

Putting The Music First

5 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR DRUMMING MORE MEANINGFUL

by Marko Djordjevic

When I meet students for the first time, I ask them to play for me so I can acquaint myself with their abilities and make assessments regarding the course of our studies. All too often, what happens could be summed up as follows: The student thinks for a few seconds, then proceeds to play some beats, fills, and licks, jumping from one idea to the next without connecting them in any logical way. Then he or she usually stops abruptly and looks up at me from the drums, so I can take over the lesson again.

I should add that, quite often, students who come to me already have a good sense of time, a decent drumming vocabulary, and enough facility on the instrument to make clear, articulate statements. But what they're often missing is the ability to put it all together in a cohesive way. It's like a chef in training who has enough quality ingredients to cook a great meal but lacks the recipe and the experience to combine the components into something tasty and nutritious.

My choice of this cooking analogy isn't arbitrary. Just as good food nourishes the body, music should feed the mind and soul of both the performer and the listener. So it is my belief that the foremost obligation of every teacher is to instill in students—from the very beginning—the idea that *music* is what brought them to the drums, and that they will get the most out of the instrument if making music is their focus at all times.

Of course, it's all too easy to tell new students that what they just played seemed disjointed and didn't measure up to the noble concept that every contact with the instrument should result in a statement that moves the player and listener emotionally and intellectually and leaves them feeling inspired and fulfilled. (Even the best musicians in the world have days, rare as they are,

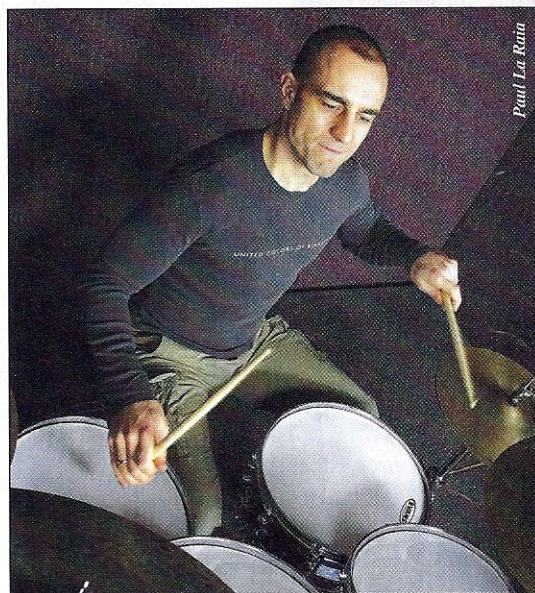
when they fail in this pursuit.)

In this day and age, drums are often used to showcase physical ability, sometimes without much regard for musical content. Inexperienced students often notice only the technical skills of very musical drummers (like, say, Terry Bozzio or Gary Husband) and overlook the fact that there is much more depth to these drummers' playing than sheer physical ability. It takes some careful redirecting of a student's attention to get him or her to hear and appreciate the nuances—the subtle and dynamic nature—of our beloved drumset.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not implying that certain styles of playing are inherently more musical than others. I believe good music transcends style, and there's a wide variety of drummers making wonderful contributions to different genres. I'm a big fan of all types of drummers, including Paul Motian, Nicko McBrain, Steve Gadd, Rashied Ali, Stewart Copeland, Trilok Gurtu, Fish Fisher, Bobby Jarzombek, and Ignacio Berroa, among others. I do, however, believe that many drummers today—students and teachers, amateurs and pros—have missed out on the axiom that developing and nurturing musicality should be the most important line on a drummer's to-do list.

To help develop your overall musicality, here are some suggestions.

1. Listen to music as often as you can. But make sure that at least half the time you're listening in a very active way. Music is around us all the time, but if you truly want to get the music *inside* you, you have to dedicate some time each day when you give it your full attention. And make sure you listen to more than just the drums. The most important thing to hear is the way the



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different instruments relate to one another within the ensemble. Many of us get too caught up in listening for a fresh lick or fill to add to our repertoire. No matter how cool your latest lick is, if you put it in a place where it doesn't belong, it will be a detriment to the music.

2. Be able to play at least one other instrument. My choice is piano, because it helps me understand the harmonic and melodic components that make up most of today's music. Guitar is another great choice, as, again, melodic and harmonic aspects are present. You could also pick up a horn or try bass. Once you learn a little about how to play this other instrument, find a drummer to jam with. This will give you a better understanding of what it's like to play with a drummer and make you more sympathetic to the other musicians playing with you when you're back on drums.

3. Sing and work on ear training. Vocalizing is the link between your musical mind and the body's ability to perform the ideas you come up with. As the old adage goes, if you can't sing it, you can't play it. Don't take this literally, though. It isn't about vocalizing every single nuance to the point of