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**The Search for Musical North
Frederick Speck**

The Search for Musical North, a mobile created by sculptor David Caudill, is suspended in the lobby space at the entry to Comstock Concert Hall at the University of Louisville. It ushers in the audience to every concert with both a spirit of adventure and an implicit challenge. One may argue that its twin should be constructed and suspended backstage, to remind the advancing performers of the mission that lies ahead. Moreover, for the conductor, the title of Caudill's work serves as a powerful metaphor regarding one's role and the issue of integrity to the score in the interest of faithful interpretation.

As a starting point, it is valuable to set boundaries regarding the concept of interpretation. In its general application, the idea of interpretation has to do with explaining something's meaning. Conductors who hold to this tenet recognize that is not restrictive, but liberating. Doing so helps resolve the question of purpose. Simply put, the conductor's task is the explanation of the art object as sound. The score is there to reveal what the conductor needs to know in order to understand the language and motivations of the work. It is, in that way, the composer's blueprint for the "musical" mobile. The performance will fill the musical space that is time, with tones that are connected according to the composer's plan, while maintaining its singular continuity of form. While, like the mobile, the composition may be perceived from varied perspectives and viewpoints, its structure and relationships must always be kept clear for the listener. In this way, the conductor's challenge becomes far less subjective than might at first be thought. Interestingly, while the mission becomes less subjective, it also becomes more decisive. Furthermore, with this premise as a point of departure, the conductor needn't worry about personalizing his or her own interpretation. With the content of the score as a guide, the inescapable human intuition of each conductor will be present in just the right degree.

A concept held by artist Pablo Picasso helps to emphasize this point. Picasso is said to have challenged young artists to "draw a perfect circle." His point was that since it cannot be done, each best attempt will reveal some small, idiosyncratic variation that will make it the artist's "own." When the conductor treats the score as "the perfect circle," the best possibility of conveying the meaning of the work exists, erasing the distraction of trying to bring one's individuality to the interpretation. As the conductor seeks that perfect circle, each performance will nonetheless reveal an inescapable part of the personality that is unique to the interpreter.

Conductor Types



Obedient Literalist.....dots the i, crosses the t, misses the point



Self-indulgent Finger Painter.....enjoys the feeling, but every color feels the same



Decadent Histrion.....excessive, self-absorbed



Musical Messenger.....informed, decisive, conveys meaning

The Paradox of Notation

While on one hand, musical notation appears to be quite specific, it is often very limiting and may at times obscure or contradict the composition's idea and meaning. Reading more deeply than the technical information and editorial markings is critical to finding the drama and motion of the music. In an effort toward efficiency, even skilled musicians sometimes tend to default to the technical alone. Pablo Casals reinforced this idea in David Blum's book, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*, commenting, "There are so many excellent instrumentalists who are completely obsessed by the printed note, whereas it has a very limited power to express what the music actually means." In this way, the literal can be the enemy of the authentic.

A superficial rendition based on simple editorial indications such as tempo and dynamics barely scratches the surface of expression, as time and intensity is not defined by the beat and decibels, but rather by the integral elements such as the span of figures and phrases and the drama of the harmonic language. For instance, tempo, on its own, does not reflect the musical time or, on another level, even the rate of speed of a work. Real musical time is drawn through the beats, across the bar lines and often in energized relationships of syncopation that may not be noticed through a cursory reading. The important sense of phrase time is distorted or obscured when players move the music forward in only moment to moment (or beat to beat) ways. In the end, a literal performance of the notation yields, at best, a reproduction and not an authentic art object.

The Language of Line

In music, the line conveys the message and portrays the drama of time more than any other element. Thematic motives and figures, so important to composers, are often left understated by performers and conductors. These, the very elements that create energy, the sense of motion, and structural relationships, should always be clearly communicated to the listener. Motives must have priority in informing the interpretation. Players are often somewhat passive in conveying motivic and figural content. In large ensembles this problem becomes aggravated (the greater the number of players on a part, the more neutral the expression). To counteract this in symphonic scoring the details of the line must be exaggerated.

Key Concepts in Conveying Line

The Musical Physics of Line – In western art music the illusion of motion in time is essential. In general, tones of short duration stimulate motion and break the inertia, thus creating energy, motivation and direction. These can be thought of as *figural triggers* or *line motivators*.

