

LEARNING the ZTAR

- a discussion on synths, new controllers, and tapping -

Just laying your hands on the instrument creates new, cool sounding stuff but it's hard to organize the random approach into actually learning the instrument, efficiently. . But the same holds true for any instrument and practicing. This really calls for a technique book which we don't yet have but a few paragraphs here can give you the benefit of the cumulative experience of a number of players over since the early 1990's.

Being methodical and focusing effort within some constraints is how you embed the learning. Research claims that new finger patterns become part of muscle memory after one lunar cycle of daily practice. So figure if you repeat an exercise 100 times for 28 days straight you're going to have that bit under your belt thereafter. Here, you're dealing with music synthesizers so every sound is available to you, and if you want to get into realistic emulations of other instruments that opens quite a Pandora's box of possibilities. Realize that you could spend a lifetime on any one sound, trying to become a master at the piano as played on the ztar. Or the violin as played on the ztar, or sax, or trumpet,guitar (Learning to play guitar on the Ztar seems strange to me) People spend a lifetime with their given acoustic instrument so it's reasonable to expect that an exact emulation would require just as much effort, maybe more. And, at the end of the road with this is the personality of the Ztar itself, which definitely leads to its own style, IMHO.

In every case you're going to try to capture the articulations of another instrument using MIDI and the different features of the ztar. So when learning to emulate the first thing is to get the sound solid in your head. If you listen to a lot of Charlie Parker and want to pull that off, listen until the sound is jammed in your brain, then bring up a sax patch that you can stomach, dial in the reverb or whatever you have to do to make it acceptable, and start doing the things he did to learn his style on his instrument. You'll find this involves lots of practice with scales, arpeggios, and patterns. This takes us to the fun part and is the reason, I think, that the effort you put into learning bebop-sax will help you with learning every other style you approach on the Ztar.

I figure the three new areas of learning with the Ztar are:

- 1) Articulations, scales, chords and note choices particular to the instrument whose voice you're trying to emulate. This is new to the Ztar and different than learning **every** musical instrument because with the Ztar you're using a common fingering and the task is still possible, a combination of circumstances that may not have existed before. Of course, this is an immense undertaking if you look at the whole of it.

2) Using the polyphony of the individual strings, multiple frets being played simultaneously on each string. This is a different way to look at your note choices and is most of the reason why #1 is possible.

3) The physical touch of the Ztar fingerboard. This is very keyboard like in the way that notes turn on and off. This merits some direct practice to get the feel of it. I'd suggest using a metronome and working through piano exercises. Or, if you want to consider the effects of statement#1, get an exercise book for the instrument you're trying to emulate and learn the natural phrasing while you're building finger strength. In general, the Ztar is physically less challenging than a guitar, so if you've acquired some proficiency on the guitar you can certainly do this. The Ztar is a bit like power steering though, and the task becomes one of learning to control note-timing.

You've got to get the notes comfortably under your fingers no matter what you're playing and while you do indeed want to end up playing music I think you have to do some calisthenics to build the muscle memory. Same as any instrument. Again, every style and every sound will dictate it's own exercises but there is a reasonable place to start.

Start with a piano sound you can listen to for at least an hour. Every synth should have at least one of those. I'm thinking tapping style here and the goal is two hands on the fingerboard. Best to start with just one hand. If that's all you ever intend to do then you can probably stick with standard guitar tuning. If you go to two hands you'll probably be happier if you switch to straight fourths tuning. Less to learn.

Now finger a major scale in a comfortable position on the fingerboard. Stay in one hand position and work that mother across all the strings at an even tempo without any fluffs. Don't bump the tempo until your solid on this. There are 1M scale studies that repeat different interval sequences and eventually you'd like to master all of it, which is what Parker did... Coltrane practiced Slonimsky's scale and intervals studies... but bear in mind that you may not want to become a virtuoso and if you do it won't happen overnight. You'll have to eventually work through every type of scale (there are 100's but 5 or 6 will cover a lot of ground) in every fingering position. There are (5) on a guitar fingerboard but in fourths tuning you'll see that the symmetry kind of blends them all together and reduces the number of variants by 2/3.

So, not to be overwhelmed or over-worked, pick a scale or fragment that works with a piece of music you're into and practice it evenly for 100 repetitions.

Teaching the picking hand to fret :

This is cool because you're starting fresh. It's just like learning the piano. Find the same major scale you had before and move it up the neck 12 frets. Start slowly. Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-f*ing-do. Serious. Again. Deliberately. Feel you uncoordinated picking hand trying to find the notes. Again. Slowly. Feel the spots where your strokes are weak. Isolate them and repeat them "do-re-do-re-do-re..." say 100 times, until the attack is consistent. Try to get the effect of a playing card stuck in the spokes of your bicycle.

