From Sight to Song: A Resource for Approaching Musicality with Young Students

Edward House

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Composition Commons, and the Music Education Commons

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/138

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/138

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
From Sight to Song:

A Resource for Approaching Musicality with Young Students

By Edward House
What is Musicality?

Musicality is playing our instrument in a way that communicates something to the audience.

How do I “communicate” with the audience if I can’t use words while I play?

The notes in the music will become your words. You will sing with your horn instead of your voice.

So what do I have to do to play musically?

Phrasing is the heart of playing musically. A musical phrase is an independent musical idea. It is the equivalent of a sentence in spoken language.
Phrasing involves two simple concepts:
   1. Connection
   2. Direction

**Connection:** The notes in the phrase must all belong together, just as the words in a sentence do. The words in the middle of the sentence help connect the words at the beginning to the words at the end and make one unified idea. The notes in a phrase do the same thing.

**Direction:** The phrase must go somewhere. The action of a sentence is very important because it tells us what is happening. The high point of the phrase is what tells us musically what is happening. All of the notes in the phrase either lead us toward the high point or away from it.
To play with connection and direction we must use two things:

1. Air
2. Sound

Air is what makes our instrument sound. Air is also what makes connection between notes. When the air keeps moving, so does the phrase. When the air stops, the phrase does too.

Sound is what the audience hears. When we speak, the sound of our voice changes as we speak. It rises and falls, or grows and relaxes. When we play, our sound must be equally dynamic, both growing and relaxing to convey emotion in the music.
Connecting Notes with Air

Take a deep breath across the bottom of your mouth, turn the air around and play. Make sure to support the sound and let it grow through the first note and continue into the second. Use the growth of the sound to help make the higher note speak easily.

\[\text{\ding{51}}\]

Do the same thing for the next exercise. Continue the support and growth of the sound through all three notes in the first measure.

\[\text{\ding{51}}\]

Finally, do the same thing again, continuing the support and growth all the way from the first note to the last.

\[\text{\ding{51}}\]

You just played a great phrase!
Now we will work the opposite direction, starting with the full phrase and ending with the important notes.

Now play the melody with some of the connecting notes removed.

Play it again, making sure to continue the air and support through each long note all the way from the first note to the final note.

Play the original melody again, playing through the connecting notes with the same quality of air as with the long notes you just played.
Ode to Joy

Beethoven
Subdivision

The following exercise is designed to help create an even growth in the sound throughout the phrasing. Any ballooning or “wah-wah” will become more obvious.

These exercises use subdivision which means that we break longer notes into shorter ones that total the same length. A whole note can be subdivided into 4 quarter notes or 8 eighth notes.

While thinking about the growth of the phrase as a whole, make sure that each eighth note is at least as loud as the one before it (or if the phrase is relaxing at the end, that each eighth is at least as soft as the previous note).

Be careful to focus on the whole phrase to create the even growth in the subdivision.

Blank staffs are provided for you to try your own breakdowns of the melodies. You can also try subdividing those breakdowns and playing them.
Chorale from Symphony No. 1

Brahms
Concerto No. 1 in Eb

R. Strauss
Theme from Symphony No. 40

W.A. Mozart
Directing the Phrase

Sometimes, there is not one “right” way to direct a phrase. Leading to different notes in the phrase will change the sound, and this is part of what makes your playing unique to you.

It is important to be able to hear ALL of the notes in your head before you play them. This is called audiation. It is hard to form a proper spoken sentence if you don’t have a clear idea in your head already. The same is true of a musical phrase.

The notes in the following exercises look a little different. The shapes of the notes are designed to help you learn to audiate the pitches. Try to hear the notes before you play them, and listen very carefully to how the notes and phrases sound when you do play them.
Directing the Phrase
A few ideas

Here are some general ideas that usually make nice direction in a phrase.

