

# EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

## Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 10*

By Daniel Roest

If you're just joining us, this series is about teaching expressive playing using a set of effects – think of them as virtual knobs on the guitar that can be dialed up or down. Because they are adjustable and together make up the whole, we're calling them "parameters" to underscore that concept. A look back at [link these] [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/may08/teaching.asp>] May (dynamics), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/jun08/teaching.asp>] June (tempo), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/jul08/teaching.asp>] July (the big picture), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/aug08/teaching.asp>] August (rhythm), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/sep08/teaching.asp>] September (balance), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/oct08/teaching.asp>] October (rubato), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/nov08/teaching.asp>] November (pitch effects), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/dec08/teaching.asp>] December (tone) and [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/jan09/teaching.asp>] January (phrasing) will catch you up.

## Stage Presence and Heart

**Your first thoughts** at reading those words are exactly right – you know what stage presence is, and you know what playing with heart is. But as teachers, how do we pass that on to students? Here are some words to help.

A performer with great **stage presence** is intriguing, captivating and obviously talented. A performer with stage presence has great awareness of the room and command – or ownership – of the stage.

A performer who plays **from the heart** is a performer who plays passionately and connects on an emotional level with the audience. They feel like they are getting to know the performer personally.

As we think about these two ideas, it's interesting that a performer with good stage presence may not be playing *from the heart* – they really are separate ideas. A guitarist could be making a big impression with technique and at the same time *not connecting* with the crowd in that other very important way. And a player may be all wrapped up in the emotion of the music, playing with heart, but seriously lacking in stage presence.

## Bring It to the Studio

It's another teaching day and you're heading into work, and it's your next chance to really help someone in a lasting way. It is said that teaching is one of the most generous and noble professions. Of course it is, in concept – giving of yourself, sharing your wisdom from years of focused effort. Is that how it goes in the day-to-day experience in the teaching studio? Naturally every student you meet will be a unique individual, and you will have varying degrees of success. But let's empathize with our students. They really are looking for help in an intangible area, personal expression through music. That's what they're paying for and not something to be taken for granted. We really need to take it seriously, even as our teaching style may be more fun and laughs than hard work.

Your students are to be commended for coping with the complexities of this instrument apart from any expression techniques: In just the first position there are four fret spaces across six strings, five lines, four spaces and four ledger lines in standard notation, different meters, beats and note values to track, four numbered fingers and, for fingerstyle players, four fingers on the right hand to use at the right moment. Quite a lot for anyone to juggle all at once!

Now take a moment to appreciate your own teaching skills – you have an amazing job. Not only do you teach the basics of technique, scales, chords, reading, repertoire and theory, but it doesn't work without expression. So add to that list teaching all of the parameters of musical expression covered so far in this series. Previous columns covered adjustments in tempo, dynamics, rhythm, tone, attack, phrasing, balance, vibrato, legato, etc. These may be easier for you to model than this month's topics. Assuming they are up and running, now you can focus on helping them achieve a soulful, moving performance.

## Stage Presence

You'll notice some of your students are more naturally expressive than others. But to a person, every one of them *wants* to play expressively – *not* boring and flat. Many of them are not after playing up on the stage so much as just being able to play well, play musically and play for friends and family. Nevertheless, they may find themselves on stage. Here are tips to give them to achieve good stage presence.

- 1) Attend concerts in person. By all means you should be exposed to great stage presence by attending great performances. By being in the audience and imagining yourself performing, you will tune into the many signals of stage presence.
- 2) Get acquainted with the space. Check the physical layout and be willing to temporarily "own it." Find out all you need to regarding power supplies, seating, music stands, PA systems, lighting, heating and cooling, acoustics, sight lines, and do a complete sound check. Check any tripping hazards, especially cords.
- 3) Be prepared to play. Stage presence is diminished by under-confident playing. So practice up well beyond the tempos needed, and do tune-up performances for your teacher, family, friends and recordings.
- 4) Arrive early enough to get centered. Recall the earlier sound check and inspiration of the stage and the room. Take time to calm your nerves by breathing slowly and purposefully, and find a personal routine that helps with this.
- 5) Dress for success and show you really care what the audience thinks of you.
- 6) Have your guitar tuned when you take the stage and stay in tune.
- 7) When you are announced and take the stage, take it. You deserve to be there, and the audience wants to see and hear you. Do *not* be morose – be obviously pleased and grateful to be there.
- 8) Make eye contact as you would when speaking to good friends and family – this will be meaningful and a positive touch for the audience.
- 9) Be in the moment as you play – you should be clearly enjoying being there throughout the performance. If you evoke a sense of being comfortable on stage, you put the audience at ease as well. Conversely, if you look uncomfortable, they may feel sorry for you. You have practiced to the best of your ability. Trust your practice to be there for you. At the same time, know that this is quite different from your practice room, so do not expect it to feel the same. Adjust to the differences as you feel them without resisting them. Embrace them.

