

Marimba Articulation and Phrasing

By Rebecca Kite

We all use articulation and phrasing every time we touch the marimba no matter what kind of music, warm-ups, or technique exercises we are playing. I have heard approaches ranging from a monotone-type of articulation where every musical idea and phrase is “said” in the same boring and uninteresting way, to a varied articulation that clearly “says” each musical idea in an interesting and musically compelling “story.”

By using the words “say” and “story,” I want point out how closely musical articulation and the articulation of speaking are related. When people speak clearly, they are using good articulation. We can hear the beginnings and endings of each syllable and word and can easily understand their meanings. Additionally, if a person is also a great storyteller—incorporating phrasing, pacing, nuance, and the skillful building and release of tension—the story comes alive with depth, meaning, and passion in a way that is impossible with a monotonous or flat reading of the exact same words.

The musician first studies the composition to understand the composer’s musical language, the musical style, the form, the harmonic structure and pacing, and the mood. Then he or she creates an interpretation using articulation and phrasing techniques that make the purpose of each note in the piece very clear, from the micro-level of phrasing even two or three notes, to the macro-level of the entire piece.

The true artist brings these elements together in an interpretation that is musically compelling, drawing the audience into the musical world of the composer and the special moment of performance where the music is alive.

Let’s look at the elements of musicianship that are a necessary part of musical phrasing and then some specific techniques to bring these elements to life.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF MUSICIANSHIP Phrasing Dynamics

These are very small changes in loudness that help shape and give character to the music lines. These are played within the larger dynamic zones indicated by written dynamic markings.

Staccato and Legato

These articulation terms refer to what happens in between notes. Legato notes sound connected to each other and staccato notes sound separated from each other. A single note cannot be staccato or legato; however, we can use specific techniques to create more or less separation between notes. We can even go so far as using dead strokes and dampening to shorten the sound envelope.

The staccato stroke is very similar to an upstroke on a drum, with a more firm grip on the mallet handle and a very fast upward wrist motion. Think of this as playing “above” the bar, getting off the bar as quickly as possible. The legato stroke is the opposite with a very relaxed grip, holding the mallet handle parallel to the bar and playing “into” the bar.

I first learned and began working with these concepts many years ago and have made my own small adjustments to take advantage of the excellent responsiveness and sound of today’s five-octave concert marimba. However, these are not new ideas. They have been taught and used in performance by many marimbists for more than fifty years. The earliest written description of these I have found is by Thomas McMillan in his method book, *Percussion Keyboard Technique*, first published in 1962.¹

Timing

Small variations in timing, breath space at phrase endings, and using tenuto (slight lengthening of a note) are all very important in bringing phrasing to life. These essential musical tools can be used within the overall pulse. Most musical styles do not use a metronomi-

cally strict pulse, although this rigidity may be appropriate in some contemporary compositions.

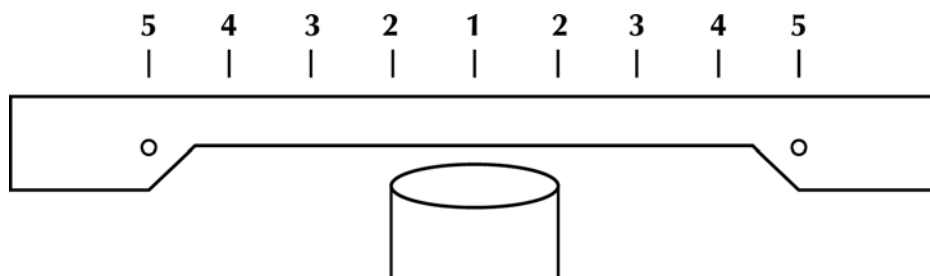
Color or Timbre and Playing Zones

The marimba bar has unique acoustical properties and produces only four harmonics: the fundamental, two octaves, three octaves + M3, and four octaves + M3. The resonators *only* affect the fundamental. The other frequencies are not amplified by the resonators, as they are even-number harmonics and the closed-tube resonator only amplifies odd-number harmonics. For more scientific details, you can read Heather Hill’s excellent Ithaca College senior thesis project in physics, “Acoustics of Marimba Bars.”²

Playing in the exact center of the bar emphasizes the fundamental more than any other playing area. This is where the resonator couples with the vibration of the bar and the sound is the loudest. As you move away from the center, toward the string, the fundamental gradually gets softer, the harmonics are more easily heard, and the sound becomes softer and thinner, yet brighter due to the additional harmonics that can be heard. At the node (string area), a thud is produced along with the high harmonics, which is most useful for special effects. These effects are mirrored in the bar as you move from center to string in either direction.

