

CHAPTER NINE: SUMMARY OF ARTICULATIONS

You have probably noticed that a lot of variety exists in the way people say the same words in English. Sometimes it enables you to recognize the person from a simple “hello” on the telephone. Part of this ability comes from the distinctive patterns of articulation that the person has developed. In the same way, articulation is largely responsible for creating the distinctive “voice” a musician has on their instrument. Articulation is not just about being clear or unclear, but about how to deliver phrases in an interesting and meaningful way. Work towards mastery of the various methods of articulation, and use your ears to observe them in music.

Following is a summary of the variety of articulations used on the electric bass. Though it doesn't list some of the more experimental methods people sometimes use to create exotic noises, it is otherwise pretty exhaustive. I have cross-referenced these techniques to other chapters for further information and application. 6-string bassists should refer also to Chapter 17.

1. Legato Walking

Normal alternating finger articulation featuring an inbuilt raking action, where one finger plucks a string and comes to rest on the string below. The next finger to be plucked should usually move off the lower string when the previous one comes to rest, and prepare to pluck the following note in the series. Notice that the fingers thus are required to move rapidly, even in slow musical passages. (See Chapters 2, 3, and 4.) Musical passages that are particularly intended to be played legato are notated with either short, straight lines over each note-head or slur lines over the entire phrase. Such phrases should sound lyrical, as if they were sung on the one breath.

2. Staccato Walking

Left- and right-hand dampening can be incorporated in order to create shorter durations. Staccato notes are notated with a dot over each note-head.

A) Staccato via left-hand dampening: The finger fretting the note immediately lifts part-way, stopping the pitch and further vibration on the string. It is best also to lower the tips or undersides of the one or more other fingers of the left hand in order to successfully dampen without harmonics. Therefore, it is a good habit to keep the fingers that are not fretting hovering low over the strings.

B) Staccato via right-hand dampening: The first and second fingers of the right hand quickly alternate and rest on the plucked string, stopping vibration a moment after being plucked. This is in contrast to the normal legato technique where the next finger to pluck hovers

over the string to be plucked. The speed with which the fingers alternate determines the duration.

3. Dead Notes

Dead notes have little or no pitch content, and are excessively dampened by the undersides of the fingers of the left hand and/or right hand palm or fingers. Dead notes are notated with a crossed-out note-head. (See Chapters 4 and 18.) Try Exercises 9-8 and 9-9 for examples of how to apply dead notes in a non-slapping style.

The different types of dead notes are:

A) Dead notes via left-hand dampening: Two or more finger tips/undersides touch the string being plucked in order to prevent either a true note or a harmonic from sounding.

B) Dead notes via palm muting: This technique probably yields the most pitch content, and can be heard sometimes in the bass lines of motown, reggae, ska and salsa, where there is pitch but little or no sustain. The outside edge of the right palm lies across the strings while the thumb and the first finger share the plucking. This tends to be less agile than walking, but can be used as a nice contrast. Consider adding more bass via your EQ settings to compensate for the sound lost by the muting. See Photograph 9-1.



Photograph 9-1: Palm muting.