

Lesson 7

The Two Styles of Playing

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LESSON 7:

THE TWO STYLES OF PLAYING

MUSIC THEORY

BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Play a note on your keyboard and listen to it. Do that now.

The most obvious part of a note, the part that makes us sit up and listen (and perhaps makes the neighbours bang on the walls) is the *start* of the note.

In most of this course so far, our focus has been on *starting* the right notes at the right times.

In this lesson, we will begin to put some attention on the *end* of notes.

Why are we doing this?

Up till now, you may have been poking at the notes on your keyboard as you play tunes. That's been fine up till this point, as you've been learning to play the notes.

Now it's time to take your playing up to another level of aesthetic.

This will be easy. But it will create a big effect on the quality of your playing. We're going to get you playing more like the professionals.

Got your attention?

Good. Here we go.

The two styles

Any piece of music consists of a series of notes. There are actually two styles of playing the notes: you can connect them together, or you can separate them.

These two styles create very different effects.

In many types of music, the notes are connected together most of the time. This creates a flowing quality to the music, which is very pleasing. This style of playing is called legato.

Definition: Legato means playing notes so they are smoothly connected with no gaps between them. ('Legato' is an Italian word meaning 'tied together'.)

The other style, where the notes are separated, gives the music a jerky quality. This is good for special effect, but you don't want to overdo it. This style of playing is called Staccato.

Definition: Staccato means playing notes so they are very short, with gaps between the notes. ('Staccato' is an Italian word meaning 'detached'.)

Legato

To play notes with no gap between them, you push one finger down at the same time as you lift another finger up. A bit like a see-saw.

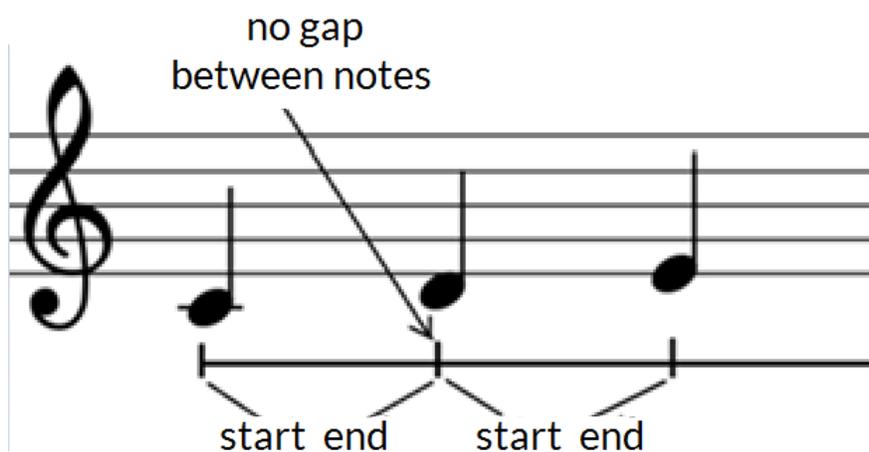
You can feel the see-saw effect if you play the music below with no gaps between the notes. Do this now, fairly slowly:



When you join quarter notes together like this, each note is exactly 1 beat long. No time is wasted on gaps.

When we play like this, we are playing **legato**. Do you hear the notes flowing one to the next?

