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*A  
History  
of  
Pianoforte Pedalling*  
*David Rowland*



In this book, David Rowland traces the history of piano pedalling from its beginning in the eighteenth century to its first maturity in the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond. Pedalling technique became a major feature of nineteenth-century piano performance at a time of new developments in piano construction and many composers were inspired to write innovative works for the literature. Rowland examines this through the technique and music of composer-pianists such as Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin. In addition, he follows the transition from harpsichord and clavichord to piano in the music of Mozart and his contemporaries and outlines the physical properties of the various stops, levers and pedals available at the different stages of the instrument's development. The book also includes an appendix of translated extracts from three well-known piano tutors.

The book will be of interest to students and scholars of music history and performance practice, as well as to pianists.



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# A History of Pianoforte Pedalling

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## Abbreviations

<i>AMZ</i>	<i>Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung</i>
<i>EM</i>	<i>Early Music</i>
<i>GSJ</i>	<i>Galpin Society Journal</i>
<i>JAMIS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society</i>
<i>JAMS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Musicological Society</i>
<i>ML</i>	<i>Music and Letters</i>
<i>MQ</i>	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Musical Times</i>



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## Introduction

The importance of the pedal as an adjunct to artistic piano playing can hardly be overestimated. It is not too much to say that the effect of almost all modern music (from the earliest compositions of Thalberg and Liszt) depends upon its skillful use, and yet no question of technic has been so much neglected. While touch has been analyzed in the most minute manner, every movement of finger, wrist and arm noted with the greatest accuracy, the study of the pedal, as Herr Schmitt remarks, has hardly gone beyond the standpoint of instinctive feeling on the part of the player.

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This was Frederick Law's assessment in 1893, given in the introduction to his translation of Hans Schmitt's *Das Pedal des Claviers* (Vienna 1875). His remarks are entirely justified. Apart from some chapters of a rather general nature in nineteenth-century piano tutors, there had been no detailed study of the subject prior to Schmitt's. Consequently, assessing the precise characteristics of the pedalling techniques of major nineteenth-century figures such as Liszt or Thalberg is far from easy, and it is still more difficult to discover the way in which the earliest pianists such as Mozart may, or may not, have used the devices which were common on pianos of their day.

Since the appearance of Schmitt's book towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of pedalling tutors have been published which explore the details of the instrument's mechanism as well as technique. More recently there has been a growing awareness of some historical aspects of the subject. One of the best modern studies which draws all of these strands together is Joseph Banowetz's book *The Pianist's Guide to Pedalling*. There is, however, a fundamental weakness in most of the historical studies which have been published: they tend to concentrate on a single composer, or small group of composers, rather than reviewing broader trends. A number of authors, for example, have written on Beethoven's pedalling – undoubtedly a crucial subject for any pianist – without fully understanding his personal idiosyncrasies. Beethoven's use of the *una corda*, for example, can only be understood properly in the context of the performing styles of his contemporaries. Conversely, some apparent peculiarities of his pedalling, such as his directions to depress

the sustaining pedal for passages lasting several bars, turn out to be quite unexceptional in the light of similar passages in works by other composers.

The purpose of this volume is to trace the history of pianoforte pedalling from its beginnings in the eighteenth century to its first maturity in the middle of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this way, the major composers for the instrument are set into the context of the different schools of pianoforte playing which have existed during various phases of the instrument's history.<sup>1</sup> These schools were widely recognised in their day. Pianists in late eighteenth-century London, for example, played in a very different style from their Viennese contemporaries, and the 'Paris style' of the 1830s and 1840s raised many conservative eyebrows, especially in Germany. Schools were distinguished by various emphases in technique; but their differences were perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the pedalling styles which their members adopted.

A variety of questions needs to be considered in a history of pedalling. A fundamental issue concerning the music of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers is the type of instrument for which composers were writing – an issue which strangely receives little attention in histories of the piano. Figures such as Mozart and Clementi played not only pianos, but harpsichords and clavichords as well. Before even considering whether a passage in their music might be pedalled it is therefore necessary to know for which type of keyboard instrument a work was written. For this reason the whole of Chapter 1 is devoted to the transition from the older keyboard instruments to the piano. If investigation of these issues establishes that a work was written for the piano, it is then necessary to have some knowledge of the bewildering array of stops, levers and pedals that appeared on instruments at various phases of the piano's history. Chapter 2 summarises this information in such a way as to make it easily available for quick reference.

If it is known what type of piano a composer was writing for, it cannot necessarily be assumed that he intended all, or indeed any, of the tone-modifying devices to be used. This issue becomes more difficult the further back one goes in the piano's history. Pedal markings did not occur in piano music until the 1790s – after Mozart's death – so the historian has to draw on information in tutors, descriptions of performances, and any scrap of evidence to trace the development of pedalling for most of the eighteenth century. Because the evidence is so varied, and yet so scarce, and because this is the first crucial phase of the history of pedalling, the whole of Part II is taken up with the techniques of the early pianists. Chapter 3 is devoted to comments made in a wide variety of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literature. Chapter 4 examines the earliest discussions of pedalling in keyboard tutors, and Chapter 5 reviews the first pedal markings in the music itself.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of printed sources of all kinds, yet it remains surprisingly difficult to pinpoint detailed

developments of technique. When, for example, was syncopated pedalling first used and by whom? How much did pianists use the *una corda* and other pedals which were so common on pianos before the middle of the nineteenth century? How enthusiastic were pianists about the introduction of the third pedal found in the middle on most modern grands? Part III investigates these and related issues.

Pianoforte pedalling is a complex subject, and an important one: the decisions which a pianist makes in this area can change the whole nature of a performance. The conclusions reached by this study will need to be considered by pianists who perform on early instruments as well as those who prefer their modern counterparts. Whilst no attempt is made to suggest how early pedalling might be realised on the modern piano – the extent to which any pianist wishes to do this will inevitably vary – all pianists will need to consider the issues which this book raises if they wish seriously to get to grips with the music they play.



**PART I**

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**The instruments**



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## The transition from the harpsichord and clavichord to the piano

### **The early history of the piano**

The history of the piano begins in Italy. Bartolomeo Cristofori, the piano's inventor, appears to have begun work on the instrument as early as 1698.<sup>1</sup> His pianos were described in detail by Maffei in 1711:<sup>2</sup> three of them survive in various parts of the world today.<sup>3</sup> Cristofori's work became well known during his lifetime: pianos by him or his pupils were found in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula<sup>4</sup> and a translation of Maffei's description was published in Hamburg by Mattheson in his *Critica Musica* of 1725. In the same year the Augsburg instrument maker Johann Cristoph Leo advertised 'Cimbale ohne Kiele' ('harpsichords without quills') – presumably pianos – in the Viennese press.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Schröter had exhibited some experimental instruments in Dresden.<sup>6</sup>

By 1758 the piano was apparently known in a number of places, according to Adlung in his *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrheit* (Erfurt, p. 563). He had not seen one himself, but he does nevertheless mention one of the most important early makers of the instrument in Germany, Friederici. Adlung returned to the history of the piano in a later publication in which he goes into far greater detail, devoting much space to the work of another maker, Gottfried Silbermann.<sup>7</sup> Silbermann was making pianos in the early 1730s, but his most famous instruments were those purchased by Frederick the Great in the 1740s, two of which still survive, along with another instrument, now in Nuremberg.<sup>8</sup> The Silbermann family were probably the most important makers of the piano in the mid eighteenth century. Gottfried's work was continued by his pupil and nephew Johann Heinrich, who worked in Strasbourg, and whose pianos were probably the first to appear in France. A number of references to pianos by members of the Silbermann family are to be found in the mid-eighteenth-century literature, underlining their significance.

From Germany, the piano spread both to England and to France. In 1755 an English cleric, William Mason, bought a piano in Hamburg.<sup>9</sup> Shortly afterwards a number of German instrument makers arrived in London. In 1763 one of them, Frederic Neubauer, advertised the sale of 'harpsichords, piano-