

# EXPRESSIVE GUITAR PLAYING

## Tapping Your Student's Inner Artist, *Part 8*

By Daniel Roest

*Can your students produce good tone? When it comes to expression, tone is primary. In this issue we'll explore how to produce and teach tone and its elements.*

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), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/sep08/teaching.asp>] September (balance), [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/oct08/teaching.asp>] October (rubato) and [<http://www.guitarsessions.com/nov08/teaching.asp>] November (pitch effects) will catch you up.

## Your Signature Sound

Tone is everything. That's only a slight exaggeration. It is **so** important – it's the sound heard by the audience, your voice, your *signature sound*. It identifies you, as much as anything else you do on stage. If you are like me, you have worked for the sound that best expresses you – your feelings – your heart – your soul. In the classical guitar world, the Holy Grail is superb technique on a great concert instrument. Here's how eminent luthier Greg Byers, mentioned last month, describes the tone he searches for:

"Here is what I work toward: a big sound, very even and sustaining, of great clarity and depth, yet warm and dark. I look for a quick lively response, fundamental support for every note, and the ability to easily shape the sound, both with vibrato and color. It should also have a shimmering brilliance when called upon, that carries to the back of the hall. I want the sound to come out effortlessly, but there should be enough headroom to really push the dynamic range."

The phenomenally versatile guitarist Michael Chapdelaine (check YouTube if you're unfamiliar) said about tone:

"I think that possessing beautiful tone is most of what it takes to play great. ...Hearing a lovely sound is much of what is appealing about music. If you play a simple melody with beautiful tone you will touch the soul of more people than if you play Paganini's 24th Caprice with bad tone."

## Attack – the Birth of Tone

We classical players attempt against all odds, with our thin little fingernails and fingertips, to get a fat, pure tone that projects to the back of the hall and brings out the best of our concert instruments. After decades of right hand technique refinement, most classical guitarists have settled on an oblique attack, as opposed to perpendicular, for our main sound.

If you want a clear demonstration of this effect with a pick, angle it to hit off one side of the pick and listen for the fullness of tone. Now lay it flat on the string and pick perpendicularly to the string, forcing the string to come off both sides. The tone is brighter and thinner. Both angles have their uses, but for classical and pick style, the default technique for a fat, full tone is diagonal instead of perpendicular. You may have demonstrated how to hold a pick in a lesson, but if you haven't mentioned the tone options, it would make sense to demonstrate them.

## The Wiggle Question

**Vibrato** is such a part of an artist's sound and such a handy item in the "expression tool kit." Thinking of it like the controls on your amp, show your students the two main parameters of vibrato – speed and depth. The more weight on the string, the more force is available. Be sure to explain that the warming effect maintains the same average pitch when the vibrato is applied parallel to the string, and the pitch averages sharp when it is wiggled at right angles to the string. Also help them register the fact that when they're using vibrato, they're saying something, and when they're *not* using it, they're saying something also. An unwavering held note has its place, as does the warmest sustained vibrato.

## To Sustain or Not to Sustain

It is important to explain about **legato** with respect to tone, because a singing, lyrical line is not only often more beautiful, but what the notes indicate. When you see a half note in Common Time, you hold the note for two beats, a whole note for four, etc., right? That also applies to quarters and eighths and everything else unless staccato or another effect is indicated. So make sure that everything is done to hold the note, uninterrupted by either hand (touching the vibrating string, lifting the fretting finger prematurely). A routine topic in my studio is *not lifting a finger unless necessary* - we could call it "the lazy method" – to not only avoid extra moves but also sustain tones.

## Guitar Heroes with Killer Tone

In classical guitar style, tonal range is a great part of the expressive technique. From very bright, by the bridge to (*ponticello*) very dark, over the neck (*sul tasto*), a classical guitarist's right hand roams, searching for the *exact right sound*. To accentuate the brighter, thinner end of the tonal spectrum and diminish the lower, a perpendicular attack is used close to the bridge. To accentuate the lower, fatter end, the fingertip flesh and nail combination is angled *just so*, close to the neck.

