

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

'Music can describe emotions far more accurately than words ever can.' John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten from the Sex Pistols)

'Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to remain silent.' Victor Hugo

It's unlikely that John Lydon, who was instrumental in the development of punk in the 1970s, enjoyed the same music as Victor Hugo, who liked the music of Beethoven and Mozart and had influential friends such as Berlioz and Liszt. Yet their quotes are remarkably similar. Many other people with their roots in disparate musical genres have said the same thing. Somehow music in all its varied forms can encapsulate deep human emotions, create different moods and tell stories without (and sometimes with) words.

So, how do we approach interpreting a musical phrase to uncover its very essence?

A phrase is a 'musical sentence'. Consider the difference between a set of completely random words and a meaningful sentence. Now compare a group of completely random pitches with a memorable tune. The difference is huge. Phrasing is how we make sense of pitches and rhythms, and organise them into coherent patterns. Like a sentence constructed from words, a phrase needs to have flow, shape, a sense of direction, emphasis on certain notes and a feeling of completion at the end. With words, we use different inflections when speaking and punctuation when writing. In music, we use articulation, dynamic shaping, tonal colour, different tempos and rubato.

Depending on the length of the piece, we may need to have an awareness of the underlying structure and the harmonic development: a long piece may undergo several transformations and it's useful to know how each phrase fits into the overall architecture.

Regardless of whether an actor is reciting a short poem or taking part in a large-scale play, each individual line needs to be delivered convincingly, and a short sentence from a play usually makes sense in its own right, outside of the larger narrative. Like lines in a play, musical phrases can interact and converse, creating questions and answers, dissonance and resolution, reassuring predictability and surprising twists.

While an awareness of the wider musical context is essential, this resource will mainly examine phrasing on a smaller scale: how do we perform each phrase with expression, conviction, coherence and stylistic awareness? We can teach this from a student's very first lesson.

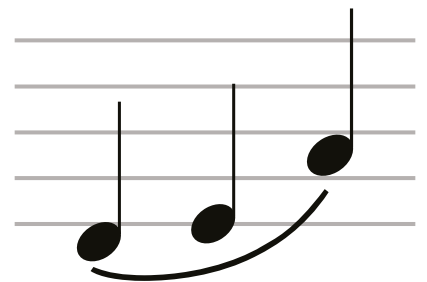
Technique

In order to express your musical ideas convincingly, it's essential to develop some basic techniques on your instrument. Technique should be developed with clear musical goals, and, regardless of your standard, you should be able to play your pieces with musical understanding and technical security. How often do you hear school performances where a section is fudged, or slows down because it gets too difficult? Why has a student been given a piece that's beyond their technical capabilities? (This is often due to the race to get exam certificates before a student is fully ready, but let's not get sidetracked.)

Technical exercises should be given from the very start. Some exercises are purely mechanical, while others should be played with a musical flow. For example, I may play single- and double-tonguing exercises on my trumpet that have no musical merit per se. This is a muscular training exercise to gain speed, strength and consistency. When I apply these skills to a piece of music, however, I can use the control I've developed to a musical end: I can play with a sense of musical shape and movement.

The technical issues below relate to brass – my own area of expertise – but most are equally applicable to different instrumental families, so please read on even if you're not a brass player. Consider how different techniques can give your students a full toolkit to play with musical expression.

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Dynamics

- Can you sustain a pitch at different volumes without compromising the tone quality or intonation?
- Can you crescendo and diminuendo with controlled gradations, again keeping tone and intonation constant?

Articulation

- Can you tongue smoothly, linking the notes within a smooth flow of air (as if whispering 'da-da-da' as smoothly as possible?) For pianists, the equivalent is transferring the weight of the fingers smoothly between the keys with no gaps – 'walking your fingers between the notes'.
- Can you articulate detached notes with clarity (here a 'ta' sound is used to give a crisp start to the note)? Even staccato notes need to have a sense of connection.
- Can you slur smoothly? (This requires a consistent flow of air, supported by the abdominal muscles.)
- Can you blend slurred and tongued notes into a legato phrase, without creating any gaps? A common problem is lifting off a slur, rather than connecting smoothly to the next note.
- Sometimes you do need to bounce off a slur. A common articulation is two slurred quavers followed by two staccato ones, creating a light, dance-like feel.

Scales and arpeggios

These are the building blocks of music. In addition to improving coordination and motor skills, these are also useful tools for developing a sense of phrase. We can practise the different articulation skills mentioned above: mixing slurred and tongued notes, varying dynamics, and playing with a sense of beginning, middle and end.

