The Lesser Known Musical Elements: Timbre

by Dennis Winge

The musical element of timbre is perhaps the simplest to understand, but rich in the ramifications that that understanding gives you. Timbre (pronounced “tamber”) simply means tone quality. It’s what distinguishes, in guitar land, an acoustic from a clean electric to an electric with distortion.

In an orchestra, a composer has access to lots of different timbres in his composition by simply choosing which instruments will play which passages. (Choosing how many instruments will play a particular passage, however, falls under the category of “texture.”) The instrumentation for any given section or piece of music directly influences the timbre of the piece.

In addition, the register that an instrument plays in will also directly affect its timbre. Have you heard a saxophone blowing in its extreme high register? It sure sounds different than it does in the middle register. Why is this useful to think about? Well, for our purposes we are going to consider timbre in light of the *emotional content* of the music. When a sax plays in this register, do you feel relaxed? No. You feel a sense of urgency.

Thus, knowing a bit about timbre can help you make deliberate choices about your sound that can serve the underlying emotion of reach musical moment. We are going to use the guitar as the instrument of our example. One of the reasons the guitar is such a popular instrument is that it is extremely broad in its timbral spectrum. A highly distorted electric guitar sounds completely different from, and has a different emotional effect than, a classical guitar.

Timbre can be influenced by how hard of soft you hit the strings and by what technical approach you use to hit the strings (i.e. with a pick, thumb, fingers, etc.) with the non-fretting hand. It can also be influenced by how the fretting hand plays the notes. For example, hammer-ons and pull-offs can have a different articulation (which means how a note is played) than ones that are picked. There are also elements such as legato (one note going right into the next) and staccato (short space between each articulation) that can influence timbre. There are also techniques such as palm muting, harmonics, vibrato, etc. that can influence timbre.

Then there are considerations like what kind of strings you use (how thick or thin the gauge of strings; whether the strings are steel or nylon; whether they are flatwounds or roundwounds, etc.) How old the strings are also effect the timbre, with new ones generally being ‘brighter’ than older ones.

On electric guitars, timbre can be greatly influenced by the tone controls. Sometimes beginners don’t realize how much control they have over their sound simply by taking time to know which knob does what on their instrument. Generally, there is at least one volume knob and at least one tone control. (If you are just getting to know your electric guitar, simply turn each knob to halfway, then, one at a time, bring each knob to zero and listen to the effect it has, then bring it all the way up and listen to the effect of that as well. You will very quickly get to know what each knob does).

The amplifier you use also has a great effect on timbre. The size of the speaker, the type of electronics used, and the positions of the dials, can all produce a great variety in sounds available.

Then there is the world of guitar effects to consider. Each effect, whether it's a footpedal or an effect dialed in via recording software, can have a profound and immediate effect on timbre. Distortion or overdrive pedals are probably the pedals that make the most striking contrast between the use of it and a 'clean' sound, but there are also pedals such as chorus, wah, flanger etc. that influence timbre. (Some pedals, such as a volume pedal or delay pedal, don't change the guitar's tone at all, they simply change the volume of or number of repetitions produced from the original sound, but even these changes can influence the overall timbre of the piece of music.)

To summarize, timbre is important because it has a direct and immediate influence on the emotional content delivered in the music. When making decisions about tone, whether it's related to playing technique, or technical specifications of your gear, always think about what emotional quality you want your tone to have. Nowadays there is so much information available on particular players and the gear they use, you can determine the type of gear your favorite players use and potentially try out that gear at a local music store. The key is to experiment, and keep your ears open to possibilities.