

# Understanding Classical and Early Romantic Dynamics

## Part 2



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### *Forte and fortissimo markings*

A string of *forte* or *sforzando* markings, indicating a succession of climactic notes, lead toward a climax, which is indicated *fortissimo*. In Beethoven's Sonata Opus 10 no.1 in C minor, mm. 78-81, three counterbeat *sforzandos* result in a climactic *ff* on the downbeat of m. 84; the same happens before m. 90. How particular Beethoven is in indicating musical high points is shown in mm. 72-73, where two *sf* build up to a smaller climax in m. 74 marked *forte*, rather than another *sf*.



20. Beethoven - Sonata in C Minor, Opus 10 no.1 (1796/98), First movement, mm. 71-103. First edition: Eder, n.d.

Since *fortissimo* indicates a climax, this also means that remaining loud after this marking would only produce loud playing. The spectacular climactic high note in m. 58 of the third movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata is all but delicate – its loudness is guaranteed by the low GG-G octave, effectuating a tonal spread that spans almost the complete five octave range of the instrument. The following *sf* on V7 in m. 60 is in fact an accent in the context of a lower dynamic level, rather than a final note that would be *even louder* than the high note climax, with the argument that “no *diminuendo* is notated”.



21. Beethoven - Sonata in C Minor, Opus 13, Pathétique (1798), Third movement, mm. 53-61. Henle Urtext (1952).

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### Messa di voce

In his treatise *Die Wahre Art das Pianoforte zu spielen* (1799), Johann Peter Milchmeyer (1750-1813) describes – as all his contemporaries – the correct performance of the slur in the same way as Leopold Mozart emphatically did in 1755. There is an interesting addition to his description, however: in slurs longer than 4 notes, the performer may add a *crescendo-decrescendo*, called *messa di voce*.<sup>1</sup> To Hiller this is one of the beauties of singing. “In legato passages of 6 or 8 notes [...], one makes the middle notes somewhat stronger and the first and last weaker. This expressivity is indicated thus, < > .” Hiller adds that the dynamics within a *messa di voce* can range from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*.<sup>2</sup>

There is no downbeat accent on each of the end-of-slur resolutions in mm. 67, 68 and 70 (left hand) of Mozart’s Sonata K. 332; but the downbeat of m. 69 is slightly louder because of a *messa di voce* in the middle of the two bar slur.



22. Mozart - Sonata in F Major, K. 332, First movement (1783). Urtext der Neue Mozart Ausgabe, Bärenreiter (1986).

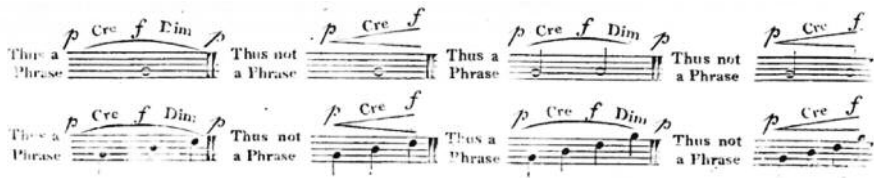
Beethoven generally wrote more and longer slurs than Mozart. In fast pieces with short meters, Beethoven’s slurs easily stretch four bars. In his Sonata Opus 2 no.2, the *messa di voce* in m. 27 is indicated *fp*. Two bars later, the left hand imitation is notated differently. As the left hand high point is even more important, the climax is indicated *sfp*. Here, the slur is broken: the heavier new beginning of the slur results in extra emphasis, which creates the high point.



23. Beethoven - Sonata in A Major, Opus 2 no.2 (1795), First movement, mm. 18-33. Henle Urtext (1952).

In the ‘Third Prerequisite for good singing’ of his treatise *The Singer’s Preceptor*, Domenico Corri (1746-1825) explains how the *messa di voce* – which he calls ‘the soul of music’ – can never end with a *crescendo*.<sup>3</sup>

This is crucial in understanding the instrumental *messa di voce* and may lead to a new understanding of familiar passages. The slur in measure 1-2 in the opening of Beethoven’s Sonata in C Minor, Opus 10 no.1 has a slight stress in the middle,



24. Corri - The Singer's Preceptor (1810).

on the downbeat of m.2. The highest note Eb 3 is almost the highest note of Beethoven's piano. If it is reached with a *crescendo*, it would be overplayed: the slur must end with a slight *diminuendo* (within the forte character) in order to end lightly, as indicated by Beethoven himself by the dots on both E-flats. The net result is a *messa di voce* with a focal point on the downbeat of measure 2.



