

How to Play Musically

By Eric Ruyle

Introduction

People are moved by music. They love the range of emotions that it can make them feel. They are not the only ones who feel the same way. Students and teacher also want to hear music - not just notes. There are players that make the music come alive: the notes seem to jump off the page. But how do they do that?

The general belief is that one cannot be taught how to play to musically - you either know how to do it or you don't. Another school of thought is that you listen to recordings, mimicking the way great players do things. That's fine, but mimicking does not mean that you are learning you are just copying. Parrots can copy words but they are not learning how to speak. Hearing great players is a wonderful way to grasp the nuances of playing, but what if there are no recordings? What are you supposed to do? Play it like a piece that you do know? If we do that, everything sounds the same, much to the chagrin of composers everywhere.

So we are back to the original question - can musicality be taught?

Yes. There are some basic guidelines to playing musically. By learning and employing these, one can play musically. Learning how to do this involves several stages of understanding/knowledge. One must assimilate the level and consistently integrate it into their playing before moving on to the next stage. It is not just a matter of reading all the levels then doing them, each stage must be a part of the player's natural playing before they can start to use the next stage. While each stage builds on the next, one must not only have a complete understanding but also apply it constantly to their playing. It has to be part of the player.

Fortunately, the steps are not complicated so that even beginning students can be taught the early levels. The information is not dependant on extensive technical abilities. In fact, musicality comes out best on melodic passages, not difficult technical runs.

But what about...

Many cynics will be quick to pint out such-and-such piece, which does not work with the guidelines. Or that this runs contrary to how a particular composer's pieces are played.

Granted, there are exceptions, times when the music needs are different than what is presented here. Each piece should be evaluated individually. Remember, these are only guidelines and are only *suggestions* on how to phrase: they are not written in stone. Playing musically is about making choices and these are intended as a guideline for making those decisions. They will not fit every situation, but will help the player understand how to decide and how/why to base their decisions. Not everyone will agree with these guidelines, but then again, they do not have to. That is what great about music - everybody does not have to sound the same way. Just listen to the great musicians - they make beautiful music but each sounds different.

Basics

Making music is about creating tension and releasing the tension. There are three basic ways of creating tension and are directly related to the three levels of teaching musicality.

Types of Tension

- I. Dynamic
- II. Harmonic
- III. Rhythmic

Level 1 - Long Note & Repeated Notes/Figures

The first level of musicianship and the most accessible even by beginners is phrasing the long notes and repeated notes/figures.

The general rule is that long notes and repeated notes/figures MUST go somewhere. Keeping the air steady and constant is the goal for any note of any length but to play them without any dynamic movement does not move the listener. Take a note and play it without any dynamics. Doesn't sound musical, does it? (When working with students, I equivocate an unchanging long note to an alarm clock: it is not a pretty sound at any time of the day.) Now take the same note and add a gradual crescendo. Sounds much better. Add dynamic movement all long notes.

When talking about movement in long notes and repeated notes/figures, do not assume that you will add a crescendo every time. There are cases where a decrescendo is the appropriate movement. A general indicator for what type of dynamic to add is where the long note is in the phrase: if at the beginning, crescendo; if at the end, decrescendo. Each phrase must be judged individually, but the above guidelines will prevail for the majority of the time.

This does not mean that you make huge changes in the dynamics; for the most part the movement should be subtle. You can add a crescendo (or decrescendo) to a note and still stay within the proper dynamic because written dynamics are not just one particular volume but a range of dynamics. So by adding subtle crescendos (as opposed to huge changes) you can give the note movement and still stay within the right dynamic.



When dealing with repeated notes the same rule applies: *do something!* Overall, the tendency is to slow down on repeated fast notes (such as the example below). By adding a slight crescendo, it will keep the tongue from slowing down. This also applies to notes that repeat just a few times. By adding crescendos and decrescendos to the repeated notes in the following passage, the phrase has more direction.



Any level of student can use this first step, even beginners. A word of caution: when demonstrating this to the student, keep the descriptions simple. You can explain the musical terms to beginners but constantly using technical terms may confuse or intimidate them. The figures may be part of a canonic passage but telling this to the student may confuse them.

This first level is useful in Marches or similar pieces with significant repetition.
 Note When using these first two levels, apply them first to the supporting lines and instruments - in many cases, they are more important than the melody.

LONG PHRASES

When creating phrasing, avoid the tendency to over-nuance. Just because you can justify doing several crescendos & decrescendos in a row doesn't mean you should. Students will often get confused if you have them constantly going up for two beats then back do for two repeated. By combining several small phrases into a long one will not only make it easier for the player to grasp but it also help give direction to the piece overall.



Level 2 – Non-Chord Tones

All notes are not equal; some notes get more emphasis than others. Musicality is about bringing out certain notes, giving them more character. Basically, we create musical tension.