• The phrase will usually go to a note near the end of the phrase not the beginning.
• The phrase will usually go to a strong beat not a weak beat
  o In 4/4 this most commonly means to beat 1, but sometimes beat 3
  o In 3/4 this means beat 1
  o In 2/4 this means beat 1

Keep blowing through the phrases and growing the sound as you have already done.
Now try this phrasing. Does it change the way the melody sounds or feels to you? Which one do you like better?
Be careful to phrase through the rest even though there is no sound
Sol-Fi

1.

2.

3.
Duets

Horn in F 1

Horn in F 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2
Andante from Symphony No. 1

Brahms
Andante from Symphony No. 1
The turn is used in place of the quintuplets in the original excerpt. The turn may be omitted, played as a traditional turn, or played as the original quintuplets. It is the teacher's choice which option best suits each student.
Poco Allegretto

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2
Overture to Der Frieschütz

C.M. Weber
Overture to Der Frieschütz

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2
Nocturne

Felix Mendelssohn
Nocturne
Nocturne
From Sight to Song:
A Resource for Approaching Musicality with Young Students

Senior Honors Project
Messiah College Honors Program

Edward House
HONR 498/499
May 10, 2013
Why I Chose this Project

Through high school I was always told that I was playing well, and that continued into my first year in college. I remember after a performance being complemented that my playing was “very musical.” After starting my sophomore year that changed.

Suddenly I was told that I was not playing musically. I hadn’t consciously changed anything about how I was playing so I was confused. It wasn’t a problem that could be fixed only by instructing muscle movements. It is as much a mental approach as physical actions. It also wasn’t a term I was familiar with, and I didn’t understand what playing musically meant.

Looking back, there were several events that came together to make a perfect storm that led to me playing without musicality. Because I had never been told what I was doing well, I didn’t know what to keep in my playing. From that point on I was on a search to understand what musical playing was, and how I too could do it.

It has been a long road to really understanding what musical playing means. I have also realized that it is not something that can be explained completely in words. To fully understand it, one must listen to many examples of musical and non-musical playing to find his or her own interpretation of what it means.

It is my hope with this book to create a resource for teachers to introduce young students to playing musically, so that they will have something to draw from later. Ideally, students will be able to actually play more musically after working through these exercises. Even if students do not actually gain the ability to play more musically, having been presented with the ideas early on, they will have a better chance of learning later when the same concepts are reintroduced by new teachers.
Having had an early experience to draw on would have accelerated my journey to understand musical playing.

**Overview and Objectives**

Playing musically is not something that is easy to explain or teach. Most beginning band methods barely mention it because there is so much emphasis on learning the instrument. The Suzuki method is based around the concept of teaching music as a foreign language. Young students will learn by ear over time at a natural rate. Review of several books on Suzuki pedagogy, however, reveals the same treatment of musicality. It is frequently mentioned that students must play musically, but never discussed. None of the books talked about how to help a student who doesn’t play musically, or how to positively reinforce those who do.

This treatment of musicality encounters a problem when students do not understand what they are doing, even if they are doing it correctly. Doug Hill points out in his book that positive reinforcement is a necessary component of learning. (Hill 96) No matter how much musical playing is reinforced, it does the students no good if they do not understand what they are doing right. As soon as they are exposed to a bad example, or encounter a passage that is harder to play musically, they may stop playing musically. It is only when they understand what musicality is, and how it works, that they can recognize their own deficiencies and see a path for improvement.

It is not my intent with this resource to try to present a step-by-step tutorial for musicality. It is instead to present exercises that help students focus their attention on musicality. By playing many short simple melodies, students will begin to see and more
importantly hear similarities in what makes a phrase sound musical. When they
encounter a passage that challenges their musicality, students will then have the tools and
understanding to deconstruct the phrase into something simpler that they can play with
good musicality. They will then be able to build back to the original phrase.

In order to do this, it is my belief that the ear must be connected to the eyes and to
the instrument. When language students are still learning, they often do not read with
proper inflection the first time through. Once they read a sentence, only then do they
understand what the sentence means and can go back and read with proper inflection. If
music is treated as a foreign language, the same concept can be applied to musicality.
Younger students often must play the phrase before they can begin to shape it and work
with it. This is because like the language student, they aren’t able to grasp its meaning
without hearing it aloud.

