

# The Art of Phrasing: How to bring a phrase to life

The technical challenges of playing brass instruments often overshadow the main reason why we are trying to master these instruments in the first place--the intense emotion generated by great music. So much energy is devoted to finding the best instrument, that magic mouthpiece, state of the art breathing gadgets, and the secret to playing monstrously higher/lower, faster, louder or better. But what is better? After the umpteenth double-C, the 10,000th 64th note and the fattest *fortississimo* has been sounded and our minds have been boggled beyond belief we are left with the suspicion that something might be missing...feeling! Now these things are not necessarily mutually exclusive-Clifford Brown, Bill Chase and Bud Herseth come to mind as players whose faster/higher/louder never got in the way of their musical statements. We all have our heroes, but the ones who make the most powerful impression are the musicians who make a statement every time they play and bring the essence of the composer's intention to life! That is the art of phrasing. Musical phrasing can be distilled down to three elements: Melody, Rhythm and Atmosphere or Song, Dance and Space.

## Song

Most great instrumentalists try to copy the simple, elegant arch shaped line of great singers. To paraphrase Arnold Jacobs, all musicians are storytellers and what carries the song is our wind. "Song and Wind" has been the Jacobs mantra for generations. Just as when we speak in conversation our musical expression must have inflection, dynamics, articulation and direction. The simplest example is known as antecedent and consequence, otherwise known as question/answer in common language. The line builds tension to the top of the phrase like a question being asked and then this tension is released and the response eases the phrase to a conclusion. There are many pieces of music where the dynamics of these subtle inflections are not notated and we must use our intuition and good taste to communicate the music. The best way to develop this expressive sense is by listening to great artists on all instruments. Try to copy the sound of Pablo Casals playing a Bach suite or the inflection of Billy Holiday singing the blues. You can learn just as much, if not more, from listening to artists from other disciplines, but the key is listening to live performances, recordings and yourself.

Already written in the music, motifs are the key ingredients, which will clearly show you the way to realize the essence of the music. These recurring ideas (sometimes called "hooks") are crafted from rhythms and intervals that express a specific musical feeling and are carried along by the harmonic progressions and the metric pulse. An interpretive musician must recognize and organize these elements like building blocks. Classical lines often have parallel structure with dynamics, articulations and colors in even proportion. Breaths are well spaced like the windows in a well-designed house. Phrases relate in proportion the way foothills, rivers and mountains create a beautiful vista. The dramatic energy is developed so that it is carried over the high point and resolves logically in the end. All are connected in the harmonic language of the melody and accompaniment. Know where you are and the direction you are going at every moment in the phrase. Listen for the tension and release of the harmonies under a phrase and the shape and proportion of the musical line will be very clear.

There is an essential character to each interval which must be discovered in the context of the music: a pillar-like neutrality to octaves and fifths, a strength to fourths, the sighing nostalgia to a descending minor second or third and a dramatically different modality to their major counterparts. Sixths have a different quality ascending and descending. A seventh pulls, yearning for octave or sixth depending on its major/minor distinction. Each interval has a role to play in the harmony and their strong personalities influence the inflection of the interpretation. Connect the resonance from note to note, express the intrinsic feeling of each interval and unlock the meaning of the music.

## Dance

Similarly, the essential ingredients of dance, rhythm and pulse, can be felt to have different characters; that's how we know which step to take so that we don't start to waltz during a mambo or goosetstep while the Macarena is being played. Any movement can be considered dance; a march is a military dance, a hard driving be-bop solo can break the speed limit, but it don't mean a thing if it...you get the idea. Our obligation is to interpret the feel of the rhythm:

- The vertical feel of two
- The circular feel of three
- The linear feel of four
- The floating swirl of five and
- The rocking or linear quality of sixes

so that the sharp snap of a march, elegance of a waltz or the wonderful flow of music in any meter carries performer and listener away. The feeling will also change depending on where you place the accent within the bar. The strong 2 & 4 backbeats of rock and jazz sound intrusive in Bach and Haydn for example. By changing the articulation, the emphasis can shift giving added weight to whichever beat is desired and enhancing forward flow. Grouping the beats together so that certain beats are heavier and others more directional will create kinetic movement and swing, driving the phrasing in a manner that magnetizes both performer and listener.

All these patterns can be observed and experienced in nature as well as in music:

Soaring like a bird, bouncing like a ball,  
galloping horses, crashing waves,  
skiing the bumps, driving through rolling hills,  
subway train rhythms, mechanized production,  
echoes, trampolines, flowing rivers, waterfalls, falling leaves

These all have innate rhythms that we can adapt to our music. By emulating organic, intuitive movement we can bring a visceral momentum to our music whether traditional or contemporary. Try to feel the rhythm and pulse in your body. By conducting or moving to the music as you listen to or sing a phrase you internalize the feel of the subdivisions and rhythmic patterns and your music comes alive.

Each style of music is unique and it is up to the performer to communicate that special nuance. There is a precise, weighted evenness to German Classical and Romantic music, an intense heat to Latin music, a buoyant flow to French style and a definite edge to American contemporary music that must all be clearly expressed or the music dies.

## **Space**

We place a great deal of importance on listening to the sound. Of equal importance is silence--the space between the notes. This is where the tone resonates and the pitches blend into harmonies and colors. It is the painful/pleasurable moment of anticipation between the initial call and the inevitable response. It is the magical moment when the final chord of a great performance dissolves into the profound silence of an attentive audience or perfect acoustic. You can hear it in many recordings by Miles Davis, Timofei Dokshitzer, and

Dennis Brain or in the singing of Caruso, Bjorling and Caballe. Basically it's there all the time, but we must pay attention to make it part of our expression.

Breathing is a dramatic part of expressing the music. Full relaxed breaths give the performer the energy required to play. Listen carefully for an open resonance at the end of notes. This release of the note influences the momentum and determines the overall pacing of the phrase. Try to create the illusion of the phrase continuing through the silence during a breath. Develop various styles of releasing the notes:

- Expectation-open and inviting to response
- Neutral-seamless connection of line over breaths
- Dramatic-emotional surge just before silence
  - Resolution-ringing finality

*Rubato* is the natural give and take of the momentum of the music. The gravity of silence can be used to propel the music forward like an object soaring into a canyon after teetering on the edge of the cliff; anticipation, tension and release all proportionately interrelated with the active silence between each event creating the drama.

Music is an emotional language that needs expressive interpreters to create the bridge from performer to listener. It's not how high, how fast, how loud or even how well you play. It's how does the music make us feel.

**© Copyright 1997 by Stephen Burns**

**Stephen Burns** is a solo trumpeter, conductor, composer and former tenured Professor of Music at Indiana University. Winner of the Maurice André Competition, the Young Concert Artists Auditions and Avery Fisher Career Grant, he began his career at Tanglewood as winner of the Charles C. Colin Award for Outstanding Brass Player. In addition to "Telemann for Trumpet" on Dorian, Mr. Burns can be heard on Hænsler Classics, ASV, Delos, Helicon and Musical Heritage Society CD's. He is presently Artistic Director of the Fulcrum Point New Music Project, Columbia Community Music Collective, and Visiting Lecturer at the Center for Advanced Musical Studies ([chosenvale.org](http://chosenvale.org)) and Amici della Musica Firenze ([amicimuisca.fi.it](http://amicimuisca.fi.it)).

