THE ART OF PHRASING

By Patricia George

"The" way or "A" way

What is a phrase? A phrase is a musical sentence. Just as in grammar, some phrases will ask a question, make a statement or make an exclamation. Some sentences will be simple. Others will be compound or complex. This is true in music because the melodic and rhythmic contour is an outgrowth of poetry. One of Marcel Moyse's excellent teaching ideas was to have the student explore the sentence "I love you" three different ways as in: *I* love you. I *love* you! I love *you?*

What is phrasing? Phrasing is using inflection to shape the musical phrase. The tools that we have to make inflection include tempo, dynamics, the lengthening or shortening of certain notes, color, vibrato, and silence or spacing. We use the air (amount, speed and angle), the tongue and the vocal folds to execute these demands.

Shape of the Note. Before we begin the discussion of how to connect notes, we should address the SHAPE of a note. Generally in ensemble playing, the strongest part of the note should be at the beginning of the note. Too many students begin the note softly and then when they are sure that they have the right pitch will increase the air and vibrato speed on the note. Many musicians have called this concept "bulbing" because the shape of the note resembles a light bulb. Some players call this "scooping" because the sound produced is as if the player is scooping into the note. However, when you are playing an unaccompanied piece for flute, you have more options in selecting how you want to begin a note. These choices might artistically include bulbing the note.

PHRASE STRUCTURE

75% - 8 bars

24% - 6 bars

1% - irregular

CONTOUR

Dot to dot note heads.

Five Shapes: mountain, valley, going up, coming down, gruppetto.

If the notes go up, then increase in volume. If the notes go down, then decrease in volume. As you gain more experience, you may choose to do the opposite. Do apply the coloring concepts discussed below.

DANCING OR SINGING

As you begin to decide how you want to phrase a melody first consider the style period in which it was written. The following is of the utmost importance because it will help you decide upon note length and beat emphasis.

Music of the 1700s is based on the idea of dancing and the notes should be separated or unglued. The stress of the notes comes away from the first beat. In 4/4 time, the strength of the beats is strong, weak, less strong, weaker.

Music of the 1800s is based on the idea of singing and in slurred passages the notes are glued. The stress of the notes leads to the first beat. William Kincaid taught the phrasing idea in scales by having the student play the first note to set tonality and then having the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th notes lead to 1.

Music of the 1900s offers a unique situation because this was a time when composers followed their individual creative path rather than the common style of the period. For example, if the composer is a neo-classic composer, then the ideas of the 1700s will prevail but if the composer is a neo-romantic, then the ideas of the 1800s will prevail.

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COLOR OPTIONS

Color at places of change of direction
Highest or lowest note of a phrase
A note with an accidental
First note of a slur
Upper or lower neighboring tone
The strong note of a "sigh" figure (lift, strong, weak)
On repeated notes
On a syncopated note
In conjunction with the strength of the beats

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Strength of the Beat Concept
Music is organized by the strength of the beat concept.

In 4/4 and 12/8 time, the organization is strong, weak, less strong, weaker.
In 3/4 and 9/8 time, the organization is strong, weak, weaker.
In 2/4 and 6/8 time, the organization is strong, weak.

Repeated Notes

Rarely are repeated notes played at the same dynamic. You should either crescendo or diminuendo with the repetition. Repeated notes as well as syncopated figures should be separated so that the audience may easily perceive the repetition.

Sigh Figure

Play the second of any two slurred notes softer than the first note. Put a faster vibrato on the first note of the slur to sound professional.

Sequential Figures

A sequence is the repetition of a melodic figure on a different scale step. Each repetition should have a dynamic design. It is your choice whether you should crescendo or diminuendo. This type of dynamic design is called "terraced" dynamics. There is no right or wrong way to execute this. The main goal is that you have a plan.

Dots or Ties - Articulated or Slurred?

Articulated? Dot equals silence or space
Slurred? Loop or Less

Pick-up Notes

Simply by their name "Pick-up" notes should be lifted into the next note

Phrase Structure

In Romantic music, start and end phrases more softly. Also, after a breath, consider starting softer. Often we are so happy to have air again after a breath that we enter much too strongly for the meaning of the music. Do not let the amount of air that you have dictate what comes out. Organize your breathing so that you bring out what the composer intends.

Short or Quick Notational Values

Generally, short or quick notational valued notes lead to longer notes. So, start softer and save your energy until you arrive on the longer note.

Syncopated Notes - Syncopation equals separation.

