

# Classical performance practices versus modern piano pedagogy

## A Review of the Australian Music Examinations Board's *Pianoforte Series 12*, C List.

Helen M. O'Brien

The Australian Music Examinations Board's recently published *Pianoforte Series 12*<sup>1</sup> introduces classical performance practices, with annotations by Geoffrey Lancaster. Ironically, the editorial style is essentially 'nineteenth-century' in its wealth of performance directions with the editorial minutiae displaying Lancaster's distinctive interpretative style instead of clarifying the fundamental principles of late eighteenth-century (1750-1800) performance practice.<sup>2</sup> The postface commentary outlines the 'eighteenth-century' meaning of many signs and terms but in many instances usage is not derived from eighteenth-century sources. Lancaster states that his interpretations use the 'techniques and ways of thinking that were deeply rooted in modern piano pedagogy'.<sup>3</sup> However classical keyboard performance practice and modern piano pedagogy are based on opposing technical and stylistic foundations. The success of the classical performance practice style relies on challenging rather than incorporating the legato premise of modern piano pedagogy.

The American musicologist Sol Babitz discusses various misconceptions about classical performance in his article 'Modern Errors of Mozart Performance'. His succinct explanation of performance practices as based on historical sources has become the *modus operandi* for 'early' classical musicians. Babitz writes that historical sources must be used in the context of historical instruments and techniques, but he proposes that it is possible to adapt the essence of classical performance practice - metric accent and articulation - to modern instruments if we understand the difference between modern and classical performance.<sup>4</sup> Since Babitz's article there has been a synthesis of these principles into a cohesive 'classical performance' style, with Lancaster's performances, especially of the *Empfindsamer Stil*, being a major contribution. Lancaster's C List editorial suggestions attempt to promote a style encapsulating the 'musical drama, gesture, articulation and internal dynamic balance'<sup>5</sup> of the classical repertoire. However, the subtle and demanding inflections of the style

can only be realized when the keyboard technique and other principles of classical performance practice have been taken into account.

### Keyboard Touch

Mid to late eighteenth-century keyboard touch was based on a non-legato touch referred to as the 'customary' touch. C. P. E. Bach in his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1753) says:

There are many who play stickily, as if they had glue between their fingers. Their touch is lethargic; they hold notes too long. Others, in an attempt to correct this, leave the keys too soon, as if they burned. Both are wrong. Midway between these extremes is best.<sup>6</sup>

The detached style was still dominant when Daniel Gottlob Türk (1750-1813) wrote his *Klavierschule* in 1789. Türk, who disliked the practice of playing only half the note's value, wrote:

For tones which are to be played in customary fashion (that is, neither detached nor slurred) the finger is lifted a little earlier from the key than is required by the duration of the note. Consequently, the notes in *a* are played approximately as in *b* or *c*, depending on the circumstances.<sup>7</sup>



Example 1: Türk, p.345.

Instead of giving instructions regarding this non-legato touch, Lancaster proposes many intricate articulation directions to create an 'articulated legato' line, with the resultant style resembling neither the modern nor multi-faceted early music schools of performance.

The following list outlines the range of keyboard touches used between 1750 and 1800:

i) Portato - indicated by dots with a slur. Notes were executed with a slight pressure and highly connected touch;

ii) Legato - indicated by a slur or by the term *legato*. Notes were held for their full value and played in a connected manner;

iii) Customary - the usual non-legato manner of playing. This touch can be further divided into 'light' and 'heavy' degrees according to context. Türk writes: 'For a *heavy* execution every tone must be played firmly (with emphasis) and held out until the very end of the prescribed duration of the note [but not necessarily implying connection]. *Light* execution is that in which every tone is played with less firmness (emphasis), and the finger is lifted from the key somewhat sooner than the actual prescribed duration'.<sup>8</sup> The term *tenuto* was used to indicate that 'customary' notes were to be held for their full written value but not connected. C. P. E. Bach writes: 'Tones which are neither detached, connected, nor fully held are sounded for half their value [customary touch], unless the abbreviation *Ten.* (hold) is written over them, in which case they must be held fully. Quarters and eighths in moderate and slow tempos are usually performed in this **semidetached manner** [my emphasis]. They must not be played weakly, but with fire and a slight accentuation'.<sup>9</sup>

iv) Staccato - indicated by strokes or dots. Notes were performed for half their (implied) value.<sup>10</sup>

