

## Mysteries of the Sustain Pedal

By Frances Wilson

*'The correct employment of the pedal remains a study for life.'*

Frédéric Chopin

### Pedalling is an aspect of piano technique which is frequently misunderstood and misused.

Ask a junior student what the right hand pedal is for and they will invariably reply 'to make the piano louder'. The right hand 'sustain' pedal is often wrongly called 'the loud pedal', or is regarded as an 'on-off switch'. Pedalling is hard to do well, something I realised when, in a lesson, my teacher asked me to teach *her* how to pedal: she wanted to check that I understood exactly what I was doing. Because most of us pedal instinctively, it was an interesting exercise to consider the how and why of using the sustain pedal, and to be able to explain this clearly to a student.

**In order to pedal well** it is important to understand what is happening, mechanically, inside the piano. When the pedal is depressed, all the dampers are lifted off the strings so that they can continue to vibrate and sound after a note on the keyboard has been released. The effect of the vibrations creates a fuller, warmer and more intense sound. This fuller sound is the result of 'sympathetic vibrations', and will mostly be pitches related to the principal note. Since the resonance of the entire instrument is brought into play when the dampers are lifted off the strings, the chief effect of the sustain pedal is a change in the sound quality of the piano. And this, I think, is a key point to remember – that the sustain pedal is about *quality* of sound, rather than *volume* of sound.

### The sustain pedal has **two** principal purposes:

- ▶ Allowing the sound to continue even after we release the keys
- ▶ Changing the timbre of the sound, making it deeper, warmer, more intense, more 'alive'

### 'Anticipated' pedalling

The point when the pedal is depressed can have a particular effect on the sound of the piano. For example, when the pedal is depressed *before* the note is struck (known as 'anticipated' pedalling), all strings are available to resonate, and the sound will have a richness *from the beginning*. While it is held down, the pedal accumulates sound with each additional note struck. This property can be used to create or enhance a *crescendo*, particularly in a context of more rapid notes where little pedal is being used. Conversely, by releasing the pedal slowly, there is a gradual decrease in the sound, which creates a *diminuendo*.

### Degrees of pedalling

There are also *degrees* of pedal, such as half, quarter or even eighth pedal as the proximity of the dampers to the strings can create remarkably different effects. Pedal deeper for a stronger, richer sound (Liszt, Rachmaninov), and shallower for a lighter, clearer, more slender sound (Bach, Mozart).

### Legato pedal

Legato pedalling is usually the first type of pedaling a student will come across. In my opinion, it's never too early to start learning about pedalling, provided you can reach the pedals! In its simplest form, legato pedalling is the act of joining two otherwise unconnected notes or chords together, and logically this can only happen when the sound of the first note/chord stops and the sound of the second note/chord begins at the same time. To achieve this, the pedal must come up exactly at the point at which the next chord sounds. Where it then goes down is a matter of judgement to do with the type of musical context or the effect desired, speed of the passage etc.

Here is a simple but effective exercise, for pianists of all abilities, to practise good legato pedalling:

*Practise this exercise by depressing the pedal on the **2nd beat** of each bar and bringing it up exactly on the downbeat of the next new chord. Start slowly and count 1, 2, 3, 4. In legato pedalling the foot releases the pedal exactly when the hand goes down. The pedal then goes down again without being snatched and rushed at some point after the first beat.*



(source: E-MusicMaestro)

And how not to do it:



This is incorrect. Note how the pedal here is being wrongly put down on the first beat of the bar, thus creating a snatched effect where there is a gap between chords. This kind of effect is more like a direct pedal, but in this instance poorly used and probably misunderstood.

(source: E-MusicMaestro)

[Download the complete legato pedalling exercise](#)

#### **Direct, 'dirty' and finger pedalling**

Direct pedalling is where the pedal goes down exactly as the hands do. The style of the music will influence how the pedal is used: for example, in classical repertoire a direct pedal, corresponding with the hands, can often be applied to two-note slurs, *sforzandi*, and cadential chords without distorting articulation and phrasing.

'Dirty' pedalling requires acute listening skills and is appropriate when a more misty sound and colour are desired, or when the texture needs to be thinned out gradually. Lift the pedal *very slowly*. I have found this technique particularly useful in Liszt when the composer designates a *smorzando* with a *diminuendo*.

'Finger' pedalling does not in fact use the pedal at all. Instead, the fingers are deliberately held down to create the effect of the sustain pedal, while the pedal is used to enhance the melody rather than the harmony of the music. This works particularly well with Alberti bass figures (for example, in Mozart), as it prevents the harmony from sounding too dry.

#### **And finally...**

Of course, it makes sense to practise without any pedal whatsoever, because this allows you to check finger placement and speed, and to hear exactly what is going on.

Ends.

#### *About the author:*

Frances holds a Licentiate Diploma (Distinction) in Piano Performance from Trinity College of Music, London, and runs a popular private piano teaching practice from her home in South West London. She blogs on music and pianism, art and culture as [The Cross-Eyed Pianist](#), and is a reviewer for international concert and opera listings site [Bachtrack.com](#).

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