

READING AND THE GUITAR

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WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES US GUITARISTS TREMBLE IN OUR BOOTS WHEN IT COMES TO SIGHT-READING? HAVING DONE CLINICS, LED ENSEMBLES, AND GIVEN COUNTLESS FINALS AND AUDITIONS THE WORLD OVER, I'VE HEARD EVERY EXCUSE IN THE BOOK FOR POOR READING ABILITY, FROM "MY READING'S TERRIBLE!" TO "DUDE, MY READING SUCKS!" I'VE HEARD THEM ALL. GUITAR PLAYERS ARE LEGENDARY FOR BEING BAD SIGHT-READERS. SO WHY DOES A GUITARIST HAVE SO MUCH MORE TROUBLE READING THAN OTHER INSTRUMENTALISTS? THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS. FIRST OFF, MOST GUITARISTS DON'T START PLAYING UNTIL THEIR TEEN YEARS. MOST STRING, BRASS AND WOODWIND PLAYERS BEGIN THEIR INSTRUMENTAL LESSONS DURING ELEMENTRY SCHOOL, AND THE LESSONS ARE USUALLY READING-ORIENTED. THEY HAVE TO BE BECAUSE THE SCHOOLS NEED THESE KIDS TO PARTICIPATE IN ENSEMBLES LIKE CONCERT BAND, WIND ENSEMBLE, ORCHESTRA, ETC. THESE ENSEMBLES ARE PLAYING WRITTEN MUSIC, SO TO PARTICIPATE YOU HAVE TO READ. RIGHT THERE, STUDENTS WHO HAVE "LEARNED" THEIR AXE VIA READING HAVE SEVERAL YEARS OF READING ON THEIR INSTRUMENT AND PLAYING IN READING SITUATIONS UNDER THEIR BELTS BY THE TIME THEY'RE TEENAGERS.

ANOTHER ISSUE WITH GUITARISTS AND SIGHT-READING IS THAT MANY OF US LEARN BY COPYING RECORDINGS OF OUR FAVORITE PLAYERS. PERSONALLY, I CONSIDER THIS TO BE AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF ANY GUITARISTS MUSICAL TRAINING. THERE ARE THOSE WHO FROWN UPON TRANSCRIBING AS LEADING TO A LOSS OF ORIGINALITY AND NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO "ONE'S INNER VOICE", ETC. BUT THE FACT IS THAT PLAYING ALONG WITH TRANSCRIPTIONS FORCES US TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT FINGERING AND CONNECTIVITY, IMPORTANT FORMATIVE CONCEPTS FOR GUITARISTS. THERE'S ALSO A WEALTH OF NUANCE ONE GAINS FROM PLAYING ALONG WITH RECORDINGS, NOT TO MENTION THE DEVELOPMENT OF "TOUCH". BUT WHAT DOES THIS ISSUE HAVE TO DO WITH SIGHT-READING, ANYWAY? THE ANSWER IS THAT MOST OF US WHILE LEARNING A PIECE FROM A RECORDING WILL NOT NOTATE IT IN TRADITIONAL MANUSCRIPT. THIS IS GREAT FOR THE EAR, BUT BAD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DEVELOPING READING SKILLS. FURTHERMORE, MANY WILL TRY TO DOCUMENT THE TRANSCRIPTION IN "TAB", WHICH IS GOOD FOR US GUITARISTS, BUT UNDECIPHERABLE TO OTHER MUSICIANS WHO DON'T PLAY GUITAR. SO AS USEFUL AS TAB IS, IT ALSO ISOLATES US FROM OTHER INSTRUMENTALISTS WHO USE TRADITIONAL NOTATION AS A MEANS OF CONVEYING MUSICAL IDEAS. SO ONCE AGAIN, WE'RE PUTTING OFF THE ISSUE OF LEARNING TO READ.

