

Sound And Rhythm For Acoustic Guitar

1. Sound

Plucking a string

You will need to experiment for yourself but most people find that the best sound is obtained by practising:

- Breaking the finger action down into i. Approaching the string ii. Plucking the string
- Usually pluck with finger at 45 degrees across the string
- Pluck with a combination of skin and nail (file nails?)
- Make sure you 'get hold' of the string and release, 'driving' the nail through so as to displace the string – *unless you are playing very quietly*
- Experiment to find the best sound and keep aiming for it until it becomes automatic and your fingers use the correct position and technique for you – *listen to how others sound and aim for that than follow exactly their explanations of how they achieve it. It's unlikely their technique will exactly suit your fingers*

Strumming a string

Once again think of the angle that you strike the strings (45 degrees - perhaps) and once again play 'through' them.

- Once again 'think' sound and aim for a particular sound you like by experimentation
- Pick or no pick, hard, medium or soft pick – *which part of pick!*
- Balance chords *ie the components of the chord*
- Alter the balance of chords
- Think in terms of bass, middle and treble and vary how much of each is in the chord and balance this too – *broadly speaking go for the strongest sound for that particular chord*
- Then vary the balance of bass, middle and treble – *allow the sound to 'weaken' for effect*

Where to pluck or strike – vary what you do

- Close to the middle of the string – *warm sound*
- Near to sound hole – *full sound*
- Close to the bridge – *bright, brittle but often interesting sound to throw in from time to time*

Dynamics

Vary how loud and soft you play in keeping with the words and the structure of the music. Dynamics can 'shape' a song and give the sense of a beginning, a middle and an end.

Which chords?

Well, we're all searching for the Lost Chord but what I mean is 'where'?

- Chords in 1st position have good sound and give good sustain, especially if they have several open strings eg using 'D' tuning or short capo at 2nd fret ('D' chord shapes but playing in 'E') – *so you don't have to play so many, which leaves space in the music*
- Use capo to get song in right key for singing **and** with chords which sound good on your instrument – *experiment (on mine open and I has good sound but so does III, V, VII and VIII) – shortening the string length brings a more 'ringing' sound*
- Exotic chords – a surprisingly modest range of them will add spice to the sound – *experiment lifting fingers off eg in Bm, D and G, adding fingers eg D and A and adding and subtracting eg C and A*
- Chords with mixed stopped (above 5th fret) and open strings – 'Power chords'
- Bar chords – *get the technique right, then use as little as possible*

2. Rhythm

Types of 4/4

Back beat – *emphasis on 2 and 4*

Funk – *emphasis on 1*

Can't remember what you call it – *emphasis on 1 and 3*

Slow rock – *can't work out whether really it's 2 bars with emphasis on 3 but essentially it's a slow back beat*

Twos and threes

Simplifying a little, many rhythms are usually characterised by differing combinations of 2 and 3 beats – *think 2s and 3s*

- By ambiguity I mean the ear isn't sure if it's hearing a 2 or 3 rhythm
- Sometimes 2 and 3 rhythms alternate - *Riverdance*
- 4/4 is in 2 but 2 (different) groups of 2...but 'Tico tico' rhythm pops up everywhere – *can be represented as a bar of 6/8 followed by a 2/4 bar*
- 3/4 is pure 3 in a bar but i. not always – *often has ambiguous 2 rhythms in it* ii. Which beat(s) are emphasised?
- 6/8 has both 3 beats and 2 beats (unambiguously) but in its pure form mainly the 2 comes over. More often 2 and 3 rhythms intermingle and cross each other and create ambiguity
- Eastern European ('Balkan') rhythms often mix 2s and 3s in combinations, often with recurring groups of 5 – *a 3 plus a 2 = 5*
- South America – *well where do you start? Break all the rules eg Tango – 4 'equally' emphasised beats*

Space in rhythm, space in sound

- Less can be more
- Leave space in the sound – don't play too many notes but place the ones you do well *ie marking the rhythm and structure (chord transitions)*

Conclusion – *the three card trick*

- Think musically
- You can get away with being simple if you sound nice
- Applying simple basics of sound and rhythm becomes 'complex' *ie musically interesting*

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