

EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 6*

By Daniel Roest

Are any of your students playing like robots? Help them improve their adjustments to tempo – to sound more 'human.' The use of rubato is the focus for this month's column.

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) and [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/sep08/teaching.asp>] September (balance) will catch you up.

Gently Does It

When you deftly change the tempo to highlight the end of a phrase or the start of a new one, you are using **tempo rubato** – a bending of the speed of the beats. As an expressive instrument, you can't beat the guitar. For every player, there is a use of rubato that matches that player's emotional interpretation. You can set the audience's feet tapping with a tight rhythm, and then touch their hearts with rubato in a well-timed **ritard** (short for **ritardando**, meaning gradually slowing tempo. **Ritenuto** is an immediate reduction in speed.) How it works is curiously personal process.

Rubato comes in two main flavors – *strict* rubato and *free* rubato. Meaning "robbed time," according to most sources, strict rubato borrows and pays back variations in time. So if you and I start the same piece at the same tempo, and I use rubato and you play in strictly steady time, we would arrive at the end at the same moment. You'd sound mechanical and I'd sound "expressive."

By contrast, free rubato's stolen time isn't given back. Dance music certainly won't use free rubato, but art music, free improvisations, cadenzas and the like may make good use of the *lack of* a beat. In concerts, I play *Serenade* by Philip Rosheger. As the title implies, it is serene. In 3/4 time, it opens with four broken chords, one per measure. I choose to use free rubato on them. Depending on the space – say, a reflective hall and a hushed audience – the chords ring out and decay. The effect is gorgeous. Then I repeat the chords "in time" and set the scaffolding for the soothing melody, which employs a stricter rubato.

Too Much, Too Little, or Just Right?

Last month we played with **balance** – and moved the virtual knobs from one extreme to the other in many expression parameters. Some of them are directly affected by rubato. As you coach your students on using rubato, demonstrate the use and benefit of rubato with a suitable piece. To set the use of rubato in perspective, play with an absolutely metronomic evenness – followed by a syrupy, overdone romanticism. Then help them find a middle ground – the right balance. The aim is to help the students get a handle on using rubato, so avoid setting some point as gospel – just help them experience gaining control of tempo.

When I hear one of my students wait for me to tell them how a passage should be played, I say to him, "You have the sacred fire, there, inside yourself. Don't wait for me to provide it."

-Andrés Segovia

The goal should be for *the student* to find his or her own best idea of speed for a given piece - when it *feels* right. Control the impulse to influence the decision with your own wise opinion. Just facilitate the process by setting out the range of options and helping refine the final setting.

Remind your students that before they use tempo rubato, they have to be able to play in strict time. That way, they will have the steady rhythmic pulse from which to make meaningful deviations.

As with tempo in general, finding the right amount of rubato depends on the mood of the piece, performance traditions, acoustics in the performing space and what works with a given audience.

A great place to use rubato is on longer tones when *vibrato* is used. Depending on the speed and depth of vibrato chosen and the point in the phrase, these will benefit from some amount of rubato. A couple of ways of explaining these moments is to say that we are fattening the lengthened notes, or that it's like a drop of oil on water. Look at this excerpt from Matteo Carcassi's **Study 19, Opus 60**:

♩ = 120

On the dotted half notes in the melody, see the effect of pushing out the harmony sixteenths, as if there's a hidden sixteenth note between the first and second notes. Then speed up the remainder of the sixteenth notes in the measure to make up the tempo – an example of *strict rubato*.

Point Them in the Right Direction

Whatever style of music you are teaching, there is room for rubato; it's not just for classical. When you push the pace here and slow it there, you create expression. Students want to learn that magic. They want to get all the technique they're capable of, but more than that, they want that real emotional charge for themselves – and anyone they play for.

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.

Copyright © 2008 Daniel Roest
www.danielguitar.com - All Rights Reserved

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]