AND FINALLY, ANOTHER REASONS WHY GUITARISTS OFTEN DON'T READ WELL, THERE IS ISSUE OF NOTE DUPLICATION. THE GUITAR WITH ITS SIX STRINGS AND TUNING IN FOURTHS HAS MANY DUPLICATED NOTES ALL OVER THE FINGERBOARD. MANY INSTRUMENTS SUCH AS THE PIANO HAVE ONLY ONE LOCATION FOR A PARTICULAR NOTE, SAY MIDDLE "C". THAT MIDDLE "C" MIGHT BE PLAYED WITH ANY FINGER IN THE COURSE OF A PIECE, BUT WILL ALWAYS REMAIN ON THAT ONE LOCATION ON THE KEYBOARD. HORN PLAYERS HAVE VALVE OR KEY FINGERINGS THAT CORRESPOND TO A NOTE. OUTSIDE OF THE OCCASIONAL "FALSE FINGERING" OR "EXTENDED TECHNIQUE", THEY PRETTY MUCH HIT A NOTE WITH THAT PARTICULAR VALVE/KEY FINGERING. NOT SO THE GUITAR! WE HAVE SO MANY OPTIONS AS FAR AS WHERE TO LOCATE/PLAY A NOTE THAT BY THE TIME WE'VE MADE UP OUR MINDS WHERE TO PLAY IT, THE BAND IS ON THE NEXT PIECE! THERE IS DEFINATELY A "LAG" TIME ASSOCIATED WITH THIS LOCATION ISSUE. WE'LL COME BACK TO THIS IN A WHILE. NOW THAT WE'VE IDENTIFIED SOME OF THE CAUSES OF GUITARISTS TENDING TO BE WEAK READERS, LET'S GO ON TO HOW TO IMPROVE OUR READING.

TO IMPROVE YOUR READING YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHY YOU'RE HAVING PROBLEMS READING.

TRY READING THIS :

THE BONGA

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CONDUCTING SCARES SOME PEOPLE, BUT I FIND THAT IT'S THE BEST WAY OF INSTILLING A STEADY SENSE OF METER WHILE PRACTICING RHYTHMS. THE RIGHT HAND (WHICH CONDUCTS THE BEAT PATTERNS) TAKES ON AN ALMOST "AUTO-PILOT" STATE AFTER SOME PRACTICE. WHEN YOU CAN CONDUCT AND SING RHYTHMS "AGAINST" THE BEAT PATTERN (WHILE KEEPING THINGS STEADY) ACCURATELY, THIS ASPECT OF "MUSICIANSHIP SKILLS" WILL TRANSFER TO YOUR GUITAR SIGHT-READING. THERE ARE SEVERAL GOOD BOOKS TO PRACTICE WITH THAT SPECIFICALLY TARGET RHYTHM STUDIES. ROBERT STAZER'S BOOK "RHYTHMIC TRAINING" IS AN EXCELLENT ONE TO START WITH. AND OF COURSE YOU CAN PRACTICE CONDUCTING AND SINGING RHYTHMS WITH ANY PIECE OF WRITTEN MUSIC, FROM JAZZ TUNES IN THE "REAL BOOK" TO EXCERPTS FROM A BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY. ONE WORD OF CAUTION: START WITH SIMPLE MATERIAL, MASTER IT, THEN GRADUALLY WORK ON HARDER PIECES.

WHEN YOU HAVE PRETTY GOOD CONTROL OF STEPS 1 AND 2, IT'S TIME TO START THINKING ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL AND FINGERING CONCEPTS ON THE GUITAR. TRADITIONALLY MOST GUITARISTS AND METHODS START AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FINGERBOARD WITH OPEN STRINGS AND THEN WORK GRADUALLY HIGHER ON THE NECK. IT MAKES SENSE TO LIMIT THE RANGE OF ACTIVITY—YOU CAN'T DO IT ALL AT ONCE. HOWEVER, THE EARLY METHODS THAT TAUGHT THE GUITAR BY READING THIS WAY TEND TO COMPROMISE THE QUALITY OF PHRASING, ESPECIALLY WITH JAZZ MUSIC. I'VE SEEN MANY STUDENTS TRYING TO READ A WES MONTGOMERY TRANSCRIPTION IN POSITION AND NOT GETTING VERY GOOD RESULTS. I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU AT THIS POINT TO LOOK OVER MY LESSON ON SCALES IN THIS SERIES ENTITLED "OF SCALES AND MOODS". WHILE THIS LESSON FOCUSES ON SCALES, SCALES CONTAIN MANY ARPEGGIO FINGERINGS AND CHORD GRIPS WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SCALE FINGERING. THE SCALES ARE PRESENTED IN ONE, TWO, AND THREE OCTAVE VERSIONS AS WELL AS DIFFERENT ORIENTATIONS LOCATIONALLY. THIS CAN HELP YOU START THINKING ABOUT THIS THIRD ASPECT OF READING: EXECUTION/LOCATION.

