On Teaching
by Gavin Black

More about pedals: looking at heels
This month I am returning to the subject of pedal playing, this time to the frown on the face of one of my students—Lysandros Aschenbock, a German student who has joined me for lessons. He is a young man with a photographic memory, particular in the area of music. He has a very good sense of rhythm and a strong hand, and he is capable of playing with great precision. However, he is not very comfortable with the use of the heel in pedal playing, which he finds difficult to control.

I have been discussing with him the different techniques and strategies that can be used to achieve a good balance between precision and control. He has been trying to use the heel more frequently, but he finds it difficult to keep the heel in place while playing. He has also been experimenting with the use of the toe, but he finds it more difficult to control.

I have been encouraging him to use both the heel and the toe, depending on the context and the music. He has been practicing with a variety of different pieces, and he has been making progress. He has been trying to use the heel more freely, and he has been enjoying the results. He has also been practicing with a variety of different pieces, and he has been making progress. He has been trying to use the heel more freely, and he has been enjoying the results.

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developed through that approach.

Each student—each player, in fact—has a somewhat different physique, which suggests a somewhat different physical orientation towards the pedal keyboard. Some people can more comfortably play off the inside of the foot, some the outside; some people can most comfortably keep the knees fairly close together; some people are more comfortable with the knees farther apart and such. The above-mentioned heel playing into this overall approach is to remind the student always to monitor and make decisions about the exact physical approach of the heels to the keys, which side of the heel for which notes, where, on the keys the heels should land (perhaps different for each key or different depending on previous or subsequent notes), where the knees should be in relation to the feet in a given passage, etc.

These are things that only the student can judge, since that judgment depends on how things feel.

**Some practice exercises**

The first step in practicing heel playing is to choose a simple passage—taken from a piece or written as an exercise—and to play some of the (appropriate) notes with heel, trying out different positions and placements along the lines mentioned above. It is by far the easiest to use the heels on a natural key that is being played just before or just after a sharp or flat, so it is best to start with such a passage. The Buxtehude quoted above is a good example. It is clear that, if the right heel is going to be used in this passage, it will be used on the G that is the second overall note and its reiterations. A student can try slowly and keeping everything physically relaxed, as always—to play G–F♯–G with heel-toe-heel, using first the inside of the foot, then the outside, letting the knees move to where it is most comfortable. (To play on the outside of the right foot the right knee will probably need to be farther out—to the right—than to play on the inside of the foot.) A player with slender feet might find that the center of the foot works. For most players, one of these configurations will be the most comfortable and should be practiced until it feels reliable. If more than one feels equally comfortable, then both should be practiced.

A short exercise like Example 2 can be used in the same way, again trying out different notes and positions for the feet and keeping track of what is comfortable. (Note that this, on its own, can well be played like Example 3. It is interesting to compare the differences in sound and feel between the different pedalings. In the context of a longer passage, one or the other might be better or actually necessary.)

Here are two matching exercises for heel at the extremes of the keyboard. (See Examples 4 and 5.) Again, they should be tried with every different alignment of inside/outside and knees. The teacher can help the student remember what all the possibilities are, but only the student can tell for certain what is and what isn’t comfortable. They should be tried both fully legato and fully detached.

The well-known Vierne theme, from the Carillon from Op. 31, is an interesting one to try on various different heel-based pedaling. (See Example 6.) It is possible, while keeping this completely legato, to use alternate toes (left first) except for left heel/lef toe going across the bar line. It is also possible, however, to make more extensive use of the heel, for example, using left heel on all of the C’s and fitting the other notes around that. The student can try it a number of ways. For using this as a learning tool, it is crucial to remember to keep it slow and light.

Example 7 is a somewhat arbitrary heel-based pedaling for a scale. I am not sure that I would use it in “real life,” but it can be useful to practice separate feet, especially if turning the foot so that the toes are poised to play the C-sharp. This is a bit more abstract than moving the toe of one foot from one note to another, but equally subject to being analyzed and practiced systematically.

Students themselves, and their teachers, can create little exercises like this, and can extract bits of pieces with which to try out the use of the heel. I want to reiterate that the key to integrating heel playing comfortably into pedal playing is to pay attention to—and make choices about—the position and angle of the feet as they address the keys. This should be done, in the manner discussed at length in my earlier columns, without any particular preconceptions. It is in the end up to the student to determine what is comfortable and what works. The teacher can certainly make suggestions, and can help evaluate the
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