THE METRONOME IS YOUR FRIEND, Part 2
How to use the metronome to improve practice and performance

By Douglas Niedt

By the way, since posting Part 1, I have added lots of training videos to help you improve your ability to hold a tempo and play in the pocket. I also added three self-evaluation videos, and videos on hemiola (switching back and forth between 6/8 and 3/4 meter). There are now over 100 videos! Check them out here.

PART 2. How to Use the metronome as a Diagnostic Tool

The original purpose of the metronome to set an absolute tempo is still important, but the phenomenal growth in its use is due to the realization of how it can be used in many other ways to improve one's playing of specific pieces and in general. Just to recap, in Part 1, I listed the three functions of the metronome and discussed the first two.

Function #1. To set an absolute tempo.

Function #2. As a tool to help us develop and improve our inner pulse. This enables us to play "in the pocket" or groove and to accurately hold a precise and steady tempo.

Here, in Part 2 and next month in Part 3, I will explain Function #3:

Function #3. As a practice and diagnostic tool to improve the efficiency of our practicing and therefore, the quality of our final performance.

The metronome can be used as a diagnostic tool to solve specific rhythm problems with specific practice techniques, usually on specific passages within a piece.

In Part 2, I will cover:

1. The basics of using the metronome and subdivision together.

2. How to use the metronome with subdivision to help keep arpeggios rhythmically even.

3. How to use the metronome with subdivision to help keep tremolos rhythmically even.

4. How to use the metronome with subdivision to understand and play complex rhythms.

5. The importance of knowing precisely:
   - Which notes fall on the metronome clicks (the beats).
   - Which fingers play on the metronome clicks (the beats).

6. How to improve the rhythmic evenness of an arpeggio plus improve your right-hand finger independence by practicing with two different metrical subdivisions.

Rules for Metronome Use

1. Always keep the metronome in a spot where it is immediately available. ALWAYS. You should not have to get out of your chair to find one.

2. Make sure you can hear the metronome. If you cannot hear it clearly, you will not be able to tell whether you are in sync with it. Find one that has a solid sound that grabs your attention (but is not irritating). The best idea is to find one with adjustable volume. As you learned in Part 1, sometimes you want to make the metronome quieter to improve your ability to play in the pocket.

You can also get a metronome with an earbud to make sure you can hear it clearly. Many players find this helps immensely in being able to focus on and stay in sync with the clicks.

3. Do not throw your metronome across the room when it points out your obvious deficiencies.

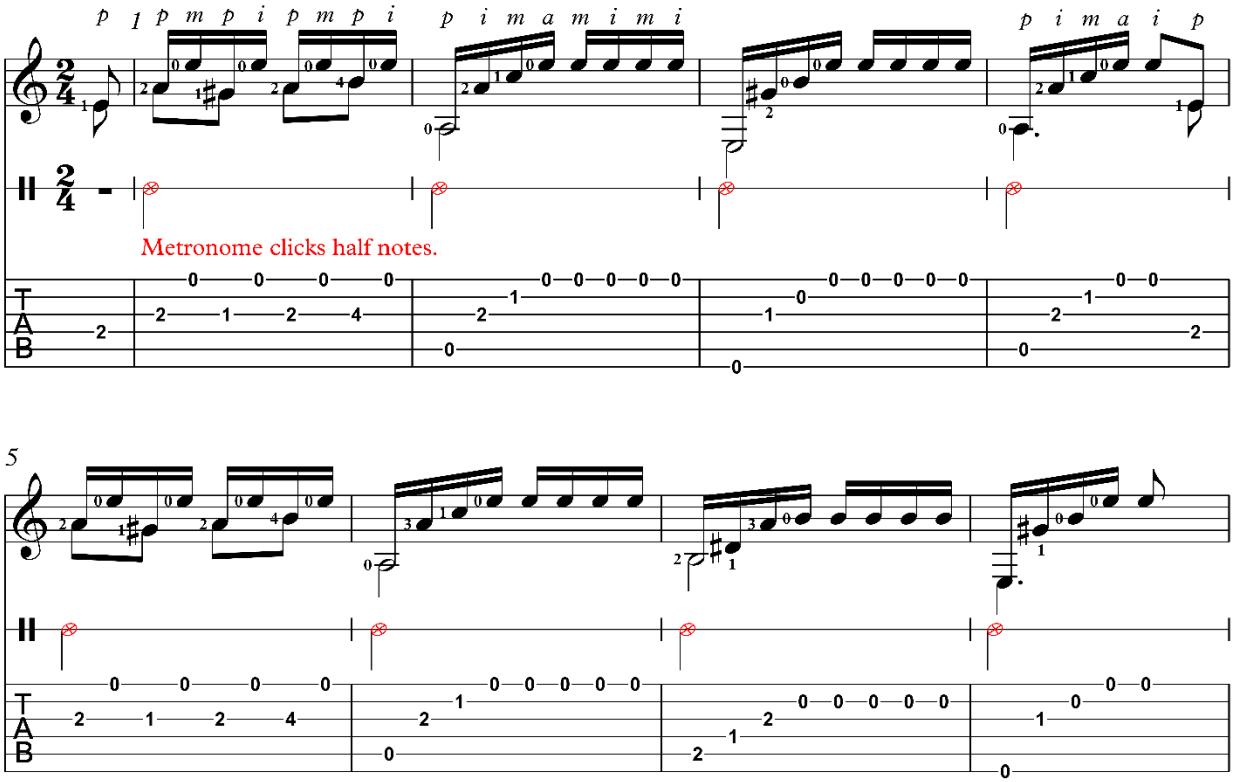
The Basics of Subdivision

It is important that you understand the principle of subdivision to use your metronome most efficiently. We can set the metronome to click different note values in a piece or passage. This is called subdivision of the measure or bar (a bar and measure are the same thing) or subdivision of the beat.

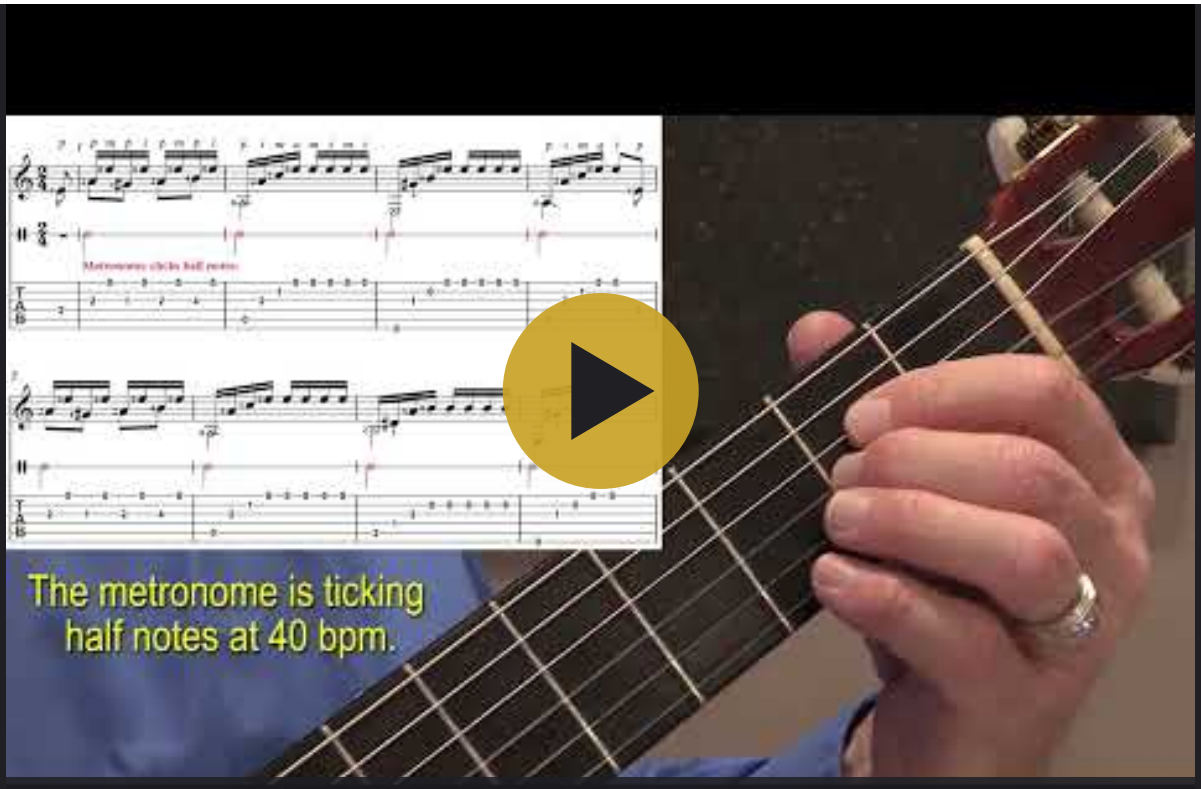
Here are examples of using subdivision in a *Caprice* by Italian guitarist Matteo Carcassi.

