

Michal, J. P. (2014). The expressive phrasing concepts of Marcel Tabuteau applied to Concerto in E-flat major for horn and orchestra, K. 417 by W. A. Mozart [Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University].

## Chapter 4: Note Grouping

The basic notion of note grouping is to link notes that have an upbeat function with notes that fulfill a downbeat function, wherever they may fall within a measure or phrase. The natural tendency for the upbeat to pull forward to the down beat is what Tabuteau believed creates the sensation of forward motion in music. Modern music notation places a large emphasis on rhythmic and metric uniformity. While this is important when looking at a large, polyphonic score; it does little to aid the performer in understanding the true structure of a phrase. Since the downbeat is the most unifying moment in music, and therefore, the most valuable to a conductor attempting to keep everything in order, it has become the structural keystone of music notation. The beaming system groups the downbeat to the upbeat, which looks very organized, but visually breaks the important bond of the upbeat leading to the downbeat.



Figure 4.1  
Traditional notation

However, to beam the notes in a manner that visually links the upbeat subdivisions with the following downbeat creates notation that is difficult to read and would be disastrous in an ensemble setting.



Figure 4.2  
Note grouping with brackets

By avoiding the tendency to play notes as they are metrically grouped on the page, the performer is exposed to entirely new vocabulary of expression. The terms *upbeat* and *downbeat* do not necessarily refer to the metrical placement of a note, but rather the inflection and function of a note. While each musical passage must be treated uniquely, there are several principles that can be used to guide the note grouping process and provide an effective framework from which to work. Tabuteau strived to find a better way to communicate the expressive qualities of the music both through his playing and his teaching. He believed that the key to enhancing the expressive quality of the music was through note grouping.

In the most basic grouping, an upbeat leading to the downbeat; there is a natural pull; a tendency of forward motion that is universally felt by both the performer and the audience. The upbeat inflection creates an expectation that is satisfied only by the arrival of the downbeat inflection. This up/down motion feels inherently natural because it can,

in fact, be found throughout nature. David Blum discusses this topic in his book titled, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*: “Nature is permeated with an unceasing ebb and flow, manifest in the change of seasons, the alternation of day and night, the movement of tides. Perpetual oscillation is at the core of biological life.”<sup>36</sup> Breathing, the most basic and necessary motion in life, moves in and out. Waves rise up and crash down. Even the sun and moon rise and set. Expressive music follows the same natural progression from stress to release, from dominant to tonic, and from upbeat to downbeat. It is important to note, however, that each downward/outward motion only occurs following the upward/inward motion. The intensity or character of the downward motion is directly influenced by the intensity or character of the upward motion. Therefore, if more intensity and energy is given to the upbeat, the forward motion created by the natural pull to the downbeat will be greater and the musical performance will be more expressive.

This idea of motion being necessary in music does not originate with Tabuteau. The ancient Greeks intuitively regarded music as an art of movement. James Thurmond discusses this in his book entitled *Note Grouping*:

In ancient Greece, the arts were classified into two groups: (1) architecture, sculpture, and painting; and (2) music, poetry, and the dance. The Greeks thought that the “beautiful,” the goal of all art, was achieved by the first group in a *state of repose*; that the different elements composing this group – juxtaposed in *space* – were perceived at one

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<sup>36</sup> Blum, David. *Casals and the Art of Interpretation*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977. 19.

particular moment of their existence. In the second, however, the “beautiful” was realized in a *state of movement*; by a succession of its elements during time. It is this quality of movement, or motion, presented during the succession of its elements that is the basis of the enjoyment that we receive from listening to music.<sup>37</sup>

The Greeks studied this phenomenon with great interest. They equated the pull from the upbeat to the downbeat to dance steps. The time during which the foot was raised to take a step was called the *arsis* (Gk.: raising) and the time when the foot was on the ground was called the *thesis*. (Gk.: lowering)<sup>38</sup> The movement from one step to the next feels very natural and any interruption in the progression from one step to the next often results in the person tripping or stumbling. In music, the progression from one note to the next should feel as natural and easy as taking a step and care should be taken to avoid any missteps or interruptions in the movement from one note to the next.

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<sup>37</sup> Thurmond, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Walker, Paul. "Arsis, thesis." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 2 Jan. 2014.

## Fundamentals of Note Grouping

When we speak out loud, we are essentially grouping letters into words, words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs. Without such groupings, the letters on the page would appear jumbled and without meaning as in the example below:

THEWEATHERISNICETODAY

### Figure 4.3

Words without groupings

By grouping these letters into words, suddenly a clear and understandable sentence emerges:

THE WEATHER IS NICE TODAY.

