

Articulation and phrasing

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The separation of successive notes from one another, singly or in groups, by a performer, and the manner in which this is done. The term ‘phrasing’ implies a linguistic or syntactic analogy, and since the 18th century this analogy has constantly been invoked in discussing the grouping of successive notes, especially in melodies; the term ‘articulation’ refers primarily to the degree to which a performer detaches individual notes from one another in practice (e.g. in staccato and legato). This distinction between the two terms was recommended by Keller (1955); but articulation in a broader sense is sometimes taken to mean the ways in which sections of a work – of whatever dimensions – are divided from (or, from another point of view, joined to) one another.

1. General.

Articulation and phrasing represent some of the chief ways in which performers, and consequently listeners, may make ‘sense’ of a flux of otherwise undifferentiated sound, and convert clock time into musical time. In tonal music in the narrower sense, they are (with tonality and thematic organization) two of the chief elements contributing to diversity within organic unity; and they are the elements for which the performer bears the most direct responsibility. Clearly, they are important to the analysis of music. Yet phrasing theory is a relative newcomer to music theory, and still occupies a somewhat peripheral and problematic position within it. This may be because the intricacies of articulation are difficult to notate and are generally transmitted orally rather than in comprehensive notated form; they ought, perhaps, to be as amenable to ethnomusicological analysis as to the document-based methods usually employed. Moreover, there is scarcely any consideration of small-scale articulation in traditional theory, except insofar as this contributes to phrasing; only recently have analysts and those in the field of performance studies begun a belated exploration of its role in musical expression. Consequently phrasing theory has been formulated largely in terms of the linguistic analogy implicit in its terminology (phrase, sentence, period), rather than in terms of the vocal and instrumental techniques, such as bowing and tonguing, that shape small-scale articulation.

The means of articulation, and hence of phrasing too, vary widely. Single notes may be articulated and phrases begun by the ‘placing’ of notes (their being played or sung a fraction late, separated from the preceding note by a brief silence or other agogic device), by an accent (or conversely by an unexpected unaccented note in a loud passage) or other dynamic device, or by nuances of timbre or intonation.

Resources of articulation also differ with the performing medium and acoustic surroundings. To achieve clarity in a hall with abundant reverberation generally requires energetic articulation, as well as a relatively slow tempo. The articulative characteristics of instruments are an important element in their musical capacities. Apart from vibrato the main differences in timbre of the violin, trumpet and oboe, for

instance, lie in their different means of articulation: their sound becomes virtually identical if the initial and terminal articulation of each note is excised from a recording. A distinct feature of bagpipe music is the use of grace notes, mordents and other embellishments to compensate for the unavailability of silence as an articulative resource. Ornaments are also a characteristic means of articulating notes on the organ or harpsichord when they might otherwise be submerged in the texture. Techniques of articulation in most wind instruments include various patterns of Tonguing : equivalent aspects of technique of instruments of the violin family involve the handling of the Bow (and the occasional use of pizzicato). In vocal music the resources of articulation, apart from grace notes and the like, portamentos, and such slivers of silence between notes as are available to most performers, are the consonants and the glottal or smooth beginnings and endings of vowel sounds. Most keyboard instruments can achieve an almost perfect melodic legato, even in a small room, when the terminal articulation of one note is produced after the initial articulation of the succeeding one.

The attack (initial articulation) of a note will most often occupy between 0.01 and 0.1 seconds. Bass notes are relatively slow in articulation, however, partly because more time is required to perceive waveforms of slower frequency and partly because more time is required to put into regular motion the larger masses of air, string and so forth that are likely to be involved in producing bass notes. Hence the trombone, bassoon and double bass are generally less incisive than the trumpet, oboe and violin.

Incisive articulation (as well as bright tone) assists the ear in sensing the location of an instrument. In this regard a Romantic inclination to diffuseness might be seen in music from the late 18th century onwards, for example in the vogue for the glass harmonica, where crisp articulation is virtually impossible, and later in the increased orchestral prominence of horns and trombones, the use of ever more heavily padded hammers on the piano, the elimination of 'chiff' in the pipe organ and the popularity of the reed organ. Yet the resources of phrasing and articulation came under special scrutiny in the 19th century, and they are no less essential to Romantic music than to Renaissance or Baroque music.

Technological developments since World War II have permitted the detailed study of the transient acoustical phenomena of articulation. In electronic music since the mid-1960s, moreover, commercially available synthesizers have been capable of governing not only the duration of the attack or decay of a note, but also certain aspects of its internal shape. But the variety of transient waveforms in 'natural' articulation as wielded intuitively by singers and instrumentalists has remained greater than that of most synthetic music.

Although Western notators (especially before the 18th century) have generally relied on the stylistic intuition of performers to achieve correct articulation, an exceptionally elaborate method of specifying qualities of articulation can be found in the *jianzi* notation of the Chinese zither (Chou, 1969), in which:

a combination symbol for both hands would usually specify how a certain right-hand finger is to pluck the string, inward or outward, with the flesh or the nail, or how two or more right-hand fingers are to be used simultaneously or in succession, how a left-hand finger stops the string, or how a left-hand finger is to tap the string or to pluck it, upward or sideways, how the pitch is altered or inflected by means of glissando or portamento after the excitation of the string, and how the timbre is varied by the addition of a certain type of vibrato or by changing from one type of vibrato to another during the decay.

