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Andrei Borshchev

# Music phrasing

– The importance of teaching music phrasing to the pupils studying music instruments



Bachelor's Thesis | Abstract

Turku University of Applied Sciences

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## Music phrasing

- The importance of teaching music phrasing to the pupils studying music instruments

The thesis consists of two parts, artistic (the weighted one) and written. In this written thesis the teaching of music phrasing is examined.

The objective was to familiarize the author during the thesis process in more depth with the importance of teaching music phrasing to the students studying music instruments.

As a method of the thesis has been used the familiarization oneself with the source material on the subject and to apply the information to the author's own teaching experiences in the flute playing.

The result of the thesis was the author's increased knowledge of music phrasing and its teaching, from which his future flute students will also benefit, since when the level of knowledge increases, the level of teaching increases as well.

Keywords:

music, music phrasing, teaching

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Andrei Borshchev

## Musiikin fraseeraus

- Musiikin fraasien opettamisen merkitys musiikkia opiskeleville soitto-oppilaille

Tämä opinnäytetyö sisältää kaksi osaa; taiteellisen (painotettu osio) ja kirjallisen. Kirjallisessa opinnäytetyössä tarkastellaan musiikin fraseerausta ja sen opettamista. Kirjoittaja soveltaa aihetta erityisesti huilupedagogiikkaan.

Tavoitteena oli perehdyttää tekijää opinnäytetyön aikana syvällisemmin musiikin fraseerauksen opettamisen merkitykseen yleisesti soitinten soittoa opiskeleville oppilaille ja erityisesti huilunsoitonopiskelijoille.

Opinnäytetyön menetelmänä on käytetty perehtymistä aihetta koskevaan lähdeaineistoon ja tiedon soveltamiseen tekijän omiin opetuskokemuksiin huilunsoitossa.

Opinnäytetyön tuloksena oli kirjoittajan lisääntynyt tietämys ja tieto musiikin fraseerauksesta ja sen opettamisesta, joista myös hänen tulevat huiluopiskelijansa hyötyvät, sillä osaamisen tason noustessa myös opetuksen taso nousee.

Asiasanat:

musiikki, fraseeraus, opetus

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# 1 Introduction

The thesis consists of two parts. The artistic part, which is the main part of my thesis, is a video recording made of Ian Clarke's composition Hypnosis. The programme and the link of the recording are as appendices in this thesis.

In my written thesis, I consider it particularly important teaching music phrasing, which is a necessary skill for each music instrument student. From the pedagogical point of view it is of course important also for music pedagogues.

In my thesis, my goal is, as a flutist and as a future music pedagogue, to learn increasingly proper understanding about music phrasing contained in classical music. As a future flute teacher, I want to be able to teach my flute students musical interpretation beginning from simple music phrases. I will search answers to the next questions: How can an instrument student learn to perceive music phrasing? In what ways can a classical music student learn to distinguish between phrases and musical motifs from each other?

As a long time music student, I have understood the importance of controlling the interpretation of music phrases. That is the most important thing in interpreting music. The proper way of music phrasing can even help the performer to find better sound. It is also helpful in the technical matters of instrument playing.

## 2 Music phrasing

I purposefully use the expression “music speaks.” In the article “About Musical Performance,” Alexander Goldenweiser writes: “When the art of music was born, man first started off from what he did with his voice — from singing and speaking”. All music always manifests itself as performing “breathing.”

As mentioned, speech and musical expression have a similar premise. In music, as well as in literature, wording forms are arranged into periods, sentences, phrases, and motifs. The text is broken down into paragraph, sentences, words and letters.

### 2.1 Comparison of speech and music

It is important to understand the connection between speech and music. When we speak, we formulate sentences. If we fail to do so, our speech is neither logical nor understandable.

