

BUILDING AN INTERPRETATION: THE TOOLS YOU'LL NEED, Ross Harbaugh

DEFINITIONS: Music exists in two forms. In little black and white lollypops on a fence, and in glorious sound. It takes musical performance by musical interpreters to change it from leaden ink blots to artistic gold. Beethoven's famous Fifth Symphony sits in IMSLP, but it can only raise the hair on our heads when we perform it, or hear it performed

What can an audience of non-musicians really hear in a musical performance? They can tell if the musicians are beginning notes together, ending notes together, making crescendos and rallentandos together. They might also notice if the music sounds ringingly in tune or sour. But over and over again, I've heard untrained audience members say "That was a great performance! You guys were really 'on' tonight. You really made the music talk!"

Wait a minute. Can music talk? It's just non-verbal sounds. How can those sounds make "sense" to us. I believe music is a universal language because of our very first, non-verbal communication with our mothers. As infants we understood her moods through volume and tempo, and vice versa. Just think of all the ways she has said your name! Sometimes sweetly and gently, and sometimes in alarm or anger.

We can tap into this universal language of sound communication through Time Management and Volume Control. Yes indeed! Knowing how to manipulate these fundamental tools makes it possible to build great musical interpretations. Professional story tellers, actors, and musical performers are able to create whole worlds of drama with these tools. This article is an introduction to this process.

1.VOLUME CONTROL:

Let's explore Volume Control first. Composers give performers indications of what pitches to play and how loudly to play them. It's an imperfect written language. They are reaching out to us, sometimes over centuries, hoping that we will understand their markings. As musicians, we learned how to associate pitches with the markings, and we learned that "forte" means loud and "piano" means soft. But this is only a recipe. These Italian words indicate much more than volume. They indicate a mood and a character. And they must always be understood in context. A "pp" in a large hall needs to be focused and projecting--even loud by small room standards. If the cello has the melody in "pp" and the rest of the ensemble is marked "pp" as well, the cello must be louder. A loud "p" with a relaxed vibrato will still create a "p" character in a large concert hall.

DYNAMICS: Volume control makes music a three dimensional experience. If four notes are played loudly and the following notes are played quietly, the listener has the impression that the first four notes are closer, and the second four notes are further away. Dynamics give the illusion of distance. If an ensemble plays everything "mf," the music feels stagnant and mono chromatic. A successful interpretation needs to lead the listener on a journey that moves dynamically. Crescendos and diminuendos are a wonderful part of this process. A crescendo gives the illusion of something moving toward the listener. A diminuendo creates the opposite

illusion. A crescendo will seem more dramatic if it is delayed. In other words, where the crescendo is marked should be the softest point. A common error among students is to immediately get louder when they see the word.

TAPER/SIGH PRINCIPLE. A building block of musical expression is the “Taper” principle. Two eighth notes that follow each other with no dynamic marking imply a sigh

Ex. 1, Taper Principle



The first note is stressed slightly more than the second. We do this all the time in everyday speech. Its important to realize that All notes are not created equal, just as all syllables are not equally important! Tommy, Karen, Danny, Sally, mama, dada, Schumann, Chopin, pathos. The first syllable gets more stress than the second. Most languages have examples of this, especially in Hungarian, which tends to stress the first syllable of every word, even first words of whole sentences, such as “AS a matter of fact.” (It’s important to know that when interpreting pieces by Bartok or Kodally). Grouping notes according to the Taper principle gives them a speech-like character. Have a student play a scale grouping the notes in pairs—strong/weak. It will instantly sound more meaningful, which is critical to successful interpretation.

GROUPINGS: This is a good time to introduce what I call the Rule of Four. By stressing the first note of a group of four notes, the group is given an expressive identity. Playing scales employing the Rule of Four will give the notes meaningful gestures. The Haydn Cello Concerto in D Major is full of groups of four notes that become more personal and meaningful if the first note is stressed slightly. If the note is lengthened, the effect is heightened, which of course is part of Time Management, another tool to be discussed later.