In western tonal music, each pitch has a specific function in the key. The seventh
scale degree leads very strongly to the tonic, and hence is called a leading tone. An
interval of a major sixth sounds very different from do to la than from so to mi. Because
the music is written with these functions in mind, understanding them is critical to
understanding the music. A native language speaker understands all the words and
relationships in a sentence without hesitation, and thus can read it with good inflection at
sight. The same thing is true of musicians who understand what the music means. They
are able to grasp the music without playing it first. This idea is supported by John
Schlabach in his article for the ITG entitled “On Connecting the Ear and Brass
Performance.”
One way to accomplish this would be to teach students all of the necessary music theory, then tell them to implement it in their playing. Most likely this approach will only lead to frustration and confusion. The volume of information combined with trying to think about all of it while playing an instrument will be overwhelming.

Another method is to get the students to naturally integrate the theory, guided by their ears. Once they have become comfortable with their ears guiding them, the teacher can begin to explain the theory in the context of “This is what you are already doing, and here is why it is working.” In this manner the teaching is descriptive of what is working well, rather than prescriptive trying to make the student play in a certain way.

Shape note singing is an old tradition of using note heads of various shapes to represent different scale degrees. Grove Music says, “They are intended to help singers with little musical expertise to sing at sight without having to recognize pitches on the staff or understand the key system.” (Eskew, Downey) Solfege is a system of solmization to assign different syllables to each scale degree, and has been commonplace in western vocal teaching since the Paris Conservatory was founded in 1795. (Jander) Both of these systems recognize the need to connect the ear to the music. To this author’s knowledge, no similar system exists for instrumental traditions. A study by George Kyme, "An experiment in teaching children to read with shape notes," published in the Journal of Research in Music Education VIII, demonstrated that shaped notes helped students learn to sightread better than those who were not taught via shape note.

The purpose of introducing shape notes to this book is to provide young students with an easily recognizable visual aid to scale degrees, without having to first teach them the music theory. The fourth to third scale degree will always be the same two note
shapes, no matter what two notes they actually are. In a round note system the student is much more likely to miss the common relationship. The same notes will also be represented with different shapes, thus discouraging false connections. A B-flat to A is a very different sound and function in they keys of B-flat and F. Yet, a young student might be tempted to see the same notes and hear them the same.

Using shape notes will not diminish ability to read music either. The notes still fall on the same lines or spaces so relationships between staff position and fingering are still reinforced. The note shapes are different by key, so note shape cannot become a crutch for fingering either.

As students show improvement with their musicality, the same exercises can be introduced with traditional round note notation. As the exercises progress they move away from shaped notes to round notes, to encourage students to begin to see function of pitches without the aid of the note shapes. Students will learn to play musically at their own pace, but the materials will help to guide them. This will keep them from feeling pressured or overwhelmed by the information, and create a path for them to learn to naturally play with great musicality and expression.

The more this author worked on the book, the more there was a realization that there needed to be a least some focus on physical action. Focusing on mental concept and approach alone would not be sufficient or have as quick rewards as changing physical processes. However, giving instruction on what to do physically is very tricky as all students may feel and describe the same action differently. Air is the basis for all sound on the horn, and it is also a simple enough concept that it can be taught, and mostly understood by beginners. The brain already knows how to handle air, and consequently
air can be used to create several physical changes. As an example, if one begins to blow air out and then speed up the flow, several physical changes occur all without focusing on any muscle movements, processes, or steps. The idea of connecting notes with air is to create physical changes in how the students flow and sustain the air through the phrase. These physical changes will produce some of the elements necessary for musical playing without the student having to take focus off of the phrase to think about the physical aspects of playing.

