

Playing with expression

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

When I was a child, my piano teacher once complained that I ‘reduced piano playing to the level of typing’. He was absolutely right. At the time, I was playing a Bach invention with grim and dogged determination, but kept running out of fingers and was never quite sure whether the clashes were Bach’s intentional dissonances or my own wrong notes. I had neither the technique nor the musical maturity to be able to tackle the music. I could just as well have been attempting to give a poetry reading in a language I didn’t understand.

How can we approach teaching so that musical understanding develops hand in hand with technique? Is it even possible to teach expressive playing, or is there an ‘x-factor’ that is innate in only a limited number of pupils?

Technique

As a trumpeter, I have come across colleagues whose mantra is ‘higher, faster, louder’. Shaping an exquisite musical phrase simply isn’t on their radar. Yet technique should be the means to a musical end, not an end itself.

From the very first lesson, we should be teaching pupils how to link notes together fluently – just as the words we speak link together, so notes we play should generally have a legato flow. You can instantly tell the difference between a human speaking and a robot, because of the natural flow between the words and the subtle inflections of speech. We need to apply the same principles in music.

After learning the basics of sound production, gaining a control of articulation is crucial on all instruments, and this usually starts in the very first lesson:

- ▶ Pianists need the finger coordination to ‘walk their fingers’ between the notes, rather than pressing down each key in a detached way.
- ▶ Wind and brass players need to be able to tongue notes in a smooth flow, rather than ‘huffing’ each note separately, or, worse still, breathing after every note.
- ▶ String players need to bow with fluidity, rather than jerking the bow up and down the instrument.

It’s often taught that articulation is either ‘legato’ or ‘staccato’ when in reality, it’s a spectrum from the smoothest slur to the shortest staccato note. Even a staccato mark can have very different implications according to its context. Does it need to have the impact of a gunshot, or does it have the purposeful bounce of a kangaroo? Developing this subtlety is not an advanced technique, and can easily be introduced to beginners. Likewise, blending different articulations within a phrase – some notes slurred, some tongued (or the equivalent for string players) but within a smooth flow – is not difficult to master. Technical control over dynamics is another major factor in playing with expression, whether this means how much weight you apply to the bow, or how hard you blow. And playing with a pleasant sound is obviously vital.

Edward Maxwell is a freelance trumpet player and teaches in primary, secondary and higher education, including at Cranleigh School, Hurstpierpoint College and Reigate Grammar School. A keen composer and arranger, his educational music books have been published by Boosey and Hawkes, Spartan Press, Music Sales and Warwick Music. He is an examiner for Music Teachers’ Board.



Difficulty of the music

While it may sound obvious, a piece should be attempted only if the pupil has the necessary technique to give a convincing performance. Unfortunately, this is not always adhered to by teachers: the clamour to get onto the next grade as quickly as possible often results in pupils being given music that's too difficult for them.

I remember hearing a primary school concert where a pupil was introduced with great acclaim because he was playing a Grade 7 piece. Despite sounding dreadful because it was entirely beyond his ability, he was given a rapturous reception for his attempt. This was followed by a very simple piece played by a beginner, played so beautifully that it brought a tear to my eye. Which was the better performance? Who was the better musician?

As a teacher, would you give a Grade 1 piece to a Grade 5 pupil? If not, why not? A parent once complained to me that I was giving her child pieces that were too easy for him, so I pointed out that firstly he could not play them perfectly without a lot of help, and secondly, professionals often play 'easy' music – they just play it really well. A piece can be performed on completely different levels: when I auditioned for the Royal College of Music, one of the set pieces also happened to be on the ABRSM Grade 5 syllabus. Many concerto movements can be found on grade syllabuses, yet there is an unimaginable gulf between how they would be played by an exam candidate and by a professional.

My own rule of thumb is that a pupil should only attempt a piece that they can sightread reasonably convincingly and that takes only a few weeks to learn thoroughly. A fast turnover of easy pieces is preferable to spending a whole year learning three exam pieces.

Let's now assume that technique is shipshape and won't prove an obstacle to tackling the musical content.