1. I can set the metronome to click once for each measure. The piece is in 2/4 meter, so the metronome is clicking half notes (minims):

Caprice by Matteo Carcassi

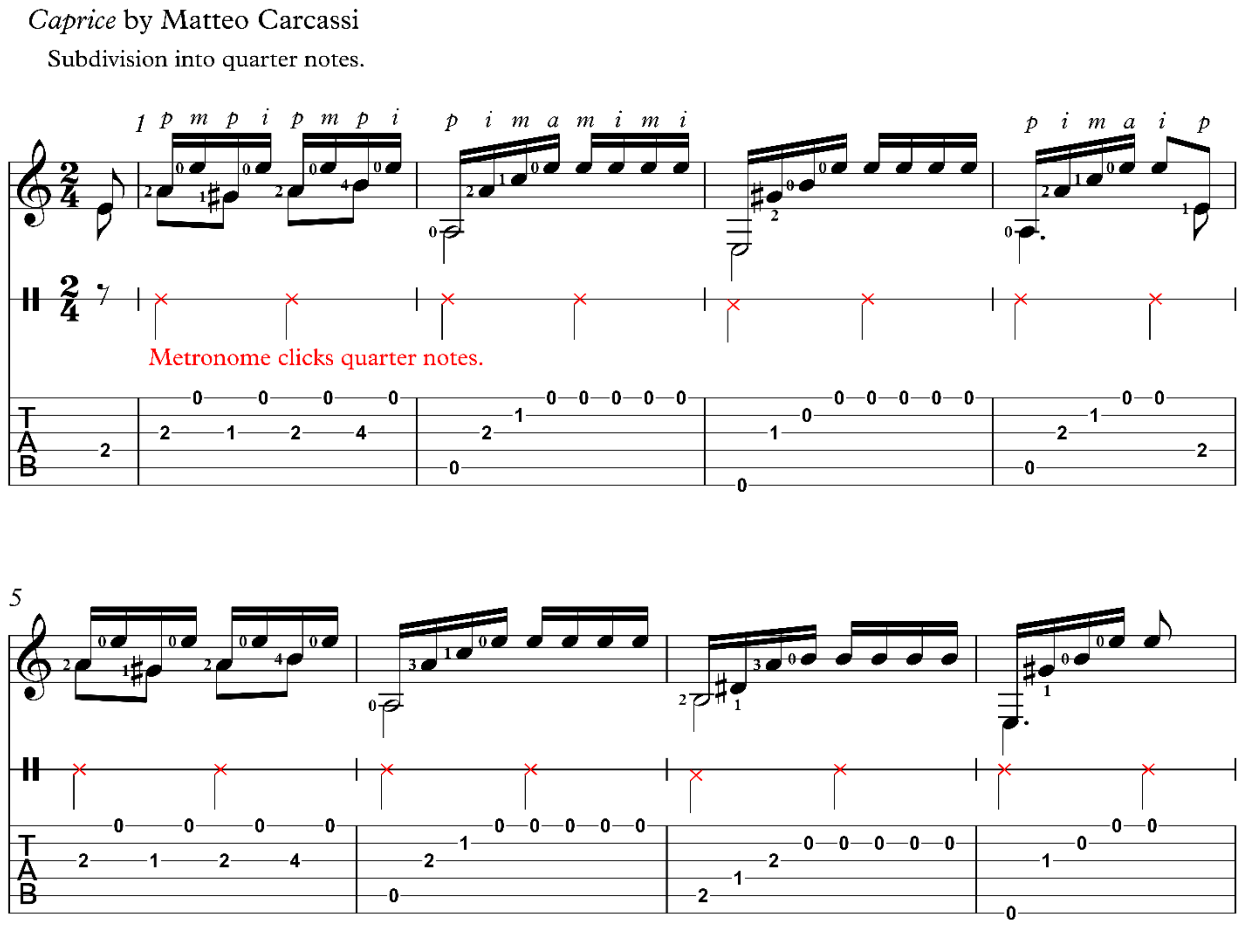


Watch me demonstrate in Video #1:

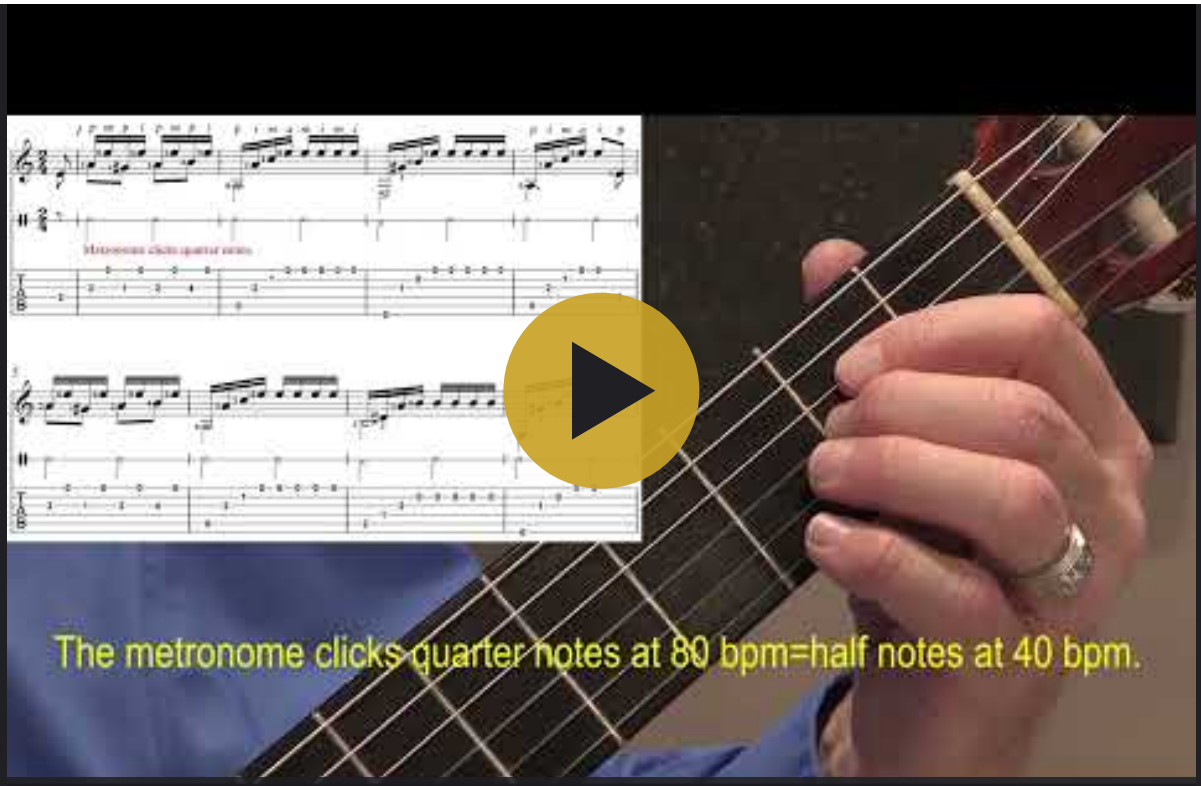


Video #1: Carcassi Caprice Subdivide Half Notes 40 bpm

2. I can divide the measure in half and have the metronome click two times in each measure. This means I am subdividing the measure into quarter notes. The metronome is clicking two quarter notes (crochets) in each measure:

