

The Affair. With The Other Instrument

by Vivian Clement

When I was in high school, I was fortunate enough to be able to learn to play several instruments. Although I considered guitar my weapon of choice, the instruments being offered in the course were wind or percussion. Since music was an easy credit and I had a general interest in other instruments, I succumbed to studying the flute. This choice in fact turned out to be a good one, since most of the musical arrangements for school bands have lead parts for the flute. This allowed me to actually learn to read music. Not only did music class give me the opportunity to play with other musicians, in our orchestra, it also taught me how to follow a conductor. In my second year, I had enough of flute and wanted to play a "cooler" instrument (I was only 15) so I decided to play sax. My music teacher at the time instructed me to first learn clarinet, which he promised would make me a better saxophonist. The reasoning was that since clarinet and sax are kissing cousins, and the clarinet is more difficult to play, it would make learning the sax that much easier to master once I decided to switch over. Even though the cool factor was not really in the clarinet, I took his advice. At the same time, I was teaching myself to play piano in the auditorium during my lunches. I had no idea what I was doing so I purchased a few piano songbooks and attempted to read the music, which was way above my head at the time. (I could hardly read the treble clef let alone the bass clef and on top of that read them simultaneously). Either way I felt inspired to tackle the piano, and over the course of time learned to play a few tunes. At some point during my musical development, I realized that being a jack-of-all-trades was probably not going to get me very far, so I made the decision to make the guitar my primary instrument. It was a turning point in my musical journey, since the guitar was the instrument that seemed to fit my musical personality.

Even though I haven't touched any of these instruments since, with the exception of the piano, I recently came to the realization that some important lessons had been ingrained into my musical psyche. The most important one being that familiarity with only one instrument can leave your musical understanding too narrow. I'm not an advocate of being a jack-of-all-trades, but I do believe that experimenting – if only superficially – with other instruments allowed me to

broaden my musical perspective, but it also imparted an appreciation and understanding of the various mindsets needed to master these instruments. Inadvertently, knowledge of various instruments also helped me to become more sympathetic with the many challenges other musicians face.



With every instrument I studied, I noticed there was a different approach to learning and a different set of physical skills that needed to be mastered in order to be competent. For example, proper breathing is vital for all wind instruments. The music written for them always takes this into consideration. Recently, I was talking to a musician friend who told me he worked with this great piano player who wrote parts for the horn section but wrote them like a piano player would play them – just tons of notes with no place to breathe. He said the gigs were exhausting since you felt like you were going to pass out before you got to the end of a phrase. The piano player was great, but was obviously clued out to the limitations of other instruments.

While we're on the subject of the piano, if you've ever played one you will undoubtedly appreciate what a great instrument it is. The piano is visually laid out before you. Its entire range is from left (low) to right (high) and all the sharp/flat notes are black. It's easy to learn to play chords and playing with both hands independently doesn't take

too much work. Of course mastering the piano is a whole different story. The interesting thing about it though, from a guitarist's perspective is that it is so much more logical than the guitar. Every note on the piano is laid out sequentially. Not so with the guitar, since each string is four intervals apart (except for the G and B of course). If you play a C7 chord on the piano you have one position plus a few inversions. The guitar, in contrast, has so many positions to play a C7 you practically need an encyclopedia to guide you (thus the reason for so many guitar books). My main point is that the approach to the piano is completely different – your left hand plays bass, while your right hand plays chords and melody; When changing positions, it's simply to play a chord an octave higher/lower. The guitar on the other hand (pardon the pun), has a more sparse approach. Sometimes you are playing rhythm, other times lead. You may at times only need to play parts of chords, sometimes copying horn parts, or playing a portion of a bass part. Guitarists are all over the place. Pianists are generally good readers; guitarists ... typically read like a kindergarten kid (There are exceptions!). We depend more on our ear.

Take a close look at drummers and you will find a whole other mindset and physical skills that are obviously quite demanding. Regardless of all the jokes made about drummers, mastering independence in your arms and legs is kind of like riding a bike, chewing gum, reading a book and combing your hair at the same time. (Hats off to the drummer who also sings.) A drummer's focus is more on rhythmic concepts and developing independence of arms and legs rather than on music itself. I must add that the best drummers I have performed with many times played a melodic instrument as well as the drums. That's not to say that drummers who don't play another instrument can't be great, but playing other instruments seemed to broaden their understanding of musical concepts.

So my hope is that you won't shy away from throwing yourself into the arms of another instrument. Just keep in mind that by studying a minor instrument, you will find that the lessons learned will filter into your musical subconscious. This will not only cause you to be a better guitarist but also build a more holistic approach to all of your future performances.

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