Ex. 2, Haydn Concerto in D, Opus 101, m.31



Thinking in groups of eight gives the music another expressive shape. Using only volume, have the student play her scale thinking in groups of eight notes. The first note begins quietly and builds gradually toward the 5th note, and tapers away to the eighth note. This is a wonderfully expressive musical shape.

In the last movement of K. 465, the cellist has fast moving eighth notes, also in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. There's no time for linking notes under one bow, but the cellist can give the ensemble a compelling sense of direction by thinking in Mega Measures. What I mean by that term is to combine two or four measures in the phrasing, rather than to be overly influenced by the bar lines, which can break up the forward motion and make the ensemble's phrasing static.

Ex. 7, Mozart Quartet, K. 465, Allegro molto, mm 13-16, cello part



BALANCE is a critical part of Volume Control. Balancing a chamber ensemble where no conductor is GIVING SOMEONE THE HAND to hush them up requires score study. An ensemble, big or small, in which the players know when they are important melodically and when they are supporting will make any performance sound more musical.

ARTICULATIONS: The impact of the music often depends on choosing the appropriate articulation. Again, the composer has attempted to communicate what sort of articulation he imagined as he composed the piece, but the interpreter needs to have a big articulation vocabulary. Special attention should be given to deciding what sort of beginning consonant the musical word should have. Does it begin with a "guh," "puh," or "yuh" to name a few possibilities.

II. TIME MANAGEMENT:

One of the great challenges of daily life is how to manage our time. The same can be said in musical interpretation. Music is fluid a art form that moves through time, exists in a time flow, is critically influenced by time. Choosing the perfect tempo is one of the most important decisions a group must make. This search can be fun. Have the students play part of an Allegro movement as if it were a Largo. Note how different the emotional impact is. Gradually increase the tempo with each reading. The tempo will start grouping itself into rhythmic units. Faster tempos need fewer pulses. Music is divided into "movements" because music moves. The Minuet was a dance that everyone of Mozart's audience members knew how to do. The musicians who played his Minuets knew first hand what Tempo di Menuetto meant. Unless someone in the group is a dancer, looking at a Youtube demonstration of the Minuet will give valuable insight into the 6 step, 6 beat dance pattern of the Minuet.

TEMPO: Students can try tempos in fast movements that accommodate the fastest passage work. A movement might start innocently enough, but quickly bog down when the flying 16ths appear. Slow movements are quite often songs, or song-like material, and students should try singing the melodies of the movement to find what works best. The cellist, violist, and 2nd violinist should learn the 1st violinist's themes on their own instruments so they can be active participants in choosing tempos and phrasing. To find the perfect tempo requires experimentation even if the composer has included a metronome marking. If the marking is impossible for everyone to play, try finding the TEMPO CHARACTER, but at a playable tempo.

CHORDS vs MELODY: In Beethoven's Opus 18, No.4 antiphonal chords play a big role. Thinking about the chords as an orchestral event helps give them the right character. They shouldn't be rushing forward in the same manner as the rest of the movement, especially as they reach their climactic conclusion. Encourage the students to try holding the tempo slightly as the chords build to the final chord.

E. 8, Beethoven, Quartet Opus 18, No 4 in C Minor, mm 109-111, first violin part



CADENCES: In Mozart and Haydn, the cello is often given a final octave note that is a charming and graceful comment on the section just concluded. It's all right for the cellist to take a little time to let this moment breathe. Encourage the other instruments to give the cellist space to do this.

Ex. 9 Mozart Quartet K. 465, Menuetto, mm 39-40, cello part



RHYTHM vs PULSE: Rhythm is the mathematics of the music. Pulse is the interpretation of that math. How the interpreter groups the notes into musical units gives the musical math a meaning and life. This is one of the most critical tasks of the Interpreter: studying the music and deciding how to vary the musical units. Once again, Mega Measures often are the most effective interpretation of the rhythm. In the opening of Beethoven's Opus 95 quartet, performing the first two measures as if they were one super measure makes a powerful musical statement even more powerful. It also solves the tempo question. Try Metronome marking 85 per half note.