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Melodies for the Left Hand

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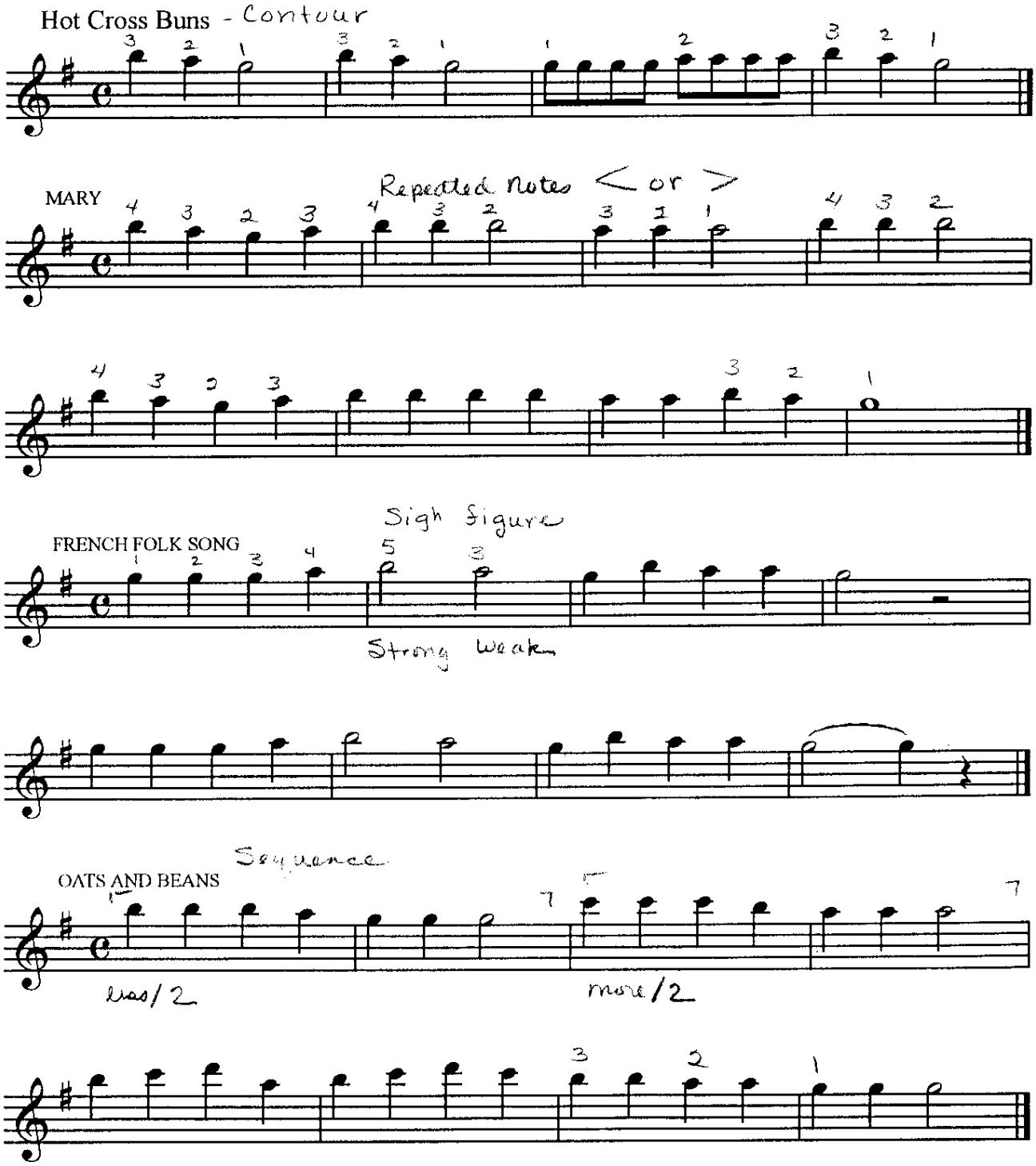

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*Color (faster) vibrato on first note of a slur.

1. **Andante** — loop — S W

2. **Allegro** ♩= 116 — *mf* — easy — *mf*

3. **Adagio** — S W — syncopation

4. — *fp* syncopation — t

5. **Adagio** — silence — L — S W — S W

6. **Moderato** — **You're a Grand Old Flag** — George M. Cohan

(Eb)

See Rules of Phrasing in Teacher's Guide, p. viii. #1 - Strength of the beat. #5 - In an articulated passage, a dot should be played as a rest. #7 - Pick-up notes are lifted into the next beat. #9 - Repeated notes should be separated and should either crescendo or diminuendo.. #13 - Syncopation = separation.

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