

Where Do I Put The Darn Dynamics?

By Douglas Niedt

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I don't know—maybe I'm odd, but I love getting mail. Any kind of mail. US mail, email, interdepartmental mail at the University of Missouri where I teach. It doesn't matter. So I was particularly pleased to receive an email from E.T. (please no jokes about my readership) concerning January's article about the exaggeration of dynamics.

E.T. writes, "I enjoyed the most recent tip—"Exaggerate". The sound samples were especially helpful. Now for the PITA question. Do you have any guidelines how and where to add exaggeration, or your favorite book on musical interpretation?"

Before I answer the question and use the answer as this month's technique tip, I have to admit I am rather clueless in the lexicon of email-dom and had to google the meaning of PITA. For those individuals like me, here is a transparent hint: "Pain in..."

One of my favorite music pedagogy books of all time is called *The Pianist's Problems* by William S. Newman (available as I write this January 2006 on amazon.com for \$1.82 used!) Although some of the book only applies to pianists, MOST of it applies to any musician. The chapter on Performance addresses dynamics. But there are fabulous chapters on sight-reading, how to practice, and how to learn a piece.

His discussion of a phrase is a good example of the succinctness and utility of the book as a whole:

"By its very definition, a phrase implies a rise and fall—that is, a beginning, a climatic point, and an ending. Just as a sentence may have one of more subordinate clauses, so a phrase may have one or more lesser climaxes. However, the first problem of the student is to determine the main climatic point toward and away from which the whole phrase should move. The rise and fall of a melodic line is often given as a clue to the rise and fall of a phrase. A rising and falling line does ordinarily mean increased and decreased intensity when it is

taken by a voice, or a wind or string instrument, any of which is most penetrating and brilliant in its highest ranges."

This brings me to a simple suggestion that makes it quite easy to determine the "correct" way to use dynamics to shape a phrase. SING IT! It doesn't matter if you can't carry a tune or have a terrible voice. Hide somewhere where no one can hear you, or take a walk in an isolated area and sing your music. Most of the time, if you get into it emotionally, the way you sing a phrase is the way you should play it on the guitar. Feel in your chest and throat which notes you want to sing louder or more fully or intensely. Or which ones you want to sing quietly or delicately, or linger on. Play them on the guitar the same way.

C.P.E. Bach, the second surviving son of J.S. Bach, in his classic book, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (\$16.00 at abebooks.com) advises one to "lose no opportunity to hear artistic singing. In so doing, the keyboardist will learn to think in terms of song. Indeed, it is good practice to sing instrumental melodies in order to reach an understanding of their correct performance. This way of learning is of far greater value than the reading of voluminous tomes or listening to learned discourses..." His chapter on Performance is excellent and applicable to any music of any time, not just the Baroque and Rococo periods. Also, may I interject that you can listen to almost any type of good singer to learn to shape a phrase. It doesn't have to be an opera singer. Listen to anyone who moves you emotionally, and use them as a model.

Back to Newman on a more analytical plane:

"In a phrase that contains some unusual feature, that feature becomes the climatic point. The feature may be an unusually expressive harmony, remote foreign tone, sharp dissonance, long tone, high tone, or low tone. Or it may be an unexpected dynamic marking, provided that the marking occurs in a way that permits adequate emphasis (for example, which lasts long enough)...Otherwise, the climatic point of the phrase normally occurs on the last strong beat before the final note. The strong beat, in this sense, is usually the first beat of the measure; though in slow music in even meter it may be the middle of a measure..."

I would recommend you use both the analytical approach in books such as *The Pianist's Problems* and the listening and singing approach mentioned by Bach. But the most important thing in performing music of any kind—to give it shape, to give it life, and convey emotion—is TO DO **SOMETHING**! Don't be afraid to make choices. Choose to play measure 28 quietly, choose to crescendo to measure 18, choose to decrescendo into the return of the theme. Someone may criticize your shaping of a phrase or your choice to play something loud that they would play soft, but at least your music will have a voice and an identity and not be a lifeless succession of notes.

"Music isn't just learning notes and playing them. You learn notes to play to the music of your soul."
(Katie Greenwood)