

Phrasing

Phrasing in instrumental music is akin to phrasing in singing, although singers have the additional incentive that they really must stop and draw breath from time to time. The presence of “space” in song, where the singer can breathe, is also found in instrumental music.

It is the act of finding the phrases, respecting them and shaping them that has the umbrella term “phrasing”.

A rule (or not)

Always beware a rule that begins “generally speaking”...

However, generally speaking, phrases in folk music and songs are often 8 or 16 bars long, regardless of whether the bars have 2,3 4 or more beats. More mature classical music has what is called “the long line” - a melody that carries on and evolves and which is passed from instrument to instrument as it is developed.

Whichever style of music one is playing, the audience will enjoy it so much more if it is sensitively phrased.

It's not the destination it's the journey

How true that is for so many aspects of life, but here in the world of music, the converse is almost as true for some pieces (for example Hampshire Guitar Orchestra's popular version of Palladio), where the final cadences are obviously all about “where we're going” and not about “where we are right now”. Other pieces, (for example HAGO's version of Moulin Rouge) are more about the glorious undulations that permeate the whole piece.

How to phrase

Phrasing is an art not a science and no amount of prescriptive rules will make someone a "natural" at phrasing. But there is a toolkit of techniques that you should experiment with...

- Repeats often benefit from mellowing of tone and/or volume
- Phrase ends often benefit from a slight pause or “breath”
- A breath can be executed as a lengthening of the last note of the phrase, (slowing the pace of the piece), or by shortening the last note (to create a gap without losing momentum)
- Rubato is often effective when the phrase climbs to its highest notes (creating a sort of roller-coaster ride through the phrase)
- Vibrato on the longer notes can create a more lyrical phrase - see my Vibrato teach-in
- Articulating the notes in a phrase by staccato or legato playing can heighten the mood - see my Articulation teach-in
- Allowing the volume to rise and fall a little with the notes can increase the lyricism
- Taking a phrase in a different position on the neck can provide a welcome contrast - see my Seventh Position teach-in

Phrasing in ensemble

In many respects, phrasing is easier in ensemble because we all have fewer notes to worry about and more choices about how and where to play them.

But remember that if you're playing an inner part that is providing harmonic substance to the overall sound, it might not have a shape of its own that is obvious how to phrase. It is obviously not good practice to phrase an inner part with no appreciation of the tune, because phrasing needs coordination (especially phrasing based on rubato!)