

ARTICULATIONS THROUGH PERIODS

The Baroque Period

Most urtext editions of J. S. Bach contain very few articulation markings.

While there is no absolute rule regarding “correct” or “incorrect” articulation, it is essential to decide clearly which articulations you will use. Any uncertainty—mental or physical—will create tension and affect your playing.

General Guidelines

Common articulations include:

- non-legato
- staccato
- two-note slur
- tenuto
- accent
- détaché (articulated legato or *briosso*)

Détaché, meaning “detached,” refers to playing each note with a separate bow stroke. Despite the separation, the bowing remains smooth and continuous. When you listen to string players performing détaché, you will notice there is no audible gap between notes.

The change of bow for every note creates a crisp, articulated sound while maintaining a connected line—hence the term articulated legato.

Use of Articulations

- Use non-legato and two-note slurs in slower pieces (examples D).
- Use détaché as a general articulation in moderate to fast pieces (examples A, B, C, F).
- Use staccato in fast movements, especially in groups of 2–3 notes that differ rhythmically from the main passage (examples B, E, F, G).
- Use combinations of tenuto or accent with staccato on longer and shorter note values (examples A, B, E).
- Groups of notes in conjunct motion (stepwise melodies) are played more smoothly, often with détaché (examples E, F).
- Groups of notes in disjunct motion (larger intervals and more dramatic contour) are played with a more detached character—non-legato or staccato (examples A, B, C, E, F, G).

a) *non-legato or détaché*

Exercise a) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

g) *détaché*

Exercise g) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

b) *non-legato or détaché*

Exercise b) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

détaché

Exercise g) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

c) *non-legato or détaché*

Exercise c) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

détaché *non-legato* *non-legato* *non-legato*

Exercise g) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

d) *non-legato*

Exercise d) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

e) *détaché*

Exercise e) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

f) *détaché*

Exercise f) is in 3/8 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a single eighth note followed by a quarter note.

Articulation Markings Practice



The Early Classical Period

- Performance of notes under the slur
- Performance of the gap between slurs

When approaching the piano works of W. A. Mozart or J. Haydn, it is essential to remember that Classical slur notation was directly influenced by violin bowing technique.

Even though we are reading Mozart's keyboard scores, the underlying model comes from his primary musical influence and teacher—his father, Leopold Mozart. As both pianist and violinist, Wolfgang absorbed a great deal about notation from Leopold's guidance. The following quotations illustrate the Classical understanding of slurs:

Leopold Mozart

"Notes [...] must all be taken together in one bow-stroke; not detached, but bound together in one stroke without lifting the bow or making any accent with it."

— *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, 1756

Daniel Türk

"by the length of the curved line, the composer indicates how many tones are to be slurred together [...] for tones which are to be slurred, the finger should be allowed to remain on the key until the duration of the given note is completely past, so that not a slightest separation (rest) results."

— *School of Clavier Playing*, 1789

Interpreting Slurred Notes

- Notes under the slur are played connected, in a style corresponding to *détaché* on the violin—continuous, and without internal accents.
- In faster movements, notes without a slur are generally played non-legato.
- In slower movements, unslurred notes are played with a more sustained, gentle connection—closer to *détaché*.

This understanding forms the basis for interpreting Classical articulation with clarity, simplicity, and stylistic accuracy.

Performance of Notes Under the Slur

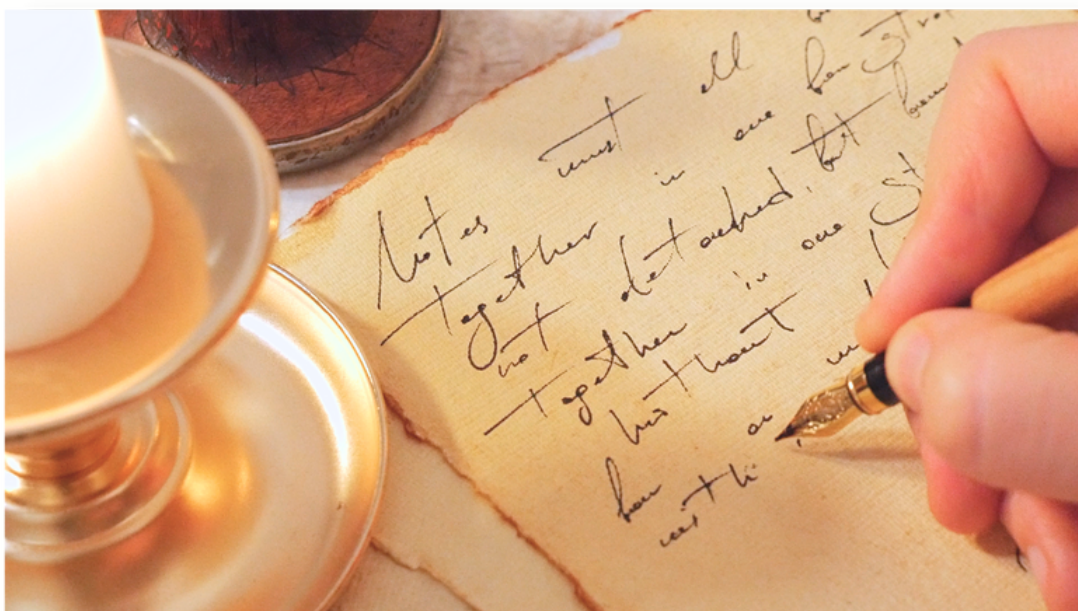
Eighteenth-century composers wrote for the fortepiano, an instrument whose sound decayed much more quickly than that of the later pianoforte. For this reason, Classical legato differs significantly from the rich, prolonged legato cantabile of the nineteenth century.

