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Keyboard Articulation

Concerning Articulation on Keyboard Instruments: Aspects from the Renaissance to the Present

Sandra P. Rosenblum

Articulation is a principal element in the shaping of phrases and texture and, along with harmonic and rhythmic activity, in the clarification of phrase lengths and larger formal sections. Within a phrase, legato groups and subtle degrees of detached, staccato, and accented notes can define subphrases and motives. Coupled with the action of the instrument, this grouping and separating of notes by the player affects the amount of emphasis each note and motive receives, subtleties for which the performer bears the ultimate responsibility.

The organ, harpsichord, clavichord, and piano have quite different articulative characteristics as a result of their kinds of action. Distinctive are the attack and release, as well as the degree of continuation or decay of tones. On a mechanical (tracker) organ the attack or articulation at the start of a note, as the valve of each pipe breaks open, is analogous to (although not as intense as) the crisp effect of a quill plucking a string on any member of the harpsichord family; but organ tone has continuity while that of the harpsichord and piano decays precipitously. The clavichord affords a more controlled attack than the organ or harpsichord, a continuing control and possibility of

altering the sound (by changing the pressure of the tangent against the string) while the note is held, flexible dynamics, and an ease of cantabile playing. These aspects led many 18th-century German musicians to recommend it above the harpsichord to arrive at an awareness of "good performance."¹ The piano possesses the virtues of the clavichord except for continued control of the sound after a note is played, and, of course, a much fuller sound.

Sixteenth Century

Prior to 1600 non-legato playing seems to have been the norm for secular music, much of which was dance-based, although notes grouped in ligatures were likely played legato. Girolamo Diruta contrasted the legato and non-legato assumed to be indigenous to the organ and harpsichord respectively.² On both of these dynamically inflexible instruments a note or beat could be emphasized by means of dissonance, a thicker texture, an ornament, or a preceding silence, or de-emphasized by "overholding" the previous note to cover a fresh attack. Ornaments as agents of articulation on both instruments predated the introduction of specific articulative signs.

Seventeenth Century

Signs specific to articulation began to appear in keyboard music in the 17th century—often in conjunction with ornamental note groups—but were not an expected and well-defined part of the notation until the late 18th century.³ The occasional slurs and staccatos

¹ See, for example, Johann Walther, *Musikalisches Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1732), 169, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Pts. 1, 2, Berlin, 1753, 1762), Pt. 1, 11.

² Girolamo Diruta, *Il transilvano dialogo sopra il vero modo di sonar organi, et istromenti da penna* (Pts. 1, 2, Venice, 1593, 1609), Pt. 1, 4v-5r, 5v-6r..

³ See Hermann Keller, *Phrasing and Articulation* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1965), 42-47. Slurred bowing and tonguing developed earlier than keyboard slurring. Diego Ortiz described slurred bowing in 1553 but did not yet use the sign: "When two or three *semiminims* occur in one example, only the first is marked and the others are passed over without another stroke of the bow." (*Trattado de glosas . . . en la musica de violones* [Rome, 1553], f. 3r). By 1620, when

that have come down to us from the early periods may be taken as a guide for the application of similar articulative nuances in analogous passages. Samuel Scheidt adopted the slur in organ works “just as violists [viol or violin players] are accustomed to do in sliding with the bow” to indicate legato playing for groups of two or four 16th notes,⁴ presumably with an articulation at the beginning and end comparable to that at the change of bow direction on contemporary stringed instruments (see Example 1).

Example 1. Scheidt, *Tabulatura nova*, pt. 1, “Wir gläuben all’an einen Gott,” 3. Versus, m. 53⁵



In 1672 Lorenzo Penna advised legato playing for continuo on all keyboard instruments. “It is always very good to play legato, so as not to distract from the vocal part.”⁶

Francesco Rognionio wrote about slurred bowing in the second book of *Selva de varii passaggi*, “it was already established as a common procedure in composed works” (Imogene Horsley, “The Solo Ricercar in Diminution Manuals: New Light on Early Wind and String Techniques,” *Acta musicologica* 33/1 [1961], 34).

⁴ Samuel Scheidt, *Tabulatura nova* (Hamburg, 1624); *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst*, ser. I, vol. 1; new ed., ed. Hans Joachim Moser (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1958), Pt. I, [84]. In 1619 Praetorius had written: “All complex ligatures should be removed . . . and in their place this small slur should be used.” (Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum*, 3 vols., 1614-1619; [facs., Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978], Vol. III, Pt. II, p. 29.).

⁵ *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst* (see fn. 4), 8.

