

## EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

### Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 3*

By Daniel Roest

*Welcome to the third in a series of columns designed to unlock the expressive potential in your students' playing, as well as your own – bring new energy to your lessons with these ideas on transforming playing from ordinary to moving.*

The first two columns in this series explored the expressive potential in **dynamics** and **tempo** and I hope you have found them inspiring. Let's review the list of **parameters of musical expression**:

***Tempo, Dynamics, Rhythm, Tone, Attack, Legato, Vibrato, Rubato, Phrasing, Bends & Slides, Register, Harmony, Balance, Rests, Silence, Stage Presence, Heart.***

Of course, these elements of expression have meaning for you as a teacher and a musician. You may routinely include some or all of these terms in your teaching. What you may not be doing is devote sufficient time and attention to these **in depth**, as I myself have not until recently. With so much to cover in so little time during lessons, I have explained and demonstrated most of these terms and ideas alongside each other and consequently left opportunities behind.

Recently, however, a new phrase has entered this old teacher's consciousness:

### ***"AN INCH WIDE, A MILE DEEP"***

It appeared in the workshops of an Artist Residency Institute I just shared with two dozen artists of different disciplines, where we were taught to deliver arts programs out in schools and other community sites. The central message I took from the workshops and wish to share with you is to learn ways to **inspire and excite** our students. The "inch wide, mile deep" approach can do the trick, and the two previous columns on dynamics and tempo demonstrated it. And while they got very focused on one term, this month we'll stand back and look at the group and consider more how to inspire our students.

## From Bland to Moving - the Big Picture

As we look at the big picture of musical expression and how to do it, let's look at the definition of the word **parameter**:

***One of a set of measurable factors, such as temperature and pressure, which define a system and determine its behavior and are varied in an experiment.***

What we have previously considered *elements* of musical expression, we will now consider *parameters* of musical expression. As in a science experiment, in music we can adjust this and adjust that, and the adjustments of the variables *within each element* directly affect how expressively the music is performed. When you steer your student's attention more toward how powerful and moving the music can be, it is useful to go the other way: have them be boring – just dull as a doorknob. Have them, on purpose, remove any and all expression from a piece – accents, volume changes, contrast of any

kind, etc. It's actually hard to do. But get them thinking about the horrors of dull, bland, unexciting playing as a place on a continuum that is possible to visit, but not a place to stay. Here then, are the "expression dials" for them to turn as they move away from boring – toward superstardom. Each can be explored a mile deep in your lessons.

## Expression Dials and Their Parameters

- TEMPO – from as slow as possible to as fast as possible, including *accelerando* and *ritardando*, all settings have an emotional effect.
- DYNAMICS – from as quiet as possible (*pppp*) to as loud as possible (*ffff*), choose from ten levels, including *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, gradually to suddenly
- RHYTHM – from none to heavy emphasis on accent patterns
- TONE – from very bright to very dark; thin to fat
- ATTACK – from soft to hard; dull to sharp
- LEGATO – from separate, detached to smooth, connected
- VIBRATO – from light to heavy; slow to fast
- RUBATO – from metronome-steady to an elastic feeling
- PHRASING – analogous to word groups and sentences in speech, from missing to emphasized
- BENDS & SLIDES – from none to bluesy
- REGISTER / PITCH – from the lowest low to the highest high
- HARMONY – from subdued/absent to emphasized
- BALANCE – from the melody buried in the harmony to distinctly above and separate from it
- RESTS – from overlooked to followed
- SILENCE – from none to too much
- STAGE PRESENCE – from no connection to total empathy; boring to riveting
- HEART – from robotic and boring to "great," "inspiring," "moving" and "it rocked my world"

## Ritardando

If you skimmed that list or blasted through it because you're short on time, slow down – or return soon when you have more time. Allow yourself time to ponder each of these parameters. This whole series is about imagination and creativity. That's what our

students look to us for – helping them express themselves and their imaginations in music.

## Do emotions belong in the studio?

A recent *Beakman and Jax* Sunday comic answered a question from a child, "What are emotions?" Jax Place responded that emotions are messages we send ourselves. They have two parts – the feeling – and your response to that feeling. Jax wisely stated that a very big part of growing up is emotional intelligence – learning how to respond to your feelings in ways that are good for your life. As guitar teachers, we empower our students in important ways when we encourage them to express themselves positively through music – so I say, yes, we should address the emotional content of music in a way that the student can relate to – connecting the music with universal human feelings. As they practice and possibly perform it, the vital emotional imagery will support the phrasing, tempo, dynamic and other choices they make.



Today I completed a three day workshop on musical expression just for teens (though some 12-year-olds snuck in!), and while this age group has its challenges, they came away with a new appreciation for the power of expressive playing and a resolve to never be boring or uninvolved when they perform. Above to my immediate right is a guest artist I brought for the final day, Ray Zhou, who dazzled them with a brilliant solo electric guitar performance over backing tracks after also playing a classical guitar solo selected for its expressiveness. After each tune we discussed the feelings they evoked, and it was clear the kids were getting more attuned to of the feeling side of music.

We are learning in this series about the emotional impact of 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.

**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. His *Great Guitars! 2004* CD has received 5-star reviews. 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.

In college Roest majored in guitar 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. This year he was selected to be a presenting 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]