Developing musical understanding

An understanding of the musical genre is essential for a convincing stylistic performance. How can you play swung quavers if you've never listened to jazz? An almost infinite amount of music is available online, so pupils will normally have easy access to recordings of pieces they're learning. Wider listening can include other compositions by the same composer or in a similar genre. See if you can find different versions of the same piece to encourage critical listening. Discussions might include:

- ▶ Which performance do you prefer and why?
- ▶ If you were blessed with the formidable technique of a world-class performer, how would you play it *differently*? (Don't just try to blindly copy.)
- ▶ When was the piece written?
- ▶ Is there any interesting historical context to shed light on it?
- ▶ Is it written for your instrument, or has it been adapted? It may have been written for a predecessor of your instrument. How would it be different if, for example, you played something on piano that was originally written for harpsichord?

Broader listening, beyond the immediate repertoire a pupil is learning, can stimulate a love of music, a curiosity to explore, and an understanding of the different moods music can create. Critical listening should be encouraged, particularly including evocative music that tells a story, captures a mood or paints a picture. Suggestions might include:

- ▶ Literally any film music: its purpose is precisely to set a scene, from the menace of the *Jaws* theme to the grandeur of *Star Wars*, from the swashbuckling shanties of *Pirates of the Caribbean* to the heart-rending pathos of *Schindler's List*.
- ▶ *Vltava* from *Má vlast* by Smetana charts the course of the River Vltava, through woods and meadows, past a wedding dance, past mermaids in the moonshine, castles, before finally arriving majestically in the city of Prague.
- ▶ Debussy's *La mer*
- ▶ Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*
- ▶ Holst's *The Planets*
- ▶ Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*
- ▶ Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony

Contemporary music, like modern art, can be hard to comprehend. It's easy to dismiss it as unpleasant and jarring. Children, however, are often more open-minded than adults, so it's important not to impose our preconceptions onto our pupils. We might need to recalibrate our musical expectations: rather than asking if it has a hummable Mozartian tune with predictable harmonies, we might instead be captivated by angular melodies, fascinating textures and timbres, hypnotic rhythms and extremes of dynamics. Similarly, modern art can be a challenge to understand because it is not always immediately obvious what's being portrayed, but if we delve deeper, we might find hidden layers, unusual combinations of colours, shapes, textures and patterns. Each viewer will be challenged to discover something different. Contemporary music can stir strong emotions: a dissonant film soundtrack might create an overwhelmingly powerful mood in the context of the narrative, despite being hard to listen to if taken in isolation.

Analysis

Music works on multiple levels. On a larger scale, we have the overall architecture, including the key structure, while on a smaller scale we have individual phrases and harmonic progressions. But even within phrases, we need to consider the minutiae of how each note and chord interconnects. A play is split into acts, scenes and individual interactions. Everything is important down to the inflection of each word, which imparts meaning to the broader narrative. Music should always have forward movement, but some moments may have a more urgent sense of purpose, perhaps heading towards a climax, while others may have a timeless sense of relaxation. We need to be aware of the points of tension and release.

An awareness of both the harmonic and melodic language, and the interplay between the two, gives us an understanding of where the music is heading. Analysis need not be dry and academic, but can be entirely practical, leading to decisions about how we actually perform a piece.

A musical journey

My old piano teacher, whom I mentioned in the introduction, also once told me that I ignored all of music's red traffic lights. A journey can be a good analogy for a piece: if each individual phrase is a road, a cadence can be treated as a junction. We need to link phrases together in such a way that they are clearly separated, but still have a coherent sense of flow: we might stop at the red traffic lights, but when we restart, we're still heading towards our destination.

The key structure of a piece may be as follows: we start at home (the tonic) and then maybe travel to see our friend (the dominant). After popping into a few places en route (as the music moves through other keys), we arrive back home (the tonic). The music might modulate to the relative minor and take a sad turn – perhaps you've been to a football match and your favourite team has lost.