Let us take, for example, some easy phrase: “Why did you not come yesterday?.” We can put different accents on different words and syllables. Depending on the accents, the meaning of the sentence is also different. When emphasizing the word “YOU,” the meaning of the sentence sounds like when everyone else came, why didn't you come? When the accent is on the word “YESTERDAY,” the meaning of the phrase sounds like why you did not come yesterday, but came, for example, today or other days. If an accent is put on the word “YOU,” the pitch goes up until to the beginning of this highlighted word, which is the highest point of the sentence. After that, the intonation goes downward. If we try to say the above example sentence directly, without intonation and without pauses — as one long string of letters in a place where there are a lot of people, I am sure some person in the back will find us very strange. That kind of speech rasps in their ear because there is no vivacity in the sentence, and it does not sound like natural speech.

## 2.2 What is music phrasing?

In music, the tunes are arranged into the following sections:

### **Period**

Period is the most extensive, finished part of the music piece. In the form of the period, even a whole, small music piece can be written. The period consists of 2–3 clauses.

### **Clause**

Clause is the widest part of the period.

### **Sentence**

Sentence consist of 2–3 phrases.

### **Phrase**

Phrase is a part of a clause. Phrases consist of 2—3 or more motifs.

### **Motif**

Motif is a simple rhythmic or melodic subject consisting of a short group of tones with one logical accent. A motif is the smallest part of a phrase.

To perform music, play an instrument or sing meaningfully and emotionally, interpreting the content of a piece of music, the performer must examine its music phrasing. In search of the interaction between motifs and phrasing, let us take an example from literature: “When spring comes, snowdrops will bloom.” There are two phrases in this sentence: “*When spring comes*” and “*snowdrops bloom*.” The first phrase has three motifs (that is words): when, spring and comes. In the second phrase there are two motifs (words): snowdrops and blossoms.

The climax of the whole sentence is another phrase and all the intonation aims there. In the first phrase (*When spring comes*), the main word is “*spring*,” and in the second phrase (*snowdrops bloom*) the main word is “*snowdrops*.”

We can imagine this phrase musically as tunes, and then we understand how it needs to be formulated and what kind of intonation comes into it. In music, the performer needs to practice each note (letter) in a slow tempo and listen to how each note relates to the next note.

If a volume is increased in music, that is, a crescendo is performed, it is slowly practised because each note must be played more strongly than the previous one. The result should be smooth. On many instruments, the instrument player must make the crescendo gradually, tone by tone more strongly changing the way they play, using more force to produce the tune. Especially, can make it very beautiful string and wind instruments, also vocalists, making a crescendo or diminuendo on during one tune, that why more easy to connect every notes with each others. Also make great intonation of the notes. More hard to do it on instruments, such as piano. Because no possibility to play on one tune louder, only controlling each subsequent notes and to play it louder than previous one, or quieter.

If we take out the phrase of example again and apply the variations in the intensity of its sound to the music, it works like this: let us start quietly, piano and proceed towards the word “spring” making a small crescendo. Then comes a small diminuendo for the word “comes” and after that a crescendo is added towards the climax, to the word “snowdrops.” Finally, to the last word “bloom” is done again diminuendo.

As a flutist, I can say that practising intonation at a very slow tempo (note by note) is not easy, but it is good exercise, because the flutists (and every instruments as well) practice not only music phrasing, but also developing sound quality. Such an exercise cannot be played well if the sound of the instrument is poor or if the singer's / instrument player`s diaphragm does not

work correctly. The exercise described above to control the sound and improve the music phrasing would be useful to the player of each instrument.

In music, it is always important to feel its “breath.” For the wind instrument players and singers, it is especially relevant. They cannot breathe however they want; they must take a breath between the music phrases, or the motifs. In sheet music, breath marks are also often written between the separate music phrases. They are called *sensura* (V). Their purpose is the same as the punctuation in verbal speech or in written text. There is still one point in common with verbal speech and music: *sensura* in music can also mean the same as the word “i.e.” in speech.

