

IN A WORD

Phrasing is born of the breath.

Jeremy Siepmann reflects

As demonstrated in our last issue, musical metre is to a very large extent intrinsic – created, exploited and sometimes obscured by the notes themselves, by patterns of melody and their harmonic implications. Though representing to a considerable (and dangerous) extent the vertical aspect of music, metre is also dynamic, with its own cycles of tension and release, expectation and fulfilment. Yet it continues to be widely mistaught, with the result that numerous pianists, too many of them professionals, frequently suggest the deadly monotony of a child reciting verse in class: ‘The boy stood on the bur-ning deck / Whence all but he had fled.’ Such indiscriminate similarity or identity of accentuation is death to music, whose essence is the flow of time, not its marking. Those who ‘encumber’ metre with unnecessary and inappropriate help, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, are the Bad Samaritans of music.

Largely because of metre’s potentially divisive character, the ideal model for musical phrasing and articulation is not song, which is littered with barlines, but speech, with its infinite variety, its innate asymmetry, and its inescapable rise and fall, dictated by the limited capacity of our lungs. The simplest spoken line is of a rhythmic subtlety far beyond the reach of our inadequate notation.

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Though I didn’t realise it at the time, my first and most important music lesson derived from speech. As a child I was puzzled by the fact that foreigners seemed to speak much faster than we did. I later discovered that foreigners, too, thought foreigners all spoke fast. Eventually the explanation dawned: When we hear a language we don’t know, all we hear is a rapid sequence of outwardly unrelated syllables. When people with no understanding of English hear the word ‘radioactivity’, for instance, they hear seven things. English-speakers hear one – a word, a concept, in which syllables are subsumed into a single entity. Nor will foreigners hear even seven things if the word is embedded in a sentence. In a sentence like, say, ‘The radioactivity killed him’, they will hear neither word nor sentence, let alone subject, verb and object. Still less will they be able to grasp the intrinsic seriousness, the implicit tragedy or the violent impact of the verb. *Killed* him. What they *will* hear, whether consciously or not, is a distinct rhythmic pattern, of contrasting though related accents, and an overall inflection (a curvaceous rise and fall) with its own internal cohesion, its own complementary

tension, development and resolution. Even without an understanding of the words, or even a perception that they *are* words, they will be hearing a phenomenon that can in every sense be described as musical: a coherent but diverse (and asymmetrical) pattern of pitches, tones and rhythms, complete with audibly related contrasts of louder and softer, shorter and longer, richer and leaner etc. No two vowel sounds are identical (the *sound* of our simple sentence, like that of any other, is a kind of subtle verbal orchestration). The consonants, each defining the start of its subsequent vowel with a different kind and degree of clarity, impart to each ‘beat’ not only a place in the aural pattern but a significant sense of function... All this without fixed pitches and, still more importantly, without the shackles of conventional metre.

A large part – indeed the largest part – of musical phrasing is precisely the defining and relating of groups, the binding together of notes, in the same way that language binds syllables into words. A close look at our ‘radioactive’ sentence can yield many valuable lessons for pianists (but not only pianists).

The only ‘subject’ in the sentence, grammatically speaking (and the only word of more than one syllable), begins with a soft, indistinct consonant, ‘r’, imprecisely followed by a spacious vowel, ‘a’, (the downbeat). This first syllable is succeeded by a (relatively) hard consonant (‘d’), followed by three vowels (run together) thus having no precise starting points. The last of these is in fact the first syllable of the second half of the word: ‘-act’. The precision of the succeeding ‘t’, sharpened by the ‘c’ immediately preceding it, gives maximum prominence to the stressed fifth syllable, which ends with the soft but heavy sound of ‘iv’. From this, the final two syllables (‘ity’) trail away like an afterbeat, present but virtually unvoiced.

The most important point here, from a musical point of view, is that this seven-syllable word contains but a single accent. When we add the other words to make our sentence, however, the primacy of that accent is reduced. Context has altered content – as it continuously does in music. The central focus is now the verb. No other accents are necessary:

‘The radioactivity *killed* him.’

Music abounds in upbeats that need hardly be voiced (as in the words ‘terrific’, ‘enchanted’, ‘preposterous’). Still more abundant are afterbeats, and compound afterbeats (afterbeat *groups*, serving in effect as a kind of vibrato, or tonal fallout) which can safely be left to look after themselves. Their passivity (indeed their near-inaudibility) is their very essence.

The natural, voiced pronunciation of ‘radioactivity’ does not divide according to the two self-contained words which make it up – ‘radio-activity’ – but rather elides the two words. What we get, in effect, is ‘radioac-tivity’. The first four syllables (which can be compressed to three: rājoác) are effectively bound together in a single, compound upbeat, enhancing the sharply definitive consonant pattern of ‘tí-vi-ty’. The softer ‘v’ imparts an impression of length to the first two syllables: ‘tívi’ [long], plus ‘ty’ [short]. The last ‘t’ matches up with the first (except that the first is voiced – hence intrinsically accented – whereas the last, the trickling end of the afterbeat, is not).

A different *context* will put the emphasis back on the subject. Verb and object are now demoted, becoming passive members of a compound afterbeat:

‘It wasn’t the drink that did it. The rājoac*tivity* killed him.’

