

EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 4*

By Daniel Roest

Rhythm – it's everywhere. This month we focus on it to bring out maximum expression. Playing expressively calls for a deeper understanding and control of rhythm. Here are ways to inspire your students about this primary element.

I've got rhythm, I've got music

So you're sitting there at the table on your lunch break eating a sandwich, and suddenly your musician's mind goes, "Hmmm, I'm chewing at about 100 beats per minute." Okay, maybe not, but you have to admit that rhythm is not only one of the three most primary components of music, along with melody and harmony, but it is *everywhere*. And that is something powerful to bring into the teaching studio. Your students are looking to you to help them realize their dreams, to explore who they are and what they can achieve. Focusing on rhythm may be just the key to unlocking a student's enthusiasm. With your help, they will find many new and exciting avenues for self expression in music.

Last month, I introduced the concept of "*An Inch Wide, A Mile Deep*" to illustrate a level of focus in the lesson on just one aspect of musicianship. In this series I have been referring to them as parameters of musical expression, as each one can be increased or decreased for expressive effect. When you teach a student how to bend or slide on a string – how far, how long, etc., you are attending to an important, but occasional, effect. By contrast, rhythm is happening *throughout* the music. This topic is sometimes so taken for granted; it may be a case of an inch deep for this main element.

The Opposite of Boring

To elevate the students' attention to rhythm, as with the other elements, ask them to identify it, so that you're clear they can see it; then have them purposely de-emphasize it. In my recent Musical Expression workshop for teens, I had them try to be boring, and they enjoyed that. We removed all traces of expressive playing, down to eliminating any accent on the first beat of the measure. All notes were to be played at the same volume. This just sucks the life right out of the music immediately and serves as a good negative example. By alternately having them emphasize and de-emphasize an element, you can be sure they understand and can control it.

At the workshop I had them clap fast and steady, about 250 beats per minute. The only expression there is just fast, steady clapping and whatever energy level that connotes. Then we clapped in three-four time, and then in six-eight time, each with the required accents. Next we alternated six-eight and three-four, and suddenly we had the rhythm of "America" from Leonard Bernstein's musical, *West Side Story*: "**One**-two-three-**Four**-five-six-**One**-and-**Two**-and-**Three**-and." Last we applied the rhythm and Bernstein's melody to the Class Song:

*I want to play more expressively,
That's because boring is not for me!
Exciting and moving is how I see
The music I'm playing so passionately!*

As teachers of many styles are reading this column, I will avoid dwelling on any one. You'll undoubtedly know in detail the many rhythmic characteristics of the music you play and have trained in. The question here, though, is how to empower your students with a better appreciation for rhythm and its importance in expression in whatever style you're teaching. Get them to think about time and how **patterns of accents within time** can express images, feelings, cultures, and so on.

Getting Academic

In the June column, we looked in depth at tempo, the speed of the beats. We can only go so fast or so slow. But if time allows, you might share this remarkable insight into the organization of temporal events by composer Curtis Roads, of the University of California at Santa Barbara. He broke it down into nine "scales of time," from infinitely long to infinitely short (talk about parameters!):

1. Infinite: literally [infinite](#), such as the length of [sine waves](#) in classical [Fourier analysis](#),
2. Supra: [months](#), [years](#), [decades](#), and [centuries](#); everything above the level of
3. Macro: "overall musical architecture or form" or the level of the individual [piece](#); [minutes](#), [hours](#), or even [days](#),
4. Meso: "Divisions of form" including [movements](#), [sections](#), [phrases](#); [seconds](#) and minutes,
5. Sound object (Schaeffer 1959, 1977): "a basic unit of musical structure" and a generalization of [note](#) (Xenakis' ministructural time scale); fraction of a second to several seconds,
6. [Micro](#): "sound particles" (see [granular synthesis](#)) down to the threshold of audible perception; thousands to millionths of seconds,
7. Sample: [sample \(music\)](#), measured as are samples in millionths of a second or [microseconds](#),
8. Subsample: changes "too brief to [be] properly recorded or perceived", billionths of a second, [nanosecond](#), or less, and
9. Infinitesimal: literally "[infinitely brief](#)" such as [delta functions](#).

Source: Roads, Curtis (2001). *Microsound*. MIT. [ISBN 0-262-18215-7](#).

Going into this kind of detail may or may not work into your lesson plan. But in researching the topic of rhythm, one quickly sees that it is immense. In addition to *beats*, *accents* and *time signature*, you will encounter the terms ***duple meter***, ***triple meter***, ***simple meter***, ***compound meter***, ***syncopated***, ***polymeter***, ***polyrhythm***, ***divisive rhythm*** and ***additive rhythm***, plus ***complex cycles*** and ***complex interlocking rhythms***.

Whew! To avoid your students' eyes glazing over, I wouldn't dump all that on them at once. The more interesting thing is that every culture has traditional rhythms that help identify its music, and the emotive power of that music is tied to its rhythm. Whether it is African, Indian, Flamenco, Delta Blues or any of the countless styles of music on this

planet, you will help your student harness the raw power of that music if you refer to its cultural traditions, identify and focus on the nature of its rhythm, and play with adjusting the rhythmic emphasis. Take it out completely, put it back, overemphasize the accents in an over-the-top exaggeration, scale back to *just the right amount* – to whatever best expresses the emotion of the music.