Can you change the character of a scale? It's fairly easy to make a major scale sound happy and upbeat, and a minor scale sad. But can you do it the other way round? Later we'll look at how we can attempt to make a C major arpeggio sound solemn, using 'The Last Post' as an illustration.

Musical awareness**Pitch**

- Can you sing a pitch and then play it on your instrument (or vice versa)?
- Can you sing a scale? Then an arpeggio? Then other intervals?
- Can you sight-sing a very simple melody?

Rhythm

- Can you maintain a steady pulse?
- Can you copy simple rhythms?
- Can you read simple rhythms?

Students should be encouraged to sing melodies and clap rhythms from the very first lesson, regardless of what instrument they learn.

Singing and breathing

Breathing is very important in outlining the phrases for wind and brass players and singers, but string players and pianists can also be encouraged to align their breathing with the phrasing to give the music a song-like quality. Singing a piece is an excellent way to gain an understanding of phrasing.

Music needs to breathe between the phrases. Some students breathe in random places, which is akin to removing all punctuation from a paragraph and dumping it back indiscriminately. The meaning will be hard to decipher and the flow stilted.

Basic principles of phrasing

We'll now look at some musical extracts to see how we can teach phrasing at different levels of development. From the very beginning, we need to be applying the basic techniques discussed above in linking notes together. Then we can make judgements about the 'musical punctuation' – where the music needs to be smooth and where there are natural gaps in the flow.

‘Au clair de la lune’

This is a very simple tune that should be playable by an almost complete beginner. A beginner trumpet student may initially huff every note separately, rather like a robot that says each word separately without any sense of linking them together. This technical shortcoming must be addressed – the ability to tongue notes in a smooth flow is a non-negotiable skill.

When they can tongue the first four crotchets fluently, they may be tempted to take their first breathe after the E in bar 2. The momentum of the crotchets stops here, so an inexperienced player may think the musical flow stops too and instinctively take a breath. However, the minim needs to be sustained: the phrase clearly comprises of two balanced halves, each one starting with four crotchets. If this is a sentence, there would be a comma at the end of bar 2 and a full stop after bar 4. Parallels with punctuation will usually be easy to understand for students who have a great deal of SPAG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) drilled into them in their early education.

A beginner with under-developed breath control might feel the need to breathe at the mid-point of the phrase. Here, they might play a crotchet D in bar 2 and create a crotchet rest to breathe, causing a major interruption to the flow. Students should be taught to take quick, deep breaths at the very last moment. If absolutely necessary, they could snatch a quick breath by turning the D into a dotted crotchet and breathing in the following quaver rest. Ideally, all four bars should be played in one breath, with only the slightest gap after bar 2 – a ‘musical’ breath, but not a physical one. Developing good breath control is essential, and students can be surprised how long they can sustain a phrase, given sufficient encouragement.

One useful trick is to sing the phrase (usually no problem in one breath), then time how long the phrase lasts (this extract lasts about eight seconds). Then time how long you can hold a note. Most students can comfortably sustain a note on a trumpet for over ten seconds. This is conclusive proof that they can indeed play all four bars in one breath.

Tonguing the entire extract could potentially sound a little laboured. Experiment by adding some slurs to add variety and elegance. The obvious places to slur would be to join the syllables in the words ‘lune’, ‘ami’ and ‘Pierrot’, but also try slurring any moving notes to discover which effect you like best.

Articulation is crucial to phrasing. Markings in music are often the decision of an editor or arranger rather than the original composer, and I firmly believe that they can be altered to suit personal interpretation. Even if articulation is marked by the composer, I think it's acceptable to overrule this if it's a thought-out decision that can be justified on *musical* grounds (and definitely not merely through laziness). As a performer, you should have the freedom to shape the music in your own unique way.

‘The Cuckoo’

This is a traditional tune that appears on the ABRSM Grade 1 trumpet syllabus. A common problem is taking a breath after the minim F in the second bar. This may be expedient as far as operating the instrument goes, but it ignores the natural flow of each phrase, which starts on an up-beat. Students who play in a rather breathless style may even breathe after the dotted crotchets. However much a student might claim to be short of breath, they simply don't need to breathe after the first two notes, and, as a rule, dotted crotchets should be sustained when followed by a quaver.

The 'comma' in the musical sentence is between the crotchets C and A in bar 2, but there is little time to breathe here. Ideally the student will play all four bars in one breath. You could introduce the concept of question and answer by playing the first half the phrase and asking the student to play the second. Then reverse the roles. That will illustrate clearly how these half-phrases balance, with the second section echoing the rhythms of the first. The second phrase is clearly mimicking a cuckoo. But is it one bird cuckooing twice or two conversing? Again, experiment with a question and answer, with student playing one and teacher the other. Should the second 'cuckoo' be louder or softer than the first?