25. Beethoven - Sonata in C Minor, Opus 10 no.1 (1796/98), First movement, mm. 1-50. First edition: Eder, n.d.

In the second theme, a four bar left hand slur starting in m. 33 leads toward the third bar, where the dominant appears. This *messa di voce* is carefully notated by Beethoven: to ensure the correct focus, the E-flat in the middle voice is tied. The right hand downbeat of bar three is syncopated, and therefore the syncopated third beat of m. 34 and the following downbeat, receiving most of the dynamical stress, must be followed by a *diminuendo*. It follows that the F immediately following on the weak second beat of m. 35 is not to be played as the high point of this gesture.

The next four bar gesture has the same structure, but the third gesture of this phrase, starting in m. 41 (line 4, m. 5), is twice as long. A hairpin now indicates the climax of the entire phrase, creating an even larger *messa di voce*. Again, the highest notes of the melody (A-flat in m. 41-42 and B-flat in 42) are not to be played as dynamical high points.

Carl Czerny also devotes a paragraph to *messa di voce*. He proposes two different ways of indicating it: *cresc-dim* or hairpins, accompanied by the comment: "It goes without saying that the performer must apply this expressivity himself, when the composer has not indicated it."<sup>4</sup>



### *Decrescendo versus diminuendo in Schubert*

It seems that for Schubert the markings *decrescendo* and *diminuendo* had a different meaning. *Diminuendo* (usually *dim.*) always seems to finish a musical thought and imply losing energy and perhaps a slight slowing down. *Decrescendo* (*decresc.*) appears more often and can be found at indiscriminate places in the score. *Decresc.* does not allow for losing energy or slowing down and serves solely to bring down the volume. When used by Schubert in combination, *dim.* always follows *decresc.* and never (with one exception, described below) precedes it. A striking example is found in the *Grazer Fantasy*, D. 605a, where *decresc.* and *dim.* follow each other in two bars ending a musical period of the Fantasy. (The *diminuendo* hairpin before the *decrescendo* marking is the second half of an expressive *messa di voce*).



27. Schubert - Grazer Fantasy, D. 605a (1818?), mm. 157-158, Henle Verlag.

In the last three Sonatas – D. 958, 959 and 960 – *decresc.* appears much more often than *dim.* Schubert creates large sections within these enormous structures in the way he identifies and carefully finishes musical thoughts with his *dim.* markings; it is only logical that there are not that many of them. For instance, two *decresc.* markings precede the *dim.* at the end of the exposition in the Allegro first movement of the Sonata in C Minor, D. 958.



28. Schubert - Sonata in C Minor, D. 958 (1828), i, Allegro, mm. 82-99. Franz Schubert's Werke, Serie X, No. 14. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1888 (Epstein).

It is not surprising that the last movement of the C minor Sonata has no *dim.* marking ("losing energy") at all, as one of the defining characteristics of this movement is its great motoric energy. Just how careful Schubert was with *dim.* becomes clear in Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960. In the entire monumental Sonata there is only one *dim.* marking: in the second movement, just before the return of the opening theme. Also Schubert's songs are full of both *dim.* and *decresc.* markings. Without an exception they imply the same interpretation.

### One exception

In two exceptional passages of the second movement of the Trout Quintet, D. 667, a *dim.* precedes a *decresc.* The *diminuendo* brings the prolonged dominant to an end but is replaced in m. 51 by a *decresc.* which finishes off the musical thought. Measures 51-52 are a transition to the coda, opening *pp/ppp dolce* in m. 53. The *dim.* may cause the transition and coda to be a bit slower than the phrase before, creating the desired *pp/ppp* stillness.

29. Schubert - Piano Quintet in A Major, D.667 'Trout' Quintet (1819), Andante, mm. 49-53, Breitkopf & Härtel. Kammermusik 875.

## 4. The question of subito dynamics

### The fortepiano's natural decay

There are very few indications for bringing the volume down in classical works before 1800. Why is that so? One of the most striking features of the early piano is the rapid decay of its tone, which is one of the central defining features of the instrument and its style. The classical phrase, moreover, has an affinity with decay. Like words in speech, musical motives do not usually end with a loud note. In fact, most musical motives have a dynamical highpoint near or at their middle-point. Finally, the musical phrase itself has a natural decay: the climax of the classical phrase falls at ca. 3/4 of the length of the phrase (exceptions abound, obviously: composers know this feature of musical diction all too well). This means that there are one or two bars left for the tension to release at the end of the phrase, which causes the volume to drop down as well. In slow movements the high point may fall a bit earlier, leaving more space for winding down.