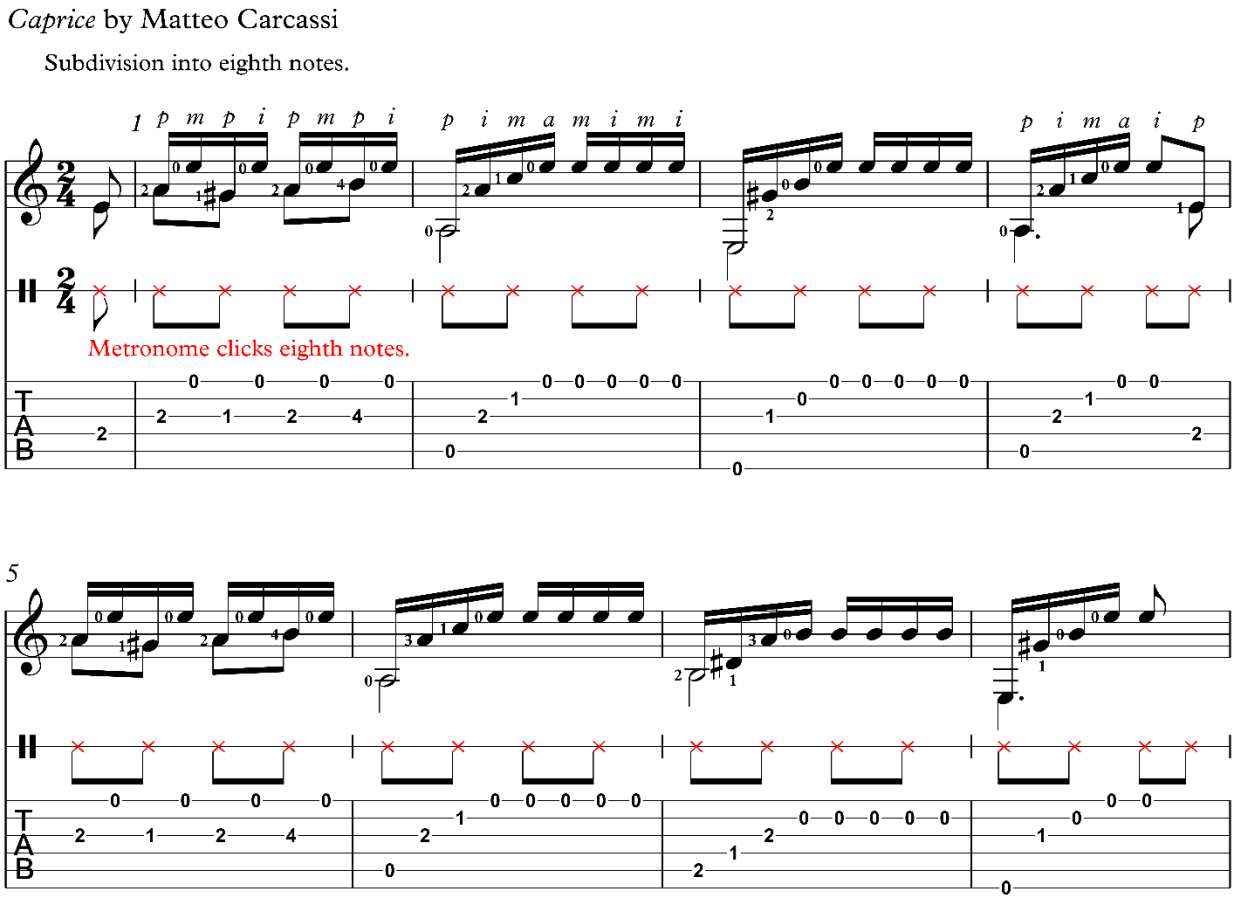


Watch me demonstrate in Video #2:

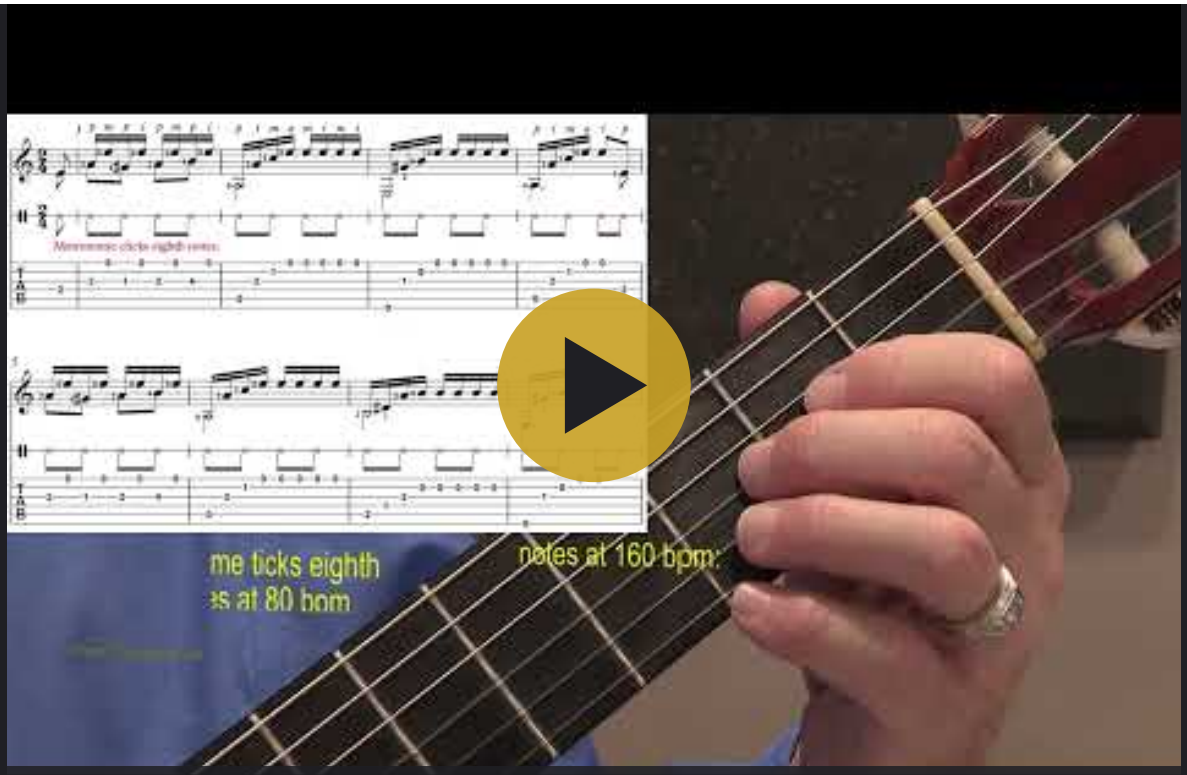


Video #2: Carcassi Caprice Subdivide Quarters 80 bpm

3. I can divide the measure into 4 parts and have the metronome click four times in each measure. This means I am subdividing the measure into eighth notes. The metronome is now clicking eighth notes (quavers):

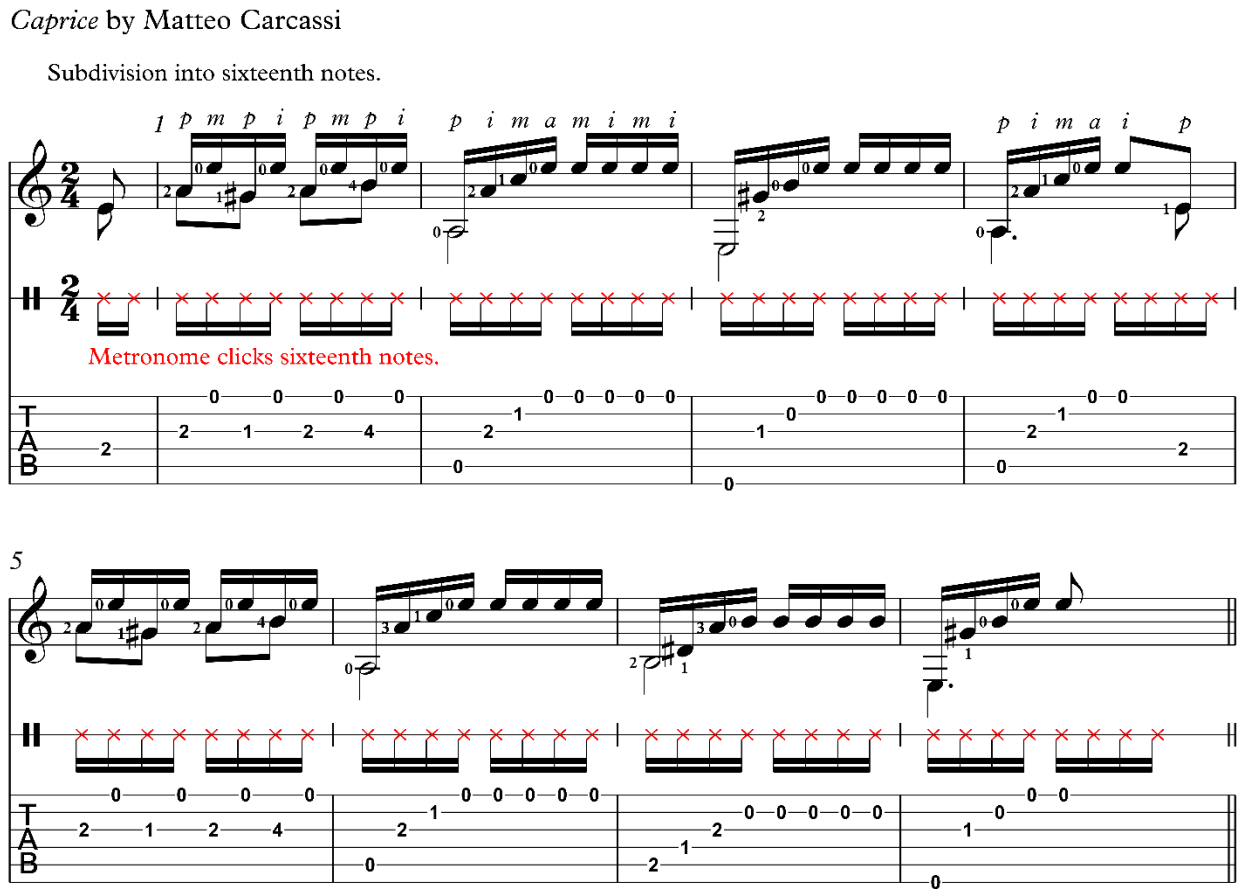


Watch me demonstrate in Video #3:

