

DYNAMICS

Forte and Piano: Power and Softness Without Tension

Producing a powerful forte without harshness—and creating the softest, most transparent piano without unwanted tension or accidental “ghost” notes—is one of the central challenges in piano technique.

The following guidance provides a clear foundation.

Key Points for Listening and Imagining Dynamic Levels

Spend a moment listening to the Adagietto from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony at different volume levels. Notice how the character of the sound changes: the transparency and delicacy of piano, and the density, fullness, and saturation of forte.

When imagining these dynamics, maintain a consistent sense of space and resonance. If you mentally “shrink” the sound for piano or imagine forte as flat or aggressive, this often leads to stiffness or unnecessary tension in the hands. A healthy tone begins with a calm, spacious acoustic in your imagination, regardless of dynamic level.

Playing *piano* Dynamics Without Tension

All dynamics rely on arm-weight transfer, and this is especially true for controlled piano.

A common difficulty among students is an increase in upper-body tension when attempting to play softly. This tension limits control, diminishes tonal colour, and still prevents a truly quiet sound.

Before playing piano always transfer arm weight into the keyboard.

Your control will come from:

- a clear inner image of the intended sound,
- sensitivity in the fingertips, and
- a free, continuous intonation of each interval supported by arm weight.

This combination enables a soft tone that is both expressive and stable, without physical strain.

Marking Dynamics in the Score

As with harmony, our aim is to keep mental practice simple and uncluttered. The clearer the score appears to your mind, the more easily you can focus on imagining the sound. When working with dynamics, this means clarifying what is already present rather than adding new indications. Only introduce markings where the original intent is unclear—for example, in sections with broad crescendos or diminuendos.

Avoid increasing your imagined dynamic every time you encounter a hairpin. In many cases, hairpins simply reflect the natural shift in colour that comes from a change in harmony—becoming slightly brighter, more resonant, or more tense—or they indicate a gentle expressive shaping of the phrasing, where more prominent parts sound slightly more expressive and brighter.

These subtle rises and falls in intensity will emerge naturally through phrasing and intonation. These nuances do not alter the overall dynamic level in your sound imagination.

Keep your notation clean and straightforward. The goal is clarity, not complexity.

1. **Highlight** the existing written dynamics to keep them visually and mentally prominent.
2. **Cross out** vague instructions such as *dim.* or *cresc.*, and replace them with the specific dynamics you intend for each bar or section.
3. **Remove hairpins** except for those that begin and end with explicit written dynamics. Treat these as true dynamic transitions and write the exact dynamic markings, just as you would in other crescendo or diminuendo passages.

Maintaining a simple, clearly annotated score helps ensure that your sound imagination remains focused and free of unnecessary confusion.

The image displays two versions of a musical score for piano, illustrating the application of dynamic notation guidelines. The left version shows the original notation, and the right version shows the revised notation with improvements.

Revisions shown in the right score:

- Highlighted dynamics:** Existing dynamics like *mf*, *p*, *mp*, *f*, and *a tempo* are highlighted in red to make them visually prominent.
- Crossed-out instructions:** Vague instructions such as *dim.* and *cresc.* are crossed out with red circles.
- Removed hairpins:** Hairpins are removed except for those that begin and end with explicit written dynamics. For example, a hairpin is removed from a section marked *mp* to *p*, and another is removed from a section marked *mf* to *f*.
- Explicit dynamic markings:** Specific dynamic markings are written at the beginning and end of sections to replace hairpins. For example, *mp* is written at the start of a section, and *p* is written at the end.
- Tempo markings:** *a tempo* is written at the beginning of a section, and *poco rit.* is written at the end of a section.

IMAGINATION OF FORTE

Why Forte Begins in the Imagination

A clear imagination of loud sound is essential for producing a healthy forte at the instrument.

If the imagined dynamic is not truly strong, the physical motions described later—such as lifting the fingers or preparing the hand—will not feel natural. Instead, you may introduce unnecessary tension in the wrist and hand.

To check whether your imagined sound is loud enough, try the following:

Imagine an interval with a fully saturated texture—*ff*—while transferring arm weight, and begin singing the imagined sound.

If your singing does not feel as full or powerful as the example in the video, then your internal forte may in fact be closer to mezzo-piano. In that case, take time to gradually expand your dynamic imagination and allow the sound to grow.

