

Learning to Pedal “by Ear”

BY JESSICA JOHNSON

Artistic pedaling is one of the most deeply personal and defining features of beautiful piano playing. And yet, it is often one of the most neglected aspects of piano study. While extremely talented students may intuitively learn to imitate recordings and teacher demonstrations, most students need guidance in order to develop comprehensive pedal techniques sequentially. Ultimately, students must learn how to *listen* to the sounds they create and respond to each unique instrument and performance venue. In *The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling*, Joseph Banowetz states, “The ear alone, rather than a set of printed directions, must always be the final guide for an artistic performance.”

While it is imperative for students to acquire the basic physical techniques and coordination necessary for proper use of the damper pedal, the ability to hear the sound and recognize how pedaling changes the overall color is paramount. Before students ever place a foot on the pedal, they can learn how the damper pedal causes the sound to resonate and vibrate. Early experiences might include having beginning students stand in the crook of the piano and listen to the teacher play with pedal. Students can also sing and shout while the damper pedal is depressed, listening to how sympathetic vibrations arise without a key ever being struck.

Teaching Beginners to Pedal

Elementary piano pieces that incorporate the use of the damper pedal allow young students to experience the rich sonority of the piano. In *Mountain Bells* by Wynn-Anne Rossi, the depiction of ringing bells emulates those produced by a carillon. In order to encourage careful listening, invite students to hold the pedal down until the sound has completely faded out.

Not too fast

f

slightly after

Experimenting with different sonorities by using less traditional performance techniques such as damping and plucking strings permits the student to explore the unique sound qualities of the piano. In *Soundworld: A Collection of New Keyboard Experiences*, Stan Applebaum uses many pedal effects that develop effective listening habits. Note how pedaling, dynamics, and articulation influence the sound in the example below. In measures 7 and 8, sympathetic vibrations are isolated by depressing the damper pedal on beats 2 and 4, during the “rests”.

mp

ff

nall.

mp

In order to foster the development of listening skills integral to artistic pedaling, elementary students should be exposed to recordings and performances featuring various instrumental and vocal sounds. Learning to equate the pedal with the vibrato of a string instrument, for example, will go a long way in facilitating artistic pedaling.

The Next Step

Before piano students can incorporate advanced pedal techniques such as half pedaling and flutter pedaling, they must first learn how to integrate syncopated or legato pedaling into their playing fluently and appropriately. They must also acquire a basic understanding of how harmonic procedures guide pedaling choices. Activities that help students understand harmony, phrasing, form, and stylistic characteristics prepare the ears for refined pedaling.

4. The fourth secret is PEDAL BY EAR.

Pedal Rhythms

Play the damper pedal with your right foot, HEEL ON THE FLOOR.
Listen for a smooth, connected sound, with no break between the chords.

For Pedal Rhythm I the pedal lifts on beat 1 and goes down on beat 2.

L.H.

Pedal Rhythm I

Pedal Rhythm II trains the foot to depress the pedal immediately after the chord is played.

L.H.

Pedal Rhythm II

There is a plethora of worthwhile teaching resources designed to introduce legato pedaling to the early intermediate student. *Pedal Rhythms* from *Piano Adventures® Technique and Artistry Book Level 3A* offers two exercises that systematically and rhythmically develop syncopated pedaling.

Once students have mastered legato pedaling, they can begin to experiment with advanced pedaling techniques based on stylistic and coloristic elements in the music. In *Yellow Moon on a Misty Lagoon* (*Technique & Artistry Level 3A*, pp. 28, 29),

the image of mist provides a wonderful opportunity to experiment with different levels of pedal. Having successfully performed the piece using full pedal, the student can use half pedal in order to create a thin layer of “mist”.

Initially the teacher should model both full and half pedaling and have the student identify, with eyes closed, which is being employed. If students are given frequent occasions to train the ears, they will learn to aurally distinguish how different levels of pedal affect the overall sonority. A grand piano also gives students visual reinforcement as they watch the dampers barely hover above the strings.

Students need to be aware that the depth of each pedal varies from instrument to instrument, one of the primary reasons that the ear must be the ultimate guiding force for sensitive pedaling. In *Notes from the Pianist’s Bench*, Boris Berman discourages the notion of “memorizing” pedaling, noting that developing an artistic aural image of the work is more important than training the foot to execute a prescribed series of motions.

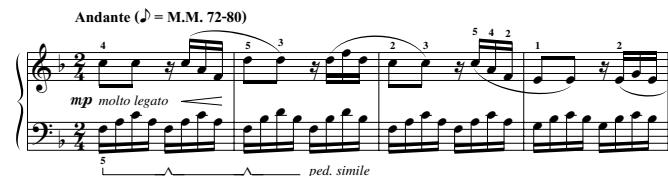
Direct, Finger, and Flutter Pedal

Intermediate students should be challenged to listen to how the style of a piece influences pedaling choices. Learning basic guidelines for stylistic pedaling is an excellent point of departure. *Artistic Pedal Technique: Lessons for Intermediate and Advanced Pianists* by Katherine Faricy offers a concise list of stylistic principles for pedaling and serves as an outstanding guide for introducing these to intermediate students.

In classical repertoire, a direct pedal, corresponding with the hands, can often be applied to two-note slurs, *sfzs*, and cadential chords without distorting the articulation and phrasing. In Haydn’s Allegro in F Major the student can add direct pedals to *sfzs* and selected two-note slurs in order to create a more orchestral sonority.



Finger pedaling should be considered when Alberti-bass figures are present in classical repertoire. Learning to lengthen the first note of each accompaniment pattern will help the student learn to distinguish between classical and romantic pedaling. Once students are able to finger pedal, they can attempt to recreate a similar sonority via half pedaling. Mozart’s Andante in F provides a good opportunity for finger pedaling and half pedaling in a classical context.



Flutter pedaling requires acute listening skills and is appropriate when a slightly veiled sound and color are desired, or when the texture needs to be thinned out gradually. In order to prepare the ears, students can play a big chord or sonority with the damper pedal fully depressed, then vibrate or flutter the pedal until the sound gradually disappears. When flutter pedaling, students need to realize that the dampers do not actually clear the strings. In Mazurka in G Minor (Homage to Chopin) by Nancy Faber, flutter pedaling can create a more seamless transition between the cadenza and return of the theme in Mm. 35-36.



To develop stylistic awareness, listening to several recordings of the same work allows students to compare how pedaling changes the interpretation of the piece. Students can even attempt pedal “dictation”, actually notating the pedaling used in a recording or performance. They might also perform a given piece in all styles, altering the pedaling to correspond with the appropriate style.

Once the teacher has guided the student through these pedaling techniques, the student should be given opportunities to apply these principles to new pieces. Frequent demonstrations, listening activities, and the chance to participate in making decisions regarding pedaling help foster independence and encourage musical growth. By challenging students to listen closely to what they hear as they play, teachers can help them discover a world of artistic possibilities.

Resources

Banowitz, Joseph. *The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Berman, Boris. *Notes from the Pianist’s Bench*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Faricy, Katherine. *Artistic Pedal Technique: Lessons for Intermediate and Advanced Pianists*. Ontario: The Frederick Harris Music Co., 2004. ■■■

Jessica Johnson serves on the piano faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as Assistant Professor of Piano and Director of Graduate Piano Pedagogy studies. She received the DMA in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Michigan. In addition to her love for the standard keyboard repertoire, Johnson frequently commissions and programs contemporary solo and chamber works. An active clinician, she has given workshops and presentations at the World Piano Pedagogy Conference, MTNA-affiliated state and national conventions, as well as held residencies at major universities and colleges throughout the United States.