Cello

From Spoon-Feeding to Artistry: The First Steps of Interpretation, Part 1

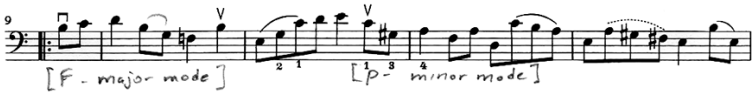
by David Carter

Spoon feeding is a technique of teaching students how to play every note of a phrase and so creating an interpretation that is inevitably based on the teacher's own biases. Certainly there are times when spoon-feeding is a good option for a teacher, but in general it is a limited technique that does not help the student in the long run. I believe even the most convincing interpretation may not be successfully taught to a student who cannot or will not accept it, for any reason. I believe that students will play most convincingly what they are convinced of themselves — that they need to own the interpretation. For this reason it is very important to help students learn the tools of interpretation so they can interpret the music themselves.

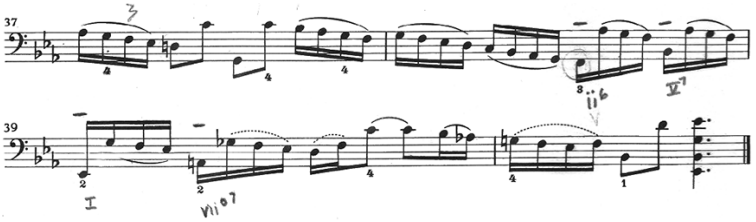
Making the transition from spoon-feeding to interpretation can often be very frustrating to a student who has been told how to play each note. Here I offer several steps towards the development of an interpretation. Some will no doubt seem very elementary to anyone who has experience teaching, but let me say that it may not be at all elementary to our students. I believe they need to be reminded of these basic concepts often, and that we as teachers should not shy away from stating the obvious. Here then are some of the first steps in the process of building an interpretation.

Character: Describing the character of the music can often be the first step in crafting an interpretation. Give students a lot of possibilities, such as "majestic" or "brooding" that go beyond the "happy" or "sad" that younger students might identify with. Character is certainly based on all the musical elements of a work, but students often can (with a little prompting) define the appropriate character without any knowledge of these elements. Prompting can help them enlarge their vocabulary of descriptive terms, for example substituting "whimsical" for just "happy."

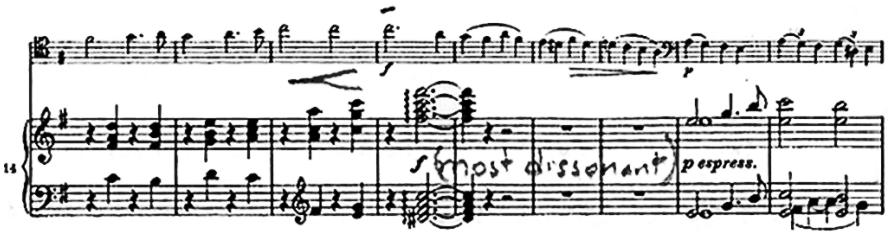
Tonality: Through early work on scales and arpeggios, students can understand and hear the difference between major and minor modes. Some knowledge of theory is helpful to understand the music, and if a teacher can connect that with the emotional impact, so much the better. The student can begin to recognize the changes between major and minor, such as the following example from Bach's *Suite #3, Bourree*:



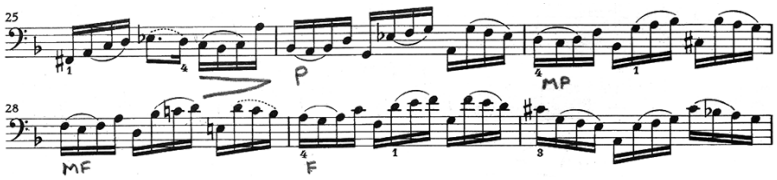
Harmonic rhythm, the rate at which harmonies change, is another consideration in this category. Often this rate will speed up near cadences, implying a slight broadening, as in the *Allemande* from Bach's *Suite #4*:



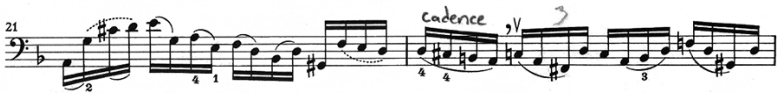
Complex, dissonant harmonies also inform one's interpretation. Dissonant notes need to be brought out through timing and sound, and the direction of a phrase is often to a dissonant note, as seen in Brahms' *Sonata Op. 38*, first movement:



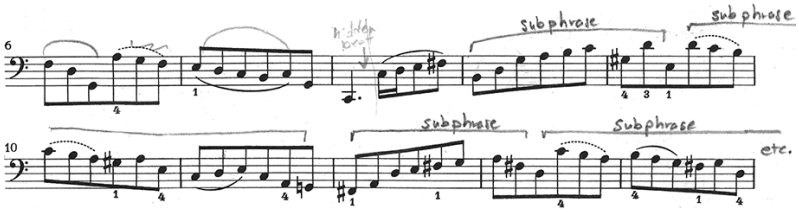
Melody: the melodic structure of a piece is vitally important to the interpretation. Recognizing sequences, cadences and other aspects of melody form the core of this knowledge. Sequences usually build when ascending and diminish when descending, though the opposite is certainly possible for contrast. Several examples are found in Bach's *Suite #2, Prelude*:



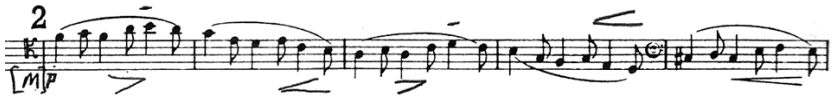
Recognizing cadences is crucial to the interpretation of melodies. Some are obvious; others are more obscure. An example of the latter is found in the *Allemande* of Bach's *Suite #2*, where the descending 4-note figure implies a cadence:



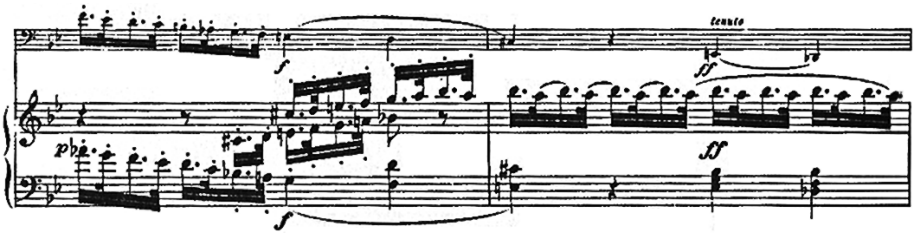
Once cadences are recognized, the player must decide how much closure they provide, and if sub-phrases need to be noted. These possibilities can create variety in a passage and possibly within a repeated section. An example is found in the *Corrente* from Bach's *Suite #3*:



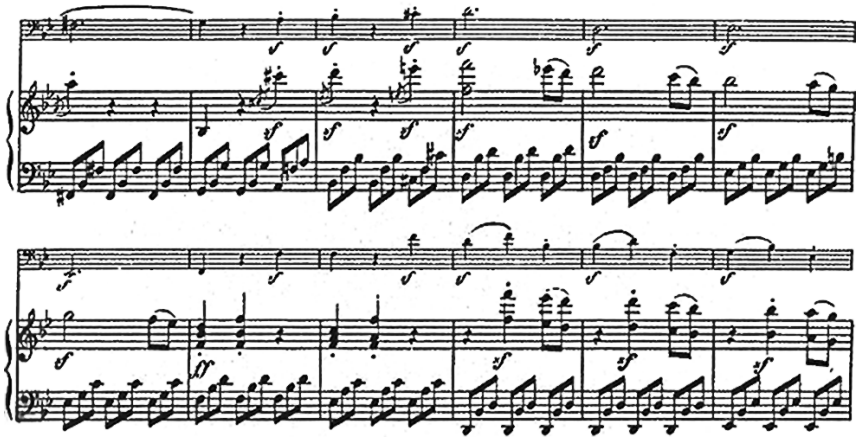
Melodic shape and contour is also important to crafting an interpretation. Emphasizing the ascending contours can create an optimistic feeling, while releasing them can create a wistful feeling, as seen in an example from Elgar's *Cello Concerto*:



Dynamics and Articulation: Students can use the nuance of dynamics and articulation to help their interpretation. For example, understanding the difference between forte and fortissimo is essential to understanding this passage from Beethoven's *Sonata for Cello and Piano Op. 5 #2*:



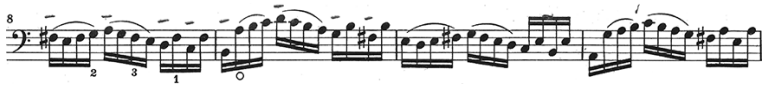
In the same sonata, powerful articulation creates a bold, noble character. The series of sforzandi implies a crescendo:



Different dynamics imply different characters, more so than actual levels of loudness. It is helpful to remind students that articulation in forte is much different than in piano, and of course that these dynamics in a solo context are much different than in an orchestral context.

Rhythm: Rhythmic context is yet another factor in interpretation. Recognizing the implications of meter and its progression of

strong and weak beats is a good first step. Syncopation and other rhythmic confusion make more sense when the backdrop of meter is recognized. Another consideration is the rhythmic unit used for counting; shorter units make the music feel more grounded while longer units allow it to flow. Often the music itself makes this clear, as in the *Prelude* to Bach's *Suite #3*:



Overall concerns: The final product of an interpretation must encompass an entire movement. It is often helpful to give structure to this expanse of music through a narrative. Two of my colleagues at St. Olaf, Janice Roberts in the Dance Department and Donna Freeman in the Theater Department have provided insight for this topic. When dance students choreograph a musical work, they are encouraged to create a narrative for the choreography, and to relate it to their personal experience. Similarly, when theater students study a role they are encouraged to relate the role to their experience. In Part 2 of this article, I will explore this connection more fully.

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