Ex. 10, Beethoven Quartet Opus 95, m 1-2, cello part

Allegro con brio.



RALLENTANDOS: Try subdividing the pulse pattern of the music as the rallentando is executed. It will be something specific and logical that everyone in the group can hold onto as they make the slow down. Let's say a piece is cooking along in straight eighth notes. The rhythmic unit will be 8 notes per unit. When the rallentando begins, the unit changes to two groups of four, then four groups of 2, then four notes each with a pulse, then the final note of the piece. It creates a smooth slow down like a locomotive coming to a halt.

Ex. 11, Subdividing a rallentando

rallentando



CUEING: One of the most important tools in building an interpretation is knowing how to lead and read cues. In general, a clarinetist's cue is the ideal model. Breathe in (lift up), set the embouchure or bow (body dips), play up (the bow moves as the body unbends to the starting position). Conducting motions are the same, so it would make sense to have your students conduct the entrance, one at a time, without their instrument. The rest of the group should pantomime the gestures of the conductor/leader. It helps tremendously if the cue readers have their bows on the string before the cue.

III. MELODIC EXPRESSION:

VIBRATO: A group should be able to match vibrato speeds. Occasionally, a solo line will have a different speed than the rest, but the default goal is to match vibrato speeds. Vibrato speeds that vary unintentionally make the group sound ragged and under rehearsed. Vibrato is such a personal expression of musical interpretation, so the group's process of developing different vibrato speeds should be done sensitively. If a group can agree on a repertoire of speeds, it makes them even more powerful interpreters.

HARMONIC DIRECTION: I alluded to harmonic direction when discussing intentional bass lines in **DYNAMIC DRIVE**. All interpreters need to think like composers as much as possible in order to bring the composer's music alive. This involves analyzing the harmonic motion of the music, especially dominant harmony and the direction implied by dominants and secondary dominants. Understanding the harmonic movement underlying a piece of music will inform decision-making in the interpretive process, including time-taking, agogic accents, and rubato.

THE MELODIC MAP: Have students identify high points of phrases, dissonant moments, tension moments, moments of release, destination points, magnetic notes (that all previous notes of a phrase are moving toward or withdrawing from). Knowing the melodic topographical map is essential to creating expressive interpretation.

IV. MISCELLANEOUS HINTS:

When executing subito dynamics, lengthen the last "f" note before a subito "p." Breathe together when placing a subito "f" after a "p."

Holding the tempo of a passage creates tension, freeing the tempo releases tension.

Hold pickups in Romantic era music. Minimize pickup in Baroque music.

Larger intervals take more time.

Dots over notes mean many things. Usually they mean some sort of emphasis. They don't always mean "short."

Articulations can include brush bow strokes, accented legato, martelle, ricochet, and a whole lexicon of other bow strokes. It's important for each member of the ensemble to master these bow strokes so that they can utilize the appropriate articulation in the service of the music. Otherwise, the breadth and color of the interpretation will be severely limited.

V. PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER:

DRAMA: Let your students' imagination help form an interpretation. Encourage them to

imagine a dramatic scene that the music suggests to them. Is it exciting, sad, tragic, romantic, playful, teasing, angry, heroic, ebullient, contemplative, hesitant, objective, or subjective? Encourage your students to use their own words to describe what they feel in the music, and share those words with their fellow interpreters. A common vision of a passage or movement helps to pull all the details together into a cohesive interpretation. Tell them to be the music! Tell them to project the characters, shapes, gestures, tones of voice, wind-ups and arrivals, dances, harmony, melodic high points, and sheer joy that's in the music.

BELIEVE IN YOUR INTERPRETATION: Tell them someone will always disagree with your interpretation. You can't help that. If you and your colleagues are convinced of your interpretation, then the audience will be.

Knowing this fundamental truth is the first essential tool for building an interpretation of music. Being musical means finding meaning in music. Music is meaningful to a musical person. I don't buy the idea that a student either "has it" or she doesn't. Quite often, the musical student just doesn't have the tools to speak the language with colleagues, nor understands the process of building an interpretation. This article will help.