

Presenting a complete musical performance

The most valuable thing to take forward from the experience of learning, then performing, a piece of music (any piece, at any level of learning) is what it means, *what it feels like*, to play it really well. For this to happen we must make sure, as teachers, that the piece is well within the pupil's grasp: they have worked hard to prepare it and there are no longer any technical stumbling blocks. Questions of difficulty no longer apply, and we can move on to the universal performance-related skills, such as rhythm, dynamics, phrasing and articulation: the things that matter most in order to present a complete musical performance but that are all too easily neglected.

These musical skills exist separately from the technical demands that confront the player, but although they are analogous to natural human activities such as walking and talking, and so should not present any particular obstacle, they nonetheless need to be taught. Of the four mentioned, none need to be avoided as 'difficult' – not even articulation, as we shall see later.

These considerations bring us to a golden rule: *All pupils should have the experience of playing their own repertoire – however simple – as well as anybody else would play theirs.* In other words, they should have the technical means to attend to all the musical points without compromise. Not only is this achievable if appropriate repertoire is chosen, it is essential if the pupil's musicianship is to flourish unencumbered.

Knowing how to process rhythmic information and respond to it correctly is perhaps the most common problem among young guitarists, yet this is probably the most important aspect of learning to play music. Some pupils have a naturally strong sense of pulse, but that is not always enough: in order to be alive to the nuances of rhythm that each metre presents, you have to know where you are in any given bar or within any given beat. This means you have to count. The ability to count while playing (or, say, reading through a piece away from the instrument

while tapping out the rhythm) is a crucial skill. It enables you to internalise and measure the exact rhythms of a passage against the underlying matrix of its metre. When pupils are trained from the start to count, they develop a feel for the different beats in the bar, including the subdivisions of the beat. If this crucial training is delayed, then remedial issues can develop later.

For an example of 'later', let's consider Villa-Lobos's fourth Prelude. Few guitar pieces illustrate so well the importance of being comfortable with metrical subdivision.

Example 1 Heitor Villa-Lobos, Prelude no.4, bars 1–8 (melody only)



One of the jewels of the repertoire, this prelude is tantalisingly accessible to the intermediate player – but beware: we owe it to music of this quality to play it accurately, with respect; yet it is not uncommon to hear wholly unrhythmic performances of this piece (an aspect of guitar performance culture the composer himself was known to dislike). Example 1 shows the first eight bars of the opening thumb melody with the four two-bar phrases vertically aligned for direct comparison. We can see that bars 3, 5 and 7 are all variants of bar 1 and that the crotchet beat is subdivided in almost every possible way (with the added bonus of a tie across beat 3 in bar 3). How valuable, then, if the pupil has