

Notation –

excerpts from the Late Starters Handbook:

‘Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar’ by Bruce Stewart

The Use of Notation

‘It’s not essential for what I’m doing. No, I’ve never found it a handicap. These dance bands that play pop on the BBC radio programmes – they sound alright at that because they can read it off music sheets. But have you heard some of them trying to play rock? It’s rotten... If I wanted to read music I’d have to pack all this in and start from scratch (Coleman, 1995)[p386]’.

John Lennon

‘He tried to take me back to the basics but by then I was starting to write some stuff of my own on the piano. Something was making me make it up, whether I knew how to do it or not. I’d already written the tune of ‘When I’m sixty-four’ when I was sixteen so I couldn’t really get on with him taking me back to the beginning (Miles, 1997)[p23]’.

Paul McCartney

‘He had no interest in learning to sight read.....Most of his tuition came from listening to jazz records and emulating the chords he heard’

- reference to Donald Fagen from ‘Reelin’ in the Years’ – the biography of Steely Dan (Sweet, 1994)[p8].

‘Contrary to popular belief, being a session guitarist does not necessarily mean you have to be a fluent reader.....More often than not, a chord chart is all that you get.....It is therefore often more important to be able to invent something on the spot than to be a fluent reader with nothing to read and nothing to say (<http://www.guitarsite.com/>)’.

Article by Kirk Lorange [Australian session musician] ‘To read or Not to read?’

Introduction

It is evident that pop musicians have little if anything to do with notation. Too often guitar students feel they must learn to read traditional notation, to gain a thorough understanding of music. As the comments above suggest, there are alternative methods for approaching music. For example, an MP3 or MD recorder could serve as a simple means of storing and preserving ideas - together with a skeletal knowledge of music theory; students could then retrieve their parts with relative ease. Intricate details could be documented on quick-and-easy-to-read notation, such as tablature. For the learner, the immediacy of such an approach may be far more functional than the lengthy procedural demands of traditional notation.

Popular music and notation

In light of the relatively simple and improvised nature of popular music, long-winded approaches used for the documentation of music, are more likely to impair the progress of the learner regardless of age. As safe as it may be to employ simpler notations, at the root of the matter, popular music with its strong African and Afro-American influence, is largely memorized rather than written – the music is nourished within the musician (Diallo, 1989)[p137]. African musicians were required to observe dancers and respond with appropriate music. Musicians would practice by listening, in some cases without touching their instrument or making any sound (Diallo, 1989)[p96]. African influences are also participatory – rhythms of celebration, dance and ritual handed down, rather than note-perfect written parts. It was this kind of heritage that influenced the earliest blues and gospel artists who are the backbone of popular music culture (Palmer, 1996, Murray, 1991).[p53/p76]

The notion that, CPN [traditional notation] be at the heart of popular music, is a fallacy. The comments made by both McCartney and Lorange speak of invention or improvisation – echoing the true nature of their art. Creative processes rely on intrinsic knowledge, not simply imitative. Popular music making is a creative process – its knowing how to use information rather than simply accessing it through notation (Palmer, 1996)[p53]. ‘Prescriptions’ are simply not enough for the adaptive, participatory activities involved in pop. This is evidenced through common activity: a club band shortening their performance of a song, or attempting to use their musical knowledge to play a request, or backup an impromptu solo performer. Many of the greatest pop innovators had neither, the time, education or inclination to notate music arrangements. Natural musical gifts, including those gained through many hours of repetition, enable the musician to alter the musical content while playing (Bruning, 1999, Diallo, 1989)[p22/p96].

Musicianship and notation

Approaching music intuitively is not simply for the gifted. Musical intuition can be altered drastically – the improved aural perception of many of my older students is ample proof. Musical intuition is the mark of a musician. It has nothing to do with reading or understanding notation - its tools are those of understanding and experience (Gaare, 1997, Bruning, 1999)[p6/p25]. In brief pop musicians approach music by firstly acquiring an understanding of music [what its' made of and what can be done with it], and to that is added their experience, the time they have invested manipulating music. Musicianship in this sense is divorced from the subject of notation (Diallo, 1989)[p98].

John Lennon recognises the value of sight-reading – that players could get together without rehearsal and produce an acceptable sound. But then he points out the obvious – how bad they sound playing modern music.

The belief that musicianship is intrinsically tied to notation, is the result of centuries of Western European Art Music thinking – a tradition that fails to account for, or play any part in giving rise to, the prominent African influences woven into popular music over the last century (Murray, 1991)[p111].

Popular manuscripts and notation

The music represented in the majority of popular songs-books is a recreation by publishing house employees, whose task it is to 'create' written parts from recorded works, for public access. Sheet music often conveys a strong message to the public, confirming their beliefs about the complexity of music and their own inabilities (Gaare, 1997)[p2], (Tisdell, 2003)[p65]. Sadly, they are unaware that the notation was an afterthought, created, not by the musicians on the recording, but aurally deciphered and written by an employee. Not only is the music difficult to read, it takes on a new role – leading many away from the intuitive (Bruning, 1999)[p6].

