PETER-LUKAS GRAF

INTERPRETATION
How to shape a melodic line

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English translation by Katharine Wake

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About 'rules'

There are no absolute rules.

However, rules are valuable signposts
in an emergency.

The frequent occurrence of 'emergencies'
prompted the author to write this book –
a book full of rules –
rules not meant to be dogmatic,
but intended as navigational aids.

If you do not feel it,
You will not pursue it.

(Goethe)

Music is now such a science,
that it cannot be judged by
personal imagination, but rather (...)
according to good taste, informed by
certain rules, and attained by
much experience and practice....

(Quantz)

Preface

Music is to a particular degree the language of feelings, and melody is a particularly direct expression of the soul. This often leads musicians into the trap of relying principally on subjective feelings and personal musical instinct.

Since music however – in common with every other language – has its own rules, a knowledge of musical 'grammar' is equally important for a good musical performance. Musicians today are particularly reliant on this knowledge. On the one hand they are expected to be highly specialized, which can lead to instrumental one-sidedness, whilst on the other hand they must be familiar with different musical periods, each of which has its own language rules.

This book is a collection of guidelines, some general, some stylistic, which – in the spirit of the 'science' and the 'certain rules' mentioned by Quantz – must be applied in the interpretation of melodic phrases. It also illustrates typical situations which reach the limits of rational argument, and where intuition and feeling – in the sense of the Goethe quote – must take over.

I hope that by formulating and commenting on the rules covered here, I have provided easily understood and practical assistance for flute-players and other instrumentalists, as well as a stimulus for answering the questions which students, teachers and performers ask themselves and grapple with every day.

Peter-Lukas Graf

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Golden rules for the interpreter

The notes on the page

The notes on the page are not in themselves 'music'. Only when they are played in the imagination or out loud do they become music. Strictly speaking, music cannot be written down, but can only be achieved by 'reading between the lines'. Nonetheless, the printed or manuscript score is the nearest approximation of the composer's ideas. Therefore:

Do everything the score says, and nothing which contradicts it.

Freedom of interpretation must always be developed in agreement with the score. Precision and freedom are not contradictory.

If you feel alterations to the score are necessary, take a critical look at your reasons.

Experience shows that in most cases the composer (i.e. the score) was right in the end.

Understanding the score

Study the complete score and understand the relationship of your own part to the others.

Flute, violin, violoncello parts etc. are only printed separately for reasons of practicality. On their own, they are insufficient to gain an understanding of the composition.

Examine solo pieces with regard to their harmony and hidden polyphony

In tonal music there is no 'pure' unison. Harmonic relationships or polyphonic passages are always to be found, whether involuntarily filled in by the ear, or visibly expressed within the composition.

About 'individual' interpretation

Examine the character and style of the piece, and don't give in to any premature and uncontrolled need for self-expression.

Rather than imposing your own ideas on the composition, you should use your own emotions and thoughts to give life to a predefined musical idea.

Identify with what you recognize to be 'correct', and use all your powers of imagination and your full ability to achieve the clearest possible acoustic realization of this.

The individuality of any performer is bound to be expressed as a result of these efforts. Individual temperament, imagination and sensitivity are important: discover these gifts and nourish them. Don't be tempted, though, to be 'original' first and foremost – personality cannot be fabricated. It can merely appear, develop and mature. For this to happen, the prerequisite is *human* development – and this, which is our aim – includes head, heart and soul.
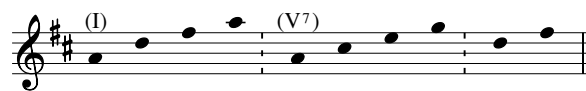
The structure and analysis of melody

All wind and string players have only one task to accomplish – except when they are providing the accompaniment in chamber or orchestral music, or when playing modern works which are not 'melodic' – namely, the interpretation of melodic phrases. To do this it is necessary, above all, to understand the *structure* of the melody. Up to a point this can happen instinctively; but spontaneous, intuitive comprehension must usually be checked and complemented by intellectual analysis.

We can differentiate between harmonic, scale-based and polyphonic melodic forms, as described in the following sections.

Harmonic melody

Three examples are sufficient to show that melodies of very different types can be based on the same 'key material'. The following chords form the basis of each example:

Example 1:

We select and sequence the notes as follows:

We give them metre and rhythm as follows:

With the repetition of some notes and the addition of one passing note, we have a.....

Swiss folksong

S'isch mer al - les ei Ding, ob i lach o-der ob i sing...

Example 2:

We start off with a slightly different selection of notes:

We give them metre and rhythm as follows:

and a few ornaments (repeated notes, appoggiaturas, passing notes) are enough to give us a melody from...

W.A. Mozart, Concerto in G Major for Flute and Orchestra
2nd movement: Adagio ma non troppo

Example 3:

We start off with a third selection and sequences of notes from the same key material:

We give them metre and rhythm as follows:

By adding appoggiaturas, grace notes, dotted rhythms, passing notes, a turn, and auxiliary notes, the result is a melody from...
F. Doppler, *Fantaisie pastorale hongroise* for flute and piano

As performers, we have to follow this procedure in *reverse,* as for instance here:

J.S. Bach, Sonata in E major for flute and basso continuo
1st movement: Adagio ma non tanto

We reduce the melody to its harmonic 'key notes':

Then we gradually give this 'melodic framework' its ornamentation, as for example in the following 'preliminary version':

By doing this, the rhythmic aspect of the ornamentation at the start of each bar is made clear, and we recognize the b^1 in the middle of the first bar as a dissonant appoggiatura.

Going from here to the original, all the demisemiquavers are shown to be passing notes which should be played evenly and fluently. The small appoggiatura notes on the second quaver of each bar, however, must (as dissonances) be played expressively, and can be notated rhythmically as follows:

(see also *The short appoggiatura*, page 24 ff)

Anyone who follows these principles will more or less inevitably arrive at a musically correct representation. Thus: for the three preceding examples (Mozart, Bach, Doppler), first play the 'preliminary versions' and then – as the final, definitive 'variant' – the original.

This can be condensed into the following general rule:

Rule

Reduce harmonic passages to their basic harmonic notes, and practise using the methods shown here.
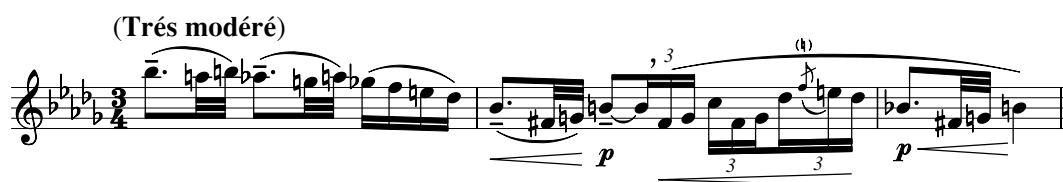
Scale-based melody

We can use the same method for melodies which are based on a scale, i.e.:

Rule

Reduce scale melody passages to their relevant scales and practise using the following methods.

Examples:

C. Debussy, *Syrinx* for solo flute

First establish which scales form the foundation of the melody: