



# First lessons on pedalling

*Developing co-ordination and listening skills in parallel*

**C**hildren are usually keen to use the sustaining pedal. They see older children playing with the pedal and hear the amazing effects that can be created by depressing the pedal. For the fun of it, many children love just putting their foot on the pedal and creating a huge blurry sound.

So what is a successful way to teach youngsters the technical and auditory skills required to manipulate this wonderful device on the piano? I think a step-by-step approach is the best. It will probably take several weeks, but young musicians will then have a skill which can be used effectively in much repertoire throughout their lives. It involves developing co-ordination and listening skills in parallel.

I am never in any rush to teach pedalling to children. I like to wait until their legs are long enough. In the past, young pupils have tried various pedal attachments, but we've never found a satisfactory one. One pupil was performing a Haydn sonata when the pedal attachment came adrift; another had trouble with a different pedal attachment in a Mozart sonata. So I almost always wait until the child can put their feet on the floor and reach the pedals comfortably before setting pieces which require pedal.

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When a pupil is ready to learn to use the pedal, I like to show them the inside of the piano, and how the dampers all come away from the strings, leaving them free to vibrate. And I demonstrate the sounds. The sustaining pedal is used to give a smoother sound to accompaniments such as Alberti or um-cha-cha basses. It adds an aura of richness to the quality of the sound. It can also be used to enhance *legato* between one note or chord and the next.

Having satisfied the child's curiosity about the inside of the piano, I ask them to watch my right foot. I softly repeat a note with one finger while I very slowly depress the pedal until I reach the point at which the pupil can hear the note

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being sustained. I explain this is called the biting point, and that this is the critical moment when pedalling. I demonstrate how small a movement of the foot is required between sustaining the note and letting it go. I also demonstrate letting the pedal come all the way to the top, and how this can create an undesirable knocking sound, and to the bottom, which also produces an undesirable sound. For control, the foot should remain touching the pedal throughout – there is no sound of foot tapping against pedal.

I then ask the pupil to put the heel of their right foot on the floor with the base of their big toe resting on the pedal. I ask them to play a single note repeatedly while slowly depressing the pedal, and then to see and feel how small a movement is required between holding the sound and letting it go.

At this stage we discuss the technique involved in pressing down the pedal. The foot remains in contact with the pedal continuously. Some people will try pushing from the hip, making the whole body swing sideways. I explain that the smallest possible movement is needed. The hip and knees stay still, but supple, while the movement comes from the ankle.

When this small movement has been understood, I demonstrate playing a C with finger 2, then slowly depressing the pedal to just below the biting point, then lifting the finger – hearing the sound continue. I explain that now is the tricky bit – listening carefully that when I play the next note of the scale, D, I lift the pedal exactly as the next note sounds – aiming for pure, clear *legato*. I demonstrate with a gap in the sound, and I demonstrate with a slight overlap, and the pupil will listen and watch.

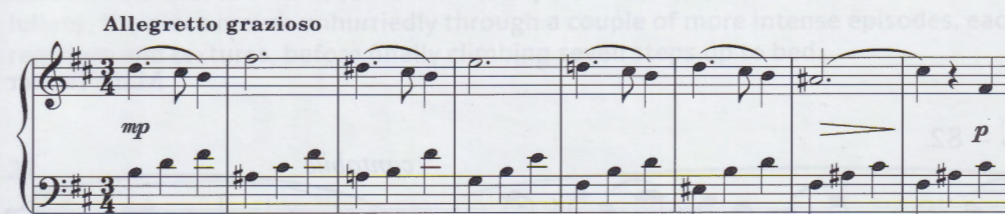
It's worth pointing out here that the pedal action will feel different on every piano – hence the importance of pupils learning to listen carefully in order to find the biting point. Pupils could be encouraged to try out the pedal on as many different pianos as possible.

This leads into my demonstrating a scale of C played with finger 2. On beat 1 I play the note, on beat 2 I carefully depress the pedal to just below the biting point, on beat 3 I lift my finger, and on the next beat 1 I co-ordinate playing the next note, D, with gently lifting the pedal a short way, listening for the *legato* between the two notes. Then the pupil has a go at this. We may well work on getting from C to D several times before the co-ordination is understood and felt and heard. I will watch my pupil's foot movements to ensure the leg and hip are not getting involved, and that the foot is moving only a tiny distance, and always remaining in contact with the pedal. It may then take several attempts to be able to play and pedal three notes, C-D-E, in succession. But once these basics have been mastered, it will be possible to play a complete scale with one finger, listening for a beautiful *legato*.

This may have taken 10 or 15 minutes of the lesson. And this basic exercise will need to be practised carefully every day for the next week. If, at the next lesson, this seems well understood, and the foot movements are small and neat, and the pupil is listening carefully, I will set the same with the left hand, using any finger. The following week, I will hear this again and, if mastered, I will set the same exercise playing triads up the scale of C in the left hand and then the right hand. These different exercises are mainly to give further opportunities for repetition, but also to encourage listening for clarity in deeper sounds and when playing chords.

So far this has taken us the best part of a month, especially if there has been a

half-term holiday in the middle of this tuition. What I now do is get the pupil to add pedal to a piece they already play extremely well, so they can focus on the new skill of using the pedal rather than have to focus also on the notes, fingerings, rhythms, musicality, and so on. A piece I often use is *Little Waltz* from *Little Flowers* by Gurlitt.



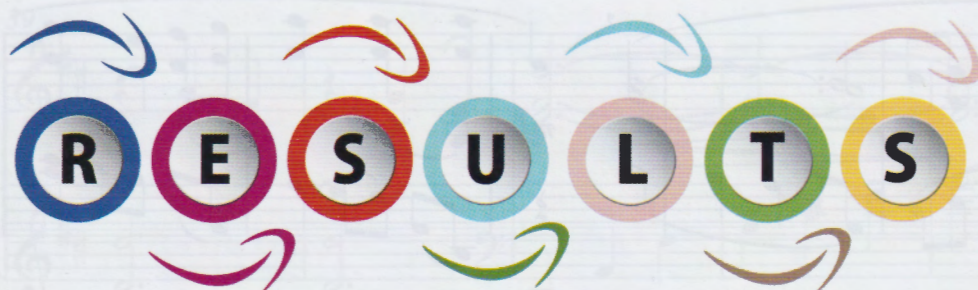
Gurlitt: *Little Waltz* bars 1–8

So while we are working on the technique of using the pedal, I will ensure the pupil can play *Little Waltz* very comfortably and musically. Then we go through the stages we addressed when playing a scale. We work initially on left hand and pedal. I ask the pupil to play the first note and depress the pedal. I ask the pupil to play the first note, depress the pedal, and very softly play the second note. The second note may come too strongly and I encourage the pupil to listen to the difference in sound between playing the second note softly or strongly. We also work on the pupil's foot technique. We do the same with the third note. Then comes the tricky bit – playing finger 5 on the first beat of the second bar and at the same time lifting the pedal. Many students want to put the pedal down again immediately, but I explain there's no hurry to put it down – that may create unwanted overlapping of sounds. The most important thing is to listen that the first beat has a clean, clear sound. And that will be the homework for the week – to play in the left hand and with pedal the first note, first two notes, first three notes, and finally first four notes of *Little Waltz*, listening acutely to the sounds.

The following week, if the first four notes, in left hand and pedal, have been mastered, we will work at the first two bars. To ensure the pedal isn't depressed too soon in bar 2, for practice it's fine to prolong the first beat of the bar, allowing time to hear a clear sound after the pedal has been released and time to depress the pedal gently before the second beat is played in the left hand – we do need to hear the bass notes through the whole bar. If that skill is readily mastered, I will set the first 8 bars in the left hand – with identical pedal movements in each bar.

The week after, we'll work at bar 1 hands together with the pedal, listening to the glorious sound. Then we'll add one more note. With such thorough background work, this will almost certainly be easy, and the pupil will be sent home to practise bars 1 to 8 hands together with pedal.

Does this seem laborious? Yes, if you like to think of it that way. Effective? Certainly. What a skill the student has now mastered! They've achieved beautiful pedal technique, and they've learned to listen to the beginning and end of each note they play. These basic skills will continually be developed and refined. Direct pedalling is no problem if this *legato* (syncopated) pedalling has been mastered. The control required to learn half-pedalling and flutter pedalling will be much easier if good technique, with small foot movements, is established first. Technical control of the pedal, combined with fine listening skills, will enable the student to master magnificently ambitious pieces with complex pedalling.



You can watch an eight-minute video of Jenny demonstrating what she explains in this article on [w: https://bit.ly/3tdgx6u](https://bit.ly/3tdgx6u)