

If You PLAY Something, SAY Something!

Brian Balmages

Director of Instrumental Publications, The FJH Music Company Inc.
Assistant Director of Bands and Orchestras, Towson University
www.fjhmusic.com • www.brianbalmages.com

Music as a Language

"It's rare that I ever meet a musician who doesn't agree that music is a language. But it's very rare to meet a musician that really treats it like one."

–Victor Wooten – Bela Fleck and the Flecktones

Elements of Music

- Understanding
- Communication / Delivery
- Expression / Emotion
- Phrasing
- Body Language

STAGES OF MUSICIANSHIP (in performance AND rehearsal)

Stage 1: Hollow Musicianship

- Lack of attention to basic musical markings
 - tempo changes (*ritardando, accelerando, morendo, subito, sans*)
 - dynamics
 - articulation
 - phrase markings
 - understanding of style and its role in the music
- Often the first stage of rehearsal with the excuse that “we will focus on notes and rhythms first, THEN get into the music”
 - Inherent problem with this approach is that students get good at what they practice (in this case, get good at playing without musicality)
 - Important to realize we can still rehearse a group technically, but important to provide musical justification while fixing technical issues.
 - Ensembles often not aware of the program notes / reason behind the composition of a piece. Makes them unable to identify with the music. If students “practice music” without contextual understanding, they get good at what they practice!

Stage 2: Choreographed Musicianship

- Observation and basic execution of musical markings / terms
- While musical intent is there, performance seems hollow because the *reason* for the musical markings is not being understood nor conveyed
- Often accompanied by a lack of facial expression and body language from the podium

Stage 3: Engaged Musicianship

- When the reason for a marking is understood through score study, communicated to the ensemble, and conveyed through performance
 - Ensemble has been aware of the inspiration behind a piece and has been rehearsing with this in mind throughout the process.
 - All musical terms have corresponding emotional / “action” terms that are understood by the ensemble
 - Facial expressions / body language of conductor reflects the music

General thoughts on phrasing

- Everything should have musical “line” (melody, supporting harmony, rhythm, sustained notes)
- Repeated notes need to have direction
- Repeated phrases need to have direction (can move upward or downward)
- Students play what they hear in their heads
- Decisions need to be made on ensemble phrasing / breathing, not just individual
- Musical breath = musical entrance

Relating Phrasing to Speech

- Breath (always musical and in tempo)
- Letters -> Notes
- Syllables -> Intervals
- Words -> Measures
- Sentences -> Phrases
- Combination of sentences -> Complete work

Musical graphs

- Helpful to create a graph of the emotional arc of an entire work
- Add musical terminology that appears throughout the music
- Include emotional / “action” terms that correspond with musical terminology
- Consider adding a second line that graphs dynamics

“Action Terms”

- Attaches an emotional / physical response to a musical term
- Provides the “why” of a musical decision (no longer getting louder just because the word “crescendo” means “get louder”)

Select Musical terms

Ritardando
Accelerando
Crescendo
Diminuendo
piano
forte
sustain

Examples of Emotional / “Action” terms

Tension (or release) / relax / ponder
Energy / intensity / momentum
Push / energy transfer / engage
Pull back / relax / calm down / (intensify)
Gentle / calm / thoughtful
Strong / confident / intention
Commitment / constant / engaged

Musical Example

The first system of music is in 4/4 time and marked *mp*. It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, all under a slur. The bass staff begins with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes F3, E3, and D3, also under a slur. The first measure of each staff ends with a fermata over the final note. The second measure continues the melodic lines. The third measure features a complex texture with a dotted quarter note G4 in the treble, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4, all under a slur. The bass staff continues with its melodic line.

The second system of music is in 4/4 time and features dynamic markings of *mf* and *mp*. It consists of two staves. The treble staff begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, all under a slur. The bass staff begins with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes F3, E3, and D3, also under a slur. The first measure of each staff ends with a fermata over the final note. The second measure continues the melodic lines. The third measure features a complex texture with a dotted quarter note G4 in the treble, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4, all under a slur. The bass staff continues with its melodic line.

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