Nails and fingertips are highly individual. Segovia's large hand and fingertips gave his great concert guitars a sound other tried and failed to match. Julian Bream incorporated more tonal variety than Segovia and provided a model for younger players. Christopher Parkening, a Segovia protégé, used innovative right hand techniques on pieces such as Ravel's *Empress of the Pagodes*. The score describes the empress disrobing and entering her bath, where she is soon serenaded by pagodes (small creatures from fairyland.) When Kazuhito Yamashita arranged and performed Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* for guitar in 1981, complete with snapping strings, fanning and fluttering effects and extremes of bright, dark, loud and soft, classical guitarists around the globe were astounded. Watch his YouTube clip for a *tour de force* of tonal expression.

Jazz guitarists have a number of role models for tone – jazz icons like Freddie Green, Eddie Lang, Les Paul, Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, Herb Ellis, Jim Hall, Wes

Montgomery, Charlie Byrd, Kenny Burrell, Joe Pass, Larry Coryell, John McLaughlin, George Benson, Pat Metheny, Tuck Andress and Martin Taylor. A treasury of photos and biographies along with a history of the instrument and its artists can be found in the coffee table book, *Masters of Jazz Guitar*, Miller Freeman Books.

Flamenco guitarists have to be heard by dancers above the hammering heelwork (*taconeo*) on wood floors, castanets, handclaps (*palmas*) and fingersnaps (*pitos*), singing (*cante*) and shouts of encouragement (*jaleos*). Therefore, the flamenco guitar's construction - range and attack are all designed to cut through. Check videos of Sabicas, Juan Serrano, Juan Martín, Paco Peña, Paco de Lucia and Vicente Amigo for examples.

The acoustic fingerstyle guitarists I've met and presented in concert – Laurence Juber, Peppino D'Agostino, Muriel Anderson, Franco Morone, Michael Chapdelaine, Richard Gilewitz, Chris Proctor, Mark Hanson, Bill Coulter and others – have favored a warm and balanced tone with a wide dynamic range and a huge register with a deep lower and shimmering harmonics.

The huge range of tonal effects made available though signal processing has made solid body electric guitar as expressive as any instrument, and books have been written on it. Whatever your style, your students are looking to you for help in making tones they've heard others make, or you've made. Who are the guitarists you most admire – your guitar heroes? Can you reproduce their sound? We always try to get the tone that inspired us!

## Show Your Secrets for Awesome Tone

Anything you can say or do to enable your students to be more expressive with tone is like gold for them. My primary impression of one of my main teachers is of him focusing on my tone and helping me improve it. It is information that not only lasts a lifetime, but infuses every note I play. Your students, like you, have music in their hearts and a passion that wants expression. It's a very personal thing, and perhaps that explains in part what drives us to work so hard for it. Here are some quotes about the personal nature of this most important aspect of musical expression, tone:

*"It's no good unless I make myself cry when I play."*

Carlos Santana

*"I've practiced on my tone for almost... fifty years, and if I can't hear my tone, I can't play... I'll just walk into the ocean and die, if I lose my tone."*

Miles Davis

*"My own thing is in my head. I hear sounds, and if I don't get them together nobody else will."*

Jimi Hendrix

All artists are on this same quest – to express their inner world. The French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) who famously painted Tahitian scenes, once said, *"I shut my eyes in order to see."*

As we have gone outside of music before for analogies on expressive controls, the word "tone" is used in so many other realms – writing, speech, painting, color theory, physical fitness, psychology, the mood or vibe in a city, etc. You can use those as imagery and analogy when teaching. "Make it sound more sassy," "mellower here," "more excited and energetic here," "more lyrical and romantic, okay?" and so on.

## Help Them Find Their Signature Sound

We must remember that we are not after clones of ourselves in the teaching studio. We can only be examples of musicians who have sought and found sounds that express our musical feelings, and coach them in doing the same. This is what will be most valuable to students.

*“Every guitarist has a special quality of sound. The best ones will use a good ear, much sensitivity, and a thorough knowledge of music to prepare the nuances and colors of sound.”*

Andres Segovia

We are learning in this series about the many parameters of musical expression: Tempo, Dynamics, Rhythm, Tone, Legato, Vibrato, Rubato, Register, Harmony, Rests, Attack, Phrasing, Balance, Silence, Stage Presence and Heart. This month, inspire your students with examples of great tone and stories of what sounds thrilled you in the past. My next column in this series will cover phrasing – the storytelling of our expression machine, the guitar.

Copyright © 2008 Daniel Roest  
[www.danielguitar.com](http://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 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 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]