Phrasing

by John Wion

Phrasing implies direction. A sense of direction in music is achieved through careful control of breathing, dynamics, vibrato, rhythm, and tone color. All of these elements are in turn related to the structure of the music and to its general style.

PHRASING IN SPEECH

When we express ourselves verbally we start with a thought that we then put into words. Depending on our level of education and the nature of the expression, the result might vary considerably in length and construction, but the appropriate amount of breath will always be taken, the stresses will be made in the correct places, and the quality of voice will relate to the emotion contained in the thought. Compare this to someone reading a text that they do not understand intellectually, or to which they bring no emotional involvement. A similar comparison in music shows the element often missing from an instrumental performance.

PHRASING IN SINGING

Expressive phrasing is rarely missing from a singer’s performance. Quantz, in his treatise On Playing the Flute, wrote: “If the pupil has the opportunity to study the art of singing, either before or at the same time that he studies the flute, I strongly recommend that he do so….Then he will not remain just a simple player of the flute, but will be on the way to becoming, in time, a musician in the true sense.” Composers of songs are inspired by the basic emotional content of the lyrics and move the expression forward with appropriate melodic line, harmonic logic, and rhythmic stress. Singers use the lyrics and their emotional content as a basis for recreating the composer's inspiration.

Flutists can learn much about phrasing from following the simple lines of beautiful arias and by imitating the ways in which great singers express them. Look at this melody from Puccini’s opera Madama Butterfly.

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Now listen to how a great soprano like Renata Tebaldi extends that line through the intervening pitches and changing vowels, across rests, dipping down to the dominant, and finally back to the tonic in eight.

By playing such arias with an understanding of both the narrative content and the musical direction we start to breathe in a more natural fashion, just as in conversation when we instinctively take the correct amount of breath for the length of the sentence, the distance of the listener, and the power of the emotion. We begin to use the entire period of each rest to breathe normally instead of holding our breath until the last moment and quickly inhaling regardless of need.

We can similarly learn from vocal material that has been transcribed for flute, such as Boehm's arrangements of Schubert songs or Schubert's own use of his "Trock'ne Blumen" as a subject for his Variations, op. 160. One can usually tell whether a flutist has heard this melody in its original setting by the choice of tempo and sense of line. The emotional quality of the expression will be affected by knowing the meaning of the text. "All you flowers, that she gave to me, will go with me into my grave." The singing flutist will choose a slower tempo and will sustain the line with longer staccato and tonal weight on each note, to achieve the expression of sadness and despair.

Ziemlich langsam. (fairly slow)

You little flowers, which to me she gave, shall soon be laid within my grave.

DYNAMICS AND INTERVALS

When playing instrumental music, not having the clarity of words as a guide, we have to find the logic elsewhere. Many flutists will not hear that bright notes need toning down in a particular situation, or that dull ones need to be brightened, and will allow the vibrato and dynamic level to fluctuate without regard to the direction of the music. If we are not conscious of a musical direction when we play, off-beat notes may become stressed just because they are long and down-beats may be under-stressed just because they are short.

Play like this, not like this.

Flutists are taught that closing certain keys on the instrument will produce a certain pitch, and that closing more keys will change that pitch. These fingerings relate more to notes on a printed page than to a musical interval, and the action can be carried out mechanically without thought. Singers, on the other hand, cannot sing an interval unless it has first been heard in the mind. Flutists' phrasing (as well as their intonation) will always improve when they start to "hear" the next anticipated pitch before actually moving the fingers, because the act is automatically leading them forward.
PHRASE ARCHITECTURE

A simple musical phrase will usually rise to a single high pitch and decline again to its starting point. Sensitive musicians will intensify the sound to that high point (perhaps increasing the tempo as well) and ease back to the end of the phrase. Listeners will subconsciously be brought along a satisfying musical journey. More complicated instrumental phrases are not always as easily understood by performers. One cannot move the phrase in a logical fashion if its direction is not perceived, and the result will not be satisfying to listeners.

Simplifying such phrases is an excellent way to understand them. Take, for example, the flute's four-bar opening in the slow movement of Mozart's Concerto in D Major, K.314.

This phrase can be simplified to G - A - B.

The crescendo shows the direction of the phrase and implies only the slightest increase in intensity. The A in bar two is repeated.

The A's in bars two and three are delayed by G-sharp appoggiaturas on the down-beats, and the movement to B in bar four is delayed by an A-sharp appoggiatura.

Performers aware of this progression will see the D and B in bar one as an ornamentation of the opening G and move the phrase through those notes to the G-sharp in bar two. That G-sharp, reduced by ornamentation to a sixteenth note, will be lengthened and stressed to carry the phrase through to the A on beat two. That A, though a quarter note, is seen as a resolution and played lighter. Similarly the long A in bar three is under-stressed, and its following C leads forward to the stressed A-sharp in bar four.
Another way to perceive this sense of forward motion is to group all the notes following a beat with the next beat. Musicians who perceive the notes following each beat as belonging to that beat tend to play in a static fashion, whereas the perception of the afterbeat notes leading to the next beat, like grace notes, gives a powerful sense of direction. A good example of this kind of note grouping can be found in the first movement of the Sonata in C Major by J. S. Bach.