The expansive Romantic legato became possible only with the development of the modern piano, which could sustain sound far longer.

With this historical context in mind, the appropriate articulation for Classical phrasing is one that is less intensely legato yet still smooth and connected—*détaché*, or articulated legato.

The notes are played connected, but the resulting sound remains clear, light, and crisp.

In the next Volume III, we will explore phrasing length and contour in more detail. Introducing a phrasing line will help the melody unfold naturally, enabling a smooth and expressive Classical style.



Performance of the Gap Between Slurs

In the Early Classical period, the practice of ending each slur at the bar line was a matter of notational convention. The notation system of the time did not allow slurs to extend freely across measures. Only later did Muzio Clementi begin to challenge this tradition. Leopold Mozart explains the reasoning with characteristic clarity:



" [...] it goes against nature if you are constantly interrupting and changing. A singer who during every short phrase stopped, took a breath, and specially stressed first this note, then that note, would unfailingly move everyone to laughter. The human voice glides quite easily from one note to another and a sensible singer will never break unless some special kind of expression, or the division or rest of the phrase, demand one. And who is not aware that singing is at all times the aim of every instrumentalist because one must always approximate to Nature as nearly as possible."

Leopold Mozart

The end of a short slur in Classical notation does not indicate a break in sound. Rather, it reflects a change of bow direction on a stringed instrument. Because of the construction of the Baroque bow, this bow change produced a naturally non-legato effect—but not a gap or silence.

On the modern piano, which sustains tone far more easily, recreating such a gap would sound unnatural.

Therefore:

Do not create an audible separation between slurs in either touch or sound.

The phrasing should remain connected and natural, guided by musical sense rather than by the mechanical limitations of historical notation.

"[...] the first note in a slur must at all times be stressed more strongly and sustained a little longer. This sustaining must be carried out with such good judgment that the bar-length is not altered in the smallest degree."

Notice how Leopold Mozart describes phrasing without the use of rubato.

His approach emphasizes a natural shaping of the musical line, similar to the inflection of spoken language. You will explore how to create this natural emphasis on the "syllables" of a phrase in the Phrasing chapter of the next volume, where phrasing contour is studied in depth.



"It should be observed, in addition, that the note on which the curved line begins should be very gently (and almost imperceptibly) accented."

Daniel Türk

The first note of a slur indicates the natural point of phrasing emphasis.

Within the context of phrasing, this slight stress should arise from the natural contour of the musical line—much like the natural accent in singing—not from any deliberate or mechanical articulation.

The accent is felt, not applied.



This next example shows the beginning of the slur functioning as a gentle emphasis on a note within the left-hand accompaniment pattern, reflecting a steady sense of metrical pulsation. You will explore how to feel and internalize this inner pulse in the next Volume III.



A two-note slur, familiar from Baroque performance practice, carries the same meaning in the Classical period.

Its articulation and musical function remain unchanged.



The Romantic Period

In nineteenth-century repertoire, both short and long slurs often function as indicators of phrasing rather than articulation.

Two-note slurs still appear and retain their traditional meaning, but the prevailing default in Romantic music is legato or legatissimo, unless the score specifies otherwise.

During a lesson with Tatiana Zelikman, the teacher of Daniil Trifonov, I was told that the accents Frédéric Chopin so carefully placed on each beat in his études should not be interpreted literally. It is quite possible that Chopin wrote these “accents” to guide his students toward a clearer sense of pulse and to help cultivate an evenness of sound across the fingers.

For example, in the C-major Étude, he may have wished for a more even tone in the right hand when playing with the little finger:



Similarly, the études below may reflect Chopin's desire to reinforce the underlying metrical pulsation rather than to demand a literal accent on every beat.

The Impressionist Period

During the Impressionist period, Maurice Ravel referred to his slurs as musical slurs, meaning they primarily indicated phrasing rather than articulation.

At times, he even preferred a more non-legato touch for notes under the slur, depending on the character and colour of the passage.

