

Phrasing

I often hear guitarists say, "I've learned my scales, and I've learned my arpeggios, but my playing still doesn't sound good. What can I do?"

One thing that will help is phrasing. Phrasing has many aspects. Often when we think of phrasing, we think of slurs and staccato. Those are important aspects of phrasing and we'll look at them in a later Note, but in this Note I want to talk about rhythm.

When we speak, we naturally phrase. If you read this sentence aloud, you'll see that you pause after "aloud." Even if I left the comma out, you'd naturally pause there. In this way we group words according to their meaning. Musical phrases also group notes by their meaning.

Example 1 looks and sounds like one musical phrase. But it's not very interesting. If you interpret unimaginatively, you'll put a slight accent on the D-flat, thus grouping the eighth notes into two groups of four.

Now look at (and play) example two. Here I've grouped the B-flat, G, E-flat and the D-flat together. By moving the G and E-flat closer (in time) to the E-flat, I've made them a group. And by anticipating the D-flat, I've encouraged it to join that group. I've also given the A-flat a little more room to breath.

Example 3, at a slower tempo, uses triplets rather than sixteenths. The grouping is less pronounced, and the feel is more "laid-back."

I'm a big fan of understatement, which we see in Example 4. I've thrown out a couple of notes. Noticed that I have a ritard in there, so this phrase might appear at the end of a ballad. The elimination of the two B-flats and the second G bring out the functions of the two E-flats. The first one sort of sounds like a lead-in to the D-flat, while the second one leads in to the D-natural. This also allows us to hear that the D-flat and the D-natural are related.

So how do you work on phrasing? Take some of you scales and arpeggios, change the rhythms, maybe add or delete some notes, and experiment. Most important, as always, listen carefully.

NotePad #8 -- Phrasing

ex. 1

♩ = 120 Cmin7 F7b9 Bbmaj

ex. 2

♩ = 120 Cmin7 F7b9 Bbmaj

ex. 3

♩ = 90 Cmin7 F7b9 Bbmaj

ex. 4

♩ = 90 Cmin7 F7b9 Bbmaj

♩ = 70 ♩ = 40

rit.

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