

# Approaches to Staccato Playing

Pianist, teacher and writer Melanie Spanswick shares Teaching & Learning strategies

When it comes to tackling articulation, there are numerous different touches to embrace, but the most crucial to master are *legato* and *staccato*. *Staccato* (or short and detached) tends to be ignored as lessons commence, perhaps due to the fact that some exam boards only require *staccato* scales above certain grades, therefore short, spikey playing is generally limited to a few notes or phrases in certain pieces at the beginning. This is possibly adequate for Grade 1, but if pupils can acquire a feel for the quick release of the keys and highly developed reflexes necessary for *staccato* technique, it will certainly prove beneficial even for relative beginners.

*Legato* generally poses few problems for students; it may take a little practice to become accustomed to the 'overlapping' of notes or 'walking' over the keys in order to join them smoothly, but most find the task surmountable fairly quickly. *Legato* scales can therefore be easily grasped. This is often not the case with *staccato*; crisp, short passage work at speed rarely feels comfortable (especially in the beginning), hence *staccato* scales are frequently taken at much slower tempos than intended. Scales are only one small facet of acquiring an effective *staccato* technique, but they can provide a convenient vehicle for those getting to grips with detached playing.

There are many variations on the *staccato* theme, including 'close-to-the-keys' *staccato*, finger *staccato*, wrist *staccato* and whole-arm *staccato*. Each touch demands a different technique and therefore a different body movement or motion. Making progress can take time and patience, because excellent coordination is a prerequisite. Tension can also be an overriding concern, sometimes irrespective of standard, and it can ruin the best of intentions. Economy of movement is essential, as is an inbuilt flexibility, so practising fruitfully, in small but regular sessions, is probably the best approach. Aim to encourage students to work little and often, with a totally focused mind set, building up muscle power and flexibility.

How do we help students conquer thorny issues associated with short, detached playing? Each *staccato* technique requires a multifarious perspective, so let's look at them individually.

Finger *staccato* is the most commonly used for rapid passagework. When working at any new motion or technique with pupils, it's helpful to ask them to drop their arms by their side at the start of practice sessions, as well as after practising a repeated movement, for a minute or two.

If they can assimilate the feeling of 'dead' or heavy arms (which is my terminology, but really this only means a totally relaxed upper body), they will learn just how relaxed and 'free' they should ideally feel when playing. It can also help students become aware of any tension building as they work, and it provides a default relaxation position to assume after engaging muscles.

Finger *staccato* implies that only the fingers should move. However, if the arms and wrists remain completely static, tension will quickly arise, rendering fast movement challenging. Ensure complete freedom in the upper body. If you can replicate this feeling when playing, flexibility won't be an issue. As with many technical challenges, focus on how your body feels when playing, not just on what is being played.

Practise rapid finger movement away from the piano. Fingers should work from the knuckles, without much assistance of muscles in the hand or wrist, and every joint must be complicit; they need to move independently, making sure the first two joints of each finger particularly (nearest the fingertip) are 'active'. Aim for a very swift finger motion; encourage fingers to make tapping movements or a quick, sharp pulling 'inwards' of each finger (towards the palm of the hand). This can be built up, so work in short bursts for a minute or so at a time, returning to dropping arms by your side at the end of each brief session.

As with most techniques, starting slowly often produces the best results. It can be useful to use heavy finger strokes to begin with; playing deeper (into the key bed), forcefully and with strong fingers (in order to strengthen them). It's important to pay attention to how every note ends. Think spiky, pithy, sharp, and extremely short. Combine this with a free wrist at all times; letting go of tension in designated places.

Once heavy movements have been grasped and they feel comfortable, lighten the touch, using the fingertip (or top/pad of the finger), and aim to acquire a 'scratch' or flicking motion, so every note can remain incredibly short and effectively sounded. Once the finger has 'flicked' it will usually draw inwards (as already mentioned), almost into the palm of the hand, but best not to allow it to go too far, as quick finger changes necessitate fingers to resume the usual position promptly. When playing a whole scale or passage using finger *staccato*, it can be beneficial for the hand to employ a very slight 'bouncing' motion, allowing flexibility, but keeping the flow.

Practise passage work in different rhythmical groups; groups of four

action needed for the strong beat sets the motion rolling, helps to rotate the wrist, and keeps the arm and elbow soft and light too. As the wrist and arm become used to the feeling, so the breaks between each chord can be less and less, although it is always necessary to free the wrist very swiftly between groups of chords, ridding the arm of any tension before continuing.

Speed will come eventually, when the wrist and arm feel able and willing to relax the muscles between passagework, then it will be possible to play longer sections without tiring. Once this aspect has been understood, velocity and virtuosity should miraculously appear.

Fore-arm, whole-arm or elbow *staccato* are probably used less frequently than the other types examined so far, and are generally in more advanced repertoire. As the titles suggest, considerable body movement is necessary, and in order to really understand and make use of these techniques, the arm-weight concept (i.e. employing weight from the upper torso whilst playing passages via flexibility in the wrist) needs to be secure, and wrist *staccato* must also be completely integrated. When playing *staccato* passagework with the whole upper body, we should ideally still be flexible between notes and chords, so when delivering short but hefty chords or octaves, a warm, controlled sound emanates. These *staccato* techniques are generally used for slightly slower figurations; those with which will be enhanced by a powerful sonority. Practising with added 'breaks' in the score, as has been suggested for wrist *staccato* above, can also be beneficial.

