

PHRASING STRUCTURE

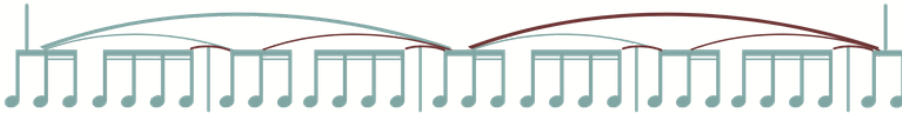
Before phrasing can be fully felt, it must first be clearly seen.

In the following parts of this lesson, you will explore the specific qualities of energy involved in phrasing, and how to express them through singing and playing.

This section focuses on understanding a clear and simple structure of phrasing—its length and the shape of each element. This structure is universal and can be applied across different pieces.

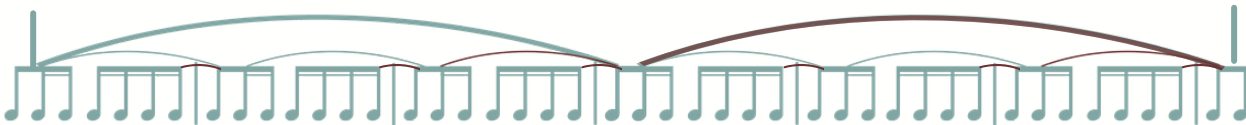
Most common structure:

- a motif (1 measure), centred on a main interval
- a phrase (2 measures), centred on a main motif
- a sentence (4 measures), centred on a main phrase



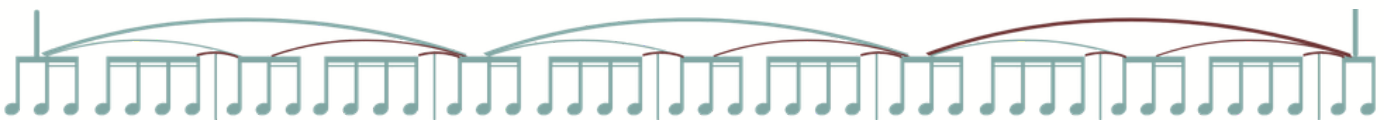
Common structure:

- a motif (1 measure), centred on a main interval
- a phrase (3 measures), centred on a main motif
- a sentence (6 measures), centred on a main phrase



Common structure:

- a motif (1 measure), centred on a main interval
- a phrase (2 measures), centred on a main motif
- a sentence (6 measures), centred on a main phrase



Less common structure:

- a motif (1 measure), centred on a main interval
- a phrase (3 measures), centred on a main motif
- a sentence (9 measures), centred on a main phrase



LENGTH OF MOTIFS

Mark each motif with a short slur, extending one measure across the bar line, following a consistent pattern.

Begin from the **second note of the measure (not the beat)** and continue to the first note of the following bar. This creates a pattern of 2-3-4-1, 2-3-4-1, which tends to feel more connected, continuous, and forward-moving.



By contrast, patterns such as 3-4-1-2, 3-4-1-2 or 4-1-2-3, 4-1-2-3 may result in a more segmented or less fluid sense of motion.



Pauses are also part of the motif:



An initial upbeat (incomplete bar) is considered a full motif:



In bars with a single note, start the next motif on the second beat:



Begin the motif from the first note of the opening bar:



Structuring motifs by the number of measures, rather than adapting to constantly changing musical patterns, may initially seem unusual. However, maintaining a consistent structural rhythm is essential for building later clear phrases and sentences.

Eventually, when playing the complete phrasing, you will notice how musical it becomes and how consistent your inner breathing feels. This creates momentum in your playing.

By contrast, if phrasing is built by following constantly changing musical patterns, the underlying structure—at the level of the motif—becomes unclear. As each motif differs in length and rhythm, it becomes difficult to develop them into clear phrases and sentences. As a result, the overall phrasing loses clarity.

Structuring by measures applies specifically to motifs. When progressing to phrases or sentences you will choose their length according to musical pattern.



LENGTH OF PHRASES

Mark each phrase with a long slur.

A phrase typically consists of 2–3 motifs (2–3 measures), depending on the melodic pattern.