Syncopation – Many lines have syncopation composed into them that is left unexpressed. The element of syncopation exists at a far deeper level than the simple shifting of an accent to an ordinarily weak part of the beat. Powerful syncopations can involve entire figures and phrases. These gestures prolong the arsis, generating musical tension, energy and motion.

An often missed opportunity for an important expression of syncopation can be quite easily taught. Implied (or disguised) syncopation can be found almost wherever the same note is seen on both the left and right side of a bar line. When these tones are articulated, the player often fractures the musical element with the interruption of the bar line, consequently destroying the tension. Musicians may experiment with such figures by adding a tie for practice purposes in order to feel the musical tension of the syncopation. After that, the tone may again be rearticulated, maintaining the stress felt by virtue of experiencing the tied version. The intentional performance of these syncopations conveys the phrase time as composed, rather than merely the segmented beat and meter time. In addition to being found in cross-bar situations, implied syncopation may be found in other locations, too. While observable in many styles from both past and present, examples are particularly plentiful in baroque music.

Diction and Dialect – Concepts of diction and dialect are as important to the instrumentalist as to the vocalist. Diction has to do with not only the clarity of the onset of tone, but also the shaping of the tone. Decisions regarding diction are content driven based on the material of the line. This extends to matching articulation between diverse instruments as well. (Blum's book, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*, devotes an entire chapter to the topic.)

Matching the dialect to the music and to one another as ensemble musicians is a quality demonstrated by the most advanced performers. When important thematic materials are passed between solo players, or even various sections of the ensemble, it is important that the statements match in gestural dialect. At its best, it will not sound like players are merely copying one another, but that they are all expressing from the same linguistic background.

Often, diction and dialect go hand in hand. For instance, the likelihood of an oboist, flutist and xylophonist matching a staccato passage through individual interpretations is very remote, if only because of the acoustical properties of the instruments. Musicians trained in diction and dialect will, however, modify accents, the body of the tones, tone lengths and in the case of the percussionist, mallet choices in order for the passage to resonate in agreement.

The Challenge of Slurred Passages

The gestural clarity of figures and motives is often neutralized when these elements are embedded in slurred passages. To begin, performers should ask whether the slurs are general or specific, that is, editorial or compositional. A liability of the macro-slur is that the performer will unintentionally garble the diction, creating the musical equivalent of a monotone speaking voice that is without nuance. There are times that this is a particular trap for woodwind and brass players. Even percussionists tend to play with neutral uniformity. When elongated slurred passages are performed in a physically literal manner (a single breath and little inflection) the expression becomes one-dimensional. This results in the loss of the expression of internal time spans and syncopations within the phrase.

It is notable that string players and vocalists have built in advantages in this regard. String players enjoy the inherent clarification that results from the bowing of a line. While the player is responsible for numerous subtleties related to bowing decisions, the composer generally groups string figures so that the bow direction changes will agree with the content of motives and figures. The obvious advantages for vocalists is the presence of text, through which musical departures, arrivals, punctuation, degrees of intensity and the energy of rhythmic figures are guided. Wind and percussion players should consider correlations with string bowing and vocal text analogies when making decisions about how to portray a line. Even using the imagination to consider what the line would “look like” if bowed by a fine violinist might create insight regarding the appropriate places for nuance within broadly slurred passages.

Just as the monotone rendition of elongated slurred passages impedes the message, a choppy, non-directional performance of repetitive figures can be unsuccessful as well. In some cases, considering the nuances of string bowing can provide an example of thinking about the trajectory of a line. In her book, *The Dynamic Orchestra*, Elizabeth A.H. Green commented on the bowing that George Szell favored for the very recognizable passage from the first movement of Mozart's *Symphony No. 40 in G minor*, K. 550. His motivation was to draw attention to the continuation of the longer line rather than the fragments. In addition, it is apparent that there is an accumulation of energy and a sense of the broader syncopation of the line. Notice in the second and sixth complete measures that there is also a suggestion of continued energy through the quarter rest, carrying the energy of the line forward with successive upbows rather than punctuating it.

