

Phrasing using note grouping is a technique that has contributed to my success with and enjoyment of the horn. Charles Bubb Jr., Principal Trumpet with the San Francisco Symphony, taught me this technique when he was one of my early teachers.

Horn technique usually means topics like fingerings and embouchures, but note grouping goes deeper into what makes music beautiful and expressive, and that is phrasing, musical interpretation, and expression. Not only will this concept make your playing more musical, but it will make your practicing more efficient, too. Note grouping is a concept that goes back to the ancient Greeks, but, strangely, little is written on the subject compared with other aspects of technique and style. For a history and discussion of technical aspects of this concept, see *Note Grouping: A Method for Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance* by James Morgan Thurmond¹, a horn player and educator.

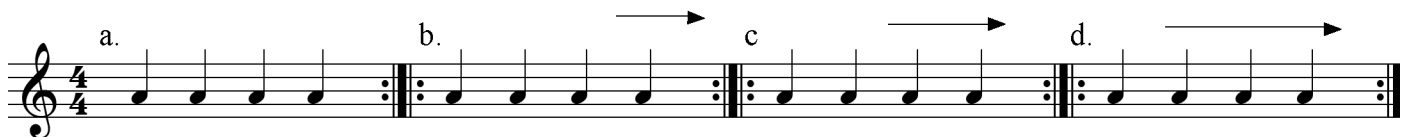
Many of you may recognize this concept as part of what was taught by the great oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Marcel Tabuteau. I learned about the Tabuteau connection later in my life, but in the meantime I had refined the concepts I learned from Mr. Bubb.

The concept of note grouping relates to the rhythm and flow of phrasing in its most elemental form. It helps us find the inner connection of the notes as they move along and brings rhythmic integrity to our playing as it follows the flow of the phrase. It deals with what we naturally do when we speak, sing, or dance. The natural way we speak in sentences, with implied punctuation, is more expressive than a dull monotone. Singing is similar in its expressiveness, and of course dancing is all about feeling the inner rhythm. *Arses*, or pick-up notes, bring the element of movement to the phrase. They are like lifting your foot to walk or dance – setting the pace for when your foot will touch down again.

When I was first taught note grouping as a young student, the concept consisted mainly of phrasing from the weak or pick-up notes to the stronger, *thesis* beats. In a sense, that, and bringing out weaker, faster notes, is all you need to know to get started. I teach this to all of my students, regardless of age, from the very beginning.

We all know that pounding the stronger *thesis* beats – 1 and 3 in a 4/4 bar, for example – can result in boring and ugly playing, so what do we do about it? Do we just play less on the strong beats, or can we do something more meaningful to find the essence of the phrase?

Let's start with some basic examples of rhythm and see how this works. If we take a measure or group of four equal notes and repeat them, can we phrase them, even if they are all the same pitch? Let's experiment. Play the pattern below without any expression or emphasis. I think most of us would agree that this is pretty static. Now, use the last note in the bar as a pick-up or arsis note to the next downbeat simply by giving it meaningful weight and direction. This is a little more interesting. Then use the last two notes of the measure to do the same thing – feel them phrasing forward to the next downbeat. Is there more or less energy in our phrase now? Finally, use all three of the notes after the downbeat to get to the next measure. I think you will definitely feel the energy and connection this brings to the phrase.



The next example has ties and arrows to show the smaller groups of notes inside the longer notes that lead to the next thesis. The eighth notes can represent slurred notes that are different pitches or one tied note. The strictest use of the arsis/thesis analysis calls for splitting each note down to a level that divides every note in the phrase so you can *feel* the arsis notes even if they are tied together. A dotted quarter on a thesis beat should be felt as three eighth notes – one thesis and two arsis notes tied together. This is a good concept for learning to feel the inner beat. It helps keep the rhythm steady and accurate and then you are already moving forward into the next arsis note that is leading to the eventual thesis. Thesis notes are not always downbeats, but they represent notes that come to rest within phrases. That is why emphasizing thesis notes can be so deadly if that is all you do.

t a a a t a a a etc. t = thesis a = arsis (Phrasing and movement is independent of articulations.)

