

## TEACHING LEGATO

By Daniel Roest

*Help your students achieve better expression and control by teaching them legato.*

### “Connect” with your students

This column is devoted to one of the most important topics in your teaching: **Legato**. It means "connected," and "smooth." Its better known opposite is **staccato** – detached. Unless otherwise marked, the default way to play melodies *is* legato.

Think about it - you have four quarter notes in a row: each of those notes occupies an entire beat - the space from one to the next. Easy to say – not so easy to do. It's a very good idea to tell your students about legato if you haven't covered it yet. The object is to keep the string vibrating for the entire duration of the written note.

### Speed up that stroke and time it perfectly

For this article we're assuming a right-handed guitar is used. If the **right hand** touch is the least bit sluggish, the string is damped for the time it takes to cross the string. Laying a pick or finger on the string before the next note is killing the present note. That can be intentional – damping the string for staccato – and that is a special effect. Again, the default way to create a beautiful, singing tone is to play legato.

A good model of how to play legato in the right hand is a bell being struck repeatedly with a hammer - the bell keeps ringing, the hammer strikes and bounces off, and the hammer doesn't waste any time resting against the bell. Your pick or right hand finger has to approach the string with enough velocity, like the hammer and bell, to get through the stroke, impart new energy to the vibrating string, and approach the ideal of a continually vibrating string.

Other instruments have it easier - the violin bow moves constantly through a scale, the flute player blows continually while shifting pitches - but guitarists can achieve legato, too. Check your students' technique by asking them to repeat tones on an open string, aiming for the most legato they have ever produced. Keep the hammer and bell model in mind. Once they can put out legato quarter notes in perfect rhythm, they're ready to work on the left hand.

### The right hand pitches, the left hand bats

Of course, the **left hand** has to synch perfectly with the right. The right hand may be as perfectly timed as a metronome, but legato will be lost if the left hand fingers are early or late, or if they don't come down crisply. If the right hand is like a ball pitching machine, the left hand is the batter. And that swing has to be as crisp as the right hand. When your student lifts or places a left hand finger, it has to be done quickly and not the least bit sluggishly. Their right hand can be perfect, but if their left hand finger touches a string without holding it firmly against the fret, the string is damped.

For legato scales, there are tips you can give your students that will help create legato. When changing from one note to another on the same string, it makes sense that legato is more likely if *only one finger* is moving instead of two. For successive descending notes on the same string, you place a finger on the next note *before* removing the

previous finger, just as in two-finger pull-offs. You obviously can't place the next finger in advance in an ascending scale unless the next note is on a different string. But just as in a hammer-on, the lower note finger should hold the pitch until the higher pitch is sounded. Keep the movements crisp to maximize each note's sustain.

## Don't shortchange that note!

I like to tell students that legato is getting as much of 100% of the note's value as they can. If they pick or pluck crisply enough, the attack stops the string for a percent or two; if it's a slow stroke, that percentage goes up and legato is lost.

Unlike instruments with built-in sustain like wind instruments, organs, bowed instruments, etc., the guitar is almost designed not to play legato. The attack, the decay, the coordinating of both hands – it's a real challenge for a beginning student to produce a legato scale. But early on you should tell them about legato and show how *sustaining the notes for their full value* makes a huge difference in how they sound. Play the melody with detached notes – you sound like a beginner. Play the same melody completely legato – you sound like a pro.

If you haven't already addressed legato in your lessons, plan to help your students get legato happening in their scales and melodies. Increasing legato in their playing will transform their sound and improve their sense of progress on the guitar.

## Next month – “I played this better at home!”

How many times have we heard that line? We'll talk about it next month – until then, happy teaching!

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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 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**

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