⁶ Lorenzo Penna, *Li primi albori musicali*, 1672; 5th ed. (Bologna, 1696), 197.

Early and Mid-Eighteenth Century

Frequent analogies between rhetoric and music testify to the perception of music as declamation, a "language of the feelings."⁷ Short slurs (from half a beat to one measure in length) still often operated at the level of decorative figures and only occasionally went over the bar line. With few exceptions even the shortest slurred groups were meant to be articulated—if only with the subtlety of a glottal stop or a hard consonant—which provided emphasis for the first note, which was usually coordinated with the metrical accentuation. The last note, on the other hand, could lose up to half its value. The usual staccato signs were the stroke, or wedge (the latter found mostly in engraved music). Although French composers enlisted the dot to negate inequality, those outside France sometimes utilized it as another indication for staccato. Portato, a semi-detached grouping, whose interpretation varied according to the type of keyboard instrument involved, was universally indicated with dots under a slur.

"Ordinary" movement still rested on a subtle non-legato for much of the common secular repertoire.⁸ But despite the importance of non-legato touch, some composers stressed legato playing relatively early.⁹ Tempo also affected articulation, as in the contrast between the "crisp" allegro and the "cantabile" adagio styles. Motives were given contrasting articulations depending on their melodic (conjunct vs. disjunct) and rhythmic design, allowing individual voice parts to

⁷ E.g. Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739), 39, 133-34 Par. 8; Pt. II, 283-84, 309; Chaps. 6, 9; Johann Philipp Kirnberger, "Instrumentalmusik," in Johann Georg Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1771, 1774), Vol. I, 559; Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig, 1789), e.g. 332-33, 334 Par. 9, 335 Par. 12, 340 Par. 19. See also George J. Buelow, "Rhetoric and Music," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

⁸ As is pointed out by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Anleitung zum Clavierspielen* (Berlin, 1755), 29, and Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig and Halle, 1789), 356.

⁹ For example, François Couperin, *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* (Paris, 1716, rev. 1717), 61; Jacques Duphly, as reported by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1768), 170-71; and Niccolo Pasquali, *The Art of Fingering the Harpsichord* (Edinburgh, 1758), Preface, 26, 27. Note also the frequency of Couperin's slurs in his *Pièces de clavecin*.

be heard distinctly when played simultaneously on a single manual of an organ or harpsichord.¹⁰ The distinction between grammatical (metrical) and rhetorical (expressive) accentuation also had an effect on articulation.¹¹

Late Eighteenth Century

The early piano had an incisive attack, quick tonal decay, and for the German and Viennese instruments, immediate damping—characteristics not unlike those of the harpsichord family. Yet, with its graduated dynamics, the piano was admirably suited to the need for increased nuance in the melodies and textures of the Classical style. The projection of successive short slurs in quick tempos was easily accomplished. Articulation underwent a conspicuous refinement until the degree of detail expressed in some pieces was as extensive as could be achieved in respect to the notation and stylistic qualities of the time (see for example Mozart's *Fantasie* K. 475 or *Rondo* K. 511).

The increasing breadth of cantabile lines led gradually to greater use of legato and to lengthier slurs. Beethoven's remark that Mozart had a "choppy (*zerhacktes*) touch, with no legato,"¹² reflects this change in performance style. Clementi and Beethoven occasionally used slurs to indicate a phrase length or even longer span, as at the end of Clementi's *Piano Sonata*, op. 13/6/iii (1785).

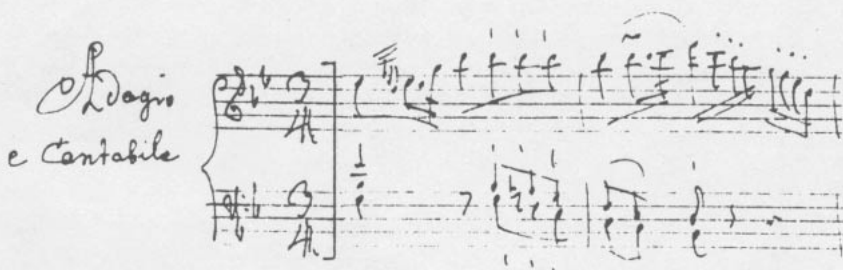
¹⁰ Concerning J.S. Bach see John Butt, *Bach Interpretation: Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J.S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 45-46, 52, 113-14; Chap. 11, 164-79, 186-99, 208-209; and Georg von Dadelzen, "Die Crux der Nebensache: editorische und praktische Bemerkungen zu Bachs Artikulation," *Bach Jahrbuch* 64 (1978), 97-98, 108. Earlier sources include C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch*, Pt. 1, 118 Par. 5, 125-26 Pars. 17, 18; and Türk, *Klavierschule*, 218, 355, 358-61.