Again, everything hinges on a single accent. Another version throws the emphasis entirely on the object, in an implicitly accelerating drive to the very end. The word ‘radioactivity’ has lost most of its original centrality:

'Strangely, though *he* was protected and they weren't, the radioactivity killed *him*'.

Through changes of context, implied inflection and the transplantation in each case of a single accent, we have imparted a variety of meanings and moods to a single simple phrase, limited, *unlike* music, by the conceptual strictures of specifically defined words.

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Musical phrasing deals all the time in such finesse. As mentioned above, the rhythmic contour of *verbal* speech can capture the subtle inflection of *musical* speech with a precision far exceeding anything in musical notation, which gives us, at best, a very rough sketch by comparison. Still less can any historical treatise tell us precisely how to shape and colour a melodic line in ways that can move listeners to tears or bring a spontaneous smile to their lips.

Having explored the musical properties of words, let us now look at the power of words to elucidate suppleness in musical performance. And thereby hangs a tale.

I once taught an accomplished amateur pianist, who was a dentist. We were working on Beethoven's so-called 'Eroica' Variations. In one, he kept relentlessly dividing up the shapely line of continuous semiquavers into regular, almost identically accented pairs: **da-da da-da da-da da-da da-da da-da da-da da** etc.

Ex 1



We spoke of upbeats, beats and afterbeats and more, but all to no avail. I tried a different tack. 'Bill,' I said, 'When you play that line, pretend you're singing the following sentence. And I sang to him: 'When I look into your mouth I see a lot of rotten teeth.' He tried it. The duplets disappeared, replaced by an exemplary shaping of the line. The fact is, you could hardly say that sentence in a sensible way and *not* produce the required phrasing and inflection.

It is virtually always possible to devise a sentence which will perfectly reflect the shape of any phrase. It doesn't have to make sense; it needn't reflect the emotion or atmosphere of the musical line in question (though of course it helps enormously if it does). It is important, however, that the chosen words suit the desired articulation and inflection, with an appropriate choice of consonants: hard (d, g, b); soft (h, s, m, n, p, v); incisive (k, t, d, q, hard c); 'liquid' (l, r, w) etc.

There are distinct pianistic equivalents of consonants and vowels – and the verbal model you have in mind, especially if it reflects the mood or atmosphere you want to convey, can dictate the actual, physical way in which you play the notes. A close parallel with music is the way the same syllable can change its sound according to its role and placement – like the respective d's in 'damn' and 'liquid'

(hard, dynamic and decisive in the first case, barely audible and passive in the second).

Every one of the following verbal examples conforms to the same overall shape and inflection as that Beethoven phrase, yet the pattern of consonants and vowels, every bit as much as the meaning of the words, imposes upon it a significantly different expressive and rhythmic character.

Instead of the flowing, uneventful dental diagnosis, the following line forces a more energetic, even aggressive attack. Again, not mainly because of the meaning of the words but because of the pattern of contrasts forged by the sheer sound of them:

'I will break your bloody bones and have your guts for garters, man!'

This sentence doesn't flow, but runs in a straight line from start to finish, with hardly a hint of subdivision. It also gathers intensity with the close juxtaposition of accented syllables defined by the contrasting, hard 'g's (a new sound, balancing but not duplicating the violent pile-up of opening 'b's), with their punching out, above all their neighbours, of the stabbing *guts* and *garters*. The crescendo is intrinsic. One can feel the tension mount. And we should never forget that crescendos and diminuendos, like dynamic markings in general, are as much psychological as acoustical phenomena.

Now another sentence, to the same essential pattern:

'Garibaldi bellowed loudly as he beat upon the gong.'

This is intrinsically metrical, almost defiantly *symmetrical*, and (like many musical phrases) loosely palindromic. The relentless pairing of syllables, juxtaposing 'g' and 'b'; the softer near-rhyming of 'lowed' and 'loudly' emphasising the lulling sound of 'l'; the final rat-a-tat now reversing the opening order and juxtaposing 'b' and 'g'. Even in strict time, this 'beat-upon-the-gong' has the effect of an *accelerando*. Notes are no less potent in their implications.

Another example, again featuring Garibaldi, whose name is irresistible:

'Garibaldi beat a bucket while beheading behemoths.' (this works only with British pronunciation: *behemoths*)

This is strenuously alliterative (creating a notably different effect), and once again it's palindromic, with the polysyllabic 'Garibaldi' balanced at the end by the contrastingly polysyllabic 'beheading behemoths'. The only accents fall on the first and last words. The framing polysyllables are offset by the effectively monosyllabic 'beat a buck-et while', rendering the first half of the phrase lighter and 'quicker', in the sense of being more eventful, while the ending is both weightier and 'longer'.

And finally, from a real-life hero to a fictional figure – and remember, we're still dealing with the same Beethoven phrase we began with:

'Dead-Eye Dick picked off the Picts and other nuisances as well.'

Here virtually all of the action, both conceptually and syllabically, is at the beginning. We have double alliterations (of 'd' and 'p') and a straight run of monosyllables, all but one of them beginning with a decisive consonant. The rhythm then smoothes out and expands into vowels and soft consonances ('and other nuisances as well'), none of them suited to the relatively vigorous accentuation of the opening. How to respond? '**Dead-Eye Dick**' (legato, relatively deep tone) 'picked off the Picts' (staccato, relatively light tone), 'and **other** nuisances as well' (legato, relatively fuller tone, but sharply tailing off after 'nuisances').

And the game has just begun.