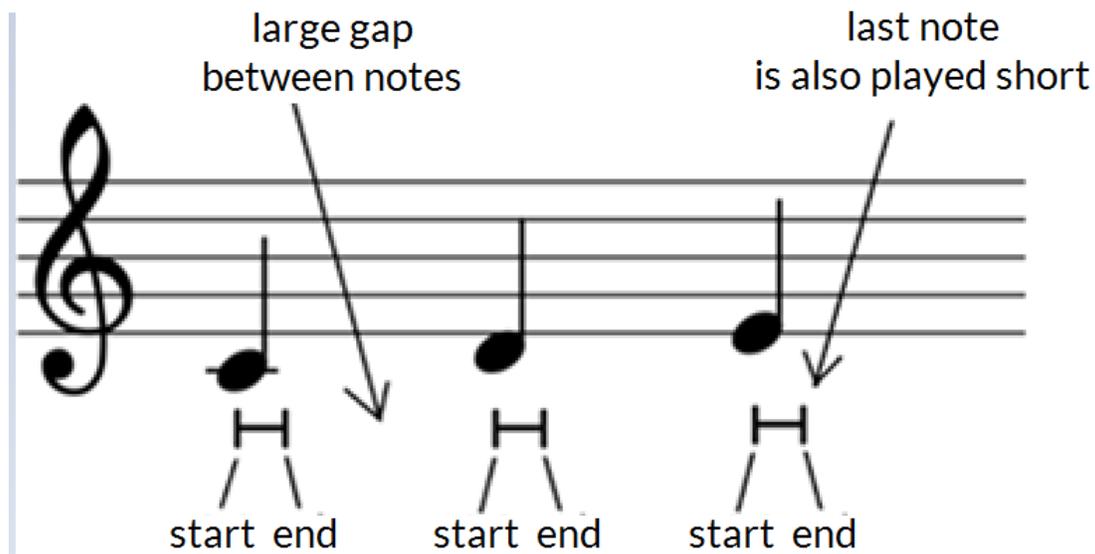
Here's an example with 3 different pitches, C D E, showing them played legato. There are no gaps between the notes. One note ends when the next note starts:



Play the above music now, connecting the notes so there are no gaps between them.

Staccato

Now we are going to do the opposite. Make each note very short with a large gap between the notes:



To do that, you make a jabbing motion with your finger, pushing the key down and quickly releasing it to end the sound. Play the above music now, making every note very short.

When we play short notes like that, we are playing **staccato**.

How would you describe the difference in effect between playing the notes legato and playing them staccato? To my ear, playing legato sounds like a flowing stream. Playing staccato sounds like a horse trotting.

shown in How legato and staccato are shown in printed music

Staccato is shown by a dot *above* or *below* a note.

This is completely different from the dot *after* a note which increases its duration by 50%:



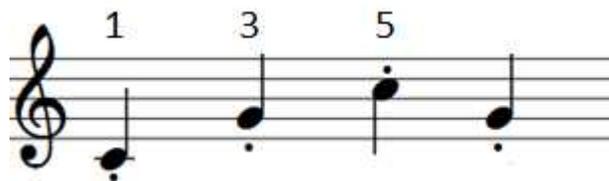
dot above or below a note
= a 'staccato note'



dot to the right of a note
increases its duration by 50%
= a 'dotted note'

The difference between two types of dot.

These 4 notes are to be played staccato:

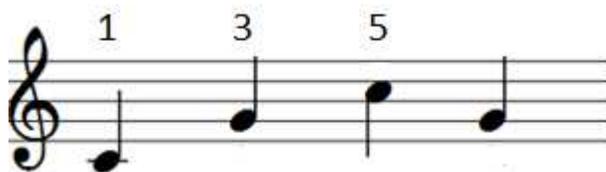


Music played staccato.

Play the above music now, making each note very short so there are gaps of silence between the notes.

Each note still gets 1 beat in the timing. The quarter note with a dot above or below it is a kind of shorthand meaning 'a short note followed by a silence that *together* adds up to 1 beat'.

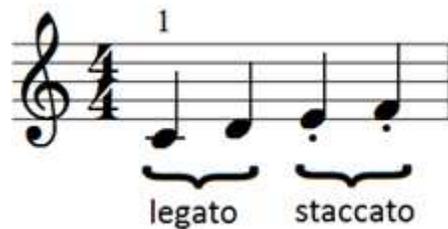
When there is no dot, it is normal to play the music legato:



Music played legato.

