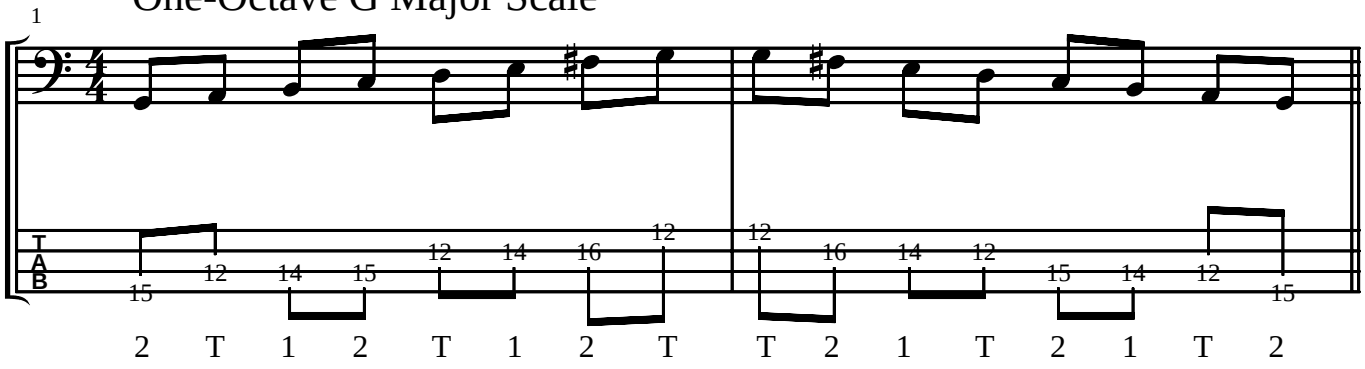
Thumb Position

A Contemporary Approach For Electric Bass

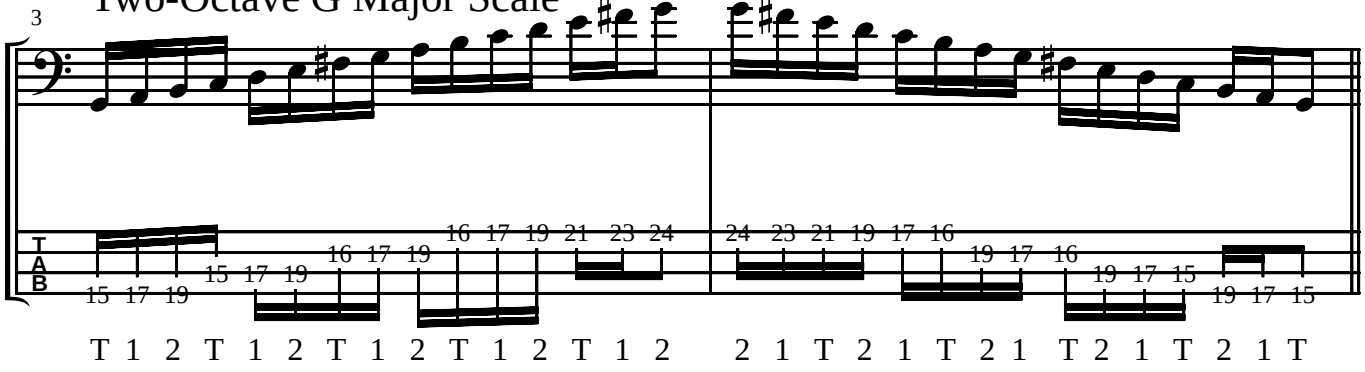
By Cliff Engel

8va

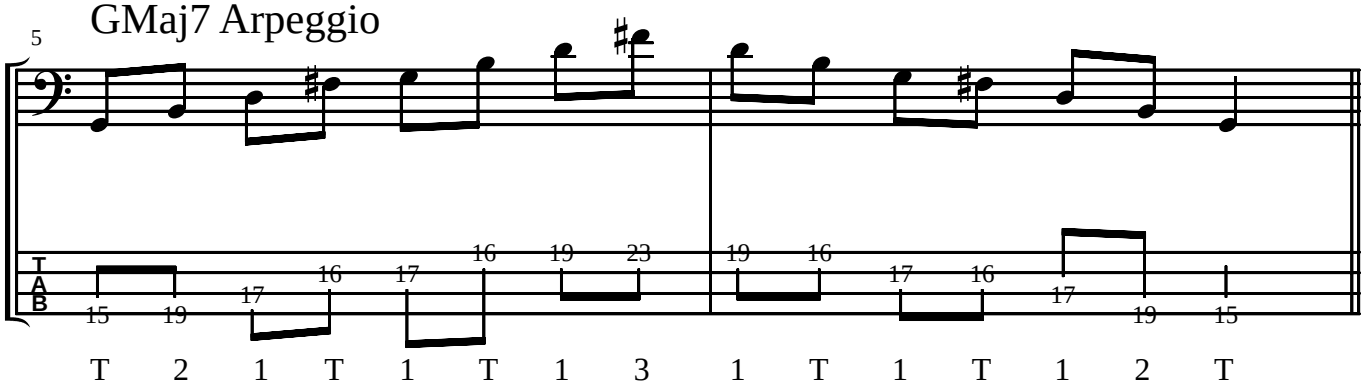
One-Octave G Major Scale



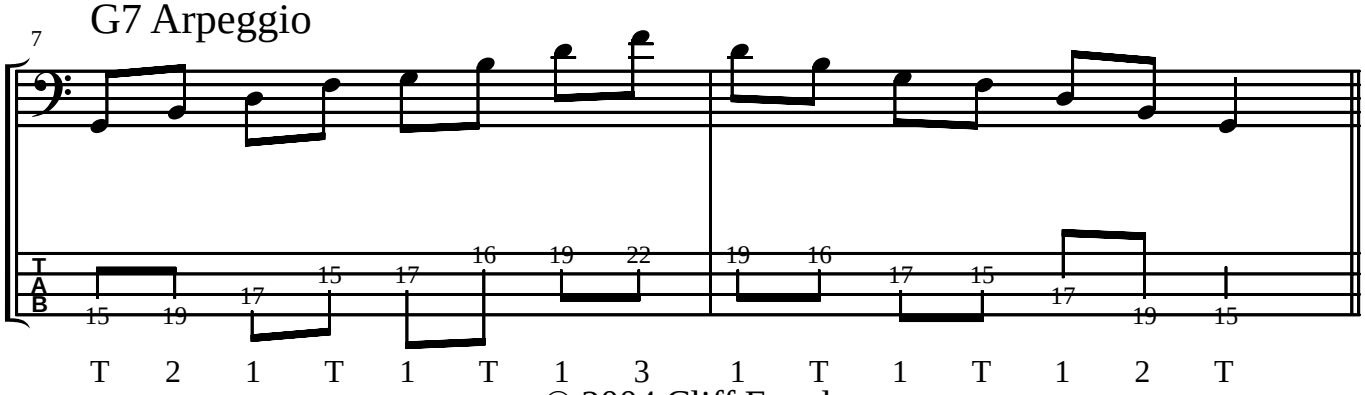
Two-Octave G Major Scale



GMaj7 Arpeggio



G7 Arpeggio



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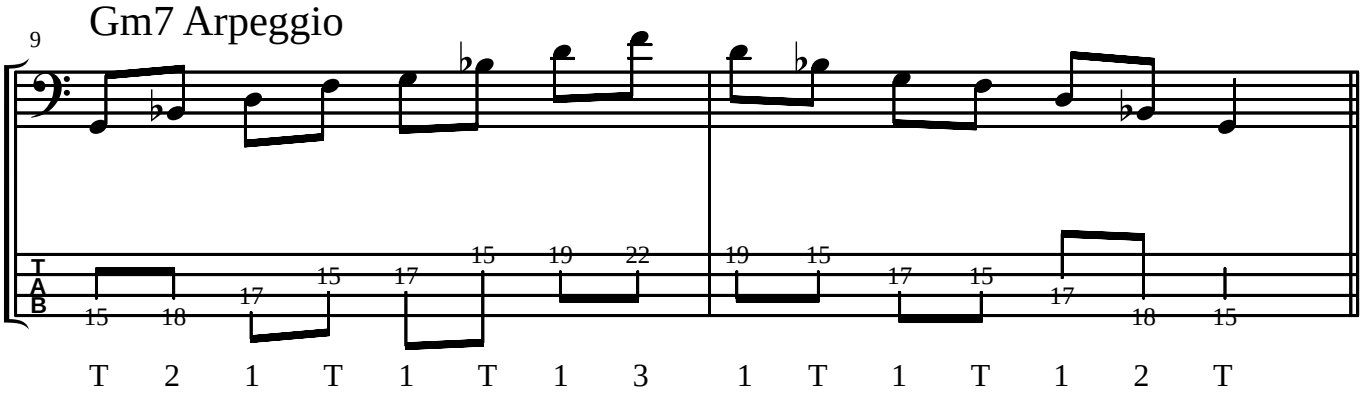

Acoustic upright bassists have been utilizing a technique called thumb position for centuries, primarily as a necessity to access the notes located on the upper half of the upright bass. By simply placing the thumb on the fingerboard, an upright player can achieve easy access to the highest registers on the bass. Although the electric bass is a considerably younger instrument as compared to its upright predecessor, the electric bass and the techniques employed by electric bassists have advanced at a much quicker pace than that of the upright bass. Yet, it has only been within the last decade or so that electric bassists have begun to incorporate the very applicable technique of thumb position into their playing. Two electric bassists who have become widely recognized for their thumb position techniques are virtuosos Brian Bromberg and Steve Bailey. In this lesson, we are going to borrow the concept of thumb position from acoustic upright bassists and apply this technique to electric bass.

