PEDAL: THE SOUL OF THE PIANO
TIPS FROM CHOPIN, CZERNY & MORE

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Chopin called the proper use of the piano’s pedals “a study for life.” The complexity of pedaling lies largely in the fact that we must tailor our use of the pedals to the style of the music that we are learning.

A sensitive and well-informed pianist will not pedal a Mozart sonata and Chopin nocturne in the same way. Learn what separates them and why they should be approached differently below!

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THE PEDALS & THEIR FUNCTION

Before discussing stylistic considerations in pedaling, let us review the functions of the three pedals and how composers indicate their use in scores.

SUSTAIN

The sustain (or damper) pedal is the rightmost pedal and the most frequently used. When depressed, the sustain pedal raises the dampers off the strings so that they continue to vibrate after the keys are released. Consequently, the sustain pedal allows for rich, expansive musical textures and harmonies and a connected legato style of playing that would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

Composers indicate use of the sustain pedal with an italicized “Ped.” and signal its release with a large asterisk. Alternatively, use of the sustain pedal is indicated with a horizontal line with indents where pedal changes are required.
THE PEDALS & THEIR FUNCTION

SOSTENUTO
Unlike the sustain pedal, which blurs all the notes of the keyboard, the *sostenuto (or middle) pedal* allows us to sustain selected notes, while leaving other notes unaffected.

To use the sostenuto pedal, we depress the key of the note(s) that we want sustained, and then we depress the sostenuto pedal, “catching the notes” before finally releasing the keys. With the pedal still held down, we are then free to play elsewhere on the keyboard. Composers indicate use of the sostenuto pedal with “sost.” or “sostenuto.”

UNA CORDA
The *una corda (or soft) pedal* is the leftmost pedal. On a grand piano, this pedal shifts the piano’s action slightly to the right, so that the hammers strike only two strings per note instead of three.

On an upright piano, this pedal shifts the hammers’ resting position closer to the strings. The pedal’s effect, however, remains the same on both kinds of pianos: it reduces the intensity (or volume) of the notes played and alters their timbre, or the quality of their sound.

Composers indicate use of the una corda pedal with “una corda” and signal its release with “tutte corde” or “tre corde.”
"[BEETHOVEN'S HAND] COULD SCARCELY SPAN A TENTH. HE MADE FREQUENT USE OF THE PEDALS.” - CARL CZERNY

Composers do not always include pedal markings in their scores, even when they would have expected us to use the pedals when performing their work.

The Austrian pianist, composer, and pedagogue Carl Czerny, for instance, recalled that Beethoven’s hand “could scarcely span a tenth. He made frequent use of the pedals, much more frequent than is indicated in his works.”

This comment seems to suggest that Beethoven used the sustain pedal at least in part to accommodate the size of his hands. If this was indeed the case, he may have occasionally omitted pedal markings knowing that other pianists with hands larger than his own would not need the pedal.
PEDAL MARKINGS IN SCORES

Scholar Reginald Gerig notes that Debussy would omit pedal markings because in his time pedals were unreliable, varying considerably in their effect from one piano to the next.

Given the irregularity of pedal markings in scores, Czerny affirms that we must employ the pedal when the composer does indicate its use.

We must also know, though, how and when to use the pedal when it isn’t marked in the score.

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**STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS**

Czerny advises pianists that “the works of each Composer must be executed in the style in which he wrote; and that the performer will assuredly fail, if he attempts to play all the works of the Masters...in the self-same style.”

We must consider the piano’s pedals with a similarly judicious and thoughtful attitude, tailoring our approach to their use to the various styles and periods of classical music.

**BAROQUE PERIOD**

Since pedals were invented after the Baroque period, keyboard music from approximately 1600-1750 should be played with as little pedaling as possible. Exceptions to this convention include sensitive use of the sustain pedal in highly contrapuntal fugues to enhance *legato* playing. The sustain pedal may also be used in *basso continuo* playing to evoke the resonance of the lute.
**STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS**

**CLASSICAL PERIOD**
Czerny encourages pianists to use the damper (sustain) pedal very lightly in the works of composers before Beethoven. Excessive, liberal pedaling in the performance of classical repertoire prevents us from evoking the “brilliant style” that was popular in Mozart’s time: this style placed a high value on “a very marked Staccato touch…and striking elegance and propriety in the embellishments…”

**ROMANTIC PERIOD**
Repertoire of the 19th century calls for a more regular use of the pedals. Many of Chopin’s piano works require us to extend our hands to wide intervals of at least a tenth or more. The sustain pedal can help us execute these large leaps. However, Chopin’s hand reportedly looked like “the mouth of a serpent about to swallow whole rabbit,” and even he still used the pedals.
STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

ROMANTIC PERIOD CONT.

This reminds us that pedals serve a much grander musical purpose than merely masking the limitations of smaller hands:

French pianist Antoine François Marmontel, a contemporary of Chopin, recalled that the composer’s use of the pedal allowed him to achieve “ravishing harmonies [and] melodic murmurs that astonished and charmed” his listeners.

Despite his own use of the pedals in his music, Chopin encouraged his students to practice without them and advised them to pedal sparingly in performance “as a kind of breathing.”

Though we may use the pedals liberally in Romantic repertoire, we should still always do so thoughtfully.

In the practice room, we should only incorporate the pedals after we feel secure playing without them – the sustain pedal, especially, does an excellent job at masking our mistakes!
20TH CENTURY & BEYOND

Twentieth-century and modern repertoire also calls for regular (though always thoughtful!) use of the pedals.

As composers grew increasingly interested in timbre (the quality, or character, of a sound rather than its pitch or volume), they turned to the pedals as a source of inspiration.

Debussy “reveled in the delicate mingling of sounds and overtones” and was known both for his combined use of the pedals and his aversion to excessive use of the sustain pedal: “[he] could not tolerate his impressionism carried to the point of unpleasant blur.”
The piano writing of George Crumb features many inventive approaches to pedaling. In his chamber work *Vox Balaenae*, for instance, the pianist must carefully depress a cluster of keys in the lower register without letting them sound. While holding these keys down, the pianist must then depress the sostenuto pedal. While holding this pedal down, the pianist then releases their hand.

This pedaling technique allows the harmonics of the previously held low notes to resonate over the music that follows, creating a beautiful, ghostly effect evocative of whale song.
THE SOUL OF THE PIANO

The renowned Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein called the pedals “the soul of the piano.”

We should feel inspired by their musical potential and challenge ourselves to harness their express power through deliberate training.

As you embark on your own pedaling adventures, we invite you to explore the pedagogical literature on pedal technique, such as Katherine Faricy’s Artistic Pedal Technique: Lessons for Intermediate and Advanced Pianists.

For the beginners among us, we recommend her text Pedaling ~ Colors in Sound: Lessons and Repertoire for Elementary Piano Students.

“I AM CONVINCED THE PEDAL IS THE SOUL OF THE PIANO” - ANTON RUBINSTEIN
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