

## UNDERSTANDING RHYTHM

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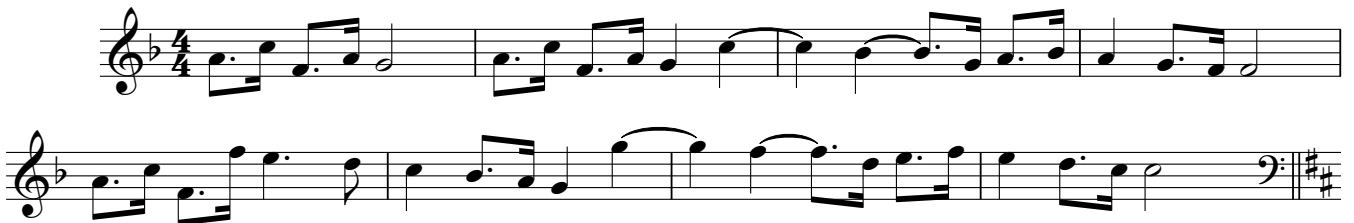
### PART 4 PHRASE CONSTRUCTION

#### Introduction

It seems that, besides observing rhythmic relationships between notes moving steadily or fast, we are also conscious of a much slower pulse - that made by the metric barlines - and require to feel a sense of balance there, as much as with beats. And just as in beats we are likely to prefer groupings in twos or fours, with three and other numbers being permissible, so we prefer bars to be grouped in twos and fours, with other lengths possible.

The situation is complicated by the existence of cadence points, i.e. mental resting places which often consist of a long note. No doubt this construction originated in simple songs. So almost any folk song will provide an example of the 16-bar verse made up of four four-bar phrases. (Two 8-bar "sentences".) Let's look at a similar example from art music:

#### *Handel, Water Music*



This has several points of interest. First, the main cadences (minims) can be seen at bars 4 and 8. Second, there is a cadence in the very first bar, and if bar 2 had been identical to bar 1, we would have had a very common pattern short-short-long; in this case 1bar, 1bar, 2 bars of sub-phrases making up the four-bar phrase. But Handel makes a slight alteration to carry things forward. Third, at bar 5 he again nearly makes a resting-point but averts it. What I want you to notice is that artistic phrase-making pays homage to the four-square model but departs from it in a convincing way.

Of course Handel hasn't finished yet. To complete his theme he has further phrases which go, including those already given: 4 + 4 4 + 6 4 + 4. Not really symmetrical, is it? So we need to look at how too much predictable four-squareness can be departed from without things ending up clumsy or leaving an unbalanced feeling in the listener.

#### *Tchaikovsky, Pathétique Symphony*

##### **Allegro con grazia**

Here the cadences every two bars are clear - except at the 8th bar, where the composer avoids four-squareness by smoothing over the join to the next phrase (it is clear that a new phrase is beginning because the melody begins again.) This use of repetition can be a potent clue to understanding phrasing: when a tune or motif begins again, so does the phrase or sub-phrase.

(It is interesting to speculate whether this 5:4 metre divides as 3 + 2 or 2 + 3. Well, it's both. The odd-numbered bars are 3 + 2, because the triplet weakens the 3rd beat, and the even-numbered bars are 2 + 3 because of the agogic emphasis on a long note. You could even make out a case that it goes 3 + 4 + 3 over every two bars.)

It is not always easy to explain irregular phrasings:

Here we nearly had three four-bar phrases (why not four?) except that the first phrase was 6 bars. As a matter of fact, it can mostly be explained away as extensions of something simpler. Or it may be a genuine one-off.

The thing is, a phrase of irregular length can always be justified if it is immediately followed by one of the same length, to give a sense of balance:

*Mozart, G minor symphony*

This piece is full of traps. The unwary analyst who merely counts bars will spot the minim in the 4th bar and cry "Four-bar phrase!" The musician who listens to themes (or who just looks at them for that matter) will spot the sequential repetition beginning after three bars. (Thematic repetitions tend to break phrases up and make a new start.) And because the theme starts yet again after six bars, this is clearly three-bar phrasing, and the natural three-bar phrase was justified by the second phrase also being three bars long, creating a balance.