Here are some questions you might want to discuss about the architecture, direction and mood of the music, using the idea of a journey:

- ▶ Where are we going?
- ▶ Are we on a road, track, river?
- ▶ Are we walking, driving, flying, sailing?
- ▶ Are we in the countryside or in a city?
- ▶ What is the scenery?
- ▶ Are we going fast or slow, uphill or downhill?
- ▶ Are we based in reality or a fantasy world?
- ▶ Can you think of words to describe the music? It may be ethereal, triumphant, mournful, joyful, energetic, lethargic or capricious.
- ▶ How does it make us feel?

Phrasing

My favourite definition of a phrase is a *musical sentence*. The words in a sentence have a natural flow, where some words have more emphasis than others. Punctuation helps to clarify the meaning. We naturally breathe between sentences, and we should encourage our pupils to breathe in phrases, whether they're pianists, string or wind players, or singers. It's common to hear wind players breathing in random places, which is comparable to removing all the punctuation from a paragraph and dumping it back in completely random places.

Music can be ambiguous, and there are not always rights and wrongs. It's important to make our own decisions about how we shape the music – this is what is meant by 'interpretation'. Phrasing a piece in different ways can give drastically different results, just as changing the punctuation completely changes the meaning of the following sentences:

The barrister said the accused was on drugs.

'The barrister,' said the accused, 'was on drugs.'

Try saying 'I'm not going to school tomorrow', with the emphasis on a different word each time. The meaning will subtly change each time. Try playing a phrase with an emphasis on different notes. Which works best?

Musical punctuation

We'll now look at how we might phrase Henry Purcell's beautiful song 'Fairest Isle' (from *King Arthur*).

Here are the notes, without any phrase marks:



There's a lot of ambiguity – should we phrase around the barlines, or should crotchets at the end of a bar be treated as upbeats? Perhaps a mixture of both? If this was a paragraph, where would we add commas and full stops to give the sentence meaning? The following version is perfectly plausible:



If we add John Dryden's poetry, however, we come up with a completely different version:

Fair-est Isle, all isles ex-cel-ling, Seat of pleas-sure and of love,

Cu-pid from his fa-v'rite na-tion, Care and en-vy will re-move;

Jea-lou-sy that poi-sons pa-ssion, And des-pair that dies for love.

Like all songs, 'Fairest Isle' has the advantage of words to help us shape the music into meaningful phrases. If there are no words, we need to think just as carefully about what the music is telling us. A creative pupil could even be encouraged to write their own words to the music, to express its mood. There are plenty of pieces of music called 'Song Without Words', but any melody is just that – the roots of all melody are in song, and it's our job as a performer to tease out the essence of the music.

The following extract is from the 'Basse Dance', the opening movement of *Capriol Suite* by Peter Warlock, based on a Renaissance dance.



Each phrase starts with three strong crotchets and finishes with a minim and a crotchet. Wind players may be tempted to breathe after the minim – admittedly easier to play, but akin to putting a full stop *before* the last word of your sentence. The musical line should *always* be our priority, and we need to adapt our technique to serve this, not vice versa.

Note also the hemiolas, indicated by my brackets – another important aspect of phrasing early music. If a computer was to play this extract, the first three notes would be identical, making them sound static. We can, however, inject a sense of forward movement by adding a crescendo, or subtly varying the articulation, just as every word you speak has its own unique inflection.

