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## **The Message of a Pianist: Chopin's Pedal Markings in *Barcarolle F# Major Op.60***

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Chopin told his students and colleagues that the proper use of the pedal was “the study of a lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> I agree with Chopin because pedaling on the piano requires musical sensitivity, technique and experience that can only be properly learned over a lifetime of study. From my experience people believe that piano is all about fingerings and agility. This comes from the idea that if a pianist wants a note all they have to do it press a key down and that note will ring out. Focusing on only fingering technique could be very harmful to a performer's musical ability. Piano pedaling plays a large part in interpreting and showcasing a piece of music. In fact, the pedal has often been referred to as “the very breath of the piano.”<sup>2</sup> Without the proper pedal technique the “soul” of a piece of music could be lost and the audience could perceive the sound as disjointed or jarring

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1. Dieter Hildebrandt, *Pianoforte: A Social History of the Piano* (New York: George Braziller, 1985), 130.

2. Roger Boardman, “A History of Teaching Piano Technic” (PhD diss., New York University, 1954.), 111.

and harmonies may also be lost. With no pedaling at all a piece would not sound soft or give off the appropriate feeling and conversely, too much pedal can be confusing to the ear and chords will be lost. Rhythm can also be affected by improper pedaling. Syncopation could be lost as well as the composer's intentions. Proper pedaling is key to a good piano performance. Many teachers vary in their method of pedal teachings and some do not instruct pedaling technique until the pianist has progressed to what the teacher sees as an appropriate level of playing. Menahem Pressler, a professor of piano at the Indiana University for over 60 years, is an accomplished pianist and a highly regarded teacher. He has been included in published pedagogy books and taught master classes around the world.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Menahem Pressler's belief that all Chopin pieces should be played with the same pedaling technique (tapping the pedal on the first beat of every bar),<sup>4</sup> I believe the art of pedaling is contextual and will vary according to multiple factors such as: the instrument being played, and venue, limitations of notational practice, as well as structural properties within the music.<sup>5</sup> I will demonstrate the implementation of these factors as informing the use of pedaling by utilizing a case study of Chopin, his *Barcarolle in F# Major Op.60*.

In 1846, Frédéric Chopin wrote *Barcarolle in F# Major Op.60* on a piano that was vastly different than the piano we know today. In the mid nineteenth century, the

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3. William Brown, *Menahem Pressler: Artistry in Piano Teaching* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 85.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

pianoforte was what people played. This pianoforte, over the course of its existence finally developed into the piano play today as a result of many significant changes. According to Cyril Ehrlich's research, "early pianos speak more easily and clearly, particularly in the bass, where individual notes of a chord are heard with clarity denied to the "woolly" modern instrument".<sup>6</sup> Although pieces originally written for the pianoforte can be played satisfactorily on a modern piano, the sound quality is different than it would have been in 1846, when *Barcarolle in F# Major Op. 60* was written. Due to structural differences, the pianos of 1846 were less resonant and the player could hold down the pedal for an entire phrase to give a "floating feeling" to the music.<sup>7</sup> Today, if a performer holds down the pedal for an entire phrase the music would sound like a blur and the harmonic progression could be lost. In 1844, a new pedal was unveiled at the Paris Exhibition by Xavier Boisselot. This pedal was named the "sostenuto pedal" and would allow pianists to sustain selected notes while others remained unaffected.<sup>8</sup> This was the beginning of a new era for pianists. The pedals today are very close to this sostenuto pedal introduced by the piano maker Boisselot. Not everyone was accepting of using pedals in piano

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6. Woolly is a term that can refer to a particular texture / timbre of sound. I would describe and compare the use of woolly sound as a lack of high frequency definition and over abundance of low and mid-range notes according to Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 44.

7. Stuart Isacoff, *A Natural History of the Piano* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 88.

8. *Ibid.*, 25.

playing. Hummel did not favor pedals.<sup>9</sup> His argument against pedals was that “Mozart did not need this to help to win his fame as the most expressive player of his time.”<sup>10</sup> Hummel did eventually decide that playing a melody in a slow tempo over a broad harmonic foundation calls for the sustaining pedal.<sup>11</sup> Until 1835, pianos were manufactured with four pedals or “stops” including bassoon, una corda, moderator and sustaining pedal. In 1835, the pedals were standardized to three and the bassoon pedal stopped being manufactured.<sup>12</sup>

Chopin was one of the first composers to consistently call for pedal in his compositions. Although only two autograph copies of Chopin’s *Barcarolle in F# Major Op.60* exist, some published editions with alteration made by pupils in lesson with Chopin still exist.<sup>13</sup> These copies tell us that Chopin was highly aware of pedaling and of the structural changes to the piano. This also tells us that pedaling can change. There is no one set way to pedal a piece nor should generalizations be made when referring to a specific composer.<sup>14</sup> This constant demand for pedaling was one of the things that set Chopin apart from his contemporaries. According to Ehrlich, pianos before the 1860s often had strings break during performance and the top octave sounded more like

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9. Boardman, “A History of Teaching Piano Technic,” 108.

10. Adolf Kullack, *The Esthetics of Pianoforte-Playing* (California: G. Schirmer, 1893), 23.

11. Boardman, “A History of Teaching Piano Technic,” 100.

12. Davide Rowland, *A History of Pianoforte Pedalling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.

13. *Ibid.*, 127.

14. Dieter Hildebrandt, *Pianoforte: A Social History of the Piano* (New York: George Braziller, 1985), 70.

a “wooden knock.”<sup>15</sup> During the late nineteenth century the thickness and tension of the strings were increased, greatly giving the piano a more brilliant and stable sound, especially in the treble.<sup>16</sup> Piano makers also introduced a new technique for laying the strings called ‘overstringing.’<sup>17</sup> This meant the bass strings would cross over the treble strings allowing for better tone quality and the option of a smaller piano. This technique is found in all modern pianos but at the time of its debut all did not accept the overstringing movement. The new technique put so much stress on the frame of the piano that the frame had to be reengineered.<sup>18</sup> In modern pianos steel wire is used for the treble and steel overspun with copper is used for the bass. In the nineteenth century piano makers used brass, silver, platinum and gold. The pedaling would sound different depending on which material was used. While playing a piece of music the performer must keep in mind that they are only presenting an interpretation of what the composer has written.

When Chopin wrote *Barcarolle in F# Major Op 60*, the piano was in the midst of some big changes. The frame, the strings and the pedals were changing across Europe and America. There is no way to recreate the exact pedaling Chopin wanted because the instruments today are so drastically different from what Chopin was writing for. One of the reasons Chopin could have

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15. Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 162.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 163.

18. Ibid.

composed with a lot of pedal was to ease the strain of the fingers. When a pianist does not hold down to pedal it is a much greater strain on the fingers because the fingers must lift the damper.

Until the early twentieth century most houses were equipped with less expensive square pianos.<sup>19</sup> These pianos were more affordable and often took longer to incorporate new developments that were seen on the grand pianos. Though Chopin's work appeared to have very precise pedal markings he often instructed his students to use the pedal sparingly.<sup>20</sup> This decision may have been in part because most solo recitals took place in small concert rooms and not in big halls like the ones performed in for modern recitals.<sup>21</sup> These smaller spaces were easier to fill with sound and therefore the performer did not have to play with much force for the whole audience to hear. Modern concert halls are spacious and resonant. Students are taught to play very loudly and play the piano with force. Pianos can often be seen moving across stage or rocking back and forth during recitals. This kind of brute strength was not used in 1845 to play *Barcarolle in F# Major op. 60*, because the performance venues for Chopin and his students were significantly smaller so the sound did not have to travel as far.

Every pianist has their own style of pedaling so it would only make sense that composers would emulate their own style in their compositions. Chopin was said to favour playing with the

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19. John Last, *Interpretation in Piano Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 17.

20. Hildebrandt, *Pianoforte: A Social History of the Piano*, 70.

21. Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History*, 140.

sustain pedal to create what seemed like a “transparent vapour” of sound.<sup>22</sup> This could not be achieved by tapping the pedal on every beat or as Pressler asserts, on the first beat of every measure. The previous observation on Chopin’s pedaling habits sounds as if Chopin is continually holding down the pedal for long periods of time to create the appropriate atmosphere. However, as previously stated, this continuous holding down of a pedal will not have the same effect as it did in 1845. The result in modern times would be very blurred together and would sound ambiguous. Modern day students are taught “even when pedal is used the legato can be more convincing if made with the fingers as well.”<sup>23</sup> The limitations of our modern day piano have been identified and teachers are changing their technique to accommodate these limits. Another prevalent limitation actually comes from the notation of the pedaling. In 1845, there became a standard for pedal notations. A “*Ped.*” Sign meant to press down the pedal and a “\*” sign meant to lift the pedal.<sup>24</sup> This form of notation was not very accurate and there is much debate on where a player should press the pedal and lift the pedal when working with these markings. Does a performer press the pedal where the “P”, “E” or “D” lies? Proper placement of the notation had not yet been discussed at the time Chopin wrote *Barcarolle in F# Major Op. 60*. On written

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22. Isacoff, *A Natural History of the Piano*, 88.

23. Joseph Hofman, *Piano Playing: With Piano Questions Answered* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), 23.

24. Joseph Banowetz, *The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 79.

autographs the placement was often off to avoid note stems or dynamic markings.<sup>25</sup> Engravers and editors tried to be exact to the autograph but over time publishers have changed Chopin's markings to suit what they think is proper. When a pianist is sight-reading Chopin's music and tries to follow the written pedal markings confusion may ensue. Chopin's pedal indications seem unusual and in some cases daring. When a player finally finds the courage to play the markings as written it is found to be musically delightful and logical. In many instances it becomes clear that the pedaling mirrors the rhythmic movement found in the score. However, another problem lays in the uncertainty of where to lift and press the pedal. Joesph Banowetz is convinced that using musical knowledge and awareness any performer should be able to see where Chopin's phrase markings coincide with his pedal markings.<sup>26</sup> Although there was a standardized pedal notation when Chopin wrote *Barcarolle in F# Major Op.60*, it was not common practice to include further pedaling details such as legato pedaling or una corda pedal.<sup>27</sup> The Una Corda pedal is a pedal that when pressed will shift the entire keyboard over so that instead of hitting all three strings for a note the hammer will only strike two. This softens the sound and also creates a new texture. Chopin never wrote "una corda" on a single piano composition.<sup>28</sup> From eye witness accounts though, Chopin seemed to love combining the sustain pedal as well as una Corda pedal so to assume that the music

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25. Ibid., 112.

26. Ibid., 99.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

never calls for *una corda* would not be congruent with the way in which Chopin played his own works.<sup>29</sup> Performers are rarely heard playing Chopin with the *una corda* pedal but in my opinion it is another decision that must be weighed when choosing how to pedal.

As a performer it is important to know what specific parts of a piece of music need to be brought out and what to emphasize as unique to the audience. There are numerous ways in which styles of pedaling affect performance practice of Chopin. If for example, as Pressler asserts, a performer were to tap the pedal at the beginning of every beat then musical content and meaning could be lost. Pedaling is a good way to highlight certain structural properties and bring them to the forefront of the audience's ear. For example, in measure fourteen of *Barcarolle in F# Major op.60*, there are two sixteenth note figures. These are marked *staccato* suggesting Chopin wanted some emphasis on these two figures. Chopin has also written a pedal marking that would appear to last the entire way through the two sixteenth note figures. There is only one way to execute this passage and it involves using the *sostenuto* pedal. Although Chopin does not write this in plain language we can imply it as a result of the inherent musical language. As a result the performer must use their musical intuition and training to come to an appropriate decision on how to play this figure. Two pages later there is a four measure phrase that also needs some thought and personal attention from each player.<sup>30</sup> Chopin has written a long *legato* line above these four bars yet has marked no pedal

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29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 38.

for three of the bars. The performer must decide based on the way he or she has played (and intends to play) the rest of the piece whether or not to incorporate pedal or to try to connect the notes smoothly using only legato fingerings. Both methods (pedal and no pedal with very legato fingering) are common in recordings and ultimately it is up to the performer to determine what structures will be highlighted and how to accomplish it. In measures 5-9 Chopin has written the pedal so as to be syncopated. To bring out syncopation it is common practice to pedal before the beat instead of on the beat. This is seen in *Barcarolle in F# Major Op.60* and if done with these markings in mind the pedal can really accentuate what Chopin wrote. Menahem Pressler's teaching that the pedal should be tapped on every beat would not work with syncopation. His teaching would align the pedal and rhythm in such a way that the audience would never notice a change. Syncopation, as a rhythmic device, is often used to accentuate a change or material that contrasts the norm. As a performer, I would want the audience to experience this to the fullest. As mentioned before a performer needs to determine what is important and needs to stand out from the rest of the music. Highlighting oddities such as syncopation can give the listener's ear a jolt and be enticing to the brain.

In conclusion, there is no way to determine a correct "universal" pedaling. As Chopin stated: "the pedal is the study of a lifetime."<sup>31</sup> There are no true expressive rules with pedaling. There are only suggestions from composers and teachers. A musician must use what they know about music to make informed

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31. Hildebrandt, *Pianoforte: A Social History of the Piano*, 130.

judgments to effectively communicate the composer's intentions and phrasing. This ensures the audience hears the piece as the performer wants them to. Musical decisions must be made contextually for each individual piece as no two pieces are alike or have the same circumstances surrounding them. Unlike Liszt or Thalberg, pianists who excelled in concert halls with grand gestures, Chopin's style was better suited for an intimate environment where the listener could hear every detail.<sup>32</sup> The modern performer must have great attention to the instrument, the venue, how the composer notated the piece and what structural components that should be highlighted for the audience before making any attempts at playing a concert. Just remember, as Joseph Banowetz says, "pedal with purpose and you can't go wrong."<sup>33</sup>

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32. Rowland, *A History of Pianoforte Pedalling*, 122.

33. Banowetz, *The Pianists Guide to Pedaling*, 307.

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