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# Phrasing: Speaking in Musical Sentences

**by John Cipolla**

"Play musically!" "Play with feeling!" "Play with expression!" How many times have our teachers and conductors urged us to do these things? For many, the terms *musicality*, *feeling* and *expression* seem shrouded in mystery. Partly because of this, it is sometimes assumed that one either has musical talent or not, and therefore that one either is or is not able to play musically. However, there are specific ways in which we can learn to infuse our performances with greater musical interest. Unfortunately, students are not always taught how to produce these effects that stir the emotions of the listener.

In music as in speech, *phrasing* the musical line produces these expressive effects. To remove the mystery from musical phrasing, it might be helpful to compare a musician to a craftsman. The craftsman has a toolbox from which she selects tools to perform her craft. She selects the proper tool for the proper job: a hammer to bang a nail, a screwdriver to drive a screw, or a wrench to loosen a bolt. When executing a musical phrase the musician also has a toolbox from which to select the right implement. This toolbox has two trays: the *Analysis Tray* and the the *Execution Tray*. Each of these contains specific tools for specific tasks.

## Analysis Tools

- Harmony
- Contour of the Musical Line
- Important Structural Notes
- Melodic and Motivic Material
- Context and Stylistic Tendencies

Like a craftsman sizing up the job before starting to work, the musician must first study the music before performing it. After our analysis is complete, we are much better prepared to create a convincing execution of the phrases. However, there is a fundamental difference between a craftsman and a musician. The musician produces sounds, which can be helpful in the analysis phase, so we should not become too bogged down with the analysis before playing a note. In fact, sometimes playing through a piece slowly first in order to hear it will help us to understand its construction better.

The first tool from the **Analysis** tray is *Harmony*. When preparing a piece of music for performance, we must always be aware of the harmonies, not only those that are explicitly included as chords, but those that are outlined or implied by the melodic line. The harmony has a central role in creating the interplay of tension and release in the musical line. For example, non–chord tones in a phrase sound like they need to resolve to more stable chord tones. When they do resolve, the tension in the line is released. When resolution is delayed, tension intensifies. An example might be the minor $7^{th}$ in a dominant $7^{th}$ chord. The unstable sound of the $7^{th}$ stabilizes if the $7^{th}$ resolve to the 3rd of the I (one) chord.

*The Contour* of the musical line generally gives clues as to where the phrase reaches its climax. This point is often, but not always, the highest point in the line. Determining this can, in turn, help the performer pace the dynamics through the phrase so that the loudest point is not reached too soon. By understanding the contour of the line and its supporting harmony, one can also determine the other *Important Structural Notes* of a phrase. An example might be a line that takes the shape of an arc in which the beginning and end of the phrase are both harmonized by stable chord, such as the tonic.

The high point in the middle of the arc has a $V^7$ chord, creating a I-$V^7$-I progression. Clearly, the middle of the phrase—the $V^7$ chord—produces the most tension. The important melodic notes are those that belong to the I-V7-I chords as each is heard. The other notes in between are not as crucial, and the composer probably used them to help approach the important structural notes in a smooth or unique way. The *Melodic Motives* in a musical line also give important clues, usually through the nature of their repetition or development. If a melody, or a fragment of a melody is repeated or developed later in the phrase, there is often a chance for the performer to vary the repeated or developed material, such as play the repetition softer or louder, to create interest for the listener.

An understanding of the *Context and Stylistic Tendencies* of the period of music being played will give the performer ideas as to how to approach the music in a literate fashion. For instance, in Mozart, a dot over a note does not mean to play the note with an extreme staccato. In that period of music, the Classic, the dot meant to play the note separated but not in a dry or “pecky” fashion. Another example from Mozart is the interpretation of dynamics. Mozart's dynamics are somewhat terraced. There are crescendos and diminuendos, but they are not of the extended dramatic type that we find later in the Romantic period. By understanding this, we might choose to reinforce the more sudden contrasts between "piano" and "forte,” rather than by phrasing with "swells" of crescendos and diminuendos.

## Execution Tools

- Dynamics
- Tempo Variation
- Articulation

- Vibrato

Reaching into the **Execution** tray of our toolbox we pull out our *Dynamics* tool. This can be one of the most effective tools in capturing the listener's attention. Simply by playing a phrase louder or softer, or by using a diminuendo or crescendo, we can immediate capture the listener's attention for that moment. When a motive is repeated a number of times, changing the dynamic often helps to add interest to the line.

Next we find our *Tempo Variation* tool. By using accelerandos and ritards (rubato), intensity can be enhanced. The listener hears that something essential is changing, and his attention is engaged for that moment. Taking liberties with the tempo by slowing down or speeding up is a common technique in vocal music, especially opera. Nineteenth–century French, Italian and German music all employ this technique freely. As singing is probably the most natural and organic form of musical expression, it is helpful for instrumentalists to listen to singers.

Our next tool, *Articulation* (the connection or separation of notes), is crucial to proper phrasing. This tool allows the performer to group together specific successions of notes so they sound as if they are part of the same phrase. Without the separation or the smooth connection of notes one wouldn't be able to tell where one phrase ends and the next begins.

At first one may not think of *Vibrato* as a tool to help phrase music convincingly. But realize that anything done tastefully that stirs the listener and captures her attention for a moment is an effective phrasing tool. As small a tool as vibrato is, it has its merits. The fast or slow speed of the vibrato can help intensify or relax a note. This, coupled with an appropriate change in dynamics, can make a listener sit on the edge of his chair.

Although some people may indeed be more innately talented than others, nearly anyone can learn how to play with musicality, feeling and expression. As we learned to speak and write at home, and then in school by studying nouns, vowels and sentence structure, we must master the analogous tools in order to speak the “language” of music fluently. With study and practice, we tend to absorb the "rules," and speak and write naturally without thinking about what we are doing; in a sense, we pass over the process of "thinking" and simply perform the task. This "natural ability" in music will improve with consistent study, practice and performance using the tools in our phrasing toolbox. We will then be able to "speak in musical sentences."

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