

Chapter 2: “Quality of Motion”

Ahhh.....now we get to the heart of the matter: what makes music do what it does? In a word, *motion*. Our medium, as musicians, is time. Our beloved art form exists within the context of time, and time alone. Music portrays the passage of time and gives it a *quality of motion*.

Once you have your technique together, you must consider its application. Tonguing cleanly, developing high register, having a smooth and beautiful legato technique, playing in tune.....all great stuff and all necessary. Not being able to do all of this in the context of time and without a quality of motion, though, is pointless. The communicative powers of music transcend, yet demand, technique. We need to “portray the hunt”. (Say what!?)

One of the best descriptions of “music” I was ever given was from Robert Hamrick, former trombonist with the Pittsburgh Symphony and an extraordinary pedagogue. When I was a young player, he became very animated in a lesson and began to tell me about “the hunt”. In a nutshell, this is how he explained it to me:

All art, essentially, is an attempt to interpret, reflect, re-live, recreate, explain, and demonstrate the hunt. When hunters returned from their adventures, they wanted to share the experience and reflect upon it. They drew pictures on cave walls, they sang and beat drums, they danced. In all of these art forms, they demonstrated some characteristics of the hunt: the boredom, the terror, the feelings of conquest, the thankfulness, etc. Distilled to their most basic elements: tension and release. This is what music seeks to do.....exemplify the hunt by creating REAL moments, in time, of *tension and release*.

In doing so, music is injected with motion. Obviously, that motion is not physical. That is, we don’t “see” music moving. We feel it, though, in the context of time. I’m sure you can imagine right now musical events that excite, calm, scare, pacify, soothe, enrage.....all elements of the hunt; all elements of the basic human condition. The best music is of the kind that succeeds in engaging the imagination of the listener in this way. Through only the sense of hearing, we’re able to recreate experience. Music is more capable of this “re-living the hunt” than any other art form. I believe that has much to do with the aforementioned string theory: music is vibration, and vibration is the essence of the Universe. (Universe: “one song”).

As musicians, then, your job is to employ every imaginable technical device to re-create the hunt; to *make motion*. I once believed that to be a very elusive, almost instinctive or genetic trait. “You either got it or you don’t”. And since I didn’t think I “had it”, I wondered if I would ever make good music.....the kind that would connect to the listener. By doing a lot of thinking, listening, reading, discussing, and by generally paying attention....I discovered some valuable tools, concepts, and techniques that I’d like to share with you.

First of all, realize that simply by being alive on this planet, each of us has the capacity to make music with good quality of motion. For some, it may seem to come more naturally, but no matter. Nature is like that. You have all experienced rich moments of tension, coupled with delicious moments of release.

My goal here is to shed some light on techniques that might better enable you to channel those experiences into your music.

When we talk about “quality of motion” or music that “exists in time”, we are really thinking of more than correct rhythm. Notated rhythm is math. It’s a (flawed!) system of notation that can be fully and completely understood by non-musicians. If you have difficulty playing correct rhythms, you simply need to get back to basics and sit down with a remedial book and start from scratch: how are regular beat patterns subdivided in differing meters? My advice, other than to read and study the matter, is to open a very simple method book. Put your metronome on very slowly and play. Perfectly. Place the “ands” in the pocket and the strong beats on the money. (The more simple the music, the better.) Since the written notation is an attempt to illustrate motion, why not move while playing? March in place while playing simple rhythms. There is a kinesthetic connection that will develop over time. A real “body-sense” of rhythm emerges. Clap and sing. Dance while singing. Bang on the table. When you can begin to FEEL the rhythm in the body, you’re on your way. (This is only for the sake of practice. In performance, this can be distracting. Keep it to a minimum and try hard to channel that energy elsewhere). Gradually, increase the complexity of the music and still put every sub-division in its proper place. That’s just math. It is essential to making good music, but the quality of motion we seek is so much more.....

The ability to readily translate rhythmic notation is a skill every musician needs to master. It will make you a better sight-reader, and that will win you work. When I won the Navy Band audition, the final round consisted entirely of sight-reading. As it happens, that was indeed a required skill on the job. Now I realize that my sight-reading abilities are largely responsible for me being able to feed myself and support a family. Learn your rhythms and be a great sight-reader!

