

## Particularities of Chopin's use of sustaining pedal

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**Abstract:** *More than other composers, Frederic Chopin made use of careful sustaining pedal notation throughout his creations. One of the problems arising from what the interpretation of his music is concerned is the correct pedalling, often lightly regarded by many pianists, who use the pedal exaggeratedly, thus changing the expression of Chopin's music. The large number of alterations that were made to his manuscripts prove the importance of the pedal for Chopin, although his notations are not always respected by the companies publishing his scores. This article intends to draw attention to the importance of the interpretation of his scores following the pedal notations made by Chopin and offers comparative examples for a better understanding of pedalling, to acquire the closest possible interpretation to the Chopin's style.*

Key-words: *sustaining pedal, Chopin's pedal technique, interpretation*

### 1. Introduction

The pedal technique and its notation have constantly changed over the centuries. Before 1790, the pedalling was not marked on the music sheet (Rowland 2004, 112). Composers such as Chopin or Liszt used to carefully mark the moments where they wanted the piano player to use the pedal, while Debussy or Scriabin did not give as much attention to this, although pedalling was also important in the interpretation of their music.

### 2. Pedal notation during Romanticism

Until recently, the composers used to avoid marking on the score the place where they wanted the pedal to be used, for various reasons, one of them being the fact that the pianist would use the pedal according to his own choice of tempo, to the

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dynamic of the interpretation, even to the instrument he would play on, or the environment where the artistic event was taking place.

During Romanticism, the varied sonorities or chromatics of the grave, medium or acute register of the piano, as well as the exploitation of the vibrations of the new instruments, which started to have much larger resonance boxes, have made the artistic pedalling an essential element of the piano performance on the stage.

Although, in Romanticism, the works of many composers depended on the extended use of the pedal, the majority did not mark on the scores precisely where to use it. F. Mendelssohn abundantly marked the pedal in some scores, while, in others, he gave no indication or noted, at the beginning of the score, “*sempre con Pedale*” (Leimer 1972, 93). In a similar manner, Schumann noted the beginning of a score or a section with *Ped*, or *con Ped*. A few examples of this way of pedalling are to be found at the end of his work, *Papillons*, where the pedal is sustained over 27 bars, or in *Hasche-Mann* from *Kinderszenen*, composed in 1838, in bars 15 to 16, where we have an anticipation of the *sostenuto* pedalling<sup>2</sup>.

The pedal notation *una corda*<sup>3</sup> is not frequently used during the Romantic period, but the interest in the coloratura of the interpretation led to its use on various dynamic levels, due to the special effect it has on the sounds.

The sustaining pedal<sup>4</sup>, also known as loud or damper pedal, was seen as a special effect before the Romantic age, and used restrictively, in specific circumstances. Only during Romanticism was this type of pedalling seen as an essential feature of the piano sound.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Using of the sustaining pedal in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century

There are three types of pedalling – related to the pedal onset time, or when it should be pressed.

**Preliminary pedalling** – the pedal can be pressed down after the sound stops and before playing the new note. It is used, first of all, to create a deeper, richer sound at the moment it is played.

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<sup>2</sup> The *sostenuto* pedal was invented in France (1843-1844) by the Boisselot brothers. It is used to sustain lower notes while changing chords in the upper register and can be found in the middle of the three pedals.

<sup>3</sup> It is placed to the left of the three pedals of the piano, changing the quality of the tone and also softening the note.

<sup>4</sup> It is the right pedal of the three pedals of the piano and it is used to make the sounds vibrate for a long period.

<sup>5</sup> Ripin, “Sustaining pedal” in Sadie, Stanley; Tyrell John (eds). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 2001, p.2

**Rhythmic pedalling** (simultaneous or direct pedalling) corresponds to pressing or releasing the pedal at the same time as playing a chord or note – this supports rhythmic emphasis, an important aspect of interpretation during Classicism.

When the pedal is pressed immediately after the note is played, the procedure is called **legato pedalling**. This technique allows the player to make a smooth legato, while avoiding the mixing of the harmonies with the previous notes. Legato pedalling is the most used of the three types of pedalling. It can be observed in the next three examples. In Figures 1 and 3 the notation is very clear and strict; while in Figure 1 there is no mention of the pedal, but the sforzando notation suggests that the sequence should be played using the rhythmic pedalling to emphasize the beginning of each beat in the bar.



Fig. 1. Preliminary pedalling in "Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53," Frederic Chopin, bars 1-4



Fig. 2. Rhythmic pedalling in "Sonata in C minor Op. 111", L. van Beethoven, bars 68-69



Fig. 3. Legato pedalling in "Nocturne Op.9 No.2," Frederic Chopin, bars 1-4

#### 4. Characteristics of the pedal use in Frederic Chopin's creations

Chopin is, probably, one of the rare composers from before the Second World War to grant special attention to the notation of pedalling. Chopin emphasized the harmonies of the notes through pedalling, as, for instance, in *Nocturne Op. 27 No.2*, or in the first bars of the *Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61*.



Fig. 4. "Nocturne, Op 27 No.2," bars 1-6

Fig. 5. "Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major, op.61," bars 1- 4

Another example of the pedalling technique in Chopin's works is provided by the *Nocturne Op. 55, No.2* (the manuscript of the piece from Figure 6), where Chopin realized the contrast between the notes, with the help of the pedals.