VIBRATO

A flutist sensitive to phrasing will also be conscious of vibrato usage. A common fault with flutists is to start a long note without vibrato, then introduce a noticeable vibrato for the remainder of the note. The result is an illogical and unsatisfying phrase because of the effect of these surges in inappropriate places. Players who truly see the direction of a phrase will not play in this disruptive way. This does not mean that an equally modulated vibrato throughout a musical line is implied. Vibrato can be modified in both speed and amplitude, and notes within a phrase may be expressively colored thereby. But an uneven vibrato, an excessively wide or slow vibrato, or an erratic vibrato, will have a considerably disruptive effect on a phrase. This is also true in a moving passage when a player uses vibrato. A pulse can coincide with a particular note giving it an unintentional accent that interrupts the musical line. A sixteenth note vibrato used during a passage of slurred sixteenth notes, for example, will remove the effect of the legato connections.

RHYTHM

Rubato, an Italian word meaning “robbed,” is used in music to describe the taking of time from one part of a phrase and giving it to another. This implies firstly that the performer has a very clear sense of basic tempo. Rubato then becomes an expressive device whereby the tempo is moved evenly, and often imperceptibly, forward or backward to increase tension or to heighten emotion, and eased back with similar evenness. Rubato is only successful when the movement grows out of a tempo, the way a human pulse can quicken.

Absolute rhythmic accuracy is often counterproductive to expressive phrasing. In the opening of Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, an exact duplet followed by an exact triplet will be less expressive than if the first note of the triplet is slightly longer and the third slightly shorter.
This phrase is a good one in which to observe many of the subjects we have been discussing. In bar one the C-sharp leads forward with a slight increase in dynamic and amplitude of vibrato to the B. The B then falls toward the G because each note is slightly quicker than its predecessor. Both dynamic and tempo then ease back to bar 2. This bar has similar direction but with slightly more exaggeration toward the G. The last three notes in the bar however, instead of easing back, lead forward to bar 3. From this bar, one must show the phrase leading from the C-sharp to the B on beat three and away to the final A-sharp, avoiding the common disruptive emphasis on the upper G-sharp or even a breath after the E. The composer’s crescendo–diminuendo in these bars is only his indication of this phrasing, not a large dynamic variation.

Some performers are mistaken in their approach to avant-garde music in similar fashion. There are places where cross-rhythms in an ensemble composition will require strict rhythmic accuracy from the performers. However, in many cases a more effective gesture will be obtained by applying a very slight accelerando, ritardando, or rubato to groups of same value notes, thereby pointing the phrase in a more meaningful direction.

CONTRAPUNTAL TEXTURE

Just as one can simplify a melody to see a progression of key pitches, one can connect various voices within a solo line to aid the sense of phrasing direction. In the “Poco adagio” movement of C. P. E. Bach’s Sonata for Unaccompanied Flute, W.Q. 132, one can discover two or even three voices, as in the following:

In the “Allemande” of J. S. Bach’s Partita, BWV 1013, much thought can be given to such connections. While many will be obvious, others are less so. In the following example the dominant D is implied as sustaining until moving to its (implied) tonic G, creating a three bar phrase. Players who understand this will only break the phrase with a breath if absolutely necessary, and will then do so in such a way that the direction of the phrase is kept clear.

In the next example the leading tone G-sharp is implied as sustaining for four beats until its (implied) resolution to the tonic A. However, the tonic chord on the first beat of bar 37 begins with the upper and lower neighbor of the C, and the tonic A is not heard till the second beat. Players who understand this will not breathe after the first note of bar 37.
Some phrases are clearly separated by rests; others have none. In these places melodic fragments must be perceived as separate entities and are not run together. The Sonata in B Minor, BWV 1030 by J. S. Bach offers many examples of this, including the following from the first movement:

Phrasing instrumental music then requires two steps. The first is a musical one, finding the logic that led the composer to create the phrase. The second is a technical one, finding the means via the instrument to convey the musical logic to an audience. The first involves meter, harmony, and form, while the second involves dynamics, nuances, vibrato, rubato, and breathing. As so often happens, the two are interconnected, and an understanding of the first will lead to an appropriate use of the second.

Phrasing is the expressive, singing quality that enriches a simple melodic line so that it touches the soul. Imitation is one of the most powerful learning tools, and the sustaining and shaping of operatic arias is an excellent way for a flutist to develop phrasing awareness and acquire control. Knowing the specific emotional range of an aria from its words leads us to strive for a quality of sound and use of vibrato and rubato that will carry those emotions through the flute to an audience; imitating the instincts, skills, and artistry of the great singers as they express these emotions can lead us down a path of limitless possibility.

ENDNOTES

1 Renata Tebaldi, in Madama Butterfly (CD; London 430-481-2)
2 Boehm, Theobald, arr. Six Lieder for Flute and Piano by Franz Schubert
3 “Trock'ne Blumen” from the song cycle Die schöne Müllerin, op. 25
4 Introduction and Variations on a theme “Ihr Blümlein Alles,” op. 160

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN WION has been Principal Flutist of the New York City Opera since 1965, and has drawn on this experience to publish a nine volume series of opera excerpt books to help flutists prepare for auditions and performances. He has appeared as a soloist in New York’s major concert halls and at prestigious summer festivals in the United States. He has made recital tours with pianist, Gilbert Kalish, and guitarist, Lisa Hurlong, and guest appearances with the Tokyo, Emerson, and Manhattan String Quartets. He has recorded a variety of solo and chamber music repertoire for Lyricorum, Turnabout, Opus1, Musical Heritage (most recently an anthology of unaccompanied flute repertoire from Bach to Berio—MHS 513074), and has released three CDs on the Harri Music Productions label. He is Professor of Flute at The Hartt School. In his many visits to Australia and New Zealand he has appeared as soloist with all the major orchestras in addition to performing recitals. He has also been Artist in Residence at several universities in Australia, and at the Banff Center in Canada. His editions and publications have been honored by the NEA's Newly Published Music Competition. His most recent publication is Sing!, opera arias arranged for flute and piano for the development of phrasing.