Lancaster's definition of *tenuto* is as follows: 'The *tenuto* (ten.) sign in the Classical era indicated that the note should be expressively elongated and stressed'.<sup>11</sup> Comparison with the above (point iii) reveals that this is not the Classical definition of *tenuto*. On the contrary, Lancaster's statement is in agreement with modern practices.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, touches were applied in a contextual manner to enhance the underlying affect, as described here by Türk:

Compositions of an exalted, serious, solemn, pathetic, and similar character must be given a heavy execution with fullness and force, strongly accented and the like. To these types of compositions belong those which are headed *grave*, *pomposo*, *patetico*, *maestoso*, *sostenuto*, and the like. A somewhat lighter and markedly softer execution is required by compositions of a pleasant, gentle, agreeable character, consequently those which are customarily marked *compiacevole*, *con dolcezza*, *glissicato*, *lusingando*. . . . Compositions in which lively, humorous and joyous feelings are predominant, for example, *allegro scherzando*, *burlesco*, *giocoso*, *con allegrezza* . . . must be played quite lightly whereas melancholy and similar affects particularly call for slurring of tones and portato . . .<sup>13</sup>

The various touches are not only intrinsic to Classical keyboard performance practices but essential to fulfil the appropriate expression.

### Metric accents

Proper execution of the 'customary' non-legato touch requires an understanding of metric accents. Throughout the classical period, notes were played with a combination of agogic and dynamic accents according to their position within the bar. These subtle inflections governed by the barline are called metric accents. The concept of dynamic accent is described by Türk in Example 2. (The *pf* stands for poco forte or 'a little loud'.)



Example 2: Türk, p.325.

From this Babitz draws the following conclusion regarding the application of accents to Classical music:

When one plays the *f m f p f m f* . . . with short articulation silences between the notes as Türk suggests, one will inevitably find that the first and third beats emerge not only stronger but also very slightly *longer* than the weaker second and fourth beats - approximately as follows.<sup>14</sup>



Example 3: Babitz, p.66.

A consequence of metric accent is *diminuendo* throughout the bar as illustrated in example 4. Although Lancaster comments that 'a crucial element of the performance practice of Classical music is the application of a subtle *diminuendo* throughout the course of each bar',<sup>15</sup> his need to apply a consistent *diminuendo* throughout the bar reveals that the principles of metric accent have not been fully understood. Therefore Lancaster's statement, while not incorrect, is insufficient to explain the importance of metric accents to piano teachers. Applying a *diminuendo* may not



Example 4

necessarily produce correct metric accentuation. While there are other important factors which determine or influence classical phrase-shape (such as gesture, rhetoric and affect), metric accent is the most fundamental.

### Articulation

Articulation refers to the clarity of execution. It is essentially the relationship of notes to one another; whether they are detached or joined, and, if so, to what degree. (Since the subject of articulation is complex, for the purposes of this article, the discussion will be confined mainly to the effectiveness of Lancaster's suggestions.) Lancaster addresses articulation chiefly through editorial markings such as slurs, staccato marks and indications of attack, marked in grey. These complicated editorial marks are not counterbalanced by discussion on the essential tenets of metric accent and touch and therefore do not successfully translate the nuances of the classical performance practice style. The three facets of articulation, metric accent and touch are interdependent, and if not applied together, a cohesive style will not be achieved. The profusion of articulation markings stipulated by Lancaster is also inappropriate for instructional purposes.

Articulation was often left to the discretion of the performer, to be added either as implied or to heighten affect. Leopold Mozart<sup>16</sup> and Joachim Quantz<sup>17</sup> provide excellent examples for study; these examples are directed toward string and woodwind playing respectively. Most importantly the non-legato keyboard touch of this period is, in essence, highly articulate.