¹¹ E.g. Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer Gründlichen Violinschule*, 1756; facs., ed. Greta Moens-Haenen (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995), 257 Par. 9, 262; C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch*, Pt. I, 130-31; Türk, *Klavierschule*, 337, 355. See also Keller, *Phrasing*, e.g. 36-39, and Dadelzen, "Bachs Artikulation," 103, 105-8.

¹² H.C. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell, eds., *The Mozart Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 33, fn. 3.

Toward the end of the 18th century some composers and writers, e.g. J.A. Hiller, Hüllmandel, and Clementi, acknowledged a distinction between staccatos indicated by the dot (gentle and less short) and by the stroke or wedge (crisp, shorter, and frequently with emphasis).¹³ Although often used inconsistently by composers and transmitted inconsistently by engravers, there was a tendency for dots to be used over quick repeated notes and passages in short note values, especially upbeats and stepwise runs (see Example 2).

Example 2. Haydn, Sonata in E-flat Major, Hob. XVI/49/ii (Aut. facs.), mm. 33-34. (By permission of the Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, Musiksammlung.)



Further study may offer a clearer understanding of the uses of dots and strokes and of whether, or when, successive measure-length

¹³ See Johann Adam Hiller, *Anweisung zum Violinspielen* (Grätz, 1795), 41-42; Joseph Nicolas Hüllmandel, *Principles of Music, Chiefly Calculated for the Piano Forte or Harpsichord* (London [1796]), 14; and Muzio Clementi, *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (London, 1801), 8; also Sandra P. Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1988), 183-89.

slurs over accompaniment patterns or passage-work in 18th- and early 19th-century music should be joined.¹⁴

Nineteenth Century

Beethoven's handling of articulation and texture goes considerably beyond that of earlier composers. He contrasted articulative styles, often in close proximity, and brought new dimensions to the notion of melodic flow. His occasional use of *ten.* [*tenuto*] reminds us that unmarked notes were often still played non-legato. Notes or chords so marked frequently contrast with staccato notes—usually of a shorter value—in the same voice (e.g. Trio, op. 1/2/i) or in a different part of the texture (e.g. Variations, op. 35, var. 15; Sonata, op. 7/ii). The interplay between unmarked, legato, and staccato quarter notes is important in the coda of the Trio, op. 1/3/iv. Another favorite device was the juxtaposition of staccato notes with unmarked notes of the next smaller value separated by rests of that value (e.g. Sonata, op. 10/2/i, 8th and 16th notes; Sonata, op. 47/ii/var. 4), or even between unmarked repeated 8th notes and *portato* 16th notes and rests (e.g. Trio, op. 1/2/ii). These and other passages with similarly sensitive articulation (e.g. Sonata, op. 90/i/1-8) require tempos that allow the distinctions to be heard.

Legato was gradually adopted as the basic keyboard touch, although in a letter of 1825 Schubert still described the “accursed chopping in which even distinguished pianoforte players indulge.”¹⁵ Slurs demarcating complete phrases or phrase members became more frequent and composers often mixed short articulative with longer phrasing slurs, or even used a longer slur over a short one, which reduces the effect of the latter. During the course of the period, as the musical aesthetic leaned toward less articulated, more diffuse sounds, the developments in piano and organ building led to a diminished articulative quality for the attack of a note. On pianos the thicker strings, more heavily padded felt hammers, and gradual increase in size and tension of instruments created a tone with a less noticeably marked attack, a slow “blooming” of the sound, and a

¹⁴ Concerning the latter see Carl Czerny, *Complete Theoretical and Practical Piano Forte School*, Op. 500, 3 vols. (1839); trans. Hamilton (London, 1839), Vol. I, 187; and Rosenblum, *Performance Practices*, 172-183.

¹⁵ Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: a Documentary Biography*, trans. Eric Blom (London: Dent, 1946), 436.

more gradual decay. Meter became less important as a determinant of accentuation and articulation. By the end of the century the contemporary instruments had changed to such an extent that a somewhat different and more energetic technique was required in order to bring out earlier articulative nuances (such as the ends of short slurs).

