

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Session 4

I've Got Rhythm

Learn how to brush up your rhythm

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Why read yet another page about Ensembles?

Count me in...

I believe that rhythm, more than anything, is the biggest hurdle to overcome with Guitar.

Left and right hand problems, tone and phrasing - all these will yield to diligent practice. But rhythm?

I've left it this far into the Website, because I think it's only right to accentuate the positive things, show you some music, show you how to work with it. But rhythm is often a problem for many players.

It's going to be difficult to find something to say which will help, which is at the right level for you, peering at this right now. But let's give it a go. Rhythm is a very practical thing, and I think it's important in Ensemble Guitar that you don't wait until your get-togethers to realise that something is, yet again, amiss rhythmically. I say yet again, because it is all too easy to practise at home, in isolation, in a slightly misdirected way - it's easy for each player to address the mechanical and interpretational side of Ensemble music at home, but less so to practise the listening and rhythm skills which make the Ensemble come together properly.

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I've Got Rhythm

But have you?

Rhythm is so elusive. Natural Rhythm is more so.

Even spelling the word rhythm defeats a lot of people. Indeed, it's a joke in our house that my elder son, who is at University, getting ready to pursue a career in music (though quite how endless parties constitutes career preparation is eluding me at the moment), actually owns a sweat shirt with "Natural Rhythm" emblazoned across the front. With rhythm spelled wrongly.

But can I even define Natural Rhythm elegantly? I suspect not. Here are some ideas, though....

Natural rhythm is when

- The music doesn't sound mechanical.
- The listener can tap their foot because they are aware of "the beat"
- The music breathes during each phrase
- Complicated and fast passages fit effortlessly into the space left for them.

None of these is an ideal definition, but many years of experience in teaching have convinced me that getting the rhythm "natural" is even harder than getting the rhythm "right", and that getting it right is pretty difficult!

So let's have one more set of definitions of natural rhythm.

- It's what turns a study into a piece of music.
- It's being effortless with the rhythm.
- It's being accurate and yet liberal.
- It's being constrained and yet free.

And, (which is why I discuss it here), rhythm within Ensemble Guitar may be the thing which turns an Ensemble piece into a performance. Or a dog's breakfast.

Let's see how to stack up the odds in our favour a bit!

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Beats me

"Beats in the bar? Beats me!" - a common cry from the novice. Well, the UK novice anyway....
"Counts in the measure? Defeats me!" doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

And from the Teacher's point of view, teaching rhythm is the most difficult part of equipping a pupil with all the skills a Guitarist needs.

Other things can be written down in plain English and taken home, to back up the notation.

Put your left finger on fret 3, string 2 and leave it there for two beats....

Play this with the ring finger....

Don't dribble when you play....

Not so easy to explain how to count a one and a half beat note, because if you know what the notation means and you can't do it, then there's not much extra written help that can be given. Apart from writing in capitals... ONE AND A HALF BEATS
Which isn't terribly professional and not at all helpful.

Us teachers have a whole set of tricks up our sleeve, of course.

- Plan A - Illustration of the same rhythm from a song you know.
- Plan B - Alliterative phrases where you bite your tongue while trying to speak a little rhyme.
- Plan C - A sound beating over the head with a folded footstool till you remember the rhythm

But what about when you get home?

I won't dwell on elementary rhythm, except to say that when you play Solo Guitar, it is quite possible to get the rhythm wrong and not know. When you play Ensemble Guitar, it *will* notice. You see, playing a whole chord earlier or later in a Solo phrase may not really be too disastrous. Making *half* a chord late in a trio might not be so pleasant on the ear, because its other notes, from the other players, won't align.

Rhythmic difficulties in Ensemble playing often exhibit themselves as a lack of clarity, rather than as a genuinely obvious mistake, because the harmonic content of a particular phrase gets destroyed if the constituent parts don't come together with the right notes at the right time, but still the piece seems to be "all there". Which is why I think we need to mention the special areas of rhythm which Ensemble players need to be at ease with.

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Hints and tips

One important fact

There's an important fact that many people never stop to absorb.

In any "classical" music - by which I mean one with a regular time signature and a conventional structure - the number of notes in a bar can vary dramatically. But the length of time between bar lines is always fixed. This is a very, very important fact which comes into its own in Ensemble work. The bar lines come at regular intervals. By learning to read ahead one can train your brain to do two things for you which will solve many of the problems you have with rhythm.

- You can store up to a bar's worth of notes in your head, ready to play at the right time
- You can know when the bar line is due.

This won't solve the problems of how to read the rhythm within each bar (there's a couple of tips on that in a moment), but it will do one thing. It will stop any rhythmic mistake from extending into subsequent bars. Because if you know when the bar line is due, you have a synchronisation point for each of you so that the next bar begins right on schedule.

It's a trivial point, but it is key.

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Tricks of the trade

So how do we get that extra confidence, that extra accuracy, that extra precision to our rhythm?

How, in an Ensemble, do we get to be the one who hits his colleague over the head with the folded footstool, rather than be the one who experiences three beats (in both senses of the word) to the measure?

