

EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 5*

By Daniel Roest

Balance is the topic of the month and the goal in performance. It's also at the heart of expression, like the other parameters – tempo, dynamics, rhythm, phrasing, etc. Attend to balance to help your students dial in the perfect feeling.

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) and [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/aug08/teaching.asp>] August (rhythm) will catch you up.

"I Need More Balance!"

That's not Christopher Walken talking, but what I tell myself constantly. In 1985 I was in grad school, and a very hip professor showed us "Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance," a film released a couple of years earlier. The title is a Hopi Indian word meaning "life out of balance," and the film made a big impression. Without dialogue, driven by a minimalist score by Phillip Glass, the film is "an apocalyptic vision of the collision of two different worlds – urban life and technology versus the environment." (Netflix)

It made quite an impression on me about the bigger concept of balance. Like the other expressive elements of tempo, dynamics, phrasing and so on, balance can be adjusted. An excellent exercise is adjusting the balance on one of the parameters – **tone**, for example. Have the student play normally; then have them pick closer and closer to the bridge. At the point getting any closer becomes impossible, reverse direction. Pass the normal picking location and continue toward the middle of the string. After testing the extremes and exploring the gradations in between, the student may locate a new preference. Check arm and hand position as usual. The important point is the student's ear being attuned to the subtle differences and exercising improved and informed control.

A Little Higher, A Little Lower, That's Perfect!

Having moved the tonal balance from one extreme to the other, it's now time to try it with other parameters. One of the big concepts in this series is to help the student experience musical expression, learn the parameters of control and feel "expressive" through musical performance. In other words, if they feel a particular emotion or mood in a piece, they have the tools to recreate those feelings musically.

With your help, it will be stimulating for the student to find what *they* like in tempo, volume, tone and so on. It may be too much for one lesson, but pick from the list below a few elements to experiment with. As in the tone study above, take on tempo, for example. 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.

Now, on to the whole list: In each of the following parameters, take a “perfect balance” approach. Ask the student to tell you what’s “right” for a piece of music that isn’t too challenging to make instant, dramatic changes.

- **Dynamics** - from as quiet as possible (*pppp*) to as loud as possible (*ffff*), choose from ten levels, including crescendo and decrescendo, gradually to suddenly

This powerful element is guaranteed to stimulate your students’ imaginations. It also teaches them to exercise more control and range of volume, whether acoustic or amplified. From as soft as possible (quadruple piano) to as loud as possible (quadruple forte), have the students check their experience at each setting.

- **Tempo** - from as slow as possible to as fast as possible, including accelerando and ritardando, all settings have an emotional effect.

Finding the right tempo depends on the mood of the piece, performance traditions, acoustics in the performing space and what works with a given audience. Remember from the June column those often mysterious Italian performance instructions – their implied speed and their emotional effect:

affrettando – hurrying, pressing onwards; **agitato** – agitated; **amoroso** – loving; **appassionato** – passionately; **brillante** – brilliantly, with sparkle; **con amor** – with love, tenderly; **con brio** – with spirit, with vigor; **con (gran, molto) espressione** – with (great, much) expression; **con larghezza** – with broadness; broadly; **con moto** – with motion; **dolcissimo** – very sweetly; **doloroso** – sorrowfully, plaintively; **energico** – energetic, strong; **eroico** – heroically; **festivamente** – cheerfully, celebratory; **fieramente** – proudly; **flebile** – mournfully; **grandioso** – grandly; **grave** – slowly and seriously; **impetuoso** – impetuously; **incalzando** – getting faster and louder; **irato** – angrily; **lamentoso** – lamenting, mournfully; **maestoso** – majestically, in a stately fashion; **misterioso** – mysteriously; **nobilmente** – in a noble fashion; **passionato** – passionately; **pastorale** – in a pastoral style, peaceful and simple; **pesante** – heavy, ponderous; **rapido** – fast; **scherzando** – playfully; **serioso** – seriously; **soave** – smoothly, gently; **solenne** – solemn; **spiritoso** – spiritedly; **teneramente** – tenderly; **tranquillo** – calmly, peacefully; **vittorioso** – victoriously

- **Rhythm** - from none to heavy emphasis on accent patterns

Just by having a tempo, the music has pulses – it’s a matter of what we do with them that is important here. Last month we saw how alternating measures of 3/4 and 6/8 instantly lent a Latin feel to West Side Story’s “America.” Keeping the accents clear is a given; striking a balance between not enough accent and going overboard is the goal. The student may be inclined to try to think it through and figure it out – let them – but encourage them to feel it as well. Another component of rhythm is timing the beat.

