influences from musical compositions by Meshuggah and King Crimson, as well as for a specific approach to the harmonic foundations reminiscent of Allan Holdsworth (1946-2017).

T. Abbasi’s electric guitar performance is highly expressive due to his remarkable and impressive playing technique. It should be noted that the guitarist combined both stable, traditional techniques and more intricate, syncretic methods, where complex patterns emerge. Like every practising musician, he has his distinctive hallmark, by which he can be easily recognised. Speaking of “selective picking”, this technique is not akin to traditional academic playing. This technique can be conceptually positioned between *legato* and alternative picking, as it incorporated both notes played with a pinch and those executed with a smoother, more consistent transition. In the same context, the speed of the notes were divided between the right and left hands. Thus, this differs from strict alternation. A regular sequence of sixteenth-note durations were divided between the picking hand and the fretting hand, with two notes played by each hand.

Another example demonstrated the technique, in which Tosin Abasi combined fret-tapping with another

of his approaches, known as “tapping”, involving the bassist Victor Wooten (born 1964). This technique incorporated double thumbing, which was performed by percussively striking the string with the tip of the thumb and then extending the thumb outward across the string to produce the second note. The outlined riff was accompanied by a pinch with the first finger, resulting in a total of three notes played by the plucking hand. It is worth adding this technique to the first two strokes of the hand, and as a result, a certain pattern of five notes were formed.

The next typical example of the technique, which was used quite often by Tosin Abasi, is one performed primarily through fretting, with some selective hybrid sound on the second string. The guitarist advocated for “picking” this repeated note with the second finger. All notes “gathered” and hand presses must be performed with equal force. It should be noted that the outlined complex technique, along with the method, where the palm muffled the strings, together created the impression that continuous *arpeggios* were being played. This technique involved the use of two fingers to create a sustained chord in the background.

To practice performing the three main techniques of Tosin Abasi, a general methodology should be applied: progress from simple to complex, and play each sample of the technique slowly and carefully. Only, when the guitarist felt the formation of muscle memory and synchronisation of both hands should the tempo be increased to match the original reproduction. It is worth referring to the three main techniques of the guitarist (Fig. 1). The sample of Tosin Abasi’s technique under consideration can be conventionally called “selective picking”. To execute this technique, the open second string should be selected by moving it down and up, followed by striking the fifth fret with the first finger, and then the fourth fret. It is necessary to repeat the movement as described, when lifting the fretboard over the entire reduced scale (B-C-D-D#-F-F#-G#-A). Another example of “selective picking” was the following technique (Fig. 2). This example involved the use of the first and fourth fingers to achieve the desired result: the first two notes were to be struck, while holding the 7th fret. At the same time, the thumb strikes the fifth string (#5) with both inward and outward movements. The string should be plucked with the first finger to complete the sequence of the first five notes. Accordingly, it is necessary to maintain the rhythmic sequence of five notes throughout the riff. This technique involved using the first and fourth fingers to touch the first and second notes, after which the seventh fret should be held. In this context, it is necessary to strike the fifth string with the thumb, utilising both inward and outward movement. The strings must be pinched using the first finger to ensure the sound of the first five notes. It is important to note that the rhythmic sequence must be sustained throughout the riff.

TOSIN ABASI style
Ex 1

Figure 1. Selective picking technique, option No. 1

Source: based on C. Griffiths (2024)

Figure 2. Selective picking technique, option No. 2

Source: based on C. Griffiths (2024)

The next example of “selective picking” demonstrated another variant of the technique, in which the side of the hand rests across the strings on the bridge to create a slight muting effect with the palm. It is necessary to use

the second finger of the fretting hand to pluck the second string on each low fret. The fingers responsible for fretting the notes work together to form a kind of *arpeggio* between them and create a smooth six-step rhythm (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Selective picking technique, option No. 3

Source: based on C. Griffiths (2024)

Tim Henson (born 1993) is recognised as another modern guitarist, who has made significant contributions to the development of electric guitar performance

techniques. It should be emphasised that this relatively young musician has managed to combine complex guitar riffs, intricate rhythms, and his own innovative approach

It is necessary to form each chord using the hand responsible for fretting with the application of the palm muting technique, to ensure that the notes were separated, when the plectrum sweeps across the guitar strings. To play the first three chords, it is

recommended to sweep across the fifth, fourth, and third strings. After that, the second string should be plucked with the second finger. Interestingly, the sixth string was added to the last chord “in the sweep” (Fig. 6).