As in life, things may seem fine until tension is added. We can get use to the tension but when it is released, life is so much better than before. The same applies to music. The notes sound fine when played equal but when particular notes are given emphasis (non-chord tones) over others (chord tones), the music starts to get a life of its own. Composers throughout the centuries have used this. Over time, what has been considered tension (dissonance or non-chord tones) and release (consonance or chord tones) has changed, but it has been utilized from the beginning. In fact, tension and release is a vital part of the composition process.

But how do we choose which notes deserve the tension?

One of the ways composers create tension is by using notes that are not in the chord. While there are many types of non-chord tones, the two that are predominant are note-above and half-step below. How composers use these notes is what gives each their own individual style.

With the understanding of how melodies are created, we have a better grasp on interpreting it. Since non-chord tones are dissonant, we want to bring them out: add tension. Generally, we bring out the tension through crescendo.

Because the *note-above* is generally part of the scale, it is *tension quotient low*.

A style of note that receives a *higher tension rating* is the *half-step below*. The attraction of this note is that it works like a leading tone. [A leading tone is the seventh scale degree of a scale and helps define the tonic.] One of the beauties about these notes is they create a mini-tonicization. Like the note-above/appoggiatura, bring out the half-step below dynamically then back off on the release note.

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords: G13, Cmaj7, Dmi7, Emi7, A7, Dmi7, G7(b9), Cmaj7, E7(b9), and Ami. The notation includes a treble clef, a tempo marking of quarter note = 60, and a dynamic marking of *sf* (sforzando) under a note. Dashed lines with arrows indicate the dynamic contour of the notes.

The highest type of tension note is chromaticism. By using notes outside the key, a high level of tension is created. This tension is to be embraced and brought out. Chromaticism is often used to suspend the key, mini-tonicizations to other chords (secondary dominants/diminished chords)

Musical notation showing chromaticism exercises. The first line includes chords: G7sus, G7alt, Cmaj7, Dmi7, Emi7, A7(b9), Dmi7, and G7sus. The second line includes chords: Gmi7, C7(b9), and F. The notation includes a treble clef, a dynamic marking of *sf*, and dashed lines with arrows indicating dynamic contours.

Chromaticism is one of the tools that will be used the most in ensemble playing and is found in the majority of the accompaniment lines. By bringing these out these note changes, the harmonic structure is featured. Do not forget to give direction to long notes.

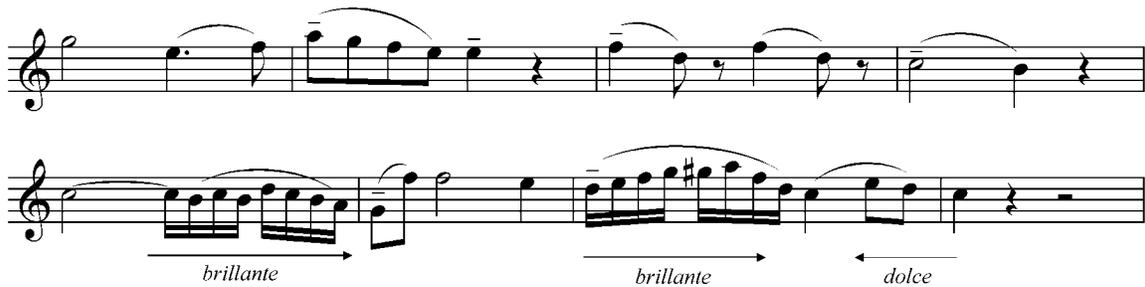
Level 3 - The Beat

This final level deals with using subtle nuances. These are very subjective and need to be used sparingly.

THE TYRANNY OF THE BEAT

In a two-part article on Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, David Etheridge wrote about playing certain passages *brillante* and others *dolce*. What he was actually pointing out that were passages where the front part of the beat is used and where the back part should be used.

This does not suggest playing with bad time or rubato, you can play in the different sections of the beat and still have a steady tempo. Each section has its own quality: The front gives the music an exciting effect. Players commonly use the middle; it is the normal sound. A lyrical quality is created when the phrase is played using the back part of the beat.



The Types - Styles

Tension Types in Traditional Style Periods:

- I. Dynamic - Baroque Period
- II. Harmonic - Romantic Period
- III. Rhythmic - Classic Period

Use in Modern Literature:

- I. Motivic based; Highly repetitive - Dynamic Tension
- II. Plenty of Chromaticism,; Thick chords - Harmonic Tension
- III. Simple, pretty melodies; Based on folk material - Rhythmic Tension

Music Examples

- Bassi - Nocturne (Class II)
- Brahms - Clarinet Sonata #1 (Class I & II)
- Cavallini - Adagio/Tarantella (Class I)

Langenus - Mount Vernon Menuet (Class III)
John Mills - 2002 Texas All State Jazz Ensemble: Saxophone Etude #2
Mozart - Clarinet Concerto (Class I)
Stravinsky - Three Pieces (Class I)