Beliefs about notation

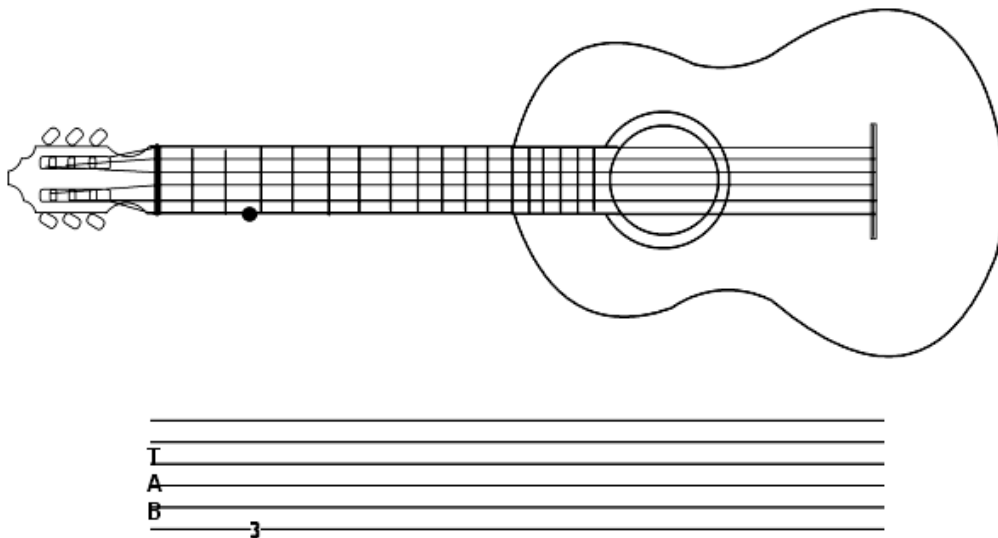
Nevertheless, it is common opinion that notation plays a supreme role in music engagement. As a consequence of the public's 'hallowed' attitude toward notation [possibly a legacy of the piano], they inevitably hold the opinion that music is infinitely larger than it is - it's not too difficult to see how this eventually transpires into poor expectation (Tisdell, 2003)[p32].

Definition of Tablature

Tablature refers to notation using letters or numbers “which direct the performer to make certain mechanical actions which, on a specified instrument, will produce the required sound” (Rastall, 1983)[p8].

Reading tablature

Tablature, is not an invention of recent times as many believe – its’ history can be traced to the early Renaissance. In those times the guitar was evolving, the lute among other instruments had similar characteristics and so the system we now see – six horizontal lines representing the six strings of the guitar - is virtually the same (Gaare, 1997)[p3]. Upon these lines sit various numbers – representing fret locations or rather, the fret intended for playing. As you move from left to right on the page, the fret locations change [both, horizontally - as the numbers increase or decrease, or vertically - as different strings are engaged for playing]. Tablature is merely a diagram – requiring little if any interpretation, informing the student about finger locations. Six horizontal lines represent the strings of the guitar as if held out in front of the player with the body, or soundboard to the right. For simple melodies or bass-note picking, it’s highly functional.



In view of the need to utilize or improvise information, notation use should be thought of as an interim or temporary measure – eventually abandoned. Students should pay attention to the information at hand – how it’s constructed and where it sits with the fingers (Miles, 1997)[p22]. The participatory nature of popular music demands that we know parts, so we can swap them around, transpose them to new keys and understand their tonality while maintaining our focus on the movements the hands are required to make – all of which have little to do with notation (Bruning, 1999)[p54].

Memorising and maps

Because popular music is about creating rather than imitating, notation is not central to the musician's activities – in fact it's rarely used. Students, on the other hand need guidance and a means to document ideas. Rather than becoming dependant on notation [tablature], I instruct my students to memorise the work they are given. To some this might sound threatening but through employing correct learning techniques, the process is not as difficult as it sounds.

With so much repetition in popular music, often the student will only be required to memorise perhaps eight bars [about ten or fifteen seconds worth of playing]. With the information retained, its relatively easy and fun to 'jam-along', more often than not repeating small phrases over and over and perhaps relocating the information [or phrase] to a new starting string. This is why the use of notation is only temporary – we simply need a means to remind ourselves about the nature of the information we wish to play. This is contrary to the notion of staring at notation the entire performance. Few popular musicians stare at music stands. I explain to my students my expectations regarding their use of tablature, by likening the reading process to that of reading a map: although they may have used a map to locate my studio on the first lesson, they'll find little need for its' use thereafter – by memorising, the task is automatic (Bruning, 1999)[p8](Sloboda, 2005)[p280].

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