Mozart: Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550, mvt. I

Molto allegro

Vln. I

The clarinet melody from the beginning of the first movement of *Little Symphony for Winds* by Franz Schubert (arranged by Verne Reynolds) provides an excellent exercise for demonstrating gestural clarity within passages that are marked with somewhat generalized slurs. Here the application of leading the line from its figural triggers (short note values that flow to long notes) can be easily observed. In the opening two measures alone, the player finds immediate opportunities to break the musical inertia by generating energy from the short-note figures. By doing so, gestural time is conveyed to the listener rather than beat time or measure time. This practice, carried into other works, will reveal similar examples of syncopation found in the internal components of a line. Another prolonged syncopation exists from the end of measure two through the beginning of measure five. Here the fifth scale degree is sustained for more than seven beats. It is both energized by eighth-note repetitions and made prominent by its sheer duration. This activated *agogic* accent on the dominant signals a growth of tension that can only materialize if the performer recognizes the connection that must be kept through the end of the whole note into the quarter note that follows. In measures five and six, the slurred sixteenth note figures qualify more directly as compositional slurs with the caveat that the quarter notes that follow them are the outcome of the line of motion.

Little Symphony for Winds, mvt. 1 clarinet excerpt

Franz Schubert/Verne Reynolds

Ex. 1 Allegro moderato ♩ = 104

1st Clarinet in B♭

Ex. 2 Allegro moderato ♩ = 104

The opening eight measures reveal how the tension of time flow (that is, how the music moves) is significantly different and of much greater musical importance than the sounds of beats and measures. While the first four measures create the tension of three elongated and syncopated gestures of time ranging from three to more than seven beats in duration, notice the compression of time beginning with each sixteenth-note group in measures five and six. Each of these gestures becomes shorter and shorter in duration, from three beats to two beats to one beat, creating the sensation of a structural *accelerando* in the approach to the written E major triad in the triplet measure during which the listener experiences the surface pulse and the thematic motion agreeing in four straight beats. This acceleration of composed motion is then suddenly pulled back by the syncopation in measure eight that prepares the cadence.

Little Symphony for Winds, mvt. 2 clarinet excerpt

Franz Schubert/Verne Reynolds

Ex. 1 Adagio (♩ = 54)

1st Clarinet in B♭

Ex. 2 Adagio (♩ = 54)

At the beginning of the second movement of the *Little Symphony for Winds*, the clarinet is again featured as the carrier of the melody in music that is scored for a quartet of two clarinets and two bassoons. In the opening of this triple-meter excerpt, the first two measures of music is notated with a slurred eighth-note triplet on beat three which continues to beat one of the following measure. A typical performance problem is encountered when the musician allows the bar line to interrupt the figure. Understanding that when a triplet is notated, there is almost always a fourth tone involved, the advanced player creates a four-note group for the listener, which sets in motion the expressive direction of the descending scale 3-2-1-7 that unifies the opening four measures and allows the macro-time to be felt. As the excerpt continues, expressing the triplets as four-note groups and using groups of sixteenth notes as figural triggers makes the language of the line quite understandable. An interesting problem, however, exists in measure twelve. Here, the E is marked slurred to the E#, though the E# clearly inflects to the F# in the next measure. A slight lift prior to the E# allows it to fulfill its mission, to direct the listener to the return of the opening measures of the movement.

Octet Excerpt

Theodore Gouvy

Ex. 1 *Allegro moderato* ♩ = 60

Oboe

p *cresc.* *f*

Ex. 2 *Allegro moderato* ♩ = 60

p *cresc.* *f*

Ex. 1 of the oboe part, which begins the *Allegro moderato* of the first movement of Theodore Gouvy's *Octet*, opens with material marked with editorial slurs over complete measures. If performed in a literal way, this practice will subvert the eighth-note motion at the ends of measures one and two, rather than enhancing the energy across the bar line as the descending 7, 6, 5 pitch content (D, C, B \flat) suggests. Further, the full-measure slur diminishes the tensional energy of the implied syncopation and *agogic* accent at the end of measure two that carries across the bar line through the rearticulated written C to the B \flat . Finally, this signature eighth-note gesture across the bar line is found once again at the end of measure four, creating both the melodic cadence and a hinge or elision to the consequent that follows. Applied together, these elements create both directional continuity and wholeness in the four-measure phrase, which would otherwise be broken into a sequence of single-measure iterations.

In the consequent, a new rhythmic figure (dotted eighth, sixteenth, eighth) produces directional contrast and the sense of accelerated surface motion. While the antecedent was focused on the descending scale (B \flat , A \flat , G), the beginning of the consequent erupts with an upward fanfare. Recognizing that the generative energy is triggered from the sixteenth-note, the full-measure slur can easily cause the line to lose its figural definition. Even when slurred, the sixteenth-note must convey an attitude of presentation. It is also notable that the end of measure five into measure six is identical to the opening measure of the antecedent, hence creating a unity.