One rule I have is never to play a repeated motif exactly the same. What is the function of the second iteration? Is it repeated for emphasis or intended as an echo? Should there be a subtle variation or fundamental transformation? You might decide to play more forcefully or more reflectively, emphasise a different note of the phrase or change your articulation and dynamics. There are no rights or wrongs – this is what 'musical interpretation' is.

Telling a story

'The Last Post'

Remembrance Sunday is a busy day for trumpet players. Virtually every competent trumpeter will be called upon to perform 'The Last Post' at a church or war memorial. This is a bugle call that uses only the five lowest harmonics on the instrument, comprising notes of a C major arpeggio.

So how can you make what, on the surface, looks like a rather lively, upbeat tune in a major key, into something suitably solemn and mournful? Here, attaching a story to the flow of the music can give it a sense of structure and imbue it with meaning. If some music is a dialogue, with phrases bouncing off each other, this is a monologue – a stream of consciousness that can go through changes in mood and emotion. Here is my visualisation of 'The Last Post' imagining it as a short film. The numbered phrases in the extract correspond with the different camera shots:

- 1 A distant bugler is playing on a hillside, barely visible through the mist.
- 2 The camera moves closer and the mist starts to clear (note that the change from crotchet to quaver upbeat implies a little more urgency and perhaps a louder dynamic).
- 3 The bugler is now fully in view and the sunshine is glinting on the instrument.
- 4 The camera now pans across the wide open space of the battlefield. The music changes to a more wistful character.
- 5 We now cut to the soldiers getting increasingly excited at the anticipation of the battle – the energy increases through this phrase, with perhaps a crescendo and accelerando.
- 6 There is a sudden change of mood – a brief sense of foreboding. The music is slower and more reflective.
- 7 The cavalry charges into battle in high spirits: the music is fast and energetic, but falters as the casualties mount. The music loses its cheery momentum and there is a ritardando as it grinds to a halt.
- 8 We survey the battlefield – now a scene of carnage.
- 9 Loved ones grieve over their losses.
- 10 We return to the mournful bugler, who gradually gets engulfed by the returning mist and fades from view. The music gets more distant.

Rubato is often overused in music, sometimes crossing the line between ‘expression’ and ‘playing out of time’. In this piece, however, it can be used liberally, with exaggerated speed changes, pauses, accelerandos and ritardandos. These have not been marked in, so the notation doesn’t get too cluttered – nor have dynamics, but these can further characterise the different moods we’re trying to create.

Disclaimer – I’m not particularly familiar with military music and this is entirely my own interpretation. Many players just power through ‘The Last Post’ without much analysis – after all, it’s just another bugle call. Maybe that’s the ‘correct’ way to play it. However, your prerogative as a performer is to be able to rework the notes into something new, exciting or spontaneous. A composer once told me that the premiere of a new piece he’d written was completely different from how he’d envisioned it. But it was coherent and worked even better than he’d imagined – it shone a different light on the piece.

Phrasing through articulation and dynamics

People often make the mistake of thinking that to make a piece lively, every note needs to be detached. This can result in a stilted and disjointed performance. Staccatos used very sparingly can often have a stronger impact on the overall style.

Handel’s Hornpipe



This extract is from Handel’s *Water Music*. Firstly, play this entirely legato. It will be lifeless and turgid. But if you play it *all* staccato, it will be disjointed and incoherent. Let’s see how we can develop mixed articulations to provide satisfying phrases.

Adding staccatos to the quavers on the first beat of bars 2, 3, 4 and 5 will instantly inject lightness and bounce. To add a further sense of direction, we could add accents to the first three crotchets – but still play them full-length. A common misconception is that accents always shorten the note. Sometimes they do imply this, but not always. A crescendo will add a sense of urgency through these notes, so when we bounce off the following quaver, it has more energy. How should we articulate the three quavers at the end of bar 2? If we slightly detach them and play with a crescendo, it will create a strong sense of movement, but if played legato, the staccato quaver on the first beat of the next bar may be more impactful. Experiment to see which you prefer.

Note that the introduction of the semiquavers in bar 3 increases the sense of drive to our staccato quavers. Below I have notated a quieter dynamic here, to add to the build up: each micro-phrase is like

a wave building momentum in the sea – it starts with a quieter dynamic and builds up. But each wave increases in intensity, leading to a larger climax at bar 6, where the joyful repeated Cs give a sense that we are surfing on a larger wave. Even these notes need to have a sense of movement – nothing can stay static.