These subtle differences—which are greatest in the lowest range and smallest in the high octaves—can be combined with small dynamic changes, gestures, and staccato and legato strokes to create more effective phrasings.

Example 1: Marimba Bar Playing Zones.



See video demonstrations of Marimba Bar Playing Zones, “Sonatina Opus 6, No. 1” and “Yellow After The Rain” in the digital edition of this issue at www.pas.org/publications/latest-issues/percussivenotes.aspx



MALLETS

Articulate mallets are an important part of my sound. I use various playing zones on the bar, angles of attack, gestures, and touch to create interesting and effective musical phrasings, and I use mallets that are responsive to these nuances. My ideal mallet has a rubber core with a wide contact area and appropriate weight for the bars that I will be striking. It has the smallest amount of yarn necessary to eliminate the bright contact sound of an unwrapped mallet (too much yarn creates a muffled attack). It provides a consistent timbre throughout all dynamic ranges and never becomes brighter and more aggressive at *fortissimo*.

Voiced mallets are also a must. I often use a heavier and larger-core bass and tenor mallet in the left hand and two matched, smaller, and lighter-core mallets in the right hand. A voiced set of mallets matches up the weight, core size, and yarn covering of the mallet with the size of the bars that it will be striking.³

TOOLS OF MUSICAL EXPRESSION

Many elements of drumming can be used for musical playing and are especially effective when working with what can potentially be our

greatest strengths for articulation and phrasing: control of dynamics, timing, and timbre. I use arm gestures with a downstroke motion to connect notes, and I use upstroke motions while pinching the mallet handle for a lighter sound and less connected notes. I also use mallet height for dynamic control, and looser or tighter grip for darker or brighter sounds.

I strive to play in a natural way, using a physically relaxed technique that becomes transparent in the performance—transparent because it is so holistically integrated into my music-making that it becomes invisible and inseparable from the sound of my music.

EXAMPLES

I have selected two compositions to show how I use these tools of musicianship. The first example by Clementi is for two mallets and uses many techniques of melodic phrasing. The second example, “Yellow After the Rain,” uses four mallets and deals with voicing a melody with accompaniment.

In my discussion of each of these examples, the articulation and phrasing markings I have added to the score will be **highlighted in bold**.

CLEMENTI DISCUSSION

Published in 1797, the phrasing notation in this composition is typical of the music of the Classical Era (or style). They are the basic instructions from the composer, and the performer is expected to play the musical figures in standard, accepted ways to bring out the musical phrasing. These composer markings include all slurs, staccato markings (inside the staff), and dynamics.

It is also standard practice for the performer to analyze the melody, harmony, cadences, dynamics, and form in creating an interpretation of music of this era and to play the articulations and phrasings that are implied by the musical content. This is done *in addition* to the composer’s expressive markings, which provide overall guidance.

This piece has some common melodic figures that occur in many different styles of music and even rhythmically in snare drum and timpani parts. The first occurs in the first two beats of the first measure (and again in m. 5, 9, 10, 13, and 14). There are several different ways to “say” this rhythm (two sixteenths + eighth), however since the melodic line descends here, I recommend a solid attack within the *piano* dynamic range (represented by the **phrasing accent**) with a **phrasing decrescendo** to the first staccato note. I use mallet height to make this rapid decrescendo be effective, with a downstroke then a tap in the leading hand with the height of the following hand placed in between. This figure should be played with the same articulation and phrasing each time it appears in this piece.

The second melodic figure is two notes long, the last eighth of the first measure and the first quarter note of the second measure: the pitches C (**larger dot** over it signifying a disconnected sound) and G (with a **tenuto accent** for a longer, louder sound). The C should be played with a low staccato stroke and the G with a high and heavy legato stroke. I think of this kind of note grouping as “short-LONG.” It should be played the same way every time it occurs in this piece.

