

In Praise of the Phrase

As band directors and music educators, we have the privilege of hearing many musical performances, both live and on recordings. The performances we hear vary from being poorly executed to moving musical experiences. Even well-executed performances may vary from being lack-luster to breathtaking. The difference between the two lies generally in musical phrasing.

“For me, phrasing has two main components. The first is musical punctuation. According to (Mark) Hindsley, in choral music the words themselves clearly indicate the phrasing, but in instrumental music the punctuation must be left to the imaginations of the performers and conductor. The way a band phrases, more than anything else, indicates its understanding of the music being played. . . “¹

In text, there are many examples of musical punctuation. One example is the period, which indicates the end of a sentence or complete thought. A musical phrase, like a phrase in prose, can be defined as a complete musical sentence or thought. It involves an understanding of harmonic and rhythmic cadences, either or both, through cognitive or affective means.

I often teach my students to determine phrase length by having them play a chorale with obvious phrases and asking them to stop playing at the end of the first phrase (without telling where that is). Phrasing is musical “decision-making” and students need to learn to make those all-important musical decisions. If there is disagreement within the band as to the length of the phrase, I use this “teachable moment” to lead my students to an understanding of harmonic and rhythmic cadences and their relationship to musical phrasing. As soon as there is agreement regarding phrase length, the students bracket the phrase with their pencils [I and label it “phrase one.” I repeat this process throughout a composition labeling the phrases 1, 2, 3, etc. This places emphasis where it belongs — on phrases, not notes. I tell my students that they should play each phrase with one breath. Younger students may have difficulty playing a complete phrase with one breath. If this is the case, I tell them to breathe at a different place than the person sitting next to them. I also tell them not to breathe at barlines for this often disturbs the “musical flow” or movement of the music.

The second component of good musical phrasing is to understand which note or notes, within a phrase, receive emphasis. Relate the teaching of musical phrases to sentences. Have the students say the following sentence four times, each time emphasize a different word:

- I love making music.
- I LOVE making music.
- I love MAKING music.
- I love making MUSIC.

Bruce Pearson *Music*

Explain to them how this changes the meaning of the sentence. The same is true of musical phrases.

The next step is to help the students discover which note or notes should receive emphasis within each phrase.

Below are four musical examples, each illustrating a different principle.



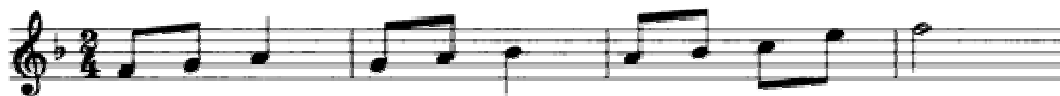
Example 1

If the notes are generally moving upward, the highest note is the destination and should receive emphasis.



Example 2

If the notes are generally moving downward, the lowest note is the destination and should receive emphasis.



Example 3

Often times, the longest note within a phrase should receive the emphasis.



Example 4

Sometimes the note outside of the key or tonality receives emphasis.

Next, I instruct my students to use their pencils to mark an X above (or below) the most important note or note of destination in each phrase.

Generally, there will be a crescendo of all notes leading to that note within the phrase and a decrescendo of all notes leading away from the most important note within a phrase.

It may be necessary to instruct those playing long notes (oftentimes the accompaniment parts) regarding the location of the most important note to ensure a fullness of musical expression.

Good teachers apply what the students have just learned to new experiences or new music. Apply this principle to the music you are preparing.

Music has often been called the “International Language” or “Universal Bridge.” This can only be true if there is good musical expression. The key to expression is good musical phrasing or one may say, “Praise the phrase.”

1. Johnson, Everett, Mark, Ed, Yale and YOU! Alla Breve, December 2002, Auburn, Al.

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