Other expressive tools

Tone

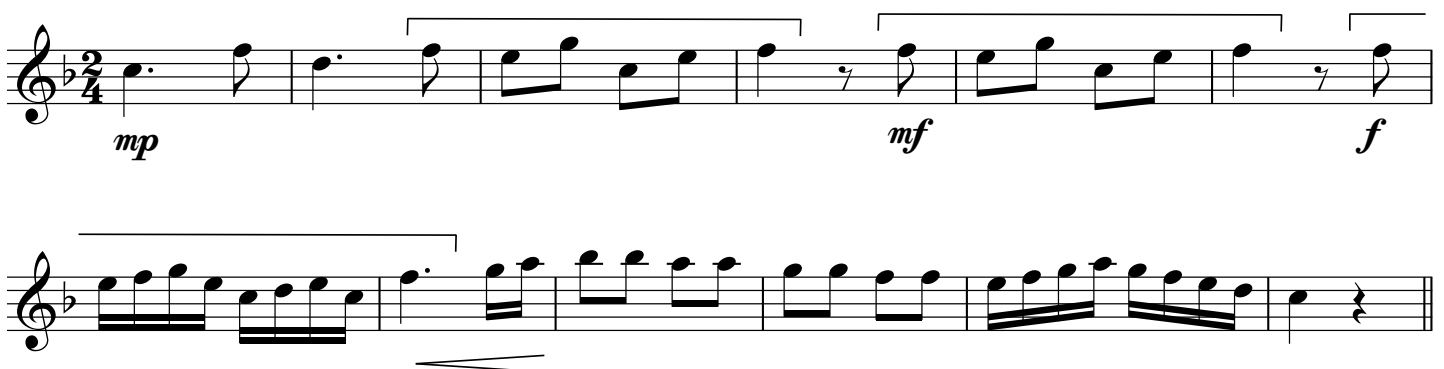
Try to change your sound according to the character of the music. Emulating a human voice is always a good model: how would you vary the tone of your voice if singing different songs? Now 'sing it' on your instrument. A varied use of vibrato is important, especially by string players.

Tempo

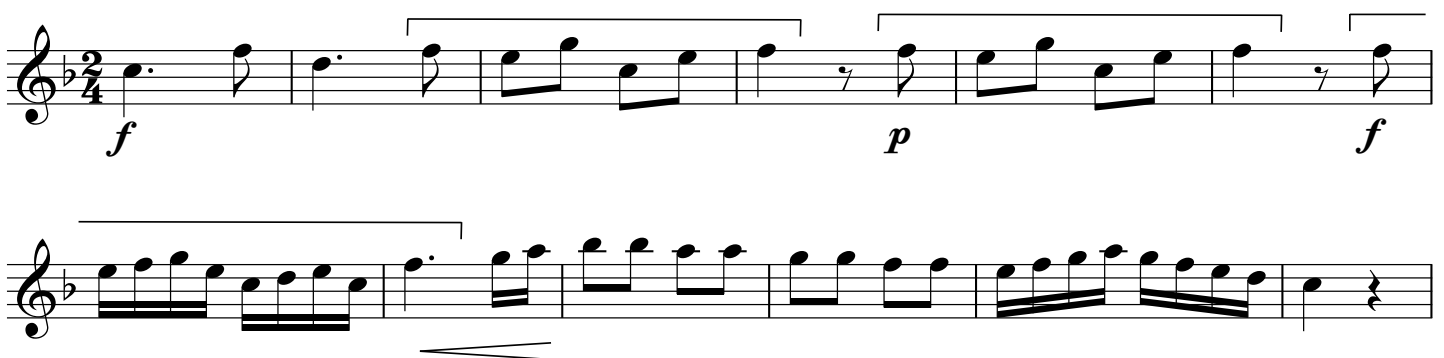
Carefully managed rubato can be effective: we may want to hurry towards a climax and then draw back in more reflective moments.

Dynamics

In the following extract from Haydn's trumpet concerto, we give our musical champagne bottle a shake (under the brackets), then a more vigorous shake, then on the third time, a new tune bubbles forth.



Or should the second phrase be treated as an echo?



Being a rondo theme, it comes back several times: perhaps each iteration can have a different interpretation. The second example may be best when the tune first appears, because it has more of an instant impact at the start, but there are no rights and wrongs – we can endlessly experiment.

Articulation

I have mentioned comparisons with speech: every word in a sentence has its place in the sentence's hierarchy, and small inflections can change the meaning. Think about how you articulate each note, in order impart musical meaning.

The two pieces below have identical notes, but if the first is played with swung quavers, it will have characteristic jazz articulation; the second one, played with even quavers and the articulation reversed, will have a Latin feel.



Music editions

How closely should we follow the directions on the page? Do we try to second-guess the composer's intentions, or are we going to mould the notes into something exciting and new? Do we know if the expression markings have been through the filter of a publisher's editor, or are they the composer's own intention?

