

Playing Bach on the Piano

And now we come to one of the raging debates of keyboard performance and pedagogy! (Faint hearts, please stop here.)

Question: How should Bach be played on the modern piano?

Answer: As though you were playing it on the harpsichord because the music was -written- for this instrument. If Bach had wanted it played on the fortepiano (which was available to him at the time), he would have notated the music differently and it would have been idiomatic for the foretepiano.

This means, in particular:

- no pedal
- no graded dynamics
- lifts
- detached notes, but no staccatos
- delineation of the voices through articulation, not dynamic differences

Your arguments:

- The melody should be louder so it soars above the accompaniment.
- And what about crescendos in Bach's violin music? He clearly marks dynamics in other solo music, too. Doesn't that mean he wants crescendos in his keyboard music?
- Shouldn't we take advantage of all the tonal possibilities the piano has to offer? Including pedal, by gum?

My responses:

- The melody is delineated by textural differences. Often in organ music Bach will set the cantus firmus (melody, usually a hymn tune) in the pedal with a reed stop or have the two voices played on different manuals, as in his trio sonatas for organ (plus or without the pedals, depending on how many voices it is), but otherwise the player's skill with articulation determines whether the melody is heard.
- Bach was writing for a violin, which could make graded dynamics. His keyboard music is for organ or harpsichord and is written with the capabilities of those instruments in mind.
- No pedal, by gum! To use pedal would blur the performer's carefully thought-out and exercised articulation, which is antithetical to the way Bach wrote his keyboard music.

One of the primary reasons people groan when it is announced that Bach will be played on the piano - - or that they will now study Bach - - is that there have been so many truly horrendous performances of it *not done in the correct style.* All the voices are smudged together, damper pedal is used for smooth elision between notes, and so forth. This is *not* Bach!! This is a travesty!

One of the primary beauties of Bach is in the admiration of his structure: how he uses a motif and transmogrifies it, how he derives a new motif from an old one, his harmonic progression, his unexpected U-turns in the melody, and such. For the performer, this can be elicited best through careful study of the structure, as articulation is pondered. For the listener, this can be elicited best through the performer's articulation.

I have played and taught the same pieces for years and years, and not a time goes by that I don't see something that I missed: some nuance of structure that Bach had hidden there, to be revealed only through careful and continuous study.

Nota Bene:

There are two things I would caution you about concerning articulation in Bach:

(1) Be careful of the duration of a note with a lift following it. Such a note is -not- a staccato note. (Many edited editions of Bach have staccato dots in them; these are editorial and are, I hope!, an effort to indicate a lift when there is no place to print a discussion of what a lift is.) The difference between a note with a lift following it and a staccato note:

- The note before the lift should be given only half its value so the lift can be made from the other half-value. Think of a note followed by a rest. (I often add a flag to a quarter-note, for example, and draw in an eighth-note rest to emphasize the exact value of the lift.) A note followed by a lift is also called a "detached note."
- A staccato note, on the other hand, is a much shorter duration - - just as long as it takes to set the string in motion and "get the heck out of Dodge."

(2) The other consideration is that although we don't intend to, we usually give a staccato note a little bit of a punch (that is, give it a tiny accent) on our way out of Dodge. Note that an accent affects the -onset- of the sound; a staccato affects the -cessation- of the sound. Not the same thing at all!

Although often it doesn't make a whole lot of difference in other sorts of literature, in Bach, because of the music's structural clarity, it -does- make a difference when we are playing on a piano or clavichord (instead of a harpsichord). The piano is sensitive to the force brought to bear on the key (it really is a percussion instrument operated by a keyboard). A harpsichord is not. Where we may be sloppy on a piano, if we do the same thing on the harpsichord (or clavichord), our negligence is immediately evident! Particularly on the clavichord, the most sensitive of keyboard instruments.

Therefore, notes which precede lifts should not be turned into staccato notes with their quasi-inherent, but unintended, accents.

For example, in Bach's Invention #4, in the RH in measure 2, be careful on that C-sharp. After it comes a lift because of the leap that follows. In playing, be careful not to emphasize the C-sharp by thinking of it as a staccato note. It is, instead, a thirty-second note followed by a thirty-second rest. (Another reason that C-sharp might get more punch than it should is that you are playing the note with a strong finger - - the thumb - - as well as approaching it from a high note, so that you work up a good head of steam on your way "down" to the C-sharp with a strong finger. This translates into a small accent.

If you are not mindful of this problem when playing Bach on the piano, your playing will be filled with many unattractive thumps.

Nobody ever said Bach on the piano is easy! (Actually, Bach on anything is not easy!) Bach on the piano is more difficult, I think, than on a [harpsichord](#) because one must "over-ride" all the pianistic autopilot settings (pedal, dynamics, etc.) and play the music in true Baroque style by using the techniques that were available, owing to the characteristics of the instruments of the day.

All the more reason to [buy yourself a harpsichord](#), don't you think?!

For more information on playing Bach, you might be interested in my file on the [baroque "sound ideal" and ornamentation](#). Baroque ornaments are the foundation of ornamentation for all musical periods. Another good reason to study Bach!

For information [on how Baroque ornaments and performance practice influenced later composers](#), you might be interested in my file on this topic using a portion of the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in F Major, K. 332, as an example.

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