Some say string players can’t groove, and let’s face it – it’s not our strong suit. We’re highly trained, so it can be frustrating when we think, ‘How can it be that I went to Juilliard and I don’t have the rhythm of a 15-year-old guitar player who’s only had four lessons?’ It’s because most classical musicians have very little to do with popular culture today. Popular music relies heavily on the underlying rhythm or ‘groove’, and we need to learn how to feel this, to improve our sense of rhythm and to keep our instruments relevant to contemporary culture (Opinion, October 2018 bit.ly/2IgCQ4e).

Our natural inclination is to find equilibrium with the bow, without stops and starts, in the same way we want to step evenly when we walk. This means that if we play a rhythm that goes back and forth in an uneven way, our arm wants to play a regular rhythm instead: we may start with oo, but soon it will become nn, and finally nn, because that’s just the back-and-forth physics of the arm. It was only in the 90s that I realised how to use this idea in my teaching: I was watching some guy in a cowboy hat strumming a guitar on TV when the phone rang, so I muted the sound. Five minutes later, when I looked up again, he was still strumming up and down in the same way. I thought, ‘Gosh, this is a long song!’ but when I turned the sound back on it was completely different music in a different key, with a different groove. A light bulb went on in my head: I realised that the strum is the common denominator of the groove, and that is the way to teach it.

GHOST NOTES AND THE ‘GROOVON’
By physicalising the subdivision of a melody with the bow, as if we were strumming a guitar, we can create different grooves by stressing the accented notes and dropping ‘ghost notes’. For example, to play the rhythm shown in figure 1a, we can move the bow in constant semiquavers (\(\frac{1}{8}\)), or ‘groovons’ (the smallest particle of the groove), and only accent the main rhythm, as shown in figure 1b. On the cross-headed notes, we can play a ‘ghost note’ by damping the sound and using very little bow. I call this ‘strum bowing’ – a technique that enables string players to learn easily how to play and teach the grooves in contemporary popular music.

All this comes very naturally to guitar players, but bowed string players never learn it – it’s just not in our pedagogy at all. First of all, a bow is not a pick: guitarists keep moving the hand up and down, hitting the notes they want to hit and avoiding the ones they don’t. (You could try doing this by plucking your own instrument in guitar position.) With a bow, it’s not so easy to lift it on and off the string, so it’s a different process: we have to damp the sound of some notes while keeping that same rhythm. But if guitar players can do it, how hard can it be? Really, it isn’t that difficult to do this technique – it’s just not what we’re accustomed to, so we need to retrain ourselves a little bit, for the greater groove.
EXERCISES

In order to strum bow, we first need to learn to ‘ghost’. Classical violin technique is generally geared towards getting as much sound as possible, with a lot of bow, but here our strokes can be tiny – we can almost think them rather than play them:

- Play steady quavers (\(\frac{1}{8}\)) using strokes less than an inch long
- Lighten up the bow pressure so much that the bow glides over the string without producing any sound at all
- Bring out some notes with heavy accents, using very little bow

The next step is to dampen the string with the left hand to remove the drone, by laying the fourth finger across the string, or resting it on the side; or by lightening the pressure of the finger we’re using.

Try using both hands to create a continuum of sounds ranging from normal to fully ghosted notes that you can hardly hear, to explore the grey area in between (exercise 1). There will always be some noise, analogous to what guitarists call ‘pick noise’, even for fully ghosted notes. This is part of what gives the sound its characteristic groove. When you are ready, try exercise 2.

EXERCISE 1 Use both hands to explore the spectrum of sounds ranging from no ghosting to full ghosting

No ghosting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partial ghosting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mostly ghosting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum ghosting</td>
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EXERCISE 2 Apply the same idea to this simple groove, to help you learn how to control the technique

No ghosting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partial ghosting</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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REPERTOIRE

When applied to classical music, strum bowing can be a useful tool to remind us of how the rhythm should go. It can even give us ideas for new bowings that preserve the natural equilibrium of the arm, give us a more even sound and keep us locked to a rhythmic grid. It also acts as our ‘inner drummer’, making us more aware of the rhythmic context of every melodic line we play, even when it’s something like Bach or Beethoven. So often we just focus on the melody as if it’s disembodied, when there is so much rhythmic and melodic context underneath.