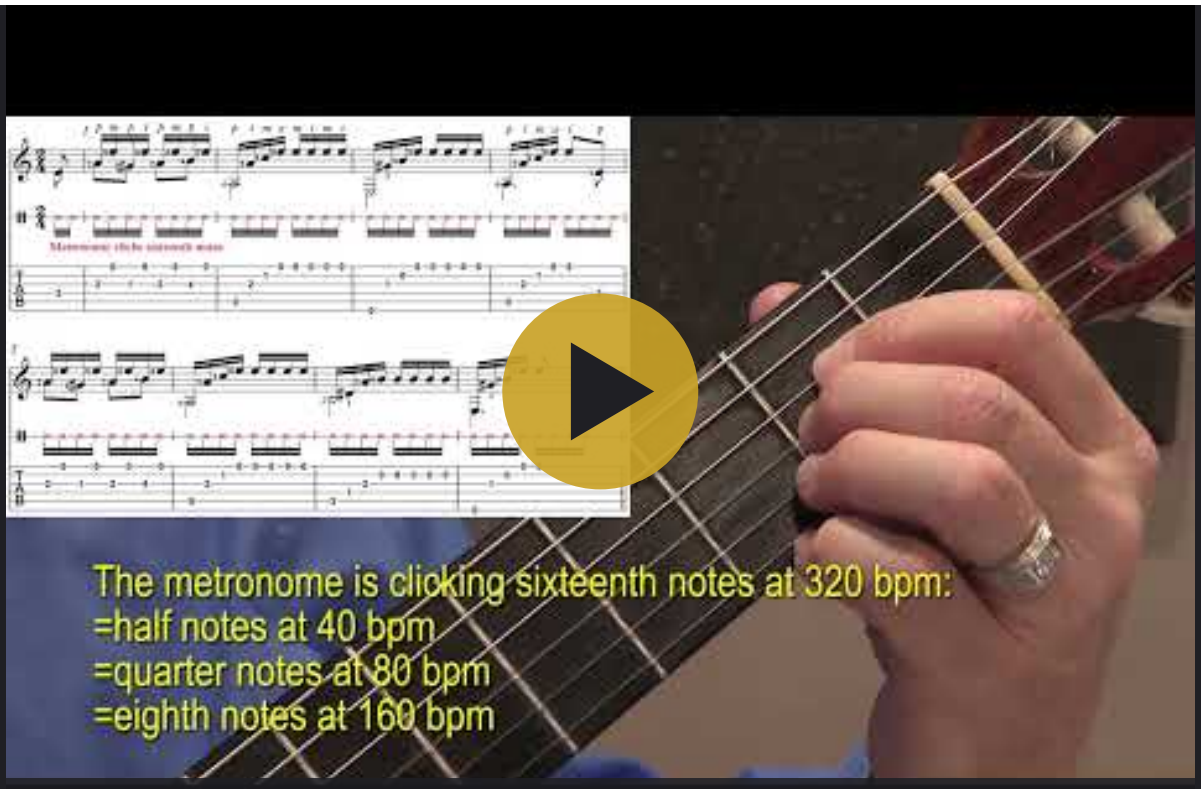


Video #3: Carcassi Caprice Subdivide Eighth Notes 160 bpm

4. I can divide the measure into 8 parts and have the metronome click eight times in each measure. This means I am subdividing the measure into sixteenth notes. The metronome is now clicking sixteenth notes (semiquavers):



Watch me demonstrate in Video #4:



Video #4: Carcassi Caprice Subdivide Sixteenth Notes 320 bpm

Which should you use? That depends on how long you have been working on the piece and the problems you are having or your goals.

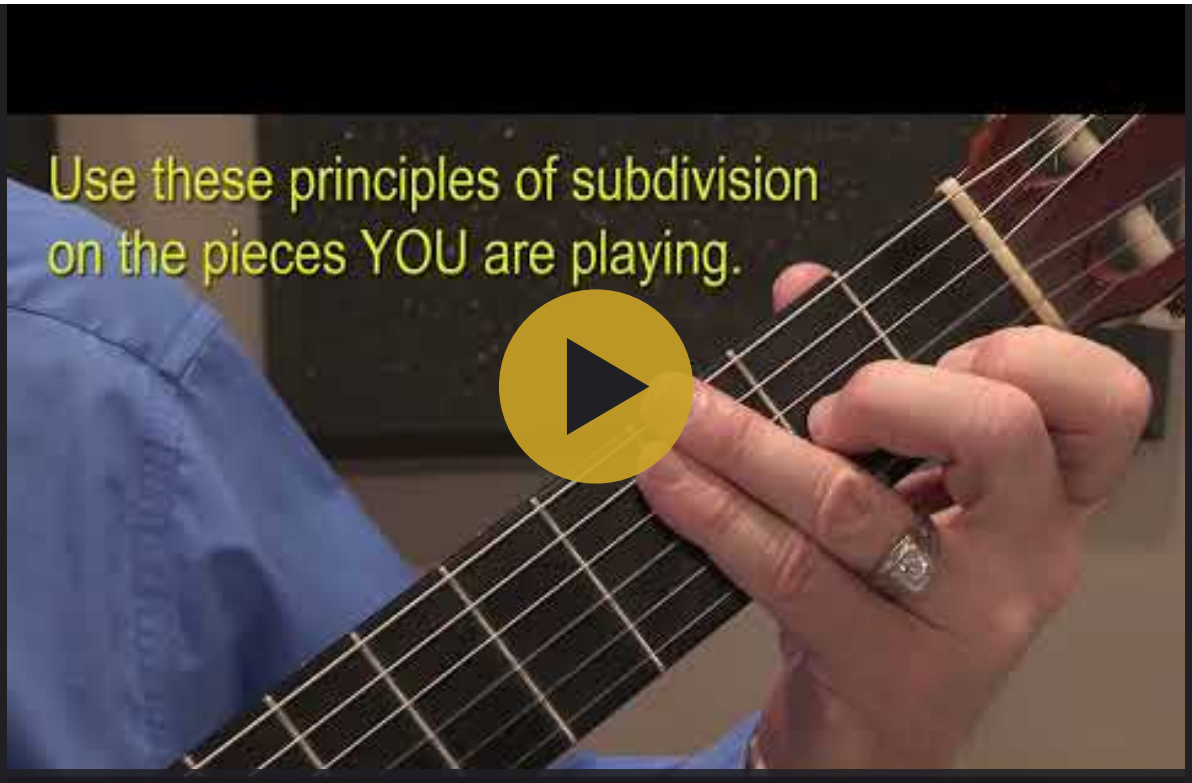
If you have just learned the notes of the piece, you might subdivide into 16th notes at 60 bpm. In other words, the metronome will now click on every 16th note. This is very slow but might be a good tempo to go through the piece to find your problem spots with chord changes.

But if it is too slow for you, you could increase the 16th note speed to 160 or 190. But you would probably drive yourself nuts listening to all those clicks (like in Video #4 above ticking sixteenths at 320 bpm). Instead, you could set it at 80 but make each click an 8th note instead of a 16th. That way, you only have to listen to half the number of clicks. But you still have plenty of reference points (the clicks) to keep things even and steady.

If you are at a stage where you want to start testing yourself at faster tempos, you might keep the metronome in the 60's or 80's but make the clicks quarter notes.

If you want to test yourself at extreme tempos you would set the metronome in the 40's-50's clicking half notes.

Watch me demonstrate how to decide which subdivision to use in Video #5:

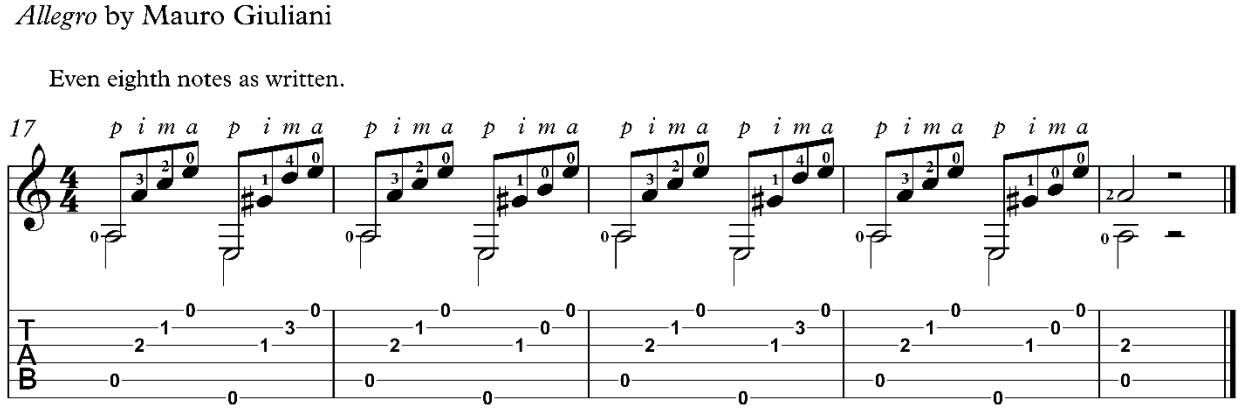


Video #5: Carcassi Caprice, Which Subdivision Should You Use?