The instances where legato slurs occur or should be added by the keyboard performer include:

i) '... slurred notes [which] appear mostly in stepwise passages and in the slower or moderate tempos' (C. P. E. Bach);<sup>18</sup>

ii) appoggiaturas [which] must always be slurred onto the note of resolution (Türk);<sup>19</sup>

iii) slurring patterns indicated by the composer [which] should be continued even after the notation ceases and until a new direction appears (Türk).<sup>20</sup>

Apart from these considerations, the dynamic and metric accentuation of non-legato tones frequently produces the effect of slurring. This effect is helped by various eighteenth-century fingerings. For example, the old C major scale fingerings (Example 5a) give specific articulative effects without actually performing slurs. The top fingering produces the effect shown in Example 5b. On a modern piano, where the reverberation is longer than on a fortepiano, the effect of slurring would be more obvious or even exaggerated.<sup>21</sup>

Lancaster endeavours to maintain the legato touch and thus adds many slurs to produce the subtle inflections of the style. However, the following examples reveal a lack of consideration for both modern piano style and eighteenth-century performance practices.

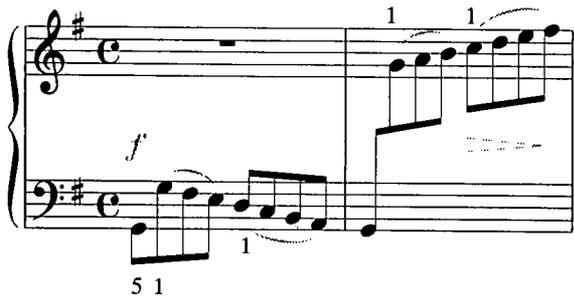
The 'Allegro' from J. C. Bach's *Three Pieces* has the added slurs shown in Example 6a (overleaf).<sup>22</sup> The placement of the slurs counteracts the silent passing under of the thumb - a cornerstone of modern piano teaching. Instead the execution according to classical performance practices would possibly be that shown in Example 6b. This non-legato execution would be in accordance with the Allegro character of the piece. However, for instructional purposes Example 6b may be too difficult. Returning to

|     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (c) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| (b) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| (a) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Example 5a: Türk, p.145.

etc.

Example 5b



Example 6a: J. C. Bach, ed. Lancaster, 'Allegro' from *Three Pieces*, bars 1-2.



Example 6b: = strong; ~ medium; - weak; ' articulative silence



Example 6c

Lancaster's suggestion, if the slur is extended but performed with metric accents, as shown in Example 6c, a more satisfactory result may be obtained.

In the first of these J. C. Bach pieces, 'Risoluto', Lancaster introduces the slurs shown in Example 7a.<sup>23</sup> The wrist movement which may result from this would not encourage correct finger independence. In example 7b, the slur and the



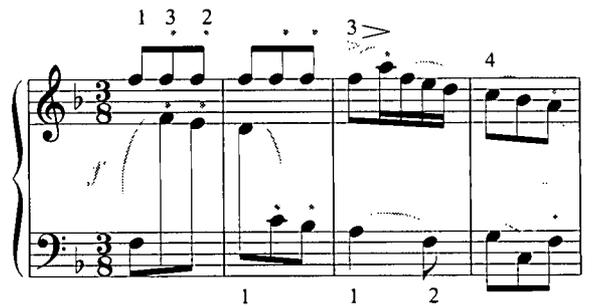
Example 7a: J. C. Bach, ed. Lancaster, 'Risoluto' from *Three Pieces*, right hand only, bar 14. Example 7b: bars 16-7.



Example 7c

following staccato notes break up the run without necessarily creating an appropriate effect. In both these examples the performance practice suggestions shown in Example 7c might be more desirable, especially for young pianists.

The editorial markings in the *Rondeau* in F Major K.15hh by Mozart create unwarranted difficulties in co-ordination for students through simultaneous execution of different types of articulation (see Example 8).<sup>24</sup> The first two bars attempt to convey the correct metric accentuation through the left hand slurs. The third bar is convoluted and does not accord with Leopold Mozart's rule to perform this figure as in the first bar of Example 9 or, if in a rapid tempo, as in the second bar of the same example.