Here is an example of how we might play this extract, including dynamics and articulations:

A musical score for a trumpet extract in 2/4 time. The score consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The score includes various dynamics and articulations: *mp*, *mf*, *p*, *tr*, and slurs.

It's horribly cluttered and over-edited and gives only one of a number of plausible interpretations. Published articulations and dynamics usually only provide broad brush strokes, and it's up to us as performers to add extra details (or, indeed, ignore the publisher's markings and come up with our own). The important things to consider are:

- ▶ How does every note fit into the phrase?
- ▶ How do we vary articulation and dynamics to outline this?
- ▶ How do we inject a sense of forward energy?
- ▶ Where are the points of tension and release?

Neruda's Concerto

When we had music lessons as children, we were probably taught to emphasise each beat of the bar and put extra weight on the first beat. Most teachers will pass this idea on to their own students – it's usually a sound principle to help play with a strong sense of beat and rhythmic security. Sometimes, however, we can find more interesting shapes, patterns and textures in the micro-phrases. Let's consider this short extract from Neruda's Concerto, originally composed for corno di caccia (hunting horn). Adapted for trumpet, it appears on ABRSM and Trinity Grade 8 syllabuses.

A musical score for a trumpet extract in 2/4 time. The score consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The score includes various dynamics and articulations: *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*.

If played with emphasis on the beats, it becomes rather four-square and robotic. We can find much more satisfying phrases if we explore the smaller patterns of notes. A good rule is link consecutive notes together and phrase around the gaps, giving us this:

A musical score for a trumpet extract in 2/4 time. The score consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The score includes various dynamics and articulations: *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*.

Here, the scale motif gives us a small climax at the top, and then the remaining three semiquavers of the bar give a further impetus into the syncopated rhythm, adding a dance-like quality with the interplay between the smaller melodic fragments giving interesting irregular rhythms. Rather than four plus four

semiquavers, we phrase five plus three. Note that the dynamics in each melodic ‘wave’ are notated the same, to give a general sense of the shape. However, these could be layered, so they get progressively louder or softer. There aren’t enough subtleties in dynamic notation to indicate this.

There can be a danger, when breaking phrases into small fragments, that we over-emphasise these subtle patterns and the performance becomes disjointed, rather like a bad actor hamming up their lines. After deciding how the phrases are organised, and perhaps practising the fragments separately, *ignore* these micro-phrases and just play the phrase as a whole. This might sound counter-intuitive, but subtleties will still be evident, just not overdone.

Listening

Passive listening

A knowledge of genre is helpful to inform how we phrase music. But there isn’t one definitive performance. YouTube is a useful resource where we can fine-tune our discerning ear. Listen to as many recordings of a piece as you can find. Each will illuminate it in a different light. The terrible videos online can be equally informative as the brilliant ones. What makes them bad? Why are the phrases disjointed? Perhaps you can hear how breathing points are not aligned with the phrases.

If you’re studying a piece of early music, listen to a ‘period-instrument’ performance. If the old incarnation of your instrument is substantially different from its modern equivalent (for example, the natural trumpet is completely different from the modern valved instrument), consider how this affects the way we phrase the music. Should we attempt to replicate the style of the old instrument on our modern one, or should we think: how would Handel have liked this to be played if he had enjoyed the benefit of a modern trumpet? There are no rights or wrongs, but – as in all aspects of life – we can make wiser choices when we’re better informed.

Active listening

Active listening is when we listen and interact, such as when we perform. I discussed earlier how we can exchange phrases when learning the simplest of pieces. This will develop the important listening skills required for ensemble playing. Phrases passed around different instruments of an ensemble need a sense of coherence.

- ▶ Are you all breathing in the same point of the phrase?
- ▶ Is the music conversational?
- ▶ Is one player taking a solo and others accompanying?
- ▶ If accompanying, are you still rising and falling with a sense of melodic and harmonic progression?

As a trumpet player, I might be called upon to play tonics and dominants in a symphony by Mozart or lots of off-beats in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. On the surface, these parts might seem dull, but a good player will be echoing the shapes of the phrases and responding to the harmonic tension and release.

Summary

As humans we generally like to find order in life. We see familiar shapes in clouds; we can find pleasing shapes and textures in abstract art; the patter of a foreign language can contain fascinating rhythms and melodic inflections, even if we don’t understand the words.

Music similarly needs to be organised, so sequences of notes are linked together coherently. There needs to be a freshness, energy and improvisatory quality, as if the music is flowing for the very first time. Think about how every note in a phrase helps to tell a story or create a particular atmosphere, and ensure you have the technique to fully express yourself.