Joking apart, then, some proven ideas which I'm happy to share. Nothing earth-shattering, nothing difficult, but the more tricks of the trade you have, the easier the solution becomes.

- Listen to the experts
If your chosen piece has been recorded by another musician, use this as your initial starting point. Don't ever regard the recorded interpretation as the only possible one - keep the musical issues (phrasing and dynamics) separate from the technical ones (fingering and counting).
- Listen to the teacher
If you are learning with a teacher, be sure to enlist their help. Just as a good teacher will prepare each lesson, so you should go to the teacher with your problem areas already listed, ready to ask questions.
- Listen to each other
If one of you can manage a tricky passage that defeats the other players, listen. It is often easier to imitate than to read, and there is nothing wrong with learning rhythm by ear, as opposed to learning by eye. After all, the audience is going to *hear* the rhythm not see it!
- Read ahead
If one can read a whole bar ahead and focus on the bar-line and know when it should arise, then any rhythm problems you may have never get the chance to extend into subsequent bars and upset the Ensemble.
- Read up and down
If you have Full Score, you might find that significant notes in the other parts can help you chart your own progress by acting as milestones.
If you have individual parts, don't be frightened to add cue notes from the other parts onto your music if they can help you keep in synchronisation with the other players.
- Double length notes
Invariably, the most tricky part of a piece is in the quick notes, since long notes can always be counted syllabically. If there are a few bars of, say, semiquavers (sixteenth notes) mixed with longer notes, then one trick is to rewrite those bars by doubling the length of each note, so that the passage is legible and countable.
- Use your computer
You've got a computer - I can tell, if you're reading this! With some simple sequencing software, it is possible to have the computer play out the awkward passages at any speed you like.
- Use a tape recorder
A tape recorder is also useful for helping diagnose the problems which arise when everyone can play their rhythm alone, but that the piece as a whole comes apart when everyone plays together.
- Practise with a tape recorder
Something I've only found marginally helpful, but may interest you, is in playing your practice at home along with a taped version of the complete Ensemble. It's inappropriate for "romantic" music, because it is highly regimented. But it can work well with Bach-like pieces, and those for which entry points are difficult to do. Counting rests for an entry point is, of course, not so dissimilar to counting notes.
- Use a metronome
I'm not a great fan of metronomes, because I've heard pupils gain or lose a beat and not know. The more expensive metronomes often have a bell on the first beat of the bar, but often, the best metronome of all is to count out loud the beat numbers and record them on tape, with a gentle "push" each time you say the syllable ONE... Then play the tape back.

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Cautionary tales

I've just mentioned extra confidence, but confidence alone is never a good weapon in the armoury of Guitar technique. Here are some bullet points (pardon the military connection there!) which I think you need to be aware of when brushing up your rhythm.

- Slow may not be sure
Be aware that slowing a piece down can sometimes upset the rhythmic feel of the piece.

I often demonstrate to my pupils that

- Many Classical pieces (for example the anonymous Romance which every Tom, Dick and Harry plays the easy part of, in Music shops) have a simple rhythm which can be slowed down and down, without changing the character of the piece, only the speed.
- Other pieces - ragtime is a fine example - lose their feel completely as the speed drops.
- Sometimes, then, playing a piece slowly might not help that much in resolving how it should "go".
- Flexibility is all
Remember that the parts within an Ensemble will become out of step for three reasons...
 - One player is early or late because of rhythm problems
 - The phrase is "breathing" but not all players are letting the phrase evolve at the same rate.
 - The phrase is accidentally gathering speed or running out of puff.

You must listen carefully to diagnose which of these is the true cause, and then each player must be flexible in changing their own rhythm by the right amount and in the right way so that the piece gets back in step.

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Rhythm in action

Study Suggestions

There is, of course, no single suggested piece or book or music which can practise you in all the aspects of rhythm that I've mentioned.

The sheer practicality which says that every Ensemble plays at a different level of expertise mean that there can be no simple study plan.

And neither is there a study plan which can offer a consistent way to improve when half the Ensemble practice is done at home, on a single part, and half is done at the get-together, in consort.

I would like, however, to mention my [Diff'rent Dances](#), because these were specifically written with the problems of rhythm in mind. Based on Dance Rhythms of the world, these pieces form a varied and contrasting set of short pieces which enable you to taste and experience different styles of music while still keeping in the framework of Classical Technique. Played singly or in any sequence you choose, these pieces don't only show you rhythm, but being short and accessible, they positively encourage you to perfect your playing "to time".

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A Real Example

I've dipped your toe and mine into the vast ocean of rhythm problems. But I began with natural rhythm as the focus for this section, and I'd like to end in the same way with an example of a piece for which natural rhythm is easy to see and to appreciate.

You see, what turns [Broadmarsh Blues](#) from a mechanical and soul-less trio into a driving and gutsy performance is in knowing not only the rhythm, but how to play it with a shuffle or groove feel. And any sort of swing rhythm is one in which the players' interpretation of the score is deliberately at odds with the shorthand "square rhythm" way in which the score is notated. Playing this piece positively encourages the development of a natural, unregimented rhythm in which the top two parts are syncopated and dovetail in and around the bass line.



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