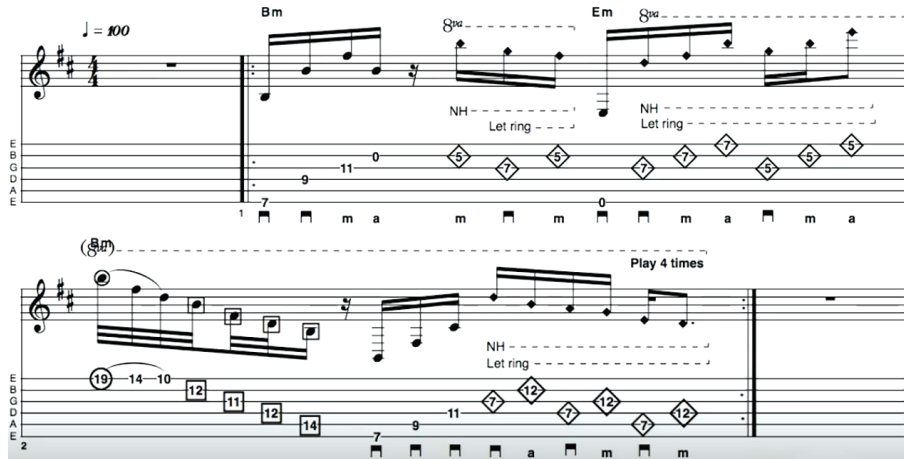


Figure 6. Natural harmonics

Source: based on C. Griffiths (2023)

This performance should be based on clean natural harmonics. The fingers should be positioned slightly above the fret, allowing neighbouring strings to resonate in unison precisely at moments, when this is physically

possible. Bar No. 2 begins with hand tapping, followed by a kind of pull-off, after which the performance descends into a B Minor *arpeggio* with fretting-hand tapping (Fig. 7).

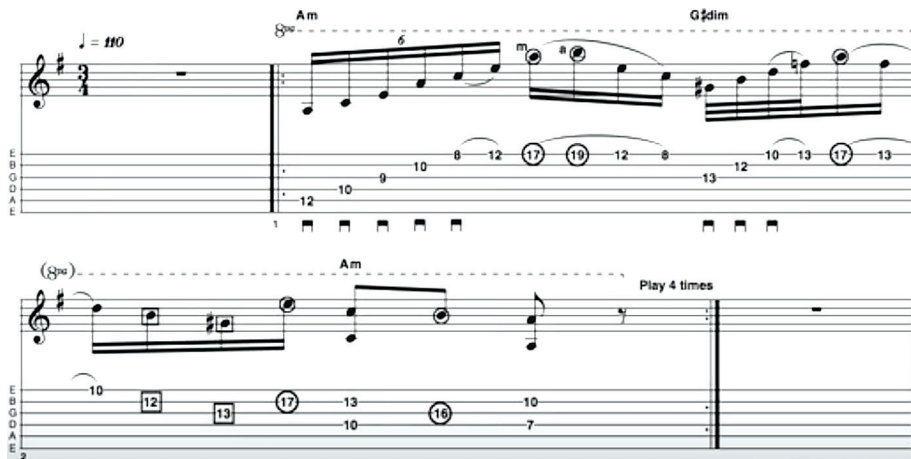


Figure 7. Tapping with two hands

Source: based on C. Griffiths (2023)

In this sample, a five-string *arpeggio* in the key of A Minor is played. Next, the guitarist should immediately tap the 17th and 19th frets with the second and third fingers. Following this, the same figure was repeated in a slightly shortened version, followed by a complex sequence consisting of beats, octave patterns, and a continuous flow of notes (Fig. 8). In

this sample (Fig. 8), there is a combination of techniques, including sweep picking, alternate picking, harmonics, open-string pull-offs, and tapping, all performed with different timbres. Initially, each part of the piece should be played at a slow tempo to ensure precision, gradually increasing the pace and combining all the elements into a cohesive performance.