Don't forget to practice pentatonic scales and blues scales, which you can burn on, with a little practice. They're easy as they may be played with two fretting fingers per string

One thing that helps timing for the top hand is to finger the scale with the bottom hand that already knows how to do this. Place your top hand 12 frets up the neck and grab the same scale. Because on the Ztar you'll be using the same fingers on either hand to play the same notes of a pattern, you can use the bottom hand to lead the timing and the top hand will follow. This is pretty easy for the brain. Piano players learn this but their fingerings are different for each hand when they play unison scales or patterns (a little ztar advantage:) without overdoing it, if you can put in 15 minutes/day working up finger strength and technique you'll get better faster on the instrument, any instrument.

Learning scales, in patterns not just from one end to the other will apply to jamming in most all styles. Practicing arpeggios is even better for learning the fingerboard, IMHO. There are idiosyncrasies to every style of music that you'll want to isolate and practice to nail. For instance, boogie-piano has that rolling left-hand bass. You'd want to isolate that and work it through a tune until you're comfortable. This is a stock lick for a guitarist or bassist but tapping it is the new thing you're learning here. Go slow to make sure the attacks come always in the right spots. You'll find tapping with the bottom hand will be easier if you can support the instrument so that it's stable without relying too much on your thumb to hold the neck in place. This will keep your hand from getting fatigued.

Once the bassline is solid you can add a chord or lick with the top hand. First, just add it once in the right spot. Bap! Now here it comes again. Bap! Go slow until you can add it at every bar in the same spot or wherever you want it. I got this from Stanley Jordan. This is a brain problem more than a hand problem. Careful repetition at an even tempo is the way. Another easy way to get into two hands playing is to finger a simple chord or interval, say a root-5 or 3-b7, and tap it with the top hand in tempo. Keep it going steadily until it's locked and start to play a bassline with the bottom hand. This reduces the task for the untrained hand to one of just keeping tempo without having to think too much about its fingerings. How pianists get fully independent hands is a two-brained thing that must be genetics but I understand practice helps. Drummers are even worse. This comes from growing up patting your head and rubbing your tummy too much.

I think the thing that gives the ztar some character is the Poly mode and using that you can develop a lot of voicings that wouldn't hear anywhere else. Using chords with two notes per string, say two or three strings, you can work up chord scales that are thick and easy to pull off. Another approach is to just get into a given tune. Practice the parts of it and see how isolated bits fall into sub-patterns of scales and arpeggios. Expand the lick to work up your own studies from this, which will help you to improvise on that tune.

Here's another fun thing to do that will give you a great view of the fingerboard. Play a scale on just one string with both hands. Try to explore this for a practice session

without changing strings. (Avoid temptation!) An interesting and enjoyable aid to this exercise is the OCTAVES preset in the Ztar that keeps the note names the same for every fret for all of the strings but by changing octaves you can get some interesting variety happening. Actually, this creates an entirely new instrument that someone someday will master. This puts 7 octaves on the 6-string fingerboard so there's a lot to explore.

Three fingers or Four?

I think the two techniques have different uses. If you stay within a hand position on the fretboard four fingers becomes pretty useful. Obviously when chording the fourth finger is going to help reach extra notes.

In fourths tuning three fingers can cover most major and minor diatonic scales in one hand position. You'll notice that when you practice three fingers after a while you get into a groove, the three-finger motor that Emmett Chapman talks about. Your wrist sort of rocks back and forth in a steady motion as you work scales from string to string. You can pop down the right fingers to get the notes while your wrist keeps going.

This works great as you move out of a hand position and travel up and down the neck. You start to think of note-patterns in 3-note chunks on a section of a string and you can just move your hand up and down a string or from string to string to grab a 3-note pattern. You can develop ridiculous speed this way as you start to drop the three fingers almost simultaneously. By using only 3 fingers you don't have to worry about "do I use finger3 or finger4?" It lends to a more automatic motion.

Try taking a 6-note pattern, 3 notes on two adjacent strings in one hand position. Play it a couple of times then pick it up and drop it one octave up, (2 strings up and 2 frets up when tuned in fourths). You can spot the little pattern all over the fingerboard this way and the symmetry is really easy on the brain.

With 3, I think chromatics are tougher and although a whole-tone scale in fourths falls out in 3 "like butter" the 5-fret stretch may be uncomfortable. But if you keep your wrist moving you just slide up or down to get the notes.

Pentatonics, which are, I would say, 2-finger scales, fall out of the 3-finger patterns easily. Also, it's more likely that you'll get firm even attacks without relying on your little baby lightweight pinky finger, which is more of an issue on a Stick than the Ztar.

The four-finger approach may lead you to understand that most scales, chords, and key modulations can be played within a single 5-fret hand position when tuned in fourths, which may be easier when balanced against two hands re-positioning up and down the fingerboard. Three and four note patterns on a chromatic scale in one hand position are a good aid to getting comfortable in this.

I think in all, it doesn't make too much difference but both techniques are definitely worth practicing to find which best suits your style.