Within this framework, there are countless effects required when playing *staccato*, depending on the composer, stylistic traits and character of a piece, but these practice ideas will hopefully provide a veritable starting point. If pupils are introduced to basic *staccato* playing from the outset, they will be able to build and develop this technique alongside their *legato* playing.

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#### Suggested advanced repertoire featuring *staccato*:

Beethoven: *Piano Sonata Op. 31 No. 3 in E flat major, Scherzo (2nd movement)*  
Mendelssohn: *Andante & Rondo Capriccioso Op. 14*  
Grieg: *Puck Op. 71 No. 3 and March of the Dwarfs Op. 54*  
Rachmaninov: *Polichinelle Op. 3 No. 4*  
Moritz Moszkowski: *Étincelles Op. 36 No. 6*  
Anton Rubinstein: *Étude Op. 23 No. 2*  
Liszt: *Gnomensagen (Dance of the Gnomes) from 2 Konzertetüden, S.145*

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semi-quavers can be accented slightly on every first beat of the group, to improve co-ordination (if hands are playing together). Practise assorted strong beats (or accents), so all fingers can attain control, making it possible to achieve totally even playing, both rhythmically and tonally. Every time the thumb turns under (or the hand turns over it) in a passage, encourage the wrist to use a small rotational or circular movement, providing a place to release any tension caused by the incessant 'picking up' finger motion necessary for finger *staccato*. Even when using a 'scratch' or flicking technique, fingers still need a 'picking up' movement, which after a while, becomes tiring. If tension does build, stop immediately, and only practise a few notes or a group of notes at a time. Divide passages into small sections, building up as and when strength is acquired.

If fingers consistently key-bed during slow practice, playing at speed with a light, detached touch should eventually feel easier, comfortable, and tension free.

For *close-to-the-keys staccato*, fingers need hardly leave the keys; they are really playing 'in position', and on the surface of the keys. *Close-to-the-keys staccato* is generally used for certain effects and isn't as widely employed as finger *staccato*. Allow fingers to assume their positions over the keys (do this by placing fingers over notes from C-G in the right hand, using the thumb on C, as if playing the first five notes of a C major scale, but with fingers 1-5). Practise each finger separately at first, playing deep into the key bed with each finger, again employing the 'scratch' movement (build in a slight break between each note). Using a free wrist will help here. Once the fingers have played heavy, but short notes, lighten the touch considerably, and aim for a very quick movement with each finger making an upward (as opposed to inward) motion. This will encourage speed, rapidly moving onto the next note, taking less time and effort than downward movement. Repeat this with the left hand (also starting in a five finger position).

Due to the title, it's easy to misinterpret wrist *staccato* as merely the wrist in a 'fixed' position bobbing up and down at the end of the arm, but if this is the only physical action taken, rigidity and extreme tension may prevail. Unlike finger *staccato*, wrist *staccato* requires much more movement than just that of the wrist.

To achieve success, it really must be harnessed to a very flexible, moveable forearm, upper arm and upper torso. As with many other techniques in piano playing, each movement benefits from being cushioned and supported by other parts of the upper body.

Practise away from the piano at first; begin with the hand in its natural position, then move it upwards using the wrist only, then downwards, with your forearm remaining fairly static, the wrist acting rather like a hinge. Gradually build up speed. The faster the speed, so the motion becomes smaller and smaller, and is eventually similar to a 'vibrato' action, as if shaking the hand rapidly.

Once the basic movement has been assimilated (by both hands) away from the instrument, experiment by applying it to a few chords (or single notes to start with) on the keyboard. Play hands separately at first and as you play every chord, using a large hinge-like motion with your wrist (almost like a 'throwing' action), land on the chord accurately using the tips of the fingers. After the chord has been struck, completely 'release' the wrist and arm, letting go of any tension, before the next chord is played. This is tricky to do at speed, so as always, slow practice can help. As speed is built, be sure to release any elbow tension too, as this can feel uncomfortable after a while. To release muscles, swing your arm down by your side; this will serve as a reminder of the feeling of relaxation with no tension.

In order for the arms, elbows and upper torso to remain as free and

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flexible as possible (so they can support the wrist), it's important to have an in-built 'breathing' space between each chord, therefore, release the upper body after every single one. The wrist and arm will eventually become accustomed to the whole tension/release mechanism. I find it useful to make a rotational movement with the wrist too (when practising slowly) as opposed to only moving it up and down, because the use of arm weight seems to cushion the movement, providing a richer sound and freer action, in preparation for brisk tempi. Some prefer a 'throwing' motion, the flexibility stemming from the wrist's release between each 'throw' of the hand.

After a while (and when the feeling of freedom has been honed), move from playing one chord at a time, to several using one wrist motion. An example of wrist *staccato* is shown below (which is the first bar of Czerny's Study No. 40, from *The Art of Finger Dexterity Op. 740*):



This passage might be practised in the manner suggested below, the rests providing spots to release tension, and build stamina. During the crotchet rests in the right hand, ensure the wrist and whole arm is loose and floppy, or free, before continuing, then you will know if you have released tension successfully.



Practise on passages which don't require a large hand stretch; if octaves or big chords feel strained, choose smaller triads as in the example above. It's important to feel comfortable, not over-stretched. Also, by giving a slight accent on the first beat of a passage or group (such as the first triad in the chordal group above), it's possible to facilitate the movement required to play all three chords in the group with ease. The

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