



Musicians Column—Aspects of Musicality

by Martha Edwards

In this article, I'm going to talk about a simple thing that you can do to make you, your band mates, and your dance community fall in love with the music that you make. It's called phrasing. Yup, phrasing.

Musical phrasing is a lot like verbal phrasing. Sentences start somewhere and end somewhere, just like music. Sometimes they start soft, and grow and grow until they END! SOMETIMES they start big and taper off at the end. Sometimes they grow and get BIG and then taper off at the end.

But a lot of people never notice that music does the same thing, that it comes from somewhere and goes somewhere. When you help it do that, you're really sending a musical experience to your audience.

Otherwise, you're just typing.

What do I mean by typing? I mean that, if all you do is play the notes, one after another, at the same intensity from beginning to end, you could play the notes perfectly, but your playing would be boring. You wouldn't be shaping the phrase, you would just be sending out a kind of telegraph message with no emotion attached. I think it happens because playing music is hard, and it's a big challenge just to be able to play the notes of a tune at all. When you finally get the notes of a tune, one after another, it's a kind of victory. But don't stop with just the notes. Learn to play musically!

photo of Miranda Arana, Jonathan Jensen and Martha Edwards (courtesy Childgrove Country Dancers, St. Louis, MO)

Don't get me wrong, playing smoothly, without big energy changes, can be kind of fun—think of an old time jam around a campfire, where there's a mesmerizing drone to the music, a riveting immersion in a continuous sound, a sustained humming from the overtones of the notes. But when you're playing for dancing, most of the time your dancers would like to have rhythm, bounce and shape to the music they're dancing to. The energy shape of the music shapes your dance energy.

So how do you get that “energy shape”? Simple, actually. Figure out where the music is coming from, and where it's going, and make each note on that journey either a bit louder than the last note, or a bit softer. Louder. Softer. Each note.

Let's take a simple tune: Frere Jacques (Are you sleeping). It might go like this:

Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?
(Getting louder and louder through “sleep,” then quieter.)

Or perhaps something even more exciting. Make the second phrase (same shape) slightly louder:

Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?

Then the next line, with its higher notes, could be even louder (the fourth phrase louder than the third):

Brother John, Brother John

Then (loudest of all—we're at the apex of the song):

Morning Bells are ringing,
Morning Bells are ringing

Then retreat into near silence:

Ding ding, dong. Ding ding dong.

Okay, I realize that the bells should probably be really loud, but the tune has a lovely shape if you make it:

Some/More/MOST/Less.

Your job, then, is to figure out the shape of the tunes you're playing, and help show that shape by simply playing each note a little louder (Some More MOST)

or a little softer (Some Less Least) to create the shape of the energy to match the shape of the phrases.

Pablo Casals, a great cellist in the 20th century, would say “When the music goes up, you get louder, and when the music goes down, you get softer.” Actually, sometimes it's really effective to do the opposite, to

get softer as you play higher notes and louder as you play lower ones. But avoid at all costs just staying the same. It's monotonous to your listeners if you always play at the same loudness, even when the notes themselves are going up and down.

As a final treat, I recommend that you view a Ted Talk by Benjamin Zander called “The Transformative Power of Classical Music,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9LCwI5iErE>. Yeah, I know, we play Folk Music, but the things he talks about are totally applicable to music of any kind—and if you and your bandmates “get it,” I promise you'll make your dancers fall in love with your music.

Martha Edwards is a dancer, fiddler, caller and dance organizer. She was a classical violinist in Boston for about 25 years, but now plays only for dancing—for contra, English, waltzing, and morris. “If people aren't moving around,” she now says, “why bother?”

Move around this summer at camp!

www.cdss.org/camp



photo by Nikki Herbst