Example 8: Mozart, ed. Lancaster, *Rondeau* in F major K.15hh, bars 1-4.



Example 9: Leopold Mozart, *Violin School*, p.86.

From bars 25 to 28 inclusive (Example 10),<sup>25</sup> the articulations are apparently inspired by the type found in Leopold Mozart's *Violinschule*. This passage could be exceedingly difficult for students to perform and the articulation suggested by Lancaster is not usually found in instructional keyboard music of this era. The same problem can be found in the articulation Lancaster gives in the opening arpeggio of Clementi's *Prelude in the Style of Haydn* (see Example 11).<sup>26</sup> The articulation suggested by Lancaster is both difficult to play and not in keeping with contemporaneous instruction.<sup>27</sup>

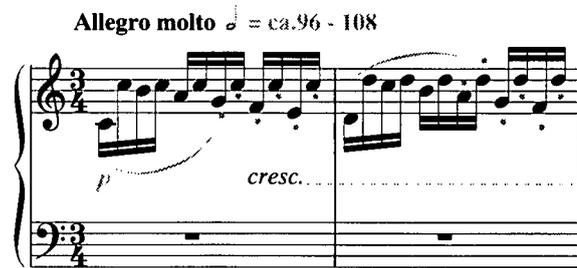
In the Mozart *Tempo di Minuetto* K.150o, Lancaster adds slurs that obscure the original directions.<sup>28</sup> Mozart wrote the first phrase without slurs, but included them in the right hand of the second phrase. The editor transfers these



Example 10: Mozart, ed. Lancaster, *Rondeau* in F major K.15hh, left hand only, bars 25-8.



Example 11: Clementi, ed. Lancaster, *Prelude*, bar 1.



Example 12: J. C. Bach, ed. Lancaster, 'Toccatà' from *Three Pieces*, bars 1-2.

markings to *all* phrases, which is not a classical performance convention. These few examples demonstrate some of the performance practice and instructional problems created by the imposition of many articulation marks.

The actual execution of slurs is poorly explained. Lancaster's statement that 'the end of a slur in the Classical era indicated a detached note'<sup>29</sup> should not be misinterpreted to mean the note is detached by a staccato action. More precisely, the end of a slur indicated a separation from the next note resulting in a slight articulative silence.

The staccato dot is often used ambiguously by the editor. As an example, see Lancaster's markings in the 'Toccatà' from J. C. Bach's *Three Pieces* (Example 12).<sup>30</sup> Here, the use of the staccato dots suggests a modern staccato action, which in this case would be difficult to perform. In the mid to late eighteenth century, staccato was an indication of note length as well as touch:

In playing detached tones one lifts the finger from the key when half the value of the note is past and pauses for the remaining period. . . . Mistakes are often made with respect to . . . striking keys as quickly as possible without regard for the values of the given note . . .<sup>31</sup>

As a touch, staccato was somewhat inactive compared to the finger and wrist action staccato employed in modern pianism.

The meaning of staccato strokes and dots as offered by Lancaster is not entirely accurate:

'The vertical dash in the eighteenth century indicated the shortest variety of detached note. The staccato dot meant a slightly longer form of detached note'.<sup>32</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, the stroke and the dot were theoretically the same. C.P.E. Bach states that the marks signified staccato and that such notes were played for half their implied value.<sup>33</sup> Türk agrees with Bach, although he writes that some composers improperly used the stroke to signify a shorter staccato.<sup>34</sup> The idea that dots and strokes had different meanings is not true for the whole period, and Lancaster's use of these signs is confusing. An example of his unclear usage is found in the *Fantasia* by C. P. E. Bach.<sup>35</sup>

A change in meaning is apparent after 1800. Clementi writes that the stroke or 'Italian Staccato' denotes shortness and distinctness by lifting the finger as soon as it has struck the key. The dot is taken to mean less staccato which is achieved through holding the finger down longer. However, Clementi comments that these marks are not always used with precision.<sup>36</sup>

There are many other areas such as tempo, ornamentation, pedalling and dynamics which cannot be discussed here as this article is intended only as a brief review. However it can be concluded that these CLIST interpretations do not successfully meet Lancaster's stated aim of transferring late eighteenth-century stylistic effects through modern piano pedagogy. The uncertainty arises from the editorial method employed, which is excessively detailed but

paradoxically imprecise. One must recognize that there are no simple solutions in compiling a 'performance edition', especially one intended for elementary instructional purposes.

