

The Lesser Known Musical Elements: Dynamics

by Dennis Winge

Just last night I was hosting a jam session at one point during which there was a clarinetist jamming with a singer/ guitarist, bass, piano, and drums. The singer had the mic and when the clarinetist went to solo, he was not near enough to use it. He consequently was getting a little drowned out by the rest of the band but never did it occur to any of those musicians to bring the volume down so they could hear him better.

Unfortunately, this scenario is very common in jam sessions, where the skill levels tend to vary. If you want to immediately boost your skill level, simply become aware of dynamics and how to use them. If you haven't thought about dynamics heretofore you simply don't know what you're missing.

Have you ever been to a classical music concert? I hope you answered yes, because it is almost always a valuable and enjoyable experience that everyone should have, and frequently at that. In almost every city there are classical concerts happening all the time and many of them are free. In my particular town there are several free concerts per month at the local university and at the local college. Make it a date with your family and I can almost guarantee you enjoy it greatly.

Why do I bring this up here? Because classical music in general uses dynamics consistently, and to great effect. Have you been up front as an audience member when the movement gets slow and quiet and just the cellos or brass section carries out a soul-searching melody, only to be contrasted a few minutes later with the timpanist bashing cymbals and the entire orchestra playing to the hilt?

Generally speaking, in the rock and pop world, dynamics are woefully scarce. Perhaps this is in part due to the over-compressed music we consistently hear on the radio. Perhaps it is that in one-on-one music lessons, the topic of dynamics never comes up. I for one never had a lesson on dynamics the entire time I took lessons, which span several decades.

Just by being aware of dynamics can give you much more control on the emotional response you are seeking from an audience. However, you may have to practice bringing the music softer and louder on your own. You may have to bring your basic playing volume down a notch (or several notches) because your default comfort zone could be near full volume and then there may be not much room to increase.

Perhaps some people are like I used to be, thinking that I want my music to be exciting! I didn't want to play softly because I simply wanted people to pay attention. Well, first of all, we as Westerners have become "anaesthetized," just like we are with sugar in our food. So many foods have sugar in them that we are by-and-large just used to it. But when you get a delicately prepared dish in which you can taste all the subtle flavors and there is no sugar in it, it can be truly delicious! Similarly, when you hear a piece of music you love, the change in dynamics can really help send you over the moon.

You may also need to communicate a desire to use dynamics with your fellow musicians. Simply ask if everyone can try playing a certain section of the music softer and more delicately, and another section full-on. I guarantee, if you have chosen your sections appropriately, the musicians will love it and so will the audience.

I know that the concept of dynamics is easy to understand intellectually, but in order to really grasp the extent of its power, you have to consistently work with it. Perhaps you could record yourself and listen back to it a few days later. Listen to whether or not you were able to change dynamics and also what emotional effects those changes in dynamics had on you as a listener.

There are many examples of great use of dynamics in rock/ pop music, but the first one that comes to my mind right now is Larry Carlton's Paris Concert. Listen to how Larry brings the trio down to almost a whisper at times. Doesn't this give so much more power and meaning to the louder sections? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuN6EcoKvX4>

I also have recorded a short video just with acoustic guitar to help illustrate the power of dynamics. <https://youtu.be/P3VED1DKX4c>

If you have examples that you'd like to share examples of pieces of music you love that have great dynamics, I'd love to see/ hear them. In the meantime, have fun practicing. See you at the next classical concert! :)