Here’s a concept I’ve developed to help put perspective on “time” and subdivided beats:

Consider the life of a cicada. Certain species of this most hideous creature (sorry, they’re gross!) live a full life of 24 hours. To the poor little bug, this is a nice, full life. Relatively speaking, it’s like us living to a ripe old age of 80 years or so. So, the cicada has a different perspective of time and its passing. They cram 80 years into 24 hours. So, one minute of cicada time is equivalent to roughly 3 weeks in human terms. Now, imagine you’re practicing under an oak tree whereupon a cicada sits above your head. You have a metronome going and it’s clicking 60 beats per minute, or 1 beat per second. That means the cicada hears a click about every 8 hours (are you following me?). Thus, if you’re attempting to play nice, even, steady eighth-notes at this tempo....the nasty little bug will expect to hear a note on the hour every 4 hours. NOT at 3 hours, 45 minutes. NOT at 4 hours, 2 minutes. How accurate do you think you are in cicada-time? Can you hear him yelling at you: “Hey! You’re 40 minutes early on that note, for Pete’s sake! Cut it out, your rhythm is awful!”. See, to you it might sound “in time”, but your perspective of time is not nearly as accurate as his. He can make

many, many more subdivisions to that beat than you can! In fact, the “click” of the metronome probably lasts about 2 minutes to his ear. (I think they have ears).

Perhaps that’s a crazy analogy, but it’s fun and it might serve to give you some perspective. When we divide a quarter note into 2 eighth notes for the sake of counting: “1-and-2-and-3”, we are essentially attempting to magnify our perception of time. Suppose you divided a beat of 60 bpm into 1,000 equal parts and played eighth notes again. Do you hit EXACTLY at the 500 mark? Or, are you hitting at 498, 503, etc. Do you see what I’m getting at? Perception of time has everything to do with your rhythmic accuracy. I am convinced that many musicians I work with are capable of such subdivisions....and they are incredibly accurate. Can you be one of those players? Can it apply to every rhythmic subdivision you see on the page? Can you make it apply to accelerandi and ritardandos? Now you’re getting somewhere. Now, you’re honing your “time”!

Simply playing correct rhythms, though, doesn’t make music happen. Time carefully and flawlessly punctuated can be done by electronic circuitry. It lacks the human element. That’s where “computer music” falls short. Not only must we seek to be “perfectly in time”, but we must then inject inflection and expressive content into our sound. But how?

Motion implies contrast. Think of it this way: if you’re driving down the road and the scenery out the windshield never changes, you would hardly have the sensation of being in motion. We need things to change to feel like we’re moving. Music is the same in this regard. Sometimes, composers will purposely write in such a way as to belie the sense of motion. These moments are rare, but sometimes very effective. Much more often, we see phrases and musical lines that imply motion. Thus, they need contrast. What devices can we employ to create contrast? Dynamics, articulation, register, pitch.....every aspect of your sound has an opposite. That’s contrast. Knowing when, where, how, and why to add contrast are the considerations of an artist. Your music making will elevate to a new, more artistic level once these considerations enter your consciousness. This is what differentiates, among other things, one performance from another. This is why one rendition might really speak to you, while another leaves you flat. We all desire to be artists. This will get you down that road.....sometimes very quickly. Seek and employ contrast in your sound!

Take a moment to think about the music you’ve heard that seems to burst at the seams with *qualities of motion*. Most pop styles do this. Dance music, by its very definition, does this. Swing bands. Hip hop. Many forms of jazz. Some strains of Beethoven, to my mind, are absolutely pregnant and swollen with motion.....you can almost see it on the pages of his score! Indeed, sometimes the aspects of motion are so obvious we cannot possibly overlook them. A good old march, done well, is my favorite portrayal of motion. Other musical moments, though, might be more subtle. The “groove” might be purposely understated. One feature that the obvious ones share is syncopation. Motion and direction are the result of contrasts occurring BETWEEN the beats.

Think of the beats as being like steadfast columns: they never waiver. They are Stoic and stayed in their brilliant predictability and dependability. They are reassuring and we need them to be steady psychologically. Once a pulse is

established, it takes no more than a few beats for us to “lock it in” as listeners. As performers, that’s why we need to have “good time”. We can’t mess with the Natural order of the beat. It’s the heartbeat. It’s the reassuring and calming pulse we first encountered in the womb. It’s the nice, warm, fuzzy aspects of “the hunt”. We crave the steadiness. We need the steadiness. Only when a composer seeks to really disrupt us and propel us from our comfort zone will they mess with the beat. Those musical moments are exciting precisely for this reason.