How to Use Subdivision and Your Metronome to Keep an Arpeggio Rhythmically Even

The metronome, combined with subdivision, can be very effective to help even out arpeggios rhythmically.

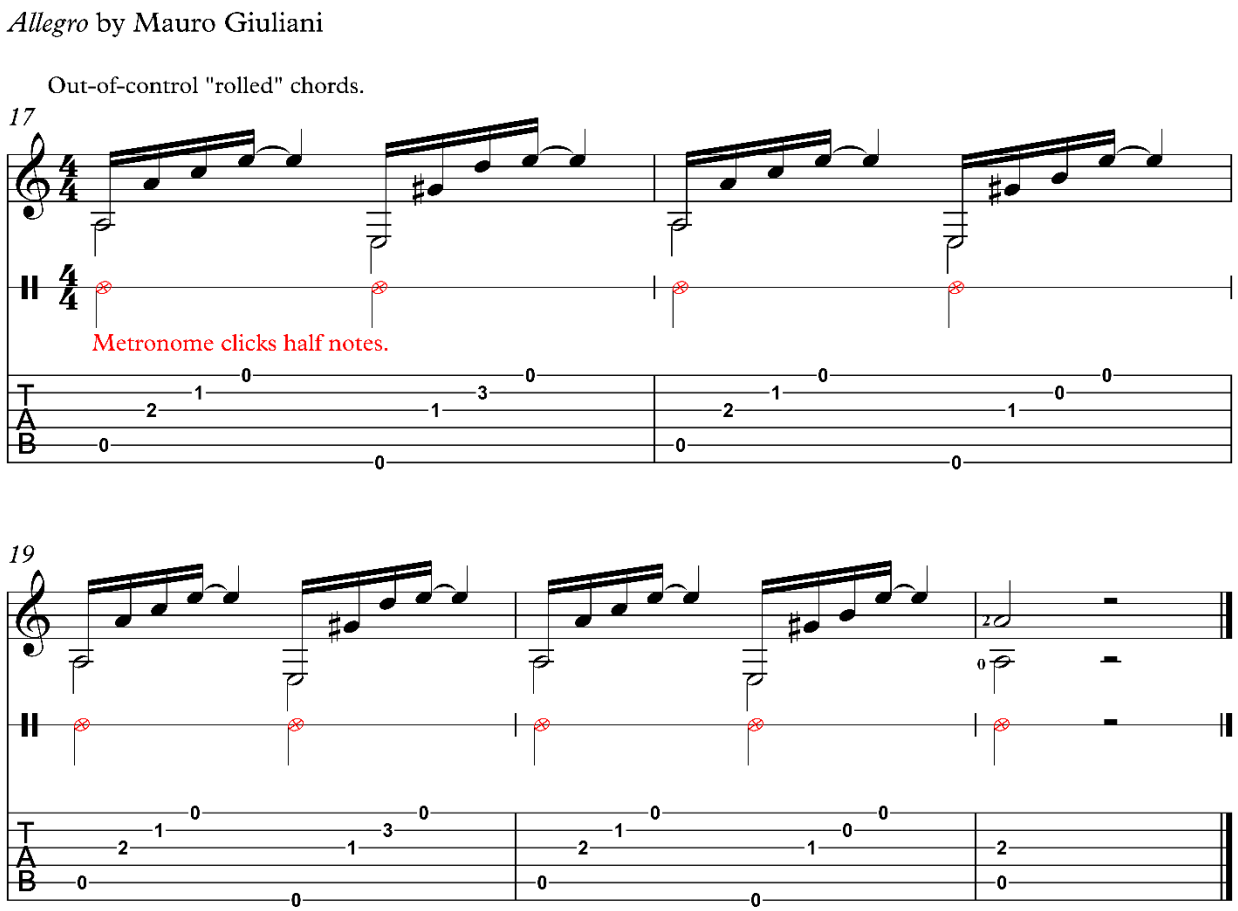
Let's begin with a fairly easy example. In the ascending arpeggio section of *Allegro* by Mauro Giuliani, the arpeggios are written as even eighth notes:



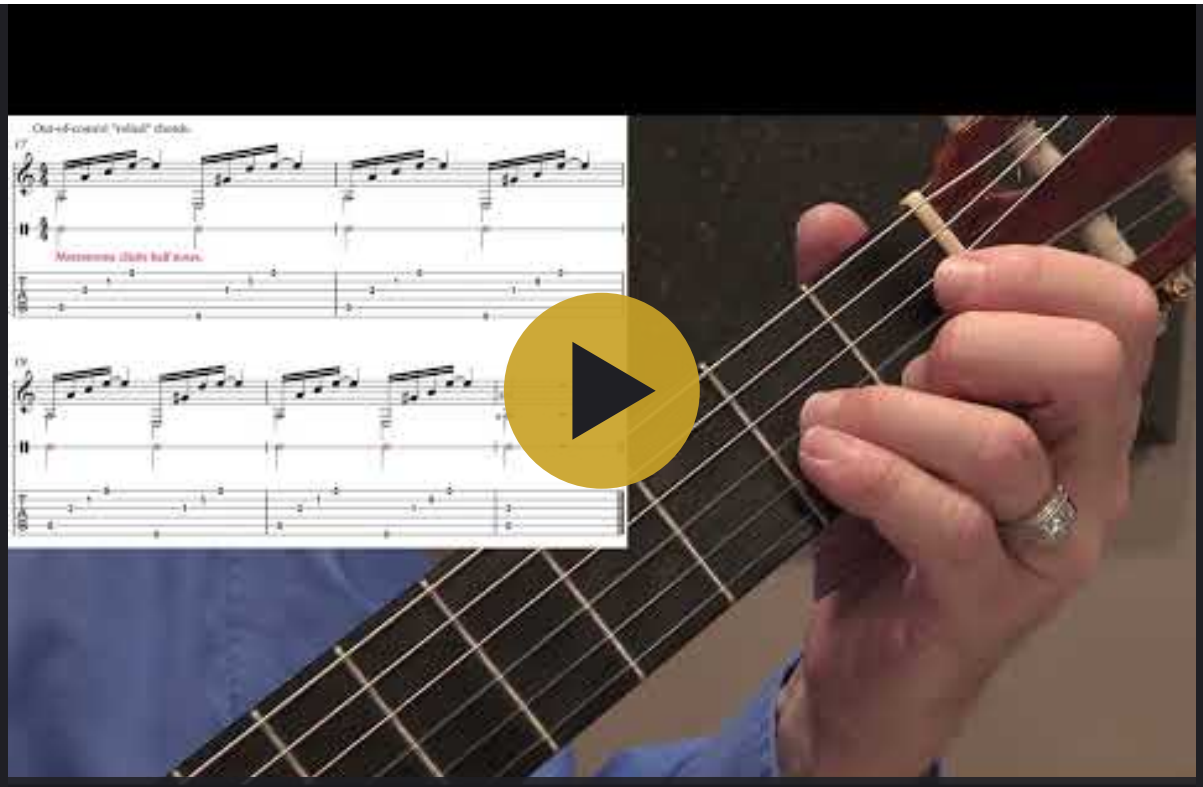
Watch me play this phrase in Video #6:

Video #6: Giuliani Allegro as written

If the metronome (or you are feeling) clicks only on the half-note (minim) thumb strokes and the tempo is increased, there is a strong tendency for "ima" to play too fast in an uncontrolled "roll" which is what produces an uneven "gallop":



Watch me demonstrate the mangled arpeggio in Video #7:



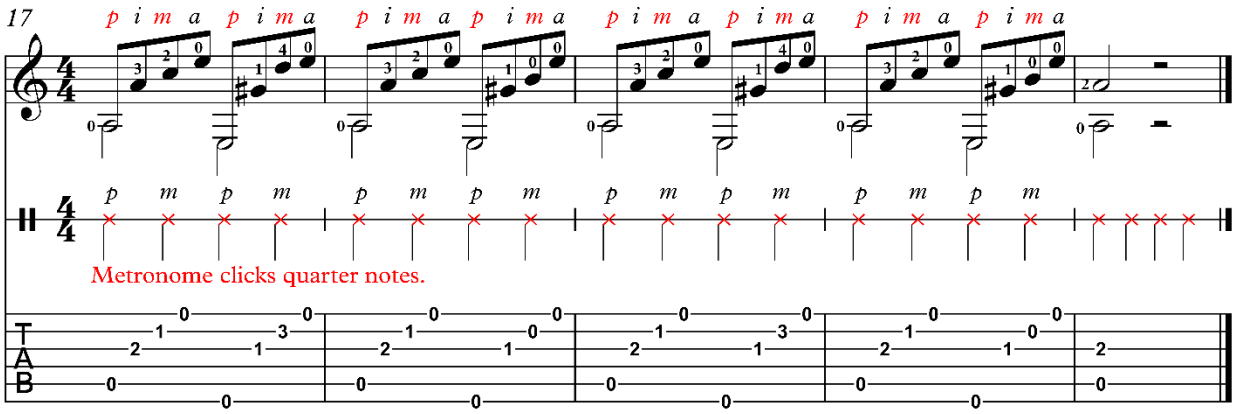
Video #7: Giuliani Allegro, mangled arpeggio

The way to keep the arpeggio pattern even is to subdivide the beat into quarter notes (crochets) so the metronome clicks on "p" and "m". Providing the additional reference point to tell "m" when to pluck helps all the fingers maintain their correct rhythmic spacing. Everything stays more precisely in rhythm.

