
BASICS

Identifying waves

Waves were a central theme for the Catalan cellist Pablo Casals, who often spoke about the way everything that has life or motion moves and functions in waves. To Casals, the reason why music becomes dull and lifeless if it is played in a 'straight line', without rising and falling, is because it no longer reflects Nature.

The Hungarian violinist and teacher Sándor Végh, friend and colleague of Casals, taught each year at Prussia Cove in Cornwall, England. The room in which he taught looked out on to the ocean. It was a feature of his teaching that he would frequently point out of the window to the waves rolling in against the rocky beach below, and remind students to liken the music to waves and not to play 'straight'.

A wave-form is anything that grows and then diminishes, anything that gets more and then gets less – like the waves coming up the beach to the furthest point they reach, then retreating back into the sea, then coming in again.

Breathing is a wave: you breathe in until the highest point, then breathe out until the lowest point. The change from night to day is a wave: darkest, lighter, lighter, lightest, darker, darker, darkest; Spring–Summer–Autumn–Winter is a wave; neither pleasure nor pain ever occurs as an unchanging, non-stop stream but always gets more and less, and so on

The accelerated-thinking teacher Edward de Bono points out that even the temperature in your living room follows a wave-pattern, going up and down in perfect curves. If you set the thermostat at 20 Celsius the temperature does not remain there: with the heating on, the temperature soon goes above 20, when the thermostat kicks in and turns it off. The temperature begins to fall, and once it goes below 20 the heating comes on again. So like everything else it goes up and down, up and down.

The composer does not always mark the waves with crescendos or diminuendos, but they must be found nevertheless:

Franck: Sonata in A, mov. 2, b. 48

Wave up Wave down Wave up Wave down

dim. *pp dolce* Wave up Wave down *cresc.* Wave up *dim.* Wave down

Two of the essential elements of western classical music are ebb and flow, tension and release, both of which create wave-forms often represented by crescendos and diminuendos. Just as, in a pool of water, there are multiple ripples criss-crossing each other, so in music different 'currents' exist at the same time:

J. S. Bach: Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV1001, Adagio

Another aspect of dynamics is the way they create a sense of space and distance. A sound appears to get softer if its origin moves away from you, and louder if it moves towards you, even though its actual volume does not change. So by playing something more softly you can give an impression of it being further away but still happening with great energy. Then it is possible to play quietly but without the music becoming weak.

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J. S. Bach: Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001, *Presto*

The image shows a musical score for J.S. Bach's Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001, Presto. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff has two phrases: the first is labeled 'Near' and the second is labeled 'Further away'. The second staff has four phrases: the first is labeled 'Closer', the second 'Further', the third 'Nearer', and the fourth 'Further'. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes with various articulations and dynamics.

Don't sustain

Casals would tell you that if you go up on top of the highest mountain you can find, and shout out as loudly as you can, all you will be able to do is make a diminuendo – because it is impossible to sustain a shout. Only a machine can do that.

It is a phenomenon of teaching that you spend half your time trying to get your students to make sound, and the other half trying to stop them. Because if you listen closely for just this one point – whether the student is sustaining any one note or phrase unremittingly – there are often many examples of notes that are being sustained but which should either be getting louder or getting softer, or sometimes one and then the other. It is in the tapering of notes, in the natural relaxation or the 'ebb' part of notes or phrases, that most attention or sympathy seems to need to be given, perhaps because players become too concerned with 'generating sound' all the time. You've got to be able to let it go. This note from Havanaise is a typical example:

Saint-Saëns: Havanaise, op 83

The image shows a musical score for Saint-Saëns' Havanaise, op 83. It consists of a single staff of music. The piece starts with a piano (p) dynamic. There are several triplet markings (3) and accents (^). A specific note is marked with a triangle (^) and labeled 'New colour'. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes with various articulations and dynamics.

The minim (half-note) B must not be sustained like a note on an organ but diminuendo like the natural dying away of a note on a piano. But unlike the piano, which is an instrument of diminuendo, we can also crescendo and the tapering marked in the example by the diminuendo is not the only musical view that can be taken. One might diminuendo the B sooner than marked and then crescendo into the new passage. The number of variations is uncountable and it should not be possible to play the note in the same way twice! But the one thing is that something must change.

A simple principle of phrasing serves most situations well: if the notes rise, get louder; if they fall, get softer; but just as often when they rise get softer (as though weakening in the effort against gravity, or as though going off into the distance), and get louder as they fall (as though gathering energy with 'gravity'). It all depends on the harmonic tensions and relative musical intensity of the notes – but the one thing you can't do is play them all the same.

Stage make-up and public speaking

One of the most important things to work on with advanced students is often not so much what they do, as how much of it they do. Dorothy DeLay used say 'you've got to hit the audience over the head with your musical ideas, otherwise they just won't get them!'

Stage make-up and public speaking provide classic analogies for how we have to approach communicating through our playing. Of course if you stand three feet away from an actor their make-up may seem absurd, but to the audience sitting a distance away it seems just the right amount. Public speaking in a large room or hall demands that everything be made larger-than-life with exaggeratedly big and slow delivery.

While the ups and downs of phrases or passages played by an average good student could be likened to the rolling of hills (but all too often the flat-lands of Lincolnshire or Texas), the vivid shaping of a player like Casals is more like a mountain range. In many lessons one needs to use only one word: more! Either more more, or more less; more attack, more crescendo, more climax, more contrast, and so on.

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Energy

The question is how to get all the features of greater dynamics, articulation, variety of colour and attack, and all the rest, into the actual playing. The answer lies in always considering what produces more energy in the playing, and what produces less; and then to make sure you are doing enough of everything that you think you are doing.

What are the factors that produce more energy? Playing nearer to the bridge, deeper into the string, faster bow speed, more accent, shorter or longer strokes, crisper spiccato, sharper martelé, faster raising and dropping (more articulation) in the left fingers, faster vibrato, faster shifts, sharper sharps and flatter flats, faster tempo, and so on.

- Work through everything you play from the point of view of either getting more, or getting less, but never staying the same, i.e. never playing even two notes in a row with the same sound, the same volume, the same vibrato, unless you mean to because the sustaining is part of a larger design.