During the first third of the 19th century the meanings of dot and stroke described above became clarified.¹⁶ The occasional adoption of the stroke as an accent sign (e.g. by Beethoven, Trio, op. 38/i/53-54, 57-58; Sonata, op. 53, iii/51-54) was the predecessor for use of the dot itself in that role by early Romantic composers (e.g. Chopin, Ballade, op. 47/213ff.).¹⁷ Later in the century composers began to expand the vocabulary of articulation signs with \frown and \triangle .

From the latter part of the century to about the 1920s performer-editors, including Hans von Bülow, Richard Epstein, and Sigmund Lebert, and theorist Hugo Riemann, added an overdose of interpretive signs and often exchanged the shorter expressive slurs of the baroque and Classic repertoires for much longer phrase markings that reflected the desired performance style of their time. Such violation of the speech-like and varied articulation necessary in the earlier music, including that of Beethoven and Schubert, continues to distort the playing of this repertoire.¹⁸








Twentieth Century

The trend of composers to mark their scores more heavily in the 19th century presumably had the purpose of eliciting ever increasing

¹⁶ E.g. Louis Adam, *Méthode de piano du Conservatoire* (Paris, [1804]), 154-55; Francesco Pollini, *Metodo per Clavicembalo* (Milan, 1812), 58; Czerny, *Vollständige theoretisch-praktische Piano-Schule*, Op. 500 (Vienna, 1839), Pt. III, 21-23. Unfortunately, the English translator of Czerny's *Pianoforte-Schule* obliterated the careful distinction between the dot and the stroke in the German.

¹⁷ Concerning these usages see Crafton Beck, "The Dot as a Nondurational Sign of Articulation and Accent," *Music Research Forum* 5 (1990).

¹⁸ A reaction may be seen in Heinrich Schenker's "Weg mit dem Phrasierungsbogen," *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik: ein Jahrbuch* (Munich, 1925; R/1974), 43-60; trans. William Drabkin, "Abolish the Phrasing Slur," *The Masterwork in Music*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20-30.

expressivity from the performer. To arrive at even greater diversity and specificity of articulative color, many 20th-century composers (e.g. Debussy, Villa-Lobos, Schoenberg, Boulez, Martino¹⁹) have added new signs to their notation, such as , , , , , and . (Martino's indication, " = separation without loss of rhythm," may remind us of the 18th-century non-legato.²⁰) Fleeting motives and textures, with successive notes often placed in different registers, and the percussive use of the piano have resulted overall in more detached articulation and less use of legato. In piano music since the 1950s the touch sometimes has to change on almost every note, requiring an extraordinarily flexible and sensitive technique (see Example 3).

Example 3. Boulez, Sonata II/iv (as in 1st ed., Huegel), mm. 28-29. By permission of HEUGEL S.A., Paris.



Rather than increase expressivity, these more detailed directions for performance may have the rather different result of taking away the

¹⁹ See Donald Martino, "Notation in General—Articulation in Particular," *Perspectives of New Music* 4/2 (Spring-Summer, 1966), 47-58, and the Explanatory Notes to his Twelve Preludes (Newton, MA; Dantalion, Inc., 1992).

²⁰ Donald Martino, *Fantasies and Impromptus* (Newton, MA; Dantalion, Inc., 1982), Notes (n.p.).

performer's individuality of expression and making of him an executant rather than an interpreter. Did composers intend to remove the performer's uniqueness, making him more and more subservient to a single, "ideal" interpretation? Although his piano scores are not that heavily marked, Stravinsky expressly desired that players of his music assume only the role of executant or transmitter of the composer's "explicit" will.²¹ On the other hand, Bartók showed

in his own interpretations that an objective and correct reading of a score and virtuosity are no substitute for *personality*, for the courage and imagination of the performing artist . . . Bartók would certainly not have agreed with Stravinsky, who asked people just to 'realise' his works precisely instead of interpreting them.²²

And Donald Martino, representative of the highly detailed scoring of the second half of this century wrote:

I attempt as best I can to notate all necessary nuances—but a mechanistic reproduction is furthest from my mind! . . . If I take great care with notation, I do not destroy musical expression; I reveal to the performer the kind of musical expression that I intend.²³

The diversity of acoustical conditions encountered in performing venues has also necessitated that players adjust the degrees of articulation for the sake of clarity. Most recently sophisticated synthesizers offer complete control of all articulative nuances.

²¹ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 1942; bilingual ed., trans. Arthur Knodell and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1970), Lesson 6, esp. 163-7.

²² László Somfai, *Bartók Record Archives*, Booklet accompanying Vol. II of the Centenary Edition of Bartók's Records (Budapest: Hungaroton, 1981), 31.

²³ Martino, "Notation . . .," 49, 50.