As the excerpt continues, the dotted rhythmic figure returns as accompaniment to a repetition of the theme as presented by the clarinet. Though more subdued as accompaniment, the shortest note in the figure still calls for clarity and propulsion.

Finally, there is the matter of the cadential material that begins with the dotted half notes. Notice that if the *crescendo* as marked is made incrementally (beat by beat), the content (which is the descending A^b to G repeated) is distorted to create a continuous five-measure group. The pitch content, however, clearly suggests a two-measure group, that is essentially repeated and elongated. To clarify the repetition, a musical hinge between the two is necessary. Here, a small lift creates definition of the time spans.

Ex. 2 of the oboe part for the *Allegro moderato* of Gouvy's *Octet* shows an alternative way to demonstrate the figural content of the melody. The alterations of the slur patterns conform with the content of the line. Some players may be able to convey this within the general slurs of Ex. 1, while others will succeed by introducing varying degrees of tongued articulation. Regardless, these subtle choices are made in order to respect and convey the musical content of the line.

Crescendo and Diminuendo

The art of *crescendo* (and *diminuendo*) is less dependent on volume than one might think. In fact, the power of a *crescendo* can be overshadowed, minimized or canceled by applying either too much volume or poor pacing. The expression should be about increasing energy, not simply sheer volume.

When making decisions about a *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, it is important to observe what compositional elements, other than volume, are changing the energy of the music. Most often, the notation of a *crescendo* or *diminuendo* points toward aspects of musical time, harmony or expressive targets (points of punctuation or arrival).

The most accomplished composers tend to employ a *crescendo* or *diminuendo* to highlight how musical material is changing in terms of its harmonic, motivic or figural energy over time. Evaluating these characteristics and making decisions about how to emphasize them (independent of modifying the volume) is a good starting point. Then, the appropriate degree and pacing of volume change can be employed to draw attention to specific musical elements.

The Harmonic Crescendo

When a *crescendo* is motivated by its harmonic content, a premature or imbalanced *crescendo* will undermine the result. Tempo can also be a factor. If a harmonic *crescendo* takes place at a relatively slow tempo, it is more likely that the musicians will be more sensitive in their intuitive understanding of how to develop the energy. (The *Finale* to Mahler's *Symphony No. 3* for instance is a great example of a patient *crescendo* that is nearly impossible to overplay because the slow pacing allows the performers to process the idea and project the arc of time authentically.)

Conversely, harmonic *crescendi* at fast *tempi* tend to lose the aural depth of the harmonic progression, reverting to force and volume. In such cases, outer voices, especially high voices, tend to prevail and if battery percussion is also scored, the composer's source of the energy, the harmony, is lost.

The Motivic Crescendo

Sometimes a *crescendo* or *diminuendo* is composed via figure groups. In these cases, the dynamic scaffolding should be altered figure by figure rather than through a general incremental change of volume. Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Toccata Marziale* provides an excellent example of a figural *crescendo* beginning at rehearsal marking number 12 of the score, continuing for four measures, followed immediately by twelve measures of a figural *diminuendo* that concludes at rehearsal number 14. (The following example shows only the woodwind parts in order to save space, however, the essential content is still clear.)

The *crescendo* is derived from the energy of the compound feel of the sixteenth-note passage in the clarinets, pitted against a *hemiola* in the brass, alto saxophones and bassoons. Adding to the energy, the passage is modulatory. These are the compositional elements that create the foundation of the *crescendo*. Thus, clarity of the expression of these elements is more important than a general change of the dynamic level.

Vaughan Williams: Toccata Marziale

12

Fl.
Picc.
Eb Clt.
Oboes
Solo Bb Clt.
1st Bb Clt.
2nd Bb Clt.
3rd Bb Clt.
Eb Alto Clt.
Bb Bass Clt.
Bb Sop. Sax.
Eb Alto Sax.
Bb Ten. Sax.
Eb Bar. Sax.
Bb Bass Sax & Bb Contra Bass Clt.
I
Bass.
II

Fl.
Picc.
Eb Clt.
Oboes
Solo Bb Clt.
1st Bb Clt.
2nd Bb Clt.
3rd Bb Clt.
Eb Alto Clt.
Bb Bass Clt.
Bb Sop. Sax.
Eb Alto Sax.
Bb Ten. Sax.
Eb Bar. Sax.
Bb Bass Sax & Bb Contra Bass Clt.
I
Bass.
II

13

Fl.

Picc.