It is imperative for everyone to breathe, to consider the *sensuras*, the breath marks — both when speaking, playing, or singing, no matter what instrument a person is playing. Only for the sake of it one can finish the previous phrase and start the next one.

When a musician tries to listen to intonation, musical speech, and music phrasing or motifs, he begins to know the main boundary points of the music phrases and climaxes of motifs. He is gaining increased experience and understanding about motif structures, and he understands how to play at any point and where there are music climaxes/ highlights. In the future, the musician begins to see and remember or keep in mind an increasing number of music phrases and entire music works.

The music climax contains the greatest emotions, it is the loudest point in a music motif, phrase, clause, or period. Usually, it also means the highest notes or tunes in an arc of melody. Before climax, the instrumentalist must play a crescendo, gradually strengthening.

Each melody has a highest point at which everything aims before it is reached. After that, the melody leaves to descend downward. For example, this can be described by different lines as follows (pictures 1, 2 and 3). Let us imagine that the lines below (pictures 1, 2 and 3) depict musical lines.

Picture 1. Calm intonation.

Looking at the line in picture 1, a smooth line is seen, according to the sheet music, the intonation occurs gradually, calmly. The climaxes of music phrases and motifs can be seen and understood visually. The tunes advance towards the highest point, then descend, and again rise high.

Picture 2. Unmusical intonation.

In Picture 2, can be seen an example of a poor, unmusical music interpretation: the dissection of all music phrases and motifs, illogicality, whereby the interpreter of the music has failed to understand the phrasing, accents, etc. properly.

Picture 3. No structural intonation.

In the third image (picture 3), only a straight line is seen, reflecting musical interpretation with no structural design, without music phrasing. Such an interpretation is annoyingly common among musicians. Usually, such musicians only make accents technically, not music-oriented. These musicians have much to learn about phrasing and musically stuff. Their thoughts, their attitude and musical understanding need a change that happens in the mind. A lot of work must be done on it in musical interpretation, such as music phrasing, sound quality and music breathing.

If a music student cannot understand the continuation of the music phrase from the preceding phrase to the beginning of the next phrase, he must focus on harmony, so that many things become clear to him through it. For example, the progression of the dominant (fifth degree) to the tonic (first degree).

Music phrasing is, first, a means of expressing the artistic image of a musical work. The player of an instrument should have a deep understanding about composer's marking, about the sheet music: about dynamics, strokes, tempo, accents, music phrasing etc. The player of an instrument needs to feel to where the accented note is going. All this will help to reveal the intention and idea of the composer and the meaning of the music piece.

The famous Russian professor of Moscow Conservatory, Konstantin Igumnov, said:

*“At every phrase there is a famous point, which is the logical center of the phrase. Intonation points out the special points of gravity, attracting to themselves towards the central music notes on which everything is built. They are very closely related to the harmonic basis. Now for me, in a sentence, in a period, there is always a center, a point towards which everything gravitates, towards which everything strives. This makes the music clearer, cohesive, connects one with the other.”*

### 2.3 Teaching music phrasing at the beginning of music instrument studies

The instrument teacher should start working on the artistic side of music education already from the first lessons together with learning the instrument and music theory.

To the first playing repertoire are worth choosing much folk music, which is sentimental and poetic. There you can find a lot of usable training material to begin with, at its best even music pieces for children to present. In these first songs, pupils should perceive and play the songs with their proper characters, the most characteristic style of the music. A sad melody should be interpreted with mournful playing, a funny melody with fun and heroic music with heroic vibe. Children know how to do it very well; they feel particularly good in all the different characters.

Musical terms should also be taught to children. Without examples or explaining, they can be quite complex for pupils. If the teacher has failed to explain or taught incorrectly, the pupil may lose interest in studying music. What is important is to start teaching these terms as early as possible by cultivating them in lessons and immersing them into the teaching of instrument playing lessons as well.

As I mentioned earlier, music takes off from speech and singing. Of course, this also needs to be connected to pupils from the beginning of music study.

