# Teaching Young Musicians How to Play Expressively
## J. Steven Moore

Music educators have developed many successful methods for teaching rhythms, scales, tuning, and many other fundamentals of music. However, we still struggle with how to teach expressive playing as a concept that can be applied to the music that a young musician encounters. Often, high school students technical capabilities far exceed their expressive abilities, even though most musicians would agree that the latter is more important. If you ask students to tell you what they know about phrasing or similar concepts you will often hear responses such as:
1) phrases are generally four measures;
2) downbeats are stronger than upbeats;
3) in common time, beats one and three are strong; beats two and four are weak;
4) a phrase is like a musical sentence.

Music teachers commonly teach nuance, expression, and phrasing using the following tried and true methods:
1) singing or playing the musical line for the students;
2) asking students to determine the peak note of the phrase;
3) demonstrating that melodies have a song or dance character.

These are all important concepts and much information can be transferred in this manner. However, we must ask if there is any tools we can give students to make their own interpretative decisions. Can we provide concepts that will help students play with the appropriate inflection?

Fortunately, there are tools that are easy to learn with appropriate modeling, listening, and repetition and that may have a remarkable effect on the musicality of individuals as well as ensembles. The concepts are generally outlined in two primary sources, *Notegrouping, A Method for Achieving Expresson and Style in Musical Performance*, by James Thurmond and *Kincaidiana, A Flute Player's Notebook,* by John Krell. While the Thurmond book is a valuable resource for every conductor, it is not suitable for most secondary school students. Unfortunately, the Krell book is out of print and can be difficult to find. Since there is a relatively small amount of literature regarding the fundamentals of musical interpretation, it is not surprising that much of the knowledge of several centuries has been learned through the apprenticeship method. Many of the available writings are cloaked in the academic language of university research and are not always useful for the wide dissemination of information to the young performers who need it most. This article will attempt to integrate some of the more helpful methodologies, communicate concepts in a manner more accessible to young players, and suggest ways in which the creative process can be applied to phrasing, nuance, and musical expression.

**How it Works**

"Could you play that again, this time with a little more feeling?" Countless times students have heard that adage by music directors or private teachers. A synthesizer can be programmed to play musical notes with a high degree of precision. Each note is played at the exact same volume at the exact same tempo. But this isn't expressive music. So how do you play with feeling? Certainly there is more to it than reproducing the notes and markings on the printed musical page.

> The printed score is like a landscape painted on a cardboard facade; houses, trees and hills stand stiffly side by side. . . .When the re-creative spirit of the performer leads us through one of the painted doors, we suddenly find ourselves entering a three-dimensional realm. The forms take on depth. We perceive the movement of light and shadow.[1]

**The Language of Music**

So how do we develop expressive and creative musical interpretations? First, let's start with the English language. If you read this sentence in a boring monotone it sounds like a meaningless string of words:

'When the concert ended the audience roared its approval.'

If you add punctuation by inserting a comma, it helps give the sentence some direction:

'When the concert ended, the audience roared its approval.'

Now if you emphasize the word "roared", you get even more expression:

When the concert ended, the audience **roared** its approval.

The final step of this example is to slow down the last half of the sentence to give it a more dramatic flair:

When the concert ended, *the audience **roared** its approval.*

This kind of punctuation, dynamic emphasis, and tempo control should also be used in playing music. A musical phrase is much like a sentence. A breath mark acts like a comma, a crescendo to an important accented note provides

---

[1]    David Blum, Casals and the Art of Interpretation (Berkeley and Los Angeles:  University of California Press, 1977) 69–70.

dynamic emphasis, and tempo changes help express emotions. As you can see there are a lot of similarities between language and music.