Phrasing, just as much as articulation, is an aspect of Western music essential to its stylish performance. Riemann (1884), like others before him, compared it to punctuation in prose or verse: an inappropriate punctuation (i.e. articulation) of the sentence ‘Er verlor sein Leben, nicht nur sein Vermögen’ as ‘Er verlor sein Leben nicht, nur sein Vermögen’ almost reverses its meaning, rather as in the sentence ‘King Charles walked and talked; half an hour after, his head was cut off’ with or without its punctuation. But, as writers had long before recognized, musical phrasing requires more subtlety and ambiguity than is implied by this simple analogy. The articulation implicit at a phrase-end, through tonality, cadence and so on, may for example be deliberately suppressed in order to maintain or increase momentum (see ex.1, in which square brackets show a conventional phrase structure, but the slurs and other articulation signs are Mozart’s own). Riemann was one of the first to attempt to catalogue these subtleties; of more modern writers, Cooper and Meyer (1960) and (from a different point of view) Keller (1955) may be found useful in this regard.

Ex.1 Square brackets show conventional phrasing; the slurs are in the original manuscript (Mozart: Rondo in A minor K511)



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2. History.

In the earliest notation of Gregorian chant, there are numerous subtle indications of agogics, lost in succeeding centuries; but in medieval and Renaissance music one does not expect to find any evidence of articulation, let alone phrasing, other than in the use of rests and fermatas (e.g. in the setting of some proper names in late medieval motets) and in the evidence of the joining together of successive notes provided by liquescent neumes, ligatures and plicas. Rests and fermatas have continued to be used as a means of notating articulation. Other early evidence of articulation is found mostly in writings about instrumental techniques, but specific evidence of phrases in the usual sense (groups of notes to be performed in a single breath) may plausibly be sought in the special signs used by Cavalieri in his *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* (1600: see Notation). At the same period, the special signs for staccatos (dots and strokes) were introduced into string music, as was the bowing slur, the latter soon imitated in keyboard music such as Scheidt’s *Tabulatura nova* (1624). Earlier string music was bowed with a single note to each bow, though separate bowing does not always necessarily imply strong articulation.

Phrasing theory developed out of 17th-century rhythmic theory which was conceived in terms of poetic metrical theory. The 18th century, however, introduced into it the rhetorical analogy of punctuation: Couperin drew on this notion in the foreword to his *Pièces de clavecin*, iii (1722), to justify his use of a

comma in the notation of his pieces; and in Mattheson (1737) the idea of phrasing explicitly appeared. These and later writers show the modern reader that various different degrees of articulation were required (even at this date) to make phrases, sentences and so on perceptible: least for the 'comma', more for the 'colon' and still more for the 'period'. And they show that articulation was now linked to new expressive ideals. Later composers, notably Mozart, continued to show interest in the precise notation of articulation (see Badura-Skoda, 1957; Albrecht, 1957; Keller, 1955) and attempts were made to refine this notation (see Notation, fig.); but well into the 19th century, performers were expected to have direct access to teachers able to instruct them in good taste, and hence both theory and notational practice remained far from rigorous, with no precise distinctions being made, for example, between wedges or strokes and dots to notate various degrees of articulation and of accentuation.

In the second half of the 19th century Lussy attempted to tackle the issue of 'expression' in a new way: to commit to writing the aspects of good taste in performance, especially in matters of accentuation and phrasing, which had hitherto been left mainly to oral tradition. As Riemann (1903) pointed out, Lussy's theory is far from rigorous, representing a reworking of various rules of thumb derived from early 19th-century sources. But, like Riemann's own theory, it grew from the conviction that 18th- and early 19th-century notation, by the second half of the 19th century, no longer provided an adequate representation of the expressive requirements of the classical repertory; and indeed (for performers used to the careful notation of composers like Wagner and Liszt and their contemporaries) this must have been true. Riemann believed also that phrase structure is generated ultimately by processes of linear growth rather than by abstract patterns of stressed and unstressed units; he developed a precise notation for phrasing (see Notation, fig.) in which the course of a piece of music is related to a theoretical eight-bar structure (the numbers below the music indicate the 'punctuation' appropriate to the bars 2, 4, 6 and 8 in this structure), but with a fairly sophisticated apparatus to show the modifications to this system in practice.

Though Riemann's influence was strong, his views were not unchallenged. In Britain, an influential critic was Macpherson (1911), whose own theory is far less radical than Riemann's. The Urtext movement, however, may have represented the most thorough-going alternative to Riemann; an articulate statement of the virtues of an Urtext against 'phrasing editions' was produced by Schenker (1925). It is clear from this essay that Schenker saw no difference in principle between legato (articulation) slurs in conventional notation, properly employed, and the slurs he used in his own mature analytical graphs, which were conceived in terms of performance of the works, and which repay study by performers; and it is true, as Schenker and several other writers of the late 19th and early 20th century point out, that the phrasing editions sometimes falsify and trivialize perfectly unambiguous indications of articulation in the music of composers like Mozart. Nevertheless, in the 20th century the pendulum swung so far in favour of Urtext editions that one is in some danger of neglecting the evidence of earlier practice which is undeniably offered by some phrasing editions.

Despite Schenker's clear interest in performance and, in particular, in articulation and phrasing, the subject remains undeveloped in his theory, and has not even yet been fully integrated into theory.

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