techniques for the guitar. At the heart of the technique is a percussive approach that imitated a drum kit on the guitar. The basic elements of this technique include the “hi-hat”, “kick”, and “snare”. The “hi-hat” consisted of pressing the guitar strings against the neck with a short, light clap. An analogy can be drawn with the techniques used to produce sound on a drum kit, particularly with the cymbals on a stand, which share the same name: “hi-hat”. A small rhythmic pulsation was also formed on the guitar to mimic this effect. The “kick” was performed by striking the body of the guitar with the wrist, specifically above the resonant hole. This action produced a dull, low sound reminiscent of the large bass drum in a drum kit, which was also referred to as the “kick”. Another key element of this technique was the “snare”, which was especially popular in the context of fingerstyle playing. Sometimes referred to as “clicking”, this technique was executed primarily with the thumb striking the bass strings. The resulting sound was sharp and bright, similar to that of a snare drum. In tablature, this technique was commonly represented by an “X”.

The fingerstyle technique, which Marcin actively promoted, also incorporated musical and expressive elements. Among the most important was dynamics, which involved the precise placement of accents to draw the listener’s attention. According to academic norms, these include dynamic markings such as *forte*, *piano*, *mezzo*, *crescendo*, and *diminuendo*, which give a piece of music a sense of “living existence”. Articulation was also crucial in fingerstyle, as nuances like *staccato* and *legato* contribute to shaping the overall character of the composition. Among the more modern, non-traditional elements of musical expression, it is worth noting the concept of “groove”. In general, the groove cannot be taught or strictly defined; instead, it was formed through a performer’s intuitive understanding of rhythm and feel. The groove can be described as a blend of intonational, rhythmic, and emotional fluctuations or mood swings, which a guitarist developed only through experience.

As a result of this scientific research, the existence of certain methods and techniques of modern performance on the electric guitar can be identified. Some of these techniques can also be freely adapted to performance practice on the acoustic guitar and intertwine, in their musical and physical nature, with academic performance traditions.

The modern electric guitar did not arise in isolation; it was preceded primarily by examples of the acoustic instrument, as evidenced by the studies of T. Hirst (2002). This view has also been shared by other musicologists, notably R. Smith (1987) and P. Trynka (1995), who presented an illustrated historical study. More recent and chronologically relevant studies include those by N. Freeth & C. Alexabder (1999), which focused specifically on the electric guitar. The study by N. Freeth *et al.* (2000) provided more detailed and updated information, considering the rapid practical development of

electric guitar performance. A kind of research arc was completed by the article of H.F. Woodworth (1995), “Electric guitar mountable upon acoustic guitar”, where the author argued for the electric guitar’s origins in the acoustic instrument.

Important scholarly research have highlighted specific areas of electric guitar performance. For instance, T. Profera (1987) and P. Gelling (2010) explored funk, while Ukrainian artists Yu. Dmitriyevsky & V. Manilov (1986) examined blues and jazz-rock on the guitar. The author V. Manilov (1988) investigated guitar accompaniment, providing a significant impetus for the growth and innovation of Ukrainian guitar musicology. A practical generalisation of this can be observed in Carlos Santana’s album, which featured compositions in rock, salsa, jazz, and blues styles (Santana, 2017). Despite the breadth and depth of these studies on acoustic and electric guitars, they were somewhat outdated. Ukrainian artists and musicians lack a sufficient scientific foundation to create more contemporary research that addresses the technique, style, manner, and performance approaches associated with the electric guitar.