Lets take this idea further, to get to expression and interpretation. The style and expressive aspects of composing come mostly from the arsis notes. Harmonic changes are much more common in arsis notes since thesis notes have more to do with resolution and repose. Grace notes and other expressive gestures are arsis notes and arsis notes control phrase flow. Unfortunately, these arsises are the parts of the beat or measure that are often neglected. Players also tend to rush through fast arsis notes – especially when tonguing – and drop their air in the process, weakening these notes even more. Concentrating on the arsis notes will bring these “weak” notes to life and show you the way to be expressive in your phrasing.

So not only must we play the arsis notes with equal or greater intensity and importance than the thesis notes, we should use them to set the whole spirit of the phrases and, finally, the whole piece. Is this methodology just phrasing and expression by the numbers? Is it merely an academic exercise of rules and regulations? Fortunately, our musical sense will guide us in applying these concepts. Note grouping is a natural process of communication, be it speaking, singing, or playing an instrument.

Look at these phrases from Mozart’s Concerto #3 in E-flat. The articulations are taken from the original manuscript found in *Mozart and the Horn* by Hans Pizka². Notice how few articulations Mozart provides. The small arrows give the internal phrasing in what I call mini phrases. These mini phrases can be as few as two notes and then they can be combined into larger parts of a full phrase. The longer arrows represent longer combinations of the smaller mini phrases. If you follow the thesis beats in the longer mini phrases, you start to see where the phrase is heading. Most phrases have more than just one point of repose. Here the first phrase comes to rest in measure two. Then the arsis beats move us along to the next thesis beat in measure three and finally another that ends the second phrase on the C# in measure 4, which is actually a suspension that resolves on an expressive arsis. Mozart’s melodic genius doesn’t allow him to just plunk down a tonic note to end the phrase.

Practice all of the small mini phrases out of context, one by one, but as close to tempo as you can and be accurate. This means you may be playing only two notes at a time. Hold the last note of each group before you go on. If there are articulations, play them, but in this piece you will need to learn to phrase with subtle emphasis and nice tonguing, only. This is an important lesson about phrasing – it exists without any articulations.

The first mini phrase should have a strong legato note leading forward to start the phrase. Continue to bring out the arsis notes as you play the longer mini phrases. Think of the smaller minis as you do this to keep the inner strength of the rhythm. Note the two small diminuendos that I have added. In Mozart you need to be careful about accenting or stressing the last note in a phrase. If there is a moving note or appoggiatura, don’t stress the last note. Appoggiatura literally means *to lean on*, so go right ahead and do it. Finally, play the whole phrase, keeping in mind what you have learned from playing the mini phrases. This is when you will really feel the flow of the inner rhythm.

Articulations may or may not coincide with phrasing. Sometimes these words are used interchangeably, but they are not the same. In fact, most composers use the device of setting the articulations against the phrasing as an expressive gesture. There are, then, many ways of articulating a Mozart concerto. Mozart did not include many articulations in the original scores for the soloist. This was the style of the time and allowed the soloist to bring even more expression to the piece. He did indicate articulations in the orchestra parts, and these are the articulations that have been incorporated into the solo parts of many editions.

Someone good at note grouping and phrasing can make sense of this piece (or any piece) with virtually any articulations or none at all. I am reminded of Alan Civil when he used to give master classes on Mozart concertos at horn symposiums in the afternoon and then play completely different articulations in the evening performance with the orchestra. Was he careless or was he enjoying his mastery of the art of note grouping and doing whatever he felt like at the moment in terms of articulations? Since it was the style of the time and Mozart left the option open, I'm sure Mozart himself would have loved it, as I did.

Once you understand the basic phrasing, try any other articulations you like. See how that enhances or works against the actual phrasing. Enjoy the interplay of the phrasing with the articulations. See how articulations with and against the phrasing add to the expressive energy of the phrases. This is part of the expressiveness of articulations. Try some really outlandish articulations or none at all and see if you can retain the phrasing.