Beethoven's piano works are replete with passages in which a *f* or *ff* is followed within the space of one, two or more bars without additional dynamic markings, by a *p* or *pp*. Modern performance practice has it that these moments are 'subito pianos'. Based on this assumption, a style of performing Beethoven has developed which does not take the other possibility, namely that a decay is implied, into account. But this other possibility is musically very attractive: *f* or *ff* often indicate a climax. Not decaying after a climax results in loud playing. To regard musical gestures as musical words make the music more speech-like, i.e. rhetorical. Besides, a *crescendo* before a *piano* passage may be treated as a *rinforzando*.

Beethoven's Piano Trio in C Minor, Opus 1 no.3 is a brilliant and spectacular piece. The notated dynamics range from *ff* to *pp*, and the work is full of *sf*, *fp* and *rinf.* markings, highlighting the dramatic content. Yet, there is not a single *crescendo* or *diminuendo* marking in the entire piano part. Instead, Beethoven used an occasional hairpin to indicate large *messa di voces* (three times), two *crescendos* and only one (!) *diminuendo* hairpin (Fourth movement, mm. 230-233). In all, there are far fewer

hairpins in this trio than in the much milder first trio in E-flat Major and the lighthearted second trio in G Major. It is of course unrealistic to believe that in this magnificent, theatrical work exploding with expressivity, Beethoven did not ask for more dynamic development than what is notated in these few cases.



30. Beethoven - Piano Trio in C Minor, Opus 1 no.3 (1793-94), First movement, mm. 348-353. Henle Urtext (1969).

In the coda of the first movement of the C Minor Piano Trio, the **ff** outburst in all three instruments (m. 350) is followed by a return of the previous **pp**. No *diminuendo* is indicated – at first glance. But the harmony is a dominant-tonic release (on a pedal point); both cello and the right hand of the piano have a slur, meaning a decay. The right hand scale descends, implying *diminuendo*, and the left hand chord experiences its natural decay, which makes it less logical for the right hand to try to maintain its **ff**. The cello is marked *cresc.*, leading to the notated **f** outburst, clearly to counter the natural tendency to create a *messa di voce* in each bar of this figuration. (Incidentally, the cello part in this first movement contains the only *crescendo* markings in the entire set of three trios). After creating the climactic downbeat of m. 350, the cello will also want to diminish in order to make sense of the **f** marking: why did Beethoven not notate **f** at the end of the bar, if the *crescendo* should continue? So, although technically speaking the *fortissimo* could be maintained in the right hand and a subito **p** could be achieved, Beethoven did not need to further specify his intentions to the contrary, as the other indicators are strong enough.

In the second movement of Beethoven's *Frühling* Sonata in F Major, Opus 24 for violin and piano, a *crescendo* in m. 6 reinforces the ascending interval E-flat-G in the melody, creating a melodic *messa di voce*. The descending flourish on the third beat releases the tension and diminishes to **p**.



31. Beethoven - Sonata in F Major, Opus 24 Frühling (1800-01), Second movement, mm. 5-8. Henle Urtext (1978).

Several older, famous interpretations of this passage agree with this interpretation. More recent performances seem to aim for a more spectacular subito interpretation.<sup>7</sup> It seems that this style of interpreting Beethoven's *crescendos* in an absolute way is rather recent, belonging to a perspective in which a composers' notation is interpreted as an instruction rather than a description. It has resulted in new aesthetics

that put more value on contrasts, in which the dynamical break from *f* to subito *p* becomes the focus of interest, as if the subito dynamic is what the passage ‘is about’.



32. Beethoven - Sonata in F Major, Opus 24 Frühling (1800-01), Second movement, mm. 44-47. Henle Urtext (1978).

Arguments for interpreting the *crescendo* under the two bar violin slur in mm. 46-47 as a *messa di voce* are the slur itself and, moreover, the fact that the last beat of m. 47 is a harmonic resolution. The *diminuendo* connected to this release does not necessarily bring the volume down completely to *p*; as in the example above, some break is still possible.<sup>8</sup> Other *crescendos* in this movement may be treated in the same way.

### Actual subito piano

*Subito piano* does exist, of course. In Beethoven's *An die Ferne Geliebte*, Opus 98 most of the *crescendo* markings are followed by dots. In the third song Beethoven leaves no doubt about the fact that he wants a *subito piano* on ‘meine Thränen’.



33. Beethoven - An die Ferne Geliebte, Opus 98 (1816). III: Leichte Segler in den Höhen. First edition. Vienna: S.A. Steiner & Co., n.d.

But what to do when there are no dots? The necessity for a dynamic break must then be determined from the context. A *subito piano* interrupts the normal flow of the musical diction, and this disruption is in fact its main purpose. Therefore, for a subito piano to be musically logical, one or more of three requirements need to be met: a harmonic break, a melodic break, or a rhythmical break.

