

Over-legato

After a period in which legato playing was the norm as a legacy of the 19th century, non-legato playing came into vogue among organists around the 1980s. The book *Artikulations-Problemen bei Tasten-Instrumente des 16.-18. Jahrhunderts* Ludger Lohmann, contained all known quotes from sources that led to the belief that this method of playing was common at least before 1800.

On closer inspection it appears that some nuance is necessary, especially because the even application of the non-legato playing promotes the same uniformity that was aimed for in the legato performances. Père Engramelle, who indicates precisely how variation in note lengths¹ brings the music to life, describes it aptly: *'c'est assurément par le défaut de cette connaissance, que ceux qui exécutent même la bonne musique déplaisent par une espèce de pesanteur ou de sécheresse qui ennuie'* (it is certainly from the lack of this knowledge that even they who play good music, displease by a kind of heaviness or dryness that bores). Apparently the player is expected to make his own choices, to vary tone lengths, as Engramelle describes in his precise instructions, and as Walther also indicates in his lexicon². Even though the rhythmic notation is the same, the player must express through length differences the position of the note in the measure, and also what its character is (as can be read in Lohmann's book as well).

In addition, it is important to point out a practice less known among organists, namely the possibility of lengthening notes to achieve a more varied sound, the so-called over-legato. Harpsichordists use this a lot, some almost constantly. The decay of the sound of the plucked strings is prolonged to make the instrument sound fuller, like a harp or a lute whose strings are also not muted. This is sometimes called 'wet playing', as opposed to 'dry playing', where the length of the notes is determined by releasing the key in time and thereby dampening the string.

All things considered, the normal legato of pianists is actually a slight over-legato, in which the key is only lifted after the next key has been struck. This helps to bring out better the melodic connection. On most 19th century and especially on pneumatic organs that respond slowly, it is also good practice to connect the notes in this way into a smooth continuous line. In the period in which these organs were made, the piano was the study instrument of organists, who could simply apply their pianistic playing method to the organ.

But also in early music, where the normal way of playing aims for a clear articulation of the notes, there is reason to use legato in some places. Of course, legato bows already presuppose a connection between the notes that should sound like the legato of wind instruments or strings. But certain notations indicate a way of playing in which chord notes in particular can be held even longer than notated.

¹ In an article in *L'art du facteur de l'orgue* by Dom Bédos (p.599), Engramelle describes all the nuances from legato to staccato by dividing each note into a sounding (*durée*) and a non-sounding part (*silence*). Through the correct application of differences in length, sense of movement and characters on the organ can be resolved.

² Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732), *Quantitas Notarum extrinseca & intrinseca*: Die äusserliche und innerliche Geltung der Noten; nach jener Art ist jede Note mit ihres gleichen in der *execution* von gleicher; nach dieser aber, von ungleicher Länge; da nemlich der ungerade Tact-Theil lang, und der gerade Tact-Theil kurtz ist.

Notation versus interpretation

It is quite complicated to correctly notate the actual length of notes in over-legato. The necessary slurs, adding of extra voices and rests make it confusing. Composers often seem to settle for a vague indication. Musicians are expected to recognize that it refers to a usual way of playing, which does not need to be noted in detail.

A well-known example (1a) is the Prelude in C from the first part of Das Wohltemperierte Clavier. The notation suggests that only the first two notes are held, but a harpsichordist will recognize this as a form of over-legato. It is played like a lutenist who makes his instrument hum by playing harmony notes. It is not without reason that this is called 'luthé'. A notation that maintains the sounding length of all notes looks complicated and requires a lot of extra work from the composer (1b).

Two musical examples, labeled vb.1a and vb.1b, showing notation for over-legato. Each example consists of two staves. In vb.1a, the first two notes of the upper staff are held, while the lower staff has a sequence of notes. In vb.1b, the notation is more complex, with many notes and slurs in both staves, illustrating a more detailed notation of the sounding length of notes.

We also find such passages in later organ music, even with Liszt, who adds for convenience 'tutti tenuti' (hold everything) in "Ad nos" (1c):

A musical example labeled vb.1c, showing a single staff with a sequence of notes. Below the staff, the instruction 'tutti tenuti' is written, indicating that all notes should be held.

Overlegato is therefore not always written out, or it produces such a complex score that it is not recognized as notated overlegato, as in Buxtehude's Toccata in d.

In many performances, this passage (example 2a) produces a sound that is too dense, because the simple chord breaking (2b) underlying it is not recognized.

Two musical examples, labeled vb.2a and vb.2b, showing notation for Buxtehude's Toccata in d. vb.2a shows a complex passage with many notes and slurs in both staves. vb.2b shows a simpler passage with fewer notes and slurs, illustrating the underlying chord breaking.

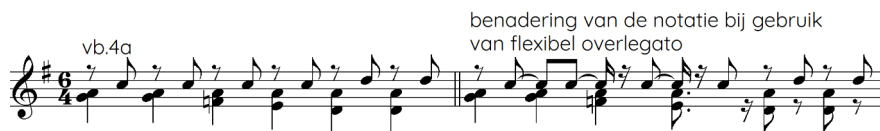
So we have to adapt our interpretation to the way of playing that seems desirable. Sometimes a certain ambiguity in the notation helps us in our choice, as in Pachelbel's Ciaconna in F minor (example 3a). One bar, like the previous bars in the right hand, gives eighths, the other unexpectedly has sixteenths with rests. Given the flow of the passage, no difference in playing style appears to be intended here. (The repeated note on the light beat in the left hand will have to be shortened anyway and should therefore have been noted as the 32nd.)



Also in the following passage from Buxtehude's Toccata in D minor (example 3b), the notation does not seem to explicitly indicate how it should be played. In the second half of this bar the descending broken thirds are suddenly notated differently. But in light of the above, one might expect that it may also be played like this for the first half of the bar, or gradually with more length on the top note.