That is the crux of using subdivision. It provides additional reference points to tell the fingers precisely when to play their notes. You can use this principle on almost any piece you play or are learning.

Allegro by Mauro Giuliani

Keep the arpeggio even by subdividing each measure into quarter notes.



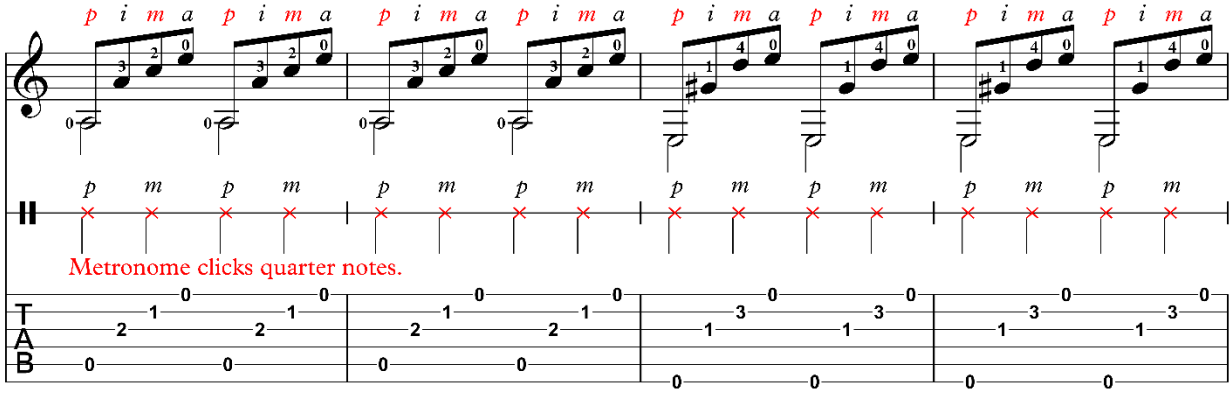
Watch me demonstrate how quarter-note subdivision works in Video #8:

Video #8: Giuliani Allegro Subdivide Quarter Notes Tick on p and m

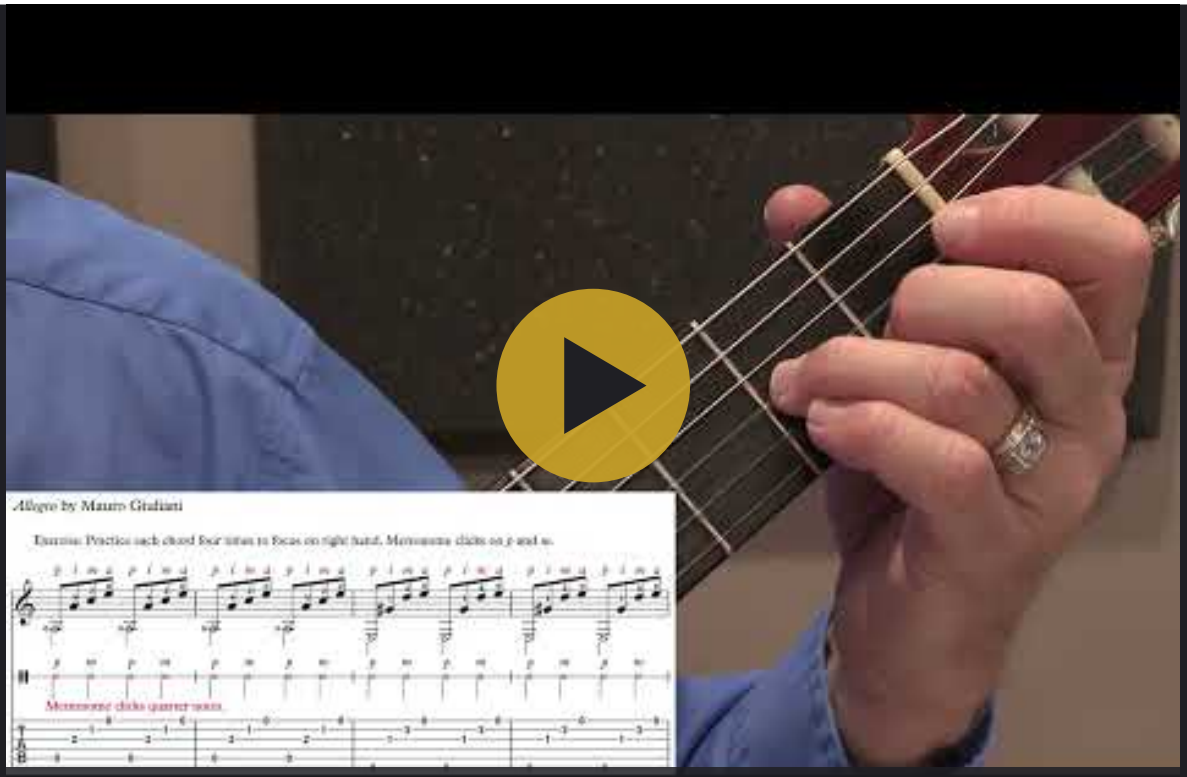
In pieces where the chords change frequently and quickly, make an exercise out of the passage. Play each chord several times so you can focus on the right hand rather than being distracted by the left-hand chord changes. Use this practice strategy on the pieces YOU play.

Allegro by Mauro Giuliani

Exercise: Practice each chord four times to focus on right hand. Metronome clicks on *p* and *m*.

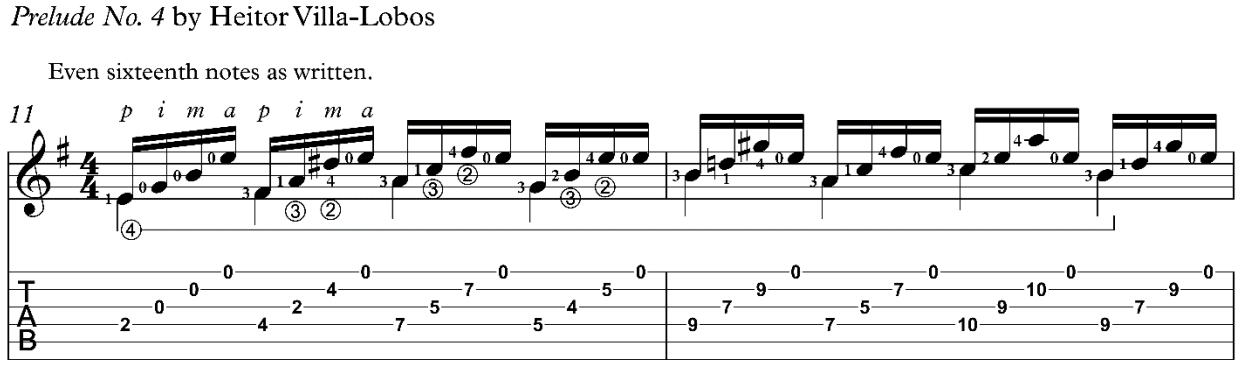


Watch me demonstrate how to use an arpeggio as an exercise in Video #9:

