Phrase Length Segmentation

Has this inner dialogue ever happened to you on stage?

> *"Ok. Here comes the hard part of the phrase. Relax and let it happen".*
> > [You inhale and clench. Ooops].
>
> *"I practiced it a lot and it's still a bit dodgy, but I can get it 9 out of 10 tries.*
> > [But it's that 1 out of 10 that gets to you; do you hear that little drip of panic?].
>
> *"Maybe I could slow down just a little, I'm always out of control here".*
> > [You only practiced to the recommended tempo].
>
> *"My girlfriend is smiling. The poor girl has heard this spot too many times".*
> > [You give her a distracted, crooked smile back to acknowledge her patience with you].
>
> *"Damn, is that my old guitar teacher over there? He knows about this spot, too".*
> > [The jitters just kicked in. More panic dripping from the faucet]
>
> *"Stop Here!... wait... What*??!"
> > [Panic pours in. You hesitate because this is how you practiced. You just got a subconscious cue to stop and repeat this little bit of the hard part.]
>
> *"Go back somewhere!...where?...No..wait… I should continue…Aaaw CRAP!".*
> > [You stumble badly].
>
> *"What the hell just happened? That sounded like ass."*
> > [You tried relaxing (your teacher's words). Impossible].
>
> "I can't seem to pick-up where I left off".
> > [You never practiced re-entry points].
>
> *"Oh well, I'll just restart at the next section. My girlfriend is giving me her pouty-pity smile. And I want to smack that smirk off my old teacher's face!"*

Phrase level segmentation is the complete **back-chaining** of a single musical phrase. It is the smallest bit of repertoire one should work up to tempo (or beyond) with a metronome. This is one of the most beneficial types of practice for intermediate and advanced students. It should be done very slowly at first, carefully controlling the levels of effort/tension. Stay attentive and don't let any distractions interfere, especially inner dialogue. The key is to begin the process at the cadence, where the music is rehearsed to come to an end. The goals in order are to:

1. Abstract segments for additional technical work.
2. Create re-entry points in case of errors.
3. Directly delineate tempo practice.
4. Eliminate invalid cues to stop in the middle of the phrase.

Let's consider each of these goals.

Abstract segments for further technical work. Examine the phrase and determine if there are mechanical or technical deficiencies that need to be addressed. **Diagnose and repair** any faulty mechanics first. Once done, abstract the difficult material and create exercises that will rebuild the constellation of mechanics necessary to achieve the technique. The reductive paradigms of **Eduardo Fernandez** are especially useful for this process. The teacher truly earns their fee at this juncture by delivering accurate diagnostics, devising creative exercises, and solving the issue within the constraints of the lesson time.

<u>Create re-entry points in case of errors</u>. This is a product of the **Back-chaining** process. By starting at several points within the phrase and continuing to the cadence, the student is creating recovery cues at several nearby locations of any error point.

<u>Directly delineate tempo practice.</u> Considerable **performance practice** time is given to bringing the entire piece "up to tempo". Unfortunately, much time is wasted practicing parts that are already complete. By isolating each phrase and bring it up to tempo, the student can maximize their performance practice time efficiency. This is important for many adults for whom time has great value. I encourage my students to be able to play each phrase at 12 clicks over tempo. This creates a sense of what I call "**mechanical headroom**". Once the student achieves 12 clicks or more above tempo, immediately have them play the phrase again at the desired tempo, and watch their "inner master's smile of success" on their face as they realize that they have controlled time enough to be able to think between the notes. While this may seem to encourage students to 'rush", my experience shows that this is very rarely the case. The student will want to find that "feeling" of control every time.

<u>Eliminate invalid cues to stop in the middle of the phrase.</u> Assuming that the student has the entire phrase back-chained and all the technical issues are resolved, the student should not practice segments that are smaller than the complete phrase. By always playing through to the cadence, the student will not be stopping/crashing in the middle of a phrase and creating a string of conflicting, invalid, and un-erasable sub-conscious cues to "stop here". Technically speaking, these invalid cues to stop in the middle of the phrase are a type of invalid **covert motor routine**, and can be he highly destructive in some students, especially those who have latent issues from childhood (mistakes are punishable, remember?) or from teachers that didn't use positive reinforcement, only negative reinforcement, which creates feelings of inadequacy when a simple mistake happens. This may cause some unwanted hesitations in performance when performance anxiety scrapes away a layer of poise. Performance practice can 'over-write' some of this but it's like a thin coat of paint over rotten drywall. And when that performance anxiety "paint scraper" comes out…

 Finally, phrase level segmentation creates a string of kinesthetic, visual inner imaging, and aural imaging cues that groups the constellations of mechanics into one single, managing motor routine. These cues are redundant, creating a performance-stable phrase/segment. If performance anxiety should "scrape" away one of your "cues", you have others that can carry the weight, like airplanes with redundant, multiple engines. (All of this is documented in the behaviorist and physiologist literature, a convergence of two disparate fields, which makes a strong case for its consideration, in my opinion). It also practices using larger muscle groups as these actions are assembled into single directives, much like Object Oriented Programming (OOPs) does for computer code (more muscle groups means fewer muscle fiber bundles in each muscle needs to fire, creating grace and minimizing "angular" motion). By now, you have discovered that some chunks of music can almost play themselves and you can transcend the mechanical and technical aspects of performance and graduate into observer/conductor status.

Phrase level segmentation is not designed to practice fundamentals; it doesn't practice posture, mechanics or pre-presentation ballistic motion in a concise manner, and is inappropriate for beginners and some early-intermediate students, around level 2-3 and under.

Go back and reread the performance inner dialogue at the beginning of this entry. Can you identify all of the mistakes that this player has made in his practice routine?