In fact, the phrasing and interpretation of music has, as its basis, the patterns and inflections found in the rhythms of speech. As *The Rhythmic Structure of Music* explains, "The five basic rhythmic groupings may be differentiated by terms traditionally associated with prosody:[2]

      a. iamb              U —
      b. anapest        U U —
      c. trochee         — U
      d. dactyl           — U U
      e. amphibrach   U — U

Knowing that musical phrases are comprised of various levels of these metric patterns, it becomes the art of the performer to discover and illuminate them. A performance that is devoid of any interpretation of these patterns is perceived as antiseptic, unfeeling, or lifeless. Another common problem with amateur—and even some professional interpretations—is that inflections are present, albeit with an unnatural, pedantic feeling. This is comparable to a novice attempting a foreign language who—clear to all native speakers—hasn't discovered the necessary rise and fall of the speech patterns. In some instances one is reminded of a person reading poetry without understanding the meaning of the verse. Often these unsatisfactory musical renditions are a consequence of undue emphasis on downbeats and the first note of each measure. The most common result is a musical sentence organized primarily with a trochaic rhythmic structure as in **example 1**:



This trochaic type of phrasing is further entrenched by the beaming of eighth notes beginning on the beat and never crossing bar lines. Whereas this type of beaming helps the performer decipher the rhythm, it obscures the fact that much of music is grouped in iambic meter as in **example 2**:



---

2  Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard Meyer, The Rhythmic Structure of Music (Chicago:  The University of Chicago Press, 1960) 6.

James Thurmond devotes an entire chapter to melodies with an anacrusic quality in his book, *Note grouping, A Method for Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance.* "Many examples from the works of the masters of musical composition could be given as further proof of the fact that the anacrusis is the <u>basic generator of motion in the motive or phrase</u> [emphasis mine].[3]

Evidently, Pablo Casals agrees with the importance of the upbeat as he describes an entire scalar passage as "having the quality of an upbeat."[4]

**Arsis-Thesis Patterns**
The steps we take when walking are like the beats of music. You can imagine the upbeat and downbeat of each step. The Greeks called the weak upbeat *arsis* and the strong downbeat *thesis.* Life is full of natural rhythms, each with an arsis and thesis. Lifting a hammer is the arsis, dropping the hammer is the thesis. Pulling back a bow is the arsis, releasing the arrow is the thesis. Breathing in is the arsis, breathing out is the thesis. All steps end with a thesis when the foot touches the ground. What happens on the arsis or upbeat before the foot touches the ground determines the style of the step. You can march into a step, leap into a step, or jump into a step. The same is true with music. The character of a downbeat (thesis) is often determined by what happens on the upbeat (arsis). Note groupings depend on the arsis-thesis relationship. As illustrated in **example 3**, an arsis triplet is incomplete without a fourth note as a thesis:



**Example 4** shows that an arsis couplet is incomplete without a third note as a thesis:

3 James Thurmond, Note grouping, A Method for Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance (Ft. Lauderdale, Fl.: Meredith Music Publications, 1983) 47.

4 David Blum, Casals and the Art of Interpretation, 27.

The above group of notes has the same flow as the prepositional phrase "up the scale."  The arsis words "up" and "the" play the same role as the arsis eighth notes and the thesis word "scale" plays the same role as the thesis quartet note. In common time, an arsis frequently occurs on beats 2 and 4, while a thesis is usually on beats 1 and 3.  Even though downbeats are important, there is a lot of musical expression in what goes on during the upbeats. The arsis-thesis concept has multiple levels and extends beyond simple note groupings. An entire musical phrase also has an arsis and thesis. In fact, an entire section of the form can function as an arsis.

**Example 5**

| thesis | | arsis | | thesis |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| **A** | \| | **B** | \| | **A** |
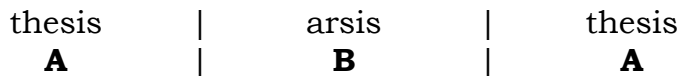
**Expression Marks**
Perhaps the best way to understand note grouping is to begin with simple exercises. In order to surmount the obstacles of trochaic beaming and bar lines, it is helpful to add markings that help clarify more preferable note groupings. In his book, *Phrasing and Articulation, A Contribution to Rhetoric of Music* (translated by Leigh Gerdine)*,* Hermann Keller compares spoken language to music.

