

Reflections on Tone and Interpretation

Every kind of tone you make with the flute has emotional content that serves to convey something musical. This is still true if the tone is indifferent or even bad, let alone if it is searingly beautiful. That is not to say that every resulting musical statement is appropriate to the music being played, but that the kind of tone, with its vibrato, that you use – or don't use – to shape a phrase always says *something, like it or not*.

This is what we call in logic an “invariant”. Because of this, it is of paramount importance to choose the tone carefully and wisely, and to reflect on it at every moment when you play, no matter what other demands are being made on your attention. A full, rich sonority, with a well-modulated vibrato, is the goal of every flutist. However, if we play this way all of the time, we will be speaking, as it were, in a monotone.

The task of the flutist, then, is to always try to discover, through experience and imagination, what the composer is saying to you, and choose the tone(s) that communicate that through you to your listeners.

Never play with a “default” sound. The listeners will quickly become bored.

Take as an example the opening Adagio movement of the first Divertimento of Kuhlau. You have a variety of choices that vary from soft and calm to resonant and full voiced, with delicate staccatos and silky legato melismas all having their place in this wonderful romantic lyricism. The richer your tonal palate – and you're working every day to enrich it, right? – the more difficult this becomes to play. How to proceed?

In general, the rule is that you must decide where each phrase is going musically, and select a combination of tone quality and vibrato that will carry your concept and communicate it emotionally. For whatever you will play will communicate *something*; the question is, have you *chosen* it, or did it just *happen*?

For instance, take the heavily ornamented phrase from measures 16-18:

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Kuhlau's Divertimento #1, measures 16-18. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of four staves of music. The first staff is labeled 'KUH LAU - DIVERTIMENTO #1 (EXCERPT)'. The second staff has a 'TRILL' marking. The third staff has a 'DIMINUENDO' marking. The fourth staff has an 'ETC.' marking and contains triplets of eighth notes. The music is highly ornamented with many trills and slurs.

It's tempting, perhaps, to play through this thinking only about getting the correct notes, which is understandable, since they are by no means easy. However, there is a detail in

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measure 18 that is easy to overlook: the word “diminuendo”. You can play it as written, gradually (and routinely) continuing to get softer, and still the phrase will sound like an etude. But what is happening emotionally here? Play with a full and brilliant sound in measure 16 through the first half of 18, but switch to something more sweet and gentle during the diminuendo. The result reveals the composers intent: to delight the listener with a delicate coloratura flowering, a surprise change of direction, a refined and civilized eloquence.

This is of course exactly the kind of interpretation driven use of tone that was the cornerstone of Marcel Moyse’s thinking and teaching about the flute. The goal is not just to sound beautiful, because to be merely beautiful is to be, ultimately, static and uninteresting.

The listener’s ear craves movement, and the soul craves emotion. Your goal is to recognize the invariant nature of “tone = musical emotion” and always to apply it to communicate the composer’s intentions, moving from one emotion to another, taking the listener with you.

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