So sometimes we have to look for the meaning of the music beyond the notation and let the effect of the sound or the structure of the music guide us. As in this passage from Buxtehude's Passacaglia (example 4a). Wouldn't a more flexible performance be desirable in this passage, with extra length for the dissonance at the beginning of the bar and a gradual shortening of the notes in the resolution afterwards?



Repeated notes presuppose that the key is lifted earlier to allow the next note to be played. The notated length can therefore never be played in full. Depending on the tempo, a longer or shorter part of the note will have to be released (the 'silence' of Engramelle). For organists it will take some exercise to pass by the well practised equal lifting of the keys in order to be able to sometimes even realize different note lengths in one hand.

Such as in this passage from the fugue in G minor BWV 542 by Bach (example 4b), where both the chromatic motif and the signal-like motif with a quarter jump and repeated notes must be played in the right hand. The notation with dots and dashes has a somewhat 'pianistic' feel, but apart from the assumed articulation in this style, there is also need for difference in note lengths to express the characters of the motifs. Played by different instruments it would obviously sound like this, an organist must consciously make a difference between the note lengths.



By viewing the notation as an explicit reflection of the composer's intention, we often miss the implicit meaning, the resounding effect, which may have been self-evident to contemporaries.

An unexpected clue



To more accurately visualize the consequences of the application of the foregoing and the resulting choices for the player, we compare two homophonic passages from organ works by Bach: the beginning of the Fantasia in G (BWV 572) and the Prelude in A minor (BWV 543). The noted lengths also appear to be flexible.

There is an older manuscript of the Fantasia in G by J.G. Walther. It contains some interesting differences with the later versions, most of which date after Bach's death. The modern editions are based on those later versions; this may also be based on a revised version by Bach himself. But the first copy dates from the time when Bach, like his cousin Walther, lived in Weimar, and is therefore an important source. It is striking that the allabreve middle section, here titled "Gayement", seems to have been intended manually. Only at the long D before the end is the pedal is indicated as P.

We are particularly interested in the beginning, which is notated differently than it is in the well-known editions.

Example 5, Fantasia in G BWV 572 (after Walther, 5a; the well-known version, 5b)



Walther's notation shows that bar 1 must also be played with two hands, as was already indicated from bar 2 in the later version by the grouping of the beams. It is noticeable that the notes in bar 1 for the right hand are notated longer, as eighth notes. The eighth on the third beat is often given a staccato point in later versions. Walther would also have played the third eighth shorter, as a light note, bearing in mind his explanation of the outer (notated) and inner (sounding) length of notes. But the length of the first note remains striking. Apparently some degree of prolongation is expected here: the first note is held for a while after the second note has been played (example 5c).



It seems logical to regard this as a baroque way of playing and to also apply it in the later version. There is no need for rubato to make the accent, the rhythm does not have to be affected, the small extension of the note already provides the accentuation. This once again shows the importance of controlling regular articulation. Accidentally lengthening a note causes an unintended rhythmic effect. But the conscious application of differentiated articulation strengthens the expression of the music.

If we consider that only late copies of the Prelude in A minor (BWV 543) are known (a less important older copy contains some inconsistencies), we could, using the possibilities that emerge from Walther's manuscript of the Fantasie in G, also interpret the beginning of this work differently.

This passage is usually played with one hand, with the thumb regularly placed on an upper key (example 6a). A distribution over two hands, similar to Walther's notation of BWV 572, immediately solves that problem (example 6b). Given the similarity with Fantasy in G, this may have been self-evident for players of that time. Length differences in the right hand can enhance the expression of the dissonances in relation to the solutions.

example 6



In bars 33 to 35 of the same Prelude a logical hand division can be found in a similar manner:

Example 7



It is somewhat puzzling that the high a on the second eighth is notated as an eighth note in the original. More logical would have been a 32nd, as part of the movement that was initiated there (example 7a). But the proposed hand division (ex.7b) creates the possibility of playing and prolonging all subsequent accent notes with the left hand, which occurs regularly in similar passages in other works. Perhaps not the length of an eighth note, but approximately as noted in example 7c.

A well-known over-legato passage in this work, in bar 11 and the following odd bars (example 8a), is often interpreted as a legato melody in the lower voice. This notation is missing in the even bars, which gives a regularly alternating picture. In measures 19 and 21 the notation of the 'quarter-melody' is missing. The scriptural player is somewhat confused here, but usually these bars are played as in the previous odd bars.

Given the nuances that the use of over-legato offers us, an extension of the first note of each motive also seems appropriate in even bars. Moreover, the notated quarter notes in the odd bars would not have to be performed in their full length as a legato melody. This means that the playing style between the different bars will differ less from each other. On the other hand, it is even possible to see the quarter notes as an indication to generally play longer in those bars, whereby other chord notes can also remain longer (in example 8b below an approximation of the lengths). Viewed in this way, the player can use over-legato in a varied manner, possibly even suggesting a climax towards the end (bar 21).

Conclusion:

By applying over-legato in the right places and with the right nuance, a more varied sound is created, which even has a dynamic effect. The effect of 'dry and wet playing' ensures that not all notes sound the same, but that the typical baroque 'chiaroscuro', which suggests a depth effect with foreground and background, is also expressed in sound.

Example 8

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece, labeled 'vb.8a' and 'vb.8b'. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system, 'vb.8a', features a treble staff with eighth-note triplets and a bass staff with eighth-note triplets and sixteenth-note patterns. The second system, 'vb.8b', features a treble staff with eighth-note triplets and a bass staff with eighth-note triplets and sixteenth-note patterns, including some notes with slurs and accents. The notation is clear and professional, typical of a printed musical score.