



with Kevin Downing

How Dynamic Is Your Playing?

One of the things that noticeably separates professional players from amateur ones is the use of dynamics. Dynamics normally relate to volume, like that of getting louder or softer. Common song dynamics are when a chorus is slightly louder than a verse, or when instrumentalists use dynamics to build a solo up to a climax, then release to wind back into the vocal section etc. However, dynamics within music can get much more complicated at advanced levels.

Dynamics are simple to understand, but definitely not easy to put into practice. Many musicians, guitarists included, don't seem to get into the habit of using them in performance – which is a critical aspect of making great music for audiences. If music lacks dynamics

it will have no feel – a bit like listening to a monotonic speaker.

So, how dynamic is your playing at the moment? Do you include dynamics in your practising? What I have in store for you this month are some basic exercises to get you into the habit of practising dynamics. Hopefully after a bit of practice they will become second nature to you.

Dynamics are notated in music like this; piano or the symbol (p) means to play soft; mezzo piano or (mp) means to play medium soft; and forte or (f) means to play loud. There are many more dynamic markings you can see in music, but they are the ones we will use for this lesson. You will also see crescendo and decrescendo signs, which are the two lines

with the increasing or decreasing gap between them. The volume increases when the lines widen, and decrease when the lines narrow.

Exercise 1 is a simple C major scale in the open position, but if you are more experienced you can use any scale you know. The crescendo and decrescendo lines indicate to begin as quietly as you can, then build up the volume until you hit the highest note, which should be the loudest. Then as you descend the scale you get quieter again.

When strumming volume dynamics are illustrated in Exercise 2, it gets a bit more tricky. It is much more difficult to play quietly and will take a lot more practice to get this going well, but stick with it as the rewards will be great. As you can see the two chords are a simple C and

G7 open chord, but you can use any chords for this type of practice.

Before taking on the next one make sure you can play Exercises 1 and 2 well first. Exercise 3 is similar to the previous one, but uses eighth note strumming. This takes the difficulty level up another notch, but again you will be well rewarded for the effort involved.

You can take the difficulty level up further again as in Exercise 4, but make sure you are very good at the previous three first. Here you start very quiet on the first note, but don't have much time getting to the loudest note. Then you have to go from loud to soft in the space of one note. This type of dynamic playing could be heard in a guitar solo.

You are now most probably beginning to see why many guitarists don't focus much on dynamics. They are difficult, but once you get a little better at them your playing will go to new heights.

One hint: Always learn a song or solo first – then consider how you can use dynamics later.

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher and author. His contact details, along with many freebies are on his website at www.guitar.co.nz

Ex 1.

Ex 2.

Ex 3.

Ex 4.