E♭ Clt.

Oboes

Solo B♭ Cit.

1st B♭ Cit.

2nd B♭ Cit.

3rd B♭ Cit.

E♭ Alto Clt.

B♭ Bass Clt.

B♭ Sop. Sax.

E♭ Alto Sax.

B♭ Ten. Sax.

E♭ Bar. Sax.

B♭ Bass Sax.
 B♭ Contra
 Bass Cit.

I
 Bsns.

II

14

Fl.

Picc.

E♭ Clt.

Oboes

Solo B♭ Cit.

1st B♭ Cit.

2nd B♭ Cit.

3rd B♭ Cit.

E♭ Alto Clt.

B♭ Bass Clt.

B♭ Sop. Sax.

E♭ Alto Sax.

B♭ Ten. Sax.

E♭ Bar. Sax.

B♭ Bass Sax.
 B♭ Contra
 Bass Cit.

I
 Bsns.

II

It is notable that in the case of Vaughan Williams's *diminuendo*, the orientation of the musical goal is to reveal musical time gestures more than the simple retreat of volume. Six gestures, all beginning with the same propulsive sixteenth-note figure are staged at varying phrase lengths and at various pitch levels, finally completing a modulation a tritone away from where the passage began. In this excerpt, time spans are as much a part of the dissipation of energy as is the dynamic change, as the first two figures are expressed as sequential five-beat gestures, followed by a the third version that is extended to ten beats. In this way, the musical clock winds down. The *diminuendo* simply helps to point this out.

Conclusion

For conductors it an understatement to say that "it's not the destination, it's the journey." Almost all suffer the same quandary; so much great repertoire, so little time! Even under the strain of limited rehearsal schedules or resources, we can remember, as encouragement, the words of Leonard Bernstein - "To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time." The plan will never suffer if the artistic informs the pedagogical.

Suggested Reading

Blum, David. *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1977.

Thurmond, James Morgan. *Note Grouping: A Method for Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications, 1991.

Biography

At the University of Louisville, Frederick Speck directs the Wind Ensemble and New Music Ensemble, teaches conducting, and serves as Chair of the Department of Performance Studies. In addition, he is the artistic director and conductor of Chamber Winds Louisville and the Louisville Concert Band. Ensembles led by Speck have earned praise for being "crisply responsive" with "terrific verve...displaying mastery" (The Courier Journal, Louisville). Under his leadership, ensembles have been invited to perform at KMEA Conferences, CBDNA Southern Division Conferences, the MENC National Conference, the CBDNA National Conference, the Midwest Clinic, the Jungfrau Music Festival in Interlaken, Switzerland, World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles Conferences in Killarney, Ireland and San Jose, California and the American Bandmasters Association Convention. Following a Wind Ensemble concert of Grawemeyer Award Winners in Carnegie Hall, *Sequenza21* reported, "Speck's energy and momentum concluded the concert with a gripping interpretation of John Corigliano's Tarantella from Symphony No. 1...Thunderous applause from a captivated audience greeted Mr. Speck and Mr. Corigliano, proof of both performer's and composer's ability to move listeners."

Speck has conducted throughout the United States and abroad. In 2006, his guest conducting residency at the Szymanowski Conservatory in Katowice, Poland led to the inaugural concert of the Conservatory Wind Orchestra. A champion of new music, he has collaborated with composers including Karel Husa, John Corigliano, Joan Tower, Per Nørgård, Chen Yi, Steven Stucky, Sebastian Currier, Brett Dean, David Maslanka and others in preparing performances and recordings of their works.

As a composer, his music has been widely performed. The New York Times has cited his work as, "vivid, driven music," and the Louisville Courier Journal as "consummate orchestration in an age of virtually limitless soundscapes." Speck's music has been performed by such ensembles as the Louisville Orchestra, the Denver Symphony, the Senzoku Gakuen Wind Ensemble, the Eastman Wind Ensemble, and Speculum Musicae, and recorded by such artists as Richard Stoltzman, Paul York, Brett Shuster and the Washington Winds.

Twice the recipient of the University of Louisville President's Award for Outstanding Scholarship, Research and Creativity, his work has also been recognized through fellowships and commissions from the Barlow Endowment, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council for the Arts and the Indiana Arts Commission.

He is an elected member of the American Bandmasters Association and President of the College Band Directors National Association Southern Division. Speck earned the B.M. and M.M. from Bowling Green State University and the D.M.A. from the University of Maryland.

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