### Figure 4.4

Words with groupings

In any spoken language, there is a grammatical system in place to arrange letters and punctuation into words, sentences and phrases that can be easily understood and comprehended. These punctuation marks and letter arrangements are intended to inform the reader where to breath, pause, inflect, and stress. In the modern musical language, however, there is no written grammatical system. The conundrum of deciding where to breathe or inflect is left up to the performer with little or no visual assistance from the printed music. Marcel Tabuteau had a profound interest in finding the hidden grammar of



However, Tabuteau observed that there is a common tendency for the intensity of the numbers to diminish as we count from 1 to 4, thus creating an unprepared, repetitive, and punchy accent on the down beat of each grouping.<sup>39</sup>

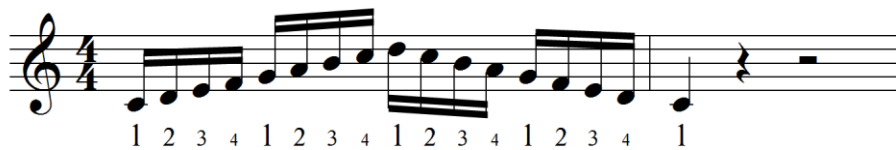


Figure 4.6  
Diminishing intensity

As the intensity diminishes, the sensation of forward motion (i.e.: the quality of musical expression) also diminishes. Tabuteau noticed that if these subdivisions were interpreted as leading to the next beat instead, the expressive quality of the phrase was greater. In contrast to how we typically think of using numbers, Tabuteau offered a different method of counting subdivisions.<sup>40</sup>

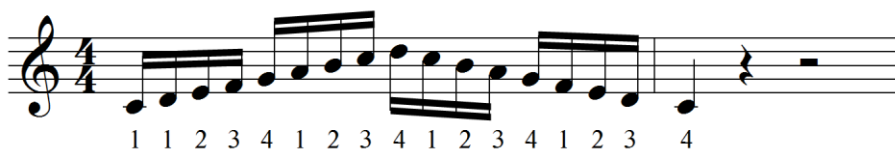


Figure 4.7  
Note grouping with rhythm numbers

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<sup>39</sup> McGill, 39.

<sup>40</sup> McGill, 39.

The figure always begins with one, which should not be interpreted as the beginning of a phrase but, rather, a starting point.<sup>41</sup> Each subdivision within the beat then serves to lead to the next down beat. This manner of interpreting the subdivisions sufficiently prepares the arrival of the down-beat and resolves the issue of repetitive punchiness and over-accenting. The basic principle that Tabuteau sought to explain to his students with the use of these numbers was to “use the inner notes of each beat to lead to the next beat or use the inner beats of a bar of music to lead to the next downbeat.”<sup>42</sup>

An excellent example of how this method of counting the subdivisions can directly apply to music written for horn comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> horn part of Symphony No. 31 by Franz Joseph Haydn. This excerpt is often played in both performances and auditions in the following manner:



Figure 4.8

F.J. Haydn, Symphony No. 31: Mvt. 4, mm. 65-68, Horn 2 - Traditional

By just looking at the groupings of notes on the page, it is easy to see where this style of performance with unprepared downbeat accents comes from. However, when a student performs this excerpt as it appears on the page, it becomes too punchy and does

<sup>41</sup>Herbine, 22.

<sup>42</sup>McGill, 40.

little to support the expression of the solo line in the Horn 1 part. If the method of subdividing this excerpt is slightly altered to allow the subdivision to lead through the measure, the emphasis on the downbeat is prepared, thus reducing the monotony of the downbeat accent, and there is a heightened sense of forward direction within the phrase.

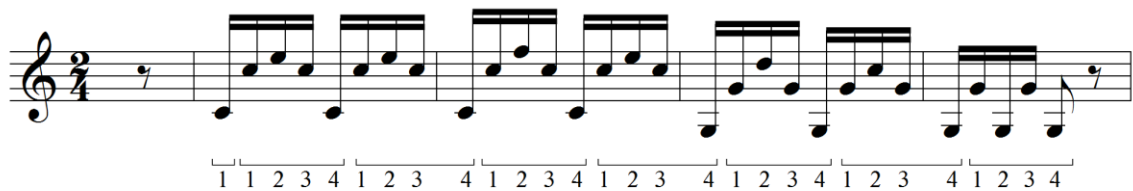


Figure 4.9

F.J. Haydn, Symphony No. 31: Mvt. 4, mm. 65-68, Horn 2 – With note grouping

This pattern of counting also can be applied to other meters as demonstrated in Figure 4.10 below.



Figure 4.10

Note grouping in various meters