A History of Shape Note

William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia first introduced shaped notes in their 1801 publication The Easy Instructor. Their intent was to create a system to aid in sight reading. (Grayson) Their introduction of shaped notes coincided with large migrations of people into the Southern and Midwest regions of the United States. Consequently publications with shaped notes commonly appeared along routes frequently traveled by settlers. (Eskew, Downey) The music included in the shape note books was drawn largely from oral traditions and folk hymns. The melody was set in the tenor voice and the other parts composed more or less independently, which leads to a harmonic structure described by some as being “crude” or “archaic” and reminiscent of medieval textures. (Eskew, Downey)

Smith and Little’s system used four different shapes with the syllables Fa, Sol, La, Mi. The shapes are arranged in the scale so that the intervals between shapes remain in the same in any key. (Grayson) As European music of the time influenced music in the
American Northeast, composers opposed the shape note system. Famous hymn composer Lowell Mason advocated for a seven note solemnization system. The result was a shift toward the seven note shaped note system. The first appearance of the seven shape system was in Jesse Aikin’s book *The Christian Minstrel*, published in 1846. (Eskew, Downey)

Singing schools were an important facet of the shape note tradition. A teacher visited a town for two to three weeks at a time. The schools were not only important for the teaching of singing but were social gatherings as well. The singing instruction consisted primarily of singing songs already familiar to those in attendance. (Baldwin) Common performance practice is for the singers to sit in a hollow square with the basses opposite the trebles, and the tenors opposite the altos. The song leader stands in the center keeping time. After the American Civil War, the subsequent erosion of rural populations also led to the decline of shaped note traditions. (Grayson)

**The Choice to Include Shape Note in this Book**

It is this author’s belief that the rapid spread of shape notes, and the popularity of using them for Church congregations, is evidence of their success as a singing aid. While the goal of this book is not to help students sing better, the function served by shaped notes is still useful. Before a person can sing a melody, the mind must form a concept of what the voice will be singing. “Audiation is the musical equivalent of thinking in language” (Gordon) It is not the singing mechanism itself that shape notes aid, but rather the mental concept of the pitches to be sung. This clear mental concept of the pitches is what John Schlabach discusses.
Players often assume they are playing musically if they can explain in detail where they will make a crescendo, ritard, accelerando, etc. It is more likely have ‘instructions’ occurring in their minds in response to what they see on the page rather than actually hearing vivid musical sounds. (Schlabach, 50)

The purpose of including shape notes in this book is to serve as an aid for young students to more quickly and reliably audiate before and while they play. Although it may appear that the shape notes have been repurposed from their original use for aiding with singing, it is this author’s belief that they are working at the mental stage between sight and sound production. In this manner they are doing exactly the same thing for instrumental students that they do for singers. The use of shape notes by churches to teach non musicians indicates that shape notes are easy to learn without having extensive musical training or theory instruction.

The seven note method, corresponds very closely to the solfege systems in use by college music departments and conservatories. The note shapes move depending on the key, so the same shape is always the same scale degree. The shapes serve as a quick visual aid to identifying scale degree and do not require any knowledge of scales or keys. Solfege, however, does require the user to understand key signatures and be able to correctly associate scale degrees to note names within a given key. Not only does this process require teaching of music theory but requires extra cognitive processing time.

There are not special provisions in the seven note method for dealing with altered pitches. For this reason, the seven note system is ideally suited to diatonic major keys. These are the same types of melodies frequently taught to young music students.
It is not intended that students use the shape note system indefinitely. It is instead intended to serve as a beginning point for students. Not only will it provide a mental bridge, but also conversation starters for the savvy teacher. Because the shape notes do not require an explanation to use, the teacher does not need to offer any more explanation than he or she feels the student is ready to handle at that time. As students begin to show signs of proper audiation and guiding their playing with their ears, they should resume reading melodies printed with standard round notes.