> Everything language cannot express with the help of punctuation signs—height and depth of pitch, duration, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, articulation—music is able to bring to expression through its notational system and additional signs, although, in most curious fashion, music has refused to create for itself a system of punctuation marks similar to that of language.[5]

Therefore we have continued to pass the art of expression on to our students through an oral tradition, asking them to mimic their teachers or listen to professional musicians. In an attempt to alleviate this problem, James Thurmond utilizes the abbreviations "A" and "T" to represent "arsis" and "thesis" respectively. Additionally, he brackets notes in the arsis-thesis combination.

---

5 Hermann Keller, translated by Leigh Gerdine, Phrasing and Articulation, A Contribution to a Rhetoric of Music (New York:  W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973) 14.

**example 6**
I also use curved lines that are dotted with an arrow on the thesis end of the curve to indicate the direction of the nuance.

A    T
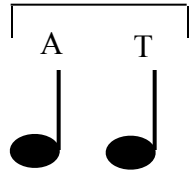
**example 7**

It is helpful to draw these markings on top of the existing music at the beginning of the discovery process. After the performer becomes comfortable with making creative decisions concerning interpretation, the visual aids become less necessary. Also when first assimilating these concepts, it is quite acceptable to overtly emphasize the note groupings, as it usually takes some time to overcome years of training in trochaic patterns. Of course, each component of developing a creative interpretation, while essential, can be over done. Good taste and common sense are also required. Once the performer feels comfortable in readjusting the emphasis, she can begin to apply these concepts to simple melodies.

**Casals and Interpretation**
According to David Blum, Pablo Casals also stressed the importance of grouping notes in order to achieve a meaningful interpretation of the music. Casals is quoted, "The arrows which I have placed above the musical examples are meant to suggest the extent and directional tendency of these subtle currents of movement."[6]

> Repetition in music—be it of a single note or of a phrase—is similar to repetition of words or phrases in speech. It is a natural feature of expressive communication that we vary the emphasis when we say the same thing more than once. . . . 'It is a general rule that repeated notes or a repeated design must not be equal,' Casals would remind his students. 'Something has to be done. Otherwise you have

---

6  Blum, Casals and the Art of Interpretation, 71.

monotony—and nothing is more monotonous than monotony!'[7]

Regarding the treatment of long notes, Blum writes:

> Like a slow gesture in dance, a long note must preserve the continuity of line; otherwise it will arrest the sense of motion. When teaching the opening movement of Bach's First Viola da Gamba Sonata, Casals commented, "If the long note stays on the same level it becomes monotonous. One is waiting for something. Well, that something is to give colour to that long note. If you do a little crescendo, then the interest continues; you will see how beautiful it is."[8]

**Conclusion**

Although Casals does not use the terminology of note grouping as defined by Thurmond or poetic meter as utilized by Cooper and Meyer, it is clear that he employs the same principles in his playing and teaching. This is not uncommon among our teachers. Many of them perform with creative expression, yet lack the tools to communicate these principles from a conceptual standpoint. Certainly, this points to the need for a more common language for discussing the tenets of creative expression. Of course, the aforementioned fundamentals of note grouping and interpretation are merely the foundation. Moving beyond these simple exercises and melodies in to the music of the masters is where the creative process of the performer can truly come into play. Complex musical problems require creative answers and provide opportunities for the artist to conceive vistas beyond ordinary musicians' imagination. It is this excursion into the three-dimensional landscape that lies beyond the notes that is inspirational to the performer and listener. Hopefully, more creative teaching processes in the future will lead to making creative expression more accessible to those performers who wish to embark on this journey of musical discovery.

---

7 Ibid., 29.

8 Ibid., 26.