

Phrase Ornamentation

Question: What's more exciting, interesting and just plain cooler?

A. Playing the best notes at the right time in a boring way, or

B. Playing mediocre notes at the right time, but playing them with passion and conviction?

... a case can be made for either A or B, but I'll take B every single time - I'm guessing you will too, at least most of the time.

Most of us have spent (and are still spending) an enormous amount of time always searching for the right note or the right chord at any given time when we're creating music through improvising, solo writing or songwriting.

It's an obvious goal that we have: "make the best note choices".

The problem is, good notes and chords played without dripping expressiveness of passion often lack the emotional power we want to express.

We want to experience that level of emotion when we play, compose, record or perform music.

Have you ever created a cool idea for a melody, solo or song and then entered the notes via MIDI into your computer in order to hear it played back by the computer?

It usually never sounds as good as you imagined it or as you can play it yourself on guitar.

Why?

Many people will say that it doesn't sound as good because it's "too perfect" when the computer plays it in MIDI.

I shake my head every time I hear that because the exact opposite is true.

Yes, the computer plays the notes you entered when you tell the computer to play them.

The fact that the computer is accurate and consistent is not the problem.

The fact that the notes are played perfectly is not the problem.

The fact that there aren't "human mistakes" is definitely NOT the problem.

The goal is not to make the computer sound more human by humanizing the quantized notes.

The goal (which MIDI computers cannot yet fully do) is to perform the music with the exact expression you intended.

You don't intend for so called humanizing (slight random mistakes). No, you intend for great expression. Your intention is accurate emotional expression.

Your computer cannot (yet) do that.

Do this:

Step 1: Play an E minor chord once and let it ring. Record this for yourself.

Step 2: Loop the recording so it repeats itself many times.

Step 3: While the Em chord loop recording is playing, play and hold (sustain) a high E note (12th fret of the high E string) WITHOUT ANY vibrato, string bends, slides nor any other ornamentation of the note. Just let the note sound until it decays.

Listen and notice that the note fits over the chord well but has no life, no drama, no passion... it's just a (boring) right note.

Step 4: Listen the Em chord recording again. This time play and hold (sustain) a high F# note (14th fret of the high E string) again WITHOUT ANY vibrato, string bends, slides nor any other ornamentation of the note.

Just let the note sound until it decays. Listen and notice that the F# note probably sounds worse to you than the high E note.

Why?

You know the answer. A lifeless note that is not even a chord tone (such as a F# note over an Em chord) sounds uninteresting. The E note was just a (boring) right note... the F# note is just a (boring) wrong note (to most people's ears).

Yes, it is a wrong note (from a certain perspective) when played in this way.

However, the F# note can sound AWESOME and very much like a right note over the Em chord... but only if YOU MAKE IT SOUND THIS WAY!

In other words, how you play the F# note WILL DETERMINE whether or not the F# note sounds good or bad, right or wrong, boring or exciting, lifeless or dripping with emotion...

"Searching for the right note to play" should never be your primary goal.

Your primary goal should always be to create the feeling you want to express.

Note choice is only one part of what you need in order to achieve that goal.

Phrasing is the rest of what you need.

Context matters. As you heard in the examples above, playing the right notes (whatever they are) will never be enough to make your playing sound great.

Lifeless notes suck, no matter what they are.

Passionate notes (whatever the notes are) can sound amazing and great without necessarily sounding like jazz.

I debated with myself whether I should provide musical examples for you to hear. I know that if I give you examples to listen to, you will understand this lesson faster... but your understanding will be limited by whichever phrasing example I give you.

You'll learn more in the end if you really do this, hear this and experience this yourself.

So here are your action steps:

Step 1. Record yourself playing the F# note using your best phrasing over your Em chord backing track.

You can use any one (or combination) of these phrasing elements to ornament the F# note:

Vibrato String bend Slide Etc.

Step 2. Repeat step 1 nine (9) more times using different phrasing each time.

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