- Align each new phrase with the start of a new musical idea.
- Avoid beginning a phrase too early—within the same melodic pattern—or too late—after the new pattern has already begun.

Avoid

starting a new phrase
within the same melodic pattern

Correct

starting a new phrase
with the *beginning* of new musical idea

LENGTH OF SENTENCES

Mark each sentence with a vertical line.

A sentence typically consists of 2–3 phrases (4–9 measures), depending on the melodic pattern.



- Align each new sentence with the beginning of a new musical idea.
- Avoid starting a sentence too early—within the same idea—or too late—after the new idea has already begun.
- Ensure that each sentence contains 2 or 3 phrases, rather than 1 or 4.



CONTOUR OF MOTIFS

Mark the main interval of the motif with a bolder slur.

The main interval is the final interval across the bar line. Shape each motif toward this point, even if a hairpin suggests emphasis earlier within the measure.



CONTOUR OF PHRASES

Mark the main motif of the phrase with a bolder slur.

The main motif is typically the one that carries greater expressive weight—through dynamics (often louder), articulation (such as tenuto or accent), harmony (more intense or diminished), or melodic direction (ascending or placed in a higher register).

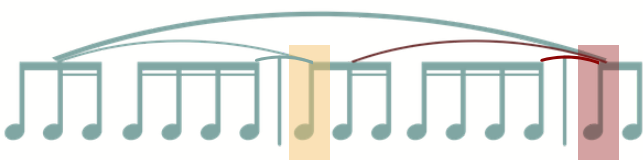
Be aware that melodic direction alone is not always decisive; an ascending line may still feel lighter if the harmonic colour is more open and the dynamics are softer. So always confirm your choice by singing or playing the phrase at a faster tempo and observe which motif naturally stands out.



If still in doubt, compare the harmonies of the final notes in the main intervals of each motif within the phrase...



And choose the motif with more expressive harmony in the main interval:

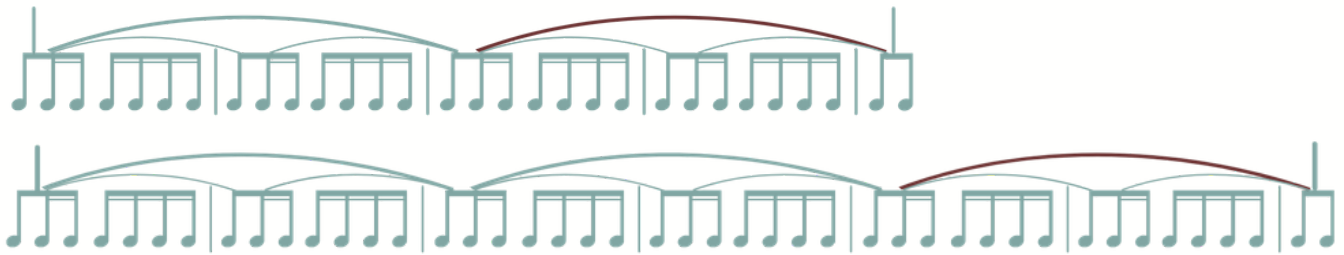


CONTOUR OF SENTENCES

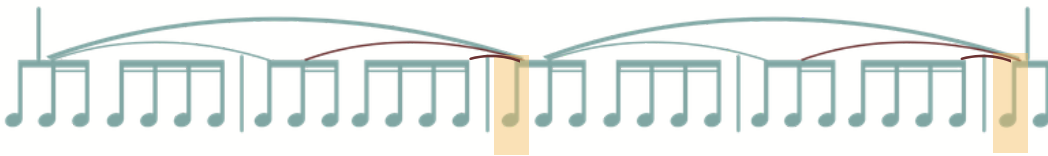
Mark the main phrase of the sentence with a bolder slur.

The main phrase is typically the one with greater expressive presence—through dynamics, articulation, harmony, or melodic direction (ascending or in a higher register).

