

The Great Debate - Technique And Theory VS 'Feel' And Using Your Ear

The battle between 'technique' and 'feel', and/or 'theory' and 'using your ear' has raged for hundreds of years. From the days of Paganini's virtuoso violin performances to Dream Theater shows today, those who play technical and complex music are regularly subject to attacks by those who appear genuinely offended by, well, the technicality and complexity of the music. 'They play too many notes', 'They play too fast' and 'They don't have any feel, it's just technique' are common comments from the 'feel and ear' camp. On the other hand you only have to visit an online 'shred guitar' forum to see equally damning claims from those for whom technique is all that matters. 'Dave Gilmour? He's shit, couldn't sweep pick to save his life'; 'Rob Harris from Jamiroquai? Not quite Steve Vai is he?'; etc. For those in both camps, their views are effectively God's Word – I have met so many musicians who just can't understand why the music they dislike exists. When musicians make achievements and gain confidence on their instruments and in music, they often become much more opinionated, to the point where anyone who disagrees with their taste in music is 'wrong', especially if the other person is a less experienced musician, or not a musician at all. However, back here in reality, the only thing anyone, technical musician, 'feel' player, or music lover who doesn't play an instrument can really say with regard to this argument, and be right, is simple. 'I like that', or 'I don't like that'. It doesn't matter who you are, from Steve Vai to Jack White, that's it. The bottom line is, if you listen to music, and you enjoy it, no-one has the right to tell you it's 'bad', whatever their reason. And vice versa, of course. Something you rarely see in Youtube comment debates is the concept of 'agreeing to disagree', but it's the most effective solution to such a pointless argument. For musicians there is another part to this debate – whether or not you should play only with feel, focus on technique, learn music theory, or ignore it. Inexperienced musicians are often concerned that practising technique will make their playing sound lifeless and robotic, and that learning music theory will force them to write music according to a rigid set of rules, sucking out the freedom that makes the creative process so much fun. Surely it's much better to just focus on feeling the music, and using your ear? Here is an alternative view. By practising technique you will gain control over your instrument, thereby allowing you to express yourself much more freely. This in turn will allow you the option of putting as much feel into your playing as you like. However, you must be sure to practice other things such as improvisation and writing music, and get out and play with others, so that you can take the technique you've learned and apply it to real musical situations. If you only practice technical exercises to the exclusion of everything else and never venture outside your bedroom, chances are when you go to jam, play a solo or write a song you will get stuck. But as part of a balanced practice routine technique can prove invaluable. Something many people miss when it comes to music theory is the fact that it is, essentially, a language with which musicians can communicate. For example, I was jamming with a friend of mine when I felt that what we were playing needed a more dreamy, happy quality to it. All I needed to say to him was 'play it in Lydian', and instantly we changed what we were playing. Sure enough, the resulting music matched how I wanted it to feel. This was possible – a change of feeling and emotion in an instant – because we both understood music theory, and were able to apply it to our instruments and music. This brings me to my next point. Music theory provides innumerable useful directions to the destination of any creative musician – expression of personal emotion. However, to do this it is not enough just to be able to repeat the contents of a theory book parrot-fashion. You must also be able to apply it to your instrument, and to any musical situation. This takes a lot of time and effort, but it is well worth it. When you are able to understand and apply music theory, you are able to express yourself without limitation. It will also allow you to examine your favourite music and use elements of it to inspire your own compositions. When you go to compose music with an understanding of music theory, it is important to remember that theory is not a set of rules. At the end of the day all creative musical decisions should be made by asking yourself one thing – 'does it sound good?'. This, of course, involves using your ear! In the realm of creative musicianship a well-developed ear is crucial, and can be obtained through effective ear training (I recommend the Earmaster program, available from www.earmaster.com). Again, like technique, music theory is most effective when used as part of a balanced musical practice. Finally, I will explain how I use all four of our apparently opposing areas in the context of my band. My ideas often come from ideas that pop up in my head, requiring me to use my ear and transcribe them. I will then use my understanding of theory to analyse the idea and create ways in which I can develop it, jamming each idea on the guitar using my ear to decide which option to go with. At this point a well-developed technique is also essential to capture the correct feel. I will also listen to my inner ear for ideas for further development. This will continue with each development until a fully formed piece emerges. Next, I have to communicate the ideas behind the piece to my band, requiring us to all understand theory so that we are on the same page. As the music is often challenging we all need a well developed technique to ensure the music is played with the intended feel. The end result is an enjoyable, musical and accurate performance. In conclusion, I hope you will use the information in this article as inspiration to pursue a well-rounded and balanced musical practice. Remember not to forget about the myriad other elements of music such as timing, groove and rhythm, etc etc – balance is the key to becoming the musician you want to be! My related items: [Hot Licks](#) - guitar training and development

About the Author

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