There are numerous benefits to be gained with thumb position on electric bass. By incorporating thumb position in the upper registers, even bassists with relatively small hands can span two octaves or more without shifting out of position, something that would be physically impossible with standard fretting technique. With thumb position, the fretting hand can cover a wider interval distance from a much more relaxed position. Now, the electric bassist can play artificial harmonics and extended voicings including double, triple, and even quadruple-stops on the bass with ease. Thumb position on electric bass can prove to be exceptionally beneficial to those bassists who play instruments with shallow cutaways which limit access to the very uppermost notes.

From a technical point of view, thumb position is easy to learn and apply to almost any musical situation on electric bass. To play in thumb position, simply place the fretting hand thumb across the strings, similar to standard technique, while fretting the notes on the side of the thumb with the part between the first joint and thumbnail. The index, middle, ring, and pinky fingers should all remain slightly curved, while not collapsing and bending inwards, when fretting notes within close positions. When lines or chordal-based material of compound intervals require more of an open position with the fretting hand, the fingers will fret notes with less curvature and make contact with the strings on more of the ball rather than near the tip. Unlike upright players who must deal with a much longer string length and a much more physically demanding instrument as a whole, electric bassists can also easily employ the third and fourth fingers on the fretting hand in thumb position. In thumb position, electric bassists now have five digits on their fretting hand to utilize if necessary.

This lesson consists of a basic collection of exercises to get you started with playing in thumb position. The notation found in the bass clef is to be played one octave higher than notated. Tablature has been included to reference positions on the fretboard, and suggested fingerings are located underneath the tablature. Keep in mind that these are only a few of the almost limitless examples and fingerings you could apply with the thumb position concept. Experiment with as many of the alternate fingerings as possible. First, there are two versions of the G Major scale, in both one and two octaves. Then, there are GMaj7, G7, and Gm7 two-octave arpeggios. After internalizing these exercises, apply this concept to everything else you already know how to play with standard technique including scales, arpeggios, and so on.

Bass Notation Legend

T = Thumb
1 = Index Finger
2 = Middle Finger
3 = Ring Finger