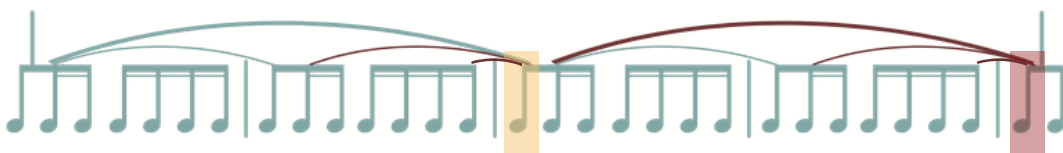
To confirm your choice, sing or play the sentence at a faster tempo and observe which phrase naturally stands out.



If still in doubt, compare the harmonies of the final notes in the main intervals of the main motifs in the sentence...



And choose the phrase with more expressive harmony in the main interval of the main motif:

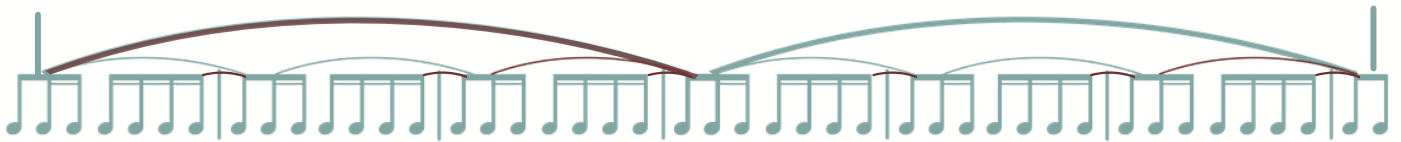


It's a great reminder to consistently apply the same approach to phrasing length and contour:

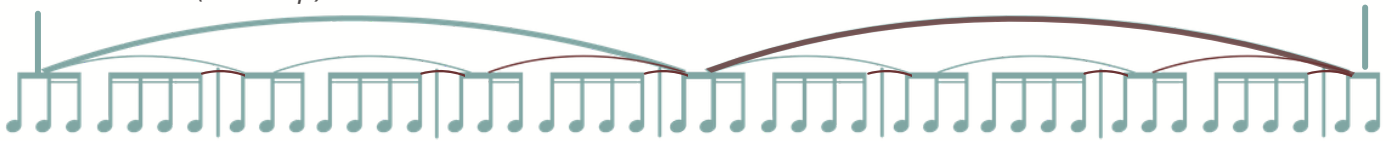
After each phrasing unit—whether a motif, phrase, or sentence—there should be a sense of *energetic exhalation*, similar to how we perceive sound dissipating when we listen. This naturally creates the need for a comma, rest, or pause.

The main slur—whether it's the main interval within a motif, motif in a phrase, or phrase in a sentence—will always feel like a buildup of energy, an *inhalation*. As a result, if a phrase or sentence begins with a red slur following a green one, it will feel more like an *exhalation*, whereas the reverse will create a sensation of *inhalation*.

Exhalation (release)



Inhalation (buildup)



EXPLORING PHRASING

Answer the following questions using the examples provided: **1. PHRASING EXAMPLES**

- Why is the motif marked with a red slur chosen as the more prominent one within each phrase?
 - Why is the phrase marked with a red slur chosen as the more prominent one within each sentence?
- _____

Understand the choice of phrasing in the following videos: **PART 1** **PART 2**

Choose the main motifs and phrases in the following examples: **2. CONTOUR OF PHRASING**

Structure the length of phrases and sentences, and identify the main motifs and phrases in the following examples: **3. LENGTH & CONTOUR OF PHRASING**

Mark the phrasing in the scores of the following pieces: **W. MOZART. SONATAS** **F. CHOPIN. NOCTURNES**

- Mark motifs, phrases, and sentences.
- Mark the more prominent intervals within motifs, motifs within phrases, and phrases within sentences.

Listen to the piece with attention to your phrasing choices in the score, and use this to confirm and refine your interpretation.

While it is generally advisable to avoid listening to other interpretations before forming your own musical understanding, in this case it may be helpful to explore recordings.

If your attention remains focused specifically on phrasing, this listening will not interfere with your own sense of expression. By limiting your focus in this way, you can observe phrasing choices while maintaining clarity and independence in your own musical approach.

OPEN LESSONS