For example, the rhythmic motif from the first movement of Beethoven’s Symphony no.7 can be problematic when bowed as in example 1a, because the result is often example 1b: if the rests or notes aren’t held for long enough, the rhythm becomes sloppy and weak. Ghosting the subdivisions (example 1c) gives a bowing that restores rhythmic accuracy and rigour (example 1d). Of course, this technique can sometimes sound too jazzy or funky in classical music, so we might not want to use it in performance, but it helps us to understand how to fit the motif into a rhythmic grid.

EXAMPLE 1A Rhythmic rigour can be lost when playing straight or hooked bowings

EXAMPLE 1B Lost rigour can result in a sloppy rhythm that sounds like this

EXAMPLE 1C Use strum bowing to lock the rhythm back into its grid

EXAMPLE 1D Now try this bowing, based on strum bowing technique
In popular genres we can use strum bowing to help us figure out the best bowing to use to make any tune rhythmically accurate. Most people would bow my piece, Belmont Strum, as it comes (example 2a), but if we add groovons, we get the bowing in example 2b. This gives us a more accurate and idiomatic jazz rhythm. The same is true for Pent-Up House, a jazz tune by Sonny Rollins (example 3a and 3b), and just about any other groove. Try it on the simple strumming of The Eagles’ Best of My Love, or the accents in Eye of the Tiger by Survivor. Kool and the Gang’s Celebration has a funky guitar groove on a single note. Get Lucky by Daft Punk is driven by Nile Rodgers’ guitar riff. The Bruno Mars hit Uptown Funk also features an important rhythm guitar part. Many of the classic Motown tunes are rich sources of rhythm guitar and rhythm keyboard riffs.

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**FURTHER MATERIALS**


Look around on YouTube for a tune with a good guitar groove, like Kool and the Gang’s Celebration bit.ly/1cxhc6K. Then hum it, strum it, say it, play it!

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**TIPS FOR TEACHERS**

Vocalising is an integral part of learning, and some classical teachers may not give enough weight to it. It’s one of the best ways to learn something new. If a student you are teaching is having difficulty learning a groove, get them to say out loud the direction their bow is travelling in, to help them direct their hands. Beatboxing can be very powerful too. Grooves that make you dance are all about rhythmic movement, and about being physically free, so pay attention to how they ‘accent’ parts of the groove with their body when they do this. The physical motions we make when we play an instrument are very connected with our voice.

Interview by Pauline Harding

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**IN YOUR PRACTICE**

The best way to practise strum bowing is to imitate grooves played by rhythm guitarists in recordings. Try this with songs in different genres, to give you flexibility: listen to the radio or your MP3 player, randomly pick tunes, find one that has a good groove and a strong rhythm-guitar riff, then work out how to play it.

To learn a groove quickly, use my Groove Proficiency System (GPS): hum it, strum it, say it, play it. First vocalise the groove to get it in your voice – this will sound like you’re beatboxing. Then ‘air strum’ it, to find and physicalise the subdivision; say the bow direction of each rhythm note out loud; and finally put the whole thing on your instrument. If you have an app such as the Amazing Slow Downer, loop and slow down a section of a song, then isolate the riff so that you can repeat and study it.

So often classical players say to me, ‘I just want to learn how to play a little jazz – it will be fun!’ That’s a bit like saying to a French teacher, ‘I just want to learn a phrase or two in French.’ Well, great: you can learn a phrase or two in French, but you’re not going to fool anybody into thinking you can speak French if you don’t have the language in your ear. It’s the same with jazz: you need to listen to whatever you want to play, whether it’s hip hop, rock or jazz. There is no substitute for the familiarity that comes with hours of listening and imitation.
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