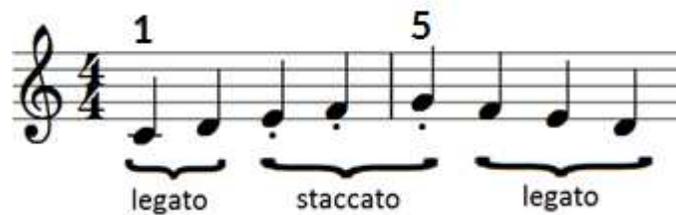
Play the above music now, joining the notes together with no gaps between them so the music sounds very smooth.

Here's an example with a mixture of legato notes and staccato notes:



Play the above music now. Join the legato notes together, and make the staccato notes short.

Here's an example of 2 measures. You may find this trickier. Play this now, and slow down if you have any trouble:



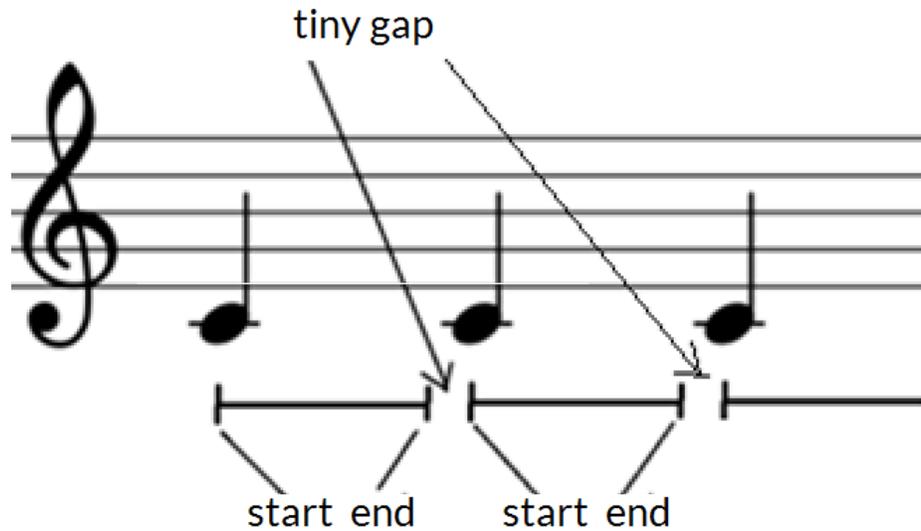
Playing legato when the pitch is repeated

Sometimes a pitch is repeated, like this:



Playing this legato can be a little tricky! Obviously, you can't start note 2 at the same time as ending note 1, because both notes need the same key on your keyboard, middle C.

The solution is to end note 1 *just before* you're ready to play note 2. That leaves a tiny gap between the notes. Make the gap as small as possible, so the notes sound smooth. Like this:



Try that now.

If you find that tricky, here's something that will help you get the hang of it. Do each step as you read it:

1. Play the music below.



Tips:

- It's OK at the start to leave a gap between the notes.
- Keep your finger on the key as you play all 3 notes.
- Ignore the timing.

2. Repeat the above music, and gradually allow the gap to become smaller.

Good. You're playing legato repeated notes.

This is a new skill. Do it as long as you need to until it becomes easy.

When the pitch is the same from one note to the next, this is referred to as 'repeated notes'. Advanced pianists pride themselves in being able to play rapid repeated notes.

Have fun with legato and staccato

When you think of having fun, the words 'legato' and 'staccato' may not instantly come to mind! However, let's have a little fun with them now.

Play some notes on your keyboard. You can play any notes you want, and make them as long or short as you want, since you are the composer. As you're playing, decide whether to play each note legato or staccato.

Congratulations! You are now a composer.

For now, play legato

For now, *I want you to play nearly everything legato*. You'll have some exercises in a moment to help you with that.

Legato is the *usual* way of playing music. If you play staccato too much, it does not sound pleasing. You play legato most of the time, and use staccato occasionally for special effect.