

The Art of the Groove

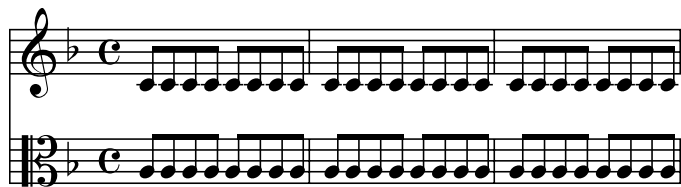
presented by the Turtle Island String Quartet

reported by Faith Farr

The Turtle Island String Quartet began their all-State residency with a lecture-demonstration they called *The Art of the Groove*. “So what’s a groove?” I wondered as I settled into the audience.

The quartet came on stage and performed a jazz standard for us — toe tapping, energetic, lively. Grand applause. “So what’s a groove?” I still wondered.

Then David Balakrishnan (first violin) stood up and said, “We all know Mr. Beethoven’s groove.” Evan Price (second violin) and Mads Tolling (viola) demonstrated:



David continued, “Over this rhythmic background there is a melody.” And Mark Summer (cello) joined the violin and viola:



Realizing “Oh! So that’s a groove!” was a light-bulb moment for me.

David explained that music with a European accent has the rhythmic emphasis on beats 1 and 3 (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven). Music with a North American accent has the emphasis on beats 2 and 4 — whistle *Pink Panther* and notice your finger snaps.

With that wonderful analogy many of the things that I “sort of” knew clicked into place. Within the wide range of styles we think of as “classical music” there are huge differences between Baroque, Classical, Romantic or Impressionistic composers, but the fundamental rhythmic background is the same. Within the wide variety of North American music — jazz, fiddle, ragtime, Latin, be-bop, rock — the fundamental rhythmic background is the same, but different from the classical background. And the trouble that I have had trying to play jazz is that I haven’t realized that I was trying to speak French with an English accent.

The Turtle Island members took turns presenting the lecture and doing the demonstration. They said that since the original instruments of jazz were bass, drum, piano and guitar, they sought ways to imitate those instruments in the quartet. The demonstrations were incredible — the chop firmly at the frog really sounded like a drum, and sometimes had a pitch like a tympani, and sometimes just had a boom like a bass drum. Evan had a technique of tapping the tip of the bow halfway up the fingerboard that sounded like a finger snap; I can’t tell how he did that. Bowing on the C-bout to sound like brushes, tapping on the wood to sound like bongos,

and strumming to sound like a banjo were more understandable techniques. And it really did sound like a banjo — not just someone pizzing on a violin to fill in the part that a banjo would take.

The clave rhythm is a familiar background for Afro-Caribbean / salsa music. This is a groove. The Turtles demonstrated clave in *The Entertainer* by Scott Joplin. The double shuffle is a variation on clave, as *The Orange Blossom Special* demonstrated. Finally, they performed the jazz standard *On Green Dolphin Street* in clave style.

Continuing the language analogy, David explained that there are other differences between music with a European accent and music with an American accent. European music tends to have counterpoint; American music tends to have solo and backup, and improvisation. European music uses a big wide vibrato that is centered on a pitch. American music uses the shake — a vibrato so big that your finger glissandos up and down — as an emphasis. Do a shake while bowing close to the bridge and it sounds like you are using electric distortion — but it is all natural sound!

Dvorak is a famous example of a European composer who was influenced by American music. The quartet performed some Dvorak as Dvorak wrote it. But, David explained, Dvorak translated what he heard into his own language. What he really heard might have sounded like ... and the Turtles began the Dvorak quartet again, but this time with a funkier rhythmic background, and progressively getting more wild and un-Dvorak as they went. It was a fascinating demonstration.

In the Q&A, the Turtles offered some advice for becoming more adept at doing jazz with strings. Listen to great jazz artists — Keith Jarrett, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and listen to great jazz standards — the golden oldies. Then be adventuresome with your instrument. Your goal is not to replace the wailing trumpet or clarinet with a violin sound, but to make your violin sound like a wailing trumpet or clarinet. The viola and cello don’t replace the saxophones or trombones, but should sound like a jazz sax or trombone. Somewhere in the quartet, someone needs to be doing the bass and percussion. In The Turtle Island Quartet, Mark Summer has developed a virtuoso pizz / slap / thumb whack / chop / foot tap technique that supplies most of the percussion needs of the ensemble. Amazing.

The concert performance was a thrilling demonstration of jazz standards and pieces composed by members of Turtle Island. Through it all, the quartet members’ rhythmic feel was obvious. No one sat still, and everyone tapped their foot. Mads alternated heel and toe. Evan tapped the heel of one foot and the toe of the other foot. Mark always had a smile of contentment and concentration as he used the sole of his right foot to brush the floor soft-shoe style during his solos.

The master class sessions provided additional insights. *Skylife* and *Julie-O* are groove tunes. They are full of funky sixteenth patterns such as:



The rhythm must in the body — torso and foot tap. (In classical

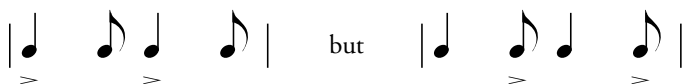
music, the rhythm tends to be just in the head.) Play the groove rhythm at the tip to imitate the timbre of jazz instruments; this music does not need the full operatic classical sound. In order to play the groove successfully, play “ghost notes” where the rests are; it actually feels like you are playing constant sixteenths. Do not stop on the rest; do a down-bow so lightly that there is hardly any sound. As David explained, if you don’t play the ghost note, you’ll get lost!

For a bow slap rhythm pattern such as:



it is important to feel all 4 beats, not just 2 and 4. Move your bow in the air in the down bow direction on the rest, and do an up-bow slap at the tip on the note. This is not boring; it takes constant concentration to really stay locked in with your ensemble.

A swing rhythm is not



think dooBa dooBa. Slur across the beat, and play in the upper 1/3 of the bow to get a swing feel.



Starting up-bow or down-bow is less important than slurring across the beat in swing. When you are at the tip, the difference between the up-bow and the down-bow is less pronounced than at the frog. Stay at the tip and get articulation using lots of taper in the sound, rather than the bounce you get at the frog. When doing separate swing eighths, stay at the tip; be flexible with fingers and wrist to kick the up-bow a bit.

To develop groove — practice slowly, tap your foot, and play with the metronome.

So where does their name come from? Turtle Island is a Native American term for North American. Using the name is their way of saying, “We play with an American accent.”

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