

MAKE THE PIANO SING

BEETHOVEN, CHOPIN, & LISZT TEACH LEGATO

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In Italian, *legato* literally means “tied” or “bound.” In music, *legato* is a term that instructs us to play in a smooth, connected style with no audible breaks between notes.

In this way, *legato* is a kind of articulation, often contrasted with staccato (“detached”) articulation. Standard notation for *legato* playing is either the word *legato* or a slur over the notes that the composer wishes to be played *legato*.

As pianists, we have to work especially hard to play in a *legato* style. String, wind, and brass players can vary the dynamic level of a single pitch by modifying bow pressure and airflow. Consequently, they can use dynamic variation to give a sense of direction to every note they play, which helps them create connected musical phrases.

When we depress a key at the piano, however, the resulting sound immediately fades. Even when we depress the sustain pedal, the sound will eventually die. As a result, we have to find creative ways of achieving a *legato* sound.

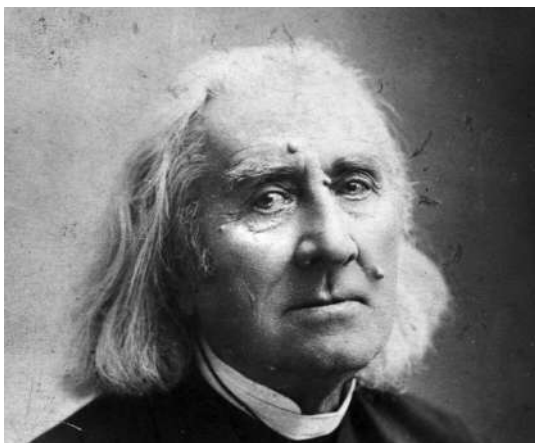
Luckily for us, dynamic variation is only one way – this PDF explores how Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt approached *legato* playing as performers and pedagogues.

TOUCH & FINGER PLACEMENT



To achieve a smooth, legato sound, let's first consider our touch – how our fingers connect with the keys.

While we use our fingertips (near the nails) to produce an effective *staccato* sound, we can use our finger pads to achieve a successful *legato* sound.



Auguste Boissier, the mother of one of Liszt's students, recalled that the composer-pianist encouraged her daughter to practice *legato* playing with the "palm" of the finger, because its softness and resilience helped to give her tone a "lovely mellowness."

TOUCH & FINGER PLACEMENT

Beethoven instructed his students to achieve a *legato* sound by playing close to the keys, namely, by placing the hands over the keyboard "...in such a position that the fingers need not be raised more than is necessary. This is the only method by which the player can learn...to make the instrument sing."



**"THIS IS THE ONLY METHOD BY WHICH THE PLAYER CAN
LEARN TO MAKE THE INSTRUMENT SING." - BEETHOVEN**

MAKE THE PIANO SING!

Notice that Beethoven encouraged his students to make the piano "sing."

Legato playing is often compared to cantabile (singable) playing, and we can enhance our legato by imagining ourselves as singers.



Beethoven viewed the notes within a musical phrase as a series of stressed and unstressed syllables, occasionally even adding words to a particular melody and singing it.



Imagining ourselves as singers helps us to achieve connected, natural phrasing. To Chopin, *unnatural* phrasing sounded "...as if someone were reciting, in a language not understood by the speaker, a speech carefully learned by rote in the course of which the speaker not only neglected the natural quantity of the syllables, but even stopped in the middle of words."

Directionless and riddled with musical hiccups, unnatural phrasing undermines *legato* playing and – needless to say! – should be avoided.

MATCH THE PIANO'S DECAY



To play in a legato style, we need to listen carefully to each note's decay.

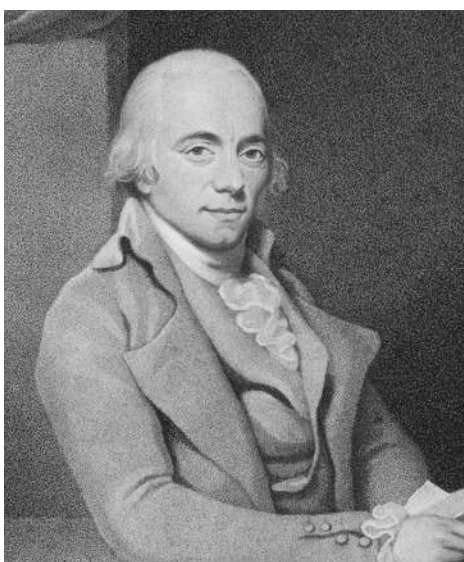
In other words, the dynamic level at which a note ends should determine the dynamic level of the note we play next. If we don't match these dynamic levels, we unintentionally accent each note we play, and our phrases sound disconnected as a result.

Ultimately, the longer a note lasts, the more it decays. When we play slow music, we often find ourselves holding notes for quite some time. Consequently, we must pay especially close attention to the decay of our notes when performing in more leisurely tempos.

FINGER PEDALING

One technique that we may use to play in a legato style is finger pedaling.

While the sustain pedal certainly allows us to connect notes that would otherwise be impossible or very difficult to play *legato*, our fingers can create a similar sustained effect on their own.



Clementi advises pianists to “...keep down the first key till the next has been struck...” This is perhaps the most fundamental step towards achieving a *legato* style.

To finger pedal, we take this idea further, only releasing the first key after we hear a brief *overlap* with the next. The resulting subtle blur in sound enhances the connectedness of our musical phrases.

Beethoven knew this: in his annotated edition of Cramer’s études, he includes directions for finger pedaling sixteenth-note sequences: “To obtain the strictest *legato*, the finger must not be lifted off the first note of each group until the fourth note is to be struck.”



CONCLUSION

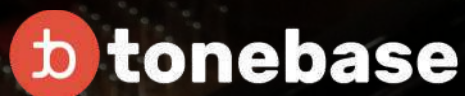
Clementi notes that many passages in Beethoven's work require a *legato* touch even when the composer did not indicate this articulation with the conventional slur. This, however, he believes "a cultivated taste will instinctively perceive."



As we develop our own musical tastes and grow as pianists, we learn that *legato* playing is often the default. Clementi echoes this sentiment: "When the composer leaves the *staccato* and *legato* to the performer's taste the best rule is to adhere chiefly to the *legato*, reserving the *staccato* to give spirit occasionally to certain passages, and to set off the higher beauty of the *legato*."

While we have to master all kinds of articulations as pianists, we are already well on our way to success if we begin by practicing our *legato*!

**"...GIVE SPIRIT TO CERTAIN PASSAGES AND SET OFF
THE HIGHER BEATUY OF THE LEGATO." - CLEMENTI**



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