The *crescendo* hairpin leaves no doubt about Beethoven's intentions in the fourth movement of the Piano Trio in C Minor, Opus 1 no.3. The logic is in the melodic break (*subito* back to thematic material) and the re-entry of rhythm, after the rhythmical break.

In the *Waldstein* Sonata in C Major, Opus 53, the *pp* coda is introduced by a repeated dominant octave in m. 260 that then turns into a diminished chord. This harmony keeps the tension high, which makes a continuous forte logical. As a result, the *pp* in m. 261 will be subito, now charged with dominant tension and the drive of the previous repeated octaves.

A rhetorical *interruptio* is found in Beethoven's Rondo in G Major, Opus 51 no. 2, where the gesture of mm. 105-106 does not come to its conclusion but





34. Beethoven - Piano Trio in C Minor, Opus 1 no. 3 (1793-94), Fourth movement, mm. 233-243. Henle Urtext (1969).



35. Beethoven - Sonata in C Major, Opus 53 (1803-04), First movement, mm. 254-264. First edition: Bureau des Arts et d'Industrie, n.d.(1805).

instead is interrupted by a literal repeat (mm. 107-108). Due to the interruption of the musical thought, m. 107 will be subito *p*. The second time, the gesture reaches a climax in m. 109.



36. Beethoven - Rondo in G, Opus 5 no. 2 (1797), mm. 105-113. First edition. Vienna: Artaria (n.d.).

## Conclusion

While around the middle of the 18th century the application of dynamics was considered to be the domain of the performer, the notation of dynamics being therefore sparse and general, towards 1800 composers started to notate more refined dynamics into their scores. However, even while more and more different indications came into use, the way composers applied them was still based on earlier practice. In many passages dynamics are not notated but implied. In these cases



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the performer must base their decisions concerning the realisation of dynamics on an understanding of the musical language: rhetorical content, the character, harmony, harmonic and melodic dissonances, the correct performance of the slur, the register, the notated touch. On the other hand, dynamics that *are* notated are in need of interpretation. They may indicate character, tutti or solo passages, or a contrast. In each of these cases the notated ‘dynamic’ marking is not primarily an indication of volume. Furthermore, dynamics can have, besides an effect on the volume, an additional indication of either: *rubato*, a climax, the possibility to create an unusual metrical effect, a *mesa di voce*, *rinforzando*, a *ritardando* or to make sure that no *ritardando* is used.

In modern performance practice, classical and early romantic dynamics are often interpreted too literally. This has an impact on the characterization as well as the flexibility of dynamics and rhythm and results in an excess number of *subito* dynamical changes and an overly-strict metrical execution. On an early piano, high notes in many cases need to be treated delicately, while on the modern piano they can and often will be played louder, in a (later) romantic spirit. The correct performance of classical slurs, meticulously described in classical as well as early romantic treatises, relies heavily on dynamics as well as *rubato*. This is an essential element of the rhetorical style. Modern performance treats slurs primarily as a technical indication (*legato*) and in doing so often replaces rhetorical classical ‘speaking’ with romantic ‘singing’.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Milchmeyer, *Wahre Art*. p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Hiller, *Anweisung*. Ch II, §8.

<sup>3</sup> Domenico Corri. *The Singer's Preceptor*. London, 1810. p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Czerny, *Vollständige theoretisch-practische Pianoforte-Schule, von dem ersten Anfange bis zur höchsten Ausbildung fortschreitend*. In 4 Theilen. op. 500. Part III: “Von dem Vortrage.” Vienna: A. Diabelli, 1839/Facs. Repr. of 2nd ed. Vienna, 1846: Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1991. Ch. 1 Von der Anwendung des crescendo und diminuendo, §4, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Mozart, *Versuch*. Ch. I, Part III. pp 131–136, §27. p. 52. This translation by Editha Knocker (Mozart, *Treatise*).

<sup>6</sup> Türk, *Klavierschule*. Ch 1 Abschnitt 5, §79, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> *Diminuendo on the third beat of m. 28*: David Oistrakh/Lev Oborin, Henryk Szeryng/Arthur Rubinstein, Gidon Kremer/Martha Argerich. *Crescendo to the barline of m 28 and sub. p on 29*: Sebastian Müller/Nico de Villiers, Dora Bratchkova/Rudolf Meister, Anne Sophie Mutter/Lambert Orkis. All performances available on YouTube.

<sup>8</sup> *Dim. on the last beat of m. 47*: David Oistrakh/Lev Oborin, Henryk Szeryng/Arthur Rubinstein. *Sub p on m. 68*: Gidon Kremer/Martha Argerich, Sebastian Müller/Nico de Villiers. *Very much sub p on m. 68*: Sebastian Müller/Nico de Villiers, Anne Sophie Mutter/Lambert Orkis. All performances available on YouTube.