There's no definitive performance of a Shakespeare play. Each one looks at the material from a new perspective, and each actor will give a unique portrayal of the characters. Rather than trying to recreate something in a dusty display cabinet in a museum, I believe that we need to breathe fresh life into a piece every time it's performed. As performers, it's our prerogative to play a piece however we want it to go, as long as our decisions are *thoughtfully considered*. I have, at different times, played historically informed performances of early music on period instruments, and jazz arrangements of the same music. There is no contradiction between the two.

I once heard a recording of a trumpet piece, played by an eminent musician, in which he had unquestioningly followed all the editorial expression and breath markings in the sheet music. Some time earlier, I had performed the piece myself using the same edition, and in my rehearsals with my accompanist, we had decided that the markings were unmusical, so we substantially re-edited them. Sheet music is often poorly edited, and we shouldn't blindly follow the markings. I'd suggest using markings as a starting point, but then overrule them if you don't like them. As I have previously said, base your decisions on *musical* considerations, rather than what is technically expedient. Allow students the freedom to experiment and make their own choices.

Even if the markings have been made by the composer, rather than an editor, you still have the right to overrule. Many composers have ignored their own markings when conducting or performing their pieces, illustrating the fact that there is no single definitive interpretation of any piece of music.

Playing with others

If you hear someone talking on the telephone, it probably won't make much sense because you're only hearing half of the conversation. Yet frequently music teachers ask pupils to learn a solo part which is only one part of the overall piece. While piano pieces are normally self-contained, for instrumentalists and singers, piano accompaniments usually provide the harmonic backdrop and provide missing musical dialogue in the bars' rest, or countermelodies that weave in and out of the main tune. In places, the piano part may take over the tune, and the solo part take over the accompaniment. Sometimes, a pupil might get to play with an accompanist for the first time on the day of an exam or performance. During the pandemic, some of the exam boards accepted unaccompanied pieces, so pupils may never have experienced the piece in its entirety. Playing pieces with piano accompaniments or backing tracks is essential to gain an understanding of the piece as a whole. Even if your piano playing is limited, do your best to play accompaniments. There are backing tracks available online to accompany many popular pieces and there are pianists who will record an accompaniment online for a small fee.

Playing in ensembles is not only fun, but crucial for musical development: you can bounce ideas off each other and work out how best to bring the music to life, in the same way that actors' interactions breathe life into their stories. Most importantly, you understand how to work effectively as a team.

I have learnt far more about musical interpretation by playing chamber music with thoughtful musicians than I ever learnt at music college, where the ability to operate a trumpet efficiently was the priority. I have been a member of a brass quintet (Mardi Brass) for 30 years. Our rehearsals are always full of lively discussions about what mood we're trying to create, the place of every note in a phrase, and, most importantly, how the different strands of music respond and interact with each other. While nuanced professional playing may be rather different from rehearsing a student ensemble, we can apply the same principles: everyone needs to listen and respond. Some questions to ask your ensemble members:

- ▶ Are you playing the tune, or are you accompanying?
- ▶ If accompanying, are you aware of who has the tune?
- ▶ If you take over the tune from someone else, are you phrasing it in the same way?
- ▶ Are you breathing in the same places?
- ▶ Are you playing in tune with each other?
- ▶ Are you playing to the same metronomic beat?
- ▶ Are you absolutely precise with your rhythms?
- ▶ Are you watching the conductor?

The performance

A good actor will captivate us and can bring even a bad script to life. A good comedian can make you laugh even if reciting something as mundane as a shopping list. A good musician transcends the notes and can make the most mediocre piece sound as if it's the most beautiful piece in the world.

A stage play gives the illusion that the narrative has never happened before: it is unfolding before our eyes. It appears spontaneous, regardless of the fact that the play in question may have been already performed thousands of times.

As musicians, we need to imagine that we are giving a piece its first ever performance. Paradoxically, that feeling of spontaneity is gained from hours of methodical practice. Once every piece of the jigsaw is painstakingly put in place, we can take a step back and admire the picture. Our technique should be invisible: we should make the piece sound easy and effortless, even improvisatory, so we can fully convey the character of the music.