

Making Friends with Silence on the Guitar

by Dennis Winge

One sentence from one book, a book that is not even about guitar, illustrates perfectly what I have been exploring for years, and so it naturally struck me quite powerfully. The book is called "Just Being at the Piano" by Mildred Portney Chase. The sentence is:

"With the limited range of dynamics available to the clavichord and harpsichord, silence is the necessary contrast that helps create the illusion of fuller volume."

What does a sentence about instruments I don't even play have to do with guitar and why in the world is this sentence so important to me? It's because the guitar has a limited dynamic range. Let's leave effects pedals and any other kind of signal processing out of the equation for a minute and just focus on the instrument itself. You have to admit, an acoustic guitar has a much smaller dynamic range than a saxophone does, for example.

How is this relevant to you? I am going to show you that if you ignore silence, even if you're fabulous in every other way, you will be missing out. This is where the quoted sentence above becomes most useful and relevant: it's about silence as an expressive musical element. Here are some other quotes from the same chapter:

"Silence [is] the mother of sound. Just as a painter may portray a subject against a quiet canvas that in its quietness still speaks to him, so it is with a musician."

"Silence is as important, expressively, as sound. The mood felt during a silence will stand revealed. Keeping the tension of expression throughout [a] rest, especially a long rest, is an art in itself."

There are many benefits to becoming attuned to the role that silence plays in your music. You have all heard the quote about music being about "the space between the notes," but do we really pay attention to the space more than the notes? This article will focus on 3 big benefits of focusing on silence: creating the illusion of a bigger dynamic range, avoiding overplaying, and playing with a softer touch.

I. Creating the Illusion of a Bigger Dynamic Range

"Tonal effects cannot bring the added dimension to playing that the sensitive use of various pronunciations of silence can bring." Even if you use lots of effects, your playing can be greatly enhanced by using silence effectively.

In the first part of [the video example that accompanies this article](#), I demonstrate using silence as a punctuating device using a simple blues on acoustic guitar. The concept of playing with the silence can be immediately applied to solo guitar playing (acoustic guitar, jazz guitar, etc.) - No effects, loop pedals, backing tracks. How does the dynamic range seem to increase just because of the way the silence is used.

But using silence reverently and consciously can be applied to any musical setting, so also pulled up a hard rock backing track against which to demonstrate this. How do the phrases support each other by the silence between them? How does each phrase convey emotion because of the silence used within it?

II. Avoiding Overplaying

Paying attention to silence helps us listen better, helps us appreciate the guitar's natural rate-of-decay of any particular note. It helps us not overplay, and you have to admit that as opposed to most other instruments, guitarists tend to overplay more than others. Wind instrument players simply run out of air and have to take a breath. Bass players have to slow down sometimes during their solos in order to stay grounded in the lower notes which naturally have slower frequencies. But on guitar, it's so much fun to play fast licks, and there's no breath or low frequency elements involved, so it's easy to overplay. And yet, to use an analogy, the longer this paragraph gets, the tougher it is to read.

You've undoubtedly heard many guitarists with great technique who are simply not nice to listen to for any extended period of time because they overplay. How can you use the elements of silence in your own playing to avoid overplaying?

III. Softer Touch

"Always try for a natural sound within any dynamic range...Do not mistake harshness for fullness."

This last quote is particularly relevant for guitarists. We've all been guilty at one time or another of hitting the strings too hard in pursuit of expanding the guitar's dynamic range. Pat Metheny, in an interview praising Jim Hall for opening up several degrees of dynamic range by picking softer, says "certainly the 3 of us who often get grouped together - me, John Scofield, and Bill Frisell, all of us have adopted that general touch on the instrument." Do you think it's just coincidence that all 3 of the biggest names in jazz guitar pick softly?

If your next thought is "but I don't play jazz," then simply ask yourself: "How can I work smarter, not harder on the guitar?" Certainly that's a great question to ask regardless of your style or genre.

How can you use silence in your solo playing, your ensemble playing, your compositions, and even your rhythm guitar playing (which could be a whole article in itself)? Explore, and listen back on another day. Rate yourself as you listen only in the context of how expressively you used silence.

Lastly, How does being aware of silence enhance your awareness of music in general? I look forward to hearing about your experiences in exploring silence if you are inclined to share them, and don't just send me a blank page. :)