

## Musical Interaction... More on Dynamics, Texture, and Contrast

At some point, we become aware of the enormous emotion and beautiful texture that *dynamics* can add to our playing. When we're young, we tend to think of this as "loud", "medium" or "soft". If you're playing popular dance music, then you also tend to think of dynamics in terms of long phrases. For example, you might play the first 32 bars at one level, and then play louder on the chorus. I'd break down the term "dynamics" into two primary areas. One is the actual *volume* of a part, (amplitude) and the other one, which could be called 'texture', is actually a dynamic "illusion"... meaning that the actual amplitude might not change, but the texture of the notes makes it seem as though it changes. (A simple drumming example would be switching the "ride rhythm" from a closed hi-hat to a ride cymbal.) You can create a similar texture illusion by simply varying the number of notes you play in any pattern, or by varying the frequency range in which you're playing.

In the context of a jazz trio improvising, these changes are more instantaneous, from one moment to the next, and will vary from one night to the next. So, for this conversation, I'll mostly disregard dance bands (of any genre) because that is more pattern-oriented, and orchestral works, where the music is preconceived. and not so improvisational. The dynamics are just as important in those settings, but they're fixed on paper. (or the recording)

### Music can be like a conversation.

Making the example of a jazz trio, yes... Music can be thought of as a conversation of sorts. You have three people traveling together across the roadmap of a tune, but each one is inserting their subjective observations, as well as reacting to the other member's observations. It's intimate, and it's interactive, and tomorrow night, it will probably be different. When it's "right", it's really beautiful.

### But there are many kinds of conversations...

There are intimate conversations between friends, and there are screaming gangs of fans at big events. (and everything in between) Is it any surprise then, that someone who grows up in a big, noisy, intense city, like New York, might prefer the kind of "conversation" that is a jazz big band, or a rock band, a big vocal choir, or an orchestra. More "information per second" delivered to your ears, but just as valid, and just as satisfying, depending on your mood.

The individuals are still doing essentially the same things as in a trio, but they're also playing specific written parts, and each of those parts (unlike a small trio) might be a rather powerful group of players. We think of these in "layers", where 5 saxes can play one thing, several trombones can play another, and the trumpet section can play something else, with the rhythm section supporting the whole thing. And obviously, all of these parts can be at different dynamic levels. It's certainly not the only way to write for a big band, but you get the idea.

So, getting back to the more interactive types of playing, such as a trio or quartet, it really is true that music can be like a conversation. And in my opinion, those variations in dynamics, texture, and contrast should all be considered on a moment-by-moment basis. If you think about the many variations in your voice when you speak, and can relate that to your other art, then you're being more expressive. If you think of it like that, then you might also consider whether you "agree" or "disagree" during these conversations. Generally, the best etiquette calls for us to adopt the personality of the leader, and save our personal musical opinions for our own acts.

### To play or not to play...

We sometimes describe a certain aspect of musicality as "Space... The final frontier". The contrast you can achieve by simply *not* playing is remarkable, and often is more dramatic than a blazing high speed fill of some kind...especially true if it occurs when you least expect it. A huge "wall of silence" overwhelms the audience... and you achieved it by simply sitting still. If you trust your fellow players, then no one should have to "keep a beat" during these spaces.

As a drummer who often plays in trios and quartets, the concept of "space" is hugely important. We sometimes play in situations where the volume is more like "background music" than a concert-like performance. You can be insulted by that if you like, but a more mature approach is to simply consider it another musical challenge, and work on ways to keep the energy up, regardless of the actual volume. Those people in the front row will appreciate your efforts, and those in the back row... should've gotten a better seat! Always play your best, regardless.

First, how "busy" your playing is has a great bearing on the perceived dynamics. If you're constantly playing a lot of notes, it will probably be perceived as "louder". This keys in with the second thing... the "white noise" factor. Aside from the actual notes you play, cymbals add "white noise". This *seems* louder, so use it as such. Press rolls, and the "swish" sound you produce with brushes are another equivalent. These tools are also what we use to simulate sustained notes on an instrument that generally only produces short tones. Try playing a swing rhythm on the snare drum with brushes, *without* the 'swish' sound, for contrast.

### **Getting in the way...**

Consider the *frequency range* of your playing. In other words, if you play your toms a lot during a (tenor) vocal, it will probably interfere, because you're in the vocalist's frequency range. As another example... If you are constantly playing complex figures on your bass drum, you will probably irritate the bassist. It's known by good listeners, including musicians and sound engineers, that each person, even in a loud band, can all be heard with remarkable clarity, if each person plays mostly in a separate frequency range. On the other hand, when everybody is "competing" in the same frequency range, (i.e., dueling guitarists and keyboardists) then no one gets heard clearly. Knowing this simple fact will let you adjust your playing on a moment-by-moment basis, so that you are heard without necessarily having to play louder. The highest quality bands play this way, either by their intention, or by instinct.

### **Rhythmic Contrast**

There are some valid general rules you can use, that are often found in composition and arranging books. For example, "A slow-moving melody with a lot of sustained notes calls for a faster-moving supporting rhythm", and the opposite, "A fast-moving, rhythmically-busy melody can tolerate a less-busy supporting rhythm." So, when the pianist in your trio launches into a blazing fast riff, don't necessarily jump on that and play busy... Do the opposite. Play simpler, support them, and wait for an appropriate space for your busier parts.

Here's an example I give my students:

I'll play a steady "beat" on a rubber pad, and ask, "What rhythm is that?" It's a bit of a trick question, because without an identifying pulse behind it, there's no way to tell if I'm playing quarter notes, triplets, or anything else. *That's the point!* You, as a drummer, must figure out how to identify the pulse and the dynamics of the music, while contributing something positive to the overall effect. Although it can be considered "hip" to momentarily make the audience wonder "where one is", it's not something you want to do all the time, because if the audience can't "groove" to it in one way or another, they will walk out the door.

### **The Smooth or Bumpy Road...**

A female jazz pianist/vocalist friend of mine, whose trio I play with often, describes what she wants the feel of a tune to be as "smooth" or "bumpy". It's entirely valid, albeit a bit subjective. What she generally means is that "smooth" is the pattern-oriented "groove" approach, where the bass and drums are mostly supportive, and not too interactive.

"Bumpy" is more obvious in a trio... Why? In a big jazz band, for example, any one section of the band can be quite powerful... larger than an entire trio. So, there are times when they can carry the pulse of the tune, while others provide the "bumps", without being powerful enough to disturb the groove. As individual players, we have to be sensitive to that, and adapt our playing in all these situations. It's not complex, but it deserves some thought. What is a perfectly good approach for one kind of music may be totally inappropriate for another. So... Listen, and think! Everyone you play with will appreciate that.