Clementi used slur markings to clearly indicate which notes should be connected. I added **arrows** to mark the changes in melodic direction. I use a legato connecting-stroke for playing all the notes under a slur marking. At the changes in direction marked with the ar-

Example 2: Vivace, Sonatina Opus 6, No. 1 Muzio Clementi (excerpt).⁴

Sonatina Op. 36, No. 1 - Clementi



row, I **re-attack** the “**arrowed**” notes that begin each small segment of melody. I use the term **re-attack** (meaning a “new beginning”), because a series of slurred notes should be played with one primary attack at the beginning for its overall shape. Within this slurred section, each melodic direction change may be brought out for musical shaping by slightly re-attacking each change of direction. I do this by lifting slightly (using small upstrokes) before the arrowed note to create a subtle separation, then I use a dropping gesture to re-attack the “arrowed” note with a **phrasing crescendo** (rising

line) or **phrasing decrescendo** afterwards (falling line). There are two layers of phrasing going on.

PETERS DISCUSSION

“Yellow After the Rain” by Mitchell Peters, first published in 1971, is written in a contemporary musical style using quartal/quintal harmony and irregular measure lengths in the melody. This is a very different style than the regular four-measure phrases and tonic-dominant harmony of Clementi’s common practice style. The only expressive markings that were

included by Peters are the *forte* marking in measure 1, the *dim. poco a poco* from measure 2 to 6, and the *piano* marking at letter “A.”

In my interpretation of this famous four-mallet marimba solo, I use **playing zones**, **slurs**, **phrasing crescendo** and **decrescendo**, and **re-attacks** for note grouping within a slur, just as in the Clementi example. The opening of this composition has the opportunity for using different interpretation techniques in each hand to create a voicing where the melody is clearly supported by the accompaniment.

I use the **playing zones** by moving from the center of the bar toward the string to enhance the dramatic decrescendo of the opening. Each zone is marked with a number and line above (for the right hand) and below (for the left hand) the notes to be played in that zone. In the opening, just as the diminuendo is *poco a poco*, the movement to the different **playing zones** should be gradual. I play the last note in measure 6 very close to the string. While I am playing measures 5 and 6 with my left hand, my right hand is preparing to play the melody at “A.”

At letter “A,” two very different things are going on at the same time. In the left hand (accompaniment), I play a fuller sound in measures 7, 9, and 11 and a softer sound in measures 8 and 10. This difference is primarily from alternating between **playing zones** 3 and 4. When I arrive at measure 12 and begin building a small crescendo, both hands are now in the same **playing zone**, as I use a fuller sound to support the increasing dynamic of the melodic line.

This simple, yet compelling melody has a statement (measures 7, 9, and 11) and answer (measures 8, 10, and 12) form with the statement getting slightly longer each time, then the voices coming together in descending motion returning to the beginning chord from letter “A.” I phrase the melody the same way in this piece as in the Clementi. I added the slur markings showing the pitches I want to connect. The **arrows** show the change in melodic direction within the connected short phrase. Because the most important part of this melody is the addition of another note in the upward scale segment, I use a **phrasing crescendo** and **decrescendo** to fully shape this phrase segment. The measures with the “answer” feature a repeated note with one lower and upper neighbor tone. I perceive this as essentially a static measure and do not use any phrasing element other than a **softer dynamic**, providing contrast to the “statement” measure before it.

SUMMARY

This article has been an introduction to working with the small, subtle aspects of articulation and phrasing to make music become vibrant and compelling. When I learn a new composition, I love getting to the point where I am practicing my interpretation and can just

Example 3: “Yellow After The Rain,” Mitchell Peters (excerpt)⁵.

Yellow After The Rain - Peters



4. "Six Sonatinas for the Piano," Op. 36, No. 1, Vivace, Muzio Clementi, 1797, public domain
5. "Yellow After the Rain," Mitchell Peters, TRY Publishing Company, Hollywood Cal., 1971, 2009. Used with permission.

Rebecca Kite has been performing and teaching marimba and percussion for more than 45 years. In her early performing career she played drumset and was timpanist of a number of orchestras including the National Symphony of Nicaragua and the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. In addition to orchestral work, she began performing solo recitals, and when the five-octave marimba became available in the mid-1980s, she focused on solo marimba performance. For more information visit RebeccaKite.com. **PN**

submerge myself in the sound of the music. I hope you find practicing and working at this level enjoyable as well.

For additional examples of my concepts of phrasing and style, I recommend that you listen to the following recordings while reading the score. From my CD album *Across Time*: "Chaconne in d minor from Partita 2, BWV 1004" by J.S. Bach, "Variations on a Theme of Handel, Op. 107" by Mauro Giuliani, and "Time for Marimba" by Minoru Miki. The Bach and Gi-

uliani scores are available for free at www.imslp.org.

REFERENCES

1. *Percussion Keyboard Technique*, Thomas McMillan, 1962, 1968, Belwin. pg 4.
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