I LOOK AT THIS ASPECT AS BEING SIMILAR TO IMPROVISING. WHEN WE IMPROVISE, THOUGH THERE MAY BE MOMENTS OF PURE SPONTANEITY, MANY OF OUR IDEAS COME FROM CRAFTWORK. THESE ARE IDEAS THAT HAVE BEEN WORKED OUT AND PRACTICED ENOUGH TO BE "SPONTANEOUSLY REARRANGED" WITH OTHER IDEAS ON THE FLY, IN AN INTERACTIVE WAY. THE ASSOCIATION WITH READING IS THAT WHEN WE READ, WE'RE ANALYZING/LISTENING FOR CONTENT THAT SUGGESTS LOCATION. OF COURSE THIS CAN VARY WIDELY WITH THE SOPHISTICATION OF THE MUSICAL CONTENT THAT WE'RE READING. FOR INSTANCE:

THIS FRAGMENT OF A SIMPLE CHRISTMAS TUNE IS COMPRISED OF NOTES COMPLETELY DIATONIC TO C MAJOR. IT COULD BE PLAYED IN "OPEN" POSITION UTILIZING OPEN STRINGS, IN MANY MOVABLE POSITIONS RELATED TO C MAJOR SCALES, ALSO SIDE TO SIDE STARTING ON THE SIXTH, FIFTH, OR FOURTH STRINGS, OR EVEN COMPLETELY ON ONE STRING AT A TIME FROM THE SIXTH OR FIFTH STRINGS.



THIS IS ANOTHER FRAGMENT OF MY TUNE "THE BONGA" IT CONTAINS ELEMENTS OF PENTATONIC SCALES, AS WELL AS POLY-CHORDAL FRAGMENTS OF TRIADIC AND QUINTAL HARMONY. BECAUSE ITS REGISTER IS LIMITED TO NOTES MAINLY IN THE STAFF, IT IS PLAYABLE IN A FEW PLACES, BUT MY CHOICES FOR FINGERING WOULD BE DICTATED BY THE PENTA AND ARPEGGIO CONTENT. CAN YOU IDENTIFY THESE ELEMENTS?



YOU CAN SEE THAT SIMPLE OR DIFFICULT, THERE'S (USUALLY) ALWAYS MORE THAN ONE LOCATION TO PLAY THE MUSIC IN. CHOICES AS TO WHERE TO PLAY AN IDEA BECOME PART HABIT, STYLE, AND LISTENING TO WHAT THE MUSIC DICTATES. START BY ANALYZING THE MUSIC YOU'RE TRYING TO READ FOR CONTENT. SOME LINE PASSAGES WILL BE SCALAR AND SOME MADE OF ARPEGGIO CONTENT. THERE ARE ALSO PASSING NOTES THAT WILL BE CHROMATIC OR DELAYED RESOLUTIONS, ETC. TRY TO "SEE" THE BASIC CONTENT TO FIND A FINGERING FROM SOMETHING YOU KNOW, SUCH AS A SCALE FRAGMENT OR A MAJOR TRIAD ARPEGGIO FORM. LOOK AT THIS ETUDE AND TRY TO FIND FINGERINGS RELATED TO THE GIVEN HARMONIES. REMEMBER, THERE ISN'T JUST ONE WAY TO DO IT, EXPERIMENT!

READING ETUDE #1

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The musical score for "Reading Etude #1" consists of eight staves of music in treble clef. The chords indicated above the staves are: A7, C7, F7, Bb7, A7, C7, F7, and Bb7. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Some notes are marked with accents (^) or slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

YOU MAY NOTICE AT THIS POINT THAT ALL THE READING EXAMPLES HAVE BEEN CHALLENGING. THESE ARE NOT EASY. THE "BONGA" FRAGMENTS ARE "PRO" LEVEL, THE ETUDE WOULD BE COLLEGE LEVEL, SOMEWHERE AROUND FOURTH SEMESTER. ONLY THE LITTLE XMAS TUNE WOULD BE SIMPLE LEVEL. IF YOU GET A SENSE OF WHAT LEVEL YOU'RE AT, TRY TO FIND SIMILAR MATERIAL THAT IS CHALLENGING AND INTERESTING, BUT NOT SO DIFFICULT THAT YOU CAN'T GET THROUGH IT. YOU'RE MUCH BETTER OFF STARTING AT A LEVEL THAT YOU CAN PLAY MUSICALLY WITHOUT TOO MANY MISTAKES. THIS BUILDS CONFIDENCE, WHICH IS AN IMPORTANT INGREDIENT FOR DEVELOPING READING SKILLS.

