

2. Nearly Stationary:

the slow movement of the Cage 1950 String Quartet in Four Parts.

The third movement “Nearly Stationary” is frequently played as though it is nothing but a succession of disjunct events;

but there is nothing about this music - not the fact that it is written by Cage; not the fact that it dates from 1950; not the fact that it is sparse; not the fact that, at the beginning of the piece, the composer indicates a rhythmic structure of $2 \frac{1}{2} : 1 \frac{1}{2}; 2:3; 6:5; 1/2 : 1 \frac{1}{2}$ -- nothing that in any way absolves a performer from the responsibility to function as a member of musical society. None of the above facts exempts the performer from playing with the utmost beauty, and elegance, and precision. None of the above means that one may not connect one event to the next; and certainly none of the above means that the responsibility for creating phrases is removed. Here is the original:

d. 54

Ex. 1

Handwritten musical score for Ex. 1, measures 200-220. The score is written in 2/2 time and consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 200-205) shows a melodic line in the upper voice and a bass line in the lower voice. The second system (measures 210-215) continues the melodic line and includes a section labeled 'Pizz.' and 'ARCO'. The third system (measures 215-220) concludes the piece with a cadence and includes a section labeled 'Pizz.' and 'ARCO'. The score is marked with various dynamics and articulations, including accents and slurs.

What do I mean when I talk about phrasing this pattern? Consider the first 7 bars. This could be phrased in four groups, the first three being of two events each, the last being the cadence, i.e. ex. (2).

Ex. 2 (by twos)

$\text{♩} = 54$

The reasoning behind such a phrasal choice is that the first three phrases will always end on the A-flat-G [major seventh], resolving to measure 204.

An alternative version would be to have three units, the first two being of three events each, the last group being the cadence.

♩ = 54

Ex.3 (by threes)

200

205

210

215

220

Pizz

Arco

Pizz

Arco

The reasoning behind that is the permutation of the three rhythmic values (whole note, whole note, half note) followed by the cadence.

Another possibility is to phrase by dynamic changes:

Ex.4 (by diminuendo)

$\text{♩} = 54$

Handwritten musical score for Ex.4, consisting of three systems of staves. The first system has measures 200-205, the second 210-215, and the third 220-225. The score includes treble and bass clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pp'. Red vertical lines are drawn at the end of each system. The bottom system includes 'Pizz.' and 'ARCO' markings.

It is also conceivable that one could break these measures into two phrases, the first six phrases being four events, the last being three.

Ex.5 (by recurring $\begin{matrix} E \\ A \end{matrix}$)

$d = 54$

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265

270

275

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315

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365

370

375

380

385

390

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400

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420

425

430

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(b) phrases are of set durations, i.e. $3 \frac{1}{2} + 4 \frac{1}{2} + 3 + 4 \frac{1}{2} + 2 \frac{1}{2} + 2 \frac{1}{2}$ measures

There are other possible ways of phrasing this, depending on whether you wish to utilize certain aspects of the rhythmic structure, or whether you wish to apply the rhythmic structure on a much broader level than a note-by-note approach permits. But the number of possibilities is not in question here. The point is that there ARE many possibilities, and you are not allowed to NOT think about them just because this is “modern music.”

If you were playing a classical work, you would sit and argue about how to phrase; where to breathe; how to bow; what type of stroke; what to emphasize; where to place the tension; where the release; and all of these, and many others, are just as present in these first seven events, as they are in any other music that you care to undertake with seriousness and conviction.

P.S. Be aware that if you do not think, or it does not occur to you to think about such phrasing in a piece such as this, could it be you are not doing so even in classical music?

PRACTICAL SUGGESTION: Given a very slow tempo, one may have difficulty perceiving how to phrase, especially if using only aural cues. That is a fair complaint. The solution is to “SING” (hum, croon, yawl, howl) THRU THE SCORE AT A VERY QUICK PACE, MANY TIMES FASTER THAN THE ORIGINAL TEMPO, in other words, to get a “birds-eye’s view” or aerial photograph, so as to be able to conceptualize an impression of the entire scene. Once you have done this, you will find the data has either grouped itself and shown its

natural shape, or you can at least have a better feel for how to group the phrases.