But, if the pulse is so boringly steady, what interest and contrast exists? The interest comes when you begin to consider all those moments BETWEEN the beats. There is an awful lot of time between beats. (remember the cicada!). You can crawl, skip, jump, run, dance, float, or fly between the columns. As an engaging performer, you will live between the beats. Here is where you will add your contrasting intensities, volumes, pitch inflections....everything and anything you can think of!

You will begin to see music as a storyteller sees a novel. There’s a beginning, middle, and an end to every piece you perform. (Every movement, every section, every phrase group, every phrase, every motive, every note.) Creativity abounds when you think in these terms. The story-telling aspects of your sound will come to life, thus making a more meaningful connection to your listeners. What interest can you create between the beats? Are some beats more important than others? Don’t certain meters stress some beats more than others? Should we stress some and perhaps downplay others? How do we arrive at certain beats and in what manner shall we leave it as we head into the future? All of these considerations happen on a multi-level scheme and we know at every step of the journey where we are in the story.....what’s happening at this moment in the hunt.

It is helpful, then, to map your music. Sit down with a pencil and do a formal analysis (you knew those classes would pay off, right?). Know your song well before you start singing (to quote Mr. Bob Dylan....master of musical inflection, if not tonal “beauty”). In learning new music, this is crucial. Otherwise, you are likely to take us on a meandering, improvisatory, meaningless stroll. Granted, that’s the musical intent sometimes.....but let’s assume you are not “making it up on the spot”.

Each phrase must relate to the entire story, whilst having a little story itself. If every piece of music has a climax, like a good plot, then so does every phrase. Have “goal notes” in mind, then map out how you are going to build tension as we approach it. Then, of course, how are you going to pace the sensation of “release”. If not done thoughtfully, music can sound very monotonous and predictable. Obviously, this is not a good portrayal of the hunt. Deviations from a pattern, exceptions to the norm, unexpected twists, and unforeseen surprises are what will add descriptive elements to your story. It’s very difficult to be bored when the mind is in this state. As you sit in the practice room shedding your technique, please be sure to lend motion to everything you play. Scales, in fact, are a great litmus test. If you can add motion and drama to a scale, you’re doing well!

In our efforts to achieve technical consistency, we sometimes go too far down the road of benign “sameness”. Then, when we step on stage to make music, we are ill prepared to tell an interesting story. We’ve worked for so long at keeping everything the same, we have difficulty creating enough contrast to engage the listener. Rarely is it musically appropriate to play a succession of notes with exactly the same intensity, volume, articulation, timbre, etc. That’s a boring hunt, and not truly relevant to experience. So, as you work to master your technique and develop some consistency, keep in mind that you need a *quality of motion* at all times.

For purposes of demonstration, let’s play a major scale in quarter notes up one octave, then down. Can you perceive any “goal notes” along the way? Perhaps the very top note is the goal (as a general rule, musical climaxes like to occur at the highest point of the phrase). Maybe the mid-point is a goal, but slightly less intense? When you reach the top of the scale and turn around to head back down, can you give the illusion of motion by driving towards tonic? How is that done? Is it an increasing tension through the body of certain notes? Is that a dynamic effect? Can you do it very blatantly? Can it be very subdued? Do some styles of music prefer subtlety, while others are a bit more “heart on the sleeve”? When you arrive at the goal note, how do you shape it? What makes it feel like “we have arrived”?

Practicing scales in this manner prepares you to be a better storyteller. Let’s be honest: if you’re bored as the player, I’m *really* bored as your listener. Am I supposed to be more wrapped up in this story than you, the performer? That’s asking an awful lot from your audience, don’t you agree? Give us something to sink our teeth into, please. Set us up for an interesting journey, a worthwhile passage through time. More often than not, technique will follow on the heels of this approach. I believe that we often put the cart before the horse in this regard. We should probably teach players from day one how to be good storytellers. Then, they will have the urge to develop their technique because they’ll want better adjectives, adverbs, and colorful language in their story.

Far too often, I hear players working technique with a complete absence of intent in the sound. How is that beneficial? I can’t imagine a musical application of that particular sound, truly. Break that habit. Every sound rendered should be ripe with sincerity and intent, right? Every note is either creating tension, or providing release.