As evidenced by the experience of many teachers and myself, children understand a surprising amount and are interested to know what the words that appear in their playing songs mean. Of course, they already understand the meaning of words, because they have studied the language for at least 4–5 years or more, but from music learning they have only the first experiences. Therefore, the instrument teachers are advised to associate with the first playing repertoire abundance of musical terms. When the pupil and the instrument teacher use music terms that appear in the pupils' notes when

speaking, even small pupils can begin to take the notes of the meanings of musical terms as they come forth in their repertoire.

One example, which is interesting for children, is New Years' song for kids. In Russia, every child knows this song. In that song, music phrasing is also understandable as well as a meaning of it. It is good practice that a teacher shows different ways of music phrasing to a pupil. It is also possible to “play with it”. For example, the teacher can play one music phrase (piano on the second phrase) and he can ask a pupil to play a different one, as he wants. Of course the pupil can not be very young, otherwise he will not understand this kind of play.

Ма-лень-кой ё-лоч-ке хо-лод-но зи-мой

Из ле-су ё-лоч-ку взя-ли мы до-мой

Маленькой елочке Холодно зимой. Из лесу елочку Взяли мы домой. Из лесу елочку Взяли мы домой.	Сколько на елочке Шариков цветных, Розовых пряников, Шишек золотых! Розовых пряников, Шишек золотых!	Бусы повесили, Встали в хоровод. Весело - весело Встретим Новый год. Весело - весело Встретим Новый год.
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Picture 1. Music sheet for children to decorate. (From music book for children).

A quote from Mikko Luoma, a music lecturer and pedagogue in the Art Academy of Turku Applied Sciences:

*“After an instrument student has played the song, I usually ask a student first what kind of piece he/ she thinks this is, or what kind of atmosphere this piece has. Of course, there is not only the one right way to answer these questions. If a student says that the piece is funny or happy, then I say, “Okay then, play it cheerfully and make your mood happy!” If, for my opinion, the atmosphere of*

*this piece differs from the student's opinion, I will say that I am trying to play it according to your mood, and not*

*the other way around. Perhaps the mood the student felt about that piece makes it more interesting.*

*The student`s music phrasing and interpretation of the piece do not remain the same forever. After one year, it has usually already become different. If it stayed the same all the time, it would not be interesting any more, If everything was static and would not ever change I would have stopped dabbling in music a long time ago”.*

The instrument teacher must teach children the main rules of music phrasing, even if they are quite proportional. In any case, pupils should be helped to find the form and logical structure of musical pieces. For example, downbeat notes should be played more strongly than notes with weak beats, or when the melody rises, one should strengthen each sound to the highest note, and as the melody drops, all notes are played more quietly than the previous one. This basic knowledge (down beats and highest music notes) must necessarily be taken into the tutorial from the very beginning. There is no need to deeply dive on music phrases with children, there comes time to teach those things them later, but the rudiment of music must be involved from the beginning. After the pupil is already able to play an instrument quite freely, the working gradually on the issues related with the music format, interpretation, and music terms etc., such as dynamics and agogics, could be started. Dynamics is the continuous variability of the music tempo, agogics is the expressive modification, nuance, and refinement of the duration of tunes, pauses and rhythms, as well as elastic tempo processing.

Working with the qualitative aspects of the sound of an instrument is very closely related to understanding music phrases. They are supported by one another. If a music student pursues a dynamic interpretation of music phrases, he or she should notice and hear the musical line of the piece internally. After that, he can play music intonation as required by the sheet music. Every note

leads to something and is important. Understanding this improves the quality of the playing and the quality of the sounds that can be produced from the instrument. Of course, as a player of a wind instrument, I understand that, for example, without the support of the diaphragm, the quality of the sound can not be good, and if the pianist's sitting position is poor (for example, one leg is on the other leg, etc.), he receives neither support nor strength from the whole body in his playing, and thus he cannot wait for the sound of the piano to be the best possible ones. Musical rules have been made solely for music performers to learn to understand and know the things that music contains. Great musicians make distinctive music phrases that are different from others, contrary to traditional rules, and yet they can make the instrument produce an incredibly beautiful sound. Music therefore cannot have strict rules. Neither could Hugo Riemann, a German music theory teacher and pedagogue who has made many studies and authored books on phraseology, could not say or find precise rules for every occasion. That is because music is an art where the main rule is that it must be alive.