The notes played without pedal were not as short during the middle of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century as they are now, due to the construction of the instrument, which provided an ampler palette and a broader contrast between the sonorities of the lower, middle and higher registers.



Fig. 6. "Nocturne Op.55 No.2," bars 5-8

As presented in Figure 6 above, pedalling in Chopin's compositions was anticipated. Almost all piano players change the pedal almost immediately after pressing the key, an aspect which has the advantage of prolonging the sound and conferring fluidity to the legato, but it also blurs the harmony, most of the time.

Watching the international Chopin piano competition, one can notice that many of the interpretations of the *Study in A-minor op.25, no.11*, and the first four bars are played with pedal, although Chopin did not make such a note for this composition:



Fig. 7. "Study in A-minor, Op. 25, No.11" bars 1-6

The difference between the use of the pedal here (although almost all the piano players use it) and playing without pressing it is colossal: in the first two bars, the sounds without pedal have no vibration, as a trumpet solo. The same thing happens for

the next two bars, for the left hand, and only by listening to an interpretation where the pedal is not used can we understand Chopin's intentions – this is the distinct counterpoint. Another example of using the pedal without indication in the music score is the *Andante spianato* preceding the *Grand Polonaise Brillante in E-flat*. The contrasting episode in G-major in the middle of the *Andante spianato* can be compared to a chord quartet or a choir singing a religious hymn, and this writing can produce a completely different sonority when played without a pedal. Chopin specifically underlined the use of legato and of the finger pedal to connect the notes to each other without pedalling, a thing many piano players tend to overlook. This type of legato is difficult, and it requires special agility of the wrist and special awareness of the placement of each finger without the use of the pedal.



Fig. 8. "Andante spianato", the contrasting episode in G major

The appropriate use of the sustaining pedal, true to Chopin's style, requires independence of hands from feet and, for this; mastery of the technique is needed (Ohlsson 1981, 68-69).

In some parts of his compositions, Chopin gives no indication about the pedals, but that does not mean that the piano player is free to use the pedal according to his own conception, but rather that pedalling is not necessary.

The absence of these notations is very important, but almost constantly overlooked by piano players, that fact becoming a long tradition.

Chopin, whose feet were described, when playing, as "literally to vibrate" (Hedley 1913, 131), seemed like he used the syncopated pedalling intuitively, especially along the cantabile sections. The syncopated pedalling was common in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century pieces based on dances, and this requires a revision of today's pedalling.

The sustain pedal has two conventional positions – "pressed" and "released", but it can be pressed intermediary, which allows for a controlled vibration of the chords. Thus, the pressed-down note can be heard, with its entire harmonics, as long as it is sustained. When the finger releases the keyboard, the volume of the sound is reduced, but it can still be heard.

Another particularity of Chopin's use of pedalling is the over-pedalling, as can be seen in the Sonata in B-flat, minor, where no notation of the pedalling is made at

the beginning, but it is abundant afterwards. This makes it sound as if the piano player exaggerates the use of the pedal, but this is the original notation of the composer.

Fig. 9. "Sonata in B-flat minor Op 35", bars1-16

To find an appropriate example of the notation of the pedal, the real problem was finding an edition of the scores to respect the original notations of the composer, as most of them had different pedalling indications, which can be misleading for the piano interpreter. The alteration of the pedalling notation is also due to the fact that the piano, as an instrument, was different from the ones of today.

In the following example, we can see the difference in what the pedal notations are concerned.

Fig. 10a. "Mazurka in B-flat minor"  
Schlesinger'sche Buch-und Musikhandlung,  
1883

Fig. 10b. "Mazurka in B-flat minor,"  
Breitkopf & Härtel Publishing House

Figure 10a, where, due to the fact that in this edition notations are added where the composer did not consider the use of the pedals necessary, demonstrates how easily

the piano player, sometimes, even the experienced ones, can be misled. For instance, the interpretation of Ingolf Wunder (Second prize, Chopin International Competition, 2010) of the *Mazurka in B flat minor, Op. 24 No. 4*, shows that the piano players used the pedal in the last two bars, contrary to the composer's indications<sup>6</sup>.

The same use of the pedal in the last two bars of the same Mazurka can be also seen in the performance of Su Yeon Kim (Third prize, Chopin, International Competition<sup>7</sup>). A third example, in the same competition, is the interpretation of Anna Fedorova (Second prize, Chopin International Competition, 2010)<sup>8</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Starting with Chopin's generation, the composers have begun to meticulously indicate the sustaining pedal on the music sheet, apart from their predecessors, who made such notations only to achieve special effects. In Chopin's creation, musical pieces where the pedalling is notated throughout or is completely missing are rare, because the composer wanted to draw the listener's attention, through the differences between the use or lack of use of the pedal, to the contrasting sections, registers or phrasing.

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc2TV\\_\\_\\_0s&ab\\_channel=ChopinInstitute](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc2TV___0s&ab_channel=ChopinInstitute)

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcfLrks65w&ab\\_channel=ChopinInstitute](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcfLrks65w&ab_channel=ChopinInstitute)

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SyzafJTid8&ab\\_channel=EricLuArchives](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SyzafJTid8&ab_channel=EricLuArchives)