Can this be overdone? Sure, but only when we stray from musical context. Like a bad B-movie actor, we can sound ridiculous if we have too much contrast for the setting. But that is a matter of taste and often results from a degree of insincerity. Are you speaking from the heart, or are you trying to put one over on us? As Jim Kraft so eloquently asked me once: “are you trying to express, or impress?” There’s a discernible and audible difference. I can spot insincerity in music from a mile away, and I hate it, frankly. It happens in every genre. By the same token, I can suffer a few technical shortcomings when I sense that the performer is really bringing it! (Miles Davis chipped notes...and man, are they beautiful moments). What you are striving for is a beautiful balance wherein your

technique assists and abets your sincerity. Channels it, guides it, focuses it, and directs it.

How can you start, if you haven't already, adding storytelling elements to your sound? Here are a few tips:

- Try it first with relatively simple music. Brad Edwards just published a terrific compilation of "tunes". That's a wonderful book for this purpose. If you can make a simple melody come alive with contrast, contour, and elements of the hunt, then applying those techniques to larger structures becomes a little easier. Try picking a note at random. From that note, play Happy Birthday, or Three Blind Mice, or something similar. Make it interesting. Listen to how you create tension and release. Lead your sound towards the goal note, and experiment with differing degrees of intensity. Try moving goal notes around for interest. Make different contours and shapes as you play the melody again and again. How many interesting variations can you create? Hunts, after all, rarely go down the same way twice.

- Record yourself. I prefer using a computer, if possible, with an application like Audacity (free, cross-platform download) or Garage Band. With these applications, you can literally see on the screen the shapes you're creating. That is incredibly beneficial. You'll probably notice that only about 80% of the expressive elements make it out the bell. We often have to over-do things to make them audible to our listeners. Recording devices are good tools for monitoring this. HINT: try singing the music into one of these programs. Are you making enough motion, contrast, and shape with your voice? When you're happy with the vocalization, then try imitating the sound through your horn.

- I keep in my trombone "ditty bag" a vacuum cleaner belt. It's like a big rubber band. As I sing through phrases, I'll pull and release the rubber band. I like to vary the moments of highest tension, when I'm *really* stretching the rubber band. Then, I like to experiment with the pacing of my release after the climax. In this way, I develop a kinesthetic feel for my phrasing. The practice of singing, too, is one of the best ways to connect with your music. Sing with great inflection and the best tone you can muster.

- Listen to great musicians. Much can be learned by paying close attention to the masters. Cello, flute, voice, percussion....makes no difference. A good musician is a good musician, and they are good storytellers with great command of tension and release. Imitate them. For that matter, pay attention to good orators, actors, dancers, conductors, etc.

- To lock myself into a groove, and to project it, I try to channel all of my rhythmic energy out the bell. Often, toe-tapping, bell-dipping, etc. is a distraction (especially in small group settings). So, if you must tap your foot, confine that energy to your big toe. Take all of that rhythmic vitality and try to focus it towards your sound. Articulation can be crucial in defining and maintaining a groove.
- Staying “in time” involves subdivisions of the beat. Thus, I usually have a great drummer in my head. Jack DeJohnette, Elvin Jones, John Bonham, Keith Carlock, Peter Erskine.....if you don't know these people, check them out at YouTube. At all times in my head, a terrific drummer is laying down a solid groove. The slower the music, the busier they are. For instance, when playing whole notes at a Largo tempo, my drummer had better be subdividing at least to the sixteenth note. I hear them do accents, punch the bass drum, ride the cymbals, etc. Also, when in a strong duple meter (like Mozart's Requeim), I find it very helpful to hear my drummer playing triplets. This seems to really help the music “flow” and stay fluid.
- Equating my articulations and musical intensity to the cellist's bow is very helpful. I watch great cellists a lot, because I can literally see their articulations. I can also see when they really dig in with the bow, or when they lighten up the pressure to release some tension in the sound. Sometimes, the bow will bounce, and dance, and glide. Having a visual cue like this is extremely beneficial. They physically portray *quality of motion* in their articulations.

Have some fun. Unleash your most creative self. Play for friends to see how you're doing. As always, please write me with questions:

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Until next time, then, when we will discuss even more uses of technology.....peace.

- Dr. Tom

