

VARIOUS MEANINGS OF THE TERM ‘MUSICAL PHRASE’

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Background

The term ‘phrase’ is commonly used in, and is essential to, many musical spheres, be they those of analysis, theory, performance, or modelling. However, the term is ambiguous on two levels: theoretical and practical. On the theoretical level, musicians have different definitions of the term. On a practical level, even if a similar definition of the term is used, different musicians, or even the same musician, may delineate phrases differently. In this paper an attempt is made to tackle the first level as a preparation for exploring and modelling the processes involved in the second. It investigates the different definitions and features presented by musicians of various backgrounds, from the artistic to the scientific. These include, music theorists (e.g. Keller), music analysts (e.g. Schenker), performers (e.g. Casals, Callas, Gould), theorists using formal and linguistic approaches (e.g. Lerdahl and Jackendoff), computational musicologists (e.g. Bod, Temperley) and experimental psychologists (e.g. Deliege, Palmer).

Aims

To explore the various definitions, features and meanings of the phrase, to identify the commonalities, and differences between them and understand their reasons.

Main Contribution

The different meanings of the term phrase cause an ambiguity in the understanding of its theoretical and practical uses. For example, music theorists and analysts in general define the term using relatively deep musical structures, such as underlying harmony (e.g. Rothstein, Schenker). Sometimes this results in very long phrases. Discussions of approach to performance concentrate on surface features and the phrases they describe are generally shorter (e.g. Bazzana). In contrast, some computational musicologists use theories that concentrate on human information-processing such as categorical perception and gestalt laws (e.g. Bod). The full paper will present a more comprehensive review.

The understanding of the term phrase will contribute to a more systematic approach to this musical feature and the investigation of the processes involved in phrase identification and performance.

Implications

The results of this study would be used as a first step in the formalisation of the definition of the term ‘phrase’. This in turn will affect the procedures used in the analysis and description of the processes involved in our perception of phrases in music. The conclusions may be relevant to linguistic and visual perception.