How Are You Feeling?

Do talk about the emotional tone of the music, and see if the student can connect with it. C.P.E. Bach said, “*A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved.*” And Plato said, “*More than anything else, rhythm and melody find their way to the inmost soul and take the strongest hold upon it.*”

In fact, when one thinks of the music therapy profession, it's about the actual manipulation of a patient's mood and behavior through exposure to music. Here is another example of the ancients' awareness of the emotional impact of rhythm, from Sa'adyah Gaon (892-942 A.D.) in *On the Influence of Music*:

The musician... at gatherings, and banquets, and parties, should begin with the rhythmic modes which strengthen the generous, moral qualities and nobleness, and liberality, like Al-Thaqil al-awwal, and so on. Then he should follow them with agreeable, joyful modes, like Al-Hazaj and Al-Ramal, and in the dance and the ring dance Al-Makhuri, and so on. And at gatherings, if he fears disturbance, excitement, and quarrelling, he should play the soothing, heavy, tranquilizing, and sad modes.

Source: *Sounding the Inner Landscape – Music As Medicine*. Kay Gardner, 1990, p. 96. ISBN: 0-9627299-3-8

We have all encountered students who believed they had no rhythm – a total misconception. Everyone has rhythm, senses rhythm and uses rhythm in many ways – but some have a mental block or insecurity about music. They are drawn to it but don't feel like they can be the source of it. They come to us for help. For students lacking confidence about rhythm, we can invite them to key into the bank of images and sounds we all carry: marching, breathing, walking, a heart beating, countless pop tunes, a Harley-Davidson idling and everyday sounds as mundane as the washing machine, etc.

Enter the Dojo

In 1998, a landmark in guitar education occurred with the publishing of *Zen Guitar* by Philip Toshio Sudo (Simon and Shuster, NY, ISBN: 0-684-83877-X.) Though his life was cut short by cancer, he left us with a marvelous volume of clear, intelligent and inspired writing, an instant classic. Based on the spirit and principles of the Japanese dojo, Sudo created a book that clearly, yet simply, articulates what had to that point been intangibles – while arguing that we all have within us everything we need to start making good music. I highly recommend it for inspiration and a treasury of quotes from everyone from Chet Atkins to Frank Zappa. On rhythm, Sudo quotes Pearl Jam's Stone Gossard:

The focus of my playing is the groove, and every time I find a new rhythm, I find I can write a bunch of new songs. Learning how to dance, or drum, or to swing my body in a new way is the fundamental way I find a new riff. Because when you learn to swing your body in a new way, you begin to swing with your instrument differently.

No matter what style we are teaching, from shred metal to classical guitar, the student needs to get in a groove – to *see and feel* the rhythmic cycle. A good vehicle for teaching real beginners to see a rhythmic cycle is Hank Williams' *Your Cheatin' Heart*. The students think "Short, short, short, Long, two, three, four, One" repeatedly throughout the tune, and just that "two, three, four, One" part fills up that void where the temporal uncertainty arises.

The Audience May Revolt

Always keep the expressive, emotional content of the music part of your lessons, and you are sure to better inspire your students. It is easy to overlook, but they didn't come to us to be bored – they came to express themselves. This is powerful stuff. Remember, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot at its premier due to the emotional impact of its powerful rhythms! The orchestra kept playing while things were being thrown at them, and the composer escaped out a back window.

We are learning in this series about the many parameters of musical expression. This month, inspire your students with new, rich experiences in expressive playing. My next column will continue to explore how to share the potential of our expression machine, the guitar.

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Daniel Roest (pronounced "roost") started playing guitar at the age of seven and never stopped. Today he has performed in countless solo and ensemble events in nearly every kind of venue, and his concerts are praised for being entertaining and informative. For ten years he served as President and Artistic Director of the South Bay Guitar Society based in San Jose, CA, preparing many successful grant applications, and is now Director Emeritus. He is recognized for presenting gifted guitarists such as Laurence Juber, Peppino D'Agostino, Muriel Anderson, Jeff Linsky, Franco Morone, Michael Chapdelaine, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Proctor, Mark Hanson, Duck Baker, Sharon Isbin, Lily Afshar, Carlos Barbosa-Lima and many others. His *Great Guitars! 2004* CD received 5-star reviews.

Roest majored in guitar in college and earned three degrees in music performance. He participated in dozens of masterclasses, including many he produced. He taught guitar and music fundamentals at California State University Stanislaus and De Anza, Foothill and San Jose City Colleges and now maintains a full-time teaching studio in Folsom, CA. He has adjudicated several multi-instrument competitions, presented music clinics and introduced many new audiences to the art of the classical guitar. His original solo composition, *February 4th*, was selected from hundreds of submissions by the ERMMedia "Masterworks of the New Era" CD series. This year he was selected to be a teaching artist in the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission's Artist Residency Institute. Previous columns for Guitar Sessions include "So You Want to Make a Living with the Guitar," Parts 1, 2 and 3, July-September 2007. [link these]