But can we expect this 3-bar pattern to continue? Next we apparently have an 8-bar phrase, or sentence. Is this two four-bar phrases? Obviously not; its fourth bar is still moving. It's a five-bar phrase ending on a Bb which would have been extended to two beats if it wasn't that another phrase starts simultaneously (this is called an overlap). And furthermore the five-bar phrase is actually an extension of a three-bar phrase. How? By repetition. If a phrase includes a repetition or sequence, this can count as an extension to an otherwise normal length. See my bar numbers above in order to follow the logic. Even when it's all been explained, it's still an irregularly phrased paragraph (3, 3, 5, 4).

Now that we've met the overlap, let's have an even clearer example:

*Mozart, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*

You can easily work out the 4-bar phrasing. The important point here is that the G beginning bar 8 serves both as the final note of one phrase and the first note of a new one, thereby losing a bar. This is one very common way in which sentence lengths become irregular.

Time to summarise the ways in which standard phrase-lengths (normally four bars) can be manipulated to make other lengths:

- 1) A phrase may be extended by repeating a bar, either literally or in a sequence. This is as if that bar was "marking time". Sometimes just the rhythm is used for this purpose.
- 2) A lengthening can take place at the cadence end by doubling the length of the notes that lead up to it.
- 3) The final cadence note or notes may be repeated.
- 4) Two phrases may overlap (share the same bar) so as to shorten a sentence.
- 5) Any length phrase may be used if balanced immediately by one of similar length.

Here's a simple phrase, extended by the first three methods above:

Method 1

Method 2

Method 3

And now here is a wonderful example of irregular phrasing which can all be explained away as modifications of standard four-bar phrasing. Try your luck at analysing it before looking at my solution.

*St. Antony Chorale, as used by Brahms*

Andante

5

10

15

20

25

#### Answer

First of all, it's best to treat the time signature as 4:8. Brahms had the same horror of 4:8 time as his predecessors, it would seem (or perhaps he got it from Haydn). The last three notes of bar 5 are just a link to the obviously new phrase at bar 6. Clearly two five-bar phrases to start with. They can either be treated as natural fivers, or as extended 4-bar phrases using method 1. The next 8 bars are simple, just normal 4-bar phrasing. But the recapitulation starting at bar 19 is puzzling and seems to be an eleven-bar phrase. Indeed it is: it should have ended at bar 23, but everything else is but an incessant repetition of the final cadence note, made more tolerable by the counter-melody beneath. If you like, you can call bar 23 an overlap with the lower tune comprising a five-bar phrase itself with a repeated cadence.

One intriguing afterthought: by Method 1 a four-bar phrase may be extended by use of sequence. What if a four-bar phrase contains a sequence? Is it therefore an extension of a three-bar phrase? The answer is that we can treat it either way as convenient. So the two four-bar phrases above might be thought of as extended two-bar phrases! The mind boggles...

One can be puzzled as to how to analyse the phrasing of a piece like this, with its endless stream of semiquavers:

*Bach, Cantata Sleepers Wake*

Of course it isn't an 8-bar sentence just because it ends in bar 8. As so often with Bach, the quaver is the pulse, and we are really in 8:8 time, or more accurately 4:8 time yet again, with too few barlines.

I will leave you to work out the phrase lengths, but maybe they won't coincide with mine, for I am going to mark, not the main phrase ends but all the phrase-ends including sub-phrases, to show how an accelerating rate of *thematic* change can give internal life to an apparently seamless row of notes.

**Conclusion**

My message to composers is this: in all the aspects of your rhythm, be conscious of what regularity entails. Use it to the degree appropriate to your music. But also avoid total regularity, which sucks the life out of music if we are not careful. Use as many rhythmic tricks as you like, provided you don't descend into chaos. As the Purcell anthem has it somewhere: "Let your moderation be known unto all men."

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July 2006