



Gettin' Around On The Saxophone

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Objectifying Phrasing: Finding The Tension/Release Points

There are too many players in both the jazz and classical idioms coming out of music schools with lots of literature under their fingers, but with little or no musicality in their playing. Their playing, while technically proficient, is mono-dynamic, for that matter, mono everything and without emotion. If they do have some semblance of phrasing, they often seem to be a clone of some other performance. Arguably, at a young age it is important to imitate, however, imitation is only the first step. It is a useful tool for gaining intimate musical knowledge of performance practices and phrasing of the music, so that the knowledge can be applied to other performances and works. But the ultimate goal for every musician is a personal expression of the music, within accepted performance practices of the idiom.

It is more difficult and time consuming to teach a student the principles of phrasing than it is to just teach the student how to play a piece. Additionally, whether you are a classical player, jazz player, or aspire to do both, there is so much literature to learn today that the concepts and principles of phrasing are often neglected in the teaching process. The time once available to teach principles of performance and debate the principles, as it applies to a piece of literature, has dwindled and is often replaced with duplication of how someone else played a work.

TENSION/RELEASE POINTS

As a classical or jazz soloist all musicians want to be recognized when someone hears them. A major part of aural recognition is, of course, a personal sound. But just as identifiable is the personal way music is expressed. This entails the selection of tension and release points, or peaks of emotional expression, often defined as a moment in time most commonly at the beginning of a note, or group of notes where musical intensity of emotion stops building and is released. These tension release points, or T/R points, are determined by the music and expressed by a recipe of musical devices. The exact recipe of musical devices, and the amount applied, remains subjective, and of course, personal. But the identification of the T/R points can be objectified.

By identifying T/R points a performer can make musical decisions about how to phrase a piece with confidence, and it's beneficial to do this in the earliest stages of practice. Because T/R points can be objectified, even a young player can have some assurance their decisions will fit within standard performance practice, and be encouraged to use personal expression. This objectification of identifying T/R points in the music is not meant to be an end in determining how to phrase a piece of music. It is a beginning, or starting point, by which a more musical performance will be performed.

The process is simple. Any piece of music has a number of T/R Points of varying strength. Looking at the big picture, there is a one main T/R point for an entire piece, others of slightly

lesser value for each period with in a piece, and there are other less strong T/R's for each phrase. Using the seven identifiers listed after this paragraph, a student can take any note in a phrase and determine the number of identifiers that note has. A note that has six of the seven identifiers will be a stronger T/R point than one only containing three of the seven. After determining the relative strength of a T/R point, a recipe for executing or expressing that T/R point can be developed. Some simple and some other not quite so simple characteristics can identify T/R Points.

Easily spotted Tension/Release points even by very young musicians are notes that have these identifiers.

1. A change of duration (different duration than the notes around it).
2. Are pivot notes for a change in melodic direction.
3. Are at an extended range of a phrase.
4. Are preceded (or occasionally followed) by a large intervallic leap.

T/R points that may require more theoretical knowledge to identify are:

5. Metric strength.
6. Harmonic strength.
7. Melodic strength.

Of the more obvious, or easily spotted identifiers, is a note that has a different duration (longer or shorter) than the notes around it (*see Example 1*). This can be as subtle as a quarter note amongst a series of eighth notes, or as obvious as a half note surrounded by sixteenth notes.

A change in melodic direction is another identifier of a T/R point (*see Example 2*). This is a note that is approached from one direction and moves on to a note in the opposite direction.

Notes that are at an extreme or extended range in a particular phrase can identify a T/R point (*see Example 3*). This does not mean that a note has to be in an extreme range of the saxophone. It only has to be the highest or lowest note in a phrase, sub-phrase, or group of notes.

The last easily spotted identifier is a note that is approached by a larger leap than the notes around it (*see Example 4*). The leap does not necessarily need to be an octave or other traditionally large leap. It only has to be larger than the other notes immediately surround it. If a melody moves in major and minor seconds a leap of a minor third would be considered a large leap and therefore a T/R point.

Metrically strong beats will vary depending on the time signature. For instance, in 4/4 time the strongest beat of the measure is of course the downbeat of one followed from stronger to weaker by beats 3, 4, and then 2. In 3/4 time beat one is still the strongest followed by three and finally two (*see Example 5*). Every time signature has a metric pattern of stronger and weaker beats. In the case of odd meters, there can be several different patterns that are quite often determined by the melo-

dy. Similarly, there is greater strength or tension on syncopated beats (upbeats) and a release when going to a downbeat.

Notes that have harmonic strength hold a strong harmonic position in the implied or expressed harmony. For instance a note that functions as a one or three of a tonic chord will hold more relative strength than if the note was a fifth of that chord (see example 6). Similarly, a note representing a strong harmonic chord like a tonic will have relatively more strength than a note on a chord of lesser harmonic strength. This of course is rather complex and requires an understanding of music theory and analysis.

A melodically strong note is one that has tension in relation to the notes immediately around it, or one that holds a strong position in the key or scale it is associated with (see example 7). For instance, any non-harmonic note will have tension and resolve or release just after the beginning of the resolution note. Tonally notes of a key have relative strength or weakness. In the Key of C major, a sixth scale degree wants to resolve to the fifth scale degree (in solfeggio, sol to la). The sixth has tension and releases at the fifth, the T/R/ point. Similar the third scale degree has relative tension that pulls to the tonic.

APPLYING A PALETTE OF MUSICAL DEVICES TO T/R POINTS

T/R points normally occur at the very beginning of a note. Theoretically, every third note can be a T/R point of some level of importance. As is obvious in my examples, as well as any music, it is rare that only one identifier of a T/R point will be present on any given note. With the concept that a musical line is always fluid, moving either forward or backward in intensity, the relative strength of any given T/R point can be determined by the number of identifiers associated with it (as listed earlier). The greater number of identifiers a T/R point has the stronger it is.

Once the T/R points of a phrase are identified, and their relative strength or weakness to one another is established, a performer chooses from their palette of musical devices to express the level of emotion desired and appropriate for each T/R point and phrase. The individual combination or recipe of musical devices used by a performer will make the performance have a personal identity. A few of the most obvious devices on the performer's palette would include:

1. dynamic contrast
2. accents
3. vibrato
4. timbre changes
5. articulations
6. pitch/tuning

Each of these devices in and of itself can be used to express a wide range of emotion and intensity. A thorough examination and understanding of how each of these devices work is vital to successfully incorporating them into a musical performance. This is obviously an extensive subject and appropriate for an article of its own. In the mean time, some experimentation could be in order. §

Example 1 - T/R point through a change in duration (arrow indicates T/R point)

Example 2 - T/R point through a change in direction (arrow indicates T/R point)

Example 3 - T/R point through of extended range (arrow indicates T/R point)

Example 4 - T/R point through a large leap (arrow indicates T/R point)

Example 5 - T/R points through metric feel (arrow indicates T/R point)
(note T/R point on beat 3 is less strong than others)

Example 6 - T/R points through harmonic strength (arrow indicates T/R point)

Example 7 - T/R points through melodic strength (arrow indicates T/R point)
(chromatic approach to the 3 of the scale, 6 resolves to 5, & 7 resolves to tonic)