Remind yourself that losing the sense of horizontal sound movement in your imagination often leads to a vertical, harsh, or percussive touch.

Developing a strong link between your inner sound and your physical touch requires patience. With consistent practice, the hands will slowly adapt to what you imagine, responding with greater ease and clarity.

PLAYING FORTE

How to Play Forte at a Slow Tempo

When playing fortissimo at a very slow tempo (around two seconds per note), using double rolls and double swings is often necessary.

When playing slightly faster, the second roll in a double roll often becomes slightly narrower and more elliptical.

Eventually, with sufficient repetition, you will be able to play using only a single roll, supported by the muscle memory developed in the earlier stages, and the motion will remain free of tension.

It is also important to open the hand—lifting the fingers—before playing the next note.

This prevents the accumulation of tension and allows the motion to reflect the full dynamic of your imagined *f*. It also serves as a valuable strengthening exercise for the finger and palm muscles.

Lifting the fingers should feel like a quick, healthy stretch that begins in the palm, not as something isolated from the rest of the hand. The pattern is simple: begin with a relaxed, closed hand, open it rapidly into a stretch, and return to a relaxed position.

Slow-Tempo Forte: Double Rolls & Swings

Double rolls

- Release tension with the first, smaller roll.
- As you reach the top of the second, larger roll, open the hand.
- Play the next note at the bottom of this second roll.

Double swings

- Open the hand at the top of the first swing.
- Play the note at the bottom of the second swing.

In both double rolls and double swings, it is useful to count:

“1” and “2” as you play the note, and “&” as you open the hand with the help of the wrist motion.

The opening of the hand should be quick, not gradual—this keeps the motion free, powerful, and aligned with the imagined *ff*.

How to Open the Hand Without Unhealthy Tension

When lifting the fingers, raise them straight upward rather than curving them. Curving immediately increases wrist tension.

Begin lifting the fingers only as you approach 6 o'clock of the first "roll or swing", reaching full opening at 12 o'clock of the second "roll or swing".

If the fingers are lifted too early or too late—the hand will tense and the motion will lose its natural freedom.

Remember that lifting your fingers is only required in slow tempos.

After each note, allow the hand to release completely. It should feel empty, light, and unengaged. This prevents unnecessary pressure from accumulating in the palm or wrist, which may otherwise lead to discomfort or pain on the underside of the wrist. A fully relaxed hand will also open more naturally and with greater amplitude. If the hand is not sufficiently relaxed, lifting the fingers will feel strained, and weak.

Adequate amplitude in the arm motion is essential when transferring weight before playing. Lift the elbows higher as you lean slightly backward, and allow them to descend as you return forward. This ensures that the imagined power of the sound—together with the arm weight—is transmitted freely to the keyboard.

If the arm motion is too small, the result will be a harsh tone and potential discomfort in the underside of the wrist.

In forte exercises, play the note on the downbeat (1), then lift the finger—opening the hand—on the upbeat (&).

Let the elbow move freely with every note, and lean the torso forward by approximately 30°. This slight forward inclination allows gravity to assist the arm weight, helping to avoid a harsh tone or aggressive key attack.

Breaking Tension Patterns: Rethinking Forte

Keep the following in mind:

1. The stronger your sound imagination, the larger your wrist movement should be. The physical motion reflects the scale and resonance of the imagined sound.

2. Fortissimo often reflects emotional residues of old tension patterns.

Many pianists were told to “play louder, but not harshly,” an instruction that easily creates confusion and tension. Over time, this can lead to a subconscious habit of holding excess stiffness when playing forte, causing the wrist motion to become restricted or rigid.

This reaction is understandable and takes time to retrain. Be patient as you build new internal sensations and associations for forte. For now, gently remind yourself that your hands remain light, empty, weak, and free—even in the strongest dynamic.

Paradoxically, a real, resonant forte does not come from muscular effort. It arises from sound imagination, intonation, and the natural transfer of arm weight.

If you still feel limited or not entirely free, Volume III will explore how posture and the correct energetic state support healthy forte playing. Once these elements are integrated, the experience of playing forte becomes both powerful and effortless — permanently.



OPEN LESSONS





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