

EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 9*

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) and [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/dec08/teaching.asp>] December (tone) will catch you up.

Phrasing often gets lost overlooked in favor of technique. I checked out a local shred-metal competition the other night and was certainly impressed technically – but not so much musically. If there were an Olympics for speed sweep-picked arpeggios, diminished and harmonic minor scales, finger-tapping and whammy-bar abuse, there would be no shortage of contestants.

As they revel in their technical development, take your students into the land of expressive playing with instruction in phrasing, because that's what will really move audiences and build reputations.

As Always, It's About Expression

Every style of guitar playing under the sun has one thing in common – the player is expressing emotions, feelings, stories, images, hopes and dreams through music. What you do in the studio to help that happen *expressively* will last longer than the current tunes and studies.

The first thing to do is draw your student's attention to the topic of phrasing and introduce some vocabulary. It may have been some years since your academic training broke down symphonic scores and had you cramming for a Form and Analysis final, but this month a few musical analysis terms need our attention. Adapt it all your own teaching style.

The most succinct definition of "phrase" I found was in my old music encyclopedia: ***"a unit of melody of indeterminate length."*** A better, short definition is by composer and music analyst Edward Cone: ***"[Phrases] consist of an initial downbeat, a period of motion, and a point of arrival."*** Well, that makes sense because phrases are like sentences. It's like you start a sentence, filled with meaning, full of inflections, a certain pacing and emphasis at one point, ending with a period. With that in mind, The New College Encyclopedia of Music (W.W. Norton & Co., NY) states that ***"The art of 'phrasing' concerns not only the articulation of complete phrases, but the articulation of their details."***

So what are these details? The musical components of phrases are **figures, motives** and **cells**.

It's a Little Thing: Cells

Cells are the smallest melodic unit or fragment. Cells can be daisy-chained together for a compelling rhythmic effect as in AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* or the minimalism compositions of Phillip Glass. Add attack, dynamics, tone, sustain, balance, vibrato and other expression parameters to cells for real expressive impact.

The terminology for phrasing is not entirely consistent. In researching this topic I found overlapping of the terms "cells," "figures," "motives" and even "phrases." Wikipedia pointed to The 1958 *Encyclopédie Fasquelle*, describing a cell as a possible motif:

- a term in musical composition, used to discuss cyclic works. It is the smallest indivisible unit; the cell is distinct from the motif, which can be divided; the cell can, itself, be used as a developmental motif (motive).

Beethoven's Fifth (Pah-Pah-Pah-Paaahhh) – the "*fate motif*" - is a classic example of a cell used as a developmental motive.

Motives, Figures and Riffs – Which is Which?

The basic difference between figures and motives is that a figure is background and a motive is foreground. Both are recurring units. **Riffs** are just figures or motives by a more familiar name.

Again, there are going to be overlapping definitions in the literature for these terms. For example, in Wikipedia's entry on Riffs:

- David Brackett (1999) defines riffs as "**short melodic phrases**," while Richard Middleton (1999) defines them as, "**short rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic figures repeated to form a structural framework**." Rikky Rooksby (2002, p.6-7) states that "A riff is a short, repeated, memorable musical phrase, often pitched low on the guitar, which focuses much of the energy and excitement of a rock song."

So Brackett calls riffs 'phrases' and Middleton calls them 'figures.' We need to have a vocabulary that works for each of us in our daily teaching practices, so please adopt the words that work for you.

As in cells, students should be encouraged to apply expression – "*Play it with feeling*" – to the larger parts of phrases. Figures are also said to be open ended and repeatable – like wallpaper.

Now We're Talkin' - The Complete Phrase

Now that we have looked at small melodic fragments, what constitutes a complete phrase? Phrases tend to appear in four bar segments, often in eight bar segments, but always convey a coherent musical idea. The phrase may be an *antecedent* phrase, ending on a weak cadence, or *consequent* phrase with a strong cadence. Think of it as a first half and second half. "*If it wasn't for bad luck (first half), I wouldn't have no luck at all (second half)*." More vocabulary here – a pair of phrases, antecedent and consequent, becomes a **period**.

For guitar teachers who haven't taken an academic path to teaching, eyes may be rolling by now. I think the main thing to convey to students is this "speaking" analogy in the music they're working on. You can show them where the phrases are in a portion of it and ask them to complete it. If they know that this will elevate the music's emotional impact, they'll be motivated to find the phrases on their own.

The "parameters" we have covered in past Expressive Playing columns are the means for this musical "speaking" - adjustments to *tempo, dynamics, rhythm, harmony, balance, rubato, register, pitch, bends, slides, microtones, percussion, tone, vibrato, attack, legato/staccato*. Adjusting tempo with rubato and dynamics with crescendo or decrescendo are especially effective in shaping phrases.

The question is, "What are you saying with [the guitar]? Not "Can you play this lick?" or "What's your speed like?" It's "What are you saying with your instrument? What is being communicated in this song?" —The Edge, U2

*From **Zen Guitar** by Phillip Toshio Sudo (Simon & Schuster, New York)*

Naturally Expressive

Lee F. Ryan has written a fine book on technique for classical guitar, **The Natural Classical Guitar – Principles of Effortless Playing** (1984 Prentice Hall, NJ), that goes into great detail in breaking down a Sor minuet. Ryan states that in its broadest sense, phrasing is "the artistic shaping of a piece of music so that its inner meaning and emotion are revealed." Let your students know that musical phrasing is about finding points of beginnings and endings within melodic lines into groups of notes – just like we speak.

Ryan gives much attention to tension and its opposite, relaxation. There are rhythmic, melodic and harmonic aspects of these two opposite tendencies. Ryan's book has an excellent table of elements within each of these areas. As he says, "*Knowing these relationships of tension and relaxation will help you determine the beginnings, climaxes and endings of the various parts of a piece.*"

With a little work your students could understand a 24-bar piece as three 8-bar sections, or periods, of two 4-bar phrases each, and each phrase made of two 2-bar motives.

We are learning in this series about the many *parameters of musical expression*: Tempo, Dynamics, Rhythm, Tone, Legato, Vibrato, Rubato, Register, Harmony, Rests, Attack, Phrasing, Balance, Silence, Stage Presence and Heart. This month, inspire your students with the most expressive phrasing you can produce. The last column in this series will be on those last two intangibles, Stage Presence and Heart – a fitting end to our series about teaching our expression machine, the guitar.

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. 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]