“I tried to play in front of the beat in a way that didn’t rush it, behind the beat in a way that didn’t drag it.” —Rick Danko, The Band

- **Tone** - from very bright to very dark; thin to fat

Ask the student to apply the great equalizer of taste to this parameter. After exploring how dark and how bright it can be played, discover what's "best." This can be a time to share how your own taste for tone came to be.

- **Attack** - from soft to hard; dull to sharp

An aspect of tone, this element expresses everything from control to anarchy and chaos, from tenderness to aggression. How cool is it that our instrument gives us this avenue for self expression? We're teaching our students to use attack and the other controls to create powerful, emotive music.

- **Legato** - from separate, detached to smooth, connected

This is one of my most often repeated points of interest in lessons. I favor legato as the default effect. Staccato would be its opposite, and the student needs to know how to achieve both - and what the resulting expressive effect is.

- **Vibrato** - from light to heavy; slow to fast

Finding balance on this one is easy enough, but make sure the technique is there to back up whatever the student likes. They will most likely be happy enough to be able imitate your vibrato, and eventually embrace their own particular rate and depth. Help them explore the range and strike the right balance.

- **Rubato** - from metronome-steady to an elastic feeling

I find it helps tremendously to demonstrate this effect and contrast it with complete absence – absolutely unwavering. It depends so much on what's being played, of course. The classical guitar standard *Romance* doesn't work rock steady; AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* doesn't work with rubato.

- **Phrasing** - analogous to word groups and sentences in speech, from missing to emphasized

You help your students develop taste when you point out the phrasing in music and have them manage it. It makes such a difference in the success of a performance. Have them exaggerate the phrasing, going beyond what is called for, then remove it altogether, to find a point of balance.

- **Bends & Slides** - from none to bluesy

There is so much to this parameter – does the music even have a slide or a bend? And if it does, how much is needed. Ask the student to make it "vocal" – like a moan or a sigh, a cry or a laugh. What does a quarter tone change feel like? A half step; a whole step?

- **Register / Pitch** - from the lowest low to the highest high

For those students improvising, send them up the neck and back down for their solos, and suggest the notion of balance in a solo, especially if it is extended. The low register has a feeling; the highest register has a different feeling. In between are shades of grey. All a matter of taste and what "works" in the moment.

- **Harmony** - from subdued/absent to emphasized

Since this is such a fundamental part of nearly all music, finding balance in harmony has many possibilities. Take a naked melody, add one bass note for harmony, and see how it hangs. Add more harmony notes and notice the difference. At some point the melody diminishes. Ask the student what relative volume the melody should be above the harmony. That is a point of balance, from the melody buried in the harmony to distinctly above and separate from it

- **Rests** – from overlooked to followed

This one doesn't lend itself to the idea of balance so much as the others, but rests define and shape the music. Cutting notes off exactly on time may work wonderfully or, in other music, be unnecessary.

- **Silence** – from none to too much

There is a tremendous dynamic between performer and audience when nothing is heard. It changes moment to moment, and every moment means something to both parties. Somewhere there is a perfect balance here – from not enough to “get on with it.”

- **Stage presence** – from no connection with the audience to total empathy; from boring to riveting

Everyone has to choose their personal style, and of course it evolves over time. But no one goes to a show to be bored. The performer has to find the right fit, a matter of balancing many factors.

- **Heart** – from robotic and boring to “great,” “inspiring,” “moving,” and “it rocked my world”

The last, hard-to-pin-down element in the mix is most rewarding for audience and performer alike. If one plays from the heart, it shows, and the listener is touched. If one plays with no heart, it shows, and the listener hears a bunch of sound – but where's the heart? That's what they're after. It's hard to find a balance point for this intangible.

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.

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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 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]