

PODCAST 3. SUBJECT - LEGATO.

This podcast will address the subject of 'legato', which in Italian means tied, linked, connected.

The word legato goes far beyond the description of a type of playing, such as legato or staccato or portato (which has nothing to do with root vegetables)

My first podcast was about linearity, or horizontality, in music, or to put it another way, the movement of voices, upon which all music is based.

This is closely related to the mystery of what links one note to another. How do we perceive the intrinsic logic that unites the notes of a theme?

Although the above question will not be addressed at present, it brings us to the subject of this podcast, as legato, in the voice, in string and wind instruments, and most challengingly, in the piano, allows us to give a trajectory to the movement of a melody. This sense of inevitability can affect the listener in quite profound ways.

Legato enables us to imagine what happens between the notes.

Until a certain point, musicians are preoccupied with the notes themselves, the black dots that constitute the code that allows us to read a score.

When the preliminary work of reading the score is over, we consider the interpretation of these notes. That involves, whether we are aware of it or not, the relationship of a note to its neighbours.

The instrument that best exemplifies legato is the voice, which can seamlessly connect two notes or vibrations. Then, in terms of difficulty, come wind and string instruments, and finally the piano.

The piano is destined to fail at this endeavour, as it is, sad to say, a percussion instrument, meaning that the sound is created by hammers falling on strings, and that therefore the volume immediately fades after the notes have been sounded. This means that legato on the piano is an illusion.

We are now at an interesting juncture.

Despite the voice's ability to connect seamlessly two notes, can we maintain that this is in effect a perfect legato?

I would contest that it is not, and that a perfect legato is as much of a mental achievement as the physical tying up of two notes.

A successful legato is an act of the imagination or faith, as one appeals to the immaterial in order to bring it about.

Unfortunately, and in contrast to the above, one often hears a violinist playing what appears to be legato but is just the effect of the bow linking notes.

A true legato is when the imagination carries one beyond any merely physical manifestation of bow on string.

If, in a musician's mind, he can link an entire phrase, he stands a chance of accomplishing this when performing the phrase. No matter what degree of

control he may have over his instrument, he won't achieve a legato without the former act of faith - and by act of faith I am not in any way intending to invoke religion. Thus a pianist can, too, give the illusion of legato. There are some conditions, though. He must be very much in control of his medium, he must have a decent instrument whose sound does not die too quickly, and he must of course be the sort of musician who can visualise the theme as a continuous line, broken only where it is indicated that a breath should be taken.

I would argue that when most composers ask for legato, not to mention legatissimo, they imagine an act of mind over matter. Thus, the singer who imagines that their technique alone allows them to convey a perfect legato is only partly right. He or she requires the conceptualisation of the melody first and foremost.

The two excerpts were, first, Beethoven Bagatelle op 126 in G major played by Sviatoslav Richter, and Bartok Solo Sonata for violin played by Yehudi Menuhin