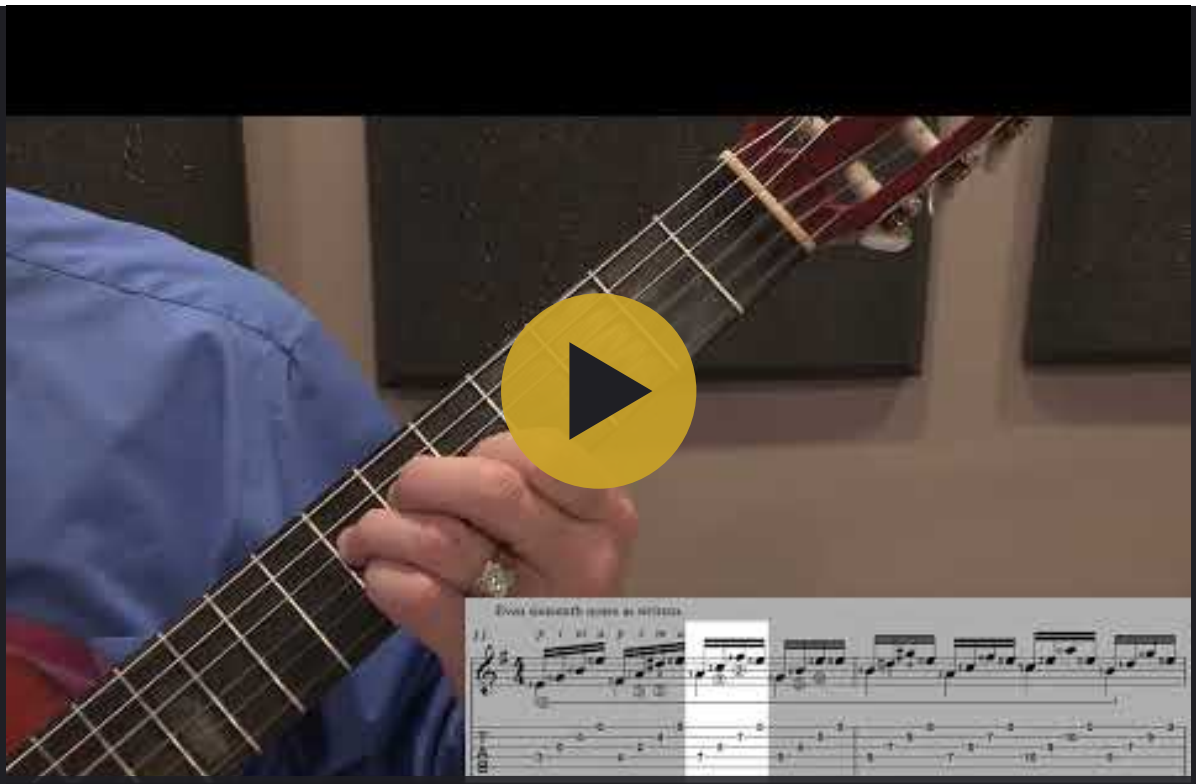


Video #9: Giuliani Allegro, Make an Exercise

Or, here is an example of the same process on a more advanced piece. In the arpeggio section of *Prelude No. 4* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, the arpeggios are written as even sixteenth notes:

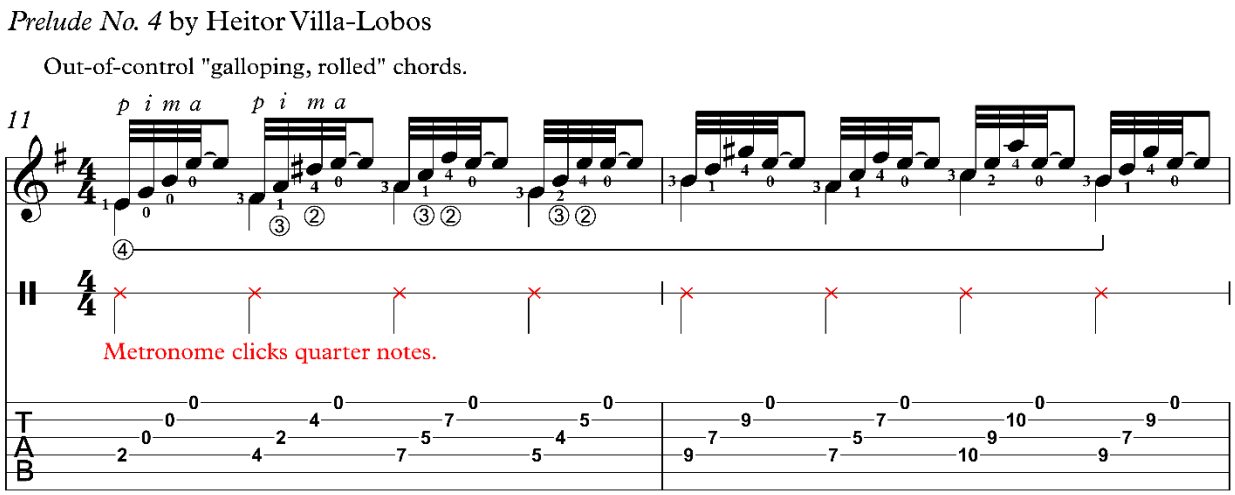


Watch me play this fragment in Video #10:

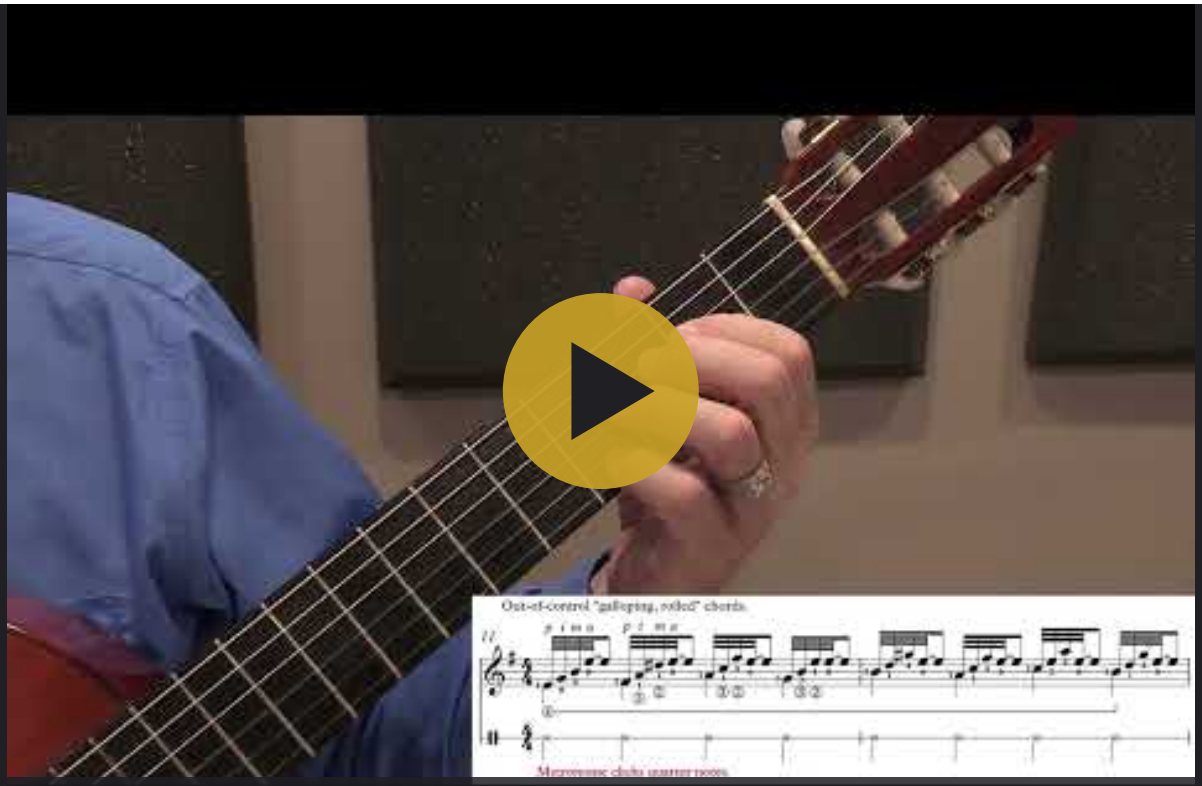


Video #10: Villa Lobos Prelude 4,original arpeggio

If the metronome (or you are feeling) clicks only on the quarter-note (crochet) thumb strokes and the tempo is increased, there is a strong tendency for "ima" to play too fast in an uncontrolled "roll" which is what produces an uneven "gallop":