Some of the questions associated with this publication must be directed to the Australian Music Examinations Board. It is pertinent to ask the following: What are the objectives of this edition? Would the introduction of performance

practices genuinely reflect current trends in modern performance? Do examiners possess the expertise to evaluate performances? How are students to be assessed if their teachers do not wish to teach performance practices? These questions need to be addressed before any publication introducing major changes in performance style can be accepted and used effectively.

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Music Examinations Board, *Pianoforte Series 12, Preliminary to Grade 6* (Melbourne: Allans, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Lancaster's detailed editorial markings are printed in grey in his editions of *Series 12, C list, Preliminary to Grade 6*.

<sup>3</sup> Lancaster, 'Classical Repertoire Using Modern Piano Techniques', *Music and the Teacher*, vol. 17 no 2 (1991), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Sol Babitz, 'Modern Errors of Mozart Performance: with additions and corrections as of May, 1969, including remarks on Beethoven performance', *Early Music Laboratory*, no 5 (1969), 63. This excellent article is highly recommended reading for modern teachers and instrumentalists, as Babitz discusses in detail the differences between modern performance and classical performance practices.

<sup>5</sup> Lancaster, 'Classical Repertoire', p.8.

<sup>6</sup> C. P. E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1753), transl. and ed. William J. Mitchell (New York: Norton, 1949), p.149.

<sup>7</sup> Türk, *School of Clavier Playing* (1789), transl. & introd. Raymond H. Hagg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982), p.345.

<sup>8</sup> Türk, *School*, p.347.

<sup>9</sup> C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, p.157.

<sup>10</sup> See Türk, *School*, pp.343-47, and C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, pp.154-56.

<sup>11</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 6*, p.74. All the commentaries have been taken from the Grade 6 issue.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd. ed. (1976), 'tenuto' is defined as 'held, sustained; usually equivalent to legato'. The current use of this term is quite different to that of C. P. E. Bach.

<sup>13</sup> Türk, *School*, p.348.

<sup>14</sup> Babitz, 'Modern Errors', p.66.

<sup>15</sup> Lancaster, *Series 12, Grade 6*, p.74.

<sup>16</sup> *A Treatise on the Fundamentals of Violin Playing* (1756), transl. Edith Knocker (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp.120-23.

<sup>17</sup> *On Playing the Flute* (1786), transl. Edward R. Reilly (London: Faber, 1966), pp.136-61.

<sup>18</sup> C. P. E. Bach, *Essay*, p.155 and see also the passage from Türk, *School*, p.348.

<sup>19</sup> See Türk, *School*, p.209.

<sup>20</sup> See Türk, *School*, p.344.

<sup>21</sup> Babitz also discusses (this) fingering in 'Modern Errors', p.82.

<sup>22</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 2*, p.16.

<sup>23</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 2*, p.14.

<sup>24</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 3*, p.16.

<sup>25</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 3*, p.16.

<sup>26</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 4*, p.18.

<sup>27</sup> For Clementi's own views (written somewhat later), see his, *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Pianoforte*, rpt (London, 1801; New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), pp.8-9.

<sup>28</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 1*, p.14.

<sup>29</sup> Lancaster, *Series 12, Grade 6*, p.74.

<sup>30</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 3*, p.24.

<sup>31</sup> Türk, *School*, p.343.

<sup>32</sup> Lancaster, *Series 12, Grade 6*, p.74.

<sup>33</sup> C.P.E. Bach, *Essay*, p.154.

<sup>34</sup> Türk, *School*, p.342.

<sup>35</sup> Lancaster, ed., *Series 12, Grade 6*, p.37.

<sup>36</sup> Clementi, *Introduction*, p.8.