**Pedagogical Considerations**

While the focus of this book is musicality, it is also designed to be somewhat progressive in difficulty to accommodate and encourage the student’s advancing technical abilities. The exercises start in familiar, band-friendly keys and eventually move into keys with three sharps or three flats. The process happens slowly introducing a key with only one more accidental at a time. The two note focus grows in interval as well. Initial exercises start with important notes that are only a major second apart, but eventually move to a major sixth by the end. It is important to note that these exercises are not directly about intervals, but the importance of the two notes that comprise the interval. They are arranged in increasing distance because of the increasing technical demands to play larger intervals.

Subdivision is a very important concept in music and essential for playing with good tempo and rhythm. It is presented here as a way of helping students to form beautiful phrases. The intention is to show students that it can be a valuable tool that will help them play better, rather than as something else they have to do to play well. It is a
process not an end goal. The presentation in this book is designed to foster that view as well as introduce it to students who have not seen it before without having to over explain it.

The duets that follow the main exercises are extensions of material already presented. They are built from previously seen melodies, and harmonized to allow for the teacher to play along. Students then see how the material they have been learning fits into the larger picture. The duets start as short harmonizations of single phrases. The longer duets are compilations of several previously learned melodies. They are altered to fit into a common large scale forms. This not only gives students the opportunity to play a “whole piece” but gives the teacher the chance to talk about formal structure if the student is ready.

The final duets presented are adaptations of orchestral excerpts. They have been placed into easier keys, and the rhythms have been simplified to make them more easily approachable. The excerpts were chosen for their musical potential. Most importantly, this introduces students to some of the prominent excerpts for the horn. Familiarity with the music written for one’s instrument is an important part of being a good musician, and there is no reason to avoid starting that familiarization early. Secondly, students will be better prepared to play the original excerpts. Students will be focusing on musicality, and be less concerned with technique. When they see the original excerpts, their early familiarity and focus on musicality will help them continue to play with good phrasing.
Some Observations From Teaching Students

From the time that I had to try to actually use these exercises to teach, I learned some very interesting things about ways they might be approached.

The shape notes did not seem to present any extra challenge to the readability of the music.

The biggest block to making a nice phases, was students’ comfort with the technical aspects of the music. While they were struggling for fingerings, right notes, or right rhythms, musical line was lost. After only a few times through the exercise, line improved without coaching. Returning to the native tongue idea, the same phenomenon happens with language. Unfamiliar or hard-to-pronounce words often interrupt the inflection of even native speakers. They certainly have no trouble speaking and reading with appropriate inflection almost all the time, but the technical difficulty of a sentence can still affect them.

Air helps. Encouraging deep, full breathes aided the musical phrasing. Using more air helped with the student’s ability to play the phrase closer to the mental concept. This is also related to the technical difficulties idea, in that air is necessary to make the instrument function properly. When students don’t play with enough support, even the simple exercises become difficult because they are fighting with the instrument just to get sound.

Getting students to demonstrate the phrases with something other than the instrument helps to uncover what their true mental concept is. One student was having some difficulty playing with the phrasing I had asked for. After setting the horn down, she absent mindedly whistled the phrase. Everything was there exactly as I had asked
for. After making her whistle it again a few times, I instructed her to then play it exactly as she had just whistled it. As expected, she then played the phrase much closer to what I wanted. Without any further instruction on the horn or the phrase she was able to greatly improve her playing simply by whistling. Singing or playing on another instrument that is more comfortable to the student are further ideas, depending on what the student feels best allows them to turn their mental concept into sound.

**Final Thoughts**

My hope is that teachers with young students will find this book to be a valuable resource for beginning conversations about musicality. It will never replace the interaction or instruction from a private teacher. It should serve as a starting point for early adventures into the realm of musical playing. It was only after completing the book and instructions that I realized my concepts of “air and sound” and “connection and direction” very closely parallel the idea of “wind and song” pioneered by tubist Arnold Jacobs. It was not my intent to copy his idea. I arrived at my ideas after thinking about what was most important and how to most simply explain it to young students. The process of having to take what I know about musicality and present it in a beginner friendly manner has helped me to clarify my own thoughts, as well as realize when I too have been guilty of over thinking things. It has also given me further ideas for how to approach music teaching in general.
Works Cited