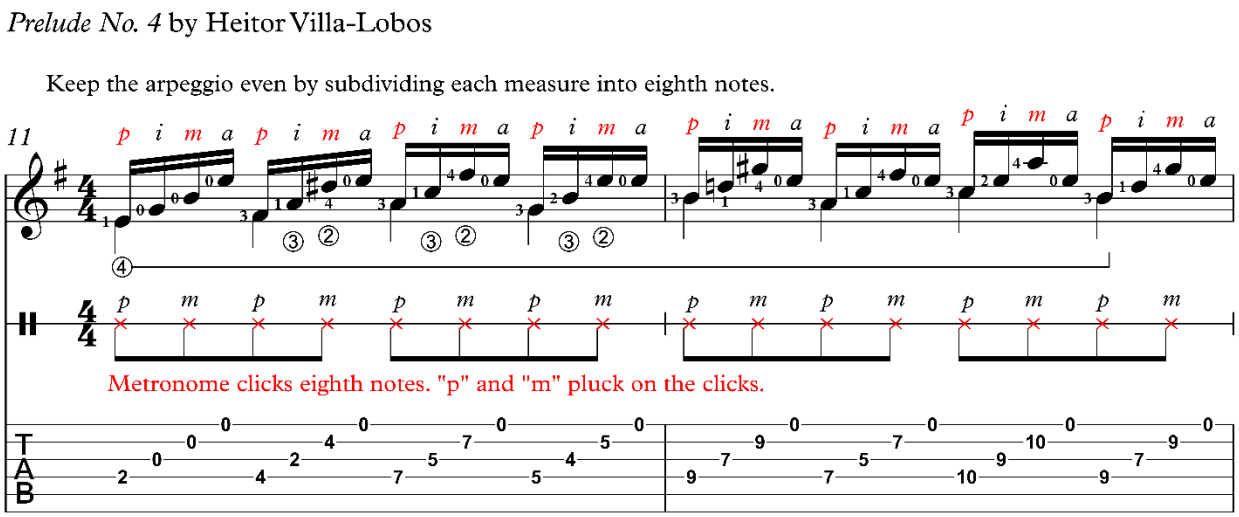
Watch me demonstrate how to mangle the arpeggio in Video #11:



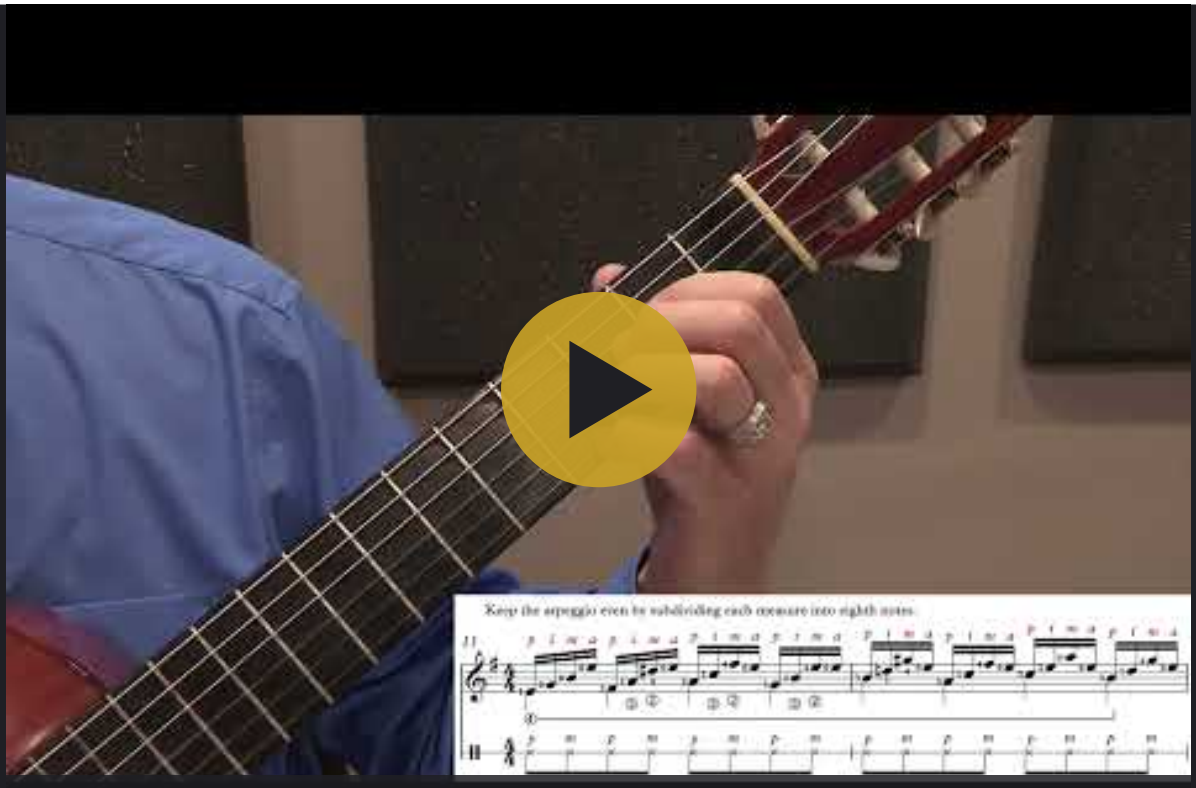
Video #11: Villa Lobos Prelude 4, arpeggio mangled

The way to help keep the arpeggio pattern even is to subdivide the beat into eighth notes (quavers) so the metronome clicks on "p" and "m". Providing the additional reference point to tell "m" when it should pluck helps all the fingers to maintain their correct rhythmic spacing. Everything stays more precisely in rhythm.

Again, this is the crux of using subdivision. It provides additional reference points to tell the fingers precisely when to play their notes. You can use this principle on almost any piece you play or are learning.



Watch me demonstrate how to subdivide the arpeggio into eighth notes in Video #12:

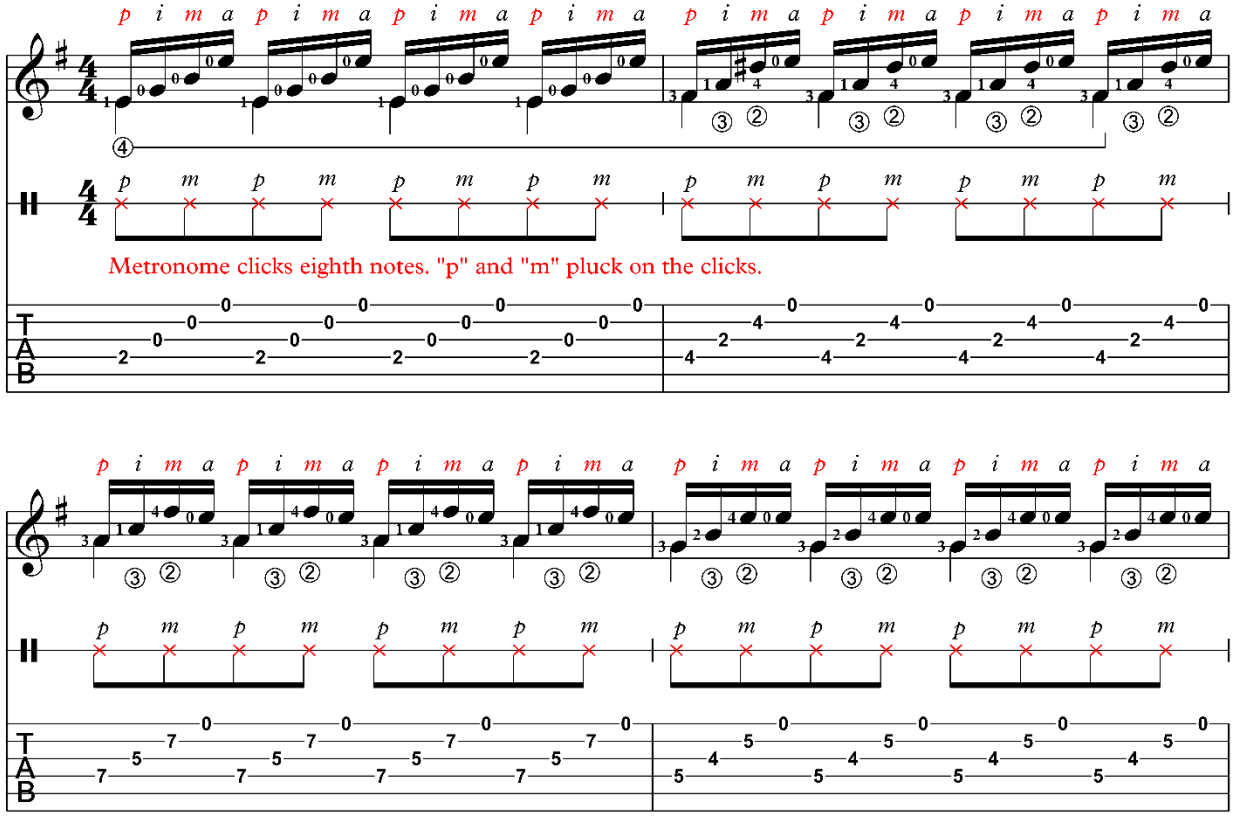


Video #12: Villa Lobos Prelude 4, the arpeggios subdivided into eighth notes

In the *Prelude No. 4* and other pieces where the chords change frequently and quickly, make an exercise out of the passage. Play each chord several times so you can focus on the right hand rather than being distracted by the left-hand chord changes. Use this practice strategy on the pieces YOU play.

Prelude No. 4 by Heitor Villa-Lobos

Exercise: Practice each chord four times to focus on right hand. Metronome clicks on *p* and *m*.



Watch me demonstrate how to turn the arpeggio into an exercise in Video #13:

Video #13: Villa Lobos Prelude 4, how to turn the arpeggio into an exercise