As we learn to apply the arsis/thesis phrasing, it is important to note that not every nuance can be folded into a strict set of rules. Consider the style of the composer, if known, and the melodic or harmonic underpinnings to get the final expressive quality of the phrases. Note grouping gives a good idea of what the underlying rhythm is and it will help you tie the “words” together in each phrase, but other expressive gestures such as articulations, dynamics, rubato, vibrato, and tone quality will burnish the sheen and delight of the phrase. Note grouping actually goes on underneath and in concert with these other qualities, which may or may not indicate the actual phrasing.

Here is the opening of the *Concertpiece* by Saint-Saens as marked for mini phrases in my book, *Real World Horn Playing*³. The *Concertpiece* is a good choice to use another practicing technique - playing the rhythm on just one note (I use the opening g), using the mini phrases out of context and then in tempo. This will establish the relationships of the different note values - especially the sixteenth and thirty-second notes - without having to worry about hitting the notes or learning the fingerings. It also allows you to get your tone quality where you want it for the dynamics, experience the phrasing, and judge the strength and direction of the arsis notes. You can also add the accents and staccato and legato tonguing. This is important in getting at the overall style and expressive quality of the piece right away.

Play very strong sixteenth notes in exact rhythm that lead to the dotted eighth notes. Notice how using this “one pitch only” mini phrasing system gives you the opportunity to do this right away. Play with as much expression as possible on the one pitch. Now you will have the feel of the piece before worrying about other technical issues.

The image displays two staves of musical notation in G major, 3/4 time. The first staff begins with a forte (f) dynamic marking. It features a series of sixteenth notes followed by dotted eighth notes. Above the staff, horizontal lines with arrows indicate phrasing groups. Below the staff, various articulation marks are present, including slurs, accents (>), and staccato (>) markings. The second staff continues the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns and articulation markings, ending with a double bar line.

I often have students read new pieces by doing the mini phrases first, before reading through. This may seem odd, but doing this gives the student an immediate awareness of the internal phrasing and the importance of the weak beats. When you tie the minis together to play through, slow down so you can do it without “finger glitches.”

By doing the mini phrases out of context, learning the technical things like fingerings is easier, too. Instead of looking at a lot of notes to learn, you are looking at bite sized, easily manageable pieces that can be strung together later. If you do need to “loop” or repeat notes to work on fingerings, use the mini phrases instead of random groups of notes. The method is to get the mini phrases up to speed first and then put them in context at a slower speed – one you can manage as you go from mini phrase to mini phrase. Think of the mini phrases as you play them. This will help you keep from rushing or otherwise distorting the rhythm; you will hear the underlying motion, and, as you go faster, you will want to keep the musical phrasing that you have developed.

This entire process puts the emphasis where it should be, on the musical qualities. Adding them in later is just wasted practice time. Students invariably learn pieces faster and have a clearer concept of musical content using this method. The more you utilize this approach the more you will focus your attention on bringing the music alive. This is part of becoming a musician - an artist - not just a player. It also plants you firmly in the exact place where you have always wanted to be - making music.

I hope this gives you some ideas for more efficient and effective practice. Remember, it is not how much you practice but how you practice that counts. My current book and DVD touch on this concept, but a forthcoming book and DVD will go into greater depth. As a bonus for this article, a video on my website⁴ demonstrates the concepts discussed here.

References

1. Thurmond, James Morgan, *Note Grouping: A Method for Achieving Expression and Style in Musical Performance*, Meredith Musical Publications, Galesville MD, ©1982.
2. Pizka, Hans, *Mozart and the Horn*. Hans Pizka Edition, Kirchheim bei Munchen, Germany ©1980
3. Rider, Wendell, *Real World Horn Playing*, Wendell Rider Publications, San Jose, California, USA, ©2002
4. www.wendellworld.com (Addendum and Extras Page)

Wendell Rider, Principal Horn with the San José Symphony for 32 years, is the author of Real World Horn Playing (book and DVD). He is currently updating and codifying horn pedagogy and pioneering the use of video conferencing to give lessons and master classes around the world. He can be reached at www.wendellworld.com.

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