- 10) Get some verbal introductions for your set list ready and rehearsed – they can be very effective in increasing rapport with the audience and giving them a handle on what you're playing. Project your voice with intention throughout the room.
- 11) Practice your entrances and exits and what you plan to say on your way in and on your way out, bowing, acknowledging your hosts, bandmates, VIPs in the audience, etc.

Stage presence is directly related to programming and stagecraft – and that encompasses things that directly impact your stage presence. Plan poor repertoire choices, too long or short of a set, wrong room temperature, bad audience seating or any number of such liabilities, and your stage presence is diminished. Your audience *must* be comfortable.

## About Stage Fright

Bridging the two topics of stage presence and heart is the fear of the stage – stage fright. As stated above, if you're not comfortable, the audience won't be. It takes courage to get up there. It takes heart. A common definition of courage is being afraid to do something and doing it anyway. Performers earn automatic points by simply taking the stage. Every audience member appreciates what it takes to be the focus of their attention. A theory put forth on why we nearly all have that funny feeling when many people are staring at us is that in our evolution, being singled out from the group may have been a prelude to being eaten, as any zebra or gazelle could attest. It's in our very DNA to want to be in the audience, the group, surrounded by many others, and not the focus of their attention. So to put ourselves in that very situation may seem right given our talent and preparation, yet to handle the conflicting messages in our bodies takes real poise.

A thorough discussion of stage fright deserves at least an entire column, and helpful advice is readily available on the web. What is important for the teacher is to be a source of comfort and guidance to the student and to lend the student all the support needed to succeed. That includes registering how comfortable they are in the activity – and how motivated they are. It also includes matching technical difficulty with the student's technical ability *and* poise under pressure.

## Heart of the Matter

Everyone has their concept of what playing with heart is and can recognize it when they see it. As for this writer, the most satisfying performances have always been those that created an emotional bond between the audience and the performer, leaving the audience with the feeling that they knew the performer personally, perhaps deeply, simply from attending and paying attention.

In his book *Zen Guitar* (Simon & Shuster, New York), the late Philip Toshio Sudo wrote a chapter called **Conviction** in a section called Black Belt Heart. Sudo wrote, "...*your inner fire must always show through. Play from the inside out; your sound should stem from the conviction of the soul.*" Like Sudo, I relate conviction to heart. Kenny Loggins did so with his hit "Conviction of the Heart." And "Put your *heart* into it" means play it *with total conviction*. You could hardly say that better than Carlos Santana:

*If [you're] going to sweep the floor, sweep it better than anyone in town. And if you're going to play the guitar, really, really, really get in it, and don't be jivin'.*

When urging your students to put their heart into it, or showing them how you do it, there are good words you can use, each of which helps them get a handle on this

intangible. "Sincere" means *"Not feigned or affected; genuine; being without hypocrisy or pretense; true."* "Earnest" means *"Marked by or showing deep sincerity or seriousness."* "Conviction" means *"The state of being convinced; the act or process of convincing."* That last part is key to success in playing with heart in performance. If one plays earnestly, sincerely, with total conviction and commitment, the audience cannot help but get it. The only question is whether the music and its execution go over. But the individual performer will be clearly communicating who he or she is – and that's where the audience makes that huge connection onto the stage.

Here is an example of just one former student who went on to gain recognition for playing *with heart*, classical guitarist David Isaacs of Long Beach, CA, about whom reviewers wrote:

*"Isaacs plays with sensitivity and technical finish and is more emotionally committed to the music and its images than many far more famous players."*

*"David shows an affinity for passion in every note. Furthermore, he executes with a keen awareness, the slivers of silence between those notes that transport the listener to a stillness and inner peace."*

*"David's love for his music shines through technically, musically, and emotionally. Bravo! He inspired my students and [me.] He cares deeply about what he is doing and it shows in his performing and in his words."*

If you check the wording, you see that the praise is for the emotional commitment and passion, and for the effect of those upon the audience.

## Coda

I wish you good luck with all of your teaching, especially when encouraging your students to rise to their expressive potential. Many words are used in a typical teaching day – but if *you* play from the heart and if *you* shine on stage when you perform, your students will certainly get it and be grateful.

We've been learning in this series about the many *parameters of musical expression*. This month, inspire your students with the most soulful playing you can produce. I hope you have enjoyed reading about teaching expressive playing and adding your own ideas about teaching 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 4<sup>th</sup>*, was selected from hundreds of submissions by the ERMMedia "Masterworks of the New Era" CD series. Last 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]