Playing Music – Once More, With Feeling

Adam Hellyer 18 January 2017



Have you ever tried listening to classical music in the car? One thing you'll immediately notice is you have to keep turning the music up and down to hear it over the noise of the road. This is because the music keeps switching between loud and quiet. A great example of this is Joseph Haydn's Symphony No.94, also called the "Surprise" Symphony, precisely because it jumps between quiet and loud. We call this dynamics.

This jumping between loud and soft is rarely a problem in modern pop or rock music. Most modern music is generated with the radio in mind. They want a strong, consistent signal so that people don't wonder if their favourite music station suddenly went off air. There are processors and exciters and all sorts of wonderful hardware and software designed to do one thing: to make sure the music has no dynamics!

> Dynamics are to music what light and shade are to photography

Why Do We Need Dynamics in Worship?

In my blog, Music Theory pt 1, I said, 'Dynamics are to music what light and shade are to

photography'. This is true. If the photo is over-exposed, you just have a blank, white frame. Underexposed, and you have a blank, black frame. The trick is to get the right combination of light and shade so that the picture is revealed.

In music, if everything is just the same volume all the time, it becomes dull. A joyful noise sounds the same as any other. Praising Him on the high cymbals is no different to the low cymbals! There should be a difference between the still, small voice and the voice like many waters.

Volume, loud and quiet, the dynamic range, are part of the music. We need to learn to use them. I will probably give this a more thorough treatment another time, but for now, here are some ideas on how you can begin to use dynamics:

Dynamics for Singers

Your voice sounds different when you sing quietly to when you sing loudly. And the distance your mouth is from the microphone will also affect not only the volume but the tone of your voice too (closer will emphasise bass, further away will emphasise treble). Often we sacrifice these subtleties because the voice is going through a PA system designed, like the radio, to keep the volume as consistent as possible.

Learn good mic technique by using the microphone with your voice to get the tone and volume you want. Also, work with your sound engineer to make sure you can hear yourself well and don't end up over-singing the whole time due to bad monitor levels.

Dynamics for Drummers

If you want to spot a novice drummer, look for who plays the loudest. Playing quietly is normally one of the last things a drummer masters. This can lead to people moaning about drums being used in church. But drums can also be used to draw out subtle tones – cymbals don't always have to crash, they can roll too.

Learn how to make other sounds besides the normal beats. Practice rolling the cymbals with the side of your stick or a soft percussionist's mallet. Learn to use the toms, lightly, to create interesting-sounding rhythms. Use the rims of the drums and experiment with other percussion instruments like shakers or djembe. Learn the many tones you can get from your snare drum, not just the usual loud 'crack', but the other subtle tones available.

Dynamics for Guitarists and Bass Players

Learn the different sounds you can make with your fingers versus only using a plectrum. Both are valid ways to play your instrument; learn both. If you are an acoustic guitarist, learn to appreciate all that your instrument can do.

Learn to pick the strings as well as to strum. Learn different positions for each chord, as different placements alter the tone and volume. Learn to strum loudly and quietly; don't always strum in the same way.

Dynamics on Other Instruments

All other instruments need to learn dynamics too. If you play synth, don't imagine that volume control is only the sound man's job. Don't fill every moment with a wall of sound. Learn to play small amounts as well as big.

Instruments like the flute or violin: learn where your instrument fits into the music, and don't feel you have to play all the time.

Actually, everyone should remember that whatever instrument you play, part of dynamics is sometimes simply not playing at all. Always leave space for the other instruments or for silence.