OBVIOUSLY, WITH SO MANY GUITARISTS AT SO MANY VARYING DEGREES OF READING ABILITY, WRITING ETUDE AFTER ETUDE OF MATERIAL FOR THIS LITTLE TREATISE WOULD BE FOOLISH. AND THERE'S ALREADY TONS OF MATERIAL AVAILABLE TO USE TOO! BUT REGARDLESS OF YOUR LEVEL, YOU CAN STILL APPLY THE THREE AREAS OF FOCUS ALONG WITH A LITTLE COMMON SENSE AND REALLY IMPROVE YOUR READING. HERE ARE SOME RECAPS AND THOUGHTS ON HOW TO PROCEED.

- CHOOSE MATERIAL THAT IS APPROPRIATE TO YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF READING SKILL. THERE ARE MANY SOURCES TO PROCURE MATERIAL FROM. TRY SOME "CLASSICAL" EXCERPT BOOKS, OR BOOKS OF DUETS (PRACTICE WITH A FRIEND). THESE BOOKS COME IN AN ASSORTMENT OF LEVELS AND ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH MANY FAMOUS PUBLISHING HOUSES. THESE BOOKS MIGHT BE WRITTEN FOR FLUTE, CLARINET, ETC. BUT WORK FINE FOR GUITAR AS LONG AS YOU DON'T GET INTO TRANSPOSITION ISSUES WHEN PLAYING WITH NON-CONCERT INSTRUMENTS.

- BEFORE YOU ACTUALLY TRY THE PIECE, GO THROUGH THE THREE STEPS:

1. IDENTIFY THE NOTES BY "EYE" AND PRACTICE FOLLOWING THE NOTES IN TIME FROM SYSTEM TO SYSTEM.

2. PRACTICE THE RHYTHMS BY CONDUCTING AND SINGING JUST THE RHYTHMS THROUGH THE PIECE.

3. ANALYZE THE PIECE FOR CONTENT AND DETERMINE WHERE TO LOCATE/PLAY WHAT YOU FIND. LOOK FOR SCALE FRAGMENTS AND ARPEGGIO/CHORD SHAPES. UNDERSTAND THE FUNCTION OF NOTES LIKE CHROMATICS, ETC. AND HOW THEY RELATE TO THE PIECE'S OVERALL CONTENT. AT THIS POINT PROCEED TO TRY THE PIECE. USE A METRONOME TO MARK YOUR PROGRESS. START AT A SLOWER TEMPO, THEN INCREASE THE SPEED AS YOU GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE MUSIC. TRY SINGING ALONG WITH THE MUSIC TO INTERNALIZE IT. THERE'S A STRONG CONNECTION BETWEEN PITCH RECALL AND SINGING.

- DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN READING AND SIGHT-READING. SIGHT-READING IS A PIECE THAT YOU READ WITH NO PREPARATION, ON THE SPOT. TRY TO DO SOME OF THIS EVERY DAY. THE MATERIAL SHOULD BE SIMPLE AT FIRST, THEN INCREASING IN DIFFICULTY AS YOUR SKILLS IMPROVE. THIS WILL HELP YOU DETERMINE HOW QUICKLY YOU'RE IMPLEMENTING THE THREE FACTORS ABOVE. LOOK FOR PIECES WITH SOME LONG DURATION NOTES, SIMPLE RHYTHMS, AND EASY TO ANALYZE CONTENT. BEFORE YOU PLAY THIS FOUR BAR EXAMPLE TAKE TWENTY SECONDS TO SCAN FOR DETAIL. THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE "BASIC" KIND OF MATERIAL TO START WITH:



I'LL CONCLUDE WITH THE ENTIRE CHART OF MY TUNE "THE BONGA". THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF A PIECE THAT WOULD BE REALLY DIFFICULT TO READ "COLD". GO THROUGH THE SYSTEM, AND TRY IT IN SMALLER CHUNKS, SAY, FOUR BARS AT A TIME. USE A METRONOME TO KEEP YOURSELF HONEST. START SLOWLY THEN SPEED UP THE TEMPO. DOWNLOAD THE AUDIO FILE AND EVENTUALLY PLAY ALONG WITH THE RECORDING. YOU MIGHT CONSIDER USING ONE OF THE MANY TRANSCRIPTION SOFTWARES AVAILABLE TO SLOW DOWN THE RECORDING'S TEMPO WITHOUT CHANGING THE PITCH.

THE BONGA

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