

Dynamic Range

It's just a posh phrase for difference between the softest and loudest sounds. Different volumes are indicated by the well-known symbols *ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *fff*

How big are the differences?

Now that's the tricky bit! A symphony orchestra has a massive dynamic range because one flute is a lot quieter than 100 brass, string and woodwind players all going flat out. But a single guitar has a limited range - capped at the top by the sound of strings slapping against the fingerboard, and at the bottom by sheer inaudibility.

Certainly, a guitar ensemble or guitar orchestra has the ability to extend the range by varying the number of players, but the key to it all is still to maximise the dynamic range of each guitar.

But didn't you just say....

So we need to maximise the dynamic range of each guitar. But didn't we just say that it is fixed?

Once we accept that the guitar really has a workable range from *pp* to *ff*, we have agreed that we should be able to play at 6 different volumes.

And that's what this article is about - maximising the dynamic range *of the player!*

Why this article?

There are two skills to acquire in gaining a full dynamic range

- Being able to play at six noticeably different volumes
- Bringing those volumes to bear in performance

Playing at six different volumes

Make no mistake, playing *mf* is effortless, but playing at the ends of the dynamic range are not.

- Playing quietly requires great control and nails free from snags and catches.
- Playing loudly is physically hard work and if anything is out of kilter with the left hand, will be peppered with buzzes.

A guitar will speak more loudly and with a more rounded and pleasing tone if the string is pushed towards the front of the guitar as it is plucked. Any slapping of the first and most intense excursion of the string is also minimised.

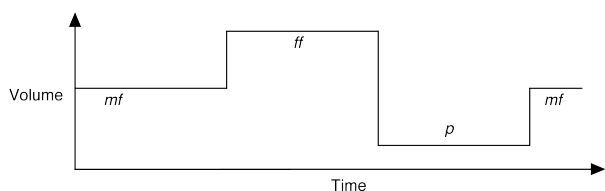
A well-known way to improve the production of loud notes is to weave a tissue between the strings at the bridge and play loudly in comparative silence.

Dynamics in performance

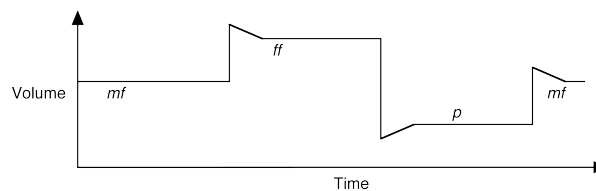
We all know the "rabbit in the headlights" feeling a performance can bring and it's no surprise that the body's response to all this is to put the right hand back in the middle of its comfort zone, and to watch the notes on the page but not the performance markings.

Marking volume changes **in red** is a good start to unpicking this response - they won't get missed.

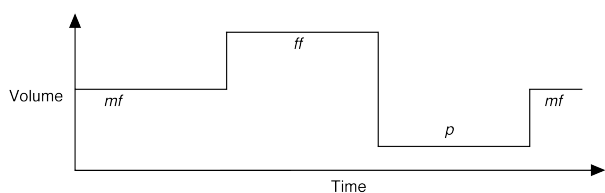
Another well-known trick is to over-emphasise volume changes and then having placed in the audience's mind the new volume, gradually back off from the limits of your range a little. You're back nearer your comfort zone (and no-one knows except us...)



What the music requires



What you play



What the audience is convinced they hear!