This scientific research resulted in conclusions regarding the existence of a wide range of performance techniques on the electric guitar, with the main techniques considered in the context of the performance creativity of Tosin Abasi, Tim Henson, and Marcin Petrzalek. It is also important to note that some authors have attempted to analyse guitar performance. For example, R. Bonds (2001) focused primarily on the varieties of the instrument rather than the techniques themselves, while D. Brosnac (1975) emphasised the historical aspects and structural features of the instrument. The specifics of vibration on the bass electric guitar were explored in the musical and physical work of H. Fleischer (2005). Through boundary-condition experiments, the author obtained previously contradictory results and investigated the potential of a vibrating string to influence neck resonance. A particularly interesting study in the field of electric guitar performance styles was the research of P. Carr (2007), which examined jazz guitarists-composers and their interpretations of jazz aesthetics. E. Jane (2024) travelled the world documenting legendary guitars that were used to create some of the greatest music ever made. In particular, the author explored Jimi Hendrix’s Woodstock Stratocaster, the guitar on which Bob Dylan “became an electrician”, and the Fender Mustang used by Kurt Cobain in the video *Smells Like Teen Spirit*.

According to the studied literature and analysis performed, it is evident that very few modern studies reveal contemporary playing techniques, methods, and approaches. Most scientific study available comprises articles written by musicians and musicologists on specialised music portals. Moreover, no comprehensive scientific research currently demonstrated the fundamental and prevailing performance techniques of any modern electric guitar performer, examined the specifics of their

playing, or provided an accurate interpretive analysis of their techniques.

Conclusions

Individual musicians of the modern era, as well as the electric guitar performers Tosin Abasi, Tim Henson, and Marcin Petrzalek, have actively contributed to the development of existing techniques and performance methods, while also creating new ones, sometimes based on unusual elements that, at first glance, seemed technically impossible to implement physically. At the same time, a detailed methodological and performance analysis, combined with active practice, demonstrated that their developments have become accessible in contemporary popular guitar practice. This required extensive performance practice, initially on the acoustic guitar, and later on the electric guitar, using traditional, academic methods and techniques.

Furthermore, Tosin Abasi has emerged as a virtuoso artist and a proponent of techniques such as “selective picking”, “selective gathering”, and fretting. Tim Henson, in

turn, promoted guitar riffs and hybrid picking techniques, while Marcin Petrzalek, by revitalising well-known academic articles, achieved impressive results in fingerstyle.

Only after prolonged academic performance, involving the acquisition of not only technical skills, but also stage endurance, versatility, and the ability to play a wide range of music, did the musicians master modern guitar techniques, which were, of course, honed through daily practice. Thus, the study analysed performance techniques in the context of the work of some of the most renowned electric guitarists of the 21st century. This research held potential for further expansion and more in-depth study, particularly from the perspective of scaling performance techniques, methods, and the inclusion of other prominent performers.

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None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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Роль сучасних виконавців в еволюційному розвитку технік гри та методів виконання на електрогітарі

■ **Анотація.** Ця стаття досліджувала деякі з найсучасніших технік гри на електрогітарі та розглядала їх застосування відомими музикантами, зокрема Тосіна Абасі, Тіма Генсона та Марціна Патрзалєка. Тосін Абасі був розглянутий як прихильник восьмиструнної гітари та техніки «селективного пікірування», тоді як Тім Генсон виступав як представник жанру прогресивного металу. Тим часом, Марцін Патрзалєк, також відомий під сценічним ім'ям «Marcin», висвітлений як видатна постать у техніці *fingerstyle*, з акцентом на його відданість виконавській майстерності. Метою цієї статті був огляд сучасних методів, підходів та технік звуковидобування на електрогітарі, з акцентом на їх використання у творчості провідних сучасних гітаристів. Її значення та актуальність полягали у чіткій систематизації та аналізі сучасних гітарних технік, підкріплених яскравими прикладами та інтерпретацією виконання. Варто зазначити, що стаття охоплювала лише основні та популярні методи гри на електрогітарі, зокрема у творчості видатних сучасних музикантів, які застосовують ці техніки як невід'ємну частину свого стилю. У статті представлено конкретні техніки, сучасні виконавські практики та стислий аналіз, а також практичні рекомендації, орієнтовані на підготовлених спеціалістів. Практична цінність цього дослідження тісно пов'язана з викладанням сучасного виконання на електрогітарі. Отримані результати можуть бути інтегровані у навчальні курси з таких предметів, як «Електрогітара», «Історія гітарного виконавства», «Сучасна акустична гітара»

■ **Ключові слова:** біти; тепінг; техніка гібридного пікірування; *fingerstyle*; *slap*