## 2.4 Music phrasing as a part of music instrument studies

I got acquainted in Russia with the especially important work on the lesson of a good piano teacher. At issue was the use of music phrases in Cantilena. I received many good lessons from this teacher about the things I write about in this written part of my thesis. The teacher in question had a piano lesson with the little girl Anna, who was a first-year pupil. They studied E. Korenevskaya's work "Autumn." They had already become acquainted with music phrases, and the girl understood the fact that without phrasing, the musical piece would not sound good. The piano teacher and pupil talked about the nature of the piece, the structures of the sentences, the musical breathing points, the intonations of the high passages of the melody, the climax points of every musical phrase as well as those places where the dynamics go up or down. As when speaking we combine sentences, poetry helps us to find musical understanding about the musical phrasing.

Next, on the piano lesson, the piano teacher and the pupil worked on with the poem “Autumn” by Aleksey Pleshcheev. It is composed as a work whose melody is smooth, calm, beautiful and harmonious and does not contain great contrasts. This music piece should be performed in a deep beautiful voice, with free intonation according to the sheet music, with legato, and as the piano teacher said, “while maintaining internal hearing.” Then the piano teacher and his little pupil began practising the musical piece in the following ways: • An attempt was made to play the musical piece with a sad mood. • Attention was paid to the intonation of motifs. • A single line of music notes was played in between without accents.

The piano teacher reminded the pupil that the hand must move so that the caller can move from one music note to another note freely. The weight of the hand needs to be shifted from finger to finger. This movement cannot be seen from the outside, as all movement and transmission occurs within the body and inside the head. The piano teacher instructed the pupil to keep the fingers as close as possible to the keyboards on the piano, to play with the fingertips to create a full, vivid touch. The pupil was asked to imagine the feeling that the player of the piano will merge with the piano keyboards. This same advice functions with the flute, the player of the flute must feel fingering with his fingertips.

The piano teacher asked the pupil to play all music phrases in one breath (which in piano playing means that the player of the piano does not lift his hand off the keyboards). In addition, the teacher requested that the pupil should play each phrase, ending them all the way to the diminuendo. Yet even the last silent piano sound needs to be controlled and audible.

I chose this example as a model of good music pedagogy. In it various pedagogical approaches and methods were used to benefit that helped the piano pupil achieve the main goals. The objectives were clearly and purposefully stated. They were constantly repeated, that is why they affected excellently and the results were well to be seen in the music interpretation of the little piano pupil.

Regardless of the instrument, the sound it produces is the main means of expression in any piece of music.

Music pieces should be approached and worked on in two ways: as a musical task and from a playing technical point of view (brain, hands, body etc.).

The main instruction for the interpretation of this music piece should be legato, in which case the player of an instrument should soften the character of the instrument (piano).

Important in all instruments and pieces of music is that the player of the instrument can stay free and relaxed, as any tightening or compressing thing, damages the quality of the sound and it does not allow the instrumentalist to achieve the best sound, performance and not interpretation.

In music, the main musical function is to hear the phrases internally contained within the music and see the climaxes in them. The technical task of each instrument requires that each note image corresponding to a particular group of fingers should be combined with the music by smoothly transferring the weight of the hand from finger to finger. In the flute playing, the playing technical challenge in this music piece would be to additionally master the blowing and fingering, which should be smooth and precise.

The aforementioned piano teacher asked the pupil to sing some phrases to understand the logic of musical phrases and dynamics. The teacher asked her to play the melody individually, without accompaniment, with each hand alternating, first with the right hand and then the left hand. This is an effective method in the practice of pianists, which can develop a melodic ear and the ability of perceiving music.

After music phrases sounded good, when the hands were played separately, the next step was to combine them into an expression that needs to be constructed dynamically, as part of the overall format of the musical piece. In each music phrase, the main weight should be in the middle of the phrase, where the climax of the phrase is. The dynamics were practised starting with

silence playing the sounds lightly and not any note was played carelessly or accentuated. Comparisons were made next to see how a different touch affected the sound of the piano. In addition, the melodic line of the music piece was studied. Particular attention was paid to the use of the thumb, the first finger of the piano players. With that finger it is easy to play accents by accident because of the strength of this finger. If the accents are not meant to be played, the player of the piano should always monitor that the thumb does not play too strongly.

Work by accompaniment was also interesting, but the main idea to support the melody, softly. Subsequently, two hands were combined in piano playing and a piece of music was played with both hands at the same time.

I was also involved on those piano lessons when Anna already played that piece of music quite well.

As the lessons progressed, there was significant progressive development in the piano pupil's playing skills and musical thinking. The music he played breathed, and the piano playing sounded as if the pianist had narrated a poem. As said, the most important thing in music is the sound quality. The goal of each instrumentalist is to achieve a deep, gentle, warm, soulful sound from their own instrument. To create a quality sound with an instrument you need at least the following factors:

- Complete flexibility (but not relaxation) of the instrumentalist's body and body weight regulation
- The free weight of the hands and their regulation: The hands must be free from the shoulder to the fingertips. All precision of the sound is concentrated on the fingertips. The body weight is transferred through the hand and fingertips to the piano/ instrument contacts, which generate the sound when they are touched. The sound quality depends on the touch.
- Most importantly, the instrumentalist keeps the attention in listening to and monitoring the quality of the sound all the time.

When this is applied to the flute, it means considering the following:

Regulation of the support taken from the diaphragm.

- Keeping the throat open (from the diaphragm should be as one line to the open throat)
- Lip elasticity (lips must be free and flexible, not compressed)
- Proper breathing: The flutist should know how to use the diaphragm and when the breathing process is going up, at that moment jaw has to be open as well and to be free, because once the inhalation is taken using the free jaw then the lips are on the rest.
- Free, but not relaxed hands and fingers, which should feel and interpret every note and every exact change in the music sheet, without compressive.
- Ears for listening to, monitor the musical pitch, and sound quality and accuracy.

### 3 Conclusions

In my thesis, I was concerned with the topic I chose, the teaching of musical phrases. I reflected the subject with the piano teacher, the piano school and with the Russian methods of teaching the piano playing.

People play many instruments, but the music is the same. It unites all musicians. The pianist always acts accompanying himself, but players of the instruments with a single voice must also work by accompaniment. Performing music together with an accompanist needs incredibly detailed work.

The soloist should know and feel how harmony supports the melody. The soloist and pianist must also seek out and find together common musical breaths, tempos, and dynamics, etc. The players of a soloist instrument should work with the accompanist effectively and in good cooperation to gain a good outcome, good sound, and good musical interpretation.

It is a big mistake when instrumentalists think that music only builds from the soloist's good voice, or just one correct way of musical phrasing. The soloist and pianist must collaborate seamlessly in search of a common interpretation for the music in progress. This kind of effort and collaboration can give rise to musical performances which is enjoyable, to which the audience will be happy to listen. One famous utterance expresses a profound truth: "The joy of music, as in science, lies in the detailed and challenging work."

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The link to the artistic part of the thesis

## **The recording of Hypnosis**

The video recording of Ian Clarke's composition **Hypnosis** made in Georgia.  
The **flute playing